Death is but the Next Great Adventure

by TheObsidianQuill

Summary

What if that night in Godric's Hollow went differently? What if Harry did die? What if Death stepped in and made a deal with the Savior of the Wizarding World? How different would Harry's life be after that deal?

(Or, Harry makes a deal with Death and in exchange gains something Voldemort has fought his entire life for. Immortality. And a strange friendship with Death)

Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own anything pertaining to the works of J.K. Rowling. I do not own Harry Potter or its characters and this is a work of fan-fiction.

Updates every Monday and Thursday/Friday. Bi-weekly updates for now, but that may change in the future.

-Pleasant Readings!
Death is but the Next Great Adventure

Magic and festivity hung in the air like the electricity charged atmosphere before a storm on that cold hallowed night. Frigid puddles interspersed over a slick deserted black road, and a wind that howled a mournful cry at the moon curled up into the air. Tucked into the warm and quiet house, a child slept soundly, ignorant of the harsh and dangerous world outside of his four walls.

With a thunderous boom the home was suddenly invaded by a serpent.

The toddler startled awake at the initial sound of the front door being blown into the house and he wiggled and stumbled up to look over the bars of his dark oak crib as a storm rolled into his home.

Footsteps pounded and echoed through the house like destructive hail battering every available surface.

The door to the innocent and encasing nursery was flung open as the frantic mother rushed to protect the lovely, wide-eyed, and rosy-cheeked child she had held protectively inside the walls of her own body for nine months.

For a moment, her gaze froze on the watery bright green eyes and puckered pouting lips of her precious, sweet boy and she feared that on some basic level he could understand that something was wrong. So very wrong. Pressing a trembling kiss to his head, the women turned around and prepared to offer anything to spare her precious boy. She knew that James was already gone from the gut-wrenching flash of green light, but she would give anything to save her son.

The serpent glided into the nursery on dirty, mud-slicked bare feet and leveled a bone white wand at the redhead’s chest. The tear-streaked face crumpled at the sight of the wand and pleas filled the room as thunder and rain permeated the house that was no longer a home.

“Please! Not- . . . not my Harry! T-take me instead! He’s-he-he’s just a baby! Please!!” She begged the expressionless creature, calling out desperately with all of the magic left in her to ‘help him!’

“Step aside Mrs. Evans . . . I am here for the boy . . . I will spare your life if you step aside.” The hissing, emotionless words yanked a desperate sob from the mother and she continued her pleading. When her voice raised to a hysteric scream to not kill her baby, the woman’s voice was cut off by a
sudden flash of green light that painted the room in the sickly pale green glow.

The confused and fussy infant began to cry louder as the snake drew closer and blazing red eyes met vivid green right before the final curse was released and both were cast from their bodies into the cold embrace of death.

Poor, beautiful Lily’s cries had not prevented her child from perishing, but they had granted an inkling of revenge that had flung the predator's soul from his body.

She was heard, though.

Death had heard her pleas and watched curiously as the scene unfolded. Death curled its large skeletal hands around the shining beacon that was the child’s soul. Death was not omnipotent, but he could see that a soul so big and bright would have made a large impact on the human world. Caressing the burning little sun in his cold brittle palm, Death turned it over in his grip as he pulled it close to his chest and saw the faint, flickering blue sliver that had lodged there. ‘Curious. . .’

Death knew quite a lot about the wizard named Tom Marvolo Riddle. Such a large and bright soul. Once Tom had cheated Death by the sly magic human’s call a Horcrux, Death could barely keep his curious eyes off of the rising wizard. After millennia of stories being cut far too short to be entertaining, Death had grown bored and restless. Death’s first dabbling in the mortal world ended badly with three dead brothers and three very powerful objects that should not have been brought into the living world for just any wizard to use unregulated. When Tom came along, things were interesting at first, but eventually he grew tired of all of Tom's easily cut down enemies as well.

The prophecy had peaked Death’s interest, but the slight misinterpretation and Tom immediately taking out the ‘chosen one(s)’ meant an unexpected end for the entertainment possibilities that came with the prophecy. Tom would return—as he knew he would—and the world would fall easily under the foot of the insane Dark Lord. Unless. . .

Death looked down at the brilliant soul in his cold dead grasp and chuckled. 'Oh, it's been so long since I've meddled!’ Death felt giddy as he ghosted a bony fingertip over the soul and it fluttered.

‘I will make you a deal, little one. I will send you back into the world of the living . . . if you can survive until the day of your eleventh birthday without my intervention, if you can survive the being that will come after you and the harsh reality that awaits, I will give you something in return. I can see what your soul yearns for, and if you survive these next few years, you will receive the tools to obtain it.’ The soul in Death’s grasp flared in response before he continued.
'Survive, and you will need not fear me, for I will become an ally. Survive, and make this world interesting. . .' Death would have grinned at the sporadic and eager flickering of the soul, but without lips, the morbid grin was eternal.

Death carried the soul closer to the veil between the dead and the living and watched the sight before him with detached intrigue. A man in pooling black robes was now holding onto the limp, dead mother of his new companion and crying out like his soul had been ripped from his body. Death had witnessed countless scenes just like this and had found each just as fascinating as the last, when the people around the mortals mourned and grieved. Everything eventually dies, so why were they so shocked and hurt when it happened?

Death moved into the physical world, invisible and completely unnoticed by the grieving man. Someone who wasn’t supposed to die, though, that he should mourn. Death may not have been planning on bringing the immortal snake’s equal into the world, but now he felt a reverent anticipation that he’d never felt before. Death approached the crib and looked down at the still-warm little body that lay lifeless on the soft blue blanket like a doll that had been tossed aside. Looking back down at bright ball of light in his hands, Death waved a hand over the soul and imbued it with an insignificant portion of his magic. Once the soul’s light flared blindingly bright, Death placed it back into the little body gently.

Immediately, the rapid little fluttering of a healthy—and very much alive—tiny heart filled the room and Death grinned his permanent grin down at the vivid green eyes that blinked open and stared right at them. Not a single cry or whimper came from the child as it watched the invisible being above its crib with chilling and intense green eyes.

‘Don’t worry, Harry. I will watch over you.’ Death whispered in his rustling, toneless voice.

Even after Death receded back into the safety of the veil, he felt as though those wild emerald eyes were still watching him.

The morning that Petunia Dursley and her husband, Vernon Dursley, found the little bundle in a basket on their doorstep was the same day that the thin and haughty woman realized that the devil came in many forms. Petunia had always been religious more for the image that it painted of her—as a righteous and loving housewife and mother—but from the moment that those cold, chilling eyes blinked open and settled on her, she felt a greater fear of the inexplicable than she ever had before.
With no choice but to accept the frightening child into her home, Petunia did her best to keep her nephew as far away from her Duddums so as not to taint or corrupt him. She hung more crucifixes all around her home and made sure to attend church with her husband and child as frequently as possible. The boy was also given a space in the cleared out cupboard under the stairs because it was the farthest from her Dudley that she could put him without making the boy sleep outside.

Harry, the boy’s name was Harry. Petunia recalled one of the few letters her sister had sent her over the years mentioning something about it being a family name on her husband’s side. When she read the brief note left with the boy on her doorstep and saw his name, she audibly scoffed and felt disgust towards her nephew’s namesake. Although ‘Harry’ was a rather normal name, knowing that it had come from that kind of people, made her feel sick just using it. So she called him other things, impersonal or even insulting names because she couldn’t hold in the repulsion inside of her and otherwise would do something irrational like try to ‘get rid’ of the child while he was still too young to fend for himself. Little things here and there kept her from throttling the boy or dumping him in an unfamiliar neighborhood and driving away.

The child, as she came to realize, was far more odd than any other that she’d encountered. As an infant, he never cried or threw tantrums—which she was thankful for, because she didn’t know what she or her husband would do if that weren’t the case. It was still odd, though. He wasn’t void of emotion or outbursts, but in times when any other baby would have cried or screamed or grizzled, he just sat quietly and watched you as he waited for you to give him what he needed.

As the infant grew into a child, his eyes became no less haunting. In fact, as the toddler developed into a small child his face became quite angelic and the epitome of innocence. Petunia will never admit it to anyone, but there were times when she doubted her approach to the boy. Sometimes she would look at her nephew and he would look so sweet and pure, incapable of doing harm to anyone, but then all she’d have to do is look into his eyes and remember where the abomination came from and where he would go later and the delusion dispersed.

It was around the time that he was four that the ‘incidents,’ that his kind were prone to have in childhood, became too much to be ignored: pictures would fly off of the walls when he was punished for a mistake, all of the flowers in her precious garden shriveling and dying when he was locked in his cupboard without food, everyone in the family except him coming down with a horrible stomach virus when Petunia lectured him about trying to upstage her son in school and how vanity and pride were sins.

Eventually, Vernon and Petunia had to shut down any notion that using that . . . sorcery in any capacity was wrong and the consequences were severe. Petunia was quite proud of her own resolve for never raising a harmful hand to the child, no matter how much she wanted to. There were cuffs upside the head and shoves, but Petunia always prided herself on being productive and efficient. So punishments usually meant longer hours in the garden, deep cleaning the carpets, and other tasks that she didn’t have time for on top of his other household duties.
Despite how well she felt she was doing raising the monster who had forced his way into her home, she knew—he knew—that she held no love or affection for the boy, and would not disillusion him into thinking he that he was welcome there. Monsters with the faces of angels were to be feared above all else.

The call of crows rang through the autumn air in the distance and a chilling wind swept through the branches, carrying with it the scent of decaying leaves. Harry had turned 8 the summer previous and had finally saved up enough money and was old enough to get his own library card at the local library. Harry had to pick up every bit of change off of the street—as well as a few coins out of Petunia’s purse—in order to afford the rather cheap library card. Harry forged Vernon’s signature and had been slipping books back into his cupboard without anyone knowing. The multiple times that Harry had asked his aunt or uncle to get him one, they’d laughed in his face, tutted, and told him that there was no use in wasting the money to educate him if he ‘just wasn’t going to amount to much anyways!’ They’d also said something about not having time to read along with all of his other chores.

Currently, he’d just finished putting a ham in the oven for a few guests who would be coming over later and was sitting outside on the left-hand side of the house between the brick and the fence with a book he’d brought back with him. Living in a world where everything he owned was either handed down to him from his cousin or small and insignificant things that he’d pinched over the years, knowledge was a possession he craved above all else because it couldn’t be taken from him once he gained it.

Harry didn’t consider himself some sort of child prodigy or genius—he was only eight—he just saw the value of a sharp mind and as much knowledge as it could carry in that moment. Harry liked to read many different things, from adventure stories to simple principles of science to words of wisdom from great people. His favorite, though, was always anything to do with people from unfortunate circumstances achieving the impossible. Call it wishful thinking.

Harry sighed and closed the book in his lap after reading the same paragraph three times without retaining anything. Recently, the bizarre ‘incidents’ have been happening more frequently and in growing strength. On top of that, Harry keeps having strange dreams that are not quite nightmares and not quite soothing either. Sometimes he dreams about an orphanage with children just as vicious as Dudley harassing him and a perpetual chill that settled into his bones, and sometimes he dreams about a cloaked figure who likes to talk to him and ask him questions like the friends in his stories do.

Harry never remembers exactly what was said when he awoke, but he could remember basic subjects they’d discussed or bits of advice the figure had given him. Harry would have been worried about having to dream up a companion who cares about him, but he knows that there isn’t much he
can do about it at this point. Harry wasn’t exactly the most inviting when it came to friendship—he found it hard to connect to people, especially when Dudley scared all of his potential friends away by spewing the same barmy nonsense his aunt and uncle liked to drill into his head about being evil or Dudley would intimidate them with his new wanna-be-thug friends.

Anyways, the dreams were happening more frequently too and—for some reason—Harry got the feeling that the conversations were leading up to something. Harry knew that they were just dreams and he was just being paranoid, but the feeling hadn’t left yet and it was beginning to affect him in his waking hours. Whatever that figure is hinting at, he certainly seems pleased with what he thinks is coming.

His mind must truly be desperate for an adventure as great as his stories, because the figure in his dreams always seemed to somehow bring up the notions of ‘magic’ and how *Harry* was magic! At first, he felt a little pathetic with how much he wanted to believe the mysterious being, but then again, how could he explain the . . . ‘incidents?’ He knew how his relatives explained it—he was worshiping the devil, a delinquent and prankster, he was being punished for the mistakes of his parents—but Harry had long since stopped holding a candle to anything his relatives said. Whether the being in his dreams actually had a clue about what was going on or if he was just deluding himself, he had no way of knowing.

The wind kicked up with another spiteful gust and Harry pulled his limbs in closer to his body. He clutched the closed book close to his chest and listened to the lively noises coming from the house with detachment. Harry’s mind drifted as he imagined the insistent wind finally taking hold of the clothes it teasingly tugged at and whisking him away, or sinewy and dirty tree roots bursting from the dirt beneath him and dragging him back down into the earth.
In the last chapter: Lily, James, and Harry Potter were killed by Voldemort in their home on Halloween. Death, watching the whole scene from outside the physical plane, decided to bring the youngest Potter back to life with a soul-binding deal. Seven years later, Harry is now eight and living with the Dursleys. Harry is frequently visited in his sleep by a strange figure, but never remembers their conversations. And so it continues. . .

Chapter Notes

Hey readers! Just so you know, I think I'm actually going to be posting chapters twice a week for the time being, at least until I get a couple of chapters in. I'll be posting at no specific time on Mondays and again on either Thursdays or Fridays.

If you have any questions, feel free to ask. Otherwise, enjoy!

-Pleasant Readings!

Harry’s always had rather bad luck. It’s not that nothing good ever happened to him—he’d consider Dudley waking up covered in burning boils after a bit too violent bout of ‘rough-housing’ pretty lucky—he was just . . . accident prone.

At first it was things like slipping in the shower or tripping over shoelaces and almost impaling himself on garden shears or gas leaks when he was the only one home. But every time something like that happened, Harry just brushed it off and counted his lucky stars that he remained intact. Eventually, they became more violent and much closer calls as he grew older: almost being hit by a van he didn’t even see, catching himself before he fell on something sharp and pointy after tripping or slipping on air, or unexpected and violent sicknesses that only affected him that disappeared just when his relatives were—begrudgingly—on the verge of bringing him to the hospital so that they didn’t have a very dead nephew on their hands.

When Harry mentioned the suspicious incidents to his frequent dream companion, he shared how he was worried that some of the events were actually his relatives trying to hurt him or get rid of him. His companion had chuckled heartily at the suggestion and dismissed it with the wave of his charred bony hand. ‘Nonsense!’ He’d said, ‘We both know that your relatives fear you far too much to try anything so . . . extreme.’ He dismissed in the strangely echoing baritone that had an oddly hushed quality to it, like everything in the world would listen without him ever having to raise his voice,
ancient and inhuman. And so he continued. ‘What’s happening is just **balance**, Harry.’

“I don’t understand, ‘balance?’” His companion had always been cryptic beyond coherency, so Harry wasn’t surprised to get another vague and confusing answer.

‘Last stitch effort of the universe to balance what is being willfully played with. However, it won’t be enough to cut things short. There isn’t much that I can say about this, explanations will come in a few years’ time when you turn eleven. Just be sure to keep safe and be careful.’ He ended in a serious tone that Harry used often enough when talking to adults so that he would be taken more seriously. Before Harry could attempt to break down those words and try to bleed some sort of understanding out of them, his companion was already moving on.

‘I was going to wait a while longer to start preparing you . . . but it cannot wait if you are already experiencing so much accidental magic. You will need to have control over it before you start school. It will be difficult communicating with you while you are awake so far from the original date I had set, but with a bit more effort, I can guide you enough to get you where you need to be without actually crossing the veil myself. I’ll need to prepare you for that world as much as possible, otherwise you will be chewed up and spit out the moment you get there.’ The cloaked figure mused, more to himself than to Harry. Harry felt like he was only hearing the dialog from only one person while so many other key parts were missing.

“I don’t understand——” a phrase Harry was starting to loath at that moment, “What are you on about?!?” What world? Accidental what!? His dreams sure were strange!

Harry could feel the other’s amusement as it seemed to echo around them and quake the black nothingness surrounding them as if they were settled in someone’s lungs while they laughed heartily, rather than Harry’s **nightmare** dream.

‘Magic, Harry! You have been a wizard since your birth and there are quite a few things that have been kept from you up until this point. There is a whole secret world out there, and I will teach you the best that I can so that you do not have to rely on those who do not have your best interest in mind once you get there. I will teach you about wizarding etiquette, spells and magic before you get your wand, what to expect in the years to come, who you are and where you came from.’ And he did just that.

That night, the being occupying Harry’s dreams went on to explain how wizards and witches came to be and how both of his parents were magic. Unlike the other times that Harry had dreamt, time moved extremely slow here, rather than too fast. Harry sat there on a wooden stool—that was surprisingly comfortable—for what felt like hours and hours, listening to a tale that seemed more complex and **amazing** than any he’d ever read before.
At some point, the being had paused in his explanation of the first wizarding war and the sudden silence shocked Harry out of the awed trance he’d been put under while listening. His companion seemed to be looking at something off to the left over Harry’s shoulder. Before Harry could turn to see what had caught his attention, the figure spoke.

‘It is almost dawn; you will be waking soon. I will not be able to converse with you while awake for at least a few more days, but we will continue this chat when you fall asleep again tonight.’ He said with a small twinge of regret in his tone for not being able to continue, but apparently not completely perturbed. Before Harry awoke, which he indeed felt himself doing soon, he had a burning question that he’d been waiting for a pause in the discussion to voice.

“Wait!” Harry held up his hand, even though the being wasn’t physically moving away Harry still felt like there was a greater distance between them now that he was close to consciousness. “Tell me who you are. If you want me to listen, if you insist on visiting me so often in my dreams then it is only polite to identify yourself.” Harry stated in a pleasant yet firm tone. The being let out unrestrained laughter and its shoulders shook and body rocked back with the force of it. Harry didn’t feel like he was being laughed at, he just patiently waited for him to settle before giving him a pointed look that said he was still waiting for an answer.

‘I'm glad I chose you, child.’ He said offhandedly before straightening and returning to his composed demeanor. ‘Are you sure you want to know? If I tell you, you’ll be . . . frightened.’ He asked, amusement still lilting in his voice.

Harry raised an eyebrow at that. Unimpressed by the underlying implications of those words.

“You must not know me well, then. Because if you did, you’d know that there isn’t much in this world that scares me anymore. I am not naïve enough to think that I’m stronger than anything that comes after me and can, therefore, not hurt me. I simply understand that there are many bad things that happen in this world and we barely have control over the good things, so why waste time pretending that we can control the bad?” Harry stared into the black abyss of shadows that seemed to thrive under the hood of the figure’s cloak to the face he knew to be there but could not see.

‘How cynical for someone so young.’ Was all the other said, not sounding disappointed nor amused by that statement. Harry frowned slightly at his words being misunderstood.

“How not cynical. I’m not saying that there isn’t good in this world or that you should give up on happiness. It’s just that, fear is wasted on what we don’t understand.” Harry wasn’t cynical, he just knew from experience that letting the fear in would only make the shadows seem darker, turn ordinary men into monsters, and keep him from opening his eyes and living his life, doing what
needs to be done. Harry wasn’t **fearless**, only an idiot would claim such a thing. Fear helps keep you sharp and safe, but too much fear can have the opposite effect. It can be debilitating.

His companion had been scrutinizing Harry’s face while he had his own little debacle inside his head about the word ‘**cynical.**’ Now that Harry was focused again, he felt the tug of consciousness dragging him away from the figure once again, whether either of them wanted to be dragged away from the conversation or not. Just as Harry thought he wasn’t going to get an answer, the being spoke up with an amused hint to his echoing and chilling voice.

‘**I am Death, Harry Potter. The Reaper of Souls and the conclusion to all that exists.**’ The finality of the words echoed through Harry’s mind as he bolted upright on his little cot in the cupboard. His heart puttered like a hummingbird’s in his chest and for once, the details of the dream stayed painfully vivid and clear in his waking mind. His head pounded achingly so, as if the dream had been carved and tattooed onto the inside of his skull.

Harry knew it was ridiculous, but every time he told himself that it was just a dream and the figure in his mind had been lying, it sounded like a lie even to his own brain.

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After dreaming about the being who called himself Death, Harry had woken up ready to dismiss the ridiculous notion and write it off as the over active imagination of a child unable to act like a child in real life. What Harry hadn’t counted on, though, was the familiar voice that spoke from just behind his ear.

The first time it happened, two days later, Harry had been making breakfast and startled well enough to drop the frying pan in his hand and managed to splash his legs with hot grease. The burns were painful, but not severe and he only got a thump on the head, a right ribbing, and a few days without meals from his aunt for the mess he’d made. It could have been much worse, had the pan melted or warped the linoleum of the kitchen floor, Harry would have been in for a far worse punishment. Getting more severe punishments than that was not common for Harry—not because his relatives were reluctant to punish him, Harry had just learned quickly not to screw up if at all avoidable.

The familiar voice hadn’t said much, just that he’d be talking with Harry again later about his magic and how to loosen his tight grip on it so that they could start practicing. As Harry sat in his cupboard for all the days of his punishment he continued to hear the voice throughout the day. By his fourth day stuck in the cupboard instead of at school, his companion had gotten considerably clearer and could talk for much longer periods of time.
Harry had resigned himself to the fact that he’d gone mad. Only mad people hear voices in the silence, only mad people listened to the voices in the silence.

It was another week before anything else happened. By ‘else’ he of course meant ‘crazy’. Harry had been tending to the garden when he noticed that every bright purple petunia he’d watered just yesterday had shriveled into brown and ugly husks. For a shocked and bewildered moment, Harry could help but feel like some divine metaphor had taken place right before his eyes, but he quickly snapped out of it and felt a mounting dread as he looked at the floral graveyard.

Harry panicked and turned around to grab for the spray bottle in a desperate hope to spray the flowers back to life before his aunt noticed. When Harry turned back around with the bottle, however, each and every petunia was flashing their bright and vibrant—and very much alive—heads at him.

Harry frowned and stared at the flowers suspiciously, like he could catch them in the act of playing dead if he waited long enough. Huffing out a weighted breath, Harry went back to the job at hand, though he never completely shoved the incident out of his mind.

Harry was usually able to easily push aside the weird and unusual things that tended to happen around him, but he was still a child and ever since his friend had shoved the thought into his head that he might be more than just Harry, he hadn’t been able to dismiss the events as easily as before. Harry wouldn’t admit it to anyone, but he was rather eager to give in to the delusions. He didn’t really mind if that made him batty, he didn’t feel mad.

After a few weeks of ‘familiarizing himself with his magical core’ (as Death had explained it, though, to Harry it just felt like some weird form of meditation) Harry finally did something.

Death—Harry had been disgruntled about calling his companion by that title, but the other had insisted—had taught him his first ‘spell’ once he felt that Harry was ready. Harry had rolled his eyes so many times over the past week, he feared that he would strain the muscle in his eyes. As it turns out, Harry was blown away when he managed to cast alohomora on his cupboard door and heard the soft sliding of metal against metal before the door swung open.

“I can’t believe it worked. . .” Harry said under his breath, still gaping at the slightly ajar door.
‘Of course it worked! It is one of the simpler spells you will learn in your first year of study. I would have done an even simpler one, but I assumed that you’d appreciate this one more.’ Death’s smug tone became a bit more serious and Harry caught on to what was silently being said. His companion had given him a way out! And Harry could appreciate it.

It meant that Harry had a way out of the cupboard at night in order to get food if he was being punished. It meant that his relatives couldn’t lock him away anymore if he needed to get out. It meant that magic is real!

That final realization had Harry’s head spinning and the hope that had been stubbornly popping up all over inside him too quickly for him to weed out now had a reason to be there. It’s real! It’s real and that means that I can leave! I’ll able to go to that wonderful school of magic and learn so much! Harry was so giddy, he felt the insane urge to pack all of his things now and wait by the mail slot for his letter even though it was still years away.

‘Oh my, has the cold and stoic child finally warmed up?’ Death’s tone practically dripped with amusement. Harry’s expression dropped into blank tolerance as he snapped at the being.

‘Enough of that!’ He hissed mentally, knowing his companion would hear the projection loud and clear. Harry was annoyed for a few more moments, before a thought popped into his head and he asked Death about it.

‘If magic comes from your core and we can cast spells without wands, then why do I need a wand? Do they do anything special?’ Harry asked, feeling more comfortable the longer he stared at the open door, the door that he opened.

‘Wands work as a focus or funnel for your magic instead of just throwing as much magic as you can at a spell until it works. Not only does it take an enormous amount of energy if you’re not used to wandless magic, but it’s essentially near impossible for many witches and wizards because they either don’t have enough power or concentration to wield wandless magic. Wandless magic is much more difficult, but in time it is certainly possible to learn how to control the flow of magic so that spells aren’t overpowered and you don’t exhaust your magic. It also means that you won’t be defenseless without a wand.

‘On top of all of that, when you turn eleven, the Trace will be put on you so that you cannot perform any underage magic outside of the magical school of witchcraft and wizardry, Hogwarts. The Trace sends a message to the Ministry of Magic anytime a person under the legal age uses magic or magic is used around them and that person will be given a warning, and then punished for any later offenses. There are loopholes, though. If you are in the presence of a magical adult, it won’t distinguish who the spell came from. The Trace has to do with using a wand for any sort of spell work, so wandless magic isn’t reported. The Trace is nullified while on school grounds, and the
Trace isn’t placed until you arrive at Hogwarts—which means that we will have a short period of
time to acquaint you with using a wand before you leave.’ Death explained.

‘So, in all; not using or having a wand will draw too much attention to you, and using one will make
all of your spell casting more precise and powerful. There is also an enormous benefit to continuing
to practice wandless magic, as it keeps your magical core sharp and under control seeing as you
have an abundance of magic, letting yourself be lazy and only use a wand will make your magic
even harder to control and could hurt you. Also, spells cast with a wand are recorded on said wand
and can therefore be seen by others if checked while wandless magic cannot, and it doesn’t leave
you defenseless when you’re without a wand. When you get your wand, use it around others and in
classes, but if you’re by yourself do try to practice it with here and there.’ Death concluded smartly.

One of the things Harry admired about his acquaintances was the fact that aside from a few stray
allusions to some huge event to take place on his eleventh birthday, he was always extremely honest
and open about the information he gave Harry. If Harry asked a question, even if he didn’t want to
know the truth, he always got the answer without any nitpicking or omissions.
It is not Death, it is Dying that Alarms me

Chapter Summary

In the last chapter: Harry finds out that there is a reason behind his 'accidents' and that he's a wizard. Harry also finds out that his 'dream companion' is actually the being Death and casts his first spell.

Chapter Notes

"It is not death, it is dying that alarms me," -Michel de Montaigne

When Harry turned nine, he finally asked the question he’d been avoiding since finding out about his heritage. ‘What happened to Lily and James Potter?’

By then, Harry had come to believe that his invisible friend was exactly who he claimed to be—Death. Between believing that he was a complete nutter or that he was magic, Harry would much prefer the latter. As Death, he would have to know something about what happened to his parents.

Harry wasn’t really shocked or surprised when he heard the story of how he’d lost his parents. His companion had of course mentioned the First Wizarding War when explaining what Harry would be submerged into as soon as he made an appearance at Hogwarts. He’d heard tales of the Dark Lord in great battles and the fear that only his name had brought.

Over time he explained more, settling more and more pieces of the puzzle into place for Harry to see. It started with the night his parents were killed and how he had supposedly vanquished the Dark Lord—Harry had scoffed at that part and the incredulity of an infant defeating an all-powerful wizard. The tales were told unbiased and apathetically, which Harry found strangely comforting. People always say that history is written by the victors, and Harry much preferred his information without opinions attached.

Harry found the complex and fantastical tale to be fascinating, and would often ask about Voldemort and Dumbledore and Grindelwald and the epic that had become his life. Harry soaked up all of the information like a sponge, along with more spells and charms and even a hex or two, wizarding etiquette, basic lectures on the wizarding world system and how it relates to the muggle world. It was
a lot to take in, but surprisingly, Death was a good teacher. Apparently the dead didn’t like to converse with him, they were too scared to, and so he enjoyed discussing the different things he’d witnessed about the changing world (both muggle and magical) around him, with Harry.

When Harry’s tenth birthday came and went, Death began to focus more on the Hogwarts curriculum and social structures within the school. Harry’s demeanor in regards to Hogwarts mellowed out quite a bit, but he was still very excited to see this new world that’d been just out of his reach all those years.

Along with more information about the school, Harry was also given more information on the man who had killed his parents. More specifically, who he was before he’d barged into Godric’s Hollow. Tom Marvolo Riddle had been a powerful and prodigal half-blood boy before he slowly transformed into the dreadful Dark Lord that had terrorized Wizarding Britain for decades. An ambitious boy who sought out immortality, despite the grave costs, in order to avoid a mundane and ‘muggle death’.

Harry was given vague information about Horcruxes. Harry didn’t know the specifics, but he knew the basics of how they were made, how they tampered with the soul, and that Voldemort had somehow made more than one and it was one of the main contributors to Tom Riddle’s devolution into Lord Voldemort.

It had shocked Harry to find out just how similar their early lives were. Half-blood orphans left in the care of muggles who feared and hated them. Harry didn’t feel bad for Tom. They had such similar experiences, but Harry wasn’t headed down the same path. He wasn’t consumed by rage or the need to prove he was superior. Harry didn’t feel much of anything towards his relatives, in fact. They weren’t good people by any stretch, but they also weren’t worth the time and effort.

No, what Harry gained from hearing about Tom Riddle was understanding. Tom Riddle was the largest puzzle piece in this whole convoluted and complex story, and without him nothing made sense—Voldemort didn’t make sense. But now Harry could understand. He didn’t agree with the choices Tom made that led him to becoming Voldemort; in fact, Harry thought that Tom was an idiot and rather petulant for taking so many needless and dangerous shortcuts and allowing the consequences to pile up as he lost his sanity and slowly diverged from his set path.

While Voldemort’s chosen path brought him closer to vengeance and total control, Harry, on the other hand, felt no desire to rule anything or to bring any attention towards himself at all. Finding out how famous he was in the Wizarding world had not been a joyful event for Harry. Being ignored was something he was good at, and while it might sting to be ignored by everyone, it also allotted an abundance of privacy that he’d grown to value.

Harry’s relationship with his relatives didn’t improve—if anything, they became more vicious as his
eleventh year approached—but Harry was able to manage much better now that he knew magic. Harry was fairly good at wandless magic and was able to create a system that helped to keep him fed properly and heal any injuries he’d acquired from his ‘accidents’ or a bashing from Dudley by the next morning. Nearly a decade of malnutrition couldn’t be wiped away that easily, though. Harry had gotten himself up from ‘sickly’ to just ‘skinny’ over the past couple of years, but he still forgot to eat all too often and it was hard trying to sneak himself food during the day and eating himself full in the cover of night wasn’t healthy or nearly enough.

The Dursley’s kept their distance though. Since Harry had become quite good at wandless magic, revenge was only that much easier. With the instruction of his companion to learn how to do this rather harmless bit of magic, Harry learned how to release his magic into the air around him. Apparently, Harry’s magic was only slightly above average in its raw form for his age, but would still be very oppressive and intimidating to muggles. With a simple cold glare and the temperature dropping significantly as the air seemed choked with magic, his relatives were far more reluctant to go out of their way to bother Harry.

It was quite a useful trick and when Harry asked his friend if wizards and witches used the same trick on each other the being had affirmed that it was a common power play to assert a higher role in the wizarding hierarchy. The dark, immortal creature also seemed convinced that Harry’s magic would change? Increase? Something like that, when his eleventh birthday came along.

Harry had steeled his resolve and refused to ask him any questions about what would happen on his eleventh birthday because he knew he wouldn’t get an answer and he would only end up more frustrated with not knowing.

A little over a month before Harry’s eleventh birthday was his dear cousin’s birthday. The morning started with the squealing and shrill whining of a spoiled boy who ‘only got 37 presents!’ Harry was already irritable from the racket Dudley had made trying to sneak down the stairs the night before to get a peek at the gifts laid out around the living room. Harry’s headache was a livid pulsing through his skull and behind his eyes as he made breakfast.

Even worse, later as he was serving them breakfast, Harry heard Petunia mention something about Arabella Figg (their next door neighbor) breaking her leg and being unable to watch Harry while they took Dudley to the zoo. Which meant that Harry, Dudley, and Dudley’s friend Piers Polkiss would be taking a little trip to the zoo together and Harry had a sinking feeling in his gut about the whole thing.

Vernon Dursley glared at Harry through his rear-view mirror throughout the drive to the zoo, as if Harry had somehow snuck into their neighbor’s house and broke her leg himself to somehow weasel
his way into going to the zoo with them. Even if Harry could do that—which he probably could, considering—why on earth would he want to?

So they made their way to the zoo, packed with rambunctious children that seemed to have been there on a school field trip, judging by all of the matching uniforms flitting around the place unsupervised.

In the Reptile House Harry watched on as his cousin and his friend pounded on the glass like Neanderthals to try and force the coiled up Boa constrictor to wake up and ‘do bloody something!’ Harry was thinking about how the smooth scales would feel under the pads of his fingertips and just how powerful its constriction would be when Dudley and Piers wandered off to look at Komodo Dragons and the snake finally lifted its head from the heap of olive green and black patterned scales.

Feeling the absence of his companion’s chatter all morning, Harry decided to ramble idly to the snake. To his bewilderment, the snake seemed to understand him and responded with a lethargic nod. His wonder was interrupted when Harry was suddenly roughly shoved out of the way and to the ground so Dudley could shriek and pound the glass like a gorilla. A tendril of hate curled tight in Harry’s chest as he imagined strong and thick coils wrapping around the squishy body of his cousin and squeezing until—

The glass vanished and Dudley toppled right over into the tank with the snake. Harry’s focus was solely for the constrictor as it slid out of its tank and onto the same cement floor Harry was still sprawled on. Then, suddenly the snake spoke in low hissing tone and thanked Harry before declaring he would go to Brazil. The screams of other terrified patrons filled Harry’s ears and he couldn’t help but wince at the trouble he’d undoubtedly caused himself.

That was the first bit of unintentional magic Harry had done since Death had begun teaching him how to get a hold on his magic.

The incident seemed to pull said being’s attention back to him and Harry immediately asked him if that snake was magical or actually a wizard or witch like what his companion had mentioned some time ago, an animagus, wasn’t it?

‘No, even in the animagus form, animals can’t talk. What you’ve experienced is what I believe to be Parseltongue. It’s an extremely rare ability among wizards that is particularly unique to the Slytherin bloodline. As of now, with Voldemort being the last of that line in the world—other branching lines are far too diluted for the ability to appear—you and him are the only Parselmouths I know of.’ Death answered with a slight hint of fascination. Harry hadn’t even noticed he was speaking a different language. The prospect of an entire language passed through DNA was incredible, but something else struck him before he could dwell on the possible implications of this newfound ability.
'Wait, does that mean that he and I are related?' Harry frowned slightly, positive that he would have remembered the house name being mentioned when they had talked about Harry’s ancestry and lordships.

‘Of course not, little one. It’s to do with the night you last faced each other. Don’t worry about it right now, it’s yet to be important. I think you should be more focused on the ghastly plum color your uncle is turning.’ Death pointed out and Harry’s mind snapped back to the present.

By the time Harry was shoved back into his cupboard with the door locked securely behind him, his head felt like it was splitting from the constant screeching from his aunt and growled threats from his uncle. Harry swears that if harpies existed, Petunia must take after one somewhere in the family tree.

Harry wasn’t actually upset about being locked in his cupboard again. It seemed that this whole ‘balance’ thing is really throwing its all at Harry. Every other day he seems to be caught in some life-threatening situation that only magic could help him out of. As much as Harry hated to admit it, one of the safest places for him—so close to his birthday—was probably right there in that cupboard.

Harry took his punishment of a week in his cupboard sans meals without a fuss and soon returned to a summer of hard labor and gardening and cleaning and cooking until his fingers and back ached and his mind lulled into the numb buzz his chores always brought on.

Harry felt equal parts nervous and queasy thinking about his birthday and everything that comes after. The thought of getting his wand and all of his school supplies, of seeing Diagon Alley for the first time and Gringotts, of meeting other wizards and getting his hands on magical books! It all had him nearly bursting out of his skin and running off to go do all those things early.

Harry’s Hogwarts letter arrived a week before his birthday. The moment he saw the red wax seal on the back of an envelope he sent the letter zipping through the air soundlessly and slipping under the door to his cupboard so he could read it later. Knowing his relatives as he did, whatever reaction they might have to the letter beckoning him into the world they despised was bound to be dreadful.

Later that night, when Harry was finally alone, he read the letter inviting him to attend Hogwarts
school of Witchcraft and Wizardry with a list of required materials on the back. Tucked between the pages was a train ticket with words that seemed to catch in the light and show different words underneath. Underneath, Harry was able to read ‘Hogwarts Express’ and ‘Platform 9 ¾.’ It also told Harry the time and place of departure. Harry figured that this must be how students got to Hogwarts.

Harry didn’t want to wait until his birthday to get everything he needed, but his friend had informed him that he would first need to access his Gringotts vault(s) and since he had neither a key nor adult escort, it would be best to wait until his magic was fully settled before trying to claim anything. He hadn’t fully understood what that all meant, but he didn’t ask because too many ‘useless’ questions made for a very irritable Death. Harry nearly rolled his eyes at the ridiculousness of that thought.

The morning of July 31st began with Harry waking up much later than he usually would and sticky with a clammy sheen over his whole body. Every joint and bone and even tooth ached and his muscles trembled slightly as he got out of bed. When Harry left his cupboard he was immediately reprimanded from another room for being lazy and sleeping half the day away. Fortunately, Harry was too busy trying to stumble his way to the loo to really hear any of it.

Once there, Harry was met with the frightening reflection of himself. His grey-pale skin was shinny with a cold sweat, colorless and fragile enough that the blue and purple veins under his skin were visible all over. His eyes were bloodshot and the purple smudges underneath only made it so much worse. He looked hunched and frail and so close to the brink of death even he didn’t think he should be up walking around.

Death was an extreme conclusion to jump to, but Harry's fever-delirious brain was refusing to take logical steps, leaping immediately to horrible situations and possibilities.

‘What’s happening? Is something wrong? Am I dying?’ Even his mental voice sounded meek and slightly raspy. There was a long silence that followed. Every passing second caused the panic to rise in Harry’s gut until it wrapped around his throat and made it harder to breathe.

‘Calm down Harry. . . This is exactly what’s supposed to happen, so don’t worry. I guess that it is time to tell you, since you have made it far enough and survived my requirements. . .’

Fever and aching muscles forgotten, Harry felt a burst of energy as he eagerly awaited the answers he’d been craving for years! Sitting on the closed lid of the toilet, Harry stared blankly at the decorative hand towels as all of his focus went to whatever his friend was about to say.
'When Voldemort cast the killing curse on you, you didn’t actually survive. Your bright soul came through the veil and warmed even my cold dead hands with its light. For several reasons—including how much of a waste your death would be and how interesting the land of the living would become if I gave you a second chance—I decided to bring you back. I asked your soul for permission first, of course. I told your soul that if you could survive until your eleventh birthday without me interfering with the universe trying to balance for your revival, then I would bestow several gifts upon you so that your soul could have a chance at gaining what it so desired.

'The first gift is a portion of my own magic. It is a completely insignificant amount to me, but it will be quite . . . beneficial for you. My second gift is actually something that I had given to one of your ancestors; the cloak of invisibility is so strong and impervious, even Death can’t find you!’ That part came with a hearty chuckle that made Harry feel a little more relaxed. That is, until Death continued.

'My last and most important gift is, immortality. If you die, you will cross into the land of the dead, and then be whisked back into your body before it even starts to cool. Aside from coming back each time you die, you will also be more resilient to death in general. My gift, for becoming such a dear friend and companion to me, Harry Potter, is the ability to do whatever you like and achieve anything you want without fear of a timeline. Immortality is not a gift without burdens, but having gotten to know you I do not regret my decision for a single moment.

'I care not what you do with your gift, I do not bother with light or dark and the state of the world is not my concern. All I ask from you is that you use this gift to find happiness. I have watched your life from the veil, I have witnessed your suffering without being able to do anything but watch until you were much older. I have, for the first time, felt sorrow for a human and I will admit to the devastation it brought me. Find what your spirit calls for in the night and I will be content with my decision.'

Harry’s mind reeled with this new information, though it didn’t feel quite real yet. He felt detached from it, like they were talking only in the hypothetical. Which is why he had no problem asking, 'And what is it? What does my soul ‘call out for’ so to speak?’ The question felt like it had more weight than everything Death had spoken of in the last few minutes. Something so deep and . . . vulnerable had him feeling hesitant. Did he really want to know what his soul desired? It was too late to take the question back now, though, with the answer already filling the air behind him.

'It calls for the song of another. Not quite the same, but they make such a beautiful melody together. It will come, in time. When it does, I wish you all the happiness.' There were faint underlying notes of pride in his companion’s tone that made Harry feel both happy and distressed at the same time. Pressure, especially emotional pressure, was not something that Harry dealt with well. It was never a requirement in his life, there were barely any positive expectations for him at all, much less ones to
be emotionally competent with others.

Not wanting to linger on the uncomfortable topic of souls and songs and what have you, Harry changed the subject to a more urgent matter.

‘So . . . how does this work? I feel like shite until the exact time of my birth? Or is my body just adjusting to the new gifts?’ Harry could still feel the energy seeping from his body as the minutes ticked by. If his companion hadn’t seemed so sure that this is exactly what was supposed to happen, Harry would have feared that this was the universes’ last leg at wiping him out, one last super-sickness to get him for sure this time.

‘Not quite . . . yes and no. Your primary gift is immortality, Harry. In order to accept your gifts, you must first give one last sacrifice before you reap the rewards. Your body is adjusting in order to receive these gifts, primarily, it’s adjusting your magical core to make room. That is why you feel . . . ‘like shite’ and it will continue to get worse until finally you heart stops and you make your first visit to me with your gifts. You will, of course, be sent back right away, but the experience will be exhausting since you will have no energy left to begin with. I’m sure that you will pass out as soon as you come back so you don’t have to worry about the discomfort of your core adjusting.’

The words sent a ringing shock through Harry’s body and it all seemed to finally snap into focus. This is real! I’m going to die, and then come back? I’ve died before! Will it hurt? What if he’s wrong? What if I don’t come back?

The panic was settling in.

It felt like he was in a vacuum.

Too much pressure. No air.

Black smudged the edges of his vision. His bum hit cold linoleum floors and he curled in on himself.

‘Calm down, Harry. . . You need to breathe and focus or else you’ll pass out. Raise your arms above your head . . . a little higher—that’s it! Now focus on slower deeper breaths. Don’t worry about whether you can feel it yet or not, just go through the motions and the breath will come.’

When the panic slowly began to subside, Harry found himself with his back bowed against the
porcelain tub and his knees close to his face. It took quite a while to come back down from the panic attack, but all too soon reality came back in the form of Dudley pounding on the door yelling something about taking a shower.

Harry sighed deeply and pushed himself off of the floor with shaky arms and legs. A few hours later found him back in his cupboard, clutching a bottle of water loosely in his hand as sweat dripped down from his hair line and down his back as he panted hoarsely with eyes half closed. Harry was leaning against the wall opposite of the door, staring at off-white paint had had been scraped away in some places in long scratches that came from blunt little fingernails.

Harry didn’t know exactly when it was going to happen, but it felt like any second now. His heart thudded lethargically in his chest and the low pulsating thrum in his ears marked the time slipping away.

While he could still move, Harry shifted until he was laying on his back and staring up at the worn wooden underbelly of the stairs. Instead of thinking about... certain undesirable topics, Harry decided to think about one of his favorite stories. The rich and indulgent tales of *Alice in Wonderland*. Harry had always hoped that one day he would see a white rabbit hopping through the garden muttering under its breath about being late. He always hoped that he’d stumble upon a rabbit hole on accident that took him far away from 4 Privet Drive.

Closing his eyes, Harry pushed through the rasp of his vocal cords in order to hum a soft and haunting tune under his breath. He didn’t know where he’d heard it from, perhaps one of the movies they blare from the living room, but it soothed him. His breath evened out and his sore body relaxed against the cot as the minor notes filled his space and washed over his mind like cool water on an overheated body. He found as much comfort in the haunting song as one might find in his mother’s arms, as strange as it sounded.

As the last mournful note rang through the air with surprising clarity, Harry didn’t pull in another breath and he fell asleep. . . At least, that’s what it felt like at the time.

When Harry opened his eyes again he was standing in a small meadow in the middle of a forest. Vivid and bright colors would have hurt his eyes, had it been real. Had he been alive.

Thick, ancient trees surrounded him, covered in moss and crackled old bark. A babbling brook somewhere nearby filled the area with a delicate trickling melody and the cool breeze carried hissed notes that were harmonious through the trees. The grass was thick and soft beneath his bare feet while the sun gently warmed his skin. The sweet scent of thriving nature untouched by man filled his lungs and he felt like laughing with how amazing it felt, despite him never being much of an outdoorsy person.
‘Beautiful, isn’t it?’ Harry whipped around at the sound of a familiar voice and couldn’t help but grin at the imposing figure before him. A towering, yet hunched, being made of shadows and billowing black robes that even the sun couldn’t touch. Harry was laughing before he even realized he wanted to laugh. ‘Found something humorous, have you?’ Death asked with amusement in his own voice. Harry took a moment to settle down before answering, though the grin didn’t dissipate whatsoever.

“Yeah, you! I just imagine all the poor souls who died and thought that they were in heaven before seeing you! You must have scared quite a few in your time.” Harry mused, imagining the terrified shrieks and squeals when their dream land suddenly gained one hell of a nightmare.

‘If you were anyone else, I would have taken great offense to that.’ Death said, though the grin was easy to hear in his voice and there was no hint of a threat in his words. ‘As much as I would enjoy talking with you here for a while longer, I’m afraid you must leave now. It won’t matter later on, but as it is your first time here, lingering for too long would not be wise. Do take my previous advice and rest when you return. When you’re ready, we’ll take that trip to Diagon Alley and get your supplies.’ Death said as he approached Harry.

Once Death stood directly in front of him, Harry didn’t get the chance to speak before one black skeletal hand pressed gently against his chest and it felt like someone had slammed his bare heart with a sledge hammer right before the world around him snapped into nothingness.
Diagon Alley and the Boy Who Lived

Chapter Summary

In the last chapter: Harry finds out the truth about his parents, Tom Riddle, and even more about Hogwarts. Harry goes to the Zoo with the Dursley’s for Dudley’s birthday and later Harry receives his Hogwarts letter. One Harry’s eleventh birthday, he finds out the truth about what exactly happened that night in Godric’s Hollow and experiences his first death since he was an infant.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Waking up after dying is as horrible as one would assume. His companion said that after the first time, the effects would be far less severe, but Harry no longer thought that that was much of a consolation anymore. It felt like Harry had been hit by several trains, thrown off the top of a skyscraper, and then forced to chug multiple bottles of bleach at once. But hey, at least it seemed that his vision had improved. Literally die and come back to life just for some good o’ 20/20.

Harry spent his first day with his new abilities in bed, nursing the worst death-hangover imaginable and summoning food and water when he needed it, which was often. Harry slept, ate, and groaned the day away, not even caring when his relatives kicked his door and snapped at him to start his chores.

On the second day, however, Harry was better than ever and itching with excitement—though he’d never let it show on the outside. He dressed in his best clothes—thank you, wandless magic and immortal being who cared about Harry’s wellbeing—pinched a few notes from Petunias purse, and took several different forms of muggle transportation to London before walking the rest of the way to the Leaky Cauldron.

Harry didn’t look at any of the witches or wizards within the pub as he calmly made his way straight for the back exit where the brick wall was that would take him to Diagon Alley. He would draw enough attention as it was by being so young and unescorted, he didn’t need anyone finding out about his . . . past quite yet. There was a decent notice-me-not charm on him, but that wouldn’t stop a full grown wizard if they were determined enough.

Harry followed his companion’s explicit instructions and tapped his bare finger against the appropriate bricks and watched with internal fascination as the bricks shifted and moved until Harry
stood before an archway that led into a bustling and busy Alley filled with shops and robe-clad wizards and witches. Ever since his birthday, Harry had noticed how his magic was much calmer, yet far quicker to answering his call. His training with Death had made Harry aware of his magical core, so it was strange feeling just how immense an ‘insignificant amount’ of Death’s magic had felt once added to his own.

Harry didn’t dawdle at the entrance, not wanting anyone to see him and wonder why a boy who looks new to the world of magic would come here unescorted. Apparently, muggle-born students were sent their Hogwarts letters in the form of a member of staff arriving at their door to explain to the child and its parents that it was magic. Then the staff member would bring the student to Diagon Alley so that they could get their supplies.

Although Harry wasn’t muggle-born, he still wouldn’t have had any idea about this place without his companion. Harry briefly wondered how in the world he would have gotten the required supplies had he not already known about this place. Would a member of staff still visit him? Would he have to explain that yes, he already knew, and no, would not need to be escorted to Diagon Alley?

He was instructed swiftly through Diagon Alley and straight to the wizarding bank, Gringotts. Harry kept his focus singular as he walked up to the first unoccupied goblin teller he could find. The bank only had a few people around, but Harry couldn’t get a good look at them because of their own notice-me-not spells—not that Harry wanted to see them really.

The goblin he approached, Bogrod, glanced disdainfully at Harry and then went back to what he was going without saying anything. Knowing what he knew about goblins, Harry felt quite amused by the quick dismissal. Goblins didn’t like nor trust wizards and tended to treat every one of them with initial resentment. His deathly companion spoke quite fondly of the highly intelligent little creatures, so Harry felt nothing but amusement towards the otherwise rude gesture.

“I’d like to have a look at my vaults, please.” Harry said politely after a short bow towards the creature. Bogrod watched him with a raised wickedly long eyebrow before responding.

“Key please.” Bogrod’s gruff voice was neither kind nor hateful, which Harry considered an improvement.

“I’m afraid I don’t have one. I was orphaned at quite a young age and I am unsure of who might hold the key to my vaults now.” Harry relayed with the same level of politeness as before. Bogrod didn’t look pleased, but it didn’t seem that the expression was meant for Harry. At least, not entirely.

Bogrod pulled out a piece of parchment that glinted gold in the warm light, and a pin. He handed
Harry the pin and placed the parchment in front of him without saying a single word. Not needing anymore clues than that, Harry pricked his finger and held it over the parchment. When the third drop fell, Bogrod snatched the paper up with long clawed fingers and his eyes moved across the page quickly as if he was reading something, which, perhaps he was. Again, a long hairy eyebrow rose and Bogrod looked up at Harry for a long moment before back down at the parchment.

Harry waited in silence as the goblin read on. Suddenly the goblin froze. Then looked up at Harry with an unreadable expression. Without another word, the Goblin hopped down from his teller station and ran to the other end of the room to where the Head Goblin sat. Harry watched with detached interest at the whispered and frantic exchange between the two goblins. Harry’s mind was elsewhere, thinking over his list of supplies he still needed to get before he left and wondering, vaguely, if there was going to be an issue with accessing the money his parents left him. Harry wasn’t interested in money or wealth, but he didn’t have any money of his own and there were things he simply needed.

Feeling slightly impatient and aware of how much he still needed to do, Harry calmly walked over to where the two goblins still had their heads bowed close to each other and didn’t notice Harry until he stopped right in front of the high desk of the Head Goblin. The Head Goblin immediately turned to Harry and flashed a wicked and sharp toothed smile.

“Our sincerest apologies Mr. Potter. It was a surprise to see you coming in here alone, and even more so to see your titles. My employee had make sure that there wasn’t a mistake in what he’d read.” The goblin explained and the pale little creature seemed to pale even further. Harry didn’t let his reactions show as his curiosity ate him up inside.

“I cannot say that I am fully aware of all of my titles or inheritances. I know that I cannot claim lordships, property, or family vaults until I am of age, but I would like to know now what I will actually be inheriting. Would you mind if I take a look?” Harry asked, pointing briefly at the golden parchment still in Bogrod’s hand.

“Of course not! You can have a look at that before Bogrod takes you to your trust vault. When you return, I can give you a copy of this inheritance parchment so that you can keep a record of what you have. I can also summon your vault key. Only your magical guardian and you should have that key, and if they have not been using it to assist you financially, then there is no reason for them to have it anymore.

"You will be in charge of your own vaults, Mr. Potter. Should you give the key to someone, therefore initiating a change in magical guardianship, come back here to fill out the official forms. The forms cannot be signed under compulsion or imperio, so you need not worry about safety. If, in the future, you have any questions about your lordships or properties or vaults, please contact me.” The Head Goblin’s tone was actually . . . pleasant! Not what Harry had been expecting.
Harry took the offered parchment with a polite smile and began reading the black ink that he hadn’t seen there before. Harry wasn’t surprised by most of it, since his companion had already had a fairly accurate knowledge of these things already. There was the Potter lordship, of course, but also a few others that Harry didn’t recognize. According to his friend, the lordships were from lines that had died out without a named heir that were either close friends of the Potters or the Potters were their closest relatives. They were small lordships, but would help if he ever stepped into the world of politics.

What caught Harry off guard, and what had probably ruffled the goblins up, was a title he hadn’t ever expected to be on there. At the very bottom of the list of titles, signaling the most recently added title, was ‘Master of Death.’ Harry quirking an eyebrow was the only external acknowledgement to his shock as he turned his curiosity inward. His friend seemed overly amused by the title.

‘Mortals and their ridiculous need to put a title to everything! I suppose if a title were to be put on what you are now, Master of Death would work, but it sounds strange being that I am ‘Death’ and I have no master, certainly not you, child.’ Death huffed and Harry wanted to roll his eyes, but he refrained, as he was in public. You know what they say about bad habits. . .

Harry handed the parchment back as Bogrod quickly moved down the small steps and came to stand in front of Harry.

“I don’t have to say that this is never to be shown or spoken about to anyone. I will trust in what I have been told about Gringotts client confidentiality and will gladly accept that copy when I return.” With a nod from the Head Goblin, Harry followed Bogrod deeper into the magical goblin bank.

Once all of Harry’s affairs with Gringotts were sorted and he walked out with an expansion and feather-light charmed leather pouch of galleons and his vault key, Harry went to Madam Malkin’s Robes for All Occasions because he figured that it'd be best to finish with the robes first since he didn't know how long they would take to make. Harry was measured quickly by the flying tape measures and the severe Madam Malkin herself. When he was ushered to sit on a chair, he met another boy his age who seemed to also be getting his school robes.

The pale boy with bone white hair talked about smuggling his broom into Hogwarts, despite the fact that the Hogwarts letter specifically told them not to try to bring one. He rambled on about Quidditch, and Harry listened politely, though he admittedly didn’t know much about the sport. When he started talking about the Hogwarts houses, though, and something about knowing he’ll probably be in Slytherin, Harry gained interest.
Harry hadn’t really thought in depth about which house he hoped to be in, since they all had the same curriculum. It seemed that the houses allotted different social purposes. Slytherin was a good house for those who wanted to climb high in society and have the network to get there. Gryffindor seemed to be the homing beacon for light wizards. Hufflepuff created strong and loyal allies and friends, although it was the house that took in the ones that didn’t fit in to any of the houses more than any other, still predominantly light families. Lastly, Ravenclaw was rather neutral as the house based its social structure on wits and personal merits rather than family and bloodlines and wealth. All of them had redeemable qualities, which is exactly what he told the other boy when he asked which house Harry wanted to be sorted into.

“That’s . . . actually pretty smart. Even if I have to disagree with you on Gryffindor being a suitable choice. I’ve seen more bigots come out of that house than Slytherin, that’s for sure!” The boy exclaimed with a sneer and Harry couldn’t help but laugh at the fuming little blonde next to him.

“I suppose you’d be quite right with that one.” The boy’s sneer transformed into a mischievous smile when he saw the sparkle of mirth in Harry’s eyes. Speaking of Gryffindor, Harry thought about his supposed fame in this world and wondered how many people expected him to follow in the footsteps of his parents. Problem was, Harry didn’t even remember his parents, why would he continue their legacy at the expense of his academic life for the next seven years?

“Did you hear? It’s been ten years since You-know-who was defeated. Which means that Harry Potter might be coming to Hogwarts this year!” The blonde leaned forward and hissed in a loud whisper, his eyes alight with gossip. Harry was chuckling on the inside as he thought to himself, if only you knew.

“You don’t say? What do you think he’ll be like?” Harry asked casually, a small smile pulling at the corners of his mouth.

“My Godfather, Severus Snape, said that he went to school with Potter’s parents and apparently his dad had been a right Gryffindor prick! Don’t get me wrong, having the defeater of the Dark Lord as a friend would be a huge public image boost, but if he’s going to be some reckless and righteous Gryffindor like his father then is there really a point?” The boy scowled just as Madam Malkin came striding back into the room with two bags in her hands. She gave one to the blonde boy and one to Harry as both boys stood up.

Just then, the door opened and a finely dressed man with a regal expression and shoulder length white blond hair with an equally elegant blond woman walked in just behind him. They walked over and began talking to Madam Malkin about something that Harry almost immediately lost interest in. Turning back to the boy he’d just met, Harry could see the resemblance and it wasn’t hard to figure out who these people were to the young to-be-Slytherin.
“I’m Draco, by the way. Draco Malfoy.” The blonde—Draco—said and held out an elegant hand, the fluid movements and pale fingers reminding Harry vaguely of a swans wing. Harry took the offered hand and shook it twice to show amicability, by not familiarity. Wizarding etiquette at its finest. Harry didn’t let go of Draco’s had right away though and a mischievous smile curled Harry’s mouth without showing teeth.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Draco Malfoy. My name is Harry Potter. I hope to be seeing you soon.” Harry’s tone was nothing but friendly and as soon as his hand slipped out of Draco’s, he gave a polite nod and left, having already paid for his robes before getting measured. The look of stunned silence on the poor blonde’s face had Harry smiling all the way to *Flourish and Blots*.

Harry bought the books he needed, feeling giddy as he left the book store and promising himself that he would be back soon enough to pick up more books that he wouldn’t need for school, but for his free time. Harry bought the rest of the supplies, leaving the wand for last.

Finding a wand was quite interesting. Albeit a long and tedious process, when Harry finally got his hands on the brother wand of the Dark Lord—a very interesting turn of events—the warm and exhilarating feeling that washed over him was something else. Harry didn’t need it to connect to his magic, but the holly and phoenix feather core wand felt like a fine brush in his hand when all he’d been doing for the past few years was finger painting.

When Harry returned to 4 Privet Drive that night, he was met with unadulterated rage. Petunia had noticed the cash he’d nicked out of her purse and before he could think to stop it, a white hot strip of pain bloomed across his face from where he’d been slapped. Bony fingers grabbed his chin and dug into the flesh, forcing Harry to look her in the eyes as she bellowed.

“HOW DARE YOU!” Her face was nearing the shade that her husband’s took on whenever he was angry. It made her look like a pumpkin that had been left outside for too long. That is, if pumpkins could turn that horrible shade of red. She pulled back and there’s another slap, and another, without ever letting go of Harry’s chin.

Harry always knew that one day things would escalate, he just hadn’t thought about how soon it could be. As Petunia raised her hand to lay another stinging slap on Harry’s already red cheek, Harry raised a hand of his own and Petunia froze. It was almost comical, the widening of her eyes when she realized that she couldn’t move her body. Harry’s magic curled out of him like smoke and the air became almost toxic with magic. Vernon took a step closer, but he too was ensnared by Harry’s magic and forced to stay still.
“A month. All I ask for is a month of civility before I leave you all alone, I know that’s what you want. Tolerate my presence for one more month and you won’t have to see me ever again if I can help it.” Harry didn’t beg them, but he also didn’t force them to comply. He let go of his hold on his relatives and neither immediately attacked him, which was a good sign. Harry’s eyes darkened and the pressure in the room returned for a moment. “If you raise a hand to me again, though, I cannot promise I will be so forgiving.” Harry warned and the fear in each set of eyes was all the confirmation he needed that his message was received. Harry went straight to the cupboard and slammed the door behind him.

Harry sat on his cot and pulled out his shrunken items from his pockets. Harry un-shrank his books and ignored the burning sting and flushed heat in his cheek as he began to read the course material. He had heard nothing from his companion, and for that he was grateful. Harry never liked talking about his relationship with his relatives. As long as he could pretend that the relationship was normal, as long as he could act like he understood why they treated him as they did, he wouldn’t have to confront the issue.

He would, one day, but that day certainly wasn’t today.

Not here, not while he still had to live with them.

Perhaps when he had absolute assurance that he would never have to return.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you guys enjoyed this chapter! The next will be posted next Monday on August 1st.

-Pleasant Readings!
In the last chapter: Harry went to Diagon Alley. Harry went to Gringotts, discovers his new title, and takes back his vault key from his magical guardian. He then met Draco at Madam Malkin’s. When Harry returned home, he made it clear to the Dursleys that they no longer held power over him.

During the month that Harry had until the beginning of his first year at Hogwarts, Harry returned to Diagon Alley once more. All he picked up were a few interesting looking books, a few quality sets of wizarding robes, and a snowy owl named Hedwig.

Also during that time, Harry acclimated the spells he knew to using them with a wand. The trouble with going from all wandless magic to using a wand, was that all of his spells were too overpowered at first. Spells can be amplified by using more magic than necessary, but if they become overpowered, they end up shorting out and not working.

For the first time, Harry and his relatives seemed to co-exist without conflict. Harry didn’t have to do chores and could focus on reading and practicing spells while his relatives ignored his existence completely. It worked perfectly well for him, in this case.

By the end of the month Harry had completely finished going through his text books—reading theories, trying out unfamiliar spells, and skimming anything unimportant that he’d already known. Harry had felt the difference in his magic ever since he’d become the ‘Master of Death,’ he kept it contained most of the time, knowing how uncomfortable it made others.

It was one week before Harry was to leave that the doorbell rang and a loud fist pounded against the door like a battering ram. Being the closest to the door and having not heard anything from his aunt about guests—which would otherwise mean him staying in the cupboard until they left—Harry answered the door to find a mountain of a man with frizzy and frayed brown hair and beard that passed his shoulders. His clothes were well worn and a bit on the ‘scrappy’ side, though Harry knew all too well what that was like. Hell, he was currently wearing Dudley’s tattered hand-me-downs and looking like a child who’d stolen his father’s clothing to play dress up in. The man smiled at Harry in a friendly manner.

“Hey there Harry! Mind if I come in?” The man asked in a gruff voice, looking unsure and awkward when Harry didn’t immediately welcome the stranger into his home.
'Ah, Rubeus Hagrid. He is on staff at Hogwarts and, if I'm not mistaken, he was the one to transport you from Godric’s Hollow all the way to 4 Privet Drive the night your parents died. He is a bit of a simple man, but seems quite loyal. Especially to Albus Dumbledore.’ His companion filled in helpfully. Harry had figured that they would eventually send someone to make sure that their Boy Who Lived would actually be able to attend Hogwarts.

Harry silently invited the enormous wizard into the house and brought him straight through to the back yard, ignoring the pointed glares he received from the rest of the inhabitants of the house. Hagrid sat down on one of the patio chairs, looking like an adult sitting in a child’s chair.

“Tea?” Harry asked before he sat down, when Hagrid politely turned him down, Harry sat across from him and waited for the man to begin whatever he came here to say. After an awkward moment of fidgeting, Hagrid leaned across the table, making it almost half way, before speaking in a low tone so that only Harry could hear.

“Yer a wizard, Harry. It’s marked down that you read the letter, but they sent me to make sure that you understood what it means. Yer parents—” Harry cut him off by raising a hand to stop Hagrid.

“I know. I understand what I am, and there was no need for you to come. It was a pleasure meeting you Hagrid, but I’m afraid I don’t need any assistance. I will see you September 1st.” Harry smiled politely and stood back up, an obvious but not unkindly dismissal. Hagrid sat back, mouth hanging open and working to try to say something, but apparently Harry not needing his help had been enough to render the man speechless.

Curious. . . If they had expected me to be completely out of the loop, as the supposed Savior of the Wizarding World, why wait until only a week before I would be thrust into that life to reveal that I’m actually a wizard? Waiting until the last week, or even the last month, to change my whole world was only asking for a disaster.

‘I agree.’ His companion hissed into his ear, obviously unimpressed by the recent events. ‘Keeping you in the dark for so long would have done nothing to help you.’

The man—Hagrid—had only just regained his composure when Harry had turned his attention outward again.

“What about yer school supplies?! Diagon Alley is no place for a child to be alone, I can take you there now and we can get yer stuff. You can ask me any questions you have about the wizarding
world while we do that, eh?” Hagrid offered, and if Harry wasn’t very impressed before, he certainly wasn’t now!

“I appreciate the offer, Hagrid. My sincerest apologies however, I’ll have to decline. I’ve already purchased everything I need and sorted everything out with Gringotts.” Harry paused when he saw revelation bloom in Hagrid’s expression.

“That’s what happened to the key!” Hagrid exclaimed, seeming to have forgotten Harry was still in front of him. Harry narrowed his eyes in suspicion.

“You’re my magical guardian?” Harry’s question seemed to pop the little bubble Hagrid had been in and Hagrid looked at Harry with shock.

“No! Of course not, Harry. That would be Sir Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts school of Witchcraft and Wizardry.” His tone practically dripped with hero worship at the mention of the powerful wizard, Harry tried not to imagine said worship dripping onto his shoes.

“Then please tell me why you would have it? I mean no offense sir, but I was told that only my magical guardian or I should every hold that key. Unless you had planned on making a claim of custody over me, it should never have been in your possession.” Harry’s tone had gone from polite to cold in a flash, his unsettling green eyes plunging into Hagrid like green ice. Hagrid flashed a nervous smile to try to lighten the slightly domineering air that had settled in around them.

“Ah! No, I not be making any such claim, Harry! You see, I be the Keeper of Keys. So Professor Dumbledore trusted me to hold on to it. He knew that I wouldn’t let anything happen to the key, no way no how!” Hagrid gave an uncertain and pitchy laugh to cover for how distressed he appeared. Harry reigned in his bit of magic again and a polite mask settled over his features once again, which had Hagrid nearly deflating with relief.

“You seem like a very nice man, Hagrid. I would like to be friends. Which is why I feel that I must be honest with you. I am young, yes, but I am also independent and do not appreciate people I do not even know making decisions for me. I do not hold you accountable to this situation, but I would very much like it if you did not allow people to speak for me if I have not given my consent. I am not an invalid, I can make decisions on my own behalf—or at the very least—I would like to be included in any such matters in the future.” Harry smiled then, knowing that his smile looked innocent and enchanting to adults.

Hagrid blinked dazedly a few times before shaking his head as if to clear it. Harry led the confused staff member back to the front door and they said their respective goodbyes before Harry close the
A loud knock on the dark wood door was the only warning before Rubeus Hagrid walked into the trinket-cluttered Headmaster’s office. The elderly wizard in silken lilac robes with silver embroidery and a matching cap and slippers looked up from the letter on his desk. The Headmaster looked over his half-moon glasses at Hagrid in surprise.

“Hagrid? I didn’t expect you to be back so soon! How was your meeting with Harry?” Albus asked as he offered Hagrid a seat and a lemon drop. Hagrid declined the sweet and plopped down on the chair heavily.

“It was . . . well, it seems that our Harry has become quite independent! He even got all of his school supplies already! The lad is just a little whelp, could put him in my pocket, but he acts like an adult if I’ve ever met one!” Hagrid huffs out a laugh, eyes wandering as he seemed to be lost in thought. Dumbledore smiled, though there was a touch of worry in his eyes.

“That wonderful, Hagrid. Though I must say I was not expecting this. Maturity is good, but I do hope that the boy doesn’t think himself so mature that he puts himself in dangerous situations to prove his maturity. Venturing into Diagon Alley alone at such a young age is dangerous and reckless. The boy had no protection and knew no magic. Accidental magic wouldn’t have been enough if the wrong person recognized him.” Dumbledore put his elbows on his desk with his hands clasped together and lightly pressed against his mouth as he thought. Hagrid shifted and cleared his throat, looking down and away as he tried to find his voice.

“Headmaster? About Harry . . . er, you see . . . he went to Gringotts and found out about his vault key being with his magical guardian. When I told him that I’d had it before he got it back, he seemed quite upset. He didn’t like that I had it since I’m not his guardian and he wasn’t happy with being left in the dark.” Hagrid felt supremely uncomfortable with the thread of conversation, but he also didn’t want to let Harry down when there was already so little he could do to help the lad.

Dumbledore sighed with a fatigue that only came with a long life.

“This will certainly be an interesting year. Harry Potter, you are not how I imagined. Not how any of us imagined.”
The morning that Harry left for Kings Cross, he didn’t say anything to his relatives. They ate their breakfast, Dudley in his red Smelting’s uniform and Harry in nice but not extravagant robes. The robes looked close enough to muggle clothes that they wouldn’t bring any unwanted attention to Harry as he made his way to the train station. The only differences being in the fabric and cut.

When Harry finished his cereal, he cleaned his bowl and spoon, and put them away in their respective places. The eerie normalcy of the situation made Harry’s skin feel itchy and too tight in places, he was all too eager to shrink down his trunk, put it in his pocket, pick up Hedwig’s cage, and head towards the door. There were no shouts for him to wait, no lingering looks in case they didn’t see him again, not even a muttered ‘good riddance’ as he left.

Having converted a few galleons into muggle money (1 galleon = £4.97 GBP/ $10.17 USD) Harry had decided that instead of trying to get his uncle to drive him or taking public transport, his most reliable option would be a cab. The cab waited outside on the road when Harry stepped out of the house he’d grown up in.

When Harry got into the cab and set his owl cage on the seat next to him, the cab driver did a double take, then frowned at Harry from the front seat. After a moment of silence—probably thinking of what to say—the cab driver spoke up.

“You know this isn’t a free ride, right?” Was all he said. Harry pulled the folded notes out of his pocket to show the driver, but didn’t hand them over. He wasn’t dumb enough to pay the driver before getting to where he needed to go. The cab driver just shook his head as if to say it was none of his business, and Harry could definitely agree.

The cab ride was long, but Harry arrived at Kings Cross as early as he’d hoped and gave the cab driver a generous tip before getting out.

With the occasional guidance of his companion, Harry made it to Platform 9 ¾ and onto the Hogwarts Express. Harry had arrived an hour early, wanting out of that house as soon as possible, so there were only a few people around, mostly students with their families out on the platform before having to actually board the train. That meant that Harry had first pick of a compartment, so he chose one closer to the back of the train, furthest from the doors of that carriage.

Once inside, Harry put Hedwig’s cage up on the shelf over the seats and cast a small compulsion charm on the door that made anyone who looked at the window look at something else and nudge anyone who aimed to open the door towards another compartment. It wouldn’t stop anyone
determined or more resilient to simple compulsion charms, but it would give Harry a bit more privacy before his identity was found out and everyone wanted a peek at the ‘Savior!’

Harry pulled out one of the shrunken books he’d bought during his second visit to Diagon Alley and unshrunk it. He’d purposely not read it once he finished the other books just so he’d have it to read on the nine-hour train ride.

As the hour trudged on the platform gradually became more and more busy and students began to slowly find their way onto the train. Eventually, Harry set down his book for a while so that he could observe the crowds on the platform. Looking out and spotting the students amongst their families was strange, looking at the smiles, watery grins, and full on tears and thinking about how these will be his new classmates.

Soon enough, the warning horn bellowed through the station and students rushed to get on the train before it left. Harry had seen plenty of students pass by in front of the window on his door, even a few that he saw quickly look away as the charm he’d put on the door took effect, but for the most part, everyone steered clear of Harry’s compartment as they left the station. That is, until about two hours in when the door to his compartment was flung open and a familiar blonde walked in.

Draco looked around for a moment before his eyes settled on Harry. A smile pulled at the corners of his mouth and he stood up a little straighter as he walked in with more confidence and sat down on the seat directly across from Harry, next to the window. Two large brutes shuffled in after him and plopped down next to their friend. Were they friends? They look more like body guards.

“Harry Potter. . .” Draco sounded smug and a little haughty—but that might just be his voice. Harry smiled a little at the future snake and closed his book before shrinking it as he put it in his pocket. Draco’s quick eyes didn’t miss the action, but the blonde didn’t let it show.

“How are you, Draco?” Harry asked politely, watching Draco’s eyes light up at Harry using his first name. It was strange how well wizarding customs conveyed one’s intent. Familiarity of first names meant that Harry was willing to have an amicable relationship beyond just acquaintances. Aside from Death, Draco was the first person that seemed like an option for a friend.

“Brilliant! I was looking for you, actually. You left me with quite a shock at Madam Malkin’s last time, I was hoping I’d be able to catch you on the train and clear the air before we start our first year. About what I said about you . . .” Draco glanced away and Harry watched with idle amusement as twin splotches of pink appeared on Draco’s cheeks.

“That I would turn out to be, oh what was it again . . . ‘a reckless and righteous Gryffindor prick?’”
Draco turned a darker shade of pink and Harry couldn’t help but laugh at his kicked-puppy face. “Well... Seeing as how the only information people have about me is the traits of my parents—whom I’ve never really met—that might somehow be passed down through my genes and some great deed I supposedly did as an infant, it seems like everyone already has a fully developed opinion of my character. The funny thing about this situation is that so many people are ready to open their arms to me and trust me even though I’ve been gone for 10 years and am essentially a stranger. I mean, I could be anybody!” Harry tutted in mock disapproval.

There was a long beat of silence before the compartment filled with laughter as Draco’s composure cracked. The tension in the small compartment snapped and Harry settled back against the seat and crossed his legs with his hands in his lap. Something inside Harry settled and he hadn’t even noticed it’s presence until it eased into something comfortable and warm. Draco soon settled down and his laughter tittered out and faded, leaving behind a wide smile and a small hint of moisture at the corners of his eyes.

“I must say, you’re not at all what I expected!” Draco looked at Harry like he found everything the other boy did fascinating. And perhaps he does, wizards are strange, Harry thought as he glanced once again at the silent presence of the two boys beside Draco. They seemed perfectly content with just being ignored.

“Well I certainly hope so! What a dull person I’d have to be in order to be so predictable with so little information.” Harry mused.

They settled into friendly conversation and eventually Harry was introduced to the two other boys—Crabbe and Goyle. Harry listened to Draco rave about his father and the trips they took over the summer to France and Spain and how his godfather was actually the Potions Professor at Hogwarts. It sounded pretty close to bragging, but Harry had heard enough of Dudley’s gloating over the years to spot the difference. Draco wasn’t just bragging to show off how much better he was, most of his stories centered around his father and a bit of his godfather. It was a classic case of hero worship and Harry was totally endeared by the shine in the boy’s eyes as he rattled off many different stories about the ‘Great Lucius Malfoy.’

It wasn’t hard to connect the dots and figure out that Draco’s father was a Death Eater, but that didn’t really bother Harry none. As long as the man didn’t attack him on sight, he would withhold judgement until.

Harry didn’t talk about himself much, which is exactly what he preferred. He mainly talked about practicing with his wand as soon as he bought one, which Draco had done as well. Harry also made vague mentions to being taught about the wizarding world before getting his letter, Draco had seemed a bit confused about why he would need someone to teach him, but Harry had moved on
before he could dive into that particular topic.
Hoggy Warty Hogwarts

Chapter Summary

In the last chapter: Harry prepares for Hogwarts. Hagrid pays Harry a visit. Dumbledore and Hagrid discuss what’s become of the boy they dropped off all those years ago. Draco finds Harry on the train and the beginnings of a friendship form between the pair.

It's a bit amazing how several hours of close quarters could change a relationship. He and Draco had achieved ‘friend’ status by the time the sun had fallen over the green and gold horizon and they were warned that they’d be arriving at Hogsmead Station in twenty minutes. Pulling shut the curtain that had appeared on the little window on the door, all four boys got out their robes and began undressing.

Once in their uniforms, they sat and waited.

When Draco sat down this time, he sat next to Harry instead of across from him and they talked about sorting—something they’d been avoiding the entire ride to keep themselves from getting nervous. Well, Harry wasn’t really nervous, mostly it was Draco. Draco feared the small chance that he’d end up in anything but Slytherin. Apparently he felt that he needed to uphold the family legacy and join the den of snakes. He then immediately turned back to Harry and told Harry to stuff his own family legacies and that he better not be sorted into Gryffindor. It had pulled a genuine laugh out of Harry and he rolled his eyes and promised Draco to placate the blonde.

When they finally arrived and exited the scarlet train onto the slick cobblestone platform, they stood together for a moment before they were joined by four more students of their year. There were two girls and two boys. Harry was introduced by Draco while Crabbe and Goyle towered behind them like human shields. The first girl was a tan girl with a sharp black bob and slightly pinched facial expression, her name was Pansy Parkinson. The second girl was a pretty and fair blonde who looked like Draco’s hand crafted counterpart, her name was Daphne Greengrass. A tall and thin boy with honey colored hair and brown eyes was introduced as Theodore Nott, but Theo for short. The last first year was Blaise Zabini, smooth mocha skin and high cheek bones. They had all been polite enough to Harry, though he did notice the brief flash of disdain on the faces of the Parkinson girl and Zabini.

Harry wasn’t able to say anything to the others in greeting because as soon as he opened his mouth a thunderous voice crackled across the sea of students, summoning all of the first years towards the end
of the platform where Hagrid could be seen towering over the students.

All of the first years where led down a worn path through the trees in a line like little ducklings. The mental image amused both Harry and his companion, who he could feel paying attention now that Harry wasn’t stuck on a train. Draco walked by his side the whole way down the path and to the side of a lake where a fleet of little boats were waiting.

What caught everyone’s attention, though, was the huge ancient castle on the other side of the lake dotted with glowing windows that looked like a scatter of floating lanterns, luring you in with the promise of warmth and shelter. The overall scene of the glassy lake, bright moon casting silver ribbons over the water’s surface, and the fantastical castle in the background made for a breathtaking sight.

Harry was physically pulled out of his thoughts by a pale hand wrapped around his wrist as he was led over to one of the boats that already held Crabbe and Goyle. Half of the boats were filled by the time Harry and Draco stepped in and sat on the hard wooden bench seat. Once everyone was situated in a boat, a few drifted forward into the water and the others followed a few at a time so that they were more of a cluster than a straight line.

They were pulled by an invisible force straight into a cave under Hogwarts and when their boats pulled up to the dock, they all climbed out carefully and were led inside by a severe-looking witch who announced that she was the transfiguration professor, Minerva McGonagall. She briefly explained the sorting process and what they were to do once they went through the large door behind her. As she did this, Harry caught a few of the whispers floating around between the other first years.

“Did you hear? Apparently Harry Potter is here!” One voice whispered before the other scoffed quietly under his breath.

“No way! I heard a couple of bloody Death Eaters found him and he croaked a few years back but the Ministry’s been hiding it to cover up for their cock up.” The other replied and Harry had to keep his face blank in an effort not to let a sneer overtake his face. Everyone just loves to speculate!

“I would’ve known if that happened, my dad works for the Ministry! So he must be here, which one do you think he is?” Harry mentally cringed listening to the pair behind him. Malfoy, most likely having heard just as much as Harry, finally had enough and whipped around to glare at the two behind them.

“Mister Weasley, Mister Finnegan, is there a reason you’re not listening to the information I’m so generously offering to make sure you don’t make a fool of yourselves in front of the entire school?
No? Well, then perhaps you should wait another minute longer for me to lead you in, get you sorted, and to your respective tables so that you might get the chance to eat and socialize.” When Harry glanced behind him at the two first years, one with a shock of red hair and the other with short brown hair and spatters of freckles, both looked thoroughly cowed as they hung their head a little.

Draco glared at them for a moment longer, before turning back towards the front with a scowl on his face. Harry nudged the blonde with his elbow and flashed a smile when he looked up. Draco huffed a sigh and rolled his eyes, but Harry spotted a lifting at the corner of his lips that hid nothing. The next moment, the large wooden doors were opening and McGonagall led them in a single file line between the two middle tables to the front of a huge dining hall. The upperclassmen all looked at the spectacle the first years made and either cooed or complained about how they keep getting smaller and smaller every year.

At the end of the room in front of the long table that seemed to hold the staff, a lone stool was place between the staff table and the student tables. Atop the stool sat a hat, a ragged and torn brown leather hat. When they stopped in front of the stool and the hat came to life with a song about the different houses, Draco, who was in front of Harry in the line, turned to get his attention and was pointing at the staff table.

“That’s Sev, my Godfather.” Draco whispered, Harry followed where he was pointing with his eyes and met the sneering glare of an intense man dressed all in black. Remembering what Draco had said about the man and his hatred for his father, Harry wasn’t at all surprised by the obvious hatred in the gaze. The sins of the father and all that.

Well, if Snape was just going to act like a petulant child then he wasn’t worth Harry's time. The first name was called and one by one, students were sorted and sent to their respective tables. When Draco was called, no one was surprised to hear the loud ‘SLYTHERIN!’ that came the moment the hat touched his head.

“Harry Potter!” McGonagall called and the hall fell dead silent. Harry stepped out of the line and quickly made his way up to the stool. It seemed like everybody but Harry was holding their breaths as the sorting hat was placed on his head and fell over his eyes like it had with many other students. In the darkness, Harry became aware of the odd sensation of prodding fingers through his mind.

“Oh my... What an extraordinary situation we have here! ‘Master of Death.’ What a pleasure it is to sort you, Harry! Now, as for the sorting...” Harry waited silently, his companion had already told him about the hat and its oath of secrecy and confidentiality.

“Yes, a serpent is what you are, through and through, but your thirst for knowledge is just as strong. Both houses would serve you well, but which road do you wish to take? Neutrality or Domination? Knowledge or Power?” The hat deliberated, sounding equally split. So Harry decided to pitch in his
two cents.

‘Knowledge is Power. There are more routes to success than the fast one. Best place me in—’

“RAVENCLAW!” The hat bellowed. When the dining hall came back into view, it seemed that people were surprised, but not angry and ready to mob. McGonagall had already called for the next student before Harry had even sat down among the other first year Ravenclaws. The clapping was an appropriate amount and cut off before the next student sat on the stool.

“Welcome to Ravenclaw!” The boy to his right said with a wide smile. The boy had thick curly golden hair, light hazel eyes, and rather simple/aesthetically pleasing features that weren’t hard to look at. Harry smiled politely in return with a slight dip of his head in a silent thanks. “My name is Anthony Goldstein.” He went on to introduce the other Ravenclaws around the table.

“This is Padma Patil, Michael Corner, Terry Boot, and Hermione Granger.” Harry greeted them and they all seemed friendly enough; not exactly friendly, actually, but more . . . approachable.

While the others went back to watching the sorting ceremony, Harry looked over that the table next to the Ravenclaw table. It only took a moment to spot the white blonde hair among the table of black and green robes. Draco had already been looking at Harry, so when their eyes met Harry just smiled and turned back to the ceremony. At least with the Ravenclaw table being right next to the Slytherin one, Harry could easily talk to Draco during meals, or even just switch tables and sit by the blonde. It’s not like they’d force students to sit only at their house tables.

By the end of the ceremony, Ravenclaw had gained four more students: Sue Li, Mandy Brocklehurst, Morag MacDougal, and Lisa Turpin. The girls were polite, though Morag turned her nose up a bit at the others, and when the feast began conversation was rather easy among all of the first years. Harry was thoroughly interrogated by the others, including a few curious upperclassmen. Harry was vague and evasive enough to get through all of their questions without actually giving them much of anything in terms of information on him.

After the meal, the seventh year prefects led the first years to the Ravenclaw dorms located on the fifth floor on the west side of Hogwarts. At the entrance to the common room, it was explained to them that they would have to answer a riddle in order to get in or wait until someone who could answer the riddle came along.

The inside of the common room was decorated in rich auburn stained wood furniture with blue velvet upholstery and huge windows framed by silk royal blue drapes and packed bookcases. The area was clean and comfortable, simple and elegant. Harry could definitely see himself spending
Anthony Goldstein, who seemed to be the friendliest and most eager out of all of them—with Hermione Granger as a close second—walked with Harry into their shared room, which held four equally spaced out beds with silk drapes that matched the larger ones in the common room hanging from the four poster twin sized beds.

Harry found his trunk at the foot of a bed on the right hand side of the room closest to the large widow with a plush royal blue velvet seat under it. Anthony’s bed was next to his, with Michael Corner across from Harry and Terry Boot next to Michael. Along with their possessions and pets, they each found a time table on their beds. They had four classes a day with breaks and meals in between aside from the two days that they had five classes to fit in that hour of Astronomy and Flying once a week and the triple Potions was his only class on Friday.

The other two boys walked into the room with both of their heads bent together as they talked, Harry didn’t spare them another glance as he put things away and settled in and he’s pretty sure that Anthony was doing the same, but the blonde boy called out an absent greeting as he dug through his trunk. Harry didn’t hear a reply, but he did hear shoes lightly thudding against hardwood floors move closer to him and stop a few feet behind him. Harry didn’t look until someone loudly cleared their throat. The blank look Harry gave Michael and Terry spoke loud enough about how he was busy and not thrilled to be interrupted.

The Michael boy’s face was twisted up in a smile that looked more like a sneer than anything.

“Let’s see it then!” Michael proclaimed and waited expectantly. Harry raised an eyebrow and caught the flicker of Michael’s eyes to his forehead before they slid back to his eyes.

Ah, so they want to see the scar? The immortalized curse scar that everyone seemed itching to get a peek at. Harry’s curly hair was just long enough on top to hide the mark.

It’s not like he hides it on purpose, he honestly doesn’t care. What he does care about though, is being treated like a road side attraction or circus act for all to ‘ooo’ and ‘ah’ at.

Instead of deigning such a ridiculous demand with a response, Harry just turned around and continued placing things in the drawer of his bedside table. That was not the response Michael had wanted, apparently. A bruising hand shot out and grabbed Harry’s upper arm and roughly spun him around to face the angry Ravenclaw. Harry’s face remained expressionless as the brunet got very close to his face.

“Look at me when I’m talking to you Half-blood!” Michael spat and before Harry could do or say
anything, he was being pulled out of the painful grip and shoved behind Anthony’s taller form.

“I suggest you *walk away*, Corner. I haven’t known you for more than a few hours or so, but I doubt you’re dumb enough to try to harass someone who has everyone’s eyes on them.” The calm, cold tone of Anthony’s voice surprised Harry, but only mildly. Harry was feeling rather tired of the situation already and just wanted to go back to organizing his stuff. If his idiotic dorm mate wanted to risk himself being on the receiving end of a rather nasty wandless curse, then so be it.

The two boys engaged in a silent battle of wills as they stared each other down and Harry absent-ly noticed for himself that Anthony was actually a bit taller than him. To be fair, years of malnutrition would take its toll no matter how many nutrition potions he took or extra meals he ate to supplement the scraps he got from the Dursleys.

Harry was dragged from that train of thought when the tension snapped like a rubber band between the two in front of them and Michael sneered as he turned his nose up at them and stomped over to his own bed, Terry trailing nervously behind him.

Anthony deflated a little and turned around to face Harry, but because Anthony had shoved Harry behind him and there wasn’t much space between where Harry had been standing when Michael walked up and the bed, Anthony ended up very close to Harry when he turned around. Anthony immediately flushed and took a tentative step back to give Harry room. Harry was still unfazed, though. When you’ve already died twice in your life, became good friends with Death, achieved immortality and survived a decade of Dursleys, not much gets to you.

“Sorry about Michael, he’s just a blood-supremacist prick. Thinks that his parentage gives him the right to decide who is worth being treated as a human and who isn’t.” Anthony amended with a hateful glare towards the other side of the room where they both knew Michael could hear every word. “Personally, I think he’s just overcompensating for a weak magical core due to generations of inbreeding.” Anthony hissed, still glowering at Michael.

Anthony was suddenly shocked out of his mental cursing of a certain boy when a smooth and melodic laughter filled his ears. He snapped his head back to the boy in front of him and saw a brilliant smile that had his mind whiting out for a moment. Joyous, genuine laughter bubbled out of the same boy he’d seen maintain a cool and distant composure the entire night and Anthony felt immensely proud at being the one to cause it.

Something . . . something about Harry Potter was *magnetic*. Even when that arctic gaze spoke very clearly that you were not even worth a second of his time, it was hard not to seek his attention. Anthony was never particularly a follower—not even his own parents could get him to do something unless he believed in it on his own. That’s why he never understood Death Eaters, he just couldn’t understand any form of blind, unconditional faith. But with Harry it was . . . it was different, he was
different.

The Goldstein line has always been quite sensitive to magic; that is not to say that they were more powerful than the average witch or wizard, that had nothing to do with the gift to sense magic and magical signatures. Anthony had inherited the gift from his grandmother and had become quite good at sensing magic and discerning all types of information from someone’s magical signature.

Michael, for example, had a magic insidious in nature, malicious intent hidden behind a seemingly pleasant exterior. Terry’s was wavering and unpredictable with an underlying heat while Padma’s was a low thrum that was hard to get a good read on and pulled back whenever he or anyone else approached. Hermione’s was a high and enthusiastic chittering, like a bird, and didn’t hesitate to feel out her surroundings. In the very short time that Anthony had known his housemates, he’d only been able to skim the surface of those four before his attention was swallowed up by Harry.

When Harry first sat down next to him in the dining hall, Anthony was completely perplexed. Everyone had a unique signature—even muggles had a tiny flicker of magic that made up what some called the human soul—and that’s what first alerted Anthony to the fact that there was something different about Harry. When Harry sat down, Anthony felt absolutely nothing. It was like, in a world composed completely of magic, Harry was a void that held absolutely nothing at all. From all that Anthony knew, it should be impossible.

But then . . . slowly . . . it came out . . .

It was after Anthony had begun talking to Harry and acting pleasantly towards the black-haired boy, magic began to slowly seep out of its confines. And what came out was . . . incomparable! It overloaded all five senses in a battle of sensations.

It felt like cold misting rain against his skin after it had been scrubbed raw and new, while his insides were saturated with an impenetrable warmth. It sounded like the lowest notes of rolling thunder that shook his bones and grounded him at the same time. It smelt like honey-dew-melon and the air before a storm. It left a taste on his tongue, something rich and sweet, like black cherries. Lastly, at the edges of his vision, an aurora borealis worthy show of lights pulsed around Harry, composed mainly of the glacial green that could only be found in Harry’s eyes, with brief dashes of reds and blues and pinks and darker greens.

The sensations came gradually and one at a time, building up on each other as time passed. When they all came together, Anthony was distracted for a few minutes, just trying to locate his mind again in the overwhelming presence that was Harry’s magic. It wasn’t the usual magical wizard posturing that was known to happen when you wanted to throw your adversary off kilter, it was intimidating and invigorating at the same time.
Whether they were sensitive to magic like Anthony or not, Anthony knew that Harry would draw people in. People would unconsciously migrate towards him; if not for his magic alone, then also for the allure Harry had as a person. Harry was undeniably beautiful as it was, raven black hair that gleamed like silk under the light, and flawless alabaster skin set on an angelic face offset by the cold green eyes that were unsettling and hypnotizing at the same time. And in time, those looks would only mature and improve along with the regal air he held around people he didn’t know. Anthony had only glimpsed beneath the persona, and what a sight it was to behold.

All of that being said, Anthony knew that Harry would have no trouble finding people who would happily follow him on whatever path he chooses, and Anthony was begrudged to admit that he might become one of them. And, honestly? He couldn’t conjure up any sort of feelings of reluctance or apprehension. This will certainly be an interesting experience.
First Years: A Guide to the Idiotic and a Most Painful Death

Chapter Summary

In the last chapter: Harry and Draco take the train together. Harry is sorted into Ravenclaw, where he meets his new house mates, including Hermione Granger, Anthony Goldstein, and Michael Corner.

When his classes started up, Harry felt a renewed sense of anticipation knowing that his scores would actually reflect what he knew and could strive for more than 'no better than Duddlykins.' Harry found himself actually engaged in his lessons. That didn’t mean that he was suddenly outgoing and answering every question, big or small, in class. Ravenclaws, it seems, are rather competitive when it came to academics and Harry would rather not bring so much attention to himself during class. There seemed to be a metaphorical war between Michael and Hermione for who could answer the most questions and rake in the most house points. So far, Hermione was winning.

There were bumps, of course. Such as the potions professor, Severus Snape. The man had been anything but subtle in his dislike for Harry. Harry didn’t care for being the center of attention, it meant no privacy and people thinking that they have an opinion on his life. So, when Snape verbally berates him for fame he didn’t ask for and tries to undermine him and everything he says, Harry finds it hard to hold onto the indifference he’d told himself he’d keep at the very first feast when he resigned himself to being the possible target for the older man’s hatred.

Snape always tried to catch Harry on something he ‘should’ know during his potions class, even if Harry knew for a fact that the topic couldn’t be found anywhere in the textbook. The first time that happened and Harry was about to state as such, he was beaten to it by Draco, leveling his Godfather with an unimpressed look for such antics. Both Snape and Harry had been shocked by the young Slytherin's quick defense of Harry.

Another individual that was causing Harry undue stress was Michael Corner. When he was around, Anthony had taken to acting as Harry’s buffer from Michael and his sidekick, Terry Boot. When Anthony wasn’t around, though, Michael took every opportunity he could to insult and antagonize Harry. By the end of his first month at Hogwarts, Harry had acquired an extensive and colorful list of oaths and insults and threats to add to his vocabulary.

All in all, the entire situation served more as entertainment than anything. Michael knew that he couldn’t do anything that would physically harm Harry or would leave any evidence to be used
against him later, which left him with only words as his weapon of choice, for now.

Other than a few bumps here and there, Harry’s time at Hogwarts was all quite enjoyable. After the first feast, Draco had practically dragged Harry over to the Slytherin table and pushed him down into the seat next to his. The older Slytherins didn’t look happy if their sneers and glares were anything to go by, but the youngest generation of snakes that Harry had met briefly on the platform in Hogsmead all seemed glad—or at least tolerant—of his presence.

After the first few meals at the Slytherin table, Harry’s new acquaintance, Anthony, had begun joining them. Out of all of the houses, Ravenclaw seemed to be the most amicable house towards Slytherins, and the Slytherin house apparently had the fewest members, so space wasn’t an issue either.

It only took about a week and a half for their company to be expected at the table under green and silver banners. And only a few weeks more for Draco and a few of his Slytherin friends—mainly Pansy and Blaise—to start sitting with Harry at the Ravenclaw table as well.

They switched back and forth, but no matter which table they sat at, it always ended with Harry, Draco, and Anthony sitting together. Aside from just meals, they could usually be found together in library or out in the courtyard while the weather still allowed it. The three boys grew closer over time and for the first time, Harry had friends. He had people his age that he could talk to and laugh with and actually feel comfortable around.

Through all of that, Harry’s other companion had never left his side. A usually silent and calming presence just over his shoulder, laughing at Anthony’s jokes or commenting on how much he approved of the young Malfoy or quietly feeding Harry information on traditions and families and secrets that very few were privileged to.

At night, when everyone in his dorm room had long since fallen asleep, Harry talked with Death. He put up wandless privacy spells around his bed so that no one would wonder why he was still awake, and he’d have long conversations with his first friend. Harry’s nights usually ended with him lying in bed, eyes half closed as he listened to his companion tell him stories.

Sometimes they were about things that Death had been witness to that he’d never forget. Sometimes he talked about the three Peverell brothers and the desperate and selfish deals they had made with Death, shouldering burdens that their minds, bodies, and souls could not withstand in the end.

Sometimes . . . sometimes Death told him stories about an infant Harry and stories about the people in his life. He’d heard the woeful tale of Severus Snape and his beloved Lily. He heard of the
Marauders: of Moony, Padfoot, Wormtail, and Prongs. He heard of Peter Pettigrew’s betrayal. Of Severus and the prophecy. It felt more like a long strange and gruesome bedtime story to Harry, rather than actual events that had an impact on his life.

Stranger so, the stories seemed to calm Harry. It grounded him to have all of the truths laid bare. The more of the timeline that was revealed, the clearer Harry’s situation became. Once the dots were connected, it was easier to see where Harry stood in all of this, where he stood in correlation to everyone else. Harry’s existence symbolized safety and the power to overcome to the public, that’s why he was practically worshiped by the general populace and hated among the few that had hoped beyond hope that Voldemort would have succeeded in taking over Magical Britain.

But, out of all of the stories, he was most troubled by Sirius Black and his wrongful imprisonment on Azkaban. His Godfather was currently in Azkaban for something he didn’t do, and had been there for nearly a decade. Harry didn’t know that man, but Harry knew injustice when he saw it. While Harry had been in his own personal hellish form of imprisonment, his Godfather had been in a similar, literal imprisonment. Harry felt a bazaar sense of comradery for the Marauder.

Harry had mauled over what he knew of the situation for almost a week before he decided that he would try to clear his Godfather’s name and get him freed. Harry had two possible outcomes for his summer in front of him: either he is somehow able to avoid being sent back to his relatives and has to find another place to live during those three months, or he is forced back into the place he thought he’d escaped for three more hellish months. If his Godfather were freed, though, he could just live with him. If he could somehow pull off the first part, it would be the preferable option.

Which meant that Harry had to find a way to visit Sirius before summer break started. Hogsmead and winter break were the only times that students were able to leave Hogwarts unless under special circumstances or if they were given permission from their guardian. Two of those weren’t options for Harry, though, because he was too young for Hogsmead trips just yet and his magical guardian was Dumbledore, and he doubted the Headmaster would be open to Harry going to Azkaban for an unsupervised visit. No, Harry’s best option was to wait until winter break and then to sneak out while the wards were open to the comings and goings of students.

In the meantime, all Harry had to do was focus on his school work, enjoy his time with Anthony and Draco, and avoid dying so that no one would find out about his . . . ability. While Harry was successful in all three, it seemed that something was going on with the rest of the school.

It wasn’t that far into the year that Harry had heard rumors of a couple of Gryffindors getting caught sneaking around in the third floor corridor that they had been warned away from the very first night that they were here. Draco had rolled his eyes and huffed about them being idiots and Anthony had strongly agreed.
Apparently one of the boys involved was none other than the redheaded boy who had been gossiping about Harry all that time ago. Draco said that he’s a Weasley and therefore a blood traitor. Anthony had yelled at Draco for being so close minded, but Harry didn’t really care. There were plenty of wizarding traditions and customs that were just down right ridiculous and more often than not silly in Harry’s opinion. Muggleborn, Half-blood, Pure-blood, blood-traitor . . . it was all rubbish to Harry.

Anyways, according to the rumors going around, Ron Weasley and his mate Dean Thomas thought that the professors were hiding something in that third floor corridor. Harry thought that was obvious, otherwise they wouldn’t forbid students from going there. Whatever it was, it was either very dangerous or very valuable, either way he wasn’t going anywhere near there! Harry may be immortal, but dying hurts and saps your energy like nothing else! Whatever they’re hiding there, it isn’t worth it.

As a side-note, it seems quite reckless hiding something so volatile at a school full of magical children.

However, all of the detentions Weasley received ended up not being enough, since it wasn’t more than a week later that Harry overheard him in class trying to cajole his other friend, Seamus Finnegan, into going back up there to check out a locked door he heard some strange noises coming from. Harry had just rolled his eyes and continued to listen to the lesson as the pair conspired behind him.

“A bunch of bloody idiots, if you ask me.” Harry grumbled later after telling Draco what had happened as they found their usual table in the library. Draco snorted and he pulled the strap to his expensive leather school bag over his head and tossed it onto the table top with a carelessness that only came with growing up with excessive wealth. Harry set his own bag on the table and sat down across from the blonde who had sprawled out in his chair, slumped down and his feet kicked up on the seat of the chair next to Harry under the table.

“If they’re sick of living, then that’s their problem!” Draco said without any actual heat in his voice. He shifted a bit until he seemed to find a comfy position and closed his eyes, winking out the bright and expressive silver. Draco’s expression melted into a sleep-like calmness and he folded his hands behind his head. Harry pulled out his charms paper that was due in two weeks and got to work, thinking that Draco was going to take a nap as he was known to do occasionally.

It was a bit strange how quickly the boy had gone from hating Harry on principle, to feeling comfortable enough around Harry to act completely himself and even sleep. Not that Harry was complaining, Draco was actually quite a good friend and conversationalist. Not to mention, Harry still found it both adorable and hilarious when Draco started talking about his father and his eyes sparkled like a doe-eyed child.
Sure, Draco may be acting this friendly because of who Harry is, since he made it clear the first time they’d met that Draco was interested in the advantages of a friendship with the Savior of the wizarding world, but Harry didn’t really mind. A friendship with incentive is still far more than what he’d had back with his relatives before he knew about his non-human companion.

It wasn’t that Harry was lonely exactly, he valued his ethereal companion over all else—even if he’d never admit it to the rutty narcissistic bastard—it’s just that there were certain areas in which Death was lacking. Death didn’t care for age; an entire wizard life-span was merely a blink in his eternal existence, which meant that he never treated Harry like a child. Harry was grateful! Of course he was, he didn’t feel eleven and he didn’t want to be treated that way, but there were times when he felt like a buffer of gentleness could have made something far easier. Like with his parents.

Harry knew of his parents, but didn’t really know them. He knew that they were apparently good people and a brilliant witch and wizard, and that they fought on behalf of the light and his mother was a muggleborn while his father was a pureblood heir. But for all intents and purposes, they were strangers to Harry. But strangers or not, hearing about their death at such a young age with about as much deference as a reading of a grocery shopping list wasn’t easy for an eight-year-old. The sneered at demise of two alcoholics was one thing, but that was something else entirely.

Harry didn’t consider himself an innocent. He was raised in a house of hatred, prejudice, and abuse. Made to think that he was an abomination, that he was evil in every sense of the word. Harry has died twice and the hand of Death was a cold one that gripped the soul and squeezed out the warmth. Harry did not feel innocent, or even young anymore. But that didn’t mean he didn’t still crave it, that he wasn’t drawn into the warmth of virtue like a moth to a flame.

Draco and Anthony were born to a world still raddled with fear and loss and doubt. They wouldn’t be children for long and they had already felt the burnt scrape of reality, but there was still a fundamental innocence that came with the age and the protective shielding of adults. Anthony and Draco made Harry feel a semblance of normalcy, a second hand innocence when he allowed himself to be swept up in joking around and enjoying their first year at Hogwarts. Death always came with a price, but sometimes . . . sometimes Harry felt like the years of almost falling prey to ‘balance’ really had been enough payment and that there was innocence in him. It always felt the truest, the most believable around friends his own age. So, Harry was going to keep them close and see if time will bring it out of him, if there really is something in there.

“Harry?” Harry was jarred out of his pensive thoughts by Draco’s hesitant and perhaps a bit apprehensive voice, causing Harry to look up immediately. Draco’s eyes were open and he’d been watching Harry—for how long, he didn’t know—with a slight crease between his pale brows.

“Yes, Draco?”
“What . . . what do you think they’re hiding in there?” The serious tone caused Harry to take a moment in order to form a serious enough answer. Whether Draco was searching for platitudes and reassurances, he wouldn’t get them from Harry. He should know as much after almost two months together.

“Honestly? I think they’re hiding something dangerous. That, or they’re hiding something valuable from someone dangerous. Either way, it has no business being anywhere near a school full of children. I don’t know what in Merlin’s name they’re thinking, but I expect you, Anthony, and myself to all be smart enough to stay away.” Harry finished with a warning look at Draco when the Slytherin finally met his gaze. Draco’s eyes didn’t linger for more than a second, though, before they were flicking over Harry’s shoulder and Draco suddenly looked very uncomfortable.

“Professor Quirrell.” Draco greeted as Harry turned to take in the turban toting and timid professor of DADA. Quirrell flashed a brief twitching smile before it vanished altogether.

“That is v-very good a-a-advice Mr. P-Potter. I d-d-do hope that you and Mr. Malfoy follow it.” Professor Quirrell stammered with another hesitant smile. Everything about him was fidgety, nervous, and stuttering, except for his eyes. His pale blue eyes were trained on Harry, unblinking and intense. Harry was unnerved by the stare, but after months of witches and wizards alike acting as if Harry was some sort of spectacle, it didn’t bother him as much as it probably should.

“Thank you, Professor.” Harry stated impersonally with a blank look, not feeling up to the fake politeness he usually melted his Professors with as the beginnings of a rather fearsome headache crept up on him. Quirrell watched Harry for a moment longer than was strictly polite, before nodding once and striding away without saying anything more.

When Harry turned back around in his seat, he caught sight of the deep frown on Draco’s face as his eyes trailed after the departing Professor. After another moment, Draco turned his frown on Harry and it morphed into something closer to concern.

“Quirrell gives me the bloody creeps! I don’t like how he was looking at you. If he does anything, you tell me!” Draco stabbed a firm finger in Harry’s direction and Harry didn’t even try to hide his eye roll and overly fond smile.

“I can take care of myself Malfoy.” Harry mockingly used his last name like the Gryffindors he was constantly butting heads with. Draco actually scoffed at Harry.
“Oh stuff it Potter! Everyone knows you’re smart as a whip, but that doesn’t mean you can go up against an adult! No offense, I know you said you practiced before you came here, but you just can’t beat being born and raised in this world. I have years on you, Harry!” One of Harry’s eyebrows reached up towards his dark hairline and he didn’t say anything as the blonde ranted.

Harry wasn’t insulted though, because underneath the undermining jabs was genuine concern. Harry knew that both Anthony and Draco felt quite protective of him, it wasn’t strictly necessary considering . . . but it did make Harry feel good knowing that they cared enough to want to protect him.

Harry smiled fondly as he returned to his homework. If only they knew. . .

On the night of October 31st the students of Hogwarts entered the dining hall to find it festively decorated for Hallowe’en. Jack-o’-lanterns floated and bobbed in the air and the charmed night sky depicted on the ceiling was clear and dotted with stars. The air was scented with the aroma of various spices and the pumpkin juice was just a little spicier than usual.

Most of the first years gaped and pointed, some even ran into things as their eyes seemed glued on the décor. This happened to be one of the rare times when Harry and Anthony sat at the Ravenclaw table while Draco sat with the other snakes. It just seemed natural to sit at their respective tables while the houses celebrated. Nothing more to it.

While the other students seem enchanted by their surroundings, Harry noticed that Draco had scoffed at their antics and pointedly ignored everything but his meal, eating primly like the future aristocrat that he was. But Harry also noticed the blonde kept sneaking glances at said décor. Harry smirked as he watched Draco try to secretly marvel at the sight like the other first years while also coming across as haughty and unimpressed on the outside.

“Has anyone seen Granger?” Lisa Turpin suddenly asked the first year group at large, looking around with mild trepidation. It was only at that moment that Harry realized that his fellow year-mate was missing, and that she was almost always present at meals. The wild-haired girl always seemed to slip under the radar around them, always very quiet outside of classes. Now that Harry thought about it, he couldn’t remember ever seeing Hermione with any sort of friend. Harry admitted to not really paying much attention to the female Ravenclaws, as he only really cared about Anthony and Draco.

The Morag girl made a disgusted sound, drawing the attention of those who had been thinking about what Lisa had said.
“I heard her sniffling and blubbering in the girl’s bathroom. For the love of Morgana! The little mudblood is lucky that a few harmless hexes were all that was done to her.” Morag huffed and crossed her arms over her chest, not directly admitting to being on the giving end of at least some of those hexes, but it was implied. Harry narrowed his eyes at the plain-faced pureblood brunette. Harry hated getting involved in things that simply weren’t his business, but as far as he knew, Hermione’s only offense was her blood and Harry was getting rather fed up with the ridiculous prejudices that seemed to plague half of the Hogwarts Wizarding population.

“Do you miss them?” Anthony asked out of nowhere, having obviously not been paying attention to the exchange happening in front of him. Harry couldn’t decipher anything from Anthony’s blank face, but he’d asked in a quieter tone so that those around them wouldn’t overhear. Harry pursed his lips and turned back to his plate, forking a piece of warm turkey into his mouth before answering.

“You can’t exactly miss what you don’t know.” Harry shrugged. “It’d be different if I had memories of them, but with nothing but tales of who they used to be, all I can mourn is the idea of them.” Harry looked back up into Anthony’s eyes before continuing, leveling the other boy with a serious expression. “So instead, I’ll mourn for those who did know them and lost a friend, a loved one, a comrade, a . . . a sister. I’ll mourn for the living because the dead have no use for our tears.” Harry finished with a sad smile that was no more than a tightening of his lips.

Again, Harry was reminded of the Godfather imprisoned on a hellish island, a family friend alone and in pain because of a condition he couldn’t help, and a Professor whose weeping wounds refused to heal. Anthony’s grim face looked strained and slightly in pain, so Harry did the only thing he could think of and bumped shoulders with the taller boy and flashed a smile when he caught his attention.

“Enough of that, talk of death will only make good food taste bland, and that would be such a waste.” Harry tried not to crack up at the affronted noise he heard over his shoulder from Death himself. Anthony’s visage brightened several watts and they were both about to tuck back into their meals when they were interrupted by the dining hall doors suddenly being flung open with great force and a panicked Professor Quirrell running into the room screaming at the top of his lungs about a troll in the dungeon.

Panic was almost immediate as students screeched, Quirrell fainted, and the teachers yelled at kids to follow their prefects back to the dorms in a calmly manner, except for the Slytherins, which were to follow their head of house, Snape, to a safer area while everything was sorted. In the chaos that was the dining hall, Harry thought of the absent girl in his year as he slowly rose from his seat and followed the flow of students.

Harry thought Anthony had been swept away by the flood that was a mass of students frantically
fleeing the hall, but when Harry slipped out of the raging current of students and into an abandoned side hall, Anthony was right behind him looking more than a little disheveled.

“Where are you going?” Anthony asked as he nearly tripped over his own feet in order to catch up with Harry’s brisk pace. Harry didn’t answer until they turned a corner and were out of sight from the students and staff alike.

“Granger wasn’t at dinner, she won’t know about the Troll and is therefore, in danger. As much as I despise getting involved, no one else seems to know she’s gone, and those that do won’t be willing to help her. You should go back to Ravenclaw tower with the others,” Harry paused in his stride and turned his head to look Anthony with a put upon sigh, “But I know you won’t because you’re ridiculous and will insist on following.” It wasn’t a question, but Anthony nodded anyways.

Shaking his head, Harry resumed his quick pace towards the girl’s bathroom near the dungeons where Granger was most likely to be. Harry wasn’t sure if he was more amused or annoyed when Anthony took longer strides and put himself half in front of Harry like he was ready to play human-shield at a moment’s notice. As funny and endearing as his and Draco’s protective nature had been before, Harry now worried that they might think him defenseless enough and do something stupid like get themselves hurt when Harry was perfectly safe.

They arrived at the corridor where the girl’s bathroom could be found and already they could hear the destruction that must be taking place within. Worried that they might already be too late, they ran the rest of the distance to the entrance of the bathroom and found the towering Mountain Troll swinging its massive club towards the last intact stall where a pair of plain black shoed feet could be spotted through the space between the stall wall and the floor.

Reacting without even thinking, Harry flung out his hand and wrapped his magic around the club, stopping it dead in the air as the troll’s hand slipped off of the handle. The Troll blinked dumbly at its empty hand for several moments, before it turned around to see the two new arrivals. Before anything else could happen, Harry sent a powerful stunner at the Troll in a beam of crimson light. The Troll was immediately rendered unconscious and teetered backwards, threatening to fall on top of the stall Harry had just saved. With a quick and heavy tug of his magic, the Troll was jerked forward so that it would fall on its face.

“Incarcerous.” Harry finished, watching for a moment as the Troll was wrapped and bound in ropes in case it wasn’t found by the professors before the stunner wore off. Speaking of, they needed to leave, quickly!

Harry turned to the frozen Anthony, who was still staring wide-eyed at the unconscious Troll. “Anthony,” Harry snapped to get the shocked boy’s attention. “Get Hermione, quickly. We don’t want to still be here when the Professors arrive, that Troll hasn’t exactly been quiet.” Seemingly
have snapped out of his frozen state, Anthony jumped into action and quickly ran over to the now open stall where a very shaky and tear-stained Hermione was watching Harry with confused and wondrous wide brown eyes.

Anthony guided the stunned girl over the rubble and splintered wood and around the incapacitated Troll to where Harry stood at the entrance, watching the hallways carefully for anyone else while Anthony kept a firm hold on her elbow to keep her steady and upright. Harry gently gripped Hermione’s other elbow and they quickly led her away from the utterly destroyed bathroom and towards Ravenclaw tower. It took only a full minute for Anthony to break.

“What that bloody hell was that?!” Anthony exclaimed, though Hermione still seemed too dazed to even flinch at the sudden outburst, and Harry kept a blank mask over his features and abstained from saying anything as Anthony went on. “Wandless magic?! You can do wandless magic and you never even told me? That-that’s not even possible! Those weren’t even simple spells. Tell me I’m not going crazy, Harry, tell me I just didn’t see your wand!” Anthony sounded slightly hysterical, which, granted, was understandable considering the dangerous situation they were currently fleeing from. Harry glanced at the vacant witch between the two of them nervously.

“Anthony, we’ll talk about this later.” Harry warned, but apparently later was right now because Anthony stopped short, forcing Harry and sequentially Hermione to stop as well. Anthony let go of Hermione, and seeing that she could stand just fine on her own, Harry did the same so that they could face each other for whatever was coming.

“Since when could you do wandless magic?” Anthony asked incredulously, saying that last part like he still didn’t quite believe in its validity. Harry heaved a heavy sigh, knowing that he couldn’t attempt to obliviate his friends considering he’d never done it before and still only knew the theory of it. Harry knew that telling Anthony was a leap of faith. Harry trusted him, but hadn’t known him for nearly long enough to feel comfortable spilling secrets of that magnitude. Without any other options, Harry dove in and offered as little as he could get away with.

“For a while now, pretty much since I found out I was magical when I was eight. I didn’t have a wand and my accidental magic was getting me in trouble with my muggle relatives. I had to find a way to control it. I . . . I didn’t tell you—or anyone, for that matter—because I came into this world with so much attention already on me for something that happened ten years ago, something that wasn’t even really my doing. Now, can you imagine the insanity that would follow the news that everyone’s precious savior was pretty damn good at wandless magic among other things?! It would turn me into either the next dark lord for those who’d fear me, or a bloody messiah for those who hailed me!

“You know how much I hate all of the exposure and unsolicited opinions as is. I am trying to rid myself of that burden, not settle it more firmly on my own shoulders.” Harry rested a hand on Anthony’s shoulder and pleaded with the other boy through his eyes. “You’re my friend, Anthony,
and I truly care about you . . . but this is my life! If people get it in their heads that I’m anything more than an average Ravenclaw first year, it will change everything. My life would no longer be my own. Please, understand my reasons and forgive my omissions.” Harry stared into the deep hazel of his friend’s eyes that seemed to be such a true reflection of the churning turmoil going on in Anthony’s head.

For a few long moments, Harry wasn’t actually sure what would happen and how his friend would react, but then, just as the dread Harry didn’t know he could feel so fiercely settled into his gut, Anthony sighed and nodded with a faint smile ghosting over his lips. Harry didn’t even hesitate before leaping into Anthony’s arms and practically strangling the other boy with his arms wrapped tightly around his neck. Anthony laughed and patted Harry’s back soothingly as Harry’s body flooded with relief. Harry hadn’t known he would be effected by his friend’s approval so much.

When they pulled apart, they both caught sight of the previously frozen witch silently tip toeing away from them at the same exact time. Harry cast a quick wandless sticking charm on her shoes.

“Oh no you don’t. Like it or not, you heard some sensitive information and I can’t just let you go about on your own.” Grinning, Harry glanced at Anthony, who wore a similar expression having caught on to what Harry was doing, then shifted his gaze back to the witch in question who had turned her body enough to look at him from over her shoulder. “You’re in this with us, Granger. So what do you say? Friends?”

Hermione’s face lit up like a Christmas tree and she nodded excitedly. Harry unstuck her shoes and the three Ravenclaws walked back to Ravenclaw Tower without any trouble. Harry went to sleep that night feeling lighter than ever before and excited to have someone new to call a friend.

Anthony didn’t fall asleep right away that night like Harry. He lay awake for a few more hours, staring up at the royal blue—almost black in the darkness—and replaying over in his head that feeling that shot through his body when Harry first used wandless magic right next to him. Being sensitive to magic, it felt like the entire bathroom was suddenly flooded with magic so thick it was hard to breathe. Anthony had felt so . . . alive! It felt like live currents of euphoric magic were shooting up through his fingertips and curling around each organ and muscle. He had nearly started giggling with the high of it.

To know that what he’d felt the first time he’d met Harry was only the tip of the iceberg of his magic left him feeling a bit disoriented. If Harry was carrying around that much raw power at all times, Anthony would protect him from the rest of the world. Harry had been absolutely right; if the public found out about this, he would either become a weapon for their blasted cause, or he would become the next dark lord in their eyes. So Anthony would do anything to keep that from happening and
protect his friend. No matter where life led Harry Potter, Anthony would be by his side.
Chapter Summary

In the last chapter: Harry starts class at Hogwarts with the occasional conflict with Snape or Michael and grows closer to his two friends Draco and Anthony. Harry spends his nights conversing with death, hearing stories about his parents and the Marauders—specifically, Sirius. Ron and his Gryffindor housemates get into trouble snooping around the third floor corridor. Hermione gets caught up in the troll fiasco and Anthony and Harry save her (resulting in Harry using wandless magic in front of Anthony). And Hermione is brought into the tight-knit group of Harry’s friends.

Chapter Notes

Hey Guys! Sorry this chapter is technically late. I've been pretty busy lately with school coming up and having to move back upstate for it.

IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENT/: With school starting soon, I will be much more busy, so I will be slowing my updates down to weekly updates until further notice. If I can, I will post more frequently, but at this point, I will have to slow down.

Thank you, I hope you all enjoy this next chapter!

-Pleasant Readings!

The rest of the term played out quite similarly to the first half: ruddy Gryffindors stuffing their noses into other people business, Severus Snape taking every opportunity to try to humiliate Harry, Death maintaining a sometimes dark other times hilarious narrative going on over Harry’s shoulder, Harry reading, and Draco, Anthony, and Harry spending every spare moment together.

Hermione had begun joining them at meals—at Harry’s cold and firm insistence—and though Draco wasn’t happy what-so-ever in the beginning, Harry was sure to thump him on the head a few times to get him to stop being an idiot and remind him not only that Harry despised the blood-titles, but that Harry was, in fact, a Half-blood.

After that, Hermione became an expected part of the group, though she didn’t join them half of the time in favor of quiet time alone to read. Harry enjoyed her feisty personality when she was around and envied her when she was allowed to have alone-time. If Harry ever tried to get some space from
the two leeches he dubbed ‘friends’ he’d end up with two furious blondes who’d want to know who else he could possibly be hanging out with, or why was he pushing them away. Bunch of blasted nits, if you asked him!

Before anyone knew it, winter break came rolling in with a ridiculous amount of snow and a signup sheet for those who would be staying at Hogwarts for Christmas. Harry put his name on the list that was mainly a few seventh-years who wanted to spend Christmas break with their friends instead. When Anthony and Draco found out, the ribbed him with dozens of questions about why he wasn’t going home and if he wanted, he could join either of their families over break.

Harry sighed and sat with his two friends at the Ravenclaw table for lunch. Draco across from him and Anthony on his right, as usual. Making a split decision—having not really thought about how his friends would react to him staying at Hogwarts—Harry decided to give them a fraction of the truth.

“Actually, I am planning on going to see family over break, but I can’t see them if I go back to where I live with my relatives. I haven’t told either of you much about them, but they . . . they don’t exactly approve of magic and all of this.” Harry made a broad sweeping gesture to Hogwarts, and the wizarding world in general. “If I went back now, chances are I’d be stuck there until break was over. My best chance is to stay here and sneak out of the castle for a while. It won’t be hard, there’s a secret tunnel leading from here to Hogsmead that the seventh-years use because it won’t trip any wards.” Harry explained as he scooped some rice and teriyaki chicken onto his plate.

“Who are you going to see?” Draco asked, brows furrowed. Liking how much easier it felt to tell the truth when he could, Harry decided to continue with that approach.

“A very close friend of my parents. I’m not sure if you know this, but Dumbledore is my current magical guardian. I think . . . I think he means well, but I don’t think he is fit to be any child’s guardian. I do not stay with him when not at Hogwarts and my guardians in the muggle world are not ideal. So I’m going to try to transfer my guardianship from Dumbledore to this family friend. If all goes well, I can live with him this summer instead of my relatives.” Harry explained with a diminutive shrug.

“Transfer Guardianship,’ you can do that?” Draco asked, tilting his head to the side and scrunching up his face in confusion. Harry smiled and nodded.

“Yeah, considering my birth parents are not alive, my Gringotts vault key—as a sign of guardianship—would be held by my magical guardian so that they could take care of me. Problem was, Dumbledore is my magical guardian but he was not using the funds from my trust vault to provide for me, I wasn’t in his care or living with him, and lastly, he had even given my key to someone else to hold on to. I don’t think he realized the severity, but by giving the key to someone else it is a show of transferring guardianship, though the paperwork was never filed, that other person could have
taken guardianship of me without anyone knowing better.

“Since he was not fulfilling the duties of a guardian, technically that key should have remained in my possession as a pseudo-emancipation until I could give the key to an adult who I would like to be my guardian. Since I now have my vault key back, I can give this family friend my key and hopefully work everything out so that he’ll become my guardian.” Harry explained.

What Harry didn’t tell them, was that this ‘family friend’ was actually the infamous Sirius Black who was currently serving a life sentence in Azkaban. Also, that Harry planned on giving Sirius his key when he visited, forcing Gringotts to investigate whether his nominated guardian was fit or not. It would sequentially reopen Sirius’ case since wizards could not stop goblin business affairs and Harry could then push the Ministry to actually give Sirius a trial, in which Harry would bring forth the necessary evidence in order to acquit his Godfather.

The timing would certainly be tricky, considering there’s no telling when the goblins will decide to investigate or when the trial will actually take place. In a perfect world, everything could be sorted and closed before summer started and nobody but those directly involved would find out about it until Sirius was already cleared.

Harry knew that he could make the process go by faster by going directly to Gringotts several times after filing to make sure that certain things were seen to and processed. Goblins, considering they rather despised wizards in general, liked to take their sweet time with things such as this, but his newly acquired title had garnered certain privileges and quite a bit of respect. Also, there wasn’t a way to bypass the Goblins, since guardianship was so closely tied in to inheritances and who could access what vaults that matters pertaining to these things were left solely to the goblins as an unbiased third party unaffected by wizarding politics.

The issue with trying to go there directly to help along the processes, was that Harry only had so much time and opportunity to sneak out of Hogwarts while on winter break and would not be able to once the term started back up.

“Wouldn’t it just be easier to stay over at either Draco’s or my place for winter break? It would be a lot easier to go see your friend if either of our parents could bring you, then you wouldn’t have to break any rules.” Anthony reasoned, lifting one shoulder in a half of a shrug. Harry knew where he was coming from but knew it wouldn’t work.

“No, since Dumbledore is still my guardian he has a say over where I go, so he’ll insist I either stay with my relatives or here. As I said before, with my relatives, it’ll be much harder to get where I need to go. I’ve thought this through extensively, and my best option is to stay here and sneak out to Hogsmead. That will also make Dumbledore think that he has eyes on me at all times.” Anthony nodded along as Harry spoke, taking in what he said and apparently not finding flaw with any of it.
Two days after winter break had begun and all of the students going home had vacated the castle, Harry got up an hour and a half before the sun rose and quickly got dressed and prepared to see his Godfather.

Harry dressed in plain black, finely tailored wizarding robes, charcoal dragon hide boots, and a thick wool cloak that was the darkest blue Harry had ever seen on fabric. Nobody in his dorm room had stayed over break—thankfully—so he didn’t have to worry about sneaking around his room and could get ready fairly quickly.

Five minutes later, Harry was wrapped up in the invisibility cloak he’d been gifted from Death his eleventh birthday and his footsteps were silenced as he quickly moved through the castle to the statue of the one-eyed witch near the DADA stairs. It only took minutes to find the statue. Harry made sure the hallways were empty before taking out his wand and tapping the witch’s hump.

“Dissendium.” Harry whispered before the statue shifted, creating a hole behind the statue and he was able to slide down into the tunnel beneath the school through.

Harry followed the tunnel with a lumos lighting his way. The tunnel ended in the cellar of Honeydukes, which was empty save for a few crates of additional stock. Harry took off the invisibility cloak, took out the Gringotts key he had in his pocket, wrapped the key in the cloak, and stuffed both into the inner pocket of his winter cloak. From a pocket in his robes, Harry pulled out a scrap of soft leather and cast a quick tempus to check the time.

Weeks prior, Harry had owled the Department of Magical Law Enforcement in the Ministry requesting a private meeting with one of its Aurors. Harry didn’t specify what the meeting was about, but considering who he was, his request was promptly accepted and they sent him a portkey via owl a few days later. Harry hated using his name to get things like this, but as a minor, it was one of the few advantages he had seeing as how Dumbledore would never allow him to do what he was about to.

As per Harry’s request, instead of a specifically timed portkey, this portkey was spelled to activate five minutes after leaving the anti-apparation wards. The wards wouldn’t keep him from portkeying, but it would alert Dumbledore and place an automatic trace on him. Similar to the wards around Hogwarts, the wards around Harry’s relative’s house would keep him from portkeying period.
Casting one last tempus, Harry straightened his robes, slipped his wand back into his inner robe pocket, and held onto the 2x2" scrap of leather tightly moments before Harry felt like he was being pulled through a straw by a fishhook embedded behind his bellybutton. A half second later, Harry was violently thrown onto the black marble floors of the reception hall of the Ministry.

Slowly pushing himself back up onto his feet as his brain seemed to spin freely inside his skull, Harry felt vaguely grateful that he’d arrived so early and there were only a few dead-eyed people shuffling about. Either just leaving after an all-night shift or just arriving for work before the sun was even up, everyone was far too drowsy to pay any attention to the young boy had come crashing into the Ministry with about as much finesse as an elephant stampeding through.

Harry kept his cloak hood up and his head down as he purposefully strode through the main area of the Ministry and over to the access lifts. The Department of Magical Law Enforcement was on level two of the Ministry, right around the corner of the lifts and behind a set of heavy oak doors. Inside was an even worse display of exhaustion than out in the main hall.

As Harry walked past desks and cubicles, he spotted several Aurors passed out in their chairs or nursing steaming cups of tea as their heads bobbed dangerously and their eyelids drooped. It took a little bit of wandering around since Harry didn’t want to start asking around, but eventually he found the cubicle he was looking for that held the Auror who’d been assigned to meeting with him. Harry stood silently and watched as a man reclined in his chair with his long legs crossed over and kicked up onto his desk. He wore a very long black leather coat and dark, stained clothes underneath. His long chestnut brown hair was half pulled back, tied with a leather cord and his hard face was full of dark scruff that showed he hadn’t shaved in at least a week.

The reason that Harry was able to study the man down to even the faint white scar curved between his eye and cheekbone? The 30-something year-old Auror was totally passed out. His mouth was hanging open slightly and deep, rumbling snores were erupting from the man. A silencing bubble had obviously been placed around the Auror, which is why Harry didn’t hear him until he stepped up to the entrance of the cubicle.

Harry sighed and rapped his hand on the desk loud enough to snap the older wizard out of sleep. The man woke rather violently and Harry almost felt bad for waking him, but Harry had business to attend to and he wanted it settled as soon as possible. When the Auror, Philias Green according to the letter that had been sent to him a few weeks ago, blinked slowly several times before he finally seemed to notice Harry.

"Mr. Green? My name is Harry Potter, and I was told I could meet with you." Harry pulled back his hood and held out his hand to the stunned and still slightly sleepy Auror. After a long pause, the man seemed to snap out of it and hesitantly took Harry’s smaller hand in his large calloused one and shook it like it was made of thin glass.
“Uh, yeah I was told I’d be meeting you, but I just thought a couple of my mates were taking the piss—ah! I mean, I thought they might be having a laugh.” Green grimaced and looked supremely uncomfortable around the child. Though Harry, for his part, kept his expression neutral. “Oh, and you can just call me Phil! I aint be ‘aving any of that ‘Mr.’ business.” Green—Phil—exclaimed with an unsure smile. Phil had a deep, rolling Irish accent that was pleasing to listen to, even if he looked rather out of his depth around anything small and remotely delicate.

Phil cleared his throat and turned on his swivel chair to face Harry, with his hands braced on his knees, elbows facing out, and his posture tense like he was about to receive a lashing or something. “What-ah . . . what can I do ye for?”

Harry took a discreet, deep calming breath before he spoke.

“I’d like an escort to visit someone in Azkaban.” Harry forced out with a determined nod of his head as if to clarify that what came out of his mouth was exactly what he meant. When Harry looked up from the middle of the Auror’s chest that he’d been staring at when he spoke, he found Phil sitting stock still with his brows high up on his forehead and deep valleys creased into his tanned forehead. After what seemed like ages, Phil suddenly broke into side-aching belly laughter, so hearty it almost made Harry’s stomach hurt from just listening to it.

When Harry didn’t laugh or say anything else, Phil’s laughter slowly died out and a look of confusion and apprehension slowly crawled over his features.

“Harry . . . you do realize that this isn’t like any old muggle prison. There are dementors everywhere and many of the prisoners are Death Eaters. It is no place for a child. Who would you even go to see?” Phil looked worried for Harry, which was both annoying a bit nice at the same time.

“I know exactly what Azkaban is and trust that I have no disillusions about what I will see at the prison. If you must know, I am going there to see my Godfather, Sirius Black.” The Auror actually jerked back a little at the name.

“Sirius Black?! The Death Eater? The one who betrayed your parents? Why on earth would you ever go to see that barking mad mutt?” Harry was glad he didn’t dismantle the silencing spell as Phil’s voice got louder and more incredulous the longer he spoke. When Harry spoke, his voice was cold and hard.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Green, but on what grounds are you making these claims? As far as I know, my
Godfather still has yet to receive a trial, and aren’t all people considered innocent until proven guilty? I would highly appreciate it if you refrained from slandering my Godfather until you have proof and a sentencing to back up what you say. Now, I’m still just a child so I don’t know much, but I’m fairly certain that being incarcerated without a trial is only legal during times of war. Well, it’s been over a decade, there hasn’t been an actual war since before my Godfather was arrested, and yet he still hasn’t received a trial.

“You seem like a good man, Mr. Green. Funny, even. I don’t wish to ruin your day by going to the Head Auror and asking why my Godfather hasn’t received a trial, and I certainly don’t wish to bring the press into such a messy matter, I truly despise confrontation. But these are trying matters, I’m afraid. Do not doubt, I will be getting my Godfather a trial. I’ll be coming back, and when I do, I’ll be coming for blood. Yet, I think that there are others more deserving of the scrutiny than the Auror Department. Young, though I may be, I do not make idle threats.” Harry let his piercing gaze bore into Phil and watched as the trained Auror squirmed a little in his seat.

‘Careful now Harry, threatening a secret Death Eater . . . tsk, tsk, such dangerous games you like to play.’ His companion put in and Harry had to school his face into a blank mask to keep from reacting. Harry certainly never thought that he’d meet his first Death Eater pretending to an ordinary Auror. As Harry studied the man before him in a new—darker light, Phil finally deflated with a resigned look on his face. Now that Harry was looking closely, he could see the hard glint in the man’s expression, the way his right hand was eerily still and tense on his leg, like he was trying hard not to just grab his wand and hex Harry.

“Fine. I’ll take you, but you will not leave my side until we reach your Godfather and you will do everything I say. Keep that head on your shoulders and don’t try anything stupid, ‘ight lad?” Phil snapped in a no-funny-business tone and waited until Harry nodded before standing up from his chair and walking past Harry. The man was easily six feet tall, if not more, and his broad shoulders plus severe expression made just about anyone grateful to not be on the other end of his wand at any given moment. Harry pulled his hood back up and followed the fake-Auror to a plain wooden door on the other end of the room.

Inside was a completely bare room with a single florescent light overhead. Phil closed the door behind Harry and for a split second, Harry feared that the Death Eater would carry out his master’s final deed and off Harry—not that it would do the man any good, considering—but he just stood in the middle of the room and held his hand out to Harry like he was leading a small child across the street. After a bit of hesitation, Harry stepped forward and took the offered hand, which once again swallowed his smaller one.

Feeling a more violent tug behind his navel than he had experienced before, Harry was ripped through the fabric of space and thrown back into an entirely different place in a matter of seconds. Harry’s knees immediately buckled and he was dangerously close from heaving up whatever was in his stomach at the moment, but the strong hand wrapped around his own quickly pulled up to keep his knees from hitting the bare cement beneath his feet.
Phil hooked his hands underneath Harry’s armpits and pulled him back up into a standing position. Never before had Harry felt so much like a child, it caused a flaming blush to bloom on his cheeks and he glared once at Phil before the man quickly let go and stepped back like he’d hurt Harry or something. Huffing once and smoothing down his robes, Harry let go of the brief irritation and allowed Phil to lead him out of the cold empty room that was almost identical to the one they’d just left.

The had apparently apparated into the check-in building just outside of the prison. It was the only area on the tiny island where apparation was possible. Dementors were the primary guards inside the prison, but Aurors manned the entrance structure and did daily patrols through the prison along with doling out meals and escorting prisoners and visitors to and from the central prison.

In the check-in place, Harry got a few odd looks, but nobody said anything but what was necessary, like to direct him to hand over his wand for the duration of his stay and to subject himself to a specialized detection spell that would locate any magical items on him or weapons so that he couldn’t sneak anything in to a prisoner. Thankfully, the cloak wasn’t discovered due to its properties to not only hide the wearer from view, but to mask magical signatures and is impervious to all spells except for the unforgivables. Once Harry was cleared, Phil led him out of the small structure and he got his first glimpse at Azkaban.

It was a daunting gray stone structure, a frightening giant against the drab overcast sky of early morning. Black wraith-like creatures swarmed and floated around the building like crows circling a corpse. Dementors.

Inside, Harry was immediately met with the screams of the tortured and insane. With dementors feeding freely on the prisoners, Harry could understand why they’d scream, why they’d go mad. Phil paused in the darkened entryway and looked down at Harry, eyes unsure and slightly haunted.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Phil asked, offering Harry one last chance to back out. There had been a moment of fear when Harry first entered the prison, but when you’ve faced Death and returned, fearing things found only in life was rather hard. Besides, he was here for a reason.

“I’m sure.” And with that, Harry was led up through flight after flight of stairs, until they reached the seventh floor and Phil pulled out a large ring of cruddy black keys and unlocked the door that would bring them into corridors holding the prisoners. As they walked, prisoners would run up to the large barred window on the door and either pleaded to be let out, or reached their dirty arms through the bars in hopes of snagging one of them, or shouted oaths at them and other profanity.

Not all of the cells held prisoners, in fact, they seemed to be spaced out enough that each wall of
perhaps ten-fifteen cells held no more than three-five prisoners. After the third turn, they came to a rather quiet corridor and halfway down, Phil stopped and gestured to a cell door roughly ten feet away. The cell was quiet, despite having probably heard both their approaching footsteps and the other shrieking prisoners.

“I want to go inside.” Harry said resolutely, but in a tone quiet enough to not be heard from inside the cell. Phil instantly shot him down.

“No, absolutely not!”

Harry narrowed his eyes at the older man. Phil looked right back at him, steely and unmoving.

“Phil, all I wish is to be able to be alone with my Godfather for a short period of time. I believe him to be unjustly imprisoned and just want to meet the man who was so close to my parents. I can very well take care of myself and it’s not like he can escape, he has no wand and no way out. Give me just one hour and then I promise we can leave.” Once again, Phil looked extremely uncomfortable and shifted his weight several times where he stood.

“Fine. But you call out if anything happens, and I am not liable for any harm that may come to you!” Phil shook a domineering finger at Harry like a scolding parent. Harry nodded seriously and followed Phil as he reluctantly unlocked the cell he’d indicated to before and let the door swing open for Harry. After a deep breath that perhaps wasn’t the wisest on his end, Harry walked into the cell and Phil closed the door behind him, but didn’t lock it and walked away to give them privacy.

The cell was frigid, drafty, damp, and dirty. The only light came from two glassless windows so high up, you wouldn’t have any hopes of seeing anything but the grey sky beyond. There wasn’t a bed or anything, just the windows and the door. A figure lay curled up on the floor against the wall, breathing deeply and presumably asleep. All Harry could discern from the lump on the ground was beyond dirty and tattered rags for clothes, long matted black hair, and bits and pieces of dirty skin peeking through the holes and tears in the fabric.

Harry was about to call out to his Godfather, when a shadow fell over one of the windows and Harry looked up just as a Dementor floated into the cell, it’s gauzy and shadow wrapped face turned towards Harry as it approached. Harry stood stock still as the creature drifted closer, the already freezing room becoming every colder. Harry didn’t even think about calling out to Phil as the dark creature came face to face with him and was only a foot away. The Dementor shifted its head closer to Harry and seemed to inhale his scent. Suddenly, like it had been burned, the creature reared back with a faint hissing noise and fled the room as quickly as it could.
Whatever it had smelt on Harry, it certainly hadn’t liked it. Feeling like he could breathe again, Harry turned his attention back to the curled up man before him.

“Sirius?” Harry called out in a gentle tone. When nothing happened, Harry called out again in a louder, but no less gentle, voice. This time, Sirius stirred and shifted enough to reveal a pair of light grey eyes that immediately landed on Harry. In a flash, Sirius was up on his feet—though he didn’t step closer—and staring at Harry with very wide eyes.

“I don’t know if you recognize me, since it’s been so long, and I’ve grown up a lot more, but I’m Harry, your Godson.” Harry said carefully, taking in every emotion that flicker in Sirius’ expression.

“Is this . . . is this real?” Sirius in a pained voice that was rough and scratchy from disuse. Harry gave him a sad smile and nodded before taking a tentative step forward and stopping to see if Sirius reacted. When he didn’t, Harry took another step forward, then another and another. When Harry was close enough, he reached out took one of Sirius’ cold and bony hands in both of his own, wishing for the warmth of his skin to seep into his, even if for only a short while. Sirius’ eyes shined with unshed tears and they quickly roved over Harry’s face, drinking in every detail like he never wanted to forget a single bit.

Something dawned on Sirius and his face morphed into one of concern.

“Harry, I-I promise, I had nothing to do—”

“I know, Sirius. I know who really betrayed my parents and I promise I will clear your name and get you out of here. I have everything planned out, you only need to be here for a little while longer, then I swear I’ll get you your trial and make sure you’re acquitted.” Harry vowed with more conviction than he ever knew was possible for him. Sirius looked surprised and a little doubtful, so Harry quickly told him his plan, and by the end, he looked contemplative and like Harry was actually on to something.

“That . . . that might actually work. But be careful Harry, I don’t care about getting out of here so much if it puts you in any kind of danger.” There was a haunted glint in his Godfather’s eyes that spoke volumes about how much he hated this place (how could he not?) but he also seemed to be telling the truth when he said he cared about Harry’s safety more. Harry ducked his head to hide the embarrassingly touched smile on his face, and nodded in agreement.

Harry and Sirius sat on the floor of the cell and talked for quite a while. Harry could tell that all of this time spent away from actual people had taken its toll on both his mental health and his social skills, but not nearly as much as Harry had expected, and as they continued to talk it seemed to
slowly become more and more natural to Sirius. Harry wasn’t fooling himself, he knew that it would take much more for Sirius to be a functional adult once Harry got him out of that place. There were times during their conversation that Sirius seemed to feel too much, and times when he seemed too numb. Sirius also hadn’t let go of Harry’s hand since Harry had grabbed his, like if he let go Harry would vanish or turn out to just be the hallucination of a broken and deprived mind.

Mainly, they talked about Harry’s first year at school and his friends. Harry could tell Sirius enjoyed listening to him talk, especially about himself. When Harry had told Sirius he’d been sorted into Ravenclaw, the man barked in laughter in what had to be the first time in nearly a decade, if not longer. Sirius made a comment about how smart Harry must be and how proud he was. It seemed Sirius was going to say something along the lines of how proud his parents would have been, but couldn’t quite get it out.

Harry cleared his throat slightly awkwardly and stood up, he only had about five minutes left before Phil came by to collect him and there was still something he had left to do. Sirius stood up as Harry dug into the pocket of his robes and pulled out the bunched up invisibility cloak. Recognizing the silvery material, Sirius gasped and his eyes widened. Harry carefully located the small golden key within the cloak and pulled it out. First, Harry handed over his key to Sirius.

“I, Harry James Potter, officially nominate Sirius Orion Black to be my magical, legal, and sole guardian from this day forward. So mote it be.” Harry proclaimed in a clear, confident voice as a shimmering white thread ran from Sirius to the key, and from the key to Harry. When the magic settled, Sirius’ cheeks were streaked with tears and an enormous grin had overtaken his face. Without any other prompting, Harry was pulled into a crushing hug which Harry returned, his arms squeezing the too-small waist of his Godfather. After a long few moments, Harry pulled back and Sirius reluctantly let go.

“Now that that is settled, there’s one more thing before I have to leave. As is, we have to sort of play the waiting game until we can get you out of here, but there are a few small things I can do before I leave. Starting with this,” Harry held out the invisibility cloak to Sirius and the man hesitantly took it with dazed eyes. “More than just hiding you from sight, it will hide your magical signature and keep dementors away from you.” Next Harry unfastened his winter cloak, which was actually a self-sizing cloak he’d bought with an identical black one when getting his supplies over the summer. Harry handed the cloak over as well.

“These cells are horribly cold and I will not have my guardian frozen solid before I can even get him out.” Harry said with a sly smile and mirth in his eyes. Next, Harry waved a hand over Sirius in a silent scourgify, which caused Sirius to yelp in surprise.

“Harry! Did you just do wandless magic?!” Sirius exclaimed in utter disbelief. Harry smirked deviously and held his index finger up to his lips with a short shushing sound and a wink. The man before him practically beamed with pride and wonder. Lastly, Harry cleaned up the cell the best that
he could, cast several heating charms on the room, his ex-winter cloak, and Sirius himself, and transfigured a mattress out of a folded up piece of paper he had shoved in his pocket. Once the mattress was finished, Harry grabbed the invisibility cloak from Sirius’ hand and spread it out over the mattress like a sheet until it was completely hidden from view.

Harry also transfigured the now-useless scrap of leather in his pocket into a cloak identical to the one he’d given Sirius, minus the resizing-charm. Harry put the duplicate cloak on so Phil wouldn’t notice anything out of place.

When all was said and done, Harry looked up at his Godfather with a reluctance to leave. He had only known the man for such a short time, but he already adored him. Harry hated leaving him here, but he knew that the best thing he could do for Sirius was get him out of here the right way. Otherwise, Sirius would spend his life looking over his shoulder and trying desperately not to get caught and dragged back to Azkaban. If that happened, Sirius wouldn’t have a chance to become Harry’s guardian and Harry would be in the same situation as now, but with a much smaller chance of clearing his name.

With one final and crushing hug, Harry walked back towards the entrance just as Phil came walking down the corridor. Turning around to look at his Godfather before he left, and offered a reassuring smile.

“I’ll get you out of here Sirius, I promise.” Sirius grinned brighter than any man in his situation should be able to. Phil opened the door and Harry walked through, not looking back. As they walked purposefully through the prison, Harry felt a warmth in his chest that he didn’t recognize. It was fleeting, but in its absence, it felt like a tiny space behind his sternum had been hollowed out to make room for the warmth when it’d return.

Phil brought him back to the Ministry and Harry departed with the promise that they would cross paths again. Phil gave Harry another one-time-use-only portkey that would bring him back to Hogsmead, and watched the young boy go, surreal pale green eyes haunting him whenever he closed his eyes. The domineering presence of the child refusing to fade from the forefront of his mind.

Harry made it back to the castle without his invisibility cloak just fine. By the time he exited the secret passage behind the one-eyed witch, breakfast had just started. Harry transfigured his duplicate cloak back into the leather scrap and shoved it into his pocket before making his way to breakfast. Now, all Harry had to do was wait.
The Rolling Philosopher Stones

Chapter Summary

In the last chapter: Hermione becomes a more expected part of the group. Harry employs his plan to free Sirius, and ends up meeting an undercover Death Eater named Phil along the way. Harry has a heart-warming reunion with his Godfather and vows to get him out of prison.

Chapter Notes

So sorry everybody! I know that this chapter is quite a bit late, but it's been crazy my first week back in school and dorms in insane heat with no AC and windows that barely open have made my motivation to do anything other that trudge through the necessities really hard. I didn't mean to put off posting for so long and hopefully I will get back into the swing of things again soon!

I know that this chapter is shorter in comparison to my usual chapters, but I'll be posting again this Monday! Thank you for being patient and I hope you enjoy the chapter!

-Pleasant Readings!

Term started up all too quickly for everyone else, but for Harry, it couldn’t come soon enough. When the students who went home finally came back, Harry had felt a vibrating anxiousness in his bones. When he first spotted Anthony, it was only a matter of seconds before he was practically tackled with a fierce hug from the taller boy. Draco been a little gentler ("pureblood proper" as Anthony had amusingly dubbed), but no less enthusiastic. Hermione had just grinned and bumped shoulders with him.

With all of his friends back, the term kicked off with bright start. Nothing had really changed from before break, except that Harry was perhaps a little more engaged in his studies, Michael came back from break with a renewed fire burning behind the plate of his breast bone to try his best to make Harry miserable, and Harry was eager for updates on his guardian situation. A week after visiting Sirius, Harry was summoned to Gringotts to file the appropriate paperwork on Sirius’ and his own behalf. When Harry explained the situation to the goblins, they seemed all too eager to rip open a case that would be a pain in the sides of many high powered wizards.

Near the end of February, though, it became clear that there was no possible way for everything to be cleared up and settled before summer began. It put a huge damper on Harry’s mood, but he didn’t let it show to his friends. The thought of having to return to his relative’s house after he told them
he’d never be coming back was, frankly, frightening. There’s no telling how violently they’d react to his return. Knowing that things could become quite bad, Harry requested a meeting with Dumbledore a few weeks into March.

Dumbledore smiled at him in a kind, grandfather-y way when he sat down in the overstuffed leather chair on the other side of the desk. Dumbledore offered him some tea and candy, but he politely declined.

“My dear boy, how you’ve flourished over this last year! I must say, your parents would be so proud, as am I.” Dumbledore exulted as he leaned back in his chair and stroked the length of his snowy white beard.

“Thank you Professor, that is very kind of you. I’m afraid that’s not why I’m here, though.” Harry adopted a more serious tone, though he kept it on the lighter side.

“Oh? Of course, of course. Please then, tell me why you’ve come.” Dumbledore sat up a little straighter and folded his hands over one another on top of his desk.

“It’s about my living arrangements for the summer. My relatives, you see, are not fond of magic—they hate it, in fact—and I simply do not feel safe returning to them.” Harry rushed out, wanting to get the uncomfortable conversation over with. “I know that you think it best for me to be protected by such powerful wards, but if Voldemort is gone, then I don’t see the reason behind needing such excessive measures.” Harry knew that Voldemort wasn’t gone, not with multiple Horcruxes tethering him to the world of the living. But Dumbledore didn’t know that he knew.

Dumbledore sighed. “Actually, Harry, I have reason to believe that he is not quite gone. I believe he is out there somewhere, too weak and too tired to return just yet.”

“Then what about Hogwarts? The wards are strong enough to protect me, I can stay here for the summer. Help out to earn my keep.” Harry sat on the edge of his chair, feeling slightly more desperate as time went on. Dumbledore shook his head sadly.

“I’m sorry that you don’t get along with your family, Harry, but that is the best place for you. You are safest behind the blood wards from your mother’s sacrifice. I’m sure that whatever issue can be overcome considering the dire situation.” Dumbledore commended.

Harry slumped back, realizing that Dumbledore would only ever see his complaints as an over-
exaggerating child who didn’t like his relatives. Dumbledore would force him back to his relative’s for the summer and as his magical guardian, he could!

“While I have you here, there’s something I wanted to ask you, Harry.” Dumbledore paused for a moment, then seemed to decide on something. “Have you ever heard of the Philosopher’s Stone?” Dumbledore asked carefully. Harry frowned a little in confusion, not sure where that came from.

“Sure, I guess. It’s in our history books. Something about Nicolas Flamel. He created a substance that turns any metal into gold and can grant someone immortality. They say he and his wife used it to stay young and healthy for centuries. Why do you ask?” Dumbledore looked pleased with how much he knew, but honestly, it was common knowledge for most wizards.

“Yes, well . . . I worked with Nicolas for many years, studying and practicing alchemy. When he passed, the stone was put in my care. For many years I’ve kept it at Gringotts for safe keeping, but right at the start of the school year, the vault it was kept in was broken into.” Harry vaguely remembered reading something about it in the Daily Prophet and thinking that it was ridiculous that someone was able to break into such a place and whoever they are, they had to be quite powerful. Harry nodded for Dumbledore to continue.

“Thankfully, I had Hagrid take it from the vault that same day and bring it here since I feared that someone would go after it. . . I trust you Harry, you’re quite smart and mature for your age, so I know that this information won’t fall into the wrong hands. The Philosopher’s Stone is being kept at Hogwarts in the third floor corridor. There are many dangerous protections placed on the stone to make sure that isn’t taken, but I worry that the same person who broke into Gringotts will be coming after the stone.” Dumbledore looked troubled and weary.

“Sir, why tell me this?” There was a long pause after Harry asked that.

“I believe that the one who broke into Gringotts was Voldemort.” That simple statement nearly knocked the breath right from Harry’s lungs. Voldemort . . . is coming here?

Harry wasn’t really sure how he felt about that. He’d always been curious about Voldemort. In a way, Voldemort was kind of like Harry’s counterpart. Such similar backgrounds, both powerful, owning brother wands, and both immortal in one way or another. Voldemort sort of represented what Harry could have become, had certain circumstances been different. But Voldemort had always just been stories to Harry, sure, a real being far away somewhere, but far enough away to just be stories to Harry.

Harry left his office feeling alone because of his living arrangements and a little overwhelmed.
because of the knowledge that Voldemort might come here. But his companion was quick to pick up on his churning emotions and started up a distracting conversation with a few quips thrown in about Draco’s slicked back hair that made Harry laugh.

As the term continued, Harry noticed the same three Gryffindors spending more and more time together and getting themselves into trouble. Draco often butted heads with the Weasley fellow. Harry could see why, but that didn’t mean he condoned it. On more than one occasion, Harry had to remind Draco that it was more trouble than it was worth and that acting like the bigger person would only improve Draco’s image. The blonde had been quite accepting after that, especially when Harry also pointed out that the boy would probably get himself in trouble sooner that Draco could purposefully do it.

Harry didn’t hold anything against Gryffindors in general, it was just those three that seemed awfully reckless that he didn’t quite care for. It also seemed that they were going to stop at nothing to try to find out what’s in that corridor. For some reason, they also seemed to be creating an even larger fuss with Severus Snape. At most meals, Ronald Weasley could be spotted sending deadly glares at the potions professor as if he was Voldemort in disguise. Who knows, perhaps Weasley did believe that.

Every day that passed brought Harry closer and closer to summer, and he was both excited and dreading it. The goblins had managed to set up a court date with the Ministry, but the ministry was being especially difficult and claimed that the earliest they could hold a trial was June 25th, fifteen days after school let out. With the help of his companion, Harry gathered information on the situation and together they figured out how they would use it. 

Exams came and went with little to no struggle. Harry, Draco, and Hermione had the top scores in their year with Anthony coming in Fifth after Michael. Michael, of course, had been livid about not making first—or even in the top three—and Anthony had just been glad to do so well. Anthony was brilliant, there’s no arguing that, but sometimes his mind drifted a bit and he was distracted for long periods of time. If Anthony was completely focused from the start of class till the end, he didn’t doubt that Anthony could have easily aced all of his exams without breaking a sweat.

The last night spent in the dorms for the school year, Harry was awoken suddenly by someone calling his name. Sitting up, Harry cast a quick tempus. He hadn’t been asleep for more than an hour. Harry rubbed the heels of his palms into his closed eyes, trying to wake himself up a little more.

‘What?’ Harry mentally snapped, having recognized the voice that had pulled him from sleep.
‘Three little lions ventured where they were never supposed to go in search of something they know not of.’ Death lilted in an amused tone.

Harry suddenly felt much more awake. Those idiots! They’re going to get themselves killed. Harry thought and reached for his wand under his pillow, but Death was already talking again before he could wrap his fingers around the warm handle.

‘No need to interfere. They were stumped by the third protective obstacle and the Headmaster caught them. Though it seems that there is another who thought to go after the stone tonight. He wasn’t able to take it and was chased off by Dumbledore before he could even really try.’

Voldemort. He’s here—was here. But how?

‘It seems that professor Quirrell came back from sabbatical with more than just a purple turban and outlandish stories. Voldemort is making his return far more quickly than I had anticipated. At this rate, he will do anything to covet a body of his own and return to power. Cheating me is no simple process, and taking sort-cuts will have dire consequences. But I wonder . . . should we help?’ Death asked in a nonchalant tone and Harry nearly swallowed his own tongue.

‘Help Voldemort? Why?’

‘That man has been running things his way for far too long. It’s dull. One can only enjoy death and destruction for so long. I made this deal with you for many reasons, one of them being that I wanted to change things up with Voldemort. I told you before, Tom Riddle had quite different ideals than Voldemort. Tom wanted to change the world, Voldemort wants it to bow at his feet. Defeating Voldemort is impossible now, he will never truly die until he wants to and very specific circumstances are met. The only chance for this world to not fall into another devastating war that would inevitably lead to many more deaths and the fall of the light, is to change Voldemort.

‘Follow my guidance, help him, restore his sanity, and I promise that you will gain what your soul most craves.’ It sounded like Death had been thinking about this for quite some time, if not from the beginning. Harry was still trying to process the fact that Quirrell was harboring Voldemort the entire school year.

‘How?’ Harry didn’t even know why he was asking, it all seemed too crazy. But was it? A little outlandish and overzealous perhaps, but the idea had merit.
'Under your pillow.' Was all Death said in response. Harry made a confused noise and reached under his pillow. He felt his wand, and . . . something else. Harry wrapped his fingers around it and pulled it out. Harry could barely see in the darkness, but from the weight and feel of it he could tell it was a large stone. Harry sucked in a surprised breath as he realized what lay in his palm.

“The Philosopher’s Stone.” Harry whispered aloud, too flummoxed to worry about his sleeping roommates. Harry shook his head and blinked in confusion.

“What am I supposed to do with this?” From what Harry knew of the stone, it granted immortality and riches. Harry was already covered for both. He had no personal use for the stone.

“Ah, yes. It seems that you have no use for the stone. Why, then, would someone who has no need to the stone, receive it?” Death asked, sounding all too pleased with himself.

“To give it to someone else? Oh! To Voldemort? But won’t that just help him on his path to self-destruction?” Harry felt like he was grasping at straws with this one.

‘Not exactly. You see, Voldemort is going to be trying to regenerate his physical form. The stone is a crucial ingredient in not only stabilizing the body once he performs the ritual, but also making sure that his body is completely his own and no dark ritualistic magic lingering from his time before losing his body will interfere in the regeneration process.

‘The problem is that even with the stone, it will not return his sanity or restore him to full power. The soul and magical core are so closely interwoven that the more Horcruxes he made and the less soul inside him, the less surface area that his magic would have to hold on to. The tricky part here, is that in order for us to do what needs to be done, we will also need all of Voldemort’s Horcruxes. One Horcrux is unobtainable, but just one is fine, if we combine all of the others and then force them back into the main soul during his resurrection, we will have the best chance at success.’

Harry’s head spun a little and he continued to stare at the stone in his hand as Death explained.

‘So . . . now we’re on Voldemort’s side?’ Even the voice in Harry’s head sounded unsure and confused. Death’s barking laughter filled Harry’s ears and Harry felt a little petulant for wanting to pout. Could you really blame him, though? He was woken up in the middle of the night to plot the resurrection of the man who would undoubtedly try to kill him on sight.

‘Of course not, we’re on our own side. Neither light nor dark, more of a third party nobody but us
knows about. If you’d like to think of it as players on a board game, Voldemort is the lord of the Dark faction, Dumbledore is the lord of the light faction, and you are the lord of a third faction not even on the board, but in league with the game-keeper.’

‘And you’re the game-keeper, I take it?’ Harry dead-panned with an eye roll.

‘Absolutely! Now what do you say, Harry? Shall we get this game started?’

‘You’re enjoying this far too much!’ Harry hissed half-heartedly and fell back onto his bed with a thump. The last thing Harry heard before slipping into sleep, was the cold rattling laughter of Death.
Chapter Summary

In the last chapter: Term starts again and everyone returns to Hogwarts for the spring. Harry confronts Dumbledore about his living arrangements for the summer, but his concerns are ignored and it becomes clear that he will have to return to his relative's house for the summer until Sirius' trial. Dumbledore talks to Harry about the Philosopher Stone. Ron, Dean, and Seamus go after the stone, but get caught part-way through and Voldemort is chased off on the back of Quirrell's very alive head. Harry is awoken that night to find the stone under his pillow and Death advises him to use it to help Voldemort return to his more alive and sane state of being.

Chapter Notes

Hey guys! Just a little note from me before you read. I wanted to address something I've noticed recently, and though there aren't many instances on this particular site and everyone's been pretty great so far, I thought it was worth mentioning. This story is M/M slash, though it will take a while to get to anything romantic or sexual in nature (because I am strongly against children and young teens being overly-sexualized like I have seen on here before) it Will happen.

I do not ask for much from any of you, but I do expect some level of maturity and tolerance here. If you do not like M/M slashes then you do not have to read it. Please, all I ask is that the comment section stays a safe place for everyone and that religious, political, and personal views on lgbtq+ stays out of my comment sections.

The comment section is for you, the readers, and I try my best to flag any harmful or hateful content before you have to read it, but I really wish I didn't have to and it didn't happen to begin with. That being said, it is TOTALLY okay to post criticism and opinions of my plot and my writing, but leave your views about lgbtq+ out of it. This is neither the time nor place.

If you really feel that you have to share that opinion or view and want to talk about it, I encourage you to message me personally and I will do my best to answer questions or at least pose some interesting thought points. Being apart of the community myself, I can do a pretty okay job of doing that. Otherwise, keep it off of this site.

Please be nice to each other, do not use my comment sections to spread hate, and enjoy the fic if nothing else.

Sorry for the long note, I just felt it needed to be said.

-Pleasant Readings!
Returning to the Dursley’s wasn’t like ripping off a Band-Aid, it was like getting your fingers caught
in a wood chipper and slowly being dragged in. First there was surprise, then there was confusion,
and finally there was outrage. Initially, Vernon had tried to force Harry bodily out of the house, but
between brawn and magic, the latter usually wins.

When they realized Harry was staying, Petunia snatched his wand away and locked it away in the
safe in their room. Vernon then grabbed Harry by the back of the neck and practically dragged him
over to the cupboard, threw him in, and bolted it shut. The quick and unexpected act caught Harry
off guard and gave Vernon the upper hand. Harry sighed as he listened to his trunk being dragged up
the stairs over his head and being thrown into his aunt and uncle’s room. Next, Harry heard the
fridge being opened and closed several times, before they apparently moved on to the pantries.

Eventually, the long train ride and chaos of an entire school year caught up to Harry and he passed
out on the familiar too-small cot he’d grown up with.

Later, Harry was jolted awake by the loud buzzing of power tools right outside his little door.
Frowning deeply, Harry sat up and listened carefully. It seemed as though his uncle was drilling both
into the door frame, and then the door. If Harry had to chance a guess, he’d say locks considering all
the clanking of metal he could hear from the other side of the door. When Harry reached out his
magic to touch the locks, his suspicions were confirmed and he found at least six heavy duty locks in
increasing complexity.

Finally, Vernon began bolting something to the door that wasn’t a lock. When Harry felt it out a little
more, he was startled to find that it was just a steel plate that would have to be unbolted just to get the
doors open.

*Insane. These people are complete nutters!*

Later that night, after the house had long since quieted down, Harry felt the slight dull ache of hunger
creeping in on him and he tried to summon some food from the fridge. Only, nothing came. Harry
tried again and felt out with his magic, but using his magic to feel out like this for too long was
draining. From the brief sweep Harry did through the kitchen, he found absolutely no food in the
house.

That’s *what that noise had been earlier*. Harry thought to himself, as he felt a slightly elevating
panic. He couldn’t summon food from any of the other houses around them, the distance would
weaken the summoning spell too much and just cause whatever food he tried to summon to smash
into their walls. He couldn’t transfigure food either because transfigured food wasn’t safe to eat and
could cause major health problems later on down the road.
So . . . short of blasting his way out of the cupboard and robbing the nearest house, he was stuck without food for the first time in a long time.

Harry tried to sleep through it, sure that he’d be let out and fed in the morning, but Harry was now unused to trying to sleep through hunger pains, and ended up staying awake through the entire night. Come morning, Harry was still locked in the cupboard while the smells of bacon, eggs, sausage, and toast wafted through the little grate on the door from the meal Vernon had picked up from a local diner.

At noon, Harry was let out to use the bathroom, and then once more before they went to sleep. Otherwise, Harry spent three sleepless days and nights in his cupboard without food and with only one water bottle. After the third day, they began putting him to work around the house again, though they continued to get their food from elsewhere and made sure to leave none left over.

The fourth day came along and Harry was running on maybe a few little power naps, a second bottle of water, and a triangle of toast he’d nicked from Petunia before she shoved the rest of her half-eaten plate down the garbage disposal and washed the shredded remains down the drain.

By the fifth day, Harry felt strangely numb. Not only to the hateful comments from his relatives, but physically. Harry had horrible head rushes every time he stood up and it felt like his bones had been made of lead. It was on this fifth day that an owl appeared at the sliding glass doors that led into the back yard. Harry immediately checked to see that nobody was around, even though he knew that the Dursley’s had all left ten minutes ago to go get lunch. Harry pulled open the door to let the regal brown and black owl into the house. It immediately flew up onto the dining room table and lifted the foot that had a letter tied to it.

Breaking the seal on the envelope and pulling out the single piece of parchment, Harry sat at the table and read the short letter as the elegant owl flew out the window without demanding treats or a reply like most owls.

The letter had been from Draco. Basically it said that Draco remembered Harry mentioning how much he didn’t want to go to his relative’s house for summer, with a very Draco-ish comment about it being obvious since they’re muggles. So, since Harry couldn’t live with this ‘family friend’ yet, Draco would be coming by to pick Harry up to spend time at Malfoy Manor until things were sorted with his guardian. The letter hadn’t asked whether or not he would like to stay with Draco, it had simply stated a fact, Harry would be staying with him.

The letter gave no indication towards when Draco would be showing up, just that it’d be soon. Shrugging, Harry went back to scrubbing stains out of the clothes currently in the sink. Harry’s day actually went a lot smoother now that he knew he wouldn’t be waiting out his entire time until the trial at the Dursley’s.
That night, when Harry laid down on his uncomfortable cot, for the first time in almost a week, he fell asleep immediately. . .

Unfortunately, Harry didn’t stay asleep. At what must have been no earlier than 3am, Harry’s sleep was interrupted by the sound of pounding on his door. No wait, not his door, but the front door of the house. Sitting up on his cot with his eyes still closed, Harry only distantly felt the rising panic amidst the cloud of exhaustion. Harry didn’t want his aunt and uncle to be woken up, so he knew he’d have to get to the door first and stop whatever bastard was pounding on their door so late.

With a hapless wave of his magic, the door to his cupboard was blasted open within a silencing bubble. Harry stumbled out of his cupboard, over shards of wood, and up to the front door. Even in all of the pandemonium Harry still felt more than half asleep. Days upon days of sleep deprivation will do that to a person.

Unlocking the front door and pulling it open, Harry found a house elf standing on his front step. Harry blinked once, twice, three times before looking up from the floppy-eared elf and finally noticing the three figures of varying height standing at the edge of his lawn. Harry forced his eyes to focus for just a moment, before they blinked heavily.

“Draco?” Harry’s mouth felt like it was full of glue and he wasn’t sure if the boy had heard him, so he left the open doorway of the house and shuffled out into the night in only a too-large pair of blue flannel pajama pants and a large grey t-shirt. The dew of the grass was cold against Harry’s bare feet and dampened the bottoms of his pant legs, but he paid it no mind as he approached the family of regal blondes.

“Harry,” a woman spoke up from beside Draco, Narcissa Malfoy, Draco’s mother. “You have to invite us past these wards so we can collect your things. Sorry to come so late, but we thought it best to do it at an inconspicuous time in case there’s someone that watches the house during the day.” Narcissa explained in a pleasant voice that sounded like bells, the epitome of motherly. Harry nodded his head jerkily and waved them forward.

“I invite you in.” Harry stated, knowing that magic he didn’t have a grasp on usually liked verbal commands. The Lord and Lady of the Malfoy line stepped past Harry and moved into the dark and still house. When Harry swayed on his feet a little, Draco quickly stepped forward and put a steadying hand on Harry’s ribs. Feeling the exhaustion creeping up into his consciousness as his head bobbed a few times, Harry paid little mind to his composure and leaned fully into Draco, letting his head rest on his shoulder like a sleeping child as his arms hung limply down between them.

“’m just gonna . . . close my eyes . . . a second. . .” Harry mumbled into night air, not even sure if he
was actually talking or if he’d already started dreaming. Arms wrapped around his back to keep him up and he slipped seamlessly into unconsciousness.

The first thing that registered was pain. Throbbing, radiating pain from within his skull that shot down the back of his neck. Harry felt like he’d been inflated past his body’s limits, then deflated into a dried out husk, and inflated again. Clutching his head, Harry sat up, and before he even opened his eyes, he knew something was off. For one thing, there was an unbelievably comfortable bed underneath him with a fluffy down-feather duvet with an equally soft down-pillow that had been under his head. When Harry finally cracked his eyes open, he saw that he was in an unfamiliar—and huge—bed with luxurious black sheets, touchable soft green bedding, and opaque black bed hangings closed around him.

When Harry pulled back the black draping’s he was hit with immediate stabbing light. Rearing back, Harry squinted narrowly out at the brightly lit room beyond and forced himself forward in order to adjust more quickly. When Harry could actually see, he took stock of the room around him. It was quite a large room with antique furniture, huge windows running the length of the wall behind the head board of the bed, and a color scheme of black, green, and accents of silver. Overall, the room looked like it had come straight out of Versailles.

Several pounding moments later, Harry remembered fuzzy snapshots of the night before. He’d been woken up by three Malfoys at the edge of his wards. If that wasn’t strange enough, he was pretty sure he’d fallen asleep on Draco’s shoulder last night. As if waiting for some divine que, the aforementioned blonde strode into the room with little care. Which meant that this was probably, in fact, Draco’s personal room.

“Oh! You’re awake. Good, I was worried you’d sleep straight through the day and night!” Draco smirked and plopped down on the side of the bed next to Harry’s hip. Harry couldn’t contain the yawn that pried his jaws apart, and right before he rubbed his eyes, Harry could have sworn he saw a flash of worry cross Draco’s face, but when he opened them again, Draco was still smirking.

“How long was I asleep?” Harry asked, remembering the letter Draco had sent about him staying at the manor until his guardian situation was sorted out. Harry still hadn’t told his friends who he’d picked to be his guardian, but he couldn’t hide it forever. The trial would certainly be in the papers, along with the shocking news that the Harry Potter was suddenly in the care of an ex-Azkaban prisoner.

“Well, it’s . . . 6pm now and we brought you here at three, so about fifteen hours? I don’t know what you’ve been doing over the past few days to tire yourself out so much, but I’ll certainly try to keep up the pace to keep you interested.” Draco said with a clap on his shoulder and a cheeky smile.
Draco didn’t mention how Harry literally fell asleep on him the night before, and Harry was more than fine with that! After another half hour of chatting, Harry got dressed and the two went on a short tour of Malfoy Manor—which overall had the same amount of excessive lavishness as Draco’s bedroom—before dinner.

When the five-star restaurant worthy dishes were served, Harry tried his best not to tear into the mouth-watering food like a starved child. He was successful, for the most part, but that didn’t mean that he didn’t finish everything off of his plate short of licking it clean like he’d seen in the movies. And if Narcissa and Lucius Malfoy shared a look when they saw how much he’d eaten, Harry didn’t take notice.

As promised, Draco indeed kept Harry very busy while he was there. Between flying around on brooms, wizard’s chest, playing all sorts of childish games Harry never got to play like hide-and-go-seek, bribing house elves into making them sweets, and running around on the immaculate grounds surrounding the Manor, Harry fell into bed each night blissfully full of warm food and pleasantly exhausted from the day’s events.

Harry’s favorite part of the property was, without question, the gardens. On the side of the Manor there was a huge garden with white stones marking the walkways and a diversity of flowers and plants that had Harry smiling without even realizing. Before Harry went to Hogwarts, gardening had been a hobby Harry actually enjoyed. The concept that it was so easy to create life and nurture and cultivate it into something extraordinary really drew Harry in to the activity. There were so many different species and families of flowers and plants. Seeing all of your hard work come to fruition, it was a very satisfying feeling.

Whenever Draco got caught up doing something else or had to go with his parent somewhere, Harry would go down to the gardens and either walk around, breathing in the fragrances, or he’d just sit on a stone bench next to the large fountain or flower bushes and think. There was a touch of impersonality to the garden, it was quite obvious that the house elves maintained the gardens for the same reason they kept the lawns a certain length and quite thick—the bigger picture. It wouldn’t do to have such a huge Manor and grounds if you didn’t even have one garden. It was simply a part of the aesthetic.

Harry’s days went on like this for roughly a week, the pattern was only broken by the lady of the estate. One day, during breakfast Narcissa Malfoy asked Harry if he’d join her for afternoon tea. Harry accepted of course, but he was wary of what Draco’s mother could possibly want. Harry wasn’t an idiot, he knew that the Malfoys were strictly a dark family, no matter what Lucius tries to peddle to the masses. Harry had heard plenty about how Lucius had been imperioed into taking the
dark mark and serving the Dark Lord. Harry didn’t believe that hogwash for a second.

Not only had the very being that, before Harry, had spent much of his time watching the Dark Lord had blatantly snorted and called bollocks when Harry had first heard about Lucius, but after meeting the man Harry just couldn’t quite see as anything but a loyal follower. Sure, the man would probably always put himself and his family first—real knack for self-preservation that one—but when Voldemort returns, Harry has no doubt in his mind that Lucius will be there eager and willing when he calls.

When Harry showed up for afternoon tea with Narcissa, it was clear he wasn’t having tea with just his best mate’s mum, but the wife of a Death Eater, Lady from the Black family, and dangerous dark witch. It was the sharp edge in her smile, the venom in her voice, and predatory way her eyes tracked his every movement. The only way that Harry could confidently drink his tea and not fear it poisoned, was knowing that even if it was, he’d come back and give Narcissa the heart attack of a lifetime.

“Mr. Potter, I can’t help but notice how close you are to my dear son, Draco. As you’ve probably heard, my family is not exactly light, you must see why this friendship might worry me, correct?” She asked in a seeming pleasant tone, but the look on her face said to tread carefully.

‘Ah, so this inquisition is about Draco! I should have known that the Matriarch of the family would be just as dotting, adoring, and protective of her son as Draco seemed to be of his parents.’ Harry mused, hearing the faint chuckling from over his shoulder. Instead of answering her question, Harry just smiled pleasantly and slid right into another topic.

“You know, it’s strange. I feel like I already knew you and your husband before I even properly met you. You see, Draco talks about you two constantly! I don’t think he even realizes how much. It’s quite endearing, actually.” Harry smiled to himself, remembering all the times he slipped unknowingly into conversation about his parents. Though it seemed he tried not to around Harry because he was an orphan, the blonde just couldn’t help it!

Harry’s smile faded and was replaced by a serious expression.

“I understand where your worry comes from, in the public’s eye I am the beacon of hope for the light, while it is clear that Draco will carry on the pattern of dark wizards in both sides of the family. I don’t expect any different and I won’t in any way try to change that. I have no problem with Draco being a dark wizard . . . but it’s not me you’re particularly worried about, is it? No, you fear that light and dark might come to a head again and Draco will be caught in the cross fires.” He analyzed, watching the minuscule twitch of one of her delicately arched eyebrows as he spoke and she sipped her tea.
Harry captured Narcissa’s eyes and leaned forward, voice coming out grave with a finality that rose the hairs on the back of her neck.

“Know this, whatever your opinion is of me, do not doubt that I care about your son. He is the first friend I made when coming to this world, and almost the first friend _period_. I have very few friends, which means that the friendships I do have I treasure very dearly. Draco has given me something invaluable just this past year, and I will pay back in kind. Whatever happens from here on, even if we are no longer on amicable terms, know that I will protect Draco with everything I have. Whether he stays by my side or points a wand at my heart, I will do everything in my power to make sure he stays alive and out of the hands of those who wish to manipulate him. I cherish Draco as a friend, and as long as I still draw breath, he will be safe.” Harry found the words surprisingly easy to say. Not because they were a lie, but because they were so true.

Narcissa looked very pleased by his words, and though not much changed in the overall appearance, she seemed a lot warmer and sincerer in her conversation. He thought that they were done in terms of what she wanted from Harry, but as the visit seemed to be winding down to an end, Narcissa grew serious again.

“There’s one more thing. . . Several days ago, when my husband and I picked you up from your relatives, there were some things . . . worrying things we’d seen that I’d hoped you’d be able to clear up for us.” Narcissa approached carefully, her face neutral with a small warm smile when she noticed Harry shift uncomfortably and wanted to reassure him or something. Harry sat up a little straighter and set his cup down on the saucer, not meeting her eyes.

“I see.” Harry swallowed nervously. Honestly, he’d been expecting this since they showed up in front of his house. The Boy-Who-Lived spending so much time in their home, right under their noses, and an opportunity to get a little dirt on him? Who wouldn’t dig a little?

“At first, we saw the empty bedroom and assumed it was yours,” Narcissa carried on, “But there were just toys and storage bins. So we had to look around a little more and found all of your things locked (including your wand) locked up in your—I assume—aunt and uncle’s bedroom. Then downstairs we . . . we found the cupboard.” Narcissa was starting to look a little uncomfortable herself and her composure was slowly fraying at the edges.

“Well, I think you know what we saw there, and what we concluded from it.” Narcissa waited until Harry met her gaze and nodded in affirmation before continuing. “I am appalled that it has gone on this long without anyone knowing, but . . . it is not my right to be delving into your business, from what I’ve heard, you are in the process of taking care of it already. I just want you to know that if something falls through with your chosen guardian or anyone else ever tries to force you back into that dreadful house, that my home is open to you. . .
“As a mother, I simply cannot allow another child to be knowingly placed in an abusive home. The fight between light and dark should not rest on the shoulders of children, and you should not be treated any differently until you hit adulthood and can make the decision for yourself. So, as long as you keep your promise to protect my son, I will continue to offer my home as asylum for you despite what may come to pass in the future.” Harry had not been expecting that in the least! But never the less, he kept his composure and gave a solemn appreciative nod.

He should have seen it coming, though. Malfoys simply don’t owe debts, to anyone.
The World isn't Split into Good People, and Death Eaters

Chapter Summary

In the last chapter: Harry returns to the Dursley's for a hellish couple of weeks before the Malfoys show in the middle of the night and rescue him. Harry spend the time up until the trial at Malfoy Manor and establishes a shaky alliance with Narcissa to protect Draco.

Chapter Notes

"The world isn't split into good people, and Death Eaters." -Sirius Black, 'Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban'

The morning of June 25th started much like the other mornings before it. Except, there was a buzzing anticipation around the raven-haired boy who’d come down to breakfast in a fine set of dark blue and black robes. Draco had been the first to realize that something was different about him.

“Why are you dressed like that so early? Usually you wear your plain robes around here—not that I’m complaining! I-I was just curious!” Draco became uncharacteristically flustered and there was a tiny tinge of pink on his pale cheeks. Harry gave him a strange look before deciding to let it go and respond to his question.

“I will, hopefully, be gaining a new guardian today.” Harry said vaguely, with a bright smile on his face as he brought a bit of sausage to his mouth and bit in. Everyone at the table seemed surprised, though a Malfoy surprised sort of looks like a Malfoy at any other point in time save for the tiniest lift in eyebrows and pause in whatever they’re doing so that they could study you.

“Right! Will you finally tell us who this mystery guardian is? It’s not like you can keep it a secret for long, the papers will snatch this up faster than a snitch in a barrel!” Draco exclaimed with a pretentious laugh at his own analogy.

“Draco!” Narcissa warned quietly. Her and Harry’s relationship was still stifled and full of formalities, so to her, Draco was rudely prying into business he had no right to. But, Harry didn’t feel the same way.
“It’s fine. You’re right, I won’t be able to keep it a secret and I wasn’t planning on it. It’s just . . . I think that people would misconstrue the situation if I told them before the trial.”

“Trial?” This was from Lucius, who usually remained quiet at meals and any sort of interaction with Harry. Harry could understand, the man was probably holding himself back from strangling or cursing Harry. It’s not every day that the person responsible for the death of your lord spends a week under your roof.

“Yes, unfortunate circumstances have resulted in my prospective guardian being imprisoned in Azkaban without ever receiving a trial. I believe him to be completely innocent, so I made sure that he couldn’t be ignored and a trial would have to take place in order to gauge whether or not he is a suitable guardian. Without a guilty verdict, he cannot be rejected as my chosen guardian. So today, in about an hour, Sirius Black will face the Wizengamot and I will testify on his behalf in order to clear his name.” At the mention of Sirius’ name, Draco choked on his orange juice and Lucius was looking at Harry like he’d just sprouted bunny ears and sang the ABC’s backwards.

“Sirius Black? Merlin Harry! You can’t be serious!” Draco was a little red-faced from choking and trying to keep orange juice from coming out of his nose for a solid thirty seconds.

“Oh I’m completely serious. Sirius Black did not betray my parents nor did he kill those muggles. He doesn’t have a Dark Mark and has never been a Death Eater. He was wrongly imprisoned and never given a trial. I will be going whether you think it wise or not. You are welcome to join me, as I’m sure Lucius will want to be there because of his job and position, and the whole thing will be covered in the press anyways. When you actually look at the evidence, anything they might have against Sirius is all too weak and circumstantial to hold up for a sentencing and the evidence I will point out when I’m called to the stand will easily clear his name. Don’t get me wrong, they’ll fight hard to convict him as guilty to cover up their mistakes, but I can get past them.”

Still shell-shocked, Draco looked to his parents, either to see their reactions to this news or to silently ask permission to actually go. Narcissa glanced at her husband before looking back at her son and Harry with a faint curiosity in her eyes.

“I suppose it’ll be alright. It’s been a while since we’ve all gone to the Ministry, and Draco, if you are to get a job there it’ll be important to be familiar with not only the building, but also the proceedings within the Ministry. Harry, we will gladly escort you to the trial. You have been our temporary ward for the past week, it is the least we can do for you. If it all goes well, do you have all of your things?” Narcissa’s calm demeanor was strangely soothing to Harry. He hadn’t even realized until he felt the tension bleeding from his shoulders that he was actually quite nervous for the trial.
Harry and his companion had spent the previous few days going over what Harry needed to say and how to present certain information that he’d gotten from—eh-ehm—questionable sources. Namely: the immortal being with a disparagement for boredom.

Now, all Harry needs to do is relay the evidence carefully and not come off as . . . intimidating as he tended to do. Many have told him that his eyes and overall presence is a bit unsettling and intense. Harry has never cared much for other people’s opinions, but this . . . this was important to him. This wasn’t about whether or not they liked him, it was about whether or not they believed him.

Mentally shaking himself out of his adrift thoughts, Harry smiled genially at Narcissa. “Yes, I do. Everything’s packed away in my trunk and shrunken in my pocket. Hedwig I sent ahead to Grimmauld Place already, if I don’t arrive there by tonight, she will return here to wait for me.” Harry took a sip of his tea and continued on with his breakfast.

A straight eyebrow climbed high on Lucius’s forehead. “You seem quite sure that he’ll be found not-guilty.” It was a statement, but there was a questioning lift in his words that spoke clearly of his curiosity.

Knowing that they will hear every reason he has to feel that way in roughly an hour, Harry decided not to answer and just continued eating after a moment of pause to look at Lucius.

An hour later, Harry was striding purposefully through the Ministry towards the court rooms. His stomach was all in knots but his face was a mask of cool indifference.

They left only minutes before the trial began at Harry’s request. By that point animated pictures of his face had already graced the papers several times a month—though how they keep finding nonsense to write about is beyond him—and people would recognize him even without seeing his scar. Harry’s presence at the trail would cause uproar and confusion. The closer they arrived to the start of the meeting, the less time he has to sit through the stares and not-so-quietly-whispered questions.

Sirius’ trial had garnered enough attention as it was and it was likely that almost every witch and wizard in the Wizengamot would attend the trial. Who would miss out on the Death Eater and betrayer of an innocent light family’s trial?
Sirius’ trial was scheduled to take place in courtroom 1, the largest courtroom they had. Harry entered through the main entrance behind Lucius and Narcissa, with Draco walking close to his side like a protective shield from and wandering gazes. The room was practically cavernous with how large it was, constructed of black and dark hunter green marble with crackled white veins running through the stone. There were black benches of rising levels encircling the room that were cut into two sections: the sitting area for the Wizengamot in their plum and black robes, and the general sitting area for press and approved observers of the trials.

The public benches were on the half of the room closest to the door, that was where the Malfoys and Harry sat. Cutting through the middle of the Wizengamot section was a raised stand where the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot would be sitting, and below it, level with the stone floors was the seat for the High Inquisitor. Which was just a fancy name for ‘lawyer.’ The last thing that Harry noticed before the main doors to the courtroom were closed was the severe-looking metal chair at the center of room, draped in thick metal chains.

When the door’s finally closed, commencing the trial, Harry finally allowed himself to look around at the people in attendance. More than half of the people present were glancing at or even outright staring at Harry from all over the room. Most looked confused, some curious, and a select few were glaring at him on principle.

The idly buzzing chatter in the room was ceased after five minutes when a large oak door behind the Chief Warlock’s stand suddenly opened and out walked several wizards. The first two are wearing plain grey robes and appeared to be one record keeper and one assistant. The third was wearing black robes with a golden embroidered circle with what looked to be measuring scales and a capital M on the shoulder of the robes. The graying wizard wearing the black robes immediately made his way to the tall Chief Warlock stand.

The witch that followed those three was wearing deep burgundy robes. Her expression was stern and hard as she sat in the High Inquisitor’s seat, smooth black hair curling into a hook shape facing inward at the ends where it sat just below her shoulders. Her cold blue eyes stared straight ahead and her lips were pinched together in a way that reminds Harry so much of McGonagall whenever she’s unimpressed with somebody or something.

There’s about a minute pause as the door the other wizards came through sits open and empty like the gaping maw of a waiting beast, before the sound of clinking chains incites utter silence over the entire room. Everyone watched with bated breath as Sirius Black was led through the door by two large Aurors—it surprised Harry when he realized that one of the Aurors was Philias Green, the Death Eater in disguise.

Harry was hit again with the clenching concern as he takes in the state of his Godfather. Sirius was in better shape than the first time Harry had visited him, but they had obviously not allowed him to clean up any before the trial and he was smeared with dirt with his dirty prison clothes hanging off of
him in a way that made him look so thin and gaunt.

It didn’t matter that Sirius wasn’t kicking and screaming his way into the courtroom, his appearance alone was enough to make several people lean back or fidget like he was a rabid dog being held back by a string. There’s a moment when his and Sirius’ eyes meet for a second and Harry tried to will his own strength into Sirius by gaze alone, but the moment was cut short when the other Auror—not Phil—jerked Sirius forward by his arm and forced him roughly into the chair in the center of the room with a look of disgust on his face.

The Aurors grabbed the ends of the chains attached to the chair and simply touched them to the shackles before they melded together and locked him into the chair.

The trial began in a monotonous formal couple of words from the acting Chief Warlock. Harry leaned towards Lucius, who was sitting on his right with Draco on his left, and said in a low tone, “I though Dumbledore was the Chief Warlock.”

Lucius peeked at him from the corner of his eye where he’s sitting aristocratically straight. Then he turned his eye back to the trial before him.

“Conflict of interest. Not only was Dumbledore his professor, but you are his magical ward, there would be an issue with you testifying without his consent, as well as Sirius being the primary candidate for your transferred guardianship.” Lucius didn’t sound annoyed or exasperated at having to explain, he was surprisingly neutral.

Harry turned his attention back on the trial when the Chief Warlock Interim, which just so happened to be Cornelius Fudge the current Minister of Magic, finally addressed Sirius without actually looking up from the papers laid out before him.

“As procedure would dictate, I must inform you that you have the right to a low dose of Veritaserum that would be administered by one of our Auror’s to validate your statements without the need for witness corroboration.” Fudge waved his hand in the air as he spoke as if he was already tired of speaking before he’d even made it half way through and couldn’t be bothered to say any more than what was required.

It was clear that it wasn’t a route often taken by those in that seat and he certainly didn’t expect Sirius to ask for it. Fudge had barely even taken a breath after speaking before continuing, but Sirius cleared his throat and cut in with a polite ‘excuse me.’
Fudge looked up at Sirius from over the tops of his reading glasses.

“I’ll take it.” Sirius said in a louder, more clear voice.

“Excuse me?” Fudge frowned in confusion, as if he had no clue what Sirius would be referring to.

“The Veritaserum, I’ll take it. I have nothing to hide and I think that my words will hold far more value to everyone here if they are accompanied by the potion.” Sirius’ voice was so calm and soothing, no hint of the mischievous marauder he was rumored to be in his youth.

Whether it was adulthood that wiped away, the decade spent in a wizarding prison, or just all of the eyes boring into him now, Harry didn’t know whether to feel disappointed, angry, or relieved. Harry had always been independent, but having someone else to rely on would be . . . different.

Fudge looked grudgingly respectable of Sirius’ choice and nodded to Phil, who silently administered the potion to his Godfather and stepped away. While the potion slowly took effect, Fudge read off the unofficial charges that had put Sirius in Azkaban in the first place, and then recounted the events of the night Harry’s parents were killed for the rest of the court as they were what seemed to lead up to Sirius supposedly massacring a street full of muggles several days later.

Harry felt strange hearing the story of his parents’ deaths being told to a court full of strangers.

Logically, Harry knew that there wasn’t a wizard in Britain who didn’t know the tale, and it didn’t make him feel any particular way to hear it except for a dull and distant sadness for the tragedy of young lives lost rather than anything even close to losing a loved one. But to have it stated as impersonal and uncaring as the weather, to have something that was still a large part of Harry’s background laid bare for so many when he was sitting right there felt exposing and invasive.

Harry hadn’t even realized he’d been white-knuckling the fabric of his trousers until he felt Draco’s warm hand gently cover one of his fists. When Harry loosened his grip and look over at his friend, Draco was facing forward and his expression didn’t give away anything.

Harry didn’t pull his hand away. Instead he turned it over and let their palms rest in overlap as his fingers loosely curled up between Draco’s to lock them together. Draco’s only reaction was to return the gesture in kind and let their hands rest between them on the bench, the solemn comfort hidden by their robes.
Once everyone was once again familiar with the events surrounding Sirius’ incarceration, the High Inquisitor—Beatrice Nightingale—began asking a faintly misty-eyed Sirius questions. Harry instantly disliked her. Unlike McGonagall, who’d he’d previously compared her to, she barely hid her disdain behind her rude jabs and unforgiving glare.

Nightingale didn’t ask any of the questions Harry had hoped she would, none that would really shine a spotlight on the holes in the story everyone seemed to know.

She asked him about his family background—knowing full well that the Blacks were a notoriously dark family and that Sirius couldn’t exactly fall into the category of ‘light’ because of it. She asked about his relationship with Dumbledore, which wasn’t great because the man had known of Sirius’ innocence and had allowed him to be imprisoned for so long.

She asked him a few questions that were bordering on helpful, but in the end, they were too vague to really make heads or tails of anything.

When Nightingale stepped back to her seat and straightened out a stack of papers while announcing that she was done questioning him for the moment, Harry felt a worried hand twist in his gut and he instinctively squeezed Draco’s hand. Sirius looked as frustrated as Harry felt.

Fudge asked a few questions himself out of curiosity, but nothing big enough.

The first character witness was called.

Sirius was released from the chair and walked a few feet away, held by the two Aurors, one on either side of him. Dumbledore walked into the room with purpose and sat in the chair with a flourish as if he was plopping down onto his favorite overstuffed armchair.

Again, Nightingale asked useless questions and Dumbledore seemed just as vague as her, talking about Sirius as if he was an old friend, but not really helping.

Harry sighed as a second witness was called, someone he doubted even knew Sirius all that well. More useless questions.

*It’s as if they’re trying to put him back in Azkaban! Or not trying at all! Like they’re just going through the motions of the trial and trying to get it over with as soon as possible. Harry thought as*
this last witness was dismissed and left without even looking at Sirius.

‘Perhaps they are. You knew they would try to cover up their mistakes. Mortals. They’ll do anything to avoid more paperwork.’ Death said from behind his left shoulder. Harry’s shoulders sagged a fraction of an inch in relief at the presence of his friend. When his companion was with him, the obstacles in front of him were far less daunting.

Draco noticed the change in Harry and gave him an odd look. Harry just ignored him and merely blinked when his own name was called. There wasn’t a single pair of eyes that weren’t trained on Harry when he stood and straightened his robes elegantly before descending the stairs with a stoic expression.

When Harry sat in the metal chair at the center of the room and waited as Nightingale slowly approached with the first flicker of emotion in her face that wasn’t contempt. She actually looked very curious. It was like she caught his gaze and completely forgot about the rest of the room around her. He had her undivided attention.

“Harry Potter . . . do you know why you’re here today?” She asked, her tone lacking the sharpness it had held every other time she spoke. Harry nodded before he spoke, not wanting to lose any sort of chance to get out much needed information to the rest of the court.

“Yes. I’m here—we’re all here—because I am trying to transfer my sole guardianship over to my Godfather, and in order to do that, he needs to be found not-guilty of certain charges by this court.” He didn’t have to raise his voice over a conversational volume because it seemed to carry over the eerily silent room.

Nightingale lifted a slim black brow, despite that she probably already knew that.

“That’s correct. I hear that you transferred your vault key over to Mr. Black in person, is that accurate?” She asked and the current of whispers through the room almost made Fudge bang his gavel to demand silence, as he seemed to be leaning over in his seat as well.

“I did. I obtained an Auror escort to Azkaban over winter break in order to see my Godfather to pass my key over.” He kept his expression open and honest as he spoke. The *Veritaserum* had been offered to every witness that was called, and each had turned it down, as had he. Harry knew it was illegal to give that potion to a minor, but with this crowd, he wouldn’t put it past them to not mention that to an ignorant child and give it to them anyway if they said yes.
“Why? If I’m not mistaken, your current magical guardian is Albus Dumbledore, why would you want Sirius Black to be your caretaker?”

“Many reasons, Ma’am. You see, when I first heard of Sirius Black—best friend of my father and very close to my mother—I had been ecstatic. The only family I have left were not even on speaking terms with my parents for years before their deaths. So to find someone who had meant so much to my parents that they entrusted their child to him if anything were to happen to them, I felt as though I was gaining that closest thing to a real family I’ve ever had in my life. But . . .

“It didn’t take much digging to find out what had become of my Godfather. Still, I wanted to know everything I could about him and what had happened. From the very beginning, there were . . . inconsistencies. There were certain things that just didn’t match up and when I looked deeper, I became convinced that my Godfather was innocent.” Harry frowned and he saw the slight furrow of Nightingale’s brows in response. Considering how she reacted to him, Harry would bet that she either had a child of her own, or she was just as smitten with the Savior as half of wizarding Britain seemed to be. Harry was betting on the former.

“That’s right, you were sorted into Ravenclaw, weren’t you Mr. Potter. That curiosity is unmistakable.” Nightingale nodded for Harry to continue and it felt like everyone in the room was sitting on the edges of their seats and leaning in to catch each melodic syllable of Harry’s voice. It was certainly not an experience Harry was used to. Drawing in the attention of one or two people in a small conversation was one thing, but to have an entire room all but entranced—for better or worse—was far different!

“Well, the first thing that caught my attention was the lack of a trial. In public record, it is stated that Sirius was incarcerated without a trial because a form of Martial Law was in effect because of the war and that all Death Eaters they could get their hands on were incarcerated until they could receive a proper trial. The fact that almost all other Death Eaters received a trial almost immediately, and yet he was never confirmed to be a Death Eater and didn’t receive one for ten years is in itself such a horrendous injustice to my Godfather, whether he be guilty or not.

“Not only that, but Martial Law shouldn’t have even been in effect at the time, considering the war was technically over the night Voldemort died. The whole of wizarding Britain knew that the war was over by the next morning, so there was no reason for that law to have been in effect.” Fudge looked thoroughly troubled by the implications and accusations behind Harry’s words, but Nightingale still seemed too caught up in his words to notice the uncomfortable shifting of several people around the room who had been in powerful positions at the time and could be held responsible for the huge oversight.

“As you mentioned before, Ma’am, being a Ravenclaw means that I am quite diligent in my research. It was during my research that I came across something. One misunderstanding that could have prevented all of this!” Harry paused to let the weight of his words settle fully over the room.
“As I’m sure everyone is aware, in order to hide from Voldemort, my parents had the fidelious charm placed over their home in Godric’s hollow. There were only six people that took part in the charm: my parents, Sirius Black, Remus Lupin, Peter Pettigrew, and the caster of the charm, Albus Dumbledore. Everyone knew how close Sirius and my father, James, were. They were like brothers in every sense except by blood. It was common sense that Sirius would be their Secret Keeper, the man would willingly die before he divulged the information. And he was the Secret Keeper . . . at first.

“It had been soon after the charm was cast that Peter Pettigrew saw a problem with that aspect. Because everyone knew how close the two were, Death Eaters would undoubtedly go after Sirius for the information. Though, if someone else became the Secret Keeper, nobody would know. The Potters saw the reason of the plan and Peter immediately volunteered himself. You see, Sirius wasn’t the Secret Keeper, it was Peter! The Secret Keeper is the only one who could have given away the location of their house in Godric’s Hollow, the only one who could betray my parents to Voldemort. Sirius didn’t betray my parents, he wasn’t and isn’t a Death Eater, and therefore had no motive to kill those muggles.” Harry got a little worked up as he went along, but he knew that it would only push everyone around into believing in his conviction.

Nightingale looked confounded, and blinked at Harry with large blue eyes for several long moments before looking at Sirius.

“Is that true? Was Peter Pettigrew the Secret Keeper?” Nightingale’s tone had changed from the last time she’d spoken to Sirius, is wasn’t even close to what she used with Harry, but it also wasn’t exactly hostile either.

“Yes. It had made so much sense at the time. As Harry had said, I would easily have died in order to protect them, they were family, but there are ways of getting answers. Veritaserum for example, it not only makes me tell the truth, but it also compels me to answer against any reservations or instincts I might have not to. I wouldn’t have been able to refuse, even if I wanted to.” Sirius explained, looking eager to give the information, to finally be asked something useful!

“Sirius being the Secret Keeper is the reason people thought he was a Death Eater when my parents were betrayed. Sirius knew that the reason my parents were dead was because of Peter, that he’d been a Death Eater. So, Sirius, in his grief and anger, went after Peter. When Sirius found him, Peter thought that Sirius would kill him—or at least bring him in to be tried for having a hand in their deaths—so he blew up the area around them, killed those muggles, cut off his own finger, and faked his death.” He could see those around the room begin to pull back from his accusations, making faces and little noises of disbelief.

Even Nightingale seemed a little dubious.
“That’s . . . quite the accusation, Mr. Potter. What makes you believe that Pettigrew was responsible—or even capable—of all that you accuse him of? Confirmation from your Godfather is great and all, but I’ll need a little more than that to clear his name.” Nightingale looked warily between Sirius and Harry. At least she wasn’t deliberately trying to incriminate his Godfather anymore.

“Certainly, I wouldn’t expect any less. You can ask Peter yourself, seeing as how he’s still alive.” It was like the telenovelas Petunia sometimes watched, the way the room collectively gasped and whipped their heads around rapidly as if someone in the crowd would have the answer and confirm what he’d said. With a slight roll of his eyes that Harry just couldn’t quite contain, Harry continued.

“Even with the spell Pettigrew used in that street, there is no way that only a finger would have been left behind. There was no wand, no clothes, not even any blood that matched Peter’s except for the finger. You see, when my father attended Hogwarts he and his three closest friends called themselves the Marauders. One of the Marauders, Remus Lupin, was a werewolf. As you all know, lycanthropy is a very serious, painful, and frightening condition that most victims do not and would not choose.

“In order to accompany and comfort Remus on full moons my father, Sirius, and Peter all practiced and achieved their own Animagus forms. They gave their more animalistic forms nicknames as a way to make light of a very difficult situation. Remus was ‘Moony’ because he was a werewolf, Sirius was ‘Padfoot’ for his canine form, my father was ‘Prongs’ for his stag form, and Peter was ‘Wormtail’ for his rat form. Now, although they didn’t register their Animagus forms, Dumbledore was well aware of their forms.

“Now, jumping forward to the muggle massacre, I believe that a few days after, someone in this room found Peter.” Harry waited a moment before turning and looking right at Arthur Weasley, who was already looking quite pale. “Mr. Weasley, if I’m not mistaken, a few days following the tragedy your son Percy found a rat in you front yard and named him Scabbers. He’s been with you for the past . . . ten years or so? Isn’t it also correct that he’s missing a toe on his left paw?”

Arthur gaped openly at Harry and a look of dread seemed to dawn over his face. Nightingale gave the elder Weasley a cold look.

“Mr. Weasley, I think it best that you go find your ‘family pet’ and bring it back here so that we might settle this once and for all.” Arthur scrambled down the stairs and out of the courtroom, hopefully on his way home to rip the mangy rat out of his child’s hands and bring it back here.

Pettigrew had been Harry’s trump card. There’s no way that they could charge Sirius with anything once it’s revealed that Pettigrew was still alive. Harry just hoped that it would all be over soon, he just wanted to be alone. Being in front of so many people, answering all of these questions and trying
his best to convey them as the honest truth—it was exhausting!

While they waited for Arthur to come back with Scabbers, Nightingale revolved back to the comment he’d made about his relatives and tried to pry more out of him about his rather unknown home life. Harry had merely countered with asking how that was relevant. The matter of his home life and guardianship would be dealt with by the Goblins, not a room full of Ministry employees and press.

It took ten minutes for Arthur to return, breathing heavily as he burst through the door with a thrashing and squealing rat in a small cage. The doors were closed behind him and at Nightingale’s insistent wave, he rushed forward. Carefully, Phil cast a petrifying spell on Scabbers and took the immobile rat out of the cage before laying on the floor.

“Revelio!” Phil cast in perfect form of a well-trained Auror/Secret Death Eater. In an instant, Scabbers transformed into a dirty, rounded man in tattered wizarding robes, scraggly blond hair, and two long rat-like front teeth peeking out from between thin chapped lips. It was unmistakable, this was Peter Pettigrew.

The courtroom was silent for two long moments, then, pandemonium. There were shouts of outrage and people jumping up from their seats. There were baffled expressions all across the room. Sirius looked ready to lunge at the frozen traitor on the ground at his feet, but with a sharp head shake from Harry, he backed down and held himself very tensely as he looked anywhere but at his former friend.

It took a solid minute of Fudge loudly banging his gavel on the desk and shouting for silence with the aid of a *sonorus* charm on his voice to regain control over the room. As soon at the chaos had lulled enough for Fudge to speak without the charm’s help, Fudge dismissed Harry, had Sirius put back in the chair—without the chains—and left back through the door behind his stand. The rest of the Wizengamot stood and followed him. Leaving the room to deliberate Sirius’ fate.

Harry was suddenly nervous as he sat down in his original spot between Draco and Lucius. He worried that he might not have given enough information or evidence, that the Wizengamot would be too full of Ministry employees and they would decide to protect integrity of the Ministry before an innocent man.

Harry’s hand was once again laced through Draco’s, though his eyes stayed on his Godfather, who was giving him a strange look, glancing between him and the Malfoys around him. Harry had a feeling that Sirius would certainly ask him about it later.
Draco leaned in close to his ear so that when he spoke, only Harry would hear him.

“You did great! Seriously, I’m impressed! I’d say I’m surprised, but honestly, I’m not. You, Harry Potter, have a knack for being exceptional in almost everything you do.” Draco smirked when Harry quirked a brow and gave him a look.

“‘Almost?’” Harry deadpanned, knowing this game with Draco quite well, and knowing that Draco was doing it to distract him. The snake was surprisingly thoughtful. Draco wiped the smirk off of his face and replaced it with innocent seriousness.

“Why, Potter, don’t tell me you actually think you’re better than me at potions! That’s preposterous, nobody can be good at everything, try not to take it too hard.” Draco gave him a faux-sympathetic smile and pat on the shoulder. He had to fight off a smirk as Draco looked away with the mega-pompous expression and posture he and Draco usually made fun of certain upperclassmen Slytherins for.

“Besides, it really isn’t fair to you. I mean, it truly is commendable how you’ve done as well as you have against me—a pureblood!” Draco pressed delicate hand to his chest and achieved the poshest tone Harry had ever had the pleasure of hearing. Harry’s lips were trapped between his teeth to keep himself from laughing, but the very unimpressed parent-like look Lucius shot at his son broke him.

Harry pressed a hand to his mouth to try to smother his laughter, but apparently not well enough. Several people around them turned on their benches in order to look at Harry with varying expressions from exasperation to wonderment at seeing the otherwise cold and serious boy laughing genuinely with his friend.

When Harry’s laughter died down to a barely contained grin, he elbowed Draco lightly in the side to give the blonde a grateful look.

When Draco’s attention wasn’t on him anymore, Harry called up a tiny bit of raw magic and sent a mild stinging hex at Draco’s rear. The blonde shot up off of his seat with an undignified squawk. Harry kept his face innocently neutral as Draco glared down at him and rubbed his hand over his stinging cheek before sitting back down. Again, Lucius sent both boys scolding glares before leaning in to talk to his wife on the other side of him.

It only took twenty more minutes for the nondescript door at the back of the room to open again and for the Wizengamot to pour out of the room or hallway beyond and take their seats, followed by Fudge and Nightingale. Harry sat deathly still, holding his breath as Fudge took his seat with a disgruntled expression on his face.
“In the case of Sirius Orion Black vs. Ministry of Magic, for all charges against him, Black has been found . . .” Fudge paused to look at Sirius for a long moment, then his gaze flicked up to Harry and his eyes didn’t linger nearly as long before the man shifted his gaze away uncomfortably and looked back down at the parchment in his hands through his crescent-moon reading glasses. “Not guilty.”

Harry squeezed Draco’s hand and beamed down at his Godfather when Sirius looked up at him with a bewildered and exuberant expression. *It worked! I can’t believe it worked!*

‘Of course it worked, Harry. I pride myself on my intelligence, to have doubted the outcome of this plan would have been an insult to me.’ His companion huffed, though there was no real annoyance in his tone, just begrudging fondness.

“As for Peter Pettigrew, he shall return at a later date for his own trial. For the time being, he will be taken to Azkaban to await his hearing.” Fudge concluded the trial and Sirius was immediately escorted—far more gently—up through the door that the Wizengamot had come through.

Harry quickly said his goodbyes to the Malfoys, with a promise to Draco that he’d write and visit soon so that he, Draco, and Anthony could meet up over break. He then made his way quickly over to the door Sirius had disappeared through before anyone could think to stop and talk to him.
In the last chapter: On the 25th of June, Harry reveals to the Malfoys that Sirius Black is his mysterious soon-to-be guardian and that his Wizengamot trial was that very day. They all attend the trial, and when the time comes, Harry testifies on Sirius' behalf. The secret identity of Peter Pettigrew is uncovered and Sirius is found not-guilty.

The door at the other end of the courtroom led to a medium sized chamber with several doors and hallways branching off in different directions. Harry followed his companion’s directions to the correct door, and he opened it to find a small antechamber lit by a roaring fire and furnished with plush chairs and a couch. Sirius stood in the center of the room with Phil, the other Auror, and the familiar Goblin, Bogrod, from Harry's first visit to Gringotts.

Phil was taking the shackles off of Sirius as Harry closed the door behind him. Sirius shot him a 100 Watt smile when he heard him come in. Bogrod was sifting through a leather satchel and pulling out various papers, while the other unnamed Auror leaned back against the wall near the fireplace with a sour look on his face.

Once Sirius’ hands and feet were free, he nearly leapt for Harry before grabbing his waist and hoisting him up over his head to spin him around in celebration. Harry yelped in surprise and immediately latched onto the cloth of Sirius’ shirt. When the man finally set Harry down with an amused grin, Harry cleared his throat and straightened his robes as he tried to regain his dignity in front of the others in the room, but the effect was lost when he felt the tips of his ears and cheeks turn hot.

Shooting his godfather a disapproving look, that seemed to not even faze the man, Harry straightened up to his full height and approached Phil first, since he was closest and Bogrod still seemed to be busy searching through his bag. The large, towering Auror crossed his arms over his chest and smirked down at Harry.

“Philias, it’s good to see you again, you seem to be doing well.” Harry intoned politely, ignoring the smug smirk he and Sirius seemed to share.

“As do you, Mr. potter. I see now that you were right to be so confident in clearing your godfather’s name, you seem to be very smart, smarter than most of the Wizards I work with.” Harry smiled at the pointed tone and intentional glance at the man next to him. Though Harry’s convinced that the
statement worked for both Aurors or Death Eaters.

Harry glanced at the unnamed Auror still leaning against the wall, watching them with unrestrained disdain. Phil caught what he was looking at and turned to his colleague.

“We’re not needed here anymore, you can leave, Bernard.” Phil dismissed, his tone making it clear that Bernard was no longer welcome. The Auror huffed and trudged out of the room with a glare at everyone his eyes could reach.

Harry only had time for brief introductions between Sirius and Phil before Bogrod announced that he was ready. He had several documents laid out on the coffee table in front of the couch, ready for both Sirius and Harry to sign. Once all of the parchments were signed with one drop of blood from the both of them, Harry felt warmth seep into his bones like he’d never felt before, and then a single, shimmering gold thread of light stretched from Harry to Sirius and there was an overwhelming sense of home sitting so close to Sirius. Harry heard Sirius suck in a breath, like he felt the same thing as Harry.

Harry knew that the immediate surge of affection and sense of familiarity were the result of the magic, so he didn't let himself dwell on such feelings for very long. Their relationship and trust would develop with time, and eventually evolve into one where such warmth could be natural. It seemed that his godfather did not hold the same objectivity once the bond had settled. . .

It was as they were looking at each other, Sirius’ eyes suspicious wet, that Bogrod cleared his throat and was looking right at Harry.

“Mr. Potter, there are a few things you should be aware of before I depart. Firstly, we have evaluated your muggle guardians extensively and found them grossly unfit to be your guardian, so we have taken the liberty of signing over total custody to Sirius Black. Should you decide that you wish to split custody between another guardian, just bring them to Gringotts, we will accommodate you. Also, because of your . . . condition, there are several changes that we had to make to our standard custody forms, nothing really major that will actually effect either of you, just a few extra policies pertaining to property and arrangements due to any extenuating circumstances.” Bogrod gave Harry a significant look.

By ‘extenuating circumstances’ he meant death. It was plain to Harry that Bogrod was quite clear on what that certain title of Harry’s entailed. Harry had seen the policies Bogrod had been talking about. Basically, should Harry die, the policies stated that any transfers of wealth, property, or titles would wait ten full days before taking effect, and that Harry’s remains would also be left untouched for at least forty-eight hours before any arrangements could be made. Harry already had his will planned out quite critically, covering all the bases he could think of to make sure that he never woke up under six feet or dirt have to go through the grueling process of being regenerated from the ashes of his
Harry nodded in agreement, even as Sirius frowned in confusion.

Bogrod went over a few more fine details about inheritances, lordships, heirs, and a few other things. Lastly, before Bogrod *apparated* out with all of the forms in his bag, he told Sirius that he had been reinstated as the Lord of the Black line and a brief summary of properties along with statuses of vaults and other practical things.

Bogrod left in a near silent pop, which left Sirius, Harry, and Phil alone in the room together. When he looked at Phil, he was staring at Harry with a calculating and confused frown. Harry ignored that entirely and said a quick goodbye to the man before he left with Sirius at his side. He wasn’t able to focus on what the Death Eater might have been thinking when he left, because his stomach was doing happy flips at the thought of the summer to come.

Grimmauld Place was exactly what he’d pictured the old Black family town home to be. Dark, wicked, and as saturated with dark magic as a house could be. The shrieking portrait of Walburga Black had greeted them upon entering, along with the stale scent of stagnant air.

Sirius introduced Harry to Kreacher, the house elf. It was clear that the old elf didn’t like Sirius, which in turn meant that he wouldn’t like Sirius’ new ward. Sirius was giving Kreacher a small list of things to do to prepare the house for their stay and didn’t seem to notice the elf glaring at Harry.

Harry never looked down on house elves, he knew that being bound to a wizard or family was how the elves fed and that they wouldn’t have it any other way. House elves were relatively intelligent creatures and quite powerful. Harry had never mistreated one—never *would* mistreat one—so the hostility of the elf was a bit surprising.

Sirius dismissed the elf and led Harry on a brief tour of the house as he made his way up to his room to change his clothes.

“You know . . . I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t a little worried about having that elf in the house,” Sirius said quietly once they entered his old room and he disappeared into a walk-in closet. Harry’s eyebrows shot up, even though Sirius couldn’t see him.
“What do you mean?”

“I haven’t been here in a number of years, I stopped coming home for summer and holidays when I was fourteen. When I was here, though, that blasted elf always hated me. Adored my brother, Regulus, but hated my guts. I think it had to do with Regulus being the epitome of a ‘dark wizard.’ My brother had been obsessed with Voldemort back in the day, was shooting for becoming a Death Eater after graduation. I don’t know how exactly, but that obsession cost him his life.

“Kreacher always blamed me, for some reason. The few times I saw him after that, he would make some attempt on my life, half-hearted or otherwise. Him being the only elf still here, the only one to service us, I worry. It has been many years since I last saw him, and if he’s changed, I don’t know if it’s for the better or worse. I do not want to put you in any sort of danger.”

Harry pursed his lips as he digested this new information.

“You’re Lord Black, now. Kreacher will be forced to either leave this house and bloodline for good, or serve you and your ward for as long as we’re here. You think that because Kreacher hates you still, that he will hate me as well and try something.” Harry reasoned, the glares he received from the elf earlier now making sense.

“Don’t you?” Sirius walked back out of the closet, now dressed in much nicer—if not still a bit worn—robes. They left the bedroom together and began making their way back through the house. Sirius sighed from beside him. “I can’t just throw the elf out on account of some ridiculous decades-old animosity. But if he hurts you, Harry, I’d never forgive myself for allowing him near you. I need to gain an unbreakable vow from him so that he won’t do anything to harm you.” Sirius reached over and smoothed a hand down Harry’s soft tufts of raven hair on instinct, not that Harry minded.

“And you, as well. I just got you back, Sirius. I will not be losing you to a damn cross elf.” Was all that Harry said, even though he knew that elven magic followed very different parameters than wizarding magic and that magical vows did not hold for them.

Harry wasn’t very concerned about his own wellbeing—since that was all taken care of long before this moment—and he could protect Sirius easily enough from one little elf if it got any ideas in its head.

Sirius led them to a large sitting room that had already been cleared of sheets, dust, and had a fire roaring heartily before several chairs and couches. Harry sat on the couch at the center, in-line with a coffee table and the fireplace. Sirius sat in the chair closest the couch, his face and posture plagued by worry and nerves. By the time Sirius finally untangled his thoughts enough to speak, Harry had
already called Kreacher in to bring them tea and their cups were steaming with a fresh brew on the table before them.

Exhaling forceful and shakily, Sirius looked Harry in the eyes before speaking, completely ignoring his tea. “Harry, I know you’re excited that everything worked out the way that it has—I am too, believe me—but we’re not completely out of the woods just yet.” Harry sat his tea down on the table without taking a sip and gave Sirius his full attention.

“You’re a very smart and observant boy, Harry. So I hope you will understand why I need to do this. . . You see, I was in that prison for many years, and it has taken a toll on my mind. I am not such a fool as to think that I’ve emerged unscathed from this experience, and so I will not pretend that that is the case. It will take time for me to return to who I once was—if I even can. Anyways, I think it would be best for me to start seeing a mind-healer twice a week or so. I wish to be the best guardian that I can for you, but I’m not there quite yet, and I know this. I’m sorry. You’ve only just obtained your chosen guardian and he’s already broken.” Sirius gave a self-deprecating laugh and shifted his gaze away.

Harry studied Sirius for a long, quiet moment before answering.

“Actually, I’m relieved. I knew from the start that you wouldn’t be 100% after leaving a place like that. I mean, it amazes me that you’re doing this well already! You’re even seeking out help yourself without my suggestion.” Harry assured, but Sirius only relaxed partially, still looking guilty for whatever reason.

“Honestly, Sirius, you don’t have to worry about leaving me on my own. I spent most of my time alone before Hogwarts, and honestly? I kind of miss the privacy.” Sirius looked up hesitantly, as if afraid he’d see something in Harry’s face that spoke the exact opposite of his words. “Besides, I’ll probably be living in the Black library this summer. It’s practically famous!” At that, Sirius flashed a knowing smile and seemed to finally melt into his chair with ease, pick up his tea, and taking a sip.

They sat in companionable silence for several minutes as they sipped their tea and watched the dancing flames curl and caress the charring logs in the fireplace. Without really giving himself a chance to think about it, Harry opened his mouth and asked.

“Can you teach me the animagus transformation?” Sirius choked on the tea in his mouth and had to quickly pinch his nose closed to keep some from shooting out his nostrils. Harry barely reacted, only turning his head slightly to watch the display with growing amusement.

“What?” Sirius croaked once his airways were cleared.
“The animagus transformation, I want to learn it. Complicated magic fascinates me and out of all of the different avenues of it that I want to explore, the animagus transformation seems to be the safest, with very little consequences should it go wrong—all being fixable. Plus . . . you and my father both learned when you were in Hogwarts, and I want to feel closer to him . . . to you.” Harry knew exactly what kinds of stings he was pulling on, but it was true.

Harry wanted something to bond with his Godfather over. Harry wasn’t exactly the best in social situations and this would give him an excuse to spend lots of time with his Godfather without being able to talk himself out of it in favor of burying himself in many fascinating books he’d no doubt find in the library. Besides, as a minor, he wouldn’t have to register his form until he came of age, and an animagus form could be very helpful to him in the future.

Sirius looked at Harry with such a profound expression, it made Harry slightly uncomfortable. Without saying anything, Sirius stood up from his chair and plopped down next to Harry on the couch before pulling him into a fierce hug. Harry returned the bone-crushing hug with several pats on the back and awkwardly sitting as still as he possibly could.

When Sirius finally pulled back, his eyes were faintly wet and his lips were pressed together tightly to contain the grin trying to force itself onto his mouth. Harry felt his own begrudging amusement in response to his Godfather’s antics.

“Of course I’ll teach you, Harry. It won’t be easy, it’ll take time and patience—things that most eleven-year-olds lack—but I’ll teach you the best I can.” Mischief leapt through Sirius’ expression and he lightly cuffed Harry on the shoulder, as if wanting to be playful and teasing but also thinking that Harry’s bones were made of glass and his skin a tissue paper.

Sirius’ expression softened and for a moment it seemed as though he was staring through Harry, rather than at him.

“Your parents would have been so proud.” His voice was a gentle call to ears it’d never reach and Harry felt as though he was intruding on something private. Harry cleared his throat nervously and took a Luke-warm sip of his tea. The gesture seemed to snap Sirius out of whatever fog he’d slipped into and the mischief returned as his eyes narrowed in on Harry once again.

“We’ll need to take a quick trip to the shops, then.” Piercing Harry with a knowing look, he worried that whatever Sirius had in mind for him, Harry certainly wouldn’t like it.
“What? Why?” Harry’s startled question trailed after Sirius as the man shot up and began purposefully striding out of the room. Harry hurried to catch up.

“For a Mandrake Leaf of course!” Sirius exclaimed through the halls of the building without looking back. Sirius wasn’t leading them towards the front door, so Harry assumed they’d be using the floo, much to his displeasure.

“What on earth would we need a Mandrake Leaf for?” Harry’s voice rose several notches in incredulity as he remembered the horrible screeching plants they unearthed in Herbology. When they reached the only fireplace that seemed to currently be connect to the floo system, in the kitchen, Harry stopped Sirius with a slender hand on his elbow. Sirius grinned down at him and Harry swallowed loudly.

“Why, everyone knows that the first step to an Animagus transformation is to hold the leaf of a Mandrake in one’s mouth for a month. Summer is the perfect time to start such training, since you don’t have to worry about school. Your father and I weren’t nearly as smart! Spent an entire month with our mouths closed because we didn’t want anyone knowing what we were trying to do and if you pierce the leaf with your teeth, you have to start over, so talking was certainly out.”

As Sirius continued to speak, Harry felt less and less sure that he’d made the right decision. Sirius used the boy’s distracted state to guide him into the floo, pour floo powder into his hand, and coaxed him into calling out their destination.

Merlin have mercy, because these bloody Gryffindors were going to be the death of him!
Can Someone Please Get Remus Lupin a Tissue?

Chapter Summary

In the last chapter: Harry finds Sirius after the trial and they sign the last bit of paperwork that officiates Sirius becoming his guardian. Sirius and Harry go to Grimmauld Place where Harry meets the Black house elf Kreacher, who does not seem to like him very much. Sirius promises to see a mind-healer and Harry asks him to teach him the Animagus transformation.

A full week after Sirius and Harry moved into Grimmauld Place saw an unexpected visitor ringing their doorbell at one in the afternoon.

Harry hadn’t done much of anything since he and Sirius had gone and picked up a few Mandrake Leaves from a potions shop. Unfortunately, Sirius had been completely honest about the Mandrake Leaves.

The leaf Harry chose was the size of a galleon and sat on his tongue for several hours before he gave in to his worry about accidentally piercing the leaf with his teeth and instead rolled the leaf up carefully and placed it under his tongue. It was far safer for the leaf, but it also made speaking nearly impossible, though eating and drinking were easier.

The leaf didn’t taste like much of anything, just a slight earthy tang that lightly coated his mouth after some time. The Mandrake Leaf wouldn’t wilt or rot, as the magical properties of the plant prevented any sort of decay after the leaf was severed from the rest of the plant. Luckily, Harry wouldn’t have to worry about that! Otherwise he probably wouldn’t have the will to go through with it.

The lack of speech meant that Harry kept both of his eager friends from visiting them, knowing that the ridiculous pair would have a field day with the situation. Harry doubted he could avoid them for a full month, but one can only hope.

However, the lack of speech didn’t mean that Harry would go completely uncommunicative during the long month ahead of him. So, after only two days of silence, Harry broke and sought a spell that would allow him to communicate. Thankfully, it only took an afternoon of searching to find a fitting spell in an old book from the Black library—which Harry had already started combing through.
Flagrate, a spell the ignited trails of fiery red/orange marks in the air left by the tip of a wand. With a bit of experimentation—and help from his friend—Harry was able to perform the spell wandlessly, the words appearing in the air quickly and efficiently. Harry used the spell rather sparingly, his first time using it in actual application was to tell Sirius to ‘shut it’ after the older wizard had been using the last two hours taking advantage of Harry’s guaranteed silence to blather on about either Quidditch or how ‘adorable’ Harry was when he pouted. Harry had made quite a few disbelieving and indignant noises before flashing the bright words before Sirius’ face.

Harry soon came too loath the words ‘adorable,’ ‘cute,’ and ‘precious.’

As promised, Sirius attended his first session with the mind-healer two days after they moved in. Harry had seen him off at the floo, since Harry couldn’t go with him, ushering out the nervous and fidgety man with reassuring and encouraging words. By the time Sirius returned, though, he looked haggard and a little pale. The smile didn’t quite reach his eyes and his shoulders were drooping as he moved through the house. The second session went much the same.

Harry barely saw Kreacher during that time. He assumed that Sirius had already demanded the unbreakable vow from the elf, since Sirius seemed completely at ease in the house after the first few days. When Harry did see the elf, it was all venomous glares and curled lips.

Before the resounding thrum of the metal knocker rang through the house, Harry had a few moments warning as the wards were tripped. Harry had been lounging in the library when it happened. It was a strange sensation, a deep vibration in his bones and a low pulse in his ears for just a moment. The only other person to approach their home had been Sirius, and since he was the lord of the house and line, the wards parted like nothing for him, resulting in no sensations at all!

Harry’s curiosity brought him to the front door a second after Sirius. Crossing his arms and leaning against the wall as he hung back from the door by a meter or so, Harry watched his Godfather pull open the door and freeze.

At first, he felt alarm at Sirius’ reaction, not able to see who was at the door from that angle. Two beats later, though, Sirius spoke and Harry’s alarm shifted back to curiosity.

“Remus.” He breathed, like the name had been unwittingly carried out on his breath.

‘Ah, so this is the last surviving Marauder.’ Death curiously intoned, and Harry suddenly wished he could elbow his friend for his lack in subtly, even if Harry was the only one who would ever hear it.
‘How is it that such a blunt creature is responsible for guiding the deceased into the afterlife?’ Harry projected, internally scolding his companion. Harry felt an indignant brush of cold air wash over his shoulders in response.

Curiosity getting the better of him, Harry silently approached the doorway and took in the man standing opposite Sirius. Honey colored hair, tired yet warm amber eyes, and a slash of rosette scars across his face. Remus Lupin looked nothing like Harry had suspected. He looked kind and gentle, like he belonged more in the setting of nurturing young children and infants rather than running through the woods and hunting down prey. Though, Harry wasn’t one to talk, he knew all too well that looks could be deceiving.

Harry stayed in the shadows of the doorway as he observed the two in front of him. Remus cleared his throat and broke the silence.

“I heard about the trial, I’d tried to get in to see it myself, but they wouldn’t let someone like me in.” Remus fidgeted sheepishly, avoiding Sirius’ gaze as he spoke. After a long pause, Remus finally lifted his gaze, his expression somber.

“I’m so sorry Sirius. I know that sorry isn’t enough and I wish there was a better word for what I felt. I shouldn’t have believed them when they said you betrayed Lily and James, or that you did those horrible things to those muggles. But I thought you were the Secret Keeper and-and I didn’t know what else to think!” By now Remus had begun to break down, voice trembling and pleading and he looked like he was in so much pain.

Sirius looked like he didn’t know what to do, still frozen in the doorway, but when Remus choked out the first sob, Sirius looked like he was in pain himself. Harry put a hand on Sirius’ back and gave him a good shove towards his friend. Taking the hint, Sirius wrapped his arms around the broken man in their doorway and tried to soothe him. Remus clung to the fabric of Sirius’ robes like he expected Sirius to try to shove him away or something.

Remus had his face buried in Sirius’ shoulder, whispering ‘I’m sorry’ over and over again in between harsh breaths and sobs, so he didn’t notice Sirius pulling him a bit further into the house, and Harry coming around to close the door behind them. When Remus calmed down enough, Sirius led him away so that they could talk more in private.

While they sorted themselves out, Harry went to the kitchen and made himself a cup of tea before returning to the library. It was nearly a half an hour before Sirius came up with Remus trailing behind him so that he could be introduced to the other marauder. Aside from a slight irritated redness ringing his eyes, there were no other signs that the werewolf had been in such disarray a short time previous.
Harry put down his book and stood when the two entered, offering a polite smile to the other man. Remus seemed to be frozen, the same haunted glaze in his eyes as when Harry first stood before Sirius. He knew what it was; they were seeing the echo of the friend they grew up with in Harry’s features, and perhaps feeling the residual loss that comes with the memories.

Harry ignored the reaction respectfully and opted to holding out his hand for the other man to shake. Although he’d gone out of his way to learn as much about Sirius as he could before the trial—and even before meeting him—Harry knew very little about the man before him. Which meant he would remain cautious until he knew more.

It seems that ten years apart and a rift in their friendship hadn’t been enough for Sirius to hold the same caution for his friend.

“Harry, this is Remus Lupin, a good friend of mine and your dad’s. He’ll be moving in with us.” Sirius beamed and didn’t seem to even notice the deprecating look Remus shot him, as if that matter was still up for debate.

Harry was glad for the leaf in his mouth, it allowed him to hide his shock quick enough before anyone saw it. He could hear the soft resonating laughter of his companion at his current situation. Harry’s eye twitched with irritation as he blocked out the disembodied chuckle from over his shoulder.

“Hello Harry, it’s an absolute pleasure to finally meet you. I’ve heard a lot about you.” Remus’ voice was as gentle as the rest of his appearance, as unintimidating as Quirrell’s—though not nearly as awkward, stilted, and trembling. Everything about Remus Lupin seemed to exude calmness.

‘Quite the paradox, we have here.’ Harry thought as he discreetly studied the man now that he was composed and actually knew Harry was there.

Harry smiled at Remus lightly, watched the confusion bloom in his amber eyes after several silent moments before he turned to look at Sirius for answers.

“Ah! I’ve nearly forgotten. Harry is currently training to achieve the Animagus transformation.” Sirius’ eyes gleamed proudly along with a warm smile that pulled at his mouth. “He’s only about a week into the Mandrake Leaf.” Sirius explained, knowing that Remus would understand the significance. Harry didn’t try to use Flagrate in front of Lupin, not sure if the man could be trusted yet.
“Brilliant!” Remus responded in surprise, looking down at Harry with mild reverence in his eyes as he seemed to reassess the young Hogwarts student before him. “That is quite impressive, Harry. That kind of magic isn’t even mentioned until your third year at Hogwarts. I heard that you’re in Ravenclaw, must have quite a mind to be placed in that house. Though, I’m not surprised, Lily always gave all of the Ravenclaws a run for their money when it came to academics. Beyond that, I know that this transformation takes quite a bit of power, are you sure you’re up for that so young?” Remus sounded concerned rather than condescending, so Harry didn’t let any of the irritation leak into his expression.

Sirius huffed, garnering the attention of his friend once more.

“You have no idea, Remus! Already mastered wandless magic, that he has. I mean, I know that James and Lils were certainly not lacking in the magic department, but to be so powerful so young, it’s bril! I’m telling you, if anyone could do it at his age, it’d be Harry.” Sirius all but preened, the embodiment of what Harry suspected a dotting and proud parent to be.

The idea was a bit of a shock to Harry. Sure, Harry was already quite fond of Sirius and looked forward to their time together. But Harry always only saw Sirius as a guardian, an adult keeper until he reached legal age, and a friend of his late parents. Never had the weighty title of ‘parent’ ever crossed Harry’s mind, not even jokingly, and frankly, it felt way too soon anything close to that. The sheer immensity of the word made Harry uncomfortable and forced him to shove it into the very back of his mind to reassess at a much later date.

Well, there goes any notion of keeping my talents a secret for a while. Harry grudged with only mild inconvenience.

“An exaggeration, I assure you.” Harry watched as the burning words formed in the air. His intention wasn’t to show off his abilities, but Harry knew that if he didn’t stop Sirius now, the man would run away with his tales and start ridiculous stories about things Harry’s never done. In his presence, at least.

After the initial introductions, Remus Lupin seemed to slot into their lives like he’d been there though whole time. It didn’t take long to see that his presence was a soothing balm to Sirius’ chaffed mentality and naturally picked up the emotional and comforting slack that Harry left, having no experience with those particular matters.

It didn’t take long for Remus to grow on Harry as well. Harry felt himself constantly surprised with
the number of people flooding into his life and settling themselves in for the long haul like there was no other place they’d rather be.

Not even a few days after Remus had moved in, Death had decided that vacation was over and lessons had begun. With the heavy wards adult magic users in the house, Harry was able to actually practice his magic quite freely. This time, his companion didn’t hold back anything and taught Harry everything from harmless hexes that could be turned into far more serious curses later on, to all of the basic and moderate forms of defensive magic.

It was a struggle getting around the lack of verbal incantation, but Death reasoned that he will need to be able to cast them silently anyways and that he ‘shouldn’t crawl when he was already on his feet and capable of running.’ So the spells became more challenging and once he’d cemented the fundamentals, Death pushed Harry to follow the ridged rules of the spells much less.

He believed that every spell had a spectrum of its own and that they were more nebulous than definite. It meant that every spell could have hundreds-to-thousands of different outcomes based on the flexibility and competence of the caster. The concept was still in its infancy for Harry, but he understood the concept and was having more and more success as time went on.

Harry only held out for another week before he caved and allowed his two very pushy and nosy friends over to visit him. They of course found out what he was doing with the leaf in his mouth and aside from a bit of initial teasing for not being able to speak, they were both immediately accepting of what he was doing.

During their visit, Harry sat quietly and listened to them excitedly recite the happenings of their summer. Occasionally Harry would use the Flagrate spell to input something or answer one of their questions. Otherwise he just sipped his tea, nodding and using expressions to communicate to the others. Draco had been jealous of his use of wandless magic, but the blonde was easily appeased by a bit of praising from Harry and Anthony on his summer adventures.

Seeing his first two Hogwarts friends had brought thoughts of Hermione to the forefront of his mind. They wrote to each other weekly, as Harry had with Draco and Anthony, but she hadn’t visited and Harry hadn’t invited her. He considered her a friend, sure, but Harry still didn’t fully trust the eager bushy-haired Ravenclaw.

Everything was still too new.

His relationship with the ex-Azkaban prisoner and his werewolf buddy, his transition from muggle-world to wizarding-world, his blooming friendship with a Slytherin and fellow Ravenclaw—both
coming from families with a history of dark or muddled-grey magic, his rather precious secret companion, and immortality.

There were many reasons to hold Hermione Granger at an arms-length—as well as the others for that matter. One of those reasons being that many of the people orbiting him had ties to the dark even if they didn’t claim so for themselves, and considering his chosen path, Harry would continue to be surrounded by shady and blatantly dark characters. With Hermione, it was too much of an unknown element. He would first have to know how open she’d be to positions other than the light.

It was very touch-and-go with muggleborns and even a few half-bloods, since muggleborns aren’t born into this world, they are brought in and fed biases from the moment they enter. Harry would have been too, had he not met his companion.

So, until Harry knew she would be open to that particular part of their world, he would wait to bring her completely into the fray. Otherwise he would need time to deconstruct certain fallacies. Harry was playing a very dangerous game and at that point, he couldn’t allow anyone to see his hand before he made his first move.

Speaking of, Harry often asked Death about the Horcruxes and when they’d start actually looking for them. Every time he asked, his companion headed him off with vague answers of ‘not ready yet’ and ‘soon’ and ‘just a few more things to learn.’ It was frustrating to say the least but, grudgingly, Harry understood why. Harry’s arsenal of spells was still mediocre compared to the average upperclassmen or Hogwarts graduate, and neither of those could ever hope to find Voldemort’s six Horcruxes—minus the one unobtainable, leaving five to find.

Harry would need to be able to disguise himself quickly (animagus) and apparate (which he could learn later on in his second year) and Harry would need to master certain spells wandlessly before he dove in and encountered Voldemort’s protections, or possibly even Voldemort himself. Besides, as loathsome as he was to admit it, Harry was still only eleven-going on twelve and a year or two can make all the difference in spell casting.

He would just have to be patient, work hard, and keep as low of a profile as possible.

About a week before Harry’s twelfth birthday, his initial Animagus training finally came to an end.
Harry had been relaxing on a large maroon couch in the Black Library, reading about the magical properties of mud formed under different moon phases at the base of a willow tree. Without any sort of warning or preamble, the *Mandrake Leaf* shot out of Harry’s mouth, leaving a sting of spit on his chin, and unraveled. The leaf glowed faintly for a moment, as if there was a light shining behind it, or within it, and then it dimmed as it slowly drifted down to lie delicately on the cushion before him.

Wiping his chin quickly on his sleeve, Harry reached out and picked up the leaf between his two fingers, studying the same leaf that’s been stored under his tongue for a whole month.

With a start, Harry realized that it *had* been a whole month! That he’d completely his training/meditation or whatever it was that he was doing.

Harry hurried to find his guardian, leaf clutched firmly but gently in his fist as he moved quickly through the halls. He found Sirius and Remus in the kitchen, Remus stirring something with a savory smell and Sirius leaning back against the counter next to him, smiling at Remus fondly.

“I did it!” Harry announced, his voice a little scratchy from disuse. The pair turned to Harry in surprise, immediately sighting the intact leaf in Harry’s hand.

Sirius nearly pulled Harry right off of his feet and swung him around when he hugged him, squeezing him till his shoulders and ribs ached, but Harry didn’t utter a word. Harry felt a warm hand soothing over his hair and knew that Remus was right there as well. With his head buried in Sirius’s chest, Harry allowed himself to smile true and bright as contentment flooded his body.

He felt warm. He felt *home*.

It was as he was lying in bed later that night, reveling in the prospects of *really* training for the transformation and still basking in the intoxicating simplicity of home life that Harry felt it. The low hum of his soul, droning on like a tuning fork that never ceased it’s call. Curling up on his side, he pressed both hands to the center of his chest and listened.

It was like listening to the mournful notes of a siren’s call. It was seeking, yearning, *pleading*.

Something was missing. And Harry, staring unseeingly into the shapeless black of his room, hoped desperately that he hadn’t already lost it for good, that *perhaps this is the true price of his gifts*. 
Harry’s twelfth birthday came and went. The celebration had been small—per Harry’s demands—and Harry made sure that Sirius didn’t try surprising him in any sort of ridiculous way. He tried! But Harry used his companion’s ability to observe a multitude of things at once to his advantage and nip every attempt in the bud. Harry didn’t like surprises, especially not when he was working on his wandless magic all summer and would likely hurt someone accidentally if they tried to scare or surprise him.

The only people in attendance were the Goldstein’s, the Grangers, and the Malfoys. The first two had got on great with Remus and Sirius, though Hermione’s parents seemed tense in such a magic-saturated ancestral home—dark magic or not, so many layers would make any muggle uncomfortable.

The Malfoys, on the other hand, were another story. Sirius had downright refused to allow them—especially Lucius—into his home. Remus had tried to politely persuade Harry into not inviting them, but Harry put his foot down with both Marauders. He had to remind them both several times over that Harry had stayed with the Malfoys for a week before the trial and had been nothing but gracious hosts to Harry. Harry didn’t mention his little ‘pact’ with Narcissa for obvious reasons, but otherwise what he said was completely true.

A few days after the party that was more or less a hit, Harry received a letter from the Ministry, informing him that a trial had taken place for Peter Pettigrew and that he’d been found guilty. The man had been given a life sentence and in a year, would have another hearing to decide whether he would receive the Dementors Kiss or not. Aside from being put off about not being informed of the trial before-hand, Harry was pleased with the outcome.

Apparently the scandal with Sirius had been enough for the Ministry the first time around, so they kept all mentions of Peter out of the paper and kept it a closed trial. Harry didn’t even want to know how much they had to pay Rita Skeeter to keep Pettigrew’s name out of her articles!

Sirius continued to go to every single mind-healer appointment as scheduled. Remus always dropped him off. Then he’d come back to Grimmauld to spend time with Harry, such as: play chess, scour Sirius’s personal stash of books full of pranking spells and hexes, cook, garden, and just sit and talk. Harry supposed it was considered special bonding time with the other resident of the house. Not that he would complain, he quite enjoyed the werewolf’s company.
Sirius was improving. It was a very slow process, and occasionally he had setbacks, but there was certainly some measure of progression over the summer. Harry just tried his best to be supportive and a source of encouragement, but he knew he wasn’t even remotely adequate, which made him ever the more grateful that Remus was around.

As for his *Animagus* transformation, after the *Mandrake Leaf* it really just came down to practicing the magic that came with the actual transformation. After the first few lessons, Sirius left Harry to carry on with the process on his own, since there really wasn’t anything more he could do for Harry.

The reason that it took most witches and wizards over a year to achieve it, though, is that the transformation was a form of wandless magic and most adults didn’t know how to do wandless magic while children had too little training and power to do the transformation.

With how long Harry’s been practicing wandless magic, it shouldn’t take him long at all to achieve his animal form.

And it *didn’t* . .

_____

It was nearing the end of August. Harry, Sirius, and Remus were all anxious for the beginning of the school year, though Harry was more on the end of excitement while the other two were nervous and reluctant. Harry still had yet to go to Diagon Alley to buy his school supplies and hadn’t even touched his trunk at the end of his bed.

Harry found early on that he had much more success drawing up the required magic for the transformation when he was meditating and in solitude, preferably someplace warm with sunlight. So there Harry sat, legs crossed, sat on the smooth wooden floor of his bedroom, the wood beneath him warmed to the touch by the strong beams of sunlight streaming through the window on a rare day of a cloudless sky in the rainy country.

Harry’s eyes were closed, orange and pink light filtering through his shut lids. His back was postured straight, but relaxed, breaths coming in slow and easy. His hands cupped loosely over his knees and skin warming in the light.

As Harry sat there, he concentrated on the thought of physical form being more fluid than ridged in the presence of magic. He slowly coaxed his magic out from his center, letting it wisp out around
him and move through him as if he weren’t even there. Goose bumps rose on Harry’s arms despite the warmth of the sun and his clothes.

With his mind, Harry asked it again and again for ‘disguise, transformation, and freedom’ the three things that are fulfilled by the transformation. His magic has to believe that not only is he ready, but that he truly wants it.

After almost half an hour of holding onto the magic swirling around him and chanting that mantra again and again in his head, Harry took a deep breath and prepared himself to once again attempt the transformation.

Stilling his magic’s lazy circulation around him, Harry waited for only a moment—enough to gather his thoughts and prepare himself—before he gripped his magic tight and jerked hard on his magic. It converged on Harry all at once and usually the magic just dissipated, unused and restless, but this time, it felt as if something reached right into his core and plucked it like the string of a harp.

Harry shuddered violently at the sensation and it felt like everything inside him was twisting, tugging, and moving. Harry’s skin tugged uncomfortably in some places and slackened in others before being pulled taunt again. As Harry fell to the floor, he couldn’t help but feel grateful that the transformation wasn’t painful, just strange and a bit unpleasant, but Sirius had said that the first time would be the worst and after that it would be as easy as breathing.

The first thing that Harry noticed when he settled into his Animagus form was that he no longer had any arms or legs. At first Harry thought that something had gone wrong during the transformation, but when he started to move around and turned his head around to look at his body, he was immediately relieved to find that it had gone fine, Harry was just a snake.

As Harry coiled up to study his new appearance, he was struck with the sight of his scales in the sunlight. What had seemed black at first glance, was actually much closer to oil slick. In the light, a gleaming rainbow of colors appeared on his scales, with the base color still black. Harry’s belly was a shiny cream color with thin stripes only two scales wide slicing up his sides like ribs, though each stripe was about half a foot apart.

Based on his size and length in comparison to the objects around him, he estimated to being around 7-8 feet long and about as thick as an adult’s upper-arm. Which was surprising, seeing as how Harry was only 12 and his Animagus form would grow with him.

Harry reveled in his success with the transformation and curling up in direct sunlight was nearly euphoric in his new form, the heat of the light warming his body easily.
Being a snake took a little getting used to, moving and getting from place to place took a bit of practice. Also, the form was quite surprising, though Harry supposed that he was just as likely to be placed in Slytherin as Ravenclaw, but the fact that Animagus forms reflected the person within and that he turned out to be a snake was intriguing.

Before he shared the news with Sirius and Remus, Harry decided to do a little researching to figure out exactly what kind of snake he was. Harry was a bit nervous about trying to explain away the connotations that came along with that particular form to the two Gryffindors, but it was not something he could change and he saw no logical reason to be ashamed of it.

It took an entire day of digging through the Black library to find what he was looking for. Harry doubted that information on normal animals would ever be found in the Black’s extensive library on all sorts of magical matters unless for potion ingredients, but Harry had a feeling that his snake form was not simply a normal snake—besides the part about the snake actually being a wizard in disguise.

Eventually, Harry found a book with published studies about magical snakes. There was a seven-part series with different types of magical animals, but Harry ignored those. The book wasn’t very thick, but the pages were cut very thin and the hand-written script was small, cramped, and hard to read. Halfway through the book, Harry finally found a snake that sounded the closest to what he was.

*The Boelen Python Ostium is a close cousin to the Boelen Python, this particular species is extremely rare and has several magical properties. Unlike its cousin, the Boelen Python Ostium has venom potent enough to kill several adults with only a single drop, potency rivaled only by the Basilisk and several other magical snakes. Pythons are typically constrictors and nonvenomous, but this snake uses both—constriction for prey, and venom for protection against predators. The average adult measures to be roughly fifteen feet in length and can weigh around 200 pounds, though females tend to be a bit larger. This snake is considered endangered due to poaching for potion ingredients and is tremendously dangerous. Do not approach.*

Harry closed the book with a thoughtful hum. There was more on that species, including a physical description, various potion uses, behaviors, habitats, and a short list of magical properties. Harry brought the book back to his room to read more extensively later.

His companion seemed quite pleased with the outcome.

*‘The Boelen Python Ostium, what an amazing creature. Beautiful and deadly. How fitting.’* Death mused, causing Harry to roll his eyes in indignation.
Don’t be ridiculous! Now that I’ve learned this form, I can move on to more challenging spells and eventually apparition. Then I will just need to figure out a way to get the stone to Voldemort and gather all of his Horcruxes before he tries to recover his body. Harry projected, thinking through the skeletal plan they had formed at that point.

‘Exactly. Now, go tell those two lions about the new snake in the family. Also, you’ll be wanting to go shopping for your supplies tomorrow.’ Death didn’t elaborate and Harry didn’t ask. He knew he wouldn’t get a straight-forward answer, but something about tomorrow must have been significant enough for his companion to mention it. Harry just hoped that whatever it was, it wouldn’t drag him into anything unnecessary.
Chapter Summary

In the last chapter: Harry began his training for the Animagus Transformation. He and Sirius began settling into home life when Remus Lupin shows up to make amends with Sirius and gets sucked into their ‘family.’ Sirius attends his mind-healer sessions and Harry takes his ‘extracurricular’ spell training with Death back up for the summer. Harry ends his training and transforms into a Boelen Python Ostium. The Malfoys, Goldstiens, and Grangers come together for Harry’s birthday. Peter Pettigrew is convicted with a life sentence in Azkaban.

Telling Remus and Sirius about his new form had actually gone over quite well. Sirius had been tense whenever he was in his snake form, but he’d tried not to let Harry notice, which said something about the man. Remus had been sincere in his congratulations on the form, but Sirius was wary in the beginning. It was later that night that Harry walked past the sitting room and heard Remus discussing it with Sirius, explaining that the form didn’t have just one meaning.

He explained that the Boelen Python Ostium’s parts were often used in various healing potions and rituals. Symbolically, that particular species was very intelligent and represented healing or mending of bonds. Harry felt it was rather fitting for the reasons he had decided to learn the form. After that, Sirius was far more comfortable around Harry’s new form and even transformed with him a few times.

Following Death’s advice, Harry went to Diagon Alley with Sirius and Remus the next day. Apart from the Alley being quite busy, there was nothing worth noting as they walked around and bought his new supplies. All Harry really needed was new parchment and quills, new robes, potions ingredients to restock his supply from the previous year, and his new textbooks.

When they reached Flourish and Blots, however, Harry felt a sinking feeling in his gut as he witnessed the utter chaos of the shop from the other side of the street. Apparently a famous author was doing a book signing, and after a quick peak of his required book materials for the year, he put it together that his new DADA professor was either a huge fan of Gilderoy Lockhart’s, or he was Gilderoy Lockhart. Either way, Harry was not looking forward the upcoming year.

Wanting to get it over with as quickly as possible, the three of them all took a portion of the texts to find and buy, then they would meet back out in front of the shop. Divide and conquer, or something like that.
While in the pandemonium, Harry saw several familiar faces, but didn’t say anything to them because they weren’t friends and he’d much rather get out of the shop as quickly as possible. Ducking through and sliding past people was much easier with his small stature, and so, Harry was the first to make it back out to their meeting spot across from the shop.

As Harry waited, he idly watched everyone who came and left the shop, staying unseen with a notice-me-not charm cast on him the moment he entered the Alley. Harry was mildly surprised to see the Malfoys—sans Narcissa—approach the shop. Draco ducked inside eagerly while his father trailed behind him. Just as Lucius was entering the shop, a small girl with bright red hair and a spatter of freckles across her nose was being shoved out of the shop by what looked like an older brother.

The girl ran straight into Lucius and the man glared down at the girl as she sputtered with wide eyes and took a step back. Just before she did, though, Harry caught the movement of Lucius’s robes before a plain black book slid into the girl’s cauldron with the rest of her books. Tilting his head to the side, Harry watched curiously as the interaction came to an end and the girl walked over to her parents, completely unaware of the additional book in her cauldron.

‘Hmm, I’ll have to keep an eye on that girl, see just what Lucius is up to.’ Harry mentally noted, watching as Ronald Weasley and the two infamous Weasley twins left the shop and joined the girl and their parents, completing the red-headed picture.

Harry wasn’t able to continue watching the family, as they started walking further into the Alley and Sirius and Remus reappeared to take him back to Grimmauld Place with all of his supplies shrunken in their pockets.

Later that night, Remus sat in the drawing room, lit only by the crackling fire as he sat in a warm leather chair. Bringing a tumbler of scotch to his lips, Remus barely noticed the smooth burn as his thoughts demanded all of his attention.

The spell was only broken when Sirius plopped down into the chair adjacent his. When Remus flicked his gaze up to Sirius, he felt a pinch in his gut at the concern clear on his friend’s face.

“What’s the celebration for?” Sirius’ sarcastic tone had Remus rolling his eyes before he returned to his previous thoughts and studied the amber liquid inside his glass for a long moment.
“This isn’t a celebration, it’s a pity party.” Remus smiled at the surprised snort from Sirius. “He’ll be going back soon...” Remus finished quietly, staring down into his glass before taking a generous sip. The smile on Sirius’ face faded at the reminder.

“Yeah. If feels too soon.” The somber tone reflected exactly how Remus felt. They had only just gotten Harry back; it would definitely hurt to let him go again until winter break.

“He’s... different than I thought he’d be.” Remus spoke softly after a long, comfortable silence.

“How do you mean?”

“He’s just--... He’s nothing like them! I mean, sure he looks like them, but I thought I’d see bits and pieces of Lils and James in his personality. Where James was reckless and constantly cracking jokes, Harry is serenely calm and impassive. Lily always had the most beautiful emerald eyes, but Harry’s are... chilling, arctic really. I know it’s ridiculous, but I can’t help but fear that something happened, something that changed our Harry.” Remus’ voice sounded wrecked by the end and he rubbed a hand roughly over his face.

Sirius sighed and reached over the arm of his chair in order to place a firm, grounding hand on his best mate’s shoulder. He waited until Remus met his gaze to speak.

“Of course something happened! He witnessed the unimaginable at such a young age, and though he probably doesn’t remember it, that affects a person in inexplicable ways. He witnessed the death of his parents, survived the killing curse, and had to live with Lily’s vile sister for most of his life. Even if he’d grown up in the most loving and happy home, you can’t expect him to be the same as the little boy who fell asleep on your chest or screeched excitedly every time he saw you. Harry’s growing up in very difficult circumstances and I think he’s doing great, considering.” Sirius’ tone wasn’t unkind as he soothed Remus’ shoulder in small circles and explained the very same thought process he’d gone through after meeting Harry again after so many years.

Remus sagged, but it was in relief. There was still a tension in his body, though, that said not all of his worries had been eased.

“But what if he doesn’t follow in his parents’ footsteps?” Remus worded carefully, knowing Sirius would pick up on what he really meant. ‘What if he decides to fight for the dark? What if he becomes a dark wizard?’
“Well, if he doesn’t follow their path, then we hope that whatever path he chose is safer. If it isn’t, then we follow him anyway. We protect him, because our allegiance is no longer to a side, it’s to Harry.” Remus seemed shocked by the utter conviction in his friend’s voice, which only made Sirius feel more secure in his stance.

“You’d do that? Even if he . . . even if he joined the dark? You spent so many years condemning your family and anything to do with the dark—except for me, of course—but you’d really put all of that aside to protect Harry?” Remus didn’t sound worried, in fact, he looked and sounded hopeful as he stared wide-eyed at Sirius.

Sirius snorted, a bit of the normal Sirius dripping back into his expression and body language.

“Oh come on, my issue was with my family, not the side they supported. I mean, I don’t think I could ever fully become dark, not with all of the stereotypes and discrimination plaguing that side at the moment, but there were things here and there that I agreed with. And I can’t change the fact that I was raised in a dark family, surrounded by dark magic, therefore making me far more comfortable and adept at dark magic.

“My tryst with the light side in my earlier years had been far more about pissing off my parents and staying close with James and Lily than anything else. Both sides have issues and I don’t agree with the management of either. Harry . . . I’ve come to realize that even though I’ve only known this new, older Harry for a short while, he is truly something special and I will protect him with my life. Not because of who his parents were, but because he’s already family. I never dreamed about having children, but now I can’t say I’d have it any other way.” Sirius squeezed Remus’ shoulder for emphasis.

Remus had never seen that particular look on his friend’s face, so profound and peaceful at the same time. After a summer with their little ward, though, Remus was starting to understand. Children were . . . so much more than either of them could ever hope to be. It doesn’t matter your achievements or failures in life, once you find yourself in the position of caring for and protecting a small child, nothing else matters. Nothing you’ve ever done up until that point can compare, and that’s okay.

It's quite difficult to explain the feeling.

As the pair continued to sit in silence, staring into the fire and lost in their own thoughts, neither noticed the small, shadowed figure leaving the wall right outside the door frame to go back upstairs. And if that figure just happened to be smiling, well . . . there was no one there in the living world to see it.
The morning that Harry was supposed to go back to Hogwarts was overcast with a surprising chill despite it still technically being summer. Harry had packed everything he needed the night before and had shrunk his trunk to fit in the pocket of his robes to make the short trip to the station easier.

Both Sirius and Remus accompanied him to the station, getting there early so that they had plenty of time to say goodbye. Harry didn’t mind Remus coming with, in fact, he actually appreciated it. Without really realizing it, Remus had become a part of their strange little family.

The few families on the platform were either overly curious about the trio, or scared enough of the ex-prisoner to shuffle their kids behind them or just make sure they stood between Sirius and their kids at all times. Harry had a few choice words for their behavior, but didn’t say it out loud, Remus was strict about swearing. Not that he did it often, but when it was necessary he didn’t shy away.

As they stood on the platform, the two older men got into an argument over whether or not to confront the more obvious gawkers. Sirius thought it wouldn’t be setting a good example to for Harry to just roll over and allow himself to be pushed around and Remus thought that confrontation and hostility should be avoided at all costs.

Harry wasn’t really paying attention though. His focus had been drawn to a flock of bustling redheads that had just made their way onto the platform as it became increasingly busy. One redhead in particular had caught his attention. The youngest Weasley was standing not twenty yards away, staring at the ground vacantly as her family bickered and joked and hugged around her.

Looking a bit closer, Harry saw that the only thing that she held was that same black, leather-bound book he’d seen Lucius slip into her caldron. Though her body and expression was lax and impassive, her grip on the book looked almost painfully tight. Harry’s eyes narrowed in suspicion. He’d never met the girl, so he couldn’t say anything about her personality and whether there was a change or not, but her glazed eyes made something in his gut churn.

Harry had saved himself from many sticky situations by listening to his instincts and gut-feelings, and something about that girl was giving him the same feeling that said that something wasn’t right.

“Ah, already got your eye on a girl, have you Harry?” Sirius cut through his thoughts with a suggestive eyebrow-quirk and a devious smirk as he glanced between Harry and the Weasley girl in an obvious manner. Harry didn’t dignify that with a response, as he normally did whenever Sirius
said something especially obtuse.

Looking back to where the large family was standing, Harry saw one of the twins tug on her hair and jump out of the way just in time to avoid the furious slap aimed at his face from the previously vacant girl. Like a switch had been flipped, the youngest Weasley unleashed a fiery temper on her older brother and chased him around their family members until the matriarch of the family snapped at them both to cut it out.

Harry cataloged the events away in his mind for later and turned back to his own rag-tag family just in time to see Remus hide a grin with a cough and a hand pressed to his mouth. Apparently Sirius wasn’t the only one to think Harry had taken quite an interest in the girl. Which, truthfully, he had. Just not in the way that they thought he had.

Granger was the first of his friends to arrive, then Anthony. Draco didn’t show up until they had already said goodbye to their families, boarded the train, and found themselves a compartment to sequester off for their group.

Saying goodbye to Sirius and Remus had been . . . an experience. Both had hugged him fiercely and had to be coaxed into letting go by a flustered Harry. Harry hadn’t known what to make of the curling warmth in his belly at the display of affection, so unfamiliar to him in his life before Hogwarts, so he just blushed and quickly said farewell before hurrying off to the train with his friends.

On the train, Draco sat down in their compartment only a few minutes-shy of the train actually taking off.

For the first hour of the train ride, everyone chatted about their summers—even though they had been sending letters back and forth all throughout break. Harry and Anthony sat on one side, while Draco and Hermione sat on the other. The pair bickered on and off for a while, but eventually settled into a civil conversation about their classes and the new DADA professor.

Harry, not feeling up for conversation, pulled out a book he had shrunken in his pocket. Anthony, next to him, turned and kicked his legs up onto the bench so that he could lay back to sleep. Except that his head was now pillowed on Harry’s thigh. Slowly, Harry lifted his book in order to see Anthony’s face, his eyes closed but his lips twitching perilously close to a grin.

Harry huffed in mock-annoyance and set the book’s spine none-too-gently on Antony’s forehead. From under the book, the blonde burst in fits of laughter that had his shoulders shaking and stomach tensing. He didn’t move the book, though, or his head, so Harry just continued to read as if nothing
Draco was usually the one Harry had to ignore because he was trying to get a rise out of him, but occasionally Anthony poked at his patience, curious to see if there really was a sleeping beast inside the slight boy as Draco and several other amiable Slytherins had claimed there to be. Harry wasn’t exactly quick to anger, so as long as they never pushed it too far, they would never know what beast slithered through his veins and hollowed out his bones.

Anthony fell asleep on his lap surprisingly fast; a deeper, more relaxed breathing coming from under his book, warm breath tickling Harry’s fingers curled around the edges. Seeing that one of their friends had already fallen off into sleep, Draco and Hermione eventually decided to try to make the train ride go fast as well by taking a nap. Which left Harry in a compartment full of slumbering children, feeling like an underpaid babysitter.

After an hour of sitting there with everyone still out like a light, Harry decided to get up and go to the bathroom. Setting a gentle levitation charm on Anthony’s head, Harry slipped out from under him without waking him up and quietly exited the compartment. Not wanting anyone to come and mess with his sleeping friends, he cast a wandless spell on the door so that it could only be opened from the inside.

After taking care of business, Harry washed his hands and began making his way back to his compartment. On the way there, Harry caught a glimpse of Ginny, sitting alone in a compartment and writing furiously in the black book. ‘Ah, so not a book. A journal, perhaps? Or a notebook? Why would Lucius give the girl a notebook?’ Not want to raise any suspicion, Harry didn’t even slow in his stride as he passed.

Crossing over into the next train car, Harry immediately spotted two figures in the long hallway. And they were right in front of his door. If that weren’t worrying enough, that fact that these were the notorious Weasley twin pranksters definitely would be concerning.

One was kneeling in front of the door with the tip of his wand pressed against the door handle as he cast a multitude of spells, none of them working to tear down Harry’s spell. Meanwhile, the other twin was bent over his brother’s shoulder and bickering with him about how to get in and that he was taking too long.

Harry stopped a meter away from the pair, watching them work. To be honest, he was a little impressed with their creativity in terms of what spells they used. They were two years older than Harry, which meant that they were going into their fourth year.
Over the summer, Harry had picked through the materials and units that would be covered in the years to come. At this point, the twins would have only skimmed the surface of spells beyond the fundamentals, these two seemed to have been doing some extracurricular spell learning.

“Merlin, George! Back off and let me do my thing or we’ll never get in! Besides, you’re supposed to be the lookout. Well . . . start looking!” The twin kneeling in front of the door—Fred—snapped in a harsh whisper.

“Right!” George straightened up, turned, and yelped when he saw Harry, jumping in fright and pressing a hand to his chest. Harry perked an unamused eyebrow at George. Fred spun around, as if to snap at his brother again, but then let out an identical yelp when, he too, saw Harry standing there.

“What are you doing?” He asked calmly.

The twins glanced at each other, something unspoken passing between them, before they looked back at Harry with identical false smiles on their faces.

“A friend of ours said she may have left her coat in there.” George started.

“She’d been looking for a place to sit on the train earlier, left it here, went to the bathroom, and then it was full when she came back.” Fred continued with a fluidity that only came with lying quite often and knowing his brother well enough to know where he would take a story.

“Our friend is quite shy and didn’t want to disturb anyone, so we came instead.” George went on just as smoothly.

“When we saw that everyone was sleeping, we thought we’d grab the jacket and go before anyone woke up.”

“But the door’s spelled shut and whatever charm was used, we’re not familiar with it and it’s quite a devil of a spell, can’t get it open.” George glanced at the door his brother had just been working on.

The fast paced back-and-fourth paired with their blatant tenacity was actually a bit amusing.
“How about I take a peek, see if the jacket is there, and give it to you if it is?” Harry asked, playing along with the little charade. The twins looked skeptical, but that was because they didn’t know that Harry was the one who put it up. Harry didn’t wait for their answer, instead he stepped up to the door, pulled out his wand for show, and cancelled the spell.

Harry slipped inside and one of the twins behind him made a surprised strangled noise. Harry had been convinced that they’d been lying, so to say that he was surprised when he found the suspect jacket shoved under the seat like it had been kicked there, was certainly an understatement. He grabbed the small blue silk bomber jacket from under the seat.

When Harry handed over the jacket, Fred and George seemed just as shocked to see it as he’d been. Which didn’t exactly help in making them look less suspicious. Despite, Fred—or perhaps it was George—took the jacket Harry held out and with a quick ‘cheers mate’ they scurried away. Sighing, Harry closed the door again and took his seat under Anthony’s head once again, canceling the levitation spell.

‘This is going to be a long year.’ Harry projected to the lurking figure just outside of the physical realm. The other-worldly being drifted closer to the surface with an echoing chuckle.

‘Giving up so soon? What happened to your enthusiasm just an hour ago?’ Death’s tone was mocking and snide, grating against Harry’s agitated mood even further. Picking his book back up with one hand and using his other hand to lightly comb through Anthony’s golden curls in order to sooth his nerves, as well as make sure that Anthony stayed asleep, Harry ignored him for a long moment.

‘You’re insufferable.’ Harry dead-panned, though the small smile that formed on his lips betrayed him.
Enemies of the Heir Be-Square

Chapter Summary

In the last chapter: Harry, Remus, and Sirius go to Diagon Alley to get Harry's school supplies. There, Harry sees Lucius slipping Ginny a diary and wonders what he's up to. Remus and Sirius mourn Harry's upcoming departure for school and have a serious chat about a rather possible and difficult future for their little ward. On the train back to Hogwarts, Harry has an encounter with a certain pair of twins and catches sight of their little sister, who seems different from the last time he'd seen her.

The year started off without much fuss. Harry’s second year at Hogwarts ushered in a new sense of excitement and diligence.

Chatter about Harry’s new guardianship had died down significantly since the beginning of the summer, but with Harry’s return, people suddenly seemed to remember why they’d been so hyped up in the first place. The rumors and gossip slowly trickled back into the student populace as time went on. Almost eclipsing the dual dread-excitement at the new DADA professor being the renowned author, Gilderoy Lockhart.

Harry tended to ignore it, as he was slowly (and painfully) becoming used to being quite the spectacle to the Wizarding World. His friends, however, were having a harder go at pretending it wasn’t happening. For the first time, they were able to see Hermione’s rather nasty temper in the face of two fifth years who hadn’t bothered lowing their voices when Harry and his friends turned the corner, betting on the extent of Sirius’s trauma and how ‘batty’ he was now.

There also may have been some dog jokes thrown in there, considering everyone now knew about Sirius’s animagus form from the trial.

Hermione had stomped right up to the two fifth years and released the unholy flood gates that was a young Ravenclaw scorned. It was actually quite impressive watching as Hermione tore down the two upperclassmen verbally with such intensity. She didn’t curse once, but there were plenty of exclamations of how pathetic they were and how they had no right to say what they had about Harry and his Godfather considering list ‘A’ through ‘Z’ of reasons why their own families were facing troubles and they should show some common decency for other people.

By the end of the verbal flaying, both boys looked positively queasy and ready to bolt. Harry had been inspired by Hermione’s rant, so when the pair turned, ready to bolt, Harry decided to dish out
his own form of retaliation. Using wandless magic, Harry yanked down both of their trousers before sending a nasty stinging hex at their behinds, causing them to yelp and jump as they ran, which inevitably resulted in them tripping on the trousers around their ankles.

One of the boys had been in the middle of trying to pull up his trousers, so he fell straight onto his face. It was apparent by the immediate flood of blood and the bruised, swollen bulb on the bridge of his nose that it had broken.

The other boy had tried to catch himself with one hand as one reached for his trousers. The second boy was unluckier than the first, since the moment he landed, a sickening crack echoed through the hallway followed by the boy’s groan of pain. The bones of his wrist shattered on impact, leaving his hand hanging limply in front of him.

Both injuries would be a quick and easy fix after a trip to Pomfrey’s, but they would surely hurt on the way over there. It had been more about hurting their dignity than causing damage to their bodies. Harry didn’t enjoy causing pain, but sometimes, the only way to get a dog to stop biting you, was to bite it back.

“You’re dead meat Potter! We won’t forget this!” The one with the broken nose cursed at Harry as the pair picked themselves up from the ground. His voice was nasally and clogged from the injury, and his eyes were brimming, but his threat was no less serious.

Harry didn’t say anything as he watched their retreating forms, arms crossed and face impassive. Threats were taken with a grain of salt when you could no longer stay dead.

“Oh! So the ‘Ice Prince’ can get angry!” Draco broke the silence first and Harry almost wished he hadn’t.

“If I hear that name one more time, I think I’m going to end up hitting someone.” Harry hissed forebodingly, which only elicited more laughter from Draco.

Once again, the trial was to blame; or more accurately, it was the paper that covered the trial that was to blame. It was no surprise when news of the trial, as well as Harry’s picture, had been plastered all over the front page of every major newspaper in Wizarding Britain. The Daily Prophet—which always seemed to be the source of his headaches these days—had decided to put a picture of Harry on their front page, a picture from the trial.
In the picture, Harry’s face was completely blank as he spoke wordlessly to people outside of the frame. The picture had made him look icy—indifferent—and it had been the cause of many students at Hogwarts suddenly dubbing him *Ice Prince* when he returned from break. Although the majority had used the term almost endearingly of Harry (mostly upperclassmen who thought that his innocent features paired with his cold demeanor towards everyone was ‘adorable’) there were those who used it as an insult and said it to try and get a reaction out of Harry.

Draco, ever the empathetic, had used the title teasingly, which usually ended in either a glare from Harry, a cuff on the back of the head from Anthony, or a lecture from Hermione.

Though, overall not much had happened in the first month and a half of school to really take up his attention, aside from the ridiculous spectacle Gilderoy Lockhart made. Time and time again, the man had tried pandering Harry into friendship and even after Harry’s clear refusals, an article would always appear in the Daily Prophet—thank you Rita Skeeter—in which Lockhart would have given interviews and went on about being Harry’s mentor and an ‘inspiration’ to the Boy Who Lived.

On top of all of that, the man couldn’t teach a fish to swim! Which had most students seeking out the aid of the friendlier Ravenclaw upperclassmen to teach them what they needed to know. Harry and Anthony helped a few first years where they could, but most went to Michael Corner for help, since the majority of the things that came out of his mouth were either lies and slander against Harry or boasts about his own intellect, and since the first years didn’t know any better, they all sought his help.

Harry didn’t really mind—less work and forced interaction for him—but Hermione and Anthony were rather livid and did what they could to combat the rumors. And each time they confronted Michael—against Harry’s wishes—they often turned around and gave Harry a long lecture about standing up for himself but he never really understood.

Harry still held tight to the belief that when faced with irrationally belligerent and cruel people, the best action was to not react at all and such behaviors would only make the situation worse. Perhaps it was the way he was raised in the Dursley household, where extreme religious views were taken as doctrine in the case of Harry, where silent suffering and endurance were approved of and rewarded. Some people would call that a martyr, Harry called it survival. Perhaps . . . Harry hadn’t completely abandoned that mindset when he left that damned house.

Nothing else really happened during the beginning of the year, however, at the end of the first month, Grant Page—the fourth year Ravenclaw seeker—had taken a nasty tumble during training and had refused to get back on his broom. They held tryouts following that to either fill Grant’s spot, or fill the spot of another Ravenclaw player so that they could take over for Grant.
Harry hadn’t thought twice about the news, but apparently his friends had something else in mind, because he was practically dragged onto the pitch by Anthony and Draco to tryout. Draco had already tried out for the Slytherin team and made seeker—which Hermione claimed was due to his father buying the team all new Nimbus 2001’s, much to Draco’s resentment—so he and Hermione just watched from the sidelines as Harry and Anthony tried out.

Harry hadn’t any interest in the sport, but he figured that the training would help strengthen both his body and his magic. Also, it would give him a better excuse for slipping away if he needed to, claiming he needed to practice.

Both He and Anthony made the team, wanting to train Anthony to replace one of their seventh year players while she studied and took her NEWT’s and for when she graduated. Harry hadn’t been baffled that he made the team, he was rather good at flying, what Harry hadn’t been expecting, though, was to make seeker. Anthony had been over the moon to hear that not only had they both made it, but that Harry had gotten the seeker position, and Draco had been giddy, itching to face Harry on the pitch as the enemy seeker.

So Harry took up the position on the team and started training almost every day for two hours (even more on the weekends.) It had been exhausting, but Harry quickly found a balance between Quidditch, his studies, time for his friends, and time to himself.

Throughout that time, Harry had of course kept an eye on the young Weasley girl. She had ended up in Gryffindor with her brothers, but she never ate with them during meals. Instead, she could only be found in the company of a young and eccentric Ravenclaw first year—Luna Lovegood—but was usually on her own.

Although Harry had been very discrete in his observations, eventually his friends caught on to his newfound interest in the young Gryffindor. Despite Harry insisting that he felt absolutely no romantic interest in the girl, Hermione kept giving him ‘knowing smiles’ whenever the girl was in the vicinity and Draco constantly whined about her being a Gryffindor—‘and a Weasley at that.’ Anthony had been strangely quiet about the entire situation, if not a bit more defensive on Harry’s part and more reluctant to believe the others over Harry, which he greatly appreciated.

After two months of watching the redhead and weathering the constant teasing and prodding of his friends, Harry’s observation finally paid off. On the day of Hallowe’en, Harry had noticed the change in Weasley’s behavior. As the weeks turned into months, Harry had taken note of how the girl who seemed tenacious and fiery around her brothers, had shriveled in front of the students of Hogwarts. He noticed how she became more and more recluse and her brother’s often shot her worried glances from further down the table.
Although she’d become withdrawn as time went on, she was still relatively engaged in her surroundings. On the anniversary of all three Potter’s deaths, though, the ginger had become nearly catatonic. In the excitement of the Hallowe’en feast, nobody had noticed the dazed girl with glazed-over eyes walking next to them in the halls, nobody but Harry.

Having a gut-feeling that something was wrong, Harry had told his friends he wanted to be left alone that day—which they understood without further explanation, considering what had happened to his parents on that day—but that he would still join them for the feast later on. Then he donned his invisibility cloak and followed Ginny as she wandered through the school, seemingly aimlessly.

It was an hour before the feast that Ginny suddenly straightened, eyes still glassy, and started off in another direction with far more purpose. Harry tailed her from fifteen meters’ behind, watching from afar as she ducked around corners and snuck down hallways quickly. If Harry didn’t know any better, he’d have though Ginny was trying to get away from him.

Eventually they ended up outside and on the part of the grounds where the animals and magical creatures were often kept. Harry watched in confusion as Ginny ducked into the chicken coup and reemerged with three chickens hanging limp from her fist and spotted with little white, red, and black feathers all over her robes and in her hair.

She went back inside, and by now the halls were completely deserted, and still, she snuck through the castle on silent feet. Not even a minute after entering the castle, Harry was suddenly distracted by the low, hissing voice that seemed to echo around him, vibrating up from the floor and into his bones. After a moment of careful listening, Harry realized with a start that the voice was coming from the wall.

When Harry looked back up, he cursed when he realized that he’d lost Ginny while he’d been trying to find the voice. Pushing off from the wall and gazing down the long corridor with multiple hallways branching off.

‘Where the bloody hell did that girl go?’ Harry growled mentally as he stalked down the hallway.

‘Abandoned first floor girl’s bathroom.’ His companion helpfully inputted. Harry narrowed his eyes.

‘You know, you being able to watch multiple places and people at once could’ve really helped me beforehand.’ Harry hissed with mild resentment, knowing it wouldn’t last long but wanting to make his words count until then.
‘I am watching other things as well, but splitting my attention like this can be draining and makes me less focused the more I divide my attention. I am watching you right now, as well as Voldemort, Sirius, and your little redhead. Besides, what fun would it be if everything was laid out for you from the beginning?’ The mocking tone of Death’s voice rang in Harry’s ears as he ascended the stairs to the first floor. Although, knowing that Death was currently watching Voldemort had him curious as to what the weakened Dark Lord was up to.

Harry soon reached the corridor that held the unused-haunted girls’ bathroom and immediately spotted the pools of water forming in the hallway from the flooding bathroom. Harry slowly approached the bathroom, but stopped halfway there when Ginny emerged from the bathroom with the chickens in hand.

Harry crept closer as Ginny climbed on top of a stool and levitated two chickens with ease while she pointed her wand at the third one, mumbled some spell Harry didn’t quite catch, and quickly embedded two fingers into the gash made on the chicken’s side. Her fingers came back out, red and slick in the glowing light of the torches on the wall.

Harry stood back and watched with unease in his stomach as the young girl repeatedly plunged her small delicate fingers into the limp body of the chicken in order to smear the next letter on the wall. When she needed more room to write, Ginny used magic to slide her stool over a bit. The displays of magic being used by the young first year would more impressive, if not for the fact that she was currently smearing the blood of an animal all over the walls and most likely under the influence of some form of magic.

When she was done, the dripping crimson letters spelled out, ‘THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS HAS BEEN OPENED. ENEMIES OF THE HEIR BEWARE.’ It had taken the blood of all three chickens to write out the huge letters on the wall. Standing in stunned, curious silence, Harry barely registered Ginny climbing down from the stool and re-entering the bathroom. Before he could move, though, she walked back out with the stiff form of what could only be Filch’s cat, Mrs. Norris, in her grasp.

She then strung up the petrified cat on the torch bracket. It seemed she was done, after that, as she just stood there, staring unseeingly at the wall for nearly two whole minutes. Harry was startled out of his own thoughts about the possible meanings behind the message written in blood on the wall when he heard the echoing scuffle of approaching footsteps.

Acting quickly. Harry vanished the dead chickens and knocked Ginny out with a stunner, catching her as her limp body crumpled towards the ground. Slipping his cloak around the girl, Harry picked up her small form ‘bridal style’ and quickly carried her down an adjacent hallway and away from the footsteps.
Harry quickly carried her to the library under the invisibility cloak, walking to one of the groups of tables in the back of the library, hidden by towering shelves and used only for couples who wanted to sneak away and make out or what have you.

Sitting Ginny down in a chair and carefully slumping her over the table like she’d passed out while studying, Harry made sure to slide her bag off first and fish around in her bag for a text book to set out, in case she woke up and didn’t remember what she did, it would be better for her to believe she’d fallen asleep while studying. Harry also made sure to clean the drying blood off of her fingers as an added measure.

Scene set up, Harry was about to set down her bag and leave to contemplate what he’d witnessed, when he suddenly thought about the diary. Glancing back down at the unconscious form of Ginny Weasley, Harry reopened her bag and rifled around until he found the diary. Whatever it was that he’d just witnessed, Harry had a strong feeling that it had to do with that diary, and even if it didn’t, perhaps reading it would grant Harry some answers.

Without wasting so much as another second, Harry slipped the diary under his robes, set the bag on the floor, and promptly left the library under his cloak of invisibility. Harry made it to the feast right on time, the diary in an inner pocket of his robes weighed him down like the pages were made of lead. Throughout the entire feast, Harry’s focus was split between his surroundings, the diary, and trying to coax answers out of his companion.

‘The Chamber of Secrets, what exactly is that?’ Harry asked as he forked another bit of food into his mouth quietly.

There was a long pause of hesitant contemplation as Harry waited for an answer. Finally, his invisible friend piped up.

‘When Salazar Slytherin helped create Hogwarts, he often butted heads with the other founders about whether or not to allow muggleborns into the school, he was—obviously—against it. Eventually, Salazar left Hogwarts, but not without leaving a parting gift should his future heir ever attend the school. He created a hidden chamber underneath the castle, as well leaving a deadly and frightening beast called a Basilisk.

‘Both can only be found and obtained by a parselmouth, a measure Salazar took to ensure only direct descendants of his line would have access. No one but a descendant has ever opened the chamber.’ Death clarified, each morsel of information drawing on more and more of Harry’s interest, until soon he wasn’t even going through the motions of eating, just staring at his plate vacantly. Thankfully, considering the occasion, nobody around him commented on it.
'Slytherins’ heir? But that doesn’t make any sense, the message Ginny wrote said that the chamber had been opened. If the chamber could only be opened by Slytherins heir, then how did she open it?’ Death didn’t answer Harry, but only because the pieces had clicked together halfway through talking.

‘Voldemort! He’s the last of the Slytherin line, he must be the heir! But . . . that still doesn’t make any sense. Voldemort is laying low right now, gathering his strength to try to regain his body, he would have neither the strength, nor the capability to constantly imperio the Weasley girl, or use some other form of magic on her. Somehow, he is indirectly involved, as is the book. I just have to figure out how.’ Harry pondered as he resumed eating.

It was blank! The journal was completely blank! Harry slumped back against his headboard, staring at the blank pages of the diary that lay open before him on his bed. After the feast, Harry had excused himself from the small group that had decided to spend a bit more time together as it was still fairly early and probably find some upperclassmen to prank because some Slytherins seemed more reckless than Gryffindors.

The dorm room had been thankfully empty when Harry got there, so the first thing Harry did was pull out the book in his pocket and open it to a random page. Blank. Fanning through the entire book. Blank. It was completely blank!

But Harry had seen Ginny writing in it. There was a reason Lucius had given the book to the girl.

Closing the book, Harry studied it for the first time since he caught a glimpse of it in Ginny’s bag. The black leather cover was completely blank, but on the back . . . on the back was a name Harry never thought he’d see on the book. Pressed into the soft leather, was the gold-leaf inlay name of T. M. Riddle. This book, or journal, had belonged to Voldemort—but before he was Voldemort.

This was the diary of Tom Riddle, the ambitious young half-blood wizard with a mountain of rage and an encompassing fear of death. This diary belonged to the young man who had no way of coping with the trauma of his unfortunate childhood.

The same man who did everything he could to prove his worth and rise above the other wizards of his age at Hogwarts to compensate from his lack of high blood-status, wealth, and education. The man whose fear led him down a path that wreaked destruction and devastation and ultimately to his devolution into a mockery of the great wizard he once was.
Now knowing the original owner of the book, Harry had no doubt that the book was significant, and whatever magic was at work there, it was powerful.

With a deep, centering breath, Harry released his tight hold on his magic and allowed it to uncurl out from his body and wrap loosely around the diary. The reaction wasn’t immediate. At first, Harry’s disappointment flared up when his magic told him that the book was nothing more than an ordinary journal. But then, a shiver ran through Harry’s body when the magic inlaid deep in the fibers of the diary slowly emerged and sent a deep thrum of magic through his fingers gripping the book, up his arm, and down his spine.

Harry couldn’t tell much about the magic or what it’s purpose was just from that, only that there was magic in the diary.

Setting the diary back down in front of him, Harry frowned down at the little book as he tried to find the connection between the book and the Weasley girl’s behavior. ‘Why did Lucius give her the book? What does the book even do?’ Harry thought as he stared hard at the subject of his frustrations, as if blinking would cause him to lose his train of thought and never reach a conclusion.

‘Think, Harry. You know what this book is, you just haven’t realized it yet. What do you know about Tom? Why would this be significant enough to place in the care of Lucius, one of his most trusted inner circle members?’ Death inquired, trying to lead Harry in the right direction but toying with him instead of just coming right out and saying it.

‘But why would he have Lucius give it to a first year girl from a family that are considered ‘blood traitors’ if it’s so important?’ Harry countered.

‘Voldemort hasn’t called his followers back to him yet, they don’t know that he lives and it’s been over ten years. Lucius gave the diary away by his own volition. So tell me, Harry, what is the significance of the diary?’ He asked again.

‘I don’t know! I don’t ever remember it being mentioned before, but it’s obviously a very powerful object to have completely ensnared the girl. It almost acts like a powerful compulsion curse, but that type of enchantment requires the compulsion to be pre-set, and would keep the person under constant compulsion until the requirements of the spell were fulfilled.

‘This . . . it’s different somehow. It’s off and on again compulsion, while Ginny still seems in control of her body most of the time. The diary is also very good at masking its magical signature and
making it as innocuous as possible. And the book is almost sentient in the way it’s magic felt coiling along with mine. As if it has its own power . . . source . . . Oh Merlin! It’s a Horcrux!’ Harry sucked in a sharp breath and his eyes flicked down to the diary before him with wide, wondering eyes with an edge of fear keeping him from picking it back up.

‘Very good, Harry. If you are going to be searching for the other Horcruxes, you’re going to have to become familiar with them—how they feel and whatnot—so that you can quickly identify the Horcrux and take it. This first Horcrux has come into your possession completely by chance, as Lucius certainly had no knowledge of its importance, but the others will be under heavy protections and you will not always have the luxury of time to figure out where the next Horcrux is and how to get to it on your own.’ Death explained.

Harry nodded, still not taking his eyes off of the diary.

‘Well, what do I do with it now?’ Harry asked hesitantly, still dumbfounded that he’d come across one of Voldemort’s horcruxes by accident!

Death laughed haltingly. ‘There isn’t much you can do at this point; you still need to learn apparation before you go after the other horcruxes. Though, it might be useful to find out why it effected the girl so much and why Lucius had given it to her in the first place. And it goes without saying that you must keep the book safe and out of anyone else’s hands.’

Sighing, Harry picked up the diary once again and leaned back against his headboard, flicking through the blank pages absently and wondering how much of Voldemort’s soul was trapped within the confines of the book. If the amount of magic it had exhibited earlier, it’s level of sentience, and the nature of the object were anything to go by, it could very well be the first. Meaning that half of Tom Riddle’s soul was in his hands.
If These Pages Could Talk, They'd Be Pretty Damn Annoying

Chapter Summary

In the last chapter: Harry kicks his second year at Hogwarts off with endless rumors and chatter about the trial, being dubbed by the public as 'Ice Prince.' Harry takes a neutral and non-confrontational approach to the teasing. Lockhart is his usual despicable self. Harry and Anthony join the Ravenclaw quidditch team as seeker and chaser. Harry's teased by his friends about his 'infatuation' with Ginny, though Anthony takes Harry's side. Harry catches Ginny writing on the wall in blood and steals the diary from her, which he later realizes is Tom Riddle's first Horcrux.

After realizing what the diary was, Harry kept it locked away in his room, taking it out each night to study it and try to figure it out. There was obviously something more to the diary than there seemed, it had some very strange effects on the young Weasley girl and Harry had always seen he writing in it, yet the diary was completely blank as far as Harry could tell.

The obvious solution to Harry’s unanswered questions was to write in the diary himself, but for a solid week, Harry was reluctant to do much else than cast detection charms on it. Finally, after days of coming up with inconclusive results with the detection spells and drawing a blank on what the diary possibly did, Harry let his curiosity win out and sat down at his desk in his dorm room while his dorm-mates were out in the common room or at the library studying (Anthony).

Dipping his quill in an ink pot, Harry’s hand was poised over a random blank page, prepared to write. However, as the inked nib of the quill hovered over the parchment, he suddenly wasn’t sure what to write. As the seconds ticked on while Harry tried to drag up something to possibly write, Harry didn’t notice the ink gathering and swelling at the tip of his nib until a fat drop of black ink struck the page with a soft sound.

Harry sighed at the sight of the wet blot on the page and set the quill down next to the diary. Once the ink had stopped spreading through the fibers of the parchment, something rather curious happened. Right before Harry’s eyes, the ink blot shrunk and faded into the page until there wasn’t any trace. Interest peaked, Harry sat further forward, picked up the quill again and didn’t hesitate to write this time.

*My name is Harry Potter.*

Again, almost as soon as Harry had finished writing the letters were disappearing one by one until...
the page was blank and seemingly untouched. Moments dragged like dead weight through his mind as Harry waited. Quicker than he’d expected, new letters seemed to ink themselves on the page, different from what he’d written.

‘Harry Potter? Ah, I’ve heard quite a lot about you from a friend of mine. Tell me, how did you get ahold of this diary?’

For while, Harry was so shocked he didn’t know what to do. Only when the words started to disappear did Harry jolt into action, writing quickly.

First, who am I speaking to? What is your name?

Harry had a pretty good idea who he was talking to, but considering who it was, it was best to be absolutely sure.

‘Of course, how rude of me. My name is Tom Riddle.’

Tom Marvolo Riddle. The sentient diary had identified itself as Tom Riddle. Not Voldemort, but ‘Tom Riddle.’ The differentiation told Harry two things. First, that for whatever reason, the Horcrux hosted within the diary was powerful enough for not only sentience, but communication and some sort of possession of the young Weasley girl. Second, that the Horcrux was cut off from Voldemort’s experiences and knowledge after being separated from his body.

Once Harry had gotten over his astonishment, his curiosity reared back up and he began asking the diary questions and conversing with it. It was absolutely fascinating! The level of intelligence, language, and ability to hold conversations was impeccable. It was truly like a snapshot of Tom Riddle’s mind and character had been taken the moment he’d created his first Horcrux as a young Hogwarts student and his complete consciousness was copied into diary. And this Tom was not at all what Harry had expected.

Harry actually knew quite a lot about Voldemort’s early life, having heard such tales from his companion. It wasn’t extensive, but Harry knew that Tom had actually been the model student before he graduated and his darker exploits took up all of his time. He had been at the top of his class, in the personal favor of every staff member (save Dumbledore, who had held his reservations for the young Slytherin since the very beginning) a pillar in the social structure of Hogwarts for
seven full years.

Harry had expected reservation and master manipulator (which he still lived up to) but relentless curiosity and amicable conversation was certainly not what Harry had had in mind when he thought about the young Tom Riddle. Over the course of a week, Harry found himself returning to the diary quite frequently when he had the time.

He kept the diary locked away in his room of course, not wanting the distressed Weasley girl’s searching gaze to recognize it in his possession out in public. In the evening, though, when everyone in the house of blue and bronze was studiously working through assignments and required/elective texts, Harry would casually reach for the diary and start up another conversation with the bodiless pen-pal. Though he was careful not to do so in the presence of Anthony.

As Harry grew closer to his small circle of friends, it felt stranger the more he lied to them. Harry knew the necessity of his lies, and they had been so natural in the beginning, but the more he was exposed to the exclusively trusting nature of his friends the heavier each lie felt on his tongue. However, no matter how much he craved to lean into that loyalty and spill every single one of his secrets—knowing that it would make them closer, their bond stronger—Harry knew that it was too early. His nebulous plans were only just beginning to solidify into full-fledged thoughts and to act now would only make everything fall apart. They wouldn’t understand, they don’t know what I know, Harry thought determinedly, though he knew that a small part of him was scared that their friendship would not withstand the truth.

One evening, three weeks after discovering the unique abilities of the diary, Harry slipped up and was caught writing in it by Anthony when he came back to the room looking for Harry to help him with something on their course work. He had looked at the diary with curiosity, but only a little, and said that he didn’t know Harry had a journal. Harry had tried to subtly move the diary out of sight and moved onto a subject sure to divert attention. He announced that he’d succeeded in the animagus transformation (even though he’d done that months ago) and like magic, Anthony completely forgot about the diary. At least, Harry hoped that that was the case.

When Draco heard the next morning, he’d been unbelievably smug about Harry’s reptilian form, giving him a good nudge and saying how he knew Harry was secretly a Slytherin at heart, with prideful grey eyes beaming into his. When Harry transformed for them in private, they had marveled at the iridescent black scales, shining a rainbow of different colors in any light.

Anthony had been more interested in certain properties of his form and asked Harry if he’d be allowed a sample of venom at some point to use or study—which Harry had been indifferent about. Draco, on the other hand, lived up to his darker heritage and constantly asked about the lethality of Harry’s form—how potent was his venom, how fast was he, how strong were his coils, and how much bigger he would get. Harry thought his friend’s interest was rather amusing.
Sometimes Harry felt that lying to cover up the Horcrux was a waste. Specifically, he felt that way every time he caught Tom trying to slip past his defenses and burrow his way in like he’d done to Ginny. Whether it be the cool brush of magic tingling up his arm and snaking around his shoulders, or smooth artfully cloaked words of charm and deceit, Harry always picked up on it and admonished Tom for his behavior.

It was like scolding a child. A child more manipulative and cunning than most politicians. If anything, calling him out on his ploys only seemed to encourage Tom to try harder. It soon became an expected and harmless battle of wills. After the first few weeks, Harry doubted that Tom was still actually trying to possess and control him, rather, now he seemed to test Harry to see if he can catch Tom every single time. So far, he has.

Occasionally, after failing yet again to get Harry to do anything for him, Tom would ask about Ginny, knowing that she had fallen easily for his tricks. According to Tom, Ginny had been quite taken with the ‘famous Harry Potter’ before coming to Hogwarts and still fancied him. The young girl had written page after page about Harry to Tom and so Tom had been quite shocked to suddenly be in contact with the subject of such adoration (even if Tom still didn’t know why Harry was so famous).

The topic always made Harry feel uncomfortable, which of course meant that Tom brought it up rather often—reciting the love-sick and childish descriptions Ginny had given Tom. Tom wasn’t teasing Ginny necessarily, Harry knew that a lot of what he said was exaggeration and made up at Harry’s expense since Tom actually spoke very little about what Ginny actually wrote to Tom.

Harry didn’t delude himself into thinking that Tom actually cared about the girl as a friend. The disembodied teen had used her to carry out his own agenda and would care little for what happened to her when he was done, but somehow, Harry felt that Tom respected her enough to not be directly cruel to the girl.

Harry knew that the chances of Diary-Tom’s memories carrying over into the fusion of the main soul were slim to none (seeing as how that was not how memories were stored and retained, the memories of the main soul where always dominant) so he felt comfortable being overly curious with Tom and asking him about his life.

At first, he didn’t answer and deflected a lot of the questions smoothly, but after a month, the snippets of information started to be woven into their long conversations. Over time, more and more of the smaller details about Voldemort’s early life were fitted into place and he came to understand Voldemort a little better than before.
Tom always tried to mine information out of Harry as well, but Harry was far less willing to let anything go. Even with the minuscule chances of the information ever reaching the current dark lord, Harry couldn’t bring himself to chance it and only told Tom about vague details; things such as being seeker of the Ravenclaw quidditch team and being friends with the heir of the Malfoy line and the youngest Goldstein. Harry talked about school and people and professors, but was very tight lipped about his own personal details.

When winter break finally came and Harry brought the diary home with him to Grimmauld place, he rarely took it out of his trunk as he enjoyed the holiday with his Godfather and Remus. Although his conversations with Tom were entertaining, he was still only a Horcrux—a fraction of the man Harry is trying to revive, a fraction that is stuck with the memories of a sixteen-year-old wizard and the snippets of information he gleaned from Ginny to go off of.

On top of that, Harry definitely didn’t trust the ulterior motives of the diary. Whatever Tom had planned, it involved possessing a first year and making them write ominous messages in animal blood on corridor walls. Whatever it is, it can’t be good, especially after hearing from his companion about the Chamber of Secrets and the Basilisk within. From the short time Harry had been talking to him, he had come to the assumption that ‘enemies of the heir’ from the message on the wall had something to do with muggleborns and opening the chamber might have something to do with the beast inside it.

Either way, Harry was going to try to keep his exposure to the diary to a minimum. Even if he did find the diary strangely fascinating.

When Harry returned from break, feeling reinvigorated from spending some quality time with Sirius and Remus, things resumed normally. Draco went on and on about the gifts he received, Anthony talked almost as much about his trip over holiday to see his beloved and eccentric great uncle, and Hermione showed off the hefty stack of books she got for Christmas. Michael Corner sneered at them and bragged about his expensive gifts and a long trip to some tropical isle, though Draco was always happy to one-up him in front of the Ravenclaw table.

The only thing that seemed to change since the previous term was little Ginny Weasley. Harry hadn’t expected much when he glanced over at her during breakfast, but he was shocked to find that the first year was looking right at him with confused and cautious eyes and a definite determined light shining in their depths. He kept his expression neutral as he casually looked away, but inside, something had dropped like a stone in his gut.

She knew, Harry wasn’t sure how she knew, but he was certain that she did. Over the course of the next month Harry teetered precariously on the edge of masked neutrality and paranoia. He began keeping the diary on his person at all times, periodically brushing his fingers over the outline of it inside his bag to make sure it was there. As the first month of the new year withered and drained into the second, Harry had finally begun to relax when one day, out of nowhere, the diary went missing.
Harry had gone back to the dorms, thinking nothing of the secret journal in his bag until he was in the privacy of his own bed-hangings and could pull the book out to once again write in it. For the first few moments of digging through his bag, Harry felt nothing but calm. Then the hedging of frustration. Then panic as it became clear that the diary was no longer in the bag.

The next morning, Ginny could once again be seen with the cursory diary tucked close to her chest. Harry wasn’t sure how she had gotten the diary off of him without his notice, but he suspected that Tom was involved. The Horcrux must have realized that time was wearing thin as the end of the year approached, because the downward spiral Ginny went through seemed to be far more rapid this time around.

It was like watching from afar as a person’s mind and body was claimed by a drug.

Almost immediately, Ginny had closed in on herself, withdrawn from everything and everyone outside of her. Painted stains of grey and purple smudges soon appeared under her eyes and a sickly pallor overtook her already fair skin. Her glazed and vacant eyes were constantly fixed on the ground as she shuffled through the halls.

After a week, people started to notice and gave the young Weasley a wide berth. A few days after that, the fiery prankster twins finally realized that something wasn’t right and began sitting on either side of her during meals, and tried to coax her into conversation whenever they could. Not that she even realized they were there.

It wasn’t until the first petrified student turned up that Harry realized what Tom might be trying to do. Harry knew that the gaze of a basilisk was absolutely lethal, but indirect eye contact may have some other effect. Harry didn’t know the purpose it served, but the more students that turned up stiff as a board yet still alive the clearer it became that Tom was behind it and the attacks were leading up to something.

He tried stealing the diary back from Ginny once, slipping into the girl’s dorms in Gryffindor tower in his animagus form, but seeing how Ginny slept curled protectively around the diary, feeling the Horcruxes magic burrowing into her . . . Harry knew that he wouldn’t be able to get it away from her without waking her up and probably causing a frantic and desperate fit.

Besides, with the nature of the magic connect the diary to Ginny this time around, the chances of it being dangerous and possibly harmful to her to try to force the diary from her were quite high.
Harry had gotten used to being in control, of having all of the answers and being the unseen force behind all of the players on the board. Though, at this point, Harry felt completely helpless as he watched a girl withering away for reasons he didn’t know. It was times like these that made Harry feel the most regretful about taking his covert stance, about being the only person alive to know what was really going on and the duties he had to carry out.

Because, being alone meant that everyone else was safe and he could move around undetected, but it also meant that he couldn’t ask for help or advice.

The only one in which he could was Death, and Death was . . . well.

So, Harry didn’t make a move. He was at a stalemate with his waring thoughts and growing frustrations. However, instead of sitting around waiting for something to happen, Harry kept a close eye on Ginny while also delving in to his research, trying to figure out where the Chamber of Secrets was, and by association, the basilisk.

Harry’s second year began to come to a close as winter dissolved into spring. As the number of petrified students steadily increased over the second term, once again, the trio of Gryffindors took charge and flung around wild accusations while also somehow finding themselves in ridiculous and dangerous situations that made them all frequent recipients of punishment.

Despite the supposed ring leader of the little group being Ginny’s older brother, Ronald Weasley, the boy hadn’t paid a lick of attention to his little sister, not even after the twins began sitting with her. The key to all of this mess was clutched in the hands on his young sister, always sat only a few seats down from him at every meal. The young, fiery-haired Gryffindor seemed almost pitifully dense to Harry at times.

Don’t get Harry wrong, they were determined! But without key facets of information, the three thankfully missed the target by a long-shot. Unfortunately, even if Harry had almost the entire picture figured out, that didn’t negate the fact that Harry couldn’t do anything about it. All he could do was wait for something to happen and hopefully act on it fast enough before any irreparable damage was done.

And wait he did. All the way up until the last week of class. Harry’s anxiousness hadn’t dissipated, but it had dulled some over time. The sharp edged blade of anticipation had inched away from his throat and he could breathe again.

He was walking alone down the same corridor that young Ginny had stained with blood when he saw a dreadful glint of red on the wall like painted jewels in the torch light. For a moment, Harry
thought he might be mistaken, seeing things that weren’t there because he was thinking about them, but when the rapidly drying rivets of crimson didn’t wink out when he blinked, he surged into action.

Harry rushed forwards until he stood before the wall, taking in the dripping letters as the smell of blood filled the hallway with its metallic and rusted perfume.

HER SKELETON WILL LIE IN THE CHAMBER FOREVER
Chamber of Secrets

Chapter Summary

In the last chapter: Harry discovers what the diary actually does and begins conversing with Tom. Anthony and Draco find out about Harry’s animagus form. Ginny steals the diary back. Harry finds the final message in blood on the wall saying that Ginny’s body would remain in the chamber forever.

HER SKELETON WILL LIE IN THE CHAMBER FOREVER

The words cut into Harry’s tangled thoughts and emancipated from his mind the only words that seemed appropriate.

“God damn it, Tom!” His voice echoed through the silent hall, indignant and tired.

A cold, wet blanket draped over Harry’s mind as he settled his anger started seeking the solution.

‘Where’s the Chamber?’ Harry projected, still standing in front of the wall, but not caring if someone were to see him.

‘You know where it is. . .’

Harry huffed in frustration.

‘Damn it! This isn’t the time for any games or riddles, a young girl could die.’ Harry tried to reason, hoping that the stakes of the situation might pry an easier answer out of his old friend.

‘Nonsense! There is always time for games. At least, for you and I. As for the girl, why do you care? You know what lies for her beyond this world, you know it is better than this place.’ Despite his words, Harry knew that his companion was not so flippant about snuffing out a life, so Harry didn’t feel the need to lie in order to get his help.
'You’re right, having seen it myself, I can’t say that dying holds much fear or grievance for me, were she an adult, had she lived a full life, I might not have stepped in so hastily. But she is still a child, she has not yet lived and if I can do something to save her I will, because death does not just affect us, it affects everyone around us, as well. And if that is not enough for you, then consider the repercussions of whatever that Horcrux has planned for her. If there is anything I have learned about soul magic over these past few years, it is that taking a life and magic always have incredible outcomes—either very good, or very bad—and the very good is all too rare.'

There was a long silence afterward, and Harry wasn’t sure what that meant for him. For Ginny.

Finally, Death spoke, a chilling and bone rattling baritone that tickled the hairs on the back of Harry’s neck in a phantom breath.

‘This is the same exact place that the girl wrote the other message.’ Death said with significance.

Knowing that there was something Harry was supposed to have gotten from that, Harry looked around. He was right, of course, this was the exact same place that the other message had been left. The other message, which said that the chamber had been opened.

‘It’s here? The opening to the chamber is here?’ Harry frowned at the wall, looking for any sort of sign that it was anything more than just a stone wall.

‘Yes, very good. Now think, that girl somehow gets into the chamber with the diary’s help and then gets the Basilisk out to attack students. How would such a creature move unnoticed through these halls?’

‘. . . Moving around unseen?’ Harry knew that there was no way it could have been placed under and concealment charms. Even if completely invisible, a full grown basilisk would be too large to not make noise or run into other students and staff along the way. Wait. . . Suddenly, the scene of that first message bloomed in Harry’s mind like the spreading of ink in crystalline water.

The chickens. The blood. The petrified Mrs. Norris. The whispering in the walls. The warning. The flooded bathroom!

Harry spun around to face the abandoned girl’s bathroom. It wasn’t flooded this time, but Harry had already caught on.
The pipes! Of course! You said that the Chamber was hidden somewhere under the school, and if there’s anything under the dungeons, it would have to be some sort of sewer or pipe system. If the Basilisk has access to the school’s pipes, it could—theoretically—go anywhere in the school connected by some kind of pipe big enough.

The darkened bathroom was lit only by hazy shadowed light coming through the windows from the cloud-cloaked moon. The infamous Moaning Myrtle was missing, as she had been the night that Ginny had written on the walls in blood. Harry looked around the room for anything that might not fit. Tom had somehow found the chamber on his own while he was at Hogwarts, so he should find it much faster with help.

“Yes, but he didn’t find it until his fifth year, you see.’ Death interjected unhelpfully.

Death chuckled, the rattling of bones and cool, bitter brush of his amusement fazing into reality for a moment before he pulled back into the comfort of the veil.

‘Salazar was a parselmouth, as was Tom, and as is you. The entrance to the chamber will open to you if only you’d ask it to.’ Death finally relented and Harry found his agitation smoothing down for the moment.

Taking his tricky words to be literal, Harry spoke in parseltongue to the room at large.

“Open.”

Harry was startled when there was a loud rumble of shifting stone right beside where he stood next to the sinks. He stepped back and watched as the sinks separated and spread out to create eight white marble pillars around the gaping black hole that seemed to be the entrance into the chamber of secrets. With the safety of the young girl currently down there on his mind, Harry didn’t waste time with hesitation, just stepped off of the edge and slipped silently through the air for a moment before the slight curving of the pipe had the metallic wall slotting in under Harry.

As the angle of the slope increased, Harry’s descent slowed until he was sliding and tumbling out of the end of the tunnel and into a room of sorts. It was graceless and rather painful, but Harry didn’t have the time or mind to feel embarrassed.
Climbing to his feet, Harry quickly cast a *lumos* and took in his surroundings. The empty chamber was shrouded in thick blankets of dust and decorated in dried and brittle little bones of many rodents and small creatures who had perished in the cold dark antechamber.

As Harry moved forward over the carpet of waste and decay, his lumos reflected off of murky panels a short distance away. When he stepped close enough, Harry could see how the panels connected into a desiccated husk long enough to encircle the entire perimeter of the large room and still have overlap. *This must be the shed skin of the Basilisk,* Harry thought apprehensively. The likelihood of him coming face to face with the creature was high, but it was not time for fear or hesitance, so Harry barely paused at the skin before climbing over to the large corridor beyond.

At the end of the long passage was a circular steel door, much like the door of a vault, with steel snakes as thick as Harry’s arm locking the door in place. Taking another chance, Harry spoke in parseltongue once again.

“Open!” The deep sounds of heavy metal mechanisms working within resonated in the hall and the solid steel snakes took on a life of their own, pulling back from the frame. When it was done, Harry slid through the small opening in the door he managed to make with it being so heavy.

The Chamber of Secrets was massive. A cavernous room that stretched further and higher than the great hall. The chamber was half flooded, leaving the enormous stone snake heads to appear to be emerging from the dark waters with bared fangs in order to bite. The wet stone under foot muddled the sound of Harry’s steps as he began walking down the elevated floor.

Even from a distance, Harry made out the sight of Ginny lying unconscious on the ground at the other end of the chamber, a figure of dark robes and pale skin leaning over her could only be Tom. He didn’t look up, but Harry knew he’d been noticed. As Harry moved more into the large cavern at the end of the chamber, he briefly took in the enormous statue behind Tom of an imposing figure that might possibly be Slytherin himself.

“You shouldn’t have come, Harry.” The smooth timbre of Tom’s voice was almost as alarming as his handsome and young features, not to mention the Hogwarts school robes he wore. Tom’s dark eyes met Harry’s and for a moment, they seemed regretful or guilty, but Tom looked back down at Ginny as he slowly rose, the expression ceasing.

“What are you doing Tom? Why is she like this?” Harry’s voice was even and calm, but had hardened as much as his gaze. Anger marred Tom’s smooth face and he met Harry’s stare with resolve.
“You wouldn’t understand, Harry! Fifty years! Fifty years spent living as a memory in that blasted diary. Trapped and silenced for half a century and then I finally make contact with someone only to find out that the one I became failed! Lost to a mere babe.” Tom hissed with roaring fury, though at the very end, he glanced away from Harry. “The girl didn’t know many details of that night, but oh did she have much to say about the boy who lived! Once I realized what had happened to the rest of me, I knew I would have to take things into my own hands. I can’t do anything without a body, which is why I need her...”

Harry looked down at Ginny as well. She looked so pale and still, if not for the slight movement of her ribs, Harry might have thought she was already dead. Focusing his attention back on Tom, Harry spoke.

“I can’t let you kill her, Tom. Acquiring a body like this... it will not give you what you want. Your power will be average at best, forming a body around half a soul will leave you heavily deformed and impaired. You will surely lose your mind and—”

“Enough!” The roar of anger was followed by a few hissed words in parseltongue, spoken too fast and too quietly for Harry to understand. Then Harry’s attention was captured by the stone head behind Tom when it’s mouth opened wide and the dark scaled head of a Basilisk slid out. Harry made sure not to look it in the eye and instead looked at Tom’s hardened expression.

“I cannot have you stopping me, Harry. I suggest you run.” Tom warned as the Basilisk slid completely out of Slytherin’s mouth and rose up high above their heads, waiting impatiently for a command from its master. “Keep him away, but do not kill him.” Tom hissed over his shoulder to the snake. Not a second later, the Basilisk lunged and Harry had to jump back to avoid the sharp dripping fangs the size of his forearm.

The Basilisk worked quickly, moving Harry back out of the end cavern and into the long hall of sorts, plunging and striking. Despite Tom’s orders not to kill, Harry could tell that the starved beast was frenzied and trying it’s hardest to sink its teeth into Harry. Harry threw spells and curses at the creature, but most bounced off of the armored scales known to the wizarding world for their magical resilience.

Harry tried commanding the snake in parseltongue, but that didn’t fool the beast, it would only obey a true descendant of Slytherin. He tried to stay level headed, as he had been trained, but practice and real-life monsters were very different situations, so Harry began to desperately fling spells at it that he knew would keep it back, but not enough to do any damage.

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Tom kneel beside Ginny once again and point a wand at her prone form.
“NO!” Harry shouted just in time to break Tom’s attention from whatever spell he was about to cast. Unfortunately, that also meant that Harry couldn’t protect himself against the crushing jaws that wrapped around his abdomen and plunged at least a dozen fangs through his unprotected flesh. Harry’s eyes were still locked on Tom’s as pain lanced through his entire body as well as the venom. Harry saw the moment Tom had seen the advancing snake behind him, could recall the instantaneous horror and arm that reached out as if to do something.

Harry didn’t hear Tom speak, but suddenly the teeth were leaving his body and he crumpled to the ground, the holes left in him having cut his marionette strings. The shock had placed Harry in a numb and thick trance, making it impossible to fully comprehend or react. But that trance was broken when his vision was filled with pale smooth skin and wide dark eyes. Harry’s gaze traced languidly over the perfectly combed wave of dark hair just before the pain really crashed over him and Harry sucked in a surprised breath. Harry’s viewpoint was shifted slightly when an arm slid underneath his shoulders and pulled his upper body half onto a lap.

“. . . this wasn’t supposed to happen! I didn’t—I. . .” The soft voice calmed Harry enough to gain back half his mind and process the situation. The Basilisk had bit him. Either he’d bleed out, or the venom would get to him first. Ginny was still alive, for the time being. That last part had Harry refocusing on Tom, he needed to convince him somehow to spare her.

When Harry’s lips parted, they were already wet and slightly sticky, but the movement snatched Tom’s gaze away from the probably ravaged and grotesque state of his abdomen at this point.

“Please, Tom . . . don’t—hurt her. Your other- . . . -self is still alive. He’s coming for you. . .” Forcing his mouth to produce words was like forcing a caterpillar to go through metamorphosis, but Harry did it anyways. His words barely reached a whisper, but Tom seemed to understand him if the confusion and pain in his expression was anything to go by.

A heady fog settled over Harry’s mind as the energy seemed to seep out of him and pool warmly on the floor and strong leg beneath him. The familiar sensation of slowly being peeled back from one’s physical body set in and Harry knew he didn’t have much time, but the venom and blood loss were not aiding in his coherency.

Suddenly, the low humming that Harry thought was his blood rushing past his ears raised in volume and Harry recognized the sound almost intimately. The thrumming call that flourished into haunting notes that he had heard that quiet and solemn night in his room at Grimmauld Place. The enchanting, mournful sirens call that had left Harry feeling a helpless sorrow. For what? He didn’t know.

Hearing it now, as Death came to claim him for not the first, nor the last time, Harry didn’t know
what to make of it.

The cold leaching his body was momentarily chased away when the temporary physical form of Tom curled over him and his face pressed hard against his shoulder while clenching fingers dug painlessly into his arm and side. The position put Tom’s ear so close that Harry found himself taking advantage of it to unburden the last thoughts flitting through his head.

“Can you hear it? Tom? I wonder . . . do all souls sing as they die, or is it just mine?” The words were barely even formed thoughts before they slid out between tacky lips, but they seemed to mean much more than Harry realized, because as the sensation was just beginning to leave his limbs and his mind drifting back into the veil, the arms around him tightened in a way that would have been painful otherwise.

“Be good, Tom.” Those were the last words Harry managed before he plunged through the veil and into the afterlife.

When Harry reemerged on the ethereal plane, he was not in a sun-lit meadow, like last time. This time, he was standing in the middle of an empty road with skyscrapers all around him, stabbing up from the concrete plane. So tall and close together that they blocked out the sun, foggy clouds drifting through the tops and hiding them from view, confusing the light and making it hard to tell if it were day or night. The surreal stillness of the empty cityscape washing Harry over in rocking tides.

“Is it going to be different every time?” Harry asked into the empty air, his voice being swallowed up by the immensity of the buildings around him.

“Most likely. If everyone’s experience of the afterlife was the same, then that would be awfully boring.” Death answered from behind Harry. Harry turned to look at his frightening friend.

“I should probably go back now.” Harry sighed at the memory of the scene he’d left. “I just hope I’m not returning to find a body.”

Harry took one last look at the abandoned city around him, then at Death. Flashing a brief half-smile at his deathly company, Harry tilted back and began to free fall, punching a hole right through the veil and plummeting back into his healed body.

With a sudden intake in breath, Harry’s eyes flicked open and he sat up. After a moment to collect himself, Harry looked over to his right to find Ginny . . . sitting up and looking at him. Harry blinked
twice. Then he commissioned his mouth back into use.

“Ginny? Are you alright?” He inquired softly, voice slightly scratchy. As he spoke, Harry scanned the now-quiet chamber to make sure they were no longer in immediate danger, but the girl being awake and alive was a good sign. The Basilisk was nowhere to be seen and the diary remained intact and inanimate a few feet from Ginny.

Ginny sucked her bottom lip into her mouth and nodded jerkily, but not a moment later, her eyes glistened and Harry quickly crossed the distance to put a comforting hand on her shoulder. Before he could ask, words were pouring out of the girl’s mouth in a quick succession.

“Oh good Morgana, I’m such a fool!” She exclaimed in a muted, defeated voice. Glancing over at the discarded diary, Harry saw the dark clouds of thought drifting over her mind before she spoke again, a self-deprecating smile tugging at her lips bitterly.

“You know . . . at first I thought it was just silly. That I might have forgotten putting it in my cauldron or one of my brothers slipped it in as a prank. Once I discovered that it could actually write back to me, I thought it might be charmed to be a sort of secret pen-pal that wouldn’t ever tell my secrets to anybody. Growing up in a house with six older brothers, I didn’t really have anyone to talk to, so I figured ‘what’s the harm in spilling everything to a dairy? Especially one that doesn’t actually record anything I write.’

“It wasn’t until platform 9 ¾ that I realized something wasn’t right. Ever since I knew what Hogwarts was I’ve been thrilled to come here, to learn magic like all of my brothers before me. I could hardly get a full-night’s sleep all summer because I was so excited. But . . . standing in the compartment of the Hogwarts Express, looking out at my mum and dad as they waved at me from the platform . . . I felt nothing. There was no excitement or relief, just a feeling of inconvenience, of wishing it was over already. That was wrong, and I knew it, yet I didn’t connect that it had anything to do with the diary at that point.” Ginny looked back over at Harry, her bright brown eyes shining with unshed tears.

“An then again, two weeks into the term, I ran into George and it felt . . . strained. I realized that I hadn’t talked to any of my brothers since I had gotten the diary. I didn’t even know! But by then it was too late, I couldn’t get through the day without writing in the diary, else my stomach would churn and thoughts were relentless. After a while, I started losing little bits of time—just a few moments during class or meals, nothing I would take much notice of. Then, the blackouts grew longer, I’d be walking to my last class one minute, and then the next I’d already be on my way back to the dorms, having finished my day. Also, Tom started asking me questions, questions I would have thought suspicious or been wary of answering, but every time he asked, I instantly answered, as if compelled. They were . . .” Ginny skidded to a stop and flicked her gaze away and back at Harry worriedly.
“It’s okay Ginny, whatever it is, it’s okay to tell me, you can trust me.” Holding her gaze solidly for several moments seemed to calm the redhead. Taking a deep breath, she reasserted herself and continued on.

“They were questions about you, and about . . . Voldemort.” The name stuttered off of her tongue, the forbidden name still such a taboo in and of itself. Still, the youngest Weasley soldiered on.

“When I realized just who Tom was, I was so terrified. That very night, I tried to get rid of the diary, since I knew I would be punished if anyone found out what I’d done and who I was helping. Tom had something planned for that night, had used me to prepare and I knew I had to act fast so I tried to flush it down a toilet in the abandoned girl’s bathroom, but it ended up flooding it instead. After that was a haze. I still remember bits and pieces, I remember writing on the wall, but not what came after.” Her breath began to come in a little shakily, but a slight squeeze of Harry’s hand on her shoulder brought her back down enough to go on.

“When the diary disappeared, I knew it wasn’t over, I knew it had been taken, since Tom wasn’t done with me just yet. At first I thought Dumbledore had it and at any moment I would be dragged away by Aurors. When I realized you had taken it, I almost thought Tom had done it on purpose, to finally meet the one he’d been asking about, but I could still feel his compulsion. I felt an overwhelming need to get the diary back and continue what we were doing. At least, at first I’d thought that it was the magic making me steal the diary back, but afterward, I understood that it my own selfishness. I knew what he was and that he was using me, yet I still craved his attention, his companionship!

“Even now, after everything, I want to protect him! Does that make me a bad person?” The question caught Harry off guard, even worse, sluggish tears stripped down her pale cheeks and gathered at the very dip of her chin before dropping into her hair. Harry allowed his instincts to guide him through the motions of comforting as he reached forward and grasped the sides of Ginny’s small child-like face to make sure she took in the weight of whatever he was about to say.

“No, Ginny, it doesn’t make you a bad person. We don’t always get a say in who comes into our lives or when they’ll leave, most of the time it’s not people or times that are convenient for us. First friends . . . well, they’re important to us and it’s very hard to let that go. Just because of something that wasn’t in your control, that shouldn’t mean that you have to make yourself hate your first friend, that is something you should be able to hold onto. Though, you should know that you and him can’t talk again. It’s dangerous, Ginny, he tried to hurt you. All of those years spent in that diary, unable to speak to anyone, it has made his mind unwell and I cannot allow him to hurt you.” Harry tried to explain, not wanting to upset the young girl. Despite, her eyes widened with dread.

Ginny grabbed both of Harry’s wrists in her small bone-white hands and gripped tight.
“You mustn’t give it to Dumbledore! He’ll kill him! Tom told me so himself.” Her voice lowered to a whisper in panic and her little fists squeezed.

“I know, you don’t have to worry, I’ll be taking the diary with me to the Black ancestral home. The wards there are strong enough to block against tracing or detection spells and the diary doesn’t affect me.” Harry soothed, easing the fingers through around his wrists and instead taking her hands. Ginny looked puzzled, yet hopeful.

“It doesn’t?”

“No, I can feel it whenever it tries to wrap its magic around me, so I’m able to stop it. As for Dumbledore, like you said, he’ll want to either destroy the diary or use it to draw Voldemort out, which would be even more dangerous than the incident last year where three students—including your brother—were almost seriously hurt, or even killed by the trap Dumbledore set up for him. So he can’t know it’s still intact.” Harry paused to think through a quick plan on what to tell Dumbledore. It was quite simple, actually.

“Alright, so we’re going to have to lie a little, but most of that will be on my part, since you were unconscious through the whole thing. You tell him almost the complete truth; that you were possessed by the diary and scared to tell anyone about it because you didn’t want to get in trouble, you say that you blacked out and when you woke up, you were in the chamber of secrets, the diary was gone and the Basilisk dead. Now, Dumbledore is a powerful legilimense so be sure to act shaken up and not meet his eyes directly so that he won’t be able to get into your head. If you have to, look at the spot just between his eyebrows, it simulates eye contact without it actually being made, he won’t be able to get anything. That’s all you have to worry about, I will take care of the rest of the story, the less you know the easier it is.” Ginny nodded along, a fierce look of determination on her face that Harry had seen a glimpse of here and there over the course of the year.

“Now, are you alright to walk?” Harry asked, knowing that the more time they spent down there, the more likely it’d be that someone came after them and he wasn’t sure if the entrance to the chamber was still open after he jumped down or if it automatically closed.

“Yeah I’ll be fine, but what about you? You were out for quite a while, and is that blood?” Ginny’s voice jumped up a few notes when her eyes caught sight of the school shirt under his robes now stiff with drying blood. The blood had disappeared from his skin through the process of healing, but the evidence on his clothes was still present.

“Oh! It’s not mine, I didn’t kill the Basilisk, but I did hurt it.” Harry lied smoothly, as he stood on steady legs and helped a still-weak Ginny to her feet. Harry summoned the diary and slipped it into
an inner pocket once she was up.

With one arm across her shoulders and gripping the top of her arm, while the other hand grasped the arm closest to him, Harry helped Ginny begin walking down the length of the chamber.

“Ginny?” Harry started once they were nearing the end of the room.

“Yes?”

“Please know that this doesn’t mean things have to go back to how they were. Tom may have been your first friend, but he won’t be your only. There will always be a spot open for you among me and mine. I think you’re incredibly brave and resilient to have gone through what you have this past year. Write to me over the summer, stay in touch and I promise you that you that things will improve.” Harry offered a rare-friendly smile, which Ginny enthusiastically returned.

“Okay, Harry Potter. I will.” The two left the chamber and fished for the resolve they would need to finish out the last few harrowing days of the year.
Harry was right to think that Dumbledore had caught wind of the absences and had the entire staff searching the castle for the two missing students. Severus Snape had been walking down the corridor with the bloody message still drying on the wall when Harry and Ginny emerged from the entrance of the chamber via wandless magic on Harry’s part. Not wanting the entrance to the chamber to be discovered, Harry threw the invisibility cloak over both he and Ginny as Snape angrily stomped past the bathroom without a second glance.

Harry didn’t take off the cloak until they were far enough away that nobody would be able to come close to discovering where the entrance was. Then they were conveniently found by Minerva and Poppy near the grand staircase. Poppy ushered Ginny away to the medical wing immediately, and was only barely dissuaded from dragging Harry along with her when Harry vehemently assured that he was fine and would see her as soon as he was done meeting with Dumbledore, which is where McGonagall was trying to take him at that moment.

The headmaster was waiting for him in his large office, littered with discarded old books and metal trinkets, sipping at a ginger tea. McGonagall left as soon as he was seated, leaving Harry alone with the genial headmaster. Albus didn’t waste much time before asking Harry what had happened.

Harry explained coming across the writing on the wall, explained that he had been curious about the diary ever since he’d seen it slipped into Ginny Weasley’s cauldron by someone in concealing long robes that day in Diagon Alley. He told a detailed but slightly altered account of the year’s events with the diary and discovering a wizard named Tom Riddle and Salazar’s Chamber of Secrets. He went through briefly how he had his suspicions about the recent petrification’s and where the chamber might be located. Then he went back to that night and how he knew Ginny was in trouble. When he went on to the events inside the chamber, Dumbledore stopped him politely for the first time in his long explanation.

“And how exactly did you get into the chamber, Harry? From what little I know of it, it can only be
opened by the ‘Heir of Slytherin’?” He inquired non-accusingly. Harry hesitated.

‘Tell him. He already knows you’re a parselmouth, he had a spy in Little Whinging and they told him about the incident at the Zoo. He just wants to know if you trust him enough to tell him. We haven’t done much to gain his trust. This’ll help us in the long run.’ Death spoke up from over his shoulder, the gentle suggestion deciding Harry’s next words. Harry trusted his friend, so he didn’t wait much longer to debate it himself.

“I’m not the heir, but I’m a parselmouth, which I suppose is a gift almost exclusive to the Slytherin line and how the chamber is opened. I don’t know how or why I am one, but I know I’m not the heir. Such a title would have come up with the rest of my inheritances at Gringotts.” Harry answered and Dumbledore only nodded, but Harry could tell he was pleased with the truth.

With that out of the way, Harry continued to explain how he’d come across the scene in the chamber. Tom having taken a temporary physical form, telling Harry that he was the wizard before Voldemort and he needed to drain Ginny of life to give himself a permanent physical body. He told Dumbledore that Tom had sent the Basilisk after Harry to keep him from stopping Tom and that Harry had to transfigure a sword out of a quill in his pocket because he didn’t know any spells that would have worked against the snake.

He said that he had read about the Basilisk’s armored flesh, so he waited for his chance and then stabbed the Basilisk through the soft pallet inside its mouth and up into its brain. When the snake was dead, he ripped a tooth from its mouth and used it to stab the diary.

Knowing the destructive nature of horcruxes, Harry acted confused as he explained how the diary combusted into golden flames and burned until there was nothing left of both the diary and Tom. That was when Harry and Ginny made their way back up and were discovered by Poppy the school nurse and McGonagall.

By the time Harry finished, the sun had risen, bringing an end to the horribly long night and the start of the day before exams. Dumbledore called Poppy up to escort Harry down to the hospital wing and insisted that Harry take the day off classes to rest and recover. The headmaster had tried to convince Harry to exempt himself from exams, but Harry had refused.

He had already done all of his studying and he did not need to give Professor Snape more reason to think him entitled. He didn’t mention the last part, but it was no less true. Harry sighed internally as he walked down to the hospital wing with the tired-looking nurse as his warden behind him. I should really deal with the Snape-situation soon, though. The man is unreasonably-persistent in his hatred against me. Harry thought reluctantly.
How could Harry speak out against a Professor without making the situation worse for himself? He had learned very young that adults listened to other adults, not the disenfranchised child.

Well, those thoughts would have to be left for another time.

Harry had spent the rest of the day in the hospital wing either talking with Ginny, watching the overwhelming nature of her older brothers from the sidelines, or having to endure the fretting and chastisement from his friends. Poppy had chased the visitors off all day, since they were supposed to be in class, but they would eventually sneak back in.

Closer to the end of the day, Harry woke up from a brief nap to find Anthony sitting beside his cot. Ginny was sleeping in the next bed over and the wing was silent as a church. Harry smiled at his friend and pushed himself up into a sitting position. Instead of returning his smile, Anthony took Harry’s hand in both of his.

“Harry . . . I know you’ve always treasured your secrets and that there are things that you can’t tell me—I’m your friend, I notice a lot more than you’d think—but you really put yourself in danger this time. I know I couldn’t stop you even if I tried, but please, Harry, if you’re in trouble or if you’re doing something dangerous, tell me! I won’t tell on you, you know that, but I can help. You don’t have to do everything yourself. Even if all I can do is provide an ear to share the burden, don’t feel like you can’t lean on me.” The earnestness of his face and voice struck Harry oddly thoroughly.

Harry reached out and pulled Anthony half off his chair and into a tight hug. Harry . . . didn’t want to leave his friends embrace, he wanted to hide in the folds of Anthony’s robes like a child hiding in his mother’s skirts. Breathing in the familiar warm scent of his friend, Harry spoke in a whisper.

“Maybe one day . . . I’ll tell you, Tony.” The half-promise wrapped around them and bond them tight like a thick scarf tied snuggly around both of their necks.

They pulled back and easily slipped into conversation about Quidditch and how the Ravenclaw team won this year against Gryffindor. The conversation was no longer strained and the air around them nothing but comfortable. They had a deep understanding of each other, you see. Harry kept his secrets, but only because he had to, and Anthony kept pulling Harry deeper into the fray of their friendship, but only because Harry needed someone to keep his head above water and Anthony needed Harry to give him a reason to keep kicking his legs and pumping his arms.
Draco and Harry’s relationship was different, but no less important. If his and Anthony’s friendship was based on an interdependency, then his and Draco’s was based on the opposite. Harry and Draco didn’t need each other, they simply liked being around each other too much to not be as close as they were. Harry genuinely cared for Draco, and he knows the blonde felt the same, even though Draco would rather bite the end of a wand than admit such a thing out loud.

Harry and Anthony . . . their friendship was symbiotic. They depended on each other. And when it was time, Harry would bring Anthony into his world of secrets and there would be no way out for either of them. Harry understood this. Anthony understood this. It was how things could be so comfortable and natural between them, even though Anthony knew Harry was keeping a lot of things from him, _big_ things.

When Harry attended class again, it was in high spirits. Dumbledore had bought his story, nobody had discovered the chamber or the very-intact-diary, and Ginny bounced back like a rubber-band and slotted seamlessly—aside from a few baffled looks from Draco—into their little group.

Which meant that the twins often visited the Ravenclaw table—much to the other Ravenclaws chagrin—to check in on their little sister and occasionally try to peddle off some pranking supplies to the fresh set of ears. Michael had tried to buy some items from them, but as soon as Anthony piped up about how if he heard of a single one of those pranks being used on Harry he’d be shoving one of those animated fireworks ‘you-know-where,’ the twins had barred the vile boy from their supplies and Michael had turned paler than Hedwig.

Exams came and went with little fuss—actually, the amount of ‘fuss’ expressed had been like a competition in the Ravenclaw house. Obviously, there were those that disregarded the integral warning to not be competitive or smug about intelligence, because there seemed to always be battles of wills and wits whenever it came to opportunities to prove one’s intellect.

Before exams, some would brag about how little they’d studied because they already knew everything that they could _possibly_ be tested on and wouldn’t let it show how stressed they may be because of the upcoming tests. And so, it kind of becomes a competition to see who could appear the most relaxed and care-free before the exam, and then get the highest scores afterward.

Michael was definitely one of those people, as well as Mandy Brocklehurst and Morag MacDougal. Morag had been completely off Harry’s radar over the past year since she had said some awful things about Hermione behind her back at the Hallowe’en feast. Though, Harry had heard a few things from Hermione about Morag being unpleasant and Mandy sometimes taking her side, especially against the first years.
Apparently, there was a particularly odd girl who had come in that year that had agitated Morag’s nasty-side, through no fault of her own. Hermione had stood up for her in the instances that she had seen it happen, but the first year had yet to react to Morag’s abuse. Harry wasn’t sure who the girl was, and he knew that Hermione said she was handling it, but if the harassment carried on in the fall, Harry decided that he would step in. He just hoped that he wouldn’t have to, for all their sakes.

The year came to an end and everyone went home, and for the first time, Harry wasn’t dreading it. The train ride seemed to go oddly quick, between reading books on unique spells not taught in school, chatting with his friends, and occasionally drifting into a bored slumber, the time it took for the sun to set and for the train to pull into King’s Cross Station seemed to pass without any delays.

The smile that Harry greeted Sirius and Remus with was genuine and eager. Remus was the first to embrace Harry, followed by the usual bone-crushing hug Sirius often gifted him. When Sirius eventually pulled back, he ruffled Harry’s hair, which had grown out a bit since Christmas, reminding Harry that he had been meaning to get it cut.

“Merlin, you’re growing like a weed! What the devil are they putting in your food there! Soon we won’t be able to call you our ‘little bird’ anymore.” Sirius fake-mourned with a sorrowful whine. Harry glared up at his godfather.

“You’ve never been able to call me that!” Harry’s voice turned dangerous as his eyes narrowed. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the edges of Remus’ lips turn up treacherously.

Sirius’ brow quirked up at that. “Well, not to your face, obviously.” The face-splitting grin that overtook Sirius in that moment almost made Harry feel guilty about the stinging hex he snapped at Sirius’ stomach in immediate retribution, almost.

Sirius and Remus escorted their little ward home, teasing each other the whole way but doing it with a rejoicing elation in their hearts at being reunited.

Unlike the previous summer, Harry didn’t receive a grace period to fully enjoy the long holiday before his companion set in on his training. While last summer consisted of Hexes, Jinxes, and Charms that could be used to defend oneself, this summer was about Curses and Curse Breaking. Hexes and Jinxes were inherently juvenile, silly really, and were relatively harmless in practice. Curses, on the other hand, were all considered dark magic.
Harry has no inhibitions when it came to learning and using dark magic, but he could see why Death waited a little while longer to delve into that particular caste of magic. No matter, Harry’s just glad to be rounding out his catalog of spells. It made him more prepared.

Despite what the general population had come to believe, practicing dark magic didn’t effect a person in any irreparable way. It’s more generous with the amount of magic it calls on, which can drain a persons’ magical reserves to the point that said person could either feel ill or a sort of heady-high that one might experience when holding their breath for too long. But those reserves always replenished themselves with time and care, any change or damage done to a person because of dark magic would be purely psychological and has far more to do with whatever act is facilitated by the curse than the magic itself.

In short, using a curse to cut someone from navel to breast bone would be about just as traumatizing as doing such manually. Magic wasn’t inherently bad or dark because of what it’s used to do, it’s about the act itself.

Curses weren’t the only thing Harry started learning as soon as summer began. Apparently, if Harry was ready to learn magic that could be used to harm, control, or kill someone, then he was ready to learn something he didn’t even know existed until then. The Language of the Dead.

According to his companion, the language was only taught to the dead, a language so powerful that just speaking it could be considered a form of magic on its own, a whole new type of casting. Many centuries ago, Necromancers could use magic to manipulate the veil and speak to the dead, it didn’t take long for the Necromancers to learn the language and use it in the world of the living. Other wizards didn’t understand this new form of magic, so they classified it as too dangerous and made the practice of speaking and learning the language illegal and forbidden.

All practitioners were either sentenced to death or had their memories wiped to oblivion. The language was forcibly eradicated and forgotten, while Necromancy—also called soul-magic—became the highest form of taboo in all magical communities. Death had been scorned by the treatment of his language, his magic, so he then refused to aid in any form of bastardized-soul-magic which resulted in the fatal or horribly painful and disfiguring repercussions of using the counterfeit magic.

It explained why the magic was currently so forbidden in wizarding society, and why Voldemort’s body and soul had been so mutilated by the magic towards the end of his life. Death explained that if Harry was to learn soul-magic—which would be necessary for deconstructing the Horcruxes and getting them back into Voldemort’s body—he would first need to understand the language of the dead.
And so, his studies began once again.

However, just because his studies had intensified in comparison to the summer previous, didn’t mean that Harry no longer had to keep up appearances. So, he lied to Sirius and Remus and told them he was spending all those hours to himself practicing dueling. During Harry’s second year, there had been a dueling club formed by Lockhart and Snape, Draco had joined, but Anthony and Harry opted out—much to Lockhart’s disappointment at not having an opportunity to get close to the BWL. Though he didn’t partake, they didn’t know that.

Harry lied and told them he wasn’t actually that good at dueling and he wanted to practice over the summer, because Draco said that he would be practicing as well and Harry didn’t want to be ‘embarrassed.’ It wasn’t hard to convince the pair that a twelve-year-old would be petty enough to want to upstage his friends.

Though, to completely abate any of their possible worries, Harry made sure to spend time with them as often and for as long as he could afford. It wasn’t like it was any kind of chore, Harry genuinely enjoyed his time with them, but the more he was around them, the more he picked up on their behavior.

At first, it was just the lingering glance on the other when they thought no one was looking, and each smile reached the crinkling eyes and ignited the skin. Then it was the touches. The fleeting brush of a palm against the small of a back as they passed, or the way their hand was instinctually drawn to a shoulder, elbow, or back whenever they’re within reaching distance. Also, every time they were in the same room, they migrated closer together until they could be seen as a unit, rather than two separate variables.

Once, Harry even saw them kiss at the door as Sirius rushed to his mind-healer session, which he was late to. It had been chaste and as natural as putting on socks before shoes. Just a simple peck that they had done too often to really think about.

By the time they sat Harry down after dinner one night to explain to him how they were ‘more than just friends,’ Harry had already figured it out and decided that he really didn’t care. In fact, he was relieved. Aside from being glad that they had someone to rely on while Harry was away at school, Harry was pleased to know that they wouldn’t be seeking outside entanglements and bringing new people that Harry didn’t trust into his life. It sounded rather selfish, even to Harry, but the fewer people involved in Harry’s personal life, the better.

Harry wasn’t ignorant to the proclivities of adults. With neither Remus nor Sirius married, they were bound to eventually seek . . . pleasures of the flesh. However, when Harry said as much to reassure the pair that he was approving of their relationship and choice in partner, Remus had turned bright crimson and Sirius looked very tired and slightly humored by Remus’s stuttering response.
“H-Harry! How do you even know about that! You’re too young—”

“Actually, it is quite natural for me to know these things. I am nearly thirteen and I’m already beginning to go through the process of puberty. In the years to come, I will be going through many changes—mentally and physically—and without the proper information, I might end up confused, scared, or even ashamed of matters outside of my control. So yes, I know about sex and sexual encounters, I know about puberty and development. ‘Shielding’ me from ‘adult’ subjects will only teach me that my body and sexuality is something to be ashamed of and can lead to very unhealthy behaviors later on in life. I do not need to know anything about you intimate relations, but there is no need for you to pretend it isn’t happening.” Harry finished speaking and the silence from the stunned adults in front of him stretched on.

Sirius blinked owlishly and leaned over to talk in a quiet voice to Remus. “I feel like we just got the ‘sex talk.’” Remus smacked Sirius’ leg, but didn’t disagree with him.

Harry shrugged off the looks from the others. “I read.” He quipped easily, and with that, he got up and left to go make himself some tea with milk and honey.
Spells for Dummies

Chapter Summary

In the last chapter: Harry manages to fool Dumbledore and reveals to the man he's a parselmouth to gain his trust. He has a moment of mutual understanding with Anthony in the hospital wing. Harry's summer begins, and so does his summer lessons with his companion; from curses to dueling to the language of the dead. Harry realizes his godfather and Remus have grown much closer than simple 'friends' and has a little 'chat' with them both.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The curse soared through the air in a stream of violet light, aimed right at Harry’s chest. Harry quickly shielded himself and sent back a curse of his own that, if used on a person, would distract them by making them feel as though their skin was being separated from muscle, bones, and tissue by thousands of insects burrowing painfully beneath their skin. Although there wasn’t any physical damaged done by the curse, the psychological damage was enough to distract an opponent long enough for Harry to get the upper hand. A milder curse Harry had learned recently.

Fortunately, he wasn’t using the spell on an actual person.

Harry followed the curse with a fatal cutting hex with the forceful slash of his wand, cleaving a deep valley into the wooden neck of his opponent. As expected, the figure slumped lifelessly back into its default training-dummy position, waiting for the exercise to start again.

Harry had found three life-sized training dummies in one of his ‘excavations’ of Grimmauld Place’s storage cellar. They were at least half a century old with only the most basic and rudimentary dueling charms and spells making them work and were marred and burnt in certain places from past practices. Harry suspected they had been used for very basic dueling training for children and adolescents.

They weren’t in the best of shape, but with a little creativity and craftiness on Harry’s part, the dummies could be used to simulate an actual fight; equipped with a deadly arsenal of curses, hexes, shields, and charms, the dummy could move and dodge and fight just like a real person—if a real person had a poll and wheels instead of actual legs, that is. Harry could set it to different levels of difficulty and could use more than one at a time.
Ever since his encounter with the Basilisk in the chamber, Harry knew that he could know more spells than any Auror and still be beaten by an average Hogwarts student if he didn’t first gain experience using those spells. Harry might be immortal, but death was a last resort. Being away from his body and unaware of what’s happening in the world of the living leaves him far too vulnerable. Harry could wake up surrounded by dead people that he was meant to protect or without his wand or cloak or any number of things. Either way, the goal was to not have to rely on his ‘special ability’ to get him through everything.

That being said, he would admit to dying once or twice during the first few test runs with his dummy.

It was about three weeks in to his summer and Harry had already sent a few letters back and forth between his friends. Hermione was in France with her parents for the summer, so her letters were a lot less frequent, but significantly longer than the others. The Malfoys were spending time with cousins in Russia—which Draco endlessly complained about in all of his letters. Anthony was staying in Britain that summer like Harry so he vowed to drop in at Grimmauld Place sometime soon.

Harry had been half-surprised when, only a week into summer, he found a letter from Ginny among the rest of the post. Harry had thought it might take the girl longer to write, considering everything that had happened, but looking back on how happily she had joined his group of friends, it really should’ve been expected.

Her letters were always short, concise, like she had written it multiple times before sending out the most to-the-point letter she could draft. Harry didn’t mind though, he found it rather endearing and so very like her personality—at least, from what he could tell in the short week he’d spent around her before school let out.

According to Ginny, her father, Arthur, had won a random draw for some prize money at his work and was taking the whole family to Egypt to visit her eldest brother, William Weasley—or Bill for short. She talked a lot about her brothers actually, more so than about herself. Bill was a freelance curse-breaker who often did jobs for Gringotts when they repossessed cursed objects or houses for whatever reasons (Bill was apparently her favorite). Charley was the second oldest, but treated like a precious baby by the matriarch or the family, especially since his job was with dragons and so very dangerous.

Percy was the next oldest and Ginny’s least favorite because of how critical he was of everyone in the family, always acting like he was better than them and that he was the only intellectual among a bunch of ‘bumbling apes.’ Harry vaguely recalled the Gryffindor prefect and his cold, disdainful gaze. It wasn’t hard to understand why he was the least favorite.

Then there were the twins, which Harry had come to know quite well. Ginny resented their constant
pranking, but knew that they still cared for her and thought of her as family—unlike Percy. Lastly, there was Ron. To Ginny, Ron was the half-way point between the twins and Percy; constantly making jokes at her expense, while also treating her like an embarrassment. What Harry saw that she might not have, was that that was the behavior of most boys with little sisters. It was in countless stories and movies he’d seen during the time he spent with his muggle relatives.

The difficulty with being young, is that empathy is usually gained with experience. It’s either taught to you by someone who understands it, or it’s learned when you ask yourself why someone might act a certain way towards you. Harry learned it rather quickly because he experienced a lot of behaviors towards him that wouldn’t make sense unless he looked at it differently. The thing is, sometimes even after you learn it, it might be better to not use it.

In Harry’s situation back at Privet Drive, empathy helped him understand, but it also made it only that much more difficult to bear whenever it happened. ‘It’ being the constant harassment from his cousin and the endless spewing of religious nonsense from his aunt and uncle. Memories trickled in of the formidable thick leather bound book with delicate pages and being forced to read hours of scripture about angelic devils and listen to his uncles preaching about his deceptions and how ‘they Good Christians’ were doing their duty by trying to purge the evil from Harry.

Harry shook his head to draw it back from the untraceable tangents it had splintered off to so that he could start up another training exercise. Harry worked on his dodging and shielding for a while, but his concentration was broken when the wards shifted to accommodate someone. Quickly ending the session with the dummy, Harry made his way out of the training room and down the stairs to the main hall.

There, at the open door, stood Sirius, who must have heard Harry coming down because he turned when Harry reached the bottom. Past his guardian, bathed in the overcast morning light was Anthony and his father. Harry grinned invitingly and greeted the pair as he made his way over. David Goldstein was a very tall man, easily surpassing six feet in height and rather broad-shouldered, but none could look at Mr. Goldstein and think him intimidating. Despite his stature, the man’s eyes were perpetually soft and kind, a smile his greeting.

Mr. Goldstein owned a medical supplies business, with dealings spreading from common household ointments, to surgical tools, to a clinic that he owned in London that aided both magical patients and otherwise. It meant that Mr. Goldstein—although rather well-off—was a very busy man. Harry knew that he wished to spend more time with his family, according to Anthony, but it was all too rare for one to be wealthy, charitable, and family oriented, something always has to give. However, Anthony had gotten to an age where he understood his father’s reasons and could forgive his misgivings.

“Ah! It is wonderful to see you, Harry. I hope you are doing well?” Mr. Goldstein ended in a question, with a polite smile for him. Harry nodded slowly.
“As you, Mr. Goldstein. I am doing wonderfully, thank you very much.” Harry replied and pointedly ignored the smirk that appeared on Anthony’s lips when he addressed his father. Anthony always found Harry’s manners to be amusing, constantly going on about how Harry ‘belonged in a Victorian novel about polite society.’ Which Harry always replied with reminding Anthony that those in ‘polite society’ didn’t have to deal with characters such as Michael Corner and his endless juvenile names and pranks.

And ‘polite society’ didn’t seek petty revenge by hexing Michael with dreams of utter humiliation and embarrassment almost every night. But Anthony didn’t have to know about the dreams, or about Harry’s secret smiles whenever Michael cringed at the sight Professor Snape, because one can only dream about the severe man leaping around a classroom in pink tights and a tutu so many times before the image is permanently etched into their brain.

Mr. Goldstein huffed with a smile and gave Sirius a meaningful look.

“Children these days, more manners in their little finger than most men have in their entire beings. Make all of us look infantile! I don’t know where it comes from.” Goldstein looked down at his son, who had been sprouting rather quickly in height and came up almost to his shoulder, and playfully disrupted the natural golden curls atop Anthony’s head with his hand. Anthony batted his father’s hand away while Sirius let out his honest barking laughter.

“Nothing truer could ever be said!” Sirius proclaimed with a grin. Harry shared a pained look with Anthony and they both endured silently while the men quelled their laughter.

“Now, I should really be off, back to work, but I hope you don’t mind Anthony imposing for a while? He has been rather insistent on visiting and told me it was alright to drop by. If it’s alright with you, I’ll be back later to pick him up, hopefully before dinner so as not to inconvenience you or anger his mother.” Goldstein clapped an affectionate hand on Anthony’s shoulder.

“Nonsense! We have plenty of food to go around, just the three of us here. Anthony is welcome to stay for dinner and if it becomes late, he can always spend the night. We have plenty of rooms and the boys haven’t seen each other in nearly a month, I’m sure they’ll be inseparable.” Sirius gave the two in question a knowing look. “Besides, having Anthony here might actually be enough to drag Harry’s nose out of a book!”

Harry’s polite smile vanished and he sent a rueful glare at his godfather, while Anthony immediately snorted.
“Yeah right.” Anthony muttered, and Harry’s glare shifted.

“Alright, I suppose I can floo your mother once I get to the office and tell her you’ll be eating here.” Mr. Goldstein turned back to Sirius. “Once it gets to be that time, depending on how much work I have at that point, I’ll give you a floo call and tell you whether I’m going to be stuck there or I can pick him up.” Sirius nodded in agreement.

Mr. Goldstein warned his son to stay out of trouble and to be a gracious guest—two things that they all knew Anthony wouldn’t struggle with—and said goodbye to his son and the rest of them before quickly making his way off into the city, and, presumably, back to work. Sirius let Anthony inside and quickly made his way back to wherever he’d come from to answer the door.

Harry smiled at his friend and motioned for him to walk with him. They were partway up the first flight of stairs when Harry spoke.

“Had I known you were coming, perhaps I could have prepared something for us to do, but no matter, I’m just glad to see you again.” Harry bumped his shoulder into Anthony and the other boy split a bright smile.

“Yeah, sorry about that. My dad’s been busy a lot lately and I haven’t had the opportunity to pop in, otherwise I would have much sooner.” Anthony rubbed the back of his neck as he explained, eyes locked on the floor boards once they reached the second floor. Harry waved away the explanation with an unperturbed air.

“Well, now that you’re here, have anything in mind that you would like to do? I suppose we could go to my room, but it’s rather dull. We could go to the library, but I know you would get on my case if I were to waste this visit reading. I could possibly ask Sirius to take us somewhere—” Anthony raised a hand to halt Harry mid-sentence.

“No, it’s alright. You must have been doing something before I arrived, I’m not in the mood for really going out so you just go back to your business and I’ll keep you company.” Anthony’s words had Harry hesitating. Surely he couldn’t continue training with Anthony around . . . could he? Harry thought about all the things he was keeping from his close friend, all of things he couldn’t share with anyone.

But this, this was the temptation of friendship, the indulgent, selfish opportunity to cross a barrier and pull his friend back over with him. The thing was, Anthony already had his heels pressed back against that line, he just didn’t know it.
Giving in to impulse, Harry’s expression became serious and he held Anthony’s gaze for a long moment. His friend picked up on the sudden change in mood and waited expectantly for Harry to speak.

“Are you sure?” Harry didn’t elaborate, but Anthony didn’t seem to be looking for an explanation. The other nodded without a word. Silently, Harry moved passed Anthony and continued up the stairs, the whispering old wooden stairs exhaling with each step as they ascended. The third floor held mainly non-bedroom rooms such as the library, storage rooms, a sitting room, an office, a bathroom, and the training room. Harry led Anthony all the way to the end of the hall where the non-descript black door waited.

Harry didn’t pause at the door, instead pushing straight through into the window-less room comprised of only bare wooden floors, grey stone walls, and a connecting closet. The room had an expansion charm to allow freedom in movement while practicing, although quite long for dueling, the room wasn’t equally wide. The room was lit by a single plain chandelier that left quite a few shadows lingering in the corners.

“What is this room supposed to be?” Anthony asked curiously, looking around the bare room, as if he thought he were missing something. Harry knew he hadn’t, since the dueling dummy had rolled itself back into the closet when he left the room.

So, in place of answering, Harry disappeared into the walk-in closet and a moment later, rolled out the dummy. Harry’s lips quirked up at the corners when the confusion on Anthony’s face deepened.

“It’s for practicing spells and dueling, I’ve taken it up since starting break.” Harry answered his friend’s unanswered question. The other boy’s confusion settled into intrigue.

“What kinds of spells? Somehow, I don’t take you for one to do anything ‘standard’ when it comes to magic.” Anthony said with a teasing raised brow that just pulled harder at the corners of the brunet’s mouth.

“The kind I shouldn’t know about yet.” He replied vaguely, knowing it would just prod the beast that was Anthony’s curiosity.

“And your godfather is just alright with this?”
Harry shrugged casually and crossed his arms loosely over his chest, exuding indifference. “They both think I’m practicing because I don’t want to be embarrassed by Draco, that I’m not as good at dueling as he is.” Anthony gave Harry an unconvinced look.

“They actually believe that?”

“What? That a twelve-year-old would be petty and prideful? Of course they’d believe it! Besides, Sirius—and I suppose you could count Remus as well—is still very new to parenting, it’s difficult for them to trust that I won’t end up killing myself by accident! If they found out I wanted to learn more advanced and possibly dangerous magic, they’d wrap me in pillows and lock me away in a room, forever. Until they can trust that I know what I’m doing, they can’t know.” Harry reasoned.

“Fair enough. So, let’s see it, then!” Anthony prompted, gesturing towards the lifeless dummy, an anxious excitement bleeding into his eyes.

Anthony ignored the ‘huff’ from Harry and watched as the raven-haired boy pulled out his holly wand and began some form of unfamiliar magic on the dummy. He didn’t incant a single syllable as luminescent clouds bloomed in front of the dummy’s chest. Once seemingly satisfied, Harry turned and moved more than halfway across the room—an appropriate dueling distance. Anthony made sure to move back to the wall, at the mid-way point between the two ‘duelers.’

Anthony’s gaze was focused solely on Harry, watching as the light-carefree expression slipped away like an ivory silk scarf. Harry assumed the proper stance and for a tense moment, Anthony’s breath refused to leave his body.

The first spell was released by Harry, a bright flash of red light jetting across the space. Anthony watched in wonderment as the previously lifeless and unimpressive training dummy exploded into life and effortlessly shielded against the spell. This was obviously no ordinary dummy, but such was expected when it came to Harry Potter.

The dim room became illuminated by the spells rapidly exchanged between the two. Anthony was entranced, by the intense match—each spell being blocked or dodged only at the very last second. He could recognize a few of the spells based on appearance once cast or hand movement alone, but most were completely unfamiliar.

And Harry. . . Harry transformed into something Anthony had never seen from his friend before. The concentration, the focus, the ease in which spells and shields sprouted from his wand like an afterthought, the swelling magic that was spreading out into the room, reverberating in the hollows of his bones and filling his skull with heady clouds. Like the outer chrysalis had split open and Anthony
was experiencing Harry, in his undiluted, unrestrained and magnificent form.

Profound thought might not be necessary, but in that moment, feeling all too much and unable to focus on combing through and fully forming thoughts in the middle of a duel, profound thought seemed to be the only medium Anthony could use to translate the mess of his thoughts. As Anthony was thinking about this, the duel suddenly came to an end when a brilliant blue light shot across the room that hit the dummy unguarded. However, instead of witnessing the effects of the spell, all Anthony saw was the light hitting a barrier within an inch of the dummy’s wooden chest—like a form of armor—and produce a bright purple light. Then the dummy slumped back into a lifeless position and Harry straightened out of his dueling pose.

Anthony waited silently as Harry straightened his casual robes and walked back over to where he stood.

“So, what do you think?” Harry asked, a pleasant light behind his eyes and upturn of his lips that was neither false nor forced.

Anthony thought about it seriously for a moment, then answered honestly.

“I think it’s brilliant, and I think I now know what I will be doing this summer.” Anthony said with a wide grin as he pushed off from the wall and looked down at his slightly flushed friend. Harry’s head tilted ever-so-slightly in confusion. “Now, what do you say to a dueling partner?”

The surprised look on Harry’s face was brilliant and almost as enjoyable as the prospect of learning far more advanced magic from his beloved friend.

Despite some of Harry’s reservations about it, he decided to agree to ‘train’ with Anthony over the summer. Perhaps it was to lessen the dull guilt Harry felt after his encounter with Anthony at the end of the school year. Harry knew he couldn’t bring anyone completely into the fold yet, so bringing Anthony in on something else fairly big, helped eased any strain in their friendship because of the secrets.

Also, Harry reasoned with himself that teaching Anthony a bit of defensive magic would help to keep his friend safe.
Harry knew his motivation for it wasn’t unselfish. But when there was so little Harry truly cared about, he would act perhaps more aggressively and protectively of those few things he did care about.

So, Harry made sure to have Anthony over at least once or twice a week so that they could practice. Death thought that it was a waste of Harry’s time, but he really didn’t care. Anthony already excelled at magic and was a very fast learner, so teaching him was rather easy, but Harry had to be careful with what he taught Anthony. There were certain spells, certain magic, that Harry would have never found in a book: curses that eviscerated, severed, caused torturous pain and far worse. Spells spoken in the language of snakes that his friend would never be able to pronounce.

Harry avoided any magic that Anthony could connect to coming from an outside source and made sure to separate his private lessons and his time with Anthony. Harry enjoyed the time spent around his friend, it made him feel less isolated over the to-be long summer ahead. Harry just had to be careful, was all.

Chapter End Notes

Happy Halloween Everyone! Hope you enjoyed the chapter and have a great night!

-Pleasant Readings!
An Unwelcome Visitor

Chapter Summary

In the last chapter: Harry delves into his training and receives a visit from Anthony. Harry then divulges to Anthony about his training and the other boy joins Harry over the summer. Harry and Ginny keep in touch over the summer, while Hermione is in France with her family, Draco is in Russia, and the Weasleys take a trip to Egypt with the prize money Arthur won.

The slow heat of summer ticked off days lazily, like honey, sinking warm and rich into July. Harry, though, didn’t allow the sedating warmth to coax him into the same mid-summer fog that had claimed both Remus and Sirius, causing the pair to sleep more and spend long hours with cold drinks in the kitchen. Instead, Harry threw himself more head-first into his work.

On most days, Harry would spend his morning studying the language of the dead, committing the lost tongue to written form in a heavily guarded and protected journal—with his companion’s permission, of course. In fact, Death had been rather pleased with Harry’s suggestion that he write down what he learned, since it was not him who thought the language unfit for practice.

On the topic of journals, Harry hadn’t touched the sole Horcrux in his possession since hiding it in his room at Grimmauld Place as soon as he returned. The diary had been completely docile since, and honestly . . . with how things were left the last time he and Tom spoke, Harry didn’t know how to face him again. As far as Tom knew, Harry died in that chamber protecting the girl he had used for his ploys, there was no reasonable explanation for how Harry could be alive, and facing those questions would only cause more problems. It was cruel, perhaps, but necessary.

So the diary stayed hidden away in the back of his drawer, spelled into a hidden compartment of expended space within the very wood, undetectable with any spell. That handy spell was the same one Harry used for his own journal, as well as the untouched philosopher stone he still held onto.

When Harry wasn’t learning the language of the dead, he was practicing in the training room: practicing new spells, spells he’d be ‘learning’ in his next year at Hogwarts, dueling, acclimating to his animagus form, and starting to learn apparation. Unlike learning the animagus transformation the previous summer, apparation was actually risky and dangerous if not done correctly, leading to painful splinching. Sphinching happened when someone attempted to apperate without proper determination to get to a certain place, leaving a body part behind in the process.
Harry may be immortal, but lost limbs don’t kill immediately and reattaching an arm or a leg would be an . . . unpleasant experience.

Despite Harry’s initial apprehension, once he really put what he knew of the magic into practice, it didn’t take long before he was ‘popping’ about from one end of the room to another. Once he got the hang of it, Harry shared it with Anthony and had the golden-haired boy apparating by the end of July, as well as proficient enough in dueling for him and Harry to have mild matches—that were more focused on learning than trying to beat one another, of course. Draco would have loved the challenge, but Anthony was placed in Ravenclaw for a reason, a scholar through-and-through.

Through all of that, Harry wasn’t the only one teaching; Anthony’s family were amongst the group of wizards that believed in passing down traditions, heritage, and magic. Harry knew a bit about the Goldstein’s ‘sensitivity’ to magic, but until Anthony began trying to teach some of the techniques to Harry, he hadn’t realized how prominent the trait was in their family. It was passed down through genes or taught, as sacred as the ‘family bible.’ Such was common among most older families.

Harry didn’t have much of an affinity for the practice, but it was still quite fascinating, and there were many things Anthony could teach him that he wouldn’t have access to otherwise. Tricks and tips from word of mouth rather than published and approved texts. Soon, the two boys began to flourish together, sharing in their curiosity and wonderment at each new spell they discovered.

With this private side of Harry now open to Anthony, Harry slowly settled into a more relaxed state, not only around Anthony, but also Sirius and Remus. It wasn’t just that Harry was warming up to them, but also felt more comfortable letting his colder side come through. Harry knew that there was a large part of him that would always be indifferent, cold, perhaps even apathetic or cruel. It was as much a part of him as his curiosity and yearn for knowledge. So, the more time he spent around those three, unconditionally accepting and welcoming, the less Harry had to hide or falsify his actions and emotions.

The wave of good fortune continued when a week before Harry’s birthday, his Hogwarts letter came—as usual—with an expected and welcome addition. Included with the letter, was a permission slip for the Hogsmead trips Harry could attend in the upcoming year. Not only were the trips an anticipated and exciting prospect for everyone going into their third year, but Harry knew that the ventures off school grounds would allow him the opportunity to seek out Horcruxes.

But beyond that, the letter brought up another matter that Harry hadn’t really thought about. A matter that until then hadn’t come up, yet Harry felt that it certainly should have been addressed sooner.

So, with the help of Sirius, Harry made a few arrangements, finishing right before his birthday. On the day of his thirteenth year, Harry awoke to a large pancake breakfast, several letters from his friends, along with a few parcels containing his gifts, and two over enthusiastic adults with
seemingly-permanent matching grins urging Harry through breakfast so that he could open his gifts.

Despite their relentlessness, Harry patiently finished what he could of the mountain of thick pancakes, savory strips of bacon, and sausage that may have been left on the pan just a little too long. Harry had barely set his glass of juice down before his abandoned plate was whisked away and replaced by two wrapped boxes that were roughly the same size, but distinguishable in that one was neatly wrapped in light blue wrapping paper, and the other was slightly puffed and crinkled from too many layers of a gaudy pink paper with obnoxious ‘Happy Birthday Princess!’ printed all over its surface, accompanied by an unholy amount of tape to tame the odd and wild edges. It was fairly clear which gift came from Remus and which came from Sirius.

Remus got Harry a few books on myths and legends from obscure magical communities, as well as the news that, starting in the fall, Remus would be the new DADA professor, which had been quite a shock, but a welcome one. Sirius gifted Harry with brand new quidditch boots and the one of newer models of a flying broom, shrunken to deceptively fit inside the box. The gifts weren’t extravagant, but Harry still found himself flustered and unable to do much else than thank them both and gingerly place the gifts back in their boxes for when he had to carry them back up to his room.

“Now, Harry, what would you like to do for the rest of the day? We could go out and see a--” Remus was interrupted mid-sentence but Sirius clearing his throat beside him, grabbing his attention.

“Actually, there’s one more thing. . .” Sirius nervously presented a plain white envelope to Remus, unsealed and unmarked on its surface. With the swiftness that Sirius had pulled the envelope from behind his back it was obvious that the man had been waiting with it in his hand for quite a while—waiting—which had Harry rolling his eyes while neither of them were focused on him.

Remus took the envelope with a confused wrinkling of the skin between normally smooth brows. Pulling out the single sheet inside, Remus skimmed the Hogsmead permission slip with mounting puzzlement. Frowning, Remus tried to offer the parchment back to Sirius, but the scruffy and nervous man just lifted a hand to politely refuse. Hoping that the younger—and usually more mature—wizard had an explanation, Remus turned back to Harry, only to just catch sight of his hand slipping back under the counter top, having left behind a single, non-descript gold key between them.

Remus picked up the key, the significance not permeating his thoughts until he recognized the design as one would receive from Gringotts. With a punched-out sound, Remus’ eyes widened to reveal the milky expanse around his mossy green iris.’s.

“Oh . . . oh.” Unblinking, mystified eyes found Harry’s as Remus visibly swallowed hard. Harry smiled softly and with a small reassuring nod, Remus took the nonverbal invitation and practically levitated out of his chair, floating around the side of the table and kneeling down to pull the young man he’d come to care for deeply into a tight embrace. The side of Remus’ face was pressed to
Harry’s soft raven hair as a tell-tale sting shot up from behind his nose to the backs of his eyes.

Harry didn’t squirm or end the hug prematurely like he usually did when his two caretakers became overly affectionate and tactile with him, instead he rested his chin on Remus’ shoulder and gripped the front of his robes, feeling safe and protected. Neither reacted when a warm hand found both of their shoulders, but they secretly reveled in the comfort.

Later on, despite Remus’ insistence that they do something more exciting for Harry’s birthday, their small, stitched-together family made their way to Gringotts to formally apply for the joint-guardianship. At Harry’s request, the goblin that handled their affairs was once again Bogrod, the same goblin who dealt with it last time and also one of two goblins that knew of Harry’s . . . unique title.

Bogrod had been elated to be chosen personally by Harry, even though the head goblin had already offered. Despite that, the head goblin still promised that he would prioritize their application as both a sign of amity and as thanks for providing a way for them to go after a few wizards in the Ministry who had been antagonizing them. Because of its precedence, the application would take no longer than a few days to process, authenticate, and pass. The entire time, Remus wouldn’t stop beaming, which Death slyly teased Harry about how he wouldn’t be so happy if he knew what a little ‘monster’ Harry was, though the comment was made completely in jest and Harry found it ironic and dryly hilarious that Death often made so many jokes.

Harry fought the curling at the corner of his lips while they listened to Bogrod speak, but the little goblin noticed quickly averted his gaze with the slightest stumble in his speech.

‘I wonder; can they feel you when you press so close to the veil?’ Harry pondered to his old friend as he noticed the slightest shifts in the others around the small office—the unconscious tugging of sleeves down over exposed wrists, the smallest tremor in the spine as hairs rose and hands slid into pockets. Harry didn’t feel anything, but that didn’t hold much severance when he frequently basked in the presence of Death, gliding against the veil like it were a cool silk sheet, so very soft to the touch.

‘Perhaps, but no more so than one would feel the touch of an apparition. Now, when I pass through to the world of the living, that’s when things get interesting!’ Death mused as Harry heard the faint rattle of dry bones shifting together as the skeletal fingers caressed the veil teasingly.

‘Hmm, then I suppose I might just have to invite you to tea one of these days when I’m alone. It seems that you’ve been away for quite a while, I’m sure it would be fun to take a trip to this side of the fence.’ Harry’s tone was a bit mocking, but his intentions were actually quite serious, it would be interesting to see what happened when his friend crossed into the living world.
‘It is true that I do not do it often, but I could make an exception, it might be entertaining. If not, it’s no hardship on my part.’ Death conceded just as the meeting came to an end and Harry was leaving with Sirius and Remus to pick up Anthony so that he might join them in the rest of the day’s festivities.

Several days after Harry’s birthday, as the last month of summer holiday was borne into humid heat with warm summer rains, the new family of three were summoned to Gringotts in much anticipation. Remus was like a boisterous pup, practically dragging both dark-haired groggy wizards down to the floo and forcing them through first before him to make sure that they didn’t stay behind to dawdle on breakfast while he waited on the other side.

Once they ate a quick, but filling breakfast at a café, Remus’ endless excitement began to bleed into their own moods and lift their spirits. When they arrived at the goblin bank, everything went preternaturally smoothly, without a single hitch, bump, or snag. Harry and Remus were magically bonded after Remus was briefly informed of the same things as Sirius had when they became bonded.

Although the excitement of it all clouded out a lot of what was being said to Remus, Sirius was able to actually absorb it all this time around. Which led to a slight frown forming on his face as the strange and specific arrangements pertaining to Harry’s possible demise including inheritances and even what would happen to Harry’s body. Harry knew that the inheritances didn’t matter to Sirius, but the fact that they weren’t named and the waiting period before they would transfer may have seemed odd.

Thankfully, Bogrod noticed as well and was quick to move on to discussions of custody, distracting both adults as they made it clear that they wanted the rights to be equally split between them, since they were all living together now.

Once everything was signed and notarized, they left to celebrate with ice cream—Sirius’ suggestion. Even though the day was overcast with sporadic showers throughout, the three spent most of the day out of the house, only returning hours later after the morning had long since faded.

Unfortunately, the lifted mood of the day did not last into the night.

Only mere moments after exiting the floo, a loud and insistent knock resounded from the front door.
Sirius moved quickly upstairs to answer it, with Remus close behind and Harry trailing after curiously.

Harry was only part way up the stairs when the door was opened and closed, a flash of silvery robes dotted with errant rain drops as a man Harry never expected to see that evening strode purposefully into the house muttering something about ‘terrible news.’ Harry went unnoticed as Sirius led the Headmaster deeper into the house and towards the sitting room, Remus following.

Harry moved silently into the hallway, knowing that he would be sent away if they remembered his presence. However, after only a quiet moment inside the room, Harry heard a creaking of floor boards and Remus gently offering to go make some tea. Harry quickly moved to the barely-used office next door and slipped inside the dark room before Remus entered the hallway.

Wanting to know whatever was about to take place, Harry quickly found the old vent at the back of the room and carefully pried the cover from the wall with a little help from his magic to keep it quiet. Then Harry set it down and melted into his animagus form so that he could easily slide into the vent and silently slither to the next grate over, which looked into the sitting room what Dumbledore was currently sat in a chair while Sirius sat on the small couch.

Harry’s smooth black tongue flicked out and scented the air, using his most powerful sense to pick apart the older wizard’s emotions: stress, determination, concern, and anxiousness.

It wasn’t until Remus returned with a floating tray of tea behind him, sat down next to Sirius, and served everyone that Dumbledore finally seem to settle into speaking. A sip of his overly sugary tea and Albus found his voice.

“Bellatrix Lestrange has escaped from Azkaban.” The words sent a jolt through Sirius, causing his fists to clench hard enough that Harry winced at the ache his bones would feel once they loosened. Remus unconsciously sought Sirius’ hand and wrapped his fingers around Sirius’ fist.

Harry absorbed the information slowly, mind whirling around everything he knew about Sirius’ deranged cousin and Voldemort’s most loyal and insane follower. If she was free, then Harry might have a problem on his hands.

“How?” Sirius’ voice was low and dangerous, unchecked rage roiling through his body, even as Remus squeezed his fist to try to ground his lover. Dumbledore sighed like he was truly feeling his age in that moment and his eyes seemed to convey pity towards his former student.
“They are not completely sure as of this moment, but somehow the witch had gotten ahold of a wand—perhaps off one of the guards—and killed every guard on the island that crossed her path before fleeing herself. They haven’t made this public yet, but they will have to if she is not found within twenty-four hours.” Albus took another long sip of his tea.

“Do you think they will?” Remus asked hopefully, but even he did not sound very convinced that they would. Dumbledore shook his head sadly.

“I do not, she is far too resourceful to get caught now, and if she has a wand . . . I wouldn’t count on it.”

There was a long stretch of silence as Sirius’ narrowed stare bore into the Headmaster suspiciously.

“You think she going to come after Harry.” It wasn’t a question, though Dumbledore didn’t seem offended or surprised by the accusation in his voice. Remus, on the other hand, looked shocked, like he hadn’t even thought about that possibility yet.

Dumbledore held Sirius’ gaze. “Yes,” he answered truthfully. “We believe that she will target Harry in order to avenge her master. It would be best if Harry could come back to Hogwarts early for the summer, as it would be safest for him.” Dumbledore would have continued if Sirius hadn’t interjected.

“What do you mean ‘we,’ who’s ‘we?’”

“Well, ever since the incident during Harry’s first year, I have begun reassembling the Order of the Phoenix in secret. You see, I fear that He is not yet dead, though I don’t think that Bellatrix knows this. So the safest place for Harry—”

“Would be here with us, his legal and magical guardians.” Sirius cut in, eyes and voice hard on the man who previous held and neglected said responsibility.

“If you wish him to stay here, that can be arranged, there are plenty of rooms here so, if necessary, the order can help protect Harry from here. You two are both very welcome to join! I was actually planning on asking you if you would, but I thought I would be able to give you more time to settle in before asking.” Dumbledore continued hopefully.
“There is nothing to ‘arrange’ Albus, we will protect Harry ourselves.” Remus surprised them all by speaking up firmly against his old mentor and current employer, but it seemed that the job meant little in the face of protecting their family from interlopers. “The wards around this place are ancient and extremely powerful, not to mention that Bellatrix had been scourged from the line and cut out of the wards when she was sent to Azkaban. We are not asking for your help as of yet, but we appreciate the offer and will know where to turn if we do find ourselves unequipped. Now, we thank you for coming to warn us personally, but if you don’t mind, we would like to spend time putting up the full protections of the wards and explaining to Harry what is going on.”

The dismissal was polite, but swift, true to Remus’s character. However, it seemed that Dumbledore was not done just yet. He hesitated for a moment, seemingly unsure whether he should hold his tongue and leave or not.

“Are you sure that is wise? I do not mean to overstep, but telling Harry might only worry and frighten him.” Harry would have rolled his eyes if he could pull it off in his *animagus* form.

“We don’t keep things from Harry. I know I’m new to this whole ‘parenting’ thing, but I also know that Harry was raised by rather awful people, he’s had to grow up far faster than any child should and while I’m still learning everyday how to be an adequate guardian, one thing that is clear to me is that he deserves more than to be treated like a defenseless child now. You cannot both force a kid to face danger and the harshness of the world and shield them from truths that may very well save their life. Sometimes you just have to have faith in them and be there to help them when they ask or step in when they can’t.” Sirius answered, his voice no longer sharp and lashing, but almost wistful in comparison.

Remus looked upon his partner with pride and something akin to love or adoration. Dumbledore finally nodded and excused himself, announcing he’d let himself out and that he wished them all luck and safety.

With Dumbledore gone, Sirius slumped back against the couch with a long-suffering sigh. After an extended moment of thought-filled silence, Sirius muttered something about finding Harry and he disappeared deeper into the house.

“You can come out now, Harry.” Remus announced when the footsteps faded up the stairs.

With a little push of wandless magic, the grate came off and gently settled on the floor. Staying in his snake form, Harry slithered over to his new guardian and didn’t hesitate before sliding up onto the couch and coiling up on Remus’ lap. Although, he had grown since first transforming, so his large body spilled over his lap on both sides and onto the couch. Remus smiled pleasantly down at his ward and began petting the cool iridescent scales.
Glowing light green eyes stared at Remus from where the head rested on the thick coils, black tongue flicking out every so often.

“Don’t give me that look. I’m a werewolf, remember? Of course I knew you were there the whole time. Kind of hard to miss with treacle-tart-breath.” Remus teased and Harry hissed half-heartedly, eliciting a chuckle out of the man. Harry settled onto the warmth of the lap underneath him and the soothing ministrations against his scales, thinking absently about the situation they found themselves in with the errant Lestrange.

By the time Sirius came back, looking a little panicked, he found Harry asleep on Remus’ lap, completely human. Remus was gazing affectionately down at the beautiful child who was growing so fast it made his heart ache, fingers gently carding through the silken locks. Harry was curled up on his side, his knees pulled up close and his head pillowed on Remus’ thigh.

Sirius tip-toed over and quietly cooed at the sight as he sat down below Harry’s feet. For all his efforts to remain dignified and mature, neither man had ever seen Harry look so small or so young. It was almost painful to see the contrast, but they cherished it none the less. Sirius even snuck a few pictures, though he knew it would be his head if Harry ever found out.

When the flames in the fireplace settled and the glowing embers dimmed, Remus carefully carried Harry back up to his room, forgoing a levitation spell to hold his new cub close. Harry nestled his face into the wolf’s chest and snuffled a little in his sleep. Once his cub was tucked into bed, Sirius and Remus retreated down stairs to begin working on the wards.

Harry huffed a small breath into his plump pillow, faint noises on his lips that weren’t quite audible, and his hand slid forward between the sheets seeking something that wasn’t there.
You Must be 'Dement'-ed!

Chapter Summary

In the last chapter: Harry and Anthony learn to apparate. Harry and Sirius decide to make things official and make Remus his legal and magical guardian along with Sirius. Dumbledore drops in unexpectedly and informs them that Bellatrix Lestrange had escaped from Azkaban, though Remus and Sirius make it very clear that they to not need the Order of the Phoenix's help in protecting Harry.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After Bellatrix escaped, Harry’s guardians refused to allow him to leave the house. The wards had been practically doubled and Grimmauld Place disappeared under the Fidelius Charm. Only after a rather heated argument between Sirius and Harry (mostly heated on Sirius’ end) Harry was able to convince his caretakers to allow Anthony to be included in the charm so that he could continue to visit. The already protective adults had become nearly hostile in their shielding of Harry. It drove the young Ravenclaw almost mad, were it not for the frequent visits from his friend.

Anthony’s casting and dueling abilities improved immensely, due to Harry demanding he visit almost every day since Harry was beginning to experience what muggles referred to as ‘cabin fever.’ Harry was thoroughly impressed with his progress and began allowing Anthony to use some of the more difficult settings on the dummies. Such as: more advanced hexes and charms with a few very mild curses, and occasionally using more than one dummy on a lower setting. A few times, Harry and Anthony even paired up against the dummies, and they were certainly one hell of a team together.

When it came time to get school supplies, once again, Harry was placed on house arrest while Sirius went out to get all his things, resulting in robes just tiny bit too long and a little too tight. Sirius had promised to get them fixed on his next trip out, but he had a feeling that the man was forgetting even as he spoke.

By mid-August Harry was jumping out of his skin, itching to begin the hunt for Voldemort’s Horcruxes.

‘I just want to begin already!’ Harry silently projected in frustration as he pushed away the journal he’d been using to write down the language of the dead. Even that had grown redundant as he was still not allowed to apply the language and use soul magic, instead he was stuck with just learning the vernacular. So far, Harry had made significant progress in grasping the language, his affinity for soul
magic making the language come easier—like parseltongue—but Harry didn’t need to be able to write bloody poetry in the tongue, just speak it.

‘My, it seems that someone’s patience is wearing thin.’ His companion was teasing him again, but nothing about that was new.

Harry grumbled inelegantly and Death chuckled.

‘I suppose if you’re truly that adamant about starting the search, we can start simple.’ Death relented and Harry became eager, body alight with too-much energy. ‘Do you know where Regulus Black’s room is?’ The question caught Harry off guard, but he answered none the less.

‘Yes?’

‘Good, go there.’ The command was simple, short, and easily obeyed. Harry climbed the stairs to the fourth floor and entered the room placarded ‘Regulus Arcturus Black’ directly across from Sirius’ old room with a similar identification on the door, though the man in question no longer slept there.

Regulus’ room was exactly what one could expect of a pureblood Slytherin’s room to be—charcoal grey and green striped walls, green, silver and black furnishings, stacks of books, and a multitude of objects and trinkets Harry suspected to be cursed or inlaid with dark magic in some form or another. The room was surprisingly pristine, having obviously received excessive care from Kreacher. It felt like, at any moment, Harry was going to be caught snooping in the bedroom by the teen himself. Probably why he sometimes spotted Sirius slipping in there on slow afternoons when it seemed that no one was paying attention. Harry ignored the slight pinch at the reminder of the young brother Sirius had lost and was quick to attention when Death spoke again.

‘The dresser.’ Was all his companion said, startling Harry slightly with its abrupt and blunt nature.

Harry approached the dark mahogany dresser with the vanity over it. At first he thought he was meant to dig through the drawers, but as soon as he was within reaching distance, his hand was flashing out and snatching something from the organized clutter on top. The buzz in his bones was immediate. Opening his fist, Harry blinked down at the golden locket with a ‘S’ on its face made of emeralds and encased in amber. With a closer look, the ‘S’ also seemed to depict a snake with its jaws open and ready to strike.

Harry marveled at the jewelry, remembering the legend he’d heard about the different founder’s
heirlooms that belonged to each house. Slytherin’s locket was in his hands. And so is Voldemort’s Horcrux, Harry thought reverently as he noted the strong—though not as prominent as the diary’s—pulse of magic that seemed to want to reach out and curl around him in its soothing and intoxicating embrace.

‘It had been here?! This entire time, it had been in the same house as me and you didn’t tell me?’ Harry’s tone was more tired than truly angry.

‘It wouldn’t have made a difference, young one. You still cannot do anything with it until you have collect the rest of the Horcruxes and learned the magic needed to manipulate them.’ Death answered unapologetically.

Sighing deeply, Harry brought the locket back down to his room and placed it next to the diary. However, before Harry resealed the wood of the drawer bottom over the hidden compartment he’d made, Harry impulsively grabbed the diary, much like his unconscious snatching of the locket. Guilt hazed slightly at the edges of his brain at the immediate surge of the diary’s magic to where his bare skin touched the cool leather. Harry had been careful to not actually touch the diary since the chamber, using a mix of summoning and levitation spells to get it there. Now, though, he couldn’t help but selfishly graze his fingertips over the surface and allow the magic to slowly climb up his hand, his wrist, his arm, seeping into the skin and gently plucking at the magic in the very marrow of his bones.

Harry could not answer Tom’s questions nor could he bring the soul fragment back into consciousness and sentience if he wasn’t going to admit he still lived. Even if their interaction was short lived, Tom had formed at least some kind of fondness for Harry, that much had been confirmed in the chamber, and if reawakening him meant causing him pain, whether he’d remember it in the transition or not, wasn’t something Harry could do.

So, instead, Harry didn’t dare open the diary, but he did use his own raw magic to envelope it, sooth it, and feed a bit of energy back into it. Nothing too drastic, just enough to settle the drained and restless magic within. Harry gently placed the diary back into the compartment before his completely lost himself to the sensations of the magic that seemed to compliment his own so well. The diary was a sinful temptation he could not afford at that moment.

The day that Remus and Harry had to travel back to Hogwarts, the two adults were a mess of nerves and fear. The rabid prison photo that had been pasted on every newspaper front for weeks had all of Britain on edge, waiting anxiously for the snarling, dirty, crazed woman from the picture to be caught and hauled back to Azkaban. The fear only got worse as the weeks rolled on without a single sighting.
What did people fear more than the monster they could see? The monster they *couldn’t* see.

Even Platform 9 ¾ held a different air from Harry’s previous two years. Instead of the crowded, lively platform filled with families clinging to their embarrassed children for every spare moment until they *had* to board, parents seemed to be quickly shuffling their students onto the train with forced smiles so as not to worry the young ones.

The tense atmosphere had even gotten to Harry’s barrage. Sirius barely took his eyes off the crowd, hand positioned rather close to his right pocket where Harry knew he always kept his wand instead of using a holster like most adult wizards. As for Remus, he did a far better job of pretending that everything was alright, though he stayed very close to Harry, a comforting and protective hand on his shoulder.

Following the example of the other parents, Sirius quickly said his goodbyes—his smile tight and hug extra constricting—and a brief kiss for Remus before giving them both a gentle nudge towards the train.

The compartments filled much faster than Harry was used to, but when he came across one with Anthony, Hermione, and Draco inside he felt relief at knowing he would not have to share with people he didn’t associate with. As polite as Harry could be to his peers and strangers, he still preferred not to have to keep up such trivialities, especially for nearly eight hours.

Remus and Harry sat on the side with Hermione, while Draco and Anthony sat across. A short while later, Ginny popped into their compartment, a little shy in front of the whole group, but her tenacity was mightily improved from her first year. The red head didn’t stay long, since it seemed she had left another group of girls to just say hello to Harry and the others.

With the train cutting a fast-red stripe through the lush green Scottish countryside, the group settled in and began interrogating Remus on his plans for the upcoming year as their new DADA professor. Remus seemed amused by the excited children all around him, listening intently as he went through a rough list of the different dark creatures and spells they’d learn about. Mostly, it was Hermione and Draco asking the questions, Anthony seemed rather content with just listening. When he and Harry made eye contact, they shared a secret smile, knowing that their own summer-time lessons had been far more exciting.

A few hours after departing from the station Harry left the compartment in search of the bathroom. He smiled to himself as he walked, noting how everyone had been so engrossed in their conversation, they didn’t even notice him leave. Harry was glad to see that his newest guardian flourished in the presence of children, his soft and nurturing nature truly shining through. Though,
Harry was a little worried about Sirius, being left alone in that place for such long stretches of time. He didn’t doubt that Remus would floo-call Sirius daily and visit him when he could, but it was the first-time Sirius would be completely alone there, with only the cruel-mannered Kreacher to keep him company.

These thoughts plagued Harry as he relieved himself and began washing his hands. But before he had even pulled them out of the hot spray, his body jolted to the side and he almost fell when the train slammed on the breaks, the high-pitched screech grating his ears. Frowning, Harry turned off the water as they came to a complete stop and shook off his suddenly cold hands.

Peeking his head out of the bathroom Harry didn’t see anything. Surprisingly, though, nobody else stuck their heads out the compartment doors to find out what was happening. Harry shrugged and began walking down the hall to the next train car, which held his compartment, though there was an edge of caution in his steps.

Harry was only halfway to the next car when he was confronted with the reason for the train’s abrupt halt. Two Dementors flung open the door with their magic and began drifting down the hallway, bringing the chill of despair as they craned their thin necks close to the windows. Frost splintered up over the surface of the glass and Harry heard the faint sound of children whimpering in fear. *They seemed to be looking for something. Bellatrix perhaps?* Harry had heard from his guardians that the Ministry was using the dark creatures to hunt the witch down, he just never expected that they’d let them on a train full of children. Dementors were not exactly gentle nor partial towards the weak or innocent.

Harry was pulled from his thoughts when one suddenly lifted its head high and seemed to scent the air. Just like *that*, he had the full attention of both creatures. Harry was glad that the car he stood in was nearly empty, being the closest to the obnoxious whistle. Otherwise, it would be rather difficult to explain to anyone why he appeared completely calm as two Dementors drifted closer to him. Gauzy charcoal wisps of fabric floating unnaturally around them as if the air was too dense with magic for them to follow the rules of gravity.

When they were close enough for their icy presence to wash over Harry, he was shocked to discover that the sensation was incredibly familiar to him, and even comforting. His last encounter with one of their kind had been in Azkaban when Harry was still a first year, so at the time he had not connected how similar the Dementors’ aura was to Death’s. Perhaps that was why people found their presence so... uncomfortable. Now, though, Harry found himself almost relaxing in the gauzy faces of the dark creatures, especially since neither seemed antagonistic, merely confused and perhaps curious.

Wanting to test one of his theories he’d gained over the summer during his studies, Harry took a chance in the nearly empty car.
The language of the dead rolled off his tongue fluently in chilling syllables and haunting cadences. The creatures perked at the sound and Harry found himself succumbing to his own dangerous fascination.

How does a mere babe learn our language? How can one of warm flesh and a beating heart be so shrouded by death? The creature closest to Harry replied, voice no more than a rumbling hiss, like that of thunder and cold rain.

Before Harry could reply, a bright light exploded from the next car over, capturing the attention of the two before him. They turned and backed up towards Harry in almost a protective stance as the door they had come through flew open and Remus charged in, his wand gripped tightly in his hand. The man looked wild and truly dangerous when he saw the Dementors so close to his cub. Apparently, he failed to notice that, when he lifted his wand at them, the Dementors screeched and back up closer to Harry, closing the gap that he could see through and effectively making a barrier between him and Remus.

Harry was bewildered to see them trying to defend him, but that feeling was short lived when his guardian shouted a spell and a bright light filled the car. A great white wolf made of white light broke free from the blue-white mist and charged the Dementors. The unholy shriek that came from the creatures upon contact with the light made Harry flinch. The Dementors escaped through an open window to flee the damaging light.

The wolf and the light disappeared and Harry found himself in a crushing hug from his ‘savior.’ Harry returned the embrace and was guided back to their compartment for some chocolate to recuperate, even though he didn’t need it.

When he returned, everyone in the car looked positively pale and shaken, while Remus looked furious. Harry could sympathize, it was reckless and idiotic to allow such dark creatures on a train full of children. There would certainly be a backlash from the parents as soon as they caught wind of it.

Remus had been reluctant to leave Harry and the others, but eventually he had to give into his duty as a staff member and check on the other students and meet with the prefects to have them doing further check-ups and comforting those who would undoubtedly need some calming down. Harry, however, knew that he could handle his friends just fine and shooed the adult off as soon as the train began moving again.

In Remus’ absence, Harry gave his own chunk of chocolate to a still-trembling Draco with a soft squeeze on the shoulder, and pulled Hermione over to the other seat so that they could all sit close. Harry knew his friends, sometimes they could be rather prideful and disliked asking for help, so he had to initiate it sometimes. He could tell in the way Hermione quickly rested her head on his
shoulder, how Anthony intertwined their fingers, and how Draco subtly scooted closer that they all needed it.

Even though he’d found the experience rather enlightening, Harry felt a protective flair of anger in his gut at what the Dementors presence had done to his friends. All he wanted to do then was pull them all closer and wrap his magic around them like a blanket. So, with no small amount of deliberation and trust, he did just that. He heard the small gasps and felt the slight tensing of his group, before they all curled into the invisible bubble he created like one might curl into a mother’s bosom. Harry sighed in relief, the tumulus emotions had shaken his tight hold on his magic and it had made it quite difficult to restrain it from encasing them protectively.

They were all silent as Harry’s raw magic filled them with ease and chased the chill from their bones. Harry knew that his magic would affect Anthony the most, with his sensitivity, so he was not at all surprised when the blonde dropped off to sleep, his hand still tightly clutching Harry’s.

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By the time Remus returned, he felt worn and troubled that so much had happened before he’d even arrived at Hogwarts. His fatigue took a back seat, though, when he entered the compartment to find all of them fast as asleep, the setting sun casting a dim golden light into the small space that nearly begged for an afternoon nap.

Remus struggled to withhold his laughter when he spotted the little Malfoy heir with his face squashed inelegantly against the glass of the window, a trail of drool cutting through the fog from his breath. Grinning, Remus quickly transfigured a large but thin blanket to drape over them. However, when he reached forward to place the blanket, his hands permeated magic so thick that all the airs on his body stood up on end and static began to spread up from his fingers, to his hands, and up his arms.

Placing the blanket quickly and pulling back, Remus gaped at his cub, knowing but hardly believing that such . . . incredible magic came from the thirteen-year-old. Remus had witnessed the spells and wandless magic and occasional magical aura from Harry before, but . . . this was inconceivably more than that!

At once, Remus was both proud and terrified. Harry was like a walking miracle in everything he did, constantly finding new ways to amaze and baffle them all, but his gifts would also put him at risk, catch the attention of those who wished to control and use those gifts. Sadly, Remus couldn’t really specify which ‘side’ that would come from either. Sometimes the most malicious cruelty was dealt at the hand of a friend and, in their eyes, helping.
Remus sighed and sat back down on the opposite seat, eyes trained on the violent hues of the setting sun across the sky. The deep purple slowly encroaching on the brilliant crimson and burnt ochre. Nothing but the thin twilight grey standing between them, the last defense against the dying war. Though the sight was frighteningly beautiful and usually inspired awe in the hapless poet within the tired wizard, Remus couldn’t help but track the morbid red banners across the horizon and mark the sight as an omen for the year to come.

Chapter End Notes

Hello! I've been getting quite a few people calling Remus 'Mama Remus' and I have to say, I fully approve!! I hadn't thought about it like that before, but looking back, I've made Remus quite the protective 'mama bear'!

Just wanted to say that I can't believe y'all are still here and I appreciate every single one of you! I am so incredibly excited for all of the things to come in this fic! I hope you're all well and healthy and happy!

-Pleasant Readings!
Batty Boggarts and Cracked Wardrobes

Chapter Summary

In the last chapter: Harry is on 'house arrest' for the rest of the summer and finds the Locket in Regulus' room. The Wizarding world is on edge from the Azkaban-escapee. Harry and Remus take the Hogwarts Express and the dementors board halfway. Harry finds out he can speak to dementors and Remus definitely goes all 'mama-bear' on them.

Despite Harry’s undeniable curiosity he felt soft dread coating the inside of his stomach and throat once he spotted the wraith Dementors swirling through the night sky like they had at Azkaban. The occasional flitting shadow across the bright moon’s visage was a chilling reminder of what patrolled those dark skies. If the Ministry was going to guard Hogwarts with those creatures, it would be a rather harrowing year for the other students.

The first feast was kicked off in a rather somber, subdued mood from the students and was then followed by the announcement that Lockhart would be replaced this year by one Remus Lupin. Though, most of the student body seemed curious and excited to possibly have an actually competent professor this time around and one with known ties to their very own little resident Ice Prince, the incident on the train had put aside any doubts about his character because of his lycanthropy.

Harry was glad to see the rather fast acceptance of his guardian among his peers. Not to mention, the look on Severus’ face was amazing! Harry would need to invest in a pensive just so he could look at it again and again. The imposing potions professor was once again miffed at being passed over as a replacement for the DADA position, and by a werewolf none the less!

As the first week settled in, Harry already began to feel the weight of his schedule and extracurricular activities. Added to Harry’s classes that year was Ancient Runes, Arithmancy, Astronomy, and Care of Magical Creatures—Harry had been convinced to take the last course with Draco because the blonde didn’t want to have to pair up with Crabbe or Goyle since the pair could ‘barely function as it is!’

Hermione was also taking more courses than recommended, but in true form, neither Ravenclaws broke a sweat in the face of the challenge. Harry wouldn’t have blinked at the extra class load if it weren’t for the fact that on top of his studies of Death’s language, secret late-night dueling practices in the Chamber of Secrets, and frequent visits to Remus’ office late at night to sneak in a floo call home to Sirius, his quidditch captain Roger Davies was nearly doubling their practice regimens because Oliver Wood—the Gryffindor quidditch captain—was graduating at the end of the year and
the Gryffindors wanted to win every match to give their beloved lion a good sendoff.

Harry cared little for winning the brutal game, but as seeker, he couldn’t sit a single practice out. Davies had been trying to push Harry extra hard during practice, subtly—or perhaps not subtly at all—the sixth year had been asking Harry to try maneuvers that were quite dangerous. During Harry’s second year, Harry had been wicked fast on a broom, but he played relatively safe if only to keep up appearances. However, at the request of the captain, Harry transitioned easily into more dangerous and death-defying stunts that got him to the snitch far quicker.

Davies had been on cloud-9 for the rest of practice and all throughout dinner, occasionally sending Harry utterly enraptured gazes that made him entirely uncomfortable and sent Draco into vicious fits of laughter at his expense. Anthony, on the other hand, had nearly had a stroke every time Harry took a vertical dive towards the pitch or weaved through players and stands alike at a break-neck speed. Like the mother-hen Anthony truly was on the inside, the blonde had gone off on Davies and stayed glued to Harry’s side all practice and throughout the rest of the day.

Through the light-hearted banter and exhausting drills of practice, nobody could quite forget the chill in their bones from the ominous floating guards in the thick cloud cover.

The nightly trips to the chamber always cut into Harry’s time to sleep, leaving him exhausted some days and pushing him to seek out small times during the day to either nap or go to the chamber so he wouldn’t have to later. The resident Basilisk had found him on his second trip to the chamber. Harry had been disconcerted at the sight, but otherwise he remained unaffected. The enormous serpent had obviously been making a point of slipping out to hunt on Hogwarts ground to satiate its appetite for other prey, which made the beast far more lucid.

The snake had wasted no time in telling Harry he wouldn’t be bitten again, apparently his blood and flesh had made the creature incredibly ill and tasted of ‘death magic’ which was a rather interesting revelation. The Basilisk had taken to referring to Harry as ‘Little Necromancer’ and Harry hadn’t bothered correcting the snake, seeing as how he technically was one. After that, the two came to an understanding that they would stay out of each other’s way; the Basilisk wouldn’t kill any humans or let itself be seen, and Harry would keep his word to protect the creature’s master.

Regrettably, Harry had elected to leaving both Horcruxes at Grimmauld Place, as he couldn’t guarantee their safety at Hogwarts, where his privacy began and ended at his mediocre trunk. Harry could certainly ward with the best of them, but he knew his peers were crafty and so much misguided, errant magic flying around was treacherous at best.

True to his word, Harry kept a close eye on a certain doe-eyed second year, Luna Lovegood and the malicious Morag MacDougal. When nearly three weeks passed with Hermione watching them within the dorms like a hawk and Harry tracking their every move outside, Harry thought that Morag
might have hopefully moved on after last year’s spat with Hermione. His hope had been short lived.

One morning, as Harry’s dorm room emptied of grumbling, tired boys, he was startled while trying to find a certain book in his trunk when Hermione burst into the room. Her face was twisted in fury and her thick curls seemed to move around her head more like snakes than the soft brown locks that they were. Anthony nearly flinched at the violent nature of her magic. Both boys quickly met the irate girl halfway across the room, Harry demanded she tell them what happened, voice cutting with a dangerous edge.

“Those . . . dreadful hags!” Hermione exploded before taking a deep breath and trying again, anger still sizzling in her tone when she spoke. “Morag and Mandy jinxed Lovegood’s clothes into appearing transparent to everyone but her. The poor girl had made it all the way out into the halls before Padma saw her and told her what had happened.” Hermione shook her head and grimaced. “Luna had been completely unfazed by everything they’d done last year, but this time . . . she’d been inconsolable! I had to lend her my own clothes while Padma fixed hers. Those retched girls had the audacity to laugh when Padma brought her back through, covered with her own outer robe.”

The atmosphere in the room was suddenly an overwhelming, oppressive, dangerous force as Harry’s concerned face slipped into a cold mask. Anthony would have cringed had such malicious magic been focused on him.

“Is she still in the common room?” Harry’s voice was a little lower, the deceptively calm tone sending shivers down both of their spines. Hermione quickly nodded. She and Anthony followed Harry when he headed towards the door without another word.

Harry descended the stairs quietly, already hearing the loud chatter coming from the common room. It was still early enough that most Ravenclaws were gathered there, chatting with their friends before heading down to breakfast together. The common room would be crowded at that point. Good.

The room fell silent the moment Harry entered, the power that filled the room demanded it. As cold verdant eyes swept the room, heads quickly dropped away, not wishing to catch such a gaze. Harry spotted Morag and Mandy on a couch across the room, surrounded by others close to, or in their year who had gone slightly pale when Harry focused on them. Morag had her back to Harry, but he could see a satisfied smirk twisting the corners of her thin, glossed lips.

As Harry strode over, he didn’t let up on the intimidating magic swirling around him, but he did adopt a pleasant expression. When he stopped beside the chair sat directly across from the couch, Harry barely glanced down at the fifth-year girl sitting there before she jumped up and hurried away to the other side of the room to watch the proceedings with the same morbid curiosity as everyone else.
Harry elegantly sank into the chair, sinking fulling into the dazzling Slytherin charm he usually only half-dawned in the presence of adults and strangers. Morag had hidden her smile behind her own polite mask before Harry came into view. *Ah, pureblood training at its best!*

“Morag MacDougal, I believe we have not had a proper conversation yet. Unfortunately, our circles don’t often mingle enough to allow such an encounter.” Harry’s voice was smooth and polite. Like the languid notes on a piano, his words flowed out without any hesitation, in perfect cadence. As he spoke, Hermione and Anthony flanked his chair on either side. Mandy shifted in her spot next to Morag, looking far less prepared for the high-societal warfare taking place between Morag and Harry.

“*Unfortunately.*” Morag repeated with a hint of annoyance slipping into her tone as she raised her chin, crossed her legs, and folded her arms in what was probably meant to look superior, but turned out looking a little defensive.

Unimpressed, Harry’s smile faded a little into a smooth and impassive expression. The air began to fill with magic, spreading through the entire room until all around, students began to shift uncomfortably in their seats and where they stood. Harry was still fighting to hold back most of it, he didn’t want to traumatize or hurt anyone, just wanted get his warning across loud and clear.

“I’ve heard that you’ve taken a special interest in one of our own.” Harry leaned forward a bit and caught the slight twitch in the other girl’s body as she fought her instincts to lean back or lower her head, even though Harry was a meter and a half away.

“What’s it mater to you? It’s my business what I do, and *half-bloodys* have no bloody place questioning someone of my stature.” Her façade disintegrated and a sneer mutilated her plain face. Her rapidly dissolving composure explaining why the little pureblood supremacist wasn’t placed in Slytherin, such a hot head would have brought her closer to the lion’s den if anything. In that moment, if nothing else, Harry greatly admired Slytherin’s skills in the art of politics and subtly.

After a long moment studying Morag, the girl—as well as the rest of the house—became more tense and uncomfortable as the moments dragged on. Finally, Harry spoke in far more lethal tone, quiet in nature, but nearly deafening in the completely silent room, half of the occupants refusing to even breath to puncture the void of sound.

“Oh, but *it is* my business, Morag. That girl is a part of this house, she is one of our own and she has done nothing to you.” Morag opened her mouth to protest, but Harry stopped her with the raising of his hand. “This is not a negotiation, I do not need your excuses, nor your insults. For as long as I am here, this house will remain *united*, helping each other towards a common goal. Have you any pride
at all, you would have never preyed on the innocent girl in the first place. I do not care what you think of me or my blood, but if you harass one of our own again, there will be consequences.” The threat was punctuated by the surge of suffocating magic around them for only a moment, before Harry pulled it back.

For the first time, Morag’s chin dipped and her eyes bore into her knees as she sat stiffly, steeling her limbs to suppress the subconscious twitch. Harry’s eyes moved over the rest of the frozen bodies in the common room as he stood, straightening his robes out in reflex.

“The same goes for everyone else, I do not care what you do, so long as you do not harm others and you show consideration for your house. Every single action you take or word you speak reflects on this house as a whole. I think we can all learn from the example another house in particular has set and be conscious of how we represent ourselves. Whatever critiques you may have of them, I have personally never seen any Slytherin students turn on each other, they are arguably the most cohesive house at Hogwarts. Keep that in mind the next time you think of turning on one of our own for your own entertainment.” And with that, Harry turned and left the common room, wandlessly accio-ing his bag from his room on his way.

At breakfast, Harry said nothing as he sat down across from Luna Lovegood, her wide red-rimmed blue eyes lingering on his face for longer than what was strictly polite. Harry made quick work of introducing himself as Anthony and Hermione took the seats next to him, Luna settled into an eccentric conversation without any prompting, appearing completely comfortable with them all as if they hadn’t just met, aside from Hermione.

When the Ravenclaw table filled with students, it was eerily hushed. Their table had never been as loud as the Gryffindors next to them, but the talking was nearly relentless in the mornings. However, even at its fullest, chatter was rather nulled and quiet. Not a word of what happened in the common room escaped from their house, having apparently taken Harry’s advice to keep matters internal.

Most avoided looking at Harry directly, but he caught the occasional wayward glance or intense look from under curtains of hair and dark lashes. Harry’s circle of friends, in contrast, were buzzing with energy. Draco was perhaps the only outsider to be filled in, and he had been beaming ever since, quietly raving something about Harry and his ‘Slytherin-tendencies.’ Harry casually ignored the blonde and ate his food in relative silence.

Unbeknownst to the others, Harry was actually listening to the disembodied voice over his shoulder, musing about Harry’s speech. At intervals, Death would update Harry on Voldemort’s movements and actions. Apparently the Dark Lord had taken on a weakened and rather disgusting rudimentary form now that he could no longer feed off Quirrell’s body and soul, the former DADA professor having already perished not long after fleeing Hogwarts. The body would sustain until Voldemort regenerated his old one, but only with the help of very powerful potions. That meant that it wouldn’t be long until Voldemort formed a plan to do just that. Despite Harry’s concerns about time, Death
assured his little companion that they would have plenty of time.

Later on, Harry was distracted from his tumulus thoughts when they got to Care of Magical Creatures and Hagrid introduced them all to his Hippogriff, Buckbeak. Harry found himself rather enthralled by the graceful creature and even managed to ride Buckbeak. The flight over the castle and across the black lake had been invigorating. The beautiful creature cutting through the air and gliding over the rippling glassy water, it’s talons skimming the surface as if to tease and frighten the fish within.

When they landed, Harry felt as wind-swept and exhilarated as he did whenever he rode his broom with careless abandon outside a match.

Draco, never one to be overshadowed, tried to do the same without showing the proper respect and almost got himself trampled. Harry had startled the rest of the class by laughing at his friend until his sides were sore as the blond whined about ‘dying’ because of the nick on his arm. Draco pouted at first, but Harry’s genuine laughter was rare and blissfully infectious, a few haughty huffs from the blonde and he was fighting off a grin himself as Hagrid righted the Slytherin sheepishly, not wanting to get in trouble with the formidable elder Malfoy on his first day as an actual professor.

Unfortunately, the next day cast a shadow over the incident when word spread that one Bellatrix Lestrange had been spotted in London, but not caught. Harry had been surprised when more than a few Ravenclaws of varying years pulled him aside throughout the day to ask if he was alright. When Harry asked Anthony about their behavior, the blonde had chuckled and informed Harry that ever since his little speech in the common room, most of Ravenclaw had been gravitating towards him, watching him from afar, and stopped listening to Michael’s constant slander against Harry. Apparently Ravenclaw had found a renewed appreciation for Harry.

Harry wasn’t sure what he thought about that. Although, he supposed that as long as the fretting and fussing was kept to a minimum, he wouldn’t intervene.

Either way, Harry didn’t waste much thought on the escaped witch. His dueling skills had greatly improved and even though he would be wary of fighting any adult Harry was confident that, if nothing else, he would be able to hold his own against her long enough to escape.

Remus, however, didn’t seem nearly as blasé about the situation—both with the Dementors and the witch they were hunting. Since one was considered a far more immediate threat, the man decided to catch Harry in any moment of what he thought was free time (which usually meant Harry was trying to sneak off to the chamber for some more spell practice) to have little private lessons on some off-curriculum defensive magic, all of which Harry knew already, except for the Patronus Charm.
Now that bit of magic was rather tricky. Harry didn’t deign himself to getting frustrated at his failed attempts at the charm, but he did grow further invested the more the spell evaded him. Harry wasn’t arrogant enough to think that he could master any form of magic that came his way, he just found himself excited at the prospect of a challenge.

Harry was aware of the implications of him not being able to perform the spell—even though Remus insisted it was because the spell was inherently very difficult and well above the level of what was taught at Hogwarts—but he also knew that the reason for his lack of success was not due to a lack of happy memories. Harry had plenty of new, bright memories collected over the last few years at Hogwarts and with his new family. No, it had far more to do with his affinity.

The Patronus charm was definitely a light spell, but the trouble came from what the spell did. As it had been demonstrated on the train, the spell was used primarily to repel Dementors, who were creatures that survived off a form of soul magic by literally draining the joy from a person’s soul. In order to be successful, the patronus spell had to be a complicated form of anti-soul magic.

Harry had done a little research of his own in the library and found the theory of it to be fascinating, though his companion had lost interest almost immediately. The magic of the patronus went directly against the primary natural affinity of his core, making it extremely difficult for him to bend his magic into a way that would accommodate this new spell.

Even though Harry didn’t even technically need the protection, he knew it would make his guardian feel better and it would be one of the most challenging forms of magic he would take on, only rivalled by the naturally difficult soul magic he would hopefully be learning soon.

A month and a half into the school year and his companion was still stubbornly declining to teach him any of the magic.

On the up side, however, having Remus as his DADA professor was rather enjoyable. Remus was truly competent in his teachings and honestly liked being around children, unlike certain broody potions masters. Harry liked all of his lessons well enough and could see the importance of the less interesting subjects, but he was actually eager to go to DADA. Harry Potter was many things, but ‘eager’ usually wasn’t one of them.

That is, until Remus announced at the beginning of class that they would be working with a Boggart that day and all of Harry’s excitement morphed into trepidation. He hadn’t even thought twice about the creatures since Remus briefly mentioned them on the train. Suddenly, Harry became very wary of his own fears. It wasn’t that they were abundant that was the problem, the exact opposite, in fact. Harry found himself drawing a blank on what his biggest fears may be.
Harry didn’t fear heights or spiders nor did he fear monsters or even death. He wasn’t naïve enough to believe that his boggart wouldn’t find something within him to turn his blood cold, his concern was that he didn’t know what it might turn into, and that whatever it may be would be disastrous. What could possibly scare someone who didn’t fear death? Who didn’t fear the rising Dark Lord?

His defense class was joint with the Gryffindors, which meant that there was a clear separation in the line, with Gryffindors crowding at the front of the line and eager to face their fears if only to prove their bravery in this small way, and the Ravenclaws standing at the end, reluctant to the confrontation that awaited them. Thankfully, Anthony picked up on Harry’s shift in mood and moved to the very back with him, not saying a word as he took the place in front of Harry.

Harry watched with growing apprehension as the boggart was released again and again, ranging from furry beasts with plenty of fangs to their very own imposing potions professor. Each time, Remus would pause to talk to the student afterward and correct them on anything they could improve upon. Harry counted down the minutes and silently willed the time to go faster and for Remus to take longer with each student. Even if it was only delaying the inevitable.

While he waited anxiously, Harry did pay attention every time someone interesting took their stance in front of the inconspicuous wardrobe. Seamus, for example, was terrified of cats, which had garnered quite a few laughs when the little orange spotted kitten mewed from the floor. Or Terry Boot, who’s Boggart was a person in black robes with only startling, glowing green eyes shining out from under the hood—Harry had found that rather amusing. Pavarti feared snakes, for Ronald it was spiders. As the boggart was transformed into increasingly hilarious forms, the nerves of some of the more reluctant students began to ease.

It was nearing the end of class and the end of the line, but Harry knew that it wouldn’t go fast enough, he would have to go. A crowd of student who had already gone formed behind the ever-shortening line to share in the laughs and slight scares and interesting revelations about their classmates.

Hermione stood before Anthony, and waited with her chin and wand raised as the clown dissolved into amorphous smoke before reforming into dozens and dozens of insects, scurrying towards her feet before they all turned into chocolate galleons that spun in their gold tin foil on the floor. Hermione joined the crowd looking a little green. Anthony went next, looking completely at ease and confident in himself. What appeared before him, though, had turned the blonde ridged.

There, standing less than two meters away, was a carbon copy of . . . Harry! Harry’s composure slipped and he gaped, as did the rest of the silent class. But this Harry was different than himself, this Harry looked like he’d been through hell. Covered in dirt and blood, weeping wounds glistening through large tears in his clothing, looking half-dead as he stood there, his vivid eyes pooled with pain and defeat, staring only at Anthony. Anthony faltered and his wand arm dropped, fingers trembling slightly when the boggart spoke.
“This is your fault. Why didn’t you save me? Why weren’t you stronger? You were supposed to protect me!” Anthony flinched at the words and Harry was woken from the fog of his own swirling thoughts. Harry didn’t hesitate before stepping up beside his friend and enclosing his slender hand around the warm back of the blonde’s neck, meant to be both comforting and commanding. It was what Anthony needed then.

Anthony looked over at the real-Harry, eyes taking a moment to soak in the others face, devoid of blood and grime, staring back at him with those bewitching green eyes and making him feel foolish for mistaking, even for a second, the Harry in front of him with this Harry. This Harry, whose magic wrapped around him like a warm cloak in the middle of a snow storm whenever he was near, whose presence he felt in the marrow of his bones, whose gaze felt like silver rain on his skin. He nodded once and turned his determined stare back on the boggart, who now looked pathetically dull and flat in comparison to the real person.

The boggart was reduced to tittering red birds with pink bows wrapped around their throats. Anthony received a final, comforting squeeze on the back of his neck, causing him to dip his head instinctively, and he moved back into the crowd to stand next to Hermione.

Harry caught the gaze of his guardian for a moment, taking in the encouraging nod before steeling himself with a deep breath and turning to face the boggart.

The relentless muscle inside his chest abused his ribs with its harsh pounding and Harry focused on keeping his breath even as the boggart once again swirled into shapeless black smoke. Then, it suddenly burst into movement, flinging itself back into the wardrobe. The doors stayed wide open as it attached itself to the back of the wardrobe, making it appear as though the back had opened up to a void, barren of all light. At first, the class held their breath in hesitant confusion, not sure what to make of the boggart’s new form. Harry could hear whispers from behind him, people asking their neighbors if it meant he was afraid of the dark or was it wardrobes?

Harry was about to ask Remus if something went wrong when a sound emitted from the wardrobe, slowly fading into existence and every cell in Harry’s body became suddenly cold. Horrified, Harry listened in utter disbelief as the familiar sounds filled the silent room, shaking him to his core to not hear them coming from within at the edge of sleep or on the brink of death. He couldn’t breathe, hearing the sound outside in his environment was even more haunting and somehow violating—it just felt wrong. The notes were so mournful, the tune unfulfilled as it ached for something else, much like a widow crying out for her late husband or mother grieving for a lost child.

The silence in the room was palpable and more jarring to Harry than if someone had set off a bomb. Harry felt a mix of horror and humiliation blossom in his chest at the fact that all his classmates were hearing something so intimate, so private. Harry felt violated in a way he did not know possible and
he moved quickly to shut it down. Flicking his wand and not saying a word, the boggart immediately
cut off mid-note and the doors to the wardrobe slammed shut. A surprising flair of anger putting a
little too much force into the spell and causing a few spider webbing-splinters to form in the wood.

Harry completely ignored the dazed and confused glances from his peers and stormed through the
room, grabbing his stuff and leaving a few minutes early. The students immediately parted for the
Ravenclaw, but he heard Anthony calling to him the moment he made it to the door.

Harry didn’t stop, but he slowed slightly in his charge through the empty halls so that the blonde
could catch up. The only thing Anthony said when he reached him, was that he’d listen if Harry ever
wanted to talk, otherwise he remained silent beside Harry. Harry’s appreciation for his friend cut
through some of his roiling emotions and Harry sent a small smile his way, even if it was still tainted
by his mood.

For several days after the boggart incident, Harry kept everyone at arms-length. However, eventually
Draco found his wits end and dragged the other boy out onto the quidditch pitch to blow off steam.
Everyone was relieved when Harry came back looking wind swept, flushed, and grinning at the
smug bloke with and arm thrown over Harry’s shoulders.
Sugar, Spice, & Everything Not-so-Nice

Chapter Summary

In the last chapter: Harry's year starts out busier than ever and he finds himself trying to juggle all of his duties at once. After a horrible prank played on Luna, Harry steps in and lays down the law by warning the other Ravenclaws that there would be consequences to bullying, especially within their own house. Harry meets Buckbeak. Bellatrix is spotted in London. Harry takes up trying to learn the Patronus charm. Harry has his first encounter with a Boggart and things go from bad to worse when Anthony has a rather awful experience then Harry's Boggart turns out to be highly personal and he is temporarily enraged at the whole mess.

Chapter Notes

Sorry this chapter is a bit late guys! I've just been busy with life in general, but thankfully I will have a long winter break off of classes--a whole month! woo who!--so I will be diving back in to getting ahead of these chapters again instead of behind rather soon!

Also, I know quite a few of you had questions about the Boggart in the last chapter, so I put a bit more info in the notes below if you were confused.

Thank you all for coming this far with me! We're nearing 100k words and I honestly never thought I'd make this fic so long! But for the sake of the integrity and quality of the story, it's going to be quite long. Sorry to those who don't like long fics! I'm trying to get to the good stuff as quick as I can!

Hope all of you lovelies have a wonderful night/day and enjoy the chapter!

-Pleasant Readings!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hallowe’en draped itself over the giddy castle and for all else, was a time of celebration and festivity, all except for Harry Potter. It wasn’t necessarily the anniversary of his parent’s demise that had gotten to him. No, it was the cold claws of apprehension that dug into his gut at knowing his track record with that date, mixed with the magical and unpredictable school was not so great. The troll his first year, Ginny his second. It spelled trouble for his third.

As loathsome as he was to admit it, Harry was surprisingly superstitious for a Ravenclaw. Be it the years before Hogwarts when his life was filled with dangerous and suspiciously coincidental ‘accidents’ or his recent dabbling in the necromantic arts, he had plenty of reason for caution. Even
though Harry had yet to learn the magic behind necromancy, his frequent contact with Death was in itself a form of necromancy of the purest standard. The forbidden branch of magic was very old—arguably the oldest—and not nearly as limited in its rules and confines as modern magic was, which made it far more unpredictable and a field in which superstition was encouraged—for the safety of the caster if nothing else.

It was for that low current of embarrassing superstition that Harry had decided to opt out of the first Hogsmead trip of the year—much to his friend’s disappointment—and instead spend the day with his guardian. Remus had more than welcomed the company, but for different reasons. It didn’t need to be specified which, because the somber mood he’d found the man in was all the indicator Harry needed. Remus was thinking about the two close friends he’d lost twelve years ago. Harry didn’t blame him, if he had any memories of his parents, he would probably be in the same state.

So, instead of venturing out of the castle with more than half of the student populace on that bitter cold and windy day, the pair stayed holed up in Remus’s personal quarters. Harry had given the man a funny look when he quickly changed into worn pajamas, slippers, and a bath robe with a steaming cup of something frothy and faintly spice-scented. Yet, not long after, Harry found himself in a similar state; wearing Remus’ warm shrunken plaid pajamas and slippers with his own warm drink as they watched a few muggle films and at one point had an open floo call with Sirius so that the other guardian could be partly included in the laid-back activities.

Harry often found himself smiling unknowingly and thanking the Fates that they had brought together the small, yet no less real family after a decade of separation and loss.

Harry would take it to his grave, but every time Remus wandered out to get something or go to the bathroom, Harry would secretly pull the collar of his borrowed shirt up to his nose and breathe in the familiar scent of his guardian. He never knew how comforting a smell could be until he began finding people important enough to cherish something so small about them as their scent. Forcing the pathways to form in his brain, Harry committed the scent to memory and to never let it fade from his depraved brain. Smell was the strongest and longest lasting sensory stimulus for memory, and Harry never wanted to forget the precious moments he spent with his guardians.

A few weeks later was the first quidditch match of the year, and the day before just so happened to be the full moon. With Remus’ usual replacement for the full moon sick, they were stuck with the brooding professor Snape as their instructor. Severus Snape had been entirely too obvious when he deliberately skipped entire chapters in the book to focus on werewolves. Those who remembered the connection between the current topic and Harry’s guardian looked highly uncomfortable on his behalf, while everyone else looked confused.
Harry’s protectiveness flared when he realized what was happening and he’d immediately and defiantly pointed out the illogical lesson plan with a narrowed gaze directed at the professor. Snape had sneered down at him and deducted points for speaking out of turn, causing Michael to scoff from his spot in the back of the class and mutter something undoubtedly nasty about Harry under his breath.

When Snape assigned the ridiculously long essay on how to identify a werewolf, the Hufflepuff students collectively groaned in defeat, as it was their team playing Gryffindor the following day and there would hardly be time to write two feet by the next DADA class.

Again, Harry silently fumed at the thought of Remus coming back from something as horrible and traumatic as the full moon and having to grade essay after essay about how to identify ‘his kind.’ Harry was thoroughly tempted to either throttle the vindictive professor, or incendio the essays before Remus saw them. Harry knew it was an irrational thought and that Remus could fight his own battles, but that didn’t take any of the conviction out of the third year.

Despite his anger, Harry couldn’t do anything outright to the professor, so he took his small revenge in the only way he could think of. Employing the help of his perpetually bored companion, Harry discretely watched the professor in benevolent amusement as his friend drifted a little too close to the edge of the veil behind the man and caused him to shudder, frown, and pull his robes a little closer. It didn’t look like much, but Harry knew that the older man’s pride was the only thing keeping him from shivering and turning pale from the bone-deep cold Death could induce, much like the Dementors, but on a less physical and more psychological level.

‘Let the bastard think that a pack of Dementors are nipping at his heels! Serves him right.’ Harry thought bitterly as he felt his friend return, absently noting the shiver that ran through a Ravenclaw sitting a few seats down—they were the closest person to Harry at the Great Hall table, since it was early and none of Harry’s friends had arrived just yet.

‘My, I do hope more foolish humans plan on stepping on your toes, I could use the entertainment.’ Death sighed with great misfortune and Harry restrained from rolling his eyes.

‘Perhaps if you were more forthcoming with the locations of the Horcruxes, things would be a bit more interesting.’ Harry deadpanned, feeling the familiar itch under his skin to act and continue hunting down the pieces of Voldemort’s soul. Death didn’t reply for a contemplative moment.

‘Point taken. Find a time to get off school grounds and I’ll tell you where to go.’ Death’s tone was as casual and uncaring as usual when giving up important information.
‘The next chance I have to get away is the next Hogsmead visit, which is a week before winter break. I can work with that.’ Harry began to sift through the details of how he would slip away from the crowd during the visit, so his friend didn’t bother speaking again and just silently slipped away to continue his current pastime of watching over the pathetic form the once great Dark Lord had taken as of late.

As the fall term dragged on into colder, more monotone months, Harry forced his mind to focus on his studies and practicing to bide his time until the next Hogsmead trip. His routine was only broken a few weeks before break when he was on his way to lunch and was snatched from the hall to be dragged gently into an empty classroom. Harry was on the verge of cursing head from shoulders when he saw who had plucked him from his path. Harry adopted a bemused expression that the grinning Weasley twins paid no mind to.

“And what wicked scheme have I been forced into now?” The raven-haired boy drawled sarcastically, pulling expressions of synchronized mock-offense from the twins.

“We do not appreciate that tone young man!” The one on the left scolded.

“Yeah! And after we went through all this trouble to try to give you a Christmas gift!” The twin on the right jumped in and they nodded once at the same time as if to agree with each other.

Harry quirked a brow and studied the pair skeptically. Although they often plopped down with his group to catch up, share gossip, or peddle their pranks, Harry couldn’t say that he was particularly close with either of them. He was closer friends with Ginny, and that relationship was still only teetering on the edge between acquaintanceship and friendship. Heeding their infamy and not lowering his guard, Harry conceded.

“What gift?” the question was met with matching feral grins and Harry already began to curse his curiosity. Before he could take it back and duck out of the classroom, the twin on the left shoved a folded piece of parchment wrapped in an uneven bow under Harry’s nose. Frowning, Harry slowly took the parchment and pulled off the silky red ribbon and unfolded it. When he verified that it was, indeed blank, Harry looked back up at the twins expectantly.

With a mischievous smirk, the one on the right pressed the tip of his wand to the center of the parchment and spoke clearly.
“I solemnly swear I am up to no good.”

Harry’s brows rose in tandem as ink appeared on the parchment—reminding him of the diary back at Grimmauld Place an awful lot. Fascinated, Harry watched as the parchment turned into a living map of the school formed by various runes and written spells marking outlines and structures. George and Fred taught Harry how to use the map and everything they knew about it. Harry had to admit he was very impressed, the map was incredibly valuable, no doubt. However, Harry’s suspicion didn’t abate.

“Why are you giving this to me?” He inquired hesitantly. The twins glanced at each other before turning back to Harry and shrugging in their answer.

“You saved our dorky little sister. We don’t want to think about what would have happened if you hadn’t found her, but even then, you didn’t just save her life and move on, you pulled her into your little group and made her feel welcome. This is sort of our way of saying ‘thank you.’” Harry was shocked by the sudden sincerity in the redhead’s tone.

“Yeah, and besides, after we heard about Sirius Black’s trial we realized that it didn’t really belong to us.” The other twin shrugged again.

“How do you mean?”

In place of answering, the twin who’d spoken last reached forward and began folding the map in Harry’s hands. When he was done, Harry stared wide-eyed down at the large ‘Marauders’ title inked over the parchment flaps, along with all of the nicknames of the members. They had created something like this?!

Harry stared at the name for a long moment before looking back up at the twins and giving them an appreciative smile. Harry tapped the map with his own wand and cleared the writing with the incantation.

“We would have given it to you sooner, but we had a few last pranks that required it and couldn’t pass up the opportunity.” The twins looked a little sheepish, but Harry just waved it off.

A spontaneous idea popping into his head, Harry quickly dug in his bag and pulled out a scrap of parchment and refilling-quill. Quickly scribbling something down, Harry handed the scrap over to the twins and smirked at their confused expressions.
“A nifty little spell I came across in my . . . extracurricular studies. It allows the caster to plant images in the mind of their victim, like a random thought popping up.” Harry met the deviously gleaming eyes of the twins and reflected their grins. “I figure a certain favorite black-robed professor of ours could use some . . . unsettling images about his coworkers or even himself to keep his life interesting.” The implications of Harry’s words were like sweet nectar to the two pranksters. He had no doubts that whatever they concocted for dear professor Snape would be both horrifying and amazing at the same time.

“Much obliged!” They exclaimed in unison before turning back to the parchment they held between them like they were holding something invaluable.

Harry left them to it and smiled all the way to the great hall. The spell wasn’t exactly light—nor was it strictly legal—but Harry knew how clever the twins could be and was confident that they could come to the same conclusions on their own and keep the spell to themselves.

Harry’s mind lingered on the map in his bag all through the day and had spent hours that night, watching in fascination as the names drifted and floated through the halls and dorm rooms until every last name had settled into a spot on the map and stilled. *Oh, this will be very valuable indeed!*

By the third night of watching the map, Harry made a rather impulsive decision after watching most of the castle settle into bed. Map in hand and invisibility cloak donned, Harry spelled himself quiet and crept from the dark and silent dorms. With the help of the map, Harry was able to easily make it up to the Astronomy tower without running into any patrolling prefects or staff members.

As soon as Harry entered the frost-laced classroom, He warded the door behind him and charmed his thin pajamas to radiate warmth and chase away the Scottish winter chill. Properly protected against the weather, Harry shrugged off the cloak and stepped out onto the huge balcony made to accommodate the nighttime stargazer the best that it could. Allowing his eyes to drink in every pale and flickering speck in the inky midnight blue sky was both overwhelming and disorienting in the best of ways. A little thrill ran up Harry’s spine as he swayed a little too close to the cold metal railing dividing him from open air.

Harry didn’t have to wait long for the reason for his late-night visit to appear. A different kind of cold seeped through his warming charms like ink on wet parchment and Harry settled into the familiar sensation as he spotted a few shadows pulling away from the dark sky to descend on his tower. This time, closer to half a dozen dementors approached curiously, but most of them kept their distance while one was bold enough to drift right up to Harry.

*{You are the strange Death child}* The creature stated bluntly and Harry just nodded in return,
causing a few of the others to lean in a little more eagerly at witnessing the young boy understand one of their own. *Young necromancer, where have you learned our language?*

*Death has brought me into this world with a task to complete. He has lent me his magic in order to do just that, but before I can learn to use this magic, I must be able to invoke it and speak the language.* Harry answered honestly, watching the other interestedly as it absorbed his words.

*This task, what does it entail?*

Harry smiled, knowing that he technically could tell them without worry of them ever being able to pass the information on to anyone else, but that didn’t make it a wise decision. They could still intervene themselves or try to hinder Harry in some way—not that Harry really thought that they would—but the risk wasn’t worth satiating the dementors curiosity.

*Unfortunately, that is something that I cannot share. The nature of my objective is rather . . . sensitive, and has yet to be fulfilled. However, there is something I would like to ask you.* Harry prompted and the dementor’s deformed head shifted slightly in a gesture that was almost human-like.

*Yes?*

*The witch you are hunting, have you seen her anywhere near here yet?* Harry couldn’t help but inquiring, thoughts of his guardian’s estranged cousin always in the back of his mind. Despite the threat she obviously posed to Harry, he wasn’t fully sure what to think about the woman. According to everything he’d heard from both the media and Sirius, the witch was clearly not mentally sound to begin with, and such a long stay in Azkaban certainly wouldn’t have helped that.

Though, Harry was curious to see how much she resembled the other members of her family—from the poise and proper Narcissa, to the light witch known as a blood-traitor and muggle-married-Andromeda, to the kindly but fiercely protective Sirius. Admittedly, Harry knew rather little about the three Black sisters, but there was one thing that seemed to be shared amongst them all: they were all incredibly strong willed.

What Harry did know about Bellatrix was her unconditional loyalty to her late master. With Voldemort’s return, she would either become a great ally or terrible nuisance. Harry was unsure how the witch would react to Voldemort becoming more stable and possibly less violent, but one thing was for sure, Harry couldn’t make odds or ends of anything until he met her. Fortunately, if everyone’s paranoia was to be trusted, she would be coming to Harry sometime soon. He would just have to wait until then, be prepared, and if it turned out that she was too unstable or couldn’t accept what Harry would do to her recently-discovered-alive master . . . well, then Harry would just have to
deal with that when the time came.

{Ah, curious about our little escapee, are you? Yes, that one is quite . . . motivated. The ones tracking her are getting closer to this school, it won’t be long until she arrives.} The dementor stated with certainty that dissolved any half-formed hope that she might be dealt with before reaching Hogwarts. He understood, though. She’s far too careful to be caught while on the run, they’d have to wait until she reached her destination and risked herself by going after Harry. The dementor continued talking when Harry didn’t immediately jump in.

{Tread carefully, young one. I do not know much of you, but if you are truly the one she is after, then your life is certainly at risk. Though, I supposed that my worries may be for not, since a human so young being so versed with the eternal one will have favor on his side in all matters of Death.} Amusement was not something easily conveyed in the language of the dead, and certainly not with non-human vocal cords, but somehow that’s exactly what Harry heard in the end of those words.

Huffing and smiling crookedly, Harry replied with, {Thanks for the warning, but you’re right, I don’t have many worries in that department. . . You know, everyone thinks that dementors are just mindless dark creatures to be handled only when there’s a raised wand between you. I have to ask, why do you allow it? I mean, I know that the language barrier is quite the obstacle, but there still must be another way to convey that you are intelligent beings.} Harry had been wondering since he first made contact on the train.

Harry caught a few dark shadows shifting behind the one in front of him, but he kept his focus on the one he was speaking with.

{Simple, it’s just self-preservation. Nothing scares humans more than something just as smart, or smarter than them, that they can’t control. It’s why they slaughter each other any chance they get. It’s why they set hierarchies amongst their own species and foster discrimination to keep those systems in place. Humans want to be at the very top and prefer their battles to be fought within their species, if they were to discover a dark creature that is intelligent and unable to be destroyed, it would create havoc. Discrimination far worse than any werewolf or vampire or giant. Working for the Ministry, we exist peacefully right under their noses, and if we need something done that they won’t approve of, they just blame it on our nature and miniscule comprehension. We remain fed and they remain ignorant of our symbiotic relationship.}

Harry couldn’t help but have the utmost respect for their decision then. It also posed a whole new avenue of opportunity for the future. The dementor’s ability to move around under the Ministries’ nose without worry of scrutiny could be very useful. Before the moment dragged on too long, Harry made a split-second decision and spoke up.

{In the spirit of mutually-beneficial relationships, would it be too forward of me to request that we
establish something of the sort? Nothing so involved as your deal with the Ministry, but more of a 'favor-system.' In that if I ever need a favor, you might be inclined to help in exchanged for something of equal value, and vice-versa.) That certainly peaked the creature’s curiosity.

{Tell me, why might a child have need of a favor from a dementor?} Harry relaxed at the fact that it didn’t seem immediately opposed to the idea.

{My . . . task, is very complicated and dangerous. I am not exactly swimming in reliable allies at the moment, so it would be nice to know that I might have a bit of outside help, should I need it.} Harry watched carefully as the being seemed to deliberate, but it ended too soon for the creature to have truly been undecided at that point.

{I will agree to this deal. You will have your favors . . . within reason, of course.}

{Of course. Then, if we’ve come to an agreement, I’ll need to know your name so that I might identify you.}

{Unlike you humans, I was not born, I am technically not even alive. My existence is less as an individual and more as a separated part of a whole—it is why humans tend to think that we dementors are more animalistic, we act more as one, like a pack might and suggests we use instinct rather than intelligence. Therefore, I have no use for a name and you will not need me specifically for your favor. This offer is on behalf of us all, speak to one of us and we all speak back through. That is why dementors don’t divide and take sides, it’s why we don’t fight each other or have a hierarchy. So, young Harry, do not worry about names.} That was quite interesting news to Harry!

He hadn’t known the dementors were closer to a ‘hive-mind’ rather than separate, but it did explain how they kept in touch with the ones tracking Bellatrix without any fast or obvious way of communicating. It would also make things a lot easier for Harry if he didn’t have to worry about exactly which dementor he came across.

It was pure luck that the short conversation had just about drawn to a close when Harry was alerted by his wards that someone was climbing the stairs of the Astronomy tower, probably a teacher checking one last time to make sure no midnight-lovers had snuck up to the secluded spot for some privacy. Harry slipped on his invisibility cloak right after a final farewell to the dementors and dismantled his wards while he waited for whoever it was to reach the class room so he might slip past them and down the stairs.

He wasn’t surprised when Snape stormed in, looking rather angry and ready to savagely strip away copious amounts of points from whatever rule-breaking students he could find. Harry was rather
smug just knowing that some of the man’s irritated mood came from two opportunistic red-heads that wasted no time at all experimenting with the spell Harry gave them and attacking the cruel professor with Merlin-knows-what daydreams that had the man on-edge, stiff-backed, and with a hint of ‘cringe’ in his usual sneer.

Harry slipped away without a sound and spent the rest of his long walk back to his dorm room thinking about the upcoming Hogsmead trip—which just happened to be the perfect opportunity to go out and get the next horcrux. In just a matter of days, he would have his hands on another piece of Voldemort’s soul. If asked, Harry would lie and say that his excitement was purely objective and had nothing to do with the peace-of-mind and warm sensations he got every time he came in contact with a horcrux. He would lie even to himself and say that the . . . pleasure they elicited was not at all tempting, that his eagerness was due to his objective progressing and not the soothing effects of having such cursed objects in his proximity.

If there was one thing that Harry was very good at, it was lies.

Chapter End Notes

AUTHOR’S NOTE//: Hello everyone! So, a lot of you seem really confused about the boggart from the previous chapter (which is on me because we all know I was super vague! Sorry guys!) and for those of you who I didn’t personally reply to your comment about it, I’d like to point you in the right direction if you want it. If you don’t want to know and just want to figure out for yourself (because it will be addressed later on in the fic, but that is a little while away) then just skip over this note completely.

Okay, so the majority of you guys seem to think that the sound Harry heard was either his parent’s deaths or had to do with the Dursley’s cupboard. While both are great guesses, they are not exactly what I was going for. You see, throughout the fic I’ve made little references to this sound that Harry hears when he is not fully conscious or close to dying, that would be his soul that he’s hearing. It’s like a frequency (if that makes any sense) that his soul emits as a sort of signature, and everyone’s frequency is different. It sounds much like a mournful song (I often refer to it as a ‘siren’s call’) and Harry knows that there is something ‘missing’ from it. Harry’s fear is not of the song itself, but what it represents as the unfinished/unaccompanied song. Primarily, Harry’s fear is loneliness, his fear is unfulfillment in the most intimate and basic sense—his soul. Also, the empty abyss at the back of the wardrobe is a little open to interpretation, you can either think of it as just his soul alone in a vast and empty space or even a representation of the veil because he is somewhere between worlds of the living and the dead.

The other students in the class had no idea what they were hearing and most likely figured it was just another vague representation of a fear. Just like how Remus’ boggart transforms into a full moon to represent his lycanthropy, and the Harry Potter in the
original story’s boggart was a dementor to show that he was afraid of fear itself. Even though the other students had no clue what it meant, Harry was so embarrassed because he knew, and to bare ones soul to a room full of strangers would be a highly violating experience.

Rereading that part later, I realized that I was actually pretty vague, but I know you guys are all smarter than I could possibly give you credit for and even if you didn't come to that specific conclusion, you came to a conclusion that would have only added to your own experience of the story. I'm not here to force you into consuming this content in any specific way, as I see it, all I do is provide you with the indentations of a story and you guys are the ones to put it together how you like. No one reading of a story is the same (not even with the same person at different times) I bring content and you guys bring your own experience and perspective so that they can meet in the middle to create something unique and wonderful.

Sorry to tangent on you guys! If you made it all the way through my ramblings I thank you and wish you all an amazing night, day, morning, whatever time it is for you when you read this. I consider you all as equally important to the development and momentum of this story as myself and have all 90k words to thank you guys for. Doing this stuff really helps be to develop my own style and let my creative side go wild, with every little comment and chapter I post, my love for writing is only renewed. Thank you all, I hope to hear from you, if not I'm just glad to know you guys are all out there. Until next time.

-Pleasant Readings!
Breaking into Gringotts and Other Terrible Ideas

Chapter Summary

In the last chapter: Harry spends a laid-back and cozy Halloween with Remus for the first Hogsmead visit and Snape fills in for Remus for the full moon and acts like a huge wanker. The twins give Harry the Marauder's Map as an early Christmas gift and Harry gives them a 'special spell' in return. Harry meets with the Dementors and gains their favor.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The second Hogsmead trip of the term took place a week before school let out for break. This meant that the biting, vicious cold of winter had swept through the area without relent, stinging the flushed cheeks and capping exposed ears in frozen scarlet as the procession of giddy students made the trek to the small wizarding village. It also meant that students were in a hurry to escape the harsh weather and ducking their heads to protect their eyes from both the wind and the painful glare off the too-white snow. With everyone’s attention averted the moment they stepped out into the deceptively sunny tundra, Harry knew that slipping away from the group would be far easier than he’d thought.

Remus, as one of the chaperones on the trip, had wanted to accompany Harry during the visit, but Harry made quick work of his prepared excuse to convince his guardian not to. Actually, it was the same excuse he used with his friends when they reached the village and everyone began to disentangle from the herd of students and moving into the shops. Harry just simply told them he hadn’t been able to owl-order anyone’s gifts because Hedwig was being stubborn in light of the especially cold winter that year and refused to make any trips that weren’t absolutely necessary, so he needed to buy them at Hogsmead and didn’t want any of them to know what he got them. It was believable enough since it was mostly true and most of the other students needed to do the same.

The benefit to waiting until the Hogsmead trip right before break was that everyone was trying so hard to sneak around those who they were buying gifts for, that no one would notice his lengthy absence. They would just think that he’s very good at avoiding them. When Harry slipped away from his small group as they headed for Honeydukes, Only Anthony and Hermione acknowledged him, and even then, it was only for a moment to nod and hurry inside the crowded sweets shop.

Harry made his way purposefully towards a used bookshop on the other end of the shopping area. The shop didn’t have much business considering there was another book shop in Hogsmead that sold all the latest material. Harry had heard rumors of the shop going out of business and the owner eager to sell it after it had been passed down through his father or something. Apparently, the new owner had his own career and wanted nothing to do with the sale of used books.
Testament to what he’d heard, when Harry entered the shop, it was completely void of people, even
the owner was nowhere in sight. There was no bell above the door to announce his presence and he
could faintly hear a radio on in a back room, going by the faint reedy notes seeping out through the
cracks in the drafty shop, whoever was on staff then was preoccupied. It was perfect!

Harry made sure to peer out of the few small windows facing the street to guarantee that he wouldn’t
be seen. As such, few students ventured that far down the lane anyways, so the streets outside were
empty.

From there, Harry quickly pulled on his invisibility cloak and apparated to Diagon Alley. Once
again, Harry was fortunate with his timing, as those few who braved the cold did not linger in the
streets and his invisible journey to Gringotts was a smooth one.

The Horcrux that he was going after this time was yet another founder’s item; Helga Hufflepuff’s
Cup. Ironically—or perhaps unfortunately—the cup had been entrusted with Bellatrix Lestrange, the
very same witch out for his head. According to his companion, the cup was in the main Lestrange
vault at Gringotts and he had to break in to steal it.

Now, Harry was rather confident in his own abilities and resourcefulness in dire situations, but
hearing that he’d have to break into the Goblin bank—and into one of the oldest Pureblood vaults at
that—Harry had been rightfully uneasy and anxious about the whole ordeal. Frankly, he’d rather
leave the cup for last and move on to the other Horcruxes instead. However, he trusted his
companion and knew that Death would not send him after the cup if he didn’t believe that Harry was
capable.

As the brunet neared the entrance to the bank, his heart picked up a frantic beat, knowing that the
archway was warded against the simpler forms of deception (glamor’s, charms, polyjuice, invisibility
cloaks, and so on) the wards didn’t stop someone using such things from entering, nor did they
undue any of the enchantments, but they did still catalog the person entering for security reasons. The
Goblins probably cared little for the deceptions (if you lost your key and someone else used it, that
would be your own fault) but Harry didn’t have a key and he couldn’t afford anyone knowing he
was even there.

So, when he reached the entrance, in order to hide his magical signature, Harry transformed into his
animagus while still under the cloak. Hopefully the combination of the transformation and the cloak
would make him completely undetectable. Harry used wandless magic to wrap the cloak around his
long body so that he wouldn’t just slip right from under it and also so that no one would step on it.

Surprisingly, the bank was still rather full, despite the weather, and Harry had to be careful as he slid
over the floor to avoid tripping anyone or being trampled. When Harry reached the door that led to the carts, he waited back for someone else to open it so it wouldn’t seem that it was opening on its own. Nearly half an hour later, a Goblin was leading a regal-looking wizard his way and used its own creature-magic to open the door for them. Harry was close at the heels of the wizard and had to flick up his tail to avoid it being slammed in the closing steel door.

Harry slithered off to the side as the Goblin and the wizard took up a cart and shot off into the endless caves and chasms. Once alone, he was presented with a troubling issue as he transformed back into his human form. *Now how in Merlin’s name am I supposed to get to the vault? I can’t bloody well fly!*

*Cease your fretting, young one, I will assist you.* Death soothed him. Before Harry could ask just how he was planning on doing that, he felt the veil press against his skin like cool silk or an autumn rain. Harry felt like he’d just downed several calming droughts at once as he sank boneless into the embrace of the veil. It wrapped around him, but he never pierced through it or crossed over, it just held him and lifted him into the air—transparent as his invisibility cloak. Harry turned over and was practically swimming in the sighing material.

Below, Harry could see that he had drifted far from the platform where the carts docked and was continuing to fly over the seemingly-bottomless caverns that would have caused him to panic if his mind was anything but pleasant soft putty at that point. His companion chuckled at the unvoiced statement but otherwise said nothing, knowing Harry wasn’t lucid enough for his usual witty remarks right then, and therefore, not a source for further entertainment.

Harry returned to himself when he was deposited in front of a very old-looking vault door. He shook the fog from his mind and forced himself to think clearly as he took in the details. This door had no key-hole, no handle, and no identifiable way of unlocking it. It complicated matters, but he only steeled his determination and tried to *think.*

Alright, so Bellatrix was Voldemort’s most devoted follower—that was undeniable—and he’d given her something incredibly important to watch over. In order to give it the highest amount of protection, she placed in her husband’s families vault instead of her personal vault just to make Harry’s life that much harder! Or so he told himself.

Harry had read everything he could on Gringotts before that day, but unfortunately, the Goblins were extremely strict about their security and tight-lipped about the different kinds they used. Everything Harry knew about the bank either came from what little information was recorded in books, word of mouth, or his own experience there. The only source with sufficient information came from the rumors and theories people spread, which were immensely varied considering that the Goblins employed a multitude of different measures for each set of family vaults at different costs to each customer.
However, there were a few rumors that could help him. Silently striding away from the vault, Harry peaked around the corner of the short hallway and spotted the enormous pale form of leathery skin stretched over wiry muscles and a protruding skeletal frame. Harry’s rush of triumph was only dampened by the sight of grotesque open wounds on the creature’s body that looked both old and fresh. The sickening amount of scar tissue and constant shudders and faint hissing whines of the dragon had Harry’s stomach turning.

Moving back towards the vault before he ended up sick all over his robes, Harry focused on the useful information he’d just obtained. If the Goblins were using a Dragon to guard a few old pureblood vaults, then the door lock was most likely activated by voice or a biological sample such as blood or hair. It was a smart bit of security. Within the wizarding world, one thing that was almost impossible to replicate was a person’s voice. Even with polyjuice potion, the voice would remain unaffected by the physical changes otherwise enacted. The voice, like a name, held power. It was why using incantations with spells was so important; it worked as another tool to guide the flow of magic at a person’s will.

So anything voice-activated was inherently of high-security. If this were anyone else’s vault, Harry would have a very tough time of getting in. Fortunately, Bellatrix was disgustingly loyal to her master and said master was paranoid to the point of utter insanity considering his already fragile mental stability with the multiple Horcruxes. If Voldemort gave Bellatrix his Horcrux, there was no possibility he wouldn’t have ensured a way in which he could retrieve it without her if need be. Add on top of that his precarious condition of occasionally possessing people to stay alive and he couldn’t leave it to just activate with his voice, as it would change dramatically with different people.

Harry grinned as he figured it out. *No, the only way to ensure only Voldemort and the Lestranges could enter the vault would be to use the skill Voldemort believed himself to be the only one to possess. Parseltongue.*

*“Open.”* Harry waited a moment, but nothing happened. Frowning, Harry tried again. *“Voldemort.”* It was a shot in the dark, but Harry quirked a brow when he heard a click, but the door did not open. *Perhaps it is more than the language, and I need to say a specific phrase to open it. Well, obviously ‘Voldemort’ is part of it.* Contemplating for a long moment, the answer suddenly carved itself in burning letters into the forefront of his mind. Hoping that there wasn’t some sort of consequence after two tries, Harry spoke once more. *“I am Lord Voldemort.”* Three more clicks and the door popped open with a heavy groan.

Sighing in relief, Harry slipped through the crack and produced a wandless *lumos* to float up in front of him and illuminate the piles of old family fortune, treasure, and undeniably dark artifacts.

*‘Careful, Harry, every object in here is cursed with both Flagrante and Geminio. They will sear flesh*
at the lightest touch and duplicate at the smallest disturbance. Many dark pureblood families use them as a defense against thieves to burn and bury them alive. Proceed with caution.’ His friend warned and Harry was thankful as he caught himself from touching one of the goblets near him to inspect it closer. Harry also shed his invisibility cloak to keep it from dragging on the ground and touching anything.

Moving to the center of the room, Harry closed his eyes and allowed himself to open himself up to the magic in the room so that he might sense the Horcrux within. When Harry felt it, he nearly stumbled forward at the sudden ache in his chest to touch it. It had been so long since he’d had the other Horcruxes within his reach, and he was shocked to realize how much their absence weighed on him.

The cup was on a shelf high up on the back wall with a table piled high with cursed objects between them. The only way to reach the cup would be to climb up on the table and only those keyed into the vault’s enchantments could do so without setting off the curses and the same went for spell casting, only those keyed into the wards could do it. With no other way of reaching it, Harry asked for Death’s assistance once more and he was wrapped in the trance-inducing veil and lifted to a height in which he could reach the cup. The cup was one of the few items not cursed, as such weak curses would degrade and erode on an item as dark as a Horcrux.

As Harry was put back on the ground and his mind slowly came back online, he couldn’t help but thinking that the cup was a lot smaller than he’d expected, and it almost looked . . . dainty. Harry forced down the smile that tried to carve itself into his expression as he left the vault and closed it behind him with wandless magic.

When Harry reached the area with the dragon, he couldn’t seem to make himself leave. All he could do was stare at the pathetic creature with a pinched expression. After only Merlin knows how long, his companion spoke up and caused him to jump at the sudden interruption.

‘Poor creature. It has lived only a life of pain and fear and rage. The only compassion it will ever see is ours.’ Harry was shaken by the serious tone of his usually indifferent or bored friend. Harry didn’t reply, he knew exactly what he’d meant by ‘our compassion.’ As much as Harry wanted to severe the chains binding the beast and allow it to tear a horrible path through the bank so that it might be free, he knew that such a thing was impossible.

Not only did he need to be stealthy to ever hope to be able to escape, he could see from where he stood that among the old injuries, huge slices had been made in the leathery wings, rendering flight impossible. Besides, even if the Dragon could fly, the world beyond was not endless forests for it to hide in, it was brick and glass buildings as far as the eye could see. The dragon would only be caught and dragged back immediately after. The world had changed, become unsuitable for even half of the magical creatures to live in, it was why there were such places as dragon sanctuaries.
Harry felt his magic seep out from his core and wrap around him. Before he knew what he was doing, Harry stepped out from behind the corner and came into full view of the dragon. The dragon instantly noticed him and began to growl menacingly at him. Slowing his approach, Harry lifted his hands in a soothing gesture and shushed the creature to try to soothe it, slipping into parseltongue to convey words of comfort even if dragons and serpents were only cousins and the dragon would not be able to comprehend the language.

His efforts paid off when it stopped growling and settled back against the wall, collapsing in an exhausted manner that made Harry wince at the pained whine it emitted. Continuing his slow approach, Harry’s magic reached out and enfolded the creature to chase away the pain in its body and causing it to sink further down and rest its head upon the ground. Eventually he stopped just before the large pale head of the dragon and knelt down when it didn’t otherwise react.

Harry’s hands came into contact with the cold scales and he gently smoothed his palms over them as the dragon let out a mournful plea that trilled through its rumbling vocal cords. Harry felt the hot breath against his knees and the tops of his thighs as the eyes slowly closed.

“Shhhh, it is alright, dear one. I will take away your pain, you will suffer no longer.” Harry’s chest clenched as he spoke these unheard promises. Harry felt the veil draped over him like a cloak as he leaned down and pressed his forehead to the massive pearlescent expanse of the dragon’s. Using even more magic, Harry combed all of the pain out of every inch of the creature and continued to whisper comforting placates.

Harry took a deep, shuddering breath as he gathered the invigoratingly cold sensation behind his lungs and felt two gentle hands of blackened bone settle on his shoulders. With one last caress of its head and painful words of whispered mercy, Harry tilted his chin forward and pressed his lips to the very center of the being’s head. Harry felt something cool pass from him to the creature at the contact and the hot breath on his knees left indefinitely with a sigh.

Harry stayed only long enough to feel the being’s soul pulled through the veil and be assured by Death that it would never feel pain again.

Mercy, like Death, was fickle almost to the point of cruelty. It did not come when called nor did it bow to any master. While Death left unfillable holes in life, Mercy was a temptress of lies and all too elusive.

Harry said nothing as he was once again wrapped in the veil and returned to the cart platform. It wasn’t until Harry had returned to Hogsmead, cup sealed and warded in a hidden pocket inside his robes, and began actually shopping did his mind let the weighted thoughts go to sink under the
surface of his consciousness. By the time Harry finished and located his friends, they were all laughing over a warm butterbeer at The Three Broom Sticks.

“Bout bloody time, Harry! You must be even more indecisive when it comes to shopping than Anthony!” Draco exclaimed when he was spotted. Anthony flushed and shot Draco a mild glare. “Who knew one could spend an hour picking out wrapping paper!?” Draco whined dramatically, causing the others to look pointedly at him, knowing that the blonde was in no position to comment on wasting time on material things.

Harry chuckled and sat with his friends for a while. When Harry had returned from Gringotts, it was already getting close to the early winter dusk and most students had returned to Hogwarts while the few remaining were enjoying a bit of food or hot beverage in one of the local pubs. And so, not long after Harry found them, the group of four were getting up to leave.

Harry was the last to step out of the pub, so no one noticed him freeze, his eyes glued to the sky. Among the cloud cover, faint flitting shadows caught Harry’s attention as they all seemed to be rushing towards the wooded area between Hogsmead and the Shrieking Shack. Reacting quickly, Harry jogged up to his friends and got their attention.

“Oi! I completely forgot to get Hedwig those special treats she likes! You guys go on ahead, I’m right behind you.” Harry was off before any of them could respond, moving in the direction of the dementors (and fortunately the pet shop as well). When Harry neared the shop, he checked that they were all out of sight before running off towards the tree line as he pulled out his cloak and threw it on.

When Harry neared the Shrieking Shack he stopped at the tree line to watch from behind a thick pine as something unexpected happened.

There, standing in snow passed her ankles with wild curly black hair poking out in every which way, was Bellatrix Lestrange. Harry watched curiously as more than forty dementors descended from the sky and the ragged woman snarled before jumping into battle. *If one could really call it ‘battle.’* One could only truly fend off dementors with the *patronus* charm (if one wasn’t versed in necromancy, that is) and Harry highly doubted that the witch bothered to learn such a light spell.

Instead, she was casting dark spell after dark spell at the approaching throng that had encircled her to try to at least force them back long enough to try to escape. However, throwing dark spells at a dementor was about as effective as using a water gun on a fish. Harry could see the panic jolting and stiffening each muscle and each joint as they drew closer. She knew the truth of the situation, they weren’t going to bring her back to Azkaban, no their orders were to give her the kiss on sight. Her life would end there in the snow; cold, alone, probably in pain. As near-skeletal hands reached out for her frail shoulders, Harry’s mind suddenly filled with the image of pearlescent scales and he
pulled off his cloak.

{Wait!} As one, the creatures froze and turned to look at Harry as he stepped into the clearing. Frantic dark eyes caught on him and for a moment Harry swore he saw utter confusion before a terrifying glee swept through the witch’s expression. That is, until she noticed that she was no longer being attacked and the dementors were all watching Harry intently.

{I know that you have orders, but if you wouldn’t mind, I would like to speak to her for a moment.} Harry queried politely, not entirely sure what he was looking for, but needing the chance to look anyways.

The dementor closest to Bellatrix bowed its head once before they all drifted back as one. The witch in question restrained her expressions and only watched everything with hard suspicion. When the dementors were far enough away for Bellatrix to take her eyes off them, her sharp gaze turned on Harry and she seemed to thinking very hard about something.

Harry stood a few meters away and didn’t say anything for a long while, doing some cataloging of his own. She’s more lucid than I expected, not that I’ve seen much, but her reflexes are fast and she hasn’t leapt at me yet to tear my face off or anything. Harry internally noted as he watched those nearly coal-black eyes flit from Harry to the dementors and back again. Finally, she spoke.

“You speak to them.” It wasn’t a question, so Harry didn’t answer, but continued to watch her with a blank face.

Finally, he said, “I hear that you are after me . . . why?” Harry’s serine tone and blank face were an unnerving combination, but they had little effect other than confusing the Azkaban-escapee. She was unsure what he was playing at and remained on her guard.

“It is my duty to collect payment for taking my master’s life. Come willingly and I vow your death will be a quick one. I do not much care for the suffering of children, but a debt must be paid.” It was rather unsettling the way her voice lilted melodically over the cruel words and her eyes never blinked as she watched Harry.

None the less, Avada green eyes held her gaze unwaveringly and she couldn’t help but think of a porcelain doll the way they shined, the way that smooth ivory skin just barely dusted pale rose at his cheeks and the full child-like pouted lips looked stained from the cherry lollies she remembered from her childhood that left phantom tangs on her tongue. In a moment of drifting focus, she mauled over thoughts of brushing his shining raven hair reverently, putting him in pretty clothes, and sitting him on her shelf so those cleaving eyes could slice through everyone who dared cross their path with
arctic precision. She imagined some of the more irritating cowards she’d worked with before Azkaban kneeling and trembling under the weight of that gaze and waiting in the haunting silence as he was doing to her now.

Harry spoke up and drew back the attention of the witch when he noticed her eyes beginning to glaze.

“That would be entirely unnecessary. I’m afraid you do not know the whole truth, for your master is, in fact, still very much alive.” The simplicity of the statement only put Bellatrix more on edge, Harry could see it in her suddenly ridged posture.

“Tsk, tsk, such young children should not tell lies.” She crooned, the jackal behind her aristocratic face bleeding through. Harry pushed down any annoyance at being called a child and continued.

“If I were trying for my life, I would hardly use that as a means of bargaining. All I am doing is informing you that your master is alive, and therefore you might need to reassess this need for revenge. Besides, as I see it, you are at the sword’s tip,” Harry nodded towards the circle of dementors just waiting for his say-so. “I am offering you the chance to go find your master and not try to attempt something that will only end needlessly in your death.”

“Even if you were telling the truth, why tell me this?” She asked skeptically.

Harry pursed his lips as he thought.

“Let’s just say that there are many shifting pieces on the board right now but the sides are too uneven. The more variables, the more outcomes to aim for. My offer is as stands, either you leave this place and go in search of the Dark Lord, or I hand you over to the dementors. It’s rather simple, and if you go searching and cannot find your master, I will still be here or within reach.” The frivolity in which Harry accepted his possible death would lead Bellatrix to either give up right then, or call his bluff—not that it was a bluff. Harry already had a fairly good idea of which she would choose.

Bellatrix glanced once again between the dementors and Harry before smirking slyly.

“You are rather the enigma, Harry Potter. This isn’t over, little bird, for I see you and do not doubt I will come back for you. I am quite fond of puzzles and ‘convoluted’ seems to trail over you like a cloak.” Bellatrix grinned ferally, tone becoming rough and reedy with the challenge. “Until we meet
again, commandant of dementors and enticingly frigid child.” With a dramatic whirl of wicked obsidian curls and dirty black dress folds, Bellatrix Lestrange disapparated with a disturbing cackle that echoed through the winter air rapidly approaching night for moments after she’d already gone.

[I apologize for not asking you first, it was disrespectful of me to do so, but that witch has become an important piece in the grand scheme of things and I could get quite a lot of use out of her. This will, of course, be considered a favor on your part and I will owe you whatever you see fit] Harry graciously apologized, having not planned on letting her go until he was already too deep in pushing her down the path he wanted. The dementors drifted closer at a relaxed pace and one close to him raised a hand in appeasement.

[Quiet, young Harry, it is alright. From what we can gather, the wizards do not truly expect us to catch her for she is rather . . . slippery. To know that we were able to hunt her and catch the witch was enough entertainment for us, the cost of this favor will not be steep, so do not fret.]

With a grateful nod from Harry, the dementors departed and Harry began to make his way back to the castle as quick as he dared on the icy path. In Harry’s churning tarred thoughts on the journey back, he barely noticed his fingers slipping into an inner cloak pocket and brushing softly over the warm metal within.

The smart scratch of an expensive quill over rough parchment and aggravated huffs were the only sound filling the empty classroom. The reflected sunlight refracted off the sparkling snow outside and beamed in through the windows, making the DADA classroom unusually bright and welcoming. The haughty professor glared down his large hooked nose at the abysmal essay currently being inked with an almost grotesque amount of red slashes of ink that was too similar to the color of arterial blood to settle right with him.

Snape was just slapping said essay aggressively onto the growing pile of failed course work when his name was called to grab his attention. Startled that he’d not heard anyone approach, Severus’ head snapped up and he nearly choked on his own tongue. Headmaster Albus Percival Wolfic Brian Dumbledore, Supreme Mugwump, Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot and defeater of the Dark Lord Grindelwald, was currently discussing the practicality of investing in new desks for the students while clad in nothing but a tight sky blue speedo with one hand on the back of his head and the other hand on his hip as he rolled his hips in a rhythmic fashion.

Snape sat horrified at all of the exposed wrinkled skin and liver spots while the old wizard then cranked it up a hundred notches by hiking his foot up on Snape’s desk and continuing the graphic motion. Snape felt supremely ill but his torment did not end there. One after another, his colleagues entered the class room to talk about other inconsequential drivel while dressed in highly inappropriate
attire and proceeding to thrust, gyrate, jiggle, and grope as some sort of strange music filled the room until it shook his bones and he felt like his stomach would never settle again.

From McGonagall in lime spandex and a tube top working on her downward dog to Hagrid in metallic gold hot pants rubbing baby oil on his oh so hairy chest jumping and jerking to the beat to Flitwick in neon pink fishnet stockings and platform heels doing the sensual Macarena to Madam Pomfrey throwing her rump every which way in a grass skirt and coconut-bra, Severus wanted to ripe his eyes from his skull but the realm that must have been hell would not allow him to close his eyes or look away.

With a horrified shout, Severus shot up straight in his bed, clutching at his chest and breathing hard as the images continued to pour in like he were not yet awake. Groaning, Snape viciously rubbed at his eyes and wished the recent insanity plaguing his every waking minute would just end! He didn’t know how many times he could watch Dumbledore give him a lap dance before he truly went mad.

Chapter End Notes

There you guys go! A lot of you really wanted some mentally-tortured-Snape content, so there it is! I may or may not put more in later, but hopefully that is enough visuals for everyone. And yes, I’m aware that the bit with Severus involves a lot of muggle references her probably shouldn’t know, but that section really isn’t plot oriented and made mostly for humor, so it’s of little consequence!

Anyways! Thank you all for all of the love and support! It makes my entire week every time I find another comment from one of you (yes, I read every single one of them, even if I’m super bad at replying or contributing to what fantastic thing you guys all have to say!) Have a wonderful day/evening everyone!

-Pleasant Readings!
It Ain't Easy Being Immortal

Chapter Summary

In the last chapter: Harry sneaks into Gringotts to steal Helga’s cup, putting the tortured dragon there to rest. When Harry returns to Hogsmead, he runs into Bellatrix and saves her from the dementors in exchange for her leaving him alone to look for her master. Snape has some unpleasant dreams.

Chapter Notes

Hey guys! Sorry, yes I know that I skipped a posting date and I'm super sorry! It's just been a little hectic and I haven't been finding the time that I need to really sit down and just write. Hopefully I can get ahead by a few chapters soon so that I won't be late again. Thank you everybody and I hope you all enjoy this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Returning home for winter break, Harry’s spirits rose to incredible heights. He had three of the five Horcruxes, Bellatrix vanished without a trace, and he could tell that the period of just learning the language of the dead would soon be coming to an end. The short conversations he’d held with the dementors must have been enough to prove to Death that he knew the language well enough, for the lessons were centered more around ‘polishing’ what he already knew rather than the rigorous studying he’d been doing up to that point.

All of Harry’s hard work over the past few years was finally providing results and he couldn’t have been happier.

Sirius and Remus noticed the uptick in his mood immediately and began their foolish game of trying to figure out just what had him smiling so much. Unsurprisingly, Sirius kept listing off the names of Harry’s peers—most likely to see if he had a ‘crush’ as they called it. Remus, having had the opportunity to observe Harry’s interactions with the other students, doubted that it had anything to do with infatuation. Harry’s reputation as the ‘Ice Prince’ didn’t come from nowhere, after all.

Either way, it just felt really nice to be home, Harry thought upon entering the Black ancestral home.

The days leading up to Christmas—or Yule, as Sirius called it—were blanketed in thick duvets of
snow as the three remained within the home next to the warm fire or wrapped in a blanket at a window seat with tea or cocoa encased in their fingers. Sirius was able to drag the other two out the day after a particularly large snowfall to play some winter games and build some snowy lumps that barely passed as figures. Although he and Remus had complained the whole way out, when they returned, they were rosy-cheeked and grinning, large flakes still melting in their hair and eyelashes.

When Christmas finally came, Harry found himself sharing in the holiday exuberance as he enjoyed an enormous and syrupy breakfast before sitting down in the warm drawing room with his small family and tearing through the piles of gifts from his friends and guardians. Any gifts that Harry received from the fanatic ‘unknown’s—there were always a few at every birthday and Christmas—were checked by Remus and Sirius before Harry could either decide to keep them or through them out, and he usually threw them away.

He hadn’t a clue how the people who sent the gifts didn’t see how inappropriate it was for strange adults to send gifts to a thirteen-year-old bi-annually. Sure, some were people of power who wanted an opportunity to boost the public’s opinion of them through association—which Harry could mildly understand—but most were just adults who wanted to ‘thank him for his service to society’ and were his ‘fans.’ Harry hadn’t even done anything to garner their attention save for his testimony at Sirius’ trial and the initial fame that came from what happened with Voldemort.

Harry wasn’t ignorant, he knew that there were some his guardians never even let him see. Occasionally he got the odd letter or two while at school that praised everything he did and expressed worrying amounts of devotion and affection. He received newspaper clippings of the very few times his picture had been in the paper usually accompanied with detailed poetry or letters about what he meant to them or misguided declarations of love. If he were anyone else, he would probably be terrified or disgusted, but as it was, Harry just vanished them or set them aflame. He had more important things to worry about than the inappropriate gazes and thoughts of strangers.

Thankfully, Sirius and Remus had gone through all of the parcels he received and checked them for any spells or enchantments before placing them under the tree. That year had to have been the best Christmas Harry had ever had! Basking in the presence of his family, having barely any work to do over break so that he could fully relax, and having the time and head space to really put effort into conquering the patronus charm. Everything seemed to be slotting into place perfectly.

With all that time to himself, it was no wonder that a few days after Christmas, Harry finally found success with the difficult spell. Clearing his mind of everything except the wondrous memories he’d collected over time while only feeding a small amount of magic into his wand, Harry’s patronus finally emerged in the ethereal glowing form of an owl. The form had surprised both him and Remus (though, of course Sirius used the opportunity to make bird/Ravenclaw jokes, which they both ignored).

Harry was certain that his patronus could be a Boelen Python—or at least a bloody snake—but
instead it was this massive, regal looking owl that didn’t look to be of any species he recognized. The wingspan was easily over ten feet with a body as big as Harry’s. The face greatly resembled a barn owl, but the overall appearance of the bird made it seem like something else entirely.

Although Harry was relieved to have finally succeeded, the spell had been incredibly draining on Harry and caused him to take it easy for the remaining days of break.

When he and Remus had to go back for the next term, it was easier that time than it had been in the fall now that Harry had seen with his own eyes how well Sirius was doing even in their absence. He certainly wanted the year to end quickly so that he could return to the old Black residence that had slowly grown into a real home, but he was more at ease knowing that his and Remus’ absence wouldn’t hinder the progress Sirius had made since Azkaban.

The spring term started rather uneventfully aside from one small incident with Michael Corner in the halls between classes. It was nearly a week after returning and Harry was making his way towards the Great Hall when he crossed paths with Michael and a small group of his friends leaning against the wall and laughing about something. As per usual, Michael called out what he probably meant to be demeaning names, but Harry only blinked and continued on his way.

"Oi! Think you’re so superior Potter? Ignoring everyone because they’re so far beneath you.” The unadulterated aggravation in Michael’s voiced caused Harry to pause, if only because it sounded eerily similar to an enraged Dudley whenever Harry ignored him in a similar fashion. Brushing off the brief wave of memories, Harry took a step forward without glancing back at the irate Ravenclaw. Unfortunately, Michael didn’t appreciate the slight and had Harry not had a metaphysical being looming over his shoulder in another plane, he would not have been able to raise a shield fast enough to block and rebound the spell aimed at his back.

At the hideous squealing coming from behind, Harry slowly turned to see Michael on the floor cupping a hand over the two front teeth rapidly growing to disturbing lengths out of his mouth and past his chin. As Michael’s ‘friends’ erupted with raucous laughter all around him, Harry simply raised a black eyebrow before continuing on his way to lunch.

Soon word of the incident spread through the student body and for a while Michael became quite the spectacle for those bored with the rather uneventful procession of the year. Harry, not one to pay much attention to the circulating gossip of Hogwarts, would have completely forgotten the incident if it weren’t for the burning glares he received from Michael whenever he was near.

Instead of pushing it completely from his mind as he usually did, Harry paid a little more attention to the boy. This time, something was different. In the past, Michael would bounce back immediately with vicious rumors of his own or even more taunts and insults, but this time was different. Instead, Michael was almost constantly an angry flush of tomato red and the glares seemed to hold something
far less superficial. Whatever Michael’s tiff with Harry, it had gone from a harmless elementary rivalry to something closer to actual hatred. While keeping an eye on Michael, he also noticed when the boy sought out Morag and they began spending far more time together.

It was thanks to this observation that led to Harry not being surprised at all when those two plus Terry Boot cornered Harry about a week later. Harry had been returning to the dorms quickly to drop of his bag after a trip to the library before dinner. The halls were empty as everyone had already gone down to the Great Hall and the dim lights illuminating the less frequently used staircase cast ominous flickering shadows on the walls and stairs like the phantom figures of students moving about. Harry had just reached the top of the stairs when he looked up to find his way blocked by the trio.

“May I help you?” Harry asked impassively, barely blinking at their defensive posture. Michael immediately sneered at the very sound of his voice.

“You know, I’m so bloody sick of you, Potter! Everyone around here seems to think that you’re the second coming of Merlin, but we know the truth.” Michael’s tone was accusing and the manic gleam in his eyes said that he thought he’d just hit the nail on the head. He was trying to call Harry’s bluff and get the boy to ‘break his façade.’ “You don’t care about anyone but yourself! You’ve got everyone wrapped around your little finger, practically pawing at you for attention, thinking that you’re going to save them from their pathetic existence. But you won’t. You’ll just keep leading them all on, making them think you’re actually worth something. And when they truly need you, you’ll just be another pathetic little half-blood without a mummy or daddy to save you.”

Michael became more worked up the longer he talked, his gestures becoming more erratic and his voice rising in volume. His little speech seemed to rile up his lackeys as well; Morag grinned and some of the nervous fidgeting left Terry when he saw that Harry didn’t immediately retaliate. Morag snorted and took a step closer to Harry.

“You really are pathetic! How’d you do it, huh? How’d you do that little trick in the common room? I bet you got Goldstein to use his magic to intimidate us, after all, he comes from a reputable pureblood family. He probably just felt bad.” Morag’s shrill voice broke into cackling at the end and Michael stepped forward as well, eyes shining and wide as he came far closer to Harry.

“We won’t take it anymore. It’s time someone deserving stood on top for once! You hear that, Potter? Your reign is over!” Michael shouted and shoved Harry’s chest for emphasis. However, Michael had forgotten where they were and his glee morphed into horror as the green-eyed teen stumbled back to the edge of the stairs where he had been standing and tipped over the side where there was no railing and began to fall towards the pale stone stairs almost two floors below. Wide verdant eyes were locked with Michael’s as the boy uselessly reached out to the one who had pushed him. Each second passed agonizingly slow until Harry’s head made contact with ancient stonework with a gut-wrenching crack.
The three stared in abject horror at Harry’s still form on the stairs, pale gaze looking uncharacteristically dull as it stared vacantly up. When a halo of thick dark crimson bloomed behind Harry’s head and began to trickle down the stairs, Morag and Terry jumped away and rushed further into the hall to escape the sight and the crushing reality of what they’d done. Terry immediately lost his stomach contents all over the floor and Morag’s holiday-tan bleached from her skin as she shook from the on-setting shock. Michael only looked away when Terry came back and grabbed his arm to physically rip him back into the hall.

Michael’s eyes were owlishly wide and he didn’t react at all to his friend’s man-handling. Whatever turmoil running through the boy and decaying his thoughts quicker than they could form, it caused Michael to completely shut down—barely even breathing.

“Michael! We have to get out of here before someone shows up!” Terry was trying to drag him away, but Michael was still practically catatonic. The visage of their housemate’s grotesquely empty and still body carved into the backs of their eyes in some kind of divine retribution for their mistake. And oh Merlin, the sound! The brittle and wet crunch of a skull that they never thought could be so fragile. Like a supple egg shell buckling under a too heavy hand.

They were just kids! They didn’t think about their own mortality, they didn’t think about how quickly and easily a life could be snuffed. They never meant any real harm, but now they all seemed to have soaked their hands in the staining red ink of debauchery with no feasible way of ever removing it.

“I—I—. . . I didn’t—” He stumbled over his words weakly as the smaller teen finally was able to force the other into motion, snagging the parchment-pale girl along the way to hopefully get them down to dinner before what had happened was discovered and anyone could connect their absence with recent nightmarish events. They fled from the area, trying and failing to leave their hurricane of thoughts behind with the cooling body on the stairs.

Several long moments later, an angry grunt echoed softly through the stairwell as Harry slowly picked himself back up and rubbed absently at the sticky patch of raven hair dried at the back of his head. With a quick cleansing spell, the teen felt the ridged burn of genuine anger.

‘They just . . . left me?!’ Harry silently seethed as he slowly made his way back up the stairs.
‘That they did. . .’ Harry didn’t notice the distracted tone of his companion as he glided through the halls on furious strides.

Harry was angry. Angry at their stupidity, at their recklessness, but mostly . . . he was angry with himself. How could he ever expect to keep his secret from major players such as Dumbledore, Voldemort, and the Death Eaters if he was so easily done in by a bloody group of children! In that moment of panic, he hadn’t thought of any quick solutions, no arresto momentum’s or cushioning charms to protect him from the fall, he just allowed himself to die in front of three of his housemates that he clearly couldn’t trust.

Harry wasn’t skilled enough in the mind-arts to perform an Obliviate, that was a spell that he would need sufficient practice in a controlled environment to be able to successfully perform, so that was out of the question. Harry fell more along the lines of ‘morally grey’ but he was not about to kill them just to keep his secret. No, Harry’s best option was to leave it be. They would never tell anyone because that would be admitting to what they did to him, and even if they tried, they would not be believed.

Harry made it to the dorms and dropped off his things before making his way to the Great Hall at a much slower pace so that whatever emotions the three Ravenclaws were stewing in would have more time to really settle in. To take a life—accidentally or not—was no small thing, especially when Harry had never really done anything wrong and despite his lack of visible activity, he was still the ‘Boy-Who-Lived’ and ‘Savior of the Wizarding World’ which they would realize the longer they had to take in what they’d done.

Harry slipped quietly into the Great Hall, barely noticed by anyone as he kept his eyes on a particularly stricken trio of Ravenclaws. None of them noticed his approach. Morag and Terry sat across from Michael, who was sitting on the side of the table Harry was on. Stopping just behind the boy, Harry’s silent anger boiled with the arctic burn of his magic, dropping the temperature a few degrees around the boy. When Morag and Terry saw him, they froze in utter terror.

Reaching out, one of Harry’s painfully cold hands settled in a firm grip on Michael’s shoulder and he visibly flinched. Leaning down so that Harry could talk directly into his ear, Harry’s whispered tone tottered dangerously on the edge of parseltongue.

“If you ever try anything like that again, I will not be so forgiving. And if you tell anyone about what happened, know that there is no protection in the world that can keep me from you.” Michael tried his best to quell the trembling by tensing his body, but Harry could still feel it from where his hand still gripped his shoulder.

The surrounding Ravenclaws wisely ignored the interaction, the only acknowledgement being a few restrained sneers or glares cast at the shaken trio. They didn’t know what Harry was saying or what
they’d done to deserve the full brunt of the ‘Ice Prince’s cutting disdain, but they knew that those three in particular had been harassing Harry since his first year and whatever they received was most likely well deserved.

Moving his hand from Michael’s shoulder to gently pat the boy’s head—causing another flinch—Harry straightened and made his way to his own group, feeling infinitely better.

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Later that same night, Harry decided to take a trip down to the Chamber of Secrets to blow off the last bits of steam he still held onto from the incident. Knowing that it would be a safe spell to cast in the perpetually damp and cavernous chamber, Harry practiced with fiend fire. The spell was exhausting to control for those without much experience, but Harry was hoping it would be exactly what he needed to extinguish the last bits of his own fire.

Harry was in the middle of coaxing a house cat made entirely of wild flame when his companion spoke for the first time since his brief comment after Harry had been revived.

‘What happened earlier was unacceptable. I thought that preparing you as much as I could in normal wizarding magic would be enough for the time being to keep you safe, but I was wrong. I am moving my plans up ahead of what I had originally set out. I was going to wait until this summer, but I think—in light of recent events—we should begin your teachings as soon as possible.’ Death sounded slightly put-out, but Harry’s exploding excitement quickly reformed it into amusement and mild excitement of his own. It had been so long since a wizard had come to him, seeking knowledge in his particular branch of magic.

Harry finited the fiend fire quickly before his emotions fueled it into becoming something far larger and completely out of his control. The day’s events forgotten, Harry eagerly awaited his first real lesson.

With a forceful gust of swirling winds and the icy bite of magic in the air, a huge tome appeared on the ground before Harry in a plume of black smoke. Kneeling before the book, Harry reached out and reverently smoothed his hand over the surface. The book was encased in black ancient-looking organic material that he couldn’t tell whether it was leather or scales of some sort. There were no markings or titles on the outside of the book and the pages were locked behind very strange looking lock on the side.

‘Speak your name in my language, it has to catalog who is using it for security reasons. There are secrets that lie within this book that no mortal has ever known, and it must stay that way.’ Harry
immediately obeyed and spoke his full name to the book. After a moment, a soft click resonated from within the lock and Harry felt a gust of cold magic sweep over him when he cracked open the tome.

As soon as Harry’s eyes landed on the small, elegant handwritten text in the language of the dead, his eyes hungrily drank in the introduction the tome provided. Harry only stopped reading when his companion informed him that the sun was about to rise and he should make his way back to the dorms so as not to rouse suspicion. Harry hadn’t even finished the introduction. Once Harry had closed and locked the book, it vanished into the veil and he felt reluctant to let it go.

Suddenly, a tired feeling washed over Harry as he made the journey back into the school, for he realized then that it was unlikely he would be doing much sleeping for the remainder of the term.

Chapter End Notes

There it is! We reached 100K!! We're about to begin Soul Magic and still have two horcruxes left to find. Comment below and tell me what you guys think is going to happen next or what the Soul Magic will be like! I already know how I'm going to be doing it but I really don't talk to you guys enough, I definitely want to start doing that more.
Chapter Summary

In the last chapter: Harry finally successfully cast a patronus in the form of a great white owl. When Harry returned to Hogwarts, a conflict arises between Harry and Michael. Michael, Terry, and Morag confront Harry and Michael accidentally pushes him down the stairs and kills him. Harry scares the daylights out of the three when he comes back to life, and Harry begins learning soul magic.

Chapter Notes

Hey guys! I know that this chapter is a little late (Sorry!!) but these last few chapters I wasn't 100% into it because I was too focused and excited about the things to come /After/ this chapter! I will try to be on time next update. Thank you all for coming this far and I hope you all enjoy this chapter! Have a wonderful evening everybody!

-Pleasant Readings!

Necromancy, as it turned out, was not exactly what Harry had been expecting. From the introduction in Death’s book, Harry gathered a few key bits of information about the form of magic. For one thing, soul magic and necromancy—in the world of magic, at least—were synonymous. Since the soul is considered neither dead nor alive, it’s considered to be a representation of the point between life and death, and the duality of the two is the basis for ‘necromancy.’ You cannot have one without the other.

Soul magic—or necromancy—was actually a far broader classification of magic, centering more on the elemental than wands and spells. It involved rituals, invocations, materials, sacrifices, and the consequences of doing a spell wrong were more severe.

The first ‘chapter’ kept Harry busy for a good month and a half. It didn’t have to do with actual spell work, it was more a series of complex cleansing rituals he had to perform on himself and when those were finished, he needed to do a few more rituals to strengthen his mental, emotion, physical, and metaphysical constitutions.

The rituals were far more . . . gritty than he’d been expecting. The modern form of magic that he was used to using (spells, charms, hexes, etc.) were so clean and precise; they’d been developed and evolved over centuries to be made easier, safer. These rituals, however, felt arcane in nature.
Drawing circles of complex runes, using raw materials or potion ingredients as the conduits of magic rather than a wand, long periods of constant chanting until something finally gave, the pure exhausting act of conjuring up and holding onto emotions in their most volatile or raw states.

At one point, Harry literally had to strip down and scrub the gritty concoction of sand, dirt, sea water, and blood into his skin to replicate his rebirth and symbolically represent his continuous journeys between life and death. Interesting in theory, not so fun in practice.

All of these rituals of course took place in the chamber. Which meant that he only had a small window to actually perform them, add onto that the time it took to discretely gather all of the materials he needed and possible times that the ritual was most effective and you have very little time to sleep and it taking exceedingly long to complete the initial round of rituals.

The rituals did little that was really noticeable. Mostly, they left Harry feeling drained, lethargic, and rather content—like how one might feel after a refreshing nap or full night’s sleep. He did notice, however, that the more powerful the spell, the more those pleasant and rewarding feelings came and the longer they stayed. When Harry asked Death, the being just blandly explained that he was doing things the ‘right way’ he was having a very positive reaction to the magic and that it was ‘rewarding’ him. Whatever that meant.

After the purification and strengthening rituals, the next little bit before Harry could begin delving in to actual spells, were totems. The significance of totems spanned across oceans and millennia, being found in all sorts of cultures throughout time. In general, totems could be anything as long as it was believed to have spiritual significance. For Harry’s purposes, though, there was only one he really needed to move forward.

One totem to serve as a grounding or focal point when performing the magic. One to represent Harry’s relationship with both life and death. More than any of the ingredients for the rituals, the materials for the totem were the most difficult to procure. First, to serve as the chain or cord that would allow Harry to wear the totem like a necklace, he needed a lock of hair from a woman who had died in childbirth. The natural paradox of the creation of life from death holding incredible magic, even if it came from a magicless muggle.

It was more difficult for Harry to take than he’d thought it would be. Not in the sense of getting his hands on such a thing—it was rather easy apparating into the morgue of a muggle hospital and finding what he needed. Just . . . it was a different thing entirely to actually be faced with the sight of still young woman who had gone into labor early and was too far from the hospital when the baby came. Out of respect, Harry had demanded to hear her story and know her name from his companion before he pulled up a stool and began lowly incanting while he braiding a small lock of silky long black hair.
Because this magic did not allow for the blatant desecration of the dead, in exchange, Harry cut a lock of his own—much shorter—hair and wove it in with hers. After that, there was only two more things he needed for his totem. Unfortunately, one was not much better than the first item. Harry had to go out and get seven skulls from witches and wizards who had not received a proper burial. With the help of Death, he found them all in one exhausting, sleepless night. Once he had them all, they were cleansed, rubbed with salts, and shrunken to the size of a silver sickle with small holes through the temporal plates so that they could be strung onto the braided hair.

The last bit that he needed was far easier to find and he was able to actually buy from a store rather than steal; enough beads made out of black volcanic glass to have three beads between each skull on the necklace. Once the totem was assembled, Harry used his own blood to paint a rune on the small ivory dome of each skull. The runes were for water, fire, earth, air, life, death, and lastly, self at the very center. The braided lock was long enough for Harry to easily slip the totem over his head.

With the totem completed, he was finally able to begin learning the spells he’d waited years for. Now, if only he could find a spell that would put an end to Death’s smug remarks about his ‘protégé’s rapid progression through the material. Even if he did owe him that one.

Anthony had been keeping a close eye on his friend since their return to Hogwarts. Without the one on one training sessions they’d had over the summer, the young teen found it increasingly difficult to catch Harry with his guard down. Without the brief moments of translucency the raven haired boy expressed during a tangle of rapid spells, Anthony had to resort to looking less with his eyes and more with his magic to gauge the state his friend was in.

In retrospect, it sounded ridiculous. Anthony was Harry’s closest friend and yet he knew and accepted that the other was still donning his iron skin whenever he drifted too close. But that was just Harry for you. So, Anthony had to keep tabs in other ways, like keeping himself open to be able to sense Harry’s magic, mentally taking note of his comings and goings, and what effect of whatever he was up to had on the ‘external self’ he projected.

At first there was nothing really out of the ordinary with Harry, but after winter break, things shifted slightly.

For starters, Anthony knew that something had happened between Harry and Michael’s little group. Anthony didn’t know what, but the complete 180 the three had done around Harry made it obvious. They went from hateful glares and spat insults to pale, jittery messes. Whatever happened, it had caused all three to begin losing sleep and practically sprinting away whenever Harry was in the area. When he asked Harry what had happened, the raven haired boy simply told him he’d ‘taken care of it’ and that it was nothing to be concerned about. Anthony knew it was yet another thing that fell
under the long list of secrets Harry was currently keeping.

Aside from that, Anthony also noticed the change in Harry. His friend had always been calm and composed, his walls up and fortified at all times, but now it was different—something was distracting Harry. Whatever it was, it was consuming all of his spare time—*including his sleep*—and distracting him from the careful control he held over his ‘external self.’ The Ravenclaw had quite clearly taken on an *obsession.* Anthony could only hope that whatever it was, it wasn’t too dangerous.

Harry’s peculiar behavior had even caught the attention of Draco and Hermione who thought it might have to do with Harry’s excessive course load, even though his impeccable academic performance remained intact.

Anthony respected Harry and his judgment, so he would not step in unless he saw with his own eyes that his friend was in over his head.

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The term came to an end with a mix of both highs and lows. The rapidly warming weather beckoned in another big win for the Ravenclaw quidditch team and Harry made leaps and bounds in his progress with the soul magic, being officially acknowledged as a ‘*competent necromancer*’ by Death. Unfortunately, one of the lows involved Remus getting a notice during the last week of school that he would not be invited back in the fall to teach.

Apparently, Snape had gone over everyone’s heads to personally owl several powerful parents just *who* and *what* was teaching their children magic. The parents had demanded Remus’ removal and some even asked that legal action be made against his guardian. Though, thankfully Dumbledore finally stepped in to appease those parents.

To say that Harry had been livid would have been an understatement. His fierce protectiveness rearing its dangerous head and he was only *just* stopped from taking extreme action by Remus, who only seemed resigned to matter—not at all surprised. Remus had seen the look in his young charge’s eyes when he delivered the news and had warned Harry against doing anything, promising a long summer confined within Grimmauld Place without access to the vast library if he did so.

Reluctantly, Remus explained to Harry the awful event that had taken place when he was in school. The horrible prank Sirius had tried to play on Severus by luring him out into the forbidden forest on a night of the full moon. Severus had almost died out there and Remus clearly still hadn’t fully forgiven his partner for the cruel and careless act. Harry couldn’t blame him.
Although that bit of information explained a lot of Snape’s animosity towards Remus, it still did not prevent Harry from confronting his potions professor after class the next day.

Severus hadn’t looked at all surprised when Harry approached his desk after the last student left. The severe man didn’t even look up from his task of marking the labeled potion bottles on his desk to note attendance. Harry just waited him out, knowing that in his next class they would just be revising all hour and it was the prime opportunity to skip without repercussion.

After several more long moments, Snape sighed in agitation and looked up to give Harry an impatient glare. Even with the man’s full attention, Harry waited silently, knowing that his long silences usually put people on edge and gave him the slightest upper-hand.

“What?” The hissed word was expelled with such force in the otherwise silent classroom that it was quite jarring, though Harry barely reacted.

“I understand that, because of your history together, it has been rather tense and uncomfortable for you and my guardian, Remus Lupin.” Severus’ upper lip subconsciously curled in disdain, but Harry continued on without faltering. “However, I find it hard to understand why you have forgone professionalism in exchange for fulfillment of personal vendetta’s. It is no secret that you wish to take over the DADA position for yourself, but this is the first time you have taken such initiative in ousting the current professor, not mention the fact that out of our last three DADA professors, Lupin has been the most competent without a shadow of a doubt.” At this, Severus didn’t react other than the slightest uncomfortable shift in his posture. Although, Harry didn’t expect much of a reaction; Snape was a Slytherin and—more importantly—an adult, he would have a decent handle on his composure.

“Mr. Potter, I do not think that it is a student’s place to question the actions of their elder. Also, for your information, I was concerned with the safety of my students. It is the right of the parents to know who is around their children.”

“Is it not my place, though? We, students, see far more than anyone else in this school and yet our concerns are ignored when we speak up and action is taken on our behalves when there isn’t a problem to begin with. Do not patronize me, professor. I do not recall there ever being letters sent home when a very valuable item was stored here after someone extremely dangerous tried to steal it from Gringotts my first year, nor did anyone inform the parents about the lethal protections placed on said item that nearly killed three first year students. Or how about when a basilisk was roaming these halls and petrifying students left and right, we were only so incredibly lucky that no student looked directly in its eyes and died. Pardon me, but I do believe that a man with a manageable affliction that has been deemed safe enough to be my guardian is far less dangerous than everything else that seems to happen every year in this blasted school!” Harry’s hard pale verdant eyes bore deeply into
challenging obsidian, unwilling to crumble against the older man’s iron will.

“If you are here to lecture me, Potter, it will be of no use, the school board’s action is final.” Snape’s cutting tone held the faintest note of defensiveness, which Harry immediately picked up on.

“I am not daft, professor, I am aware of this. I just hope that, moving forward, you will take your stature more seriously and get over these childish and ignorant mannerisms of yours. I have accepted the fact that my parentage is difficult for you and you have trouble separating me from my late father, but there are other students out there who are suffering because of your irrational, and frankly, toxic behavior. If you want people to blame, if you want to aggravate and antagonize people, try taking our side, you will find an abundance of people looking to control and mold us that you can butt heads with. Perpetuating the house rivalry only makes you just as culpable as everyone who tried to tear apart you and my mother. Be our voice and you will be surprised by what we have to say.” With that, Harry turned and left the classroom, having finally made his peace. Whatever Snape did after that was out of his hands.

Meanwhile, the stiff potions professor deflated with an arduous sigh as his dropped his face into his hands. With a budding fog of dread in his gut, Severus was staring to see his actions for the first time in the harsh and unforgiving light of day. He just hoped that the damage he’d done was not irreparable.

Two days before Harry left Hogwarts for the summer, Death rewarded all of his hard work for the soul magic with the location of the next Horcrux. Of course, the Horcrux just happened to be only a few floors above him all that time—and in the incredible legendary Room of Requirement that would have been invaluable to him the past three years.

Harry excitement fizzled when he saw the towering piles of precariously stacked junk in the Room of Hidden Things. Knowing that his companion could not guide him any further than that, Harry deflated once facing the daunting task of having to search for the Horcrux. None the less, he did not back down or try to beg more information out of his amused ethereal friend.

Harry began wandering through the mountains of lost objects aimlessly, hoping beyond all hope that he would just happen upon the Horcrux and would be back in the dorms before curfew. As the minutes seemed to be greedily devoured by the beastly piles, however, that wish drifted further and further from his reach.

After several hours of searching, Harry grew frustrated and switched to a different tactic. Harry took
several calming breaths and closed his eyes. Slipping into a practiced state of meditation that had him clearing his mind and slowly garnering awareness of every inch of his body, Harry eventually gathered his magic and slowly fed it into the space around him like a lazy ripple. Harry made sure that the magic was spread incredibly thin so as not to immediately exhaust his core.

Even with spreading it thin, Harry was already feeling the strain not even halfway through the room. Cool sweat formed on his forehead and the back of his neck as he reached half-way. A few moments later, a tremble took hold of his body and his breathing became slightly labored. He could feel every magical item his magic passed over, which was almost everything in the room. By the time his magic finally gathered around an object like a magnet, Harry was feeling the beginnings of magical exhaustion.

Letting go of all of his magic other than a thin thread leading him in the right direction, Harry quickly made his way back towards the entrance until he came upon the right pile. Harry frantically dug through the base of the pile until he uncovered a slightly tarnished blue and silver diadem that practically sang the moment Harry’s fingers made contact. Clutching the Horcrux close, the raven collapsed in a heap in order to rest a moment before he got up and snuck back into the dorms.

With yet another Horcrux collected, Harry returned home feeling like he was back on top of his luck. Just one Horcrux to go. With everything brewing around him, Harry knew that the upcoming summer would be the most exciting yet.
The sky was a deceiving pale grey that promised shade and relent from the summer heat. Instead, it left the air thick and humid, filling the lungs with lethargic dense clouds that were heavy and hard to drag back out. Harry’s stomach was in knots, his excitement a flat press of a cool blade against his mind as he gently trailed his fingertips down the thin brittle bones of a snake skeleton still nailed to the decrepit wooden door.

A week had passed since school let out and once he’d settled in and found some time to himself, Death wasted no time directing him towards the last Horcrux. He was shocked to hear that the final Horcrux also contained one of his friends hallows. The Resurrection Stone. As fascinated as he was, Harry had no desire to use the stone. He had no need for summoning shades from the peace of the afterlife.

The Horcrux was a ring that had belonged to the Gaunt family, but was stolen by Tom’s father.
When Tom killed him, he got the ring back, made it into another Horcrux and hid it in the abandoned Gaunt house. Which is where Harry now stood.

The house was more of a shack than a place where people actually lived and looked like it could be blown down by a strong wind. The wood rotting away quicker than normal under the broken and malevolent magic that had seeped into the property from its previous owners. The residual magic eroded at Harry’s, making him feel more uncomfortable with every passing moment he stood there.

Without any more preamble, Harry stepped inside. The inside was no less worse for wear than the outside, dust covered everything, the spiders had clearly taken residence if the thick curtains of webs were anything to go by, and various creeping plants and weeds had slipped in through broken windows and cracks in the walls to reclaim the home as theirs.

But there was something else there, as well. A thick atmosphere that Harry could practically taste; a splash of rich black cherry cut through with the bitter sweet bite of dark chocolate. It was not quite alluring in nature, but still intoxicatingly dangerous. Harry hesitantly wandered around the main room, only stopping when he stood where it seemed the most concentrated—the very middle of the room. Since that area was barren, Harry knelt down and skimmed his fingers over the surface of the stripped wooden floors. There was something underneath, something of immense dark magic.

Harry easily pried the already loose board up to find a small compartment with a wooden box within. It was clear that the magic had nothing to do with the Horcrux itself—no other Horcruxes had behaved in such a way—and clearly Harry was dealing with an incredibly dark curse. Setting the box on the ground next to the compartment, Harry slowly flipped the lid with the tip of his wand, not wanting to touch it just in case.

As he suspected, inside lay the crude gold ring with a black stone that he’d been looking for and was indeed the item that had been so heavily cursed. Cupping a hand over his nose and mouth, Harry tried not to choke on the overwhelming smell and taste of black cherries and chocolate. Carefully dumping the ring out from the box onto the floor, Harry pulled out his totem and put it on while forcing himself to breathe through his mouth.

Slicing open the pad of his thumb with a cutting hex, Harry began to chant as he ignored the grimy floor in order to begin drawing the crude visage of Ouroboros, the serpent devouring its own tail for eternity. With that done, Harry ended the first part of the chant and harshly spit on the ring before starting up the second part as he dragged his bleeding thumb in a circle around the snake twice. The ring began to shake and spin as it slowly lifted a foot into the air above the bloody drawing.

The magic pooled under Harry’s skin as his body became his conduit and his head tipped back as his eyes slid shut. His body hummed with power as he carefully stripped away the layers of the dark curse from the ring without damaging it or the Horcrux, his hands hovering in the air—not quite
touching the ring.

Like the cracking of stiff joints, Harry felt his magic suddenly give way and the curse leaving the ring with a sharp sound. When the curse was successfully removed, the dark magic skimmed over his own briefly before dissipating and Harry was left drained and triumphant as he apparated back home with the ring.

With all of the Horcruxes obtained, he was eager to join them together and begin planning how he was going to get them back to Voldemort (hopefully without dying again).

‘What’s next, then?’ Harry inquired, excitement buzzing under his skin as he silently consulted his companion in the darkness of his bedroom as he lay awake and restless.

‘Patience, little one. Remember, we need to wait until Tom makes a move of his own towards his resurrection, that is the only time he will be vulnerable and bodiless. If we were to try to force the remainder of his soul upon him while he holds a body, it would be far too much and would end in disaster.’ Death replied, causing Harry to sink a little in disappointment. Death may have an eye on Voldemort at all times, but Harry didn’t; he didn’t know if they were at all close to the resurrection, or if it was years away.

‘Is there anything we can do? Or do we just have to sit and wait?’ No, that was not bitterness in his voice, he was just . . . a little frustrated at all of the delays. When Death spoke again, he sounded amused, which Harry pointedly ignored.

‘Actually, there is something we can do to nudge him along the right path a little quicker.’ The being drawled, testing Harry’s recently short patience by drawing it out longer than need be.

‘Well?’ Harry could practically feel the morbid, skeletal grin his companion wore in that moment.

‘The stone.’ It was all that was said, but the silence that followed was busy with rolling clouds of thoughts and the pleasant hum of plans being stitched together. Right as Harry began slipping into sleep, he noted that there was someone he needed to get back in touch with that probably wouldn’t be thrilled by the reunion.
The box sat innocuously on the scuffed and worn oak desk. Pristine black velvet stretched over hard plains, adorned with a delicate silver silk ribbon wrapping around the box and tied off in a neat bow. Tucked under the tails of the bow was a plain white envelope addressed to the very same Auror that now stared down at the mysterious box with apprehension.

Philias Henry Green plopped heavily down into his chair, frown unwavering. The Ministry employee who had delivered it had said that the only spell on the box was a strong security spell that prevented anyone but the intended recipient from opening it, which made it technically safe, and that the box had just shown up among the other mail, not coming by owl. However, one did not live a double life as an Auror and secret Death Eater without unhealthy amounts of paranoia and survive. So, when Phil picked up the envelope and saw no return address on its cover, he became extremely cautious.

Opening the letter, Phil found that it only contained a short note, but the contents had him freezing in place.

*I know what you are and who you really work for. If you wish for this information to remain private, then meet me at the Leaky Cauldron in room 8 at midnight tonight to discuss your . . . incentives to keep me quiet. Bring the box with you. If you are not there by the stroke of midnight, all of wizarding Britain will know of your duplicity by morning.*

-A Friend

By the end, Phil’s hand subconsciously curled around the threatening note until the parchment creaked in his tight fist. With a jittery glance around, the Auror quickly vanished the note and shoved the box into a large pocket in his leather coat.

Phil had hoped that with the fall of his master, his life as an Auror could become real, that the fake life he’d constructed around himself could really be *his*. It was his naivety that most likely led him to being caught. The life he thought he’d left behind was now nipping at his heels and threatening to drag him under. Well, then he’d just have to eliminate the threat and then he can go back to his life, go back to pretending to be the hero so hard that he could begin to believe it himself.

Oh, he’d certainly be going later that night, but not to give in to the demands of some fool who thought they could make a pretty penny playing with fire. He would do *anything* for this beautiful lie. Even if it meant once again donning the shadows he thought he’d left behind.
With only minutes remaining, Philias Green emerged from the shadowed alley beside the pub with his deep hood up to cover half of his face while the rest was blurred by a disillusionment charm. From the moment he entered the rowdy pub, Phil kept his head down and moved with purpose, not even stopping at the counter to chat with the inn keeper, Tom.

Up the stairs and all the way down to the end of the hall, Phil paused outside the door to check the time with a *tempus* spell and listen for a spare moment for movement within the room, but it remained quiet. One hand on the door knob and the other raised and ready with his wand pointed true, Phil steeled himself for a moment.

Ripping open the door and striding through, the deadly curse caught in his throat when his eyes landed on the only other occupant in the room. Phil stumbled to a halt and simply stared in utter bafflement as Harry bloody Potter casually turned his head to him as he sipped at a steaming cup of tea. A dark brow rose curiously over vibrant and unnerving light green eyes.

“**Wha—**”

“Come, have a seat Mr. Green.” Harry cut in, looking not at all uneased by the wand that was still leveled at his face, left forgotten by the stunned man before him.

Numbly, Phil dropped his hand down to his side and walked over to the round table where the young teen was sat. Another steaming cup of tea appeared before him when he sat, but he didn’t touch it. The door, which he’d left open in his shock, softly closed without a single spell uttered and Phil was jolted out of his trance by the faint click.

“What the hell is going on?” He demanded, his confusion morphing into frustrated anger. Harry calmly set his cup down as he examined Phil blankly.

“What do you mean? I do believe that we are having our meeting, as planned.” Phil’s stomach dropped into his shoes at the thought that *Harry Potter* was the one who knew his secret, who was blackmailing him. Not only would everyone believe the kid if he were to accuse Phil of working for Voldemort, but now there’s no way he could possibly ‘get rid of the threat.’ And if all of that wasn’t hard enough to process, there’s also the fact that *the fucking Savior of the Wizarding World is fucking blackmailing him!* The kid’s only, what, thirteen?! It’s insane!

“Actually,” Harry continued, as if the man before him was *not* silently imploding, “The reason I asked you to come here was *not* to get money out of you or threaten you. I assure you, Mr. Green,
your secret is quite safe with me. I wanted to ask you for a favor.” He said pleasantly. Phil immediately scoffed in disbelief.

“A favor? You’ve got to be taking the piss! Why not just ask me then? Why go through all . . . this?” Phil exclaimed, waving a hand vaguely to the room and themselves.

“Because the favor I am asking for is not strictly legal and would require your status as a Death Eater, not an Auror. I cannot simply pop into the office where anyone can see us together, and although I am asking, it should be noted that I do know some sensitive information about you and I do not intend for my request to be turned down.” Harry answered, sounding nothing like the young teen that he was supposed to be.

Phil’s expression hardened when he recognized the thinly veiled threat for what it was. There had always been something unnerving about Harry Potter, ever since the little devil had first shown up at the Ministry and demanded Phil take him to Azkaban to see the man that had betrayed his parents. It felt as though Harry always knew far more than he ever let on and that he was constantly ten steps ahead of everyone else. Now Phil knew that he was. Harry was clearly not the pure and righteous savior they had all expected him to be, the kid was playing for a side and Phil suddenly had no idea which.

“So, what? You want me to sniff out other Death Eaters to save my own hide? You want help taking down the dark wizards and witches? You want me to rough up some school bullies?” Phil’s tone was flat and slightly condescending, but Harry didn’t outwardly react.

“No. With your help, we’re going to save the greatest man to ever live.” The words held a conviction unfitting for someone so young. It was a tone Phil had heard before, during the first war and while he was still in school. Both sides had been recruiting Hogwarts students as quickly as they could, getting to them as young as possible for their spies and soldiers as soon as they left school. He heard that tone from the ones who held die-hard convictions about their beliefs, the ones who knew only the path before them, the ones who saw no other end than through their cause.

And now he heard it again, straight out of boy who lived, and he had a feeling that it was not for the light.

He wasn’t sure if he wanted to know, but he knew he had to. “And who might that be?”

Harry didn’t answer him, just tilted his head slightly and appeared to be studying the older man for a long moment.
“Tell me, Mr. Green, why did you become a Death Eater?” The question caught Phil so off guard that he stumbled over his words before spitting out the truth without really stopping to think about the consequences.

“I-Well-I-uh... I was young, I guess. There were things wrong with the world and I was angry, angry that things were not as nice or fair as everyone tried to make them seem. It was the middle of a war, my peers were dying or loosing family or being torn apart by the sudden demand for ‘picking sides.’ At the time, it wasn’t really an option to leave school and get a normal job and stay out of the fight; many of us knew that we would not live to see our eighteenth or nineteenth birthdays. Because of that, I was angry.

“And Voldemort... well, sure he was a bit off his rocker in his methods, he was violent and he nurtured some of the prejudices that the dark pureblood families held to make his cause more appealing, or whatever... but there was something else to it. It’s hard to explain, but there was this life, this passion and drive behind the man that was infectious. He made us feel like what we were doing was the most important thing in the world—that we could change the world. We weren’t just a rebellion, we were a revolution! We were an idea and an unstoppable force that could save the world that was crumbling under corruption and false morals.” A spark ignited in Phil that he’d thought long since extinguished. Thinking about the first few years of his time as a ‘freedom fighter’ as he’d seen it then brought up the memories and emotions that had first gotten him into a situation he never thought he’d escape from. Which now turned out to be right.

The light dimmed inside him a little as he thought about the time following those first few glorious years.

“Then something changed. It was no longer a movement, but a purposeless slaughter of enemies and innocents alike. He became the monster everyone now remembers him as. Those who had loyally sworn themselves to him in solidarity became his slaves, our badges of honor became our collars and leashes.” Phil trailed off, having been swept away by his memories, he soon came back to himself, having remembered exactly who he was sharing his war memories with.

Harry leaned forward and captured Phil’s gaze, expression serious and surprisingly open and genuine like Phil had never seen on the teen before.

“That man, the one who had purpose and actual beliefs, the one whose conviction could divide an entire country for the sake of changing society, the one who gained comrades and not followers, the one who flickered through the monster and gave you something to believe in, that is the one we’re going to save.” Harry allowed his words to take hold, but continued before Phil could really start freaking out. “There was a man before ‘Voldemort,’ a man whose ambition was more powerful than his blood or background. That man was drowned out by the beast before he was old enough to reach
his full potential and I believe that bringing him back could do something wonderful for this world.”

“But why? Not even going into the fact that bringing people back from the dead is impossible unless they’re *Inferi*, why on earth would you want to try to bring Voldemort back? If it doesn’t work, if you can’t save him then you’ve brought back a genocidal psychopath!” Phil didn’t even know why he was indulging what were obviously the misinformed delusions of a mentally ill child, but he couldn’t stop himself.

“He’s *already* back! You must believe this on some level, you probably felt it—the sudden throb in your mark three years ago, the slightest darkening. Voldemort had . . . certain *failsafe’s* in place to ensure that he could not easily die. Through a very dark and forbidden form of bastardized necromancy, he was able to anchor his soul to the living world. The decade following his supposed ‘demise’ he’d been bodiless, but unable to move on to the afterlife. As of right now, he is very weak, but is slowly regaining his strength. Soon, he will attempt to procure a permanent body and will once again be able to call on his Death Eaters and resume his war. We need to act before it’s too late and undo the physical and psychological damage done by anchoring his soul in such a way.” Harry was taking a risk by confiding so much in the Auror, but as he’d said before, he was not planning on leaving without getting what he needed from Philias.

Phil eyed him suspiciously, not willing to let himself believe all of the things Harry was saying, even if a few of them struck a little too close to a few of his own suspicions.

“How would you even know all of that?”

“Let’s just say that I have a partner that I trust with my life who is very well informed.” Harry didn’t share anymore about his companion. Philias seemed to consider him for a long time.

“This favor that you mentioned before, what is it exactly?” Phil finally asked.

“Well, in short, I want us to work together. Because of my . . . reputation, I cannot get close to Voldemort, that is where you come in. Right now, his only focus is getting his body back, he will not be hosting any raids or calling on his Death Eaters, he currently only has two in his company to help him along. All you need to do is reconnect with him and when the time comes, help get me near him so that I can do what needs to be done.” Harry answered honestly, when he finished, Phil huffed and rolled his eyes.

“Yeah, as if it’s just that simple! I don’t know if you know this, but Voldemort happens to be a powerful *legilimense* and would know immediately about all of this. On top of that, I don’t know where he is and I was never a part of his inner circle, there’s no reason for him to trust me or allow
me to stick around enough to be of any use to you. If anything, he’d torture and kill me just for knowing he was alive before he was ready to make his debut!” Phil argued, shaking his head and pinching the bridge of his nose.

“You don’t need to worry about all of that, it’s taken care of. This is a very sensitive matter and if we are to work together, we will both need to make unbreakable vows. If worded correctly, I can make it so that the vow will protect any memories you have of me and what you do for me, it will also be protected from veritaserum. The same will go for me, nobody will know anything about your status as a Death Eater nor will they know that we’ve met at all outside of those two previous public meetings. As for Voldemort not killing you on sight, that is where the box comes in.” Harry nodded towards Phil’s jacket pocket. Surprised, Phil pulled out the box and placed on the table, confused as to how the box could possibly help.

“Inside that box is something that Voldemort wants very badly. It is absolutely invaluable to him. Once we make the vows and your mind is thoroughly secure, I will give you a new note very similar to the one you received earlier. The note will entail blackmailing you and asking that you meet up with your blackmailer. The only difference will be the location and time. The location will be Voldemort’s current hide out and you will go there intent on meeting your blackmailer. I will remain the anonymous sender of that box and the intrigue about me will be enough to protect you. Because he has so few with him right now, he will use the opportunity before him and you’ll be kept on a short leash for a while, but if you prove yourself capable I’m sure it’ll get easier.” Harry explained, having planned out exactly how he wanted to give Voldemort the stone.

This way, he remains a mysterious and anonymous helper and gets someone on the inside. When Voldemort moves forward with his plans for procuring a body, he will need blood from Harry, as he sees Harry as his biggest enemy aside from Dumbledore himself, and between him and the headmaster, a naive fourteen-year-old is the far easier target. He just had to make sure that Voldemort’s plans went along without a hitch up until the point where Harry needs to intervene, it’ll be a lot easier if he has someone in his corner for that part.

To be continued. . .

Chapter End Notes

Part 2 will be posted later today/tonight.
In the last chapter: Harry goes to the abandoned Gaunt house to retrieve the last Horcrux—the Gaunt ring—and has to break the dark curse with his newly learned Necromancy. Harry now has all of Voldemort's Horcruxes and now it's time to give Voldemort the Philosopher Stone. To do so, Harry enlists the help of the Auror/Death Eater, Philias Green.

“And when you can’t save him? What will you do then?” Philias asked, sounding so sure that Harry would fail. From across the small table in the private room above the Leaky Cauldron, Harry glared something fierce.

“If I fail, then I will take him out myself.” Harry gritted through his tense jaw, not appreciating the lack of confidence in him, but also not surprised by it. After all, in the other man’s eyes, he was just a kid.

“You kill Voldemort?! Sorry kid, but no matter what the rest of this insane world seems to believe, children are not fit to be soldiers. I’ve watched too many ambitious young wizards and witches killed in this war before they even began to live—including your parents.” Philias emphasized the end bit to try to get to Harry, but the raven-haired boy was not so easily swayed or manipulated.

“I am perfectly capable of handling myself, Mr. Green. Perhaps when you take the vow, I will show you if it’ll ease your worries. Besides, I will be moving forward with or without you. Without you, though, I will have to do things myself which will be far riskier. If you’ll take this vow with me, then I can explain a little more because most of this information is too sensitive to hand over without some assurances. The vow will not force you to work for me or even help me in any way, it'll just make sure that our secrets remain secret.” Harry replied calmly. Watching the curiosity spark in Philias’ eyes and the apprehension melting from his expression made Harry more confident.

After a long moment, Philias nodded and leaned forward in his seat, resting one arm on the table in a readying position. Smiling briefly, Harry slipped a slender hand into the folds of his robe, making the Auror/Death Eater tense across from him, though he paid him no mind. Harry pulled out two folded pieces of parchment and handed them both over.

Phil was mildly surprised to see that Harry had already written out each of their vows and handed him a quill in case he wished to make any changes. Phil was further impressed to see that the vows
were actually quite comprehensive, covering things he wouldn’t have thought about on the spot and were also in his favor without trying to underhandedly sneak in more than just a vow of secrecy. In the end, Phil decided not to make any changes and they made their unbreakable vows.

Phil sighed in relief, finally relaxing a little now that he knew his identity would be safe and he was able to actually put his full focus on what Harry had said to him earlier.

“You said you would show me something? Am I going to be meeting this mysterious informant of yours?” Phil asked, his tone was sardonic but he was actually quite curious. It wasn’t every day that you met someone half your age that knew more about the Dark Lord than a real life Death Eater, he wanted to know who was feeding all of that impossible information to the boy.

Harry smirked and shook his head.

“No, my friend is rather . . . shy, and I don’t think the two of you will be meeting for quite a while. As for what I have to show you, I ask that you trust me and do exactly as I say, which is nothing. What I am about to show you will be difficult to understand and may very well frighten you at first, but I assure you that there is nothing to be afraid of and I will be completely fine. I ask that you remain in your seat—or at the very least, the room—and that you do not try to leave until I come back.” Harry articulated carefully, as if he were instructing a child.

Each confusing word sent a spike of trepidation through Phil and he suddenly wasn’t so sure he wanted to know. However, his mind locked away the words that would stop whatever was about to happen and all he could manage to get out was a pathetic;

“‘Come back?’ What do you mean ‘come back’? From where?” But Harry did not answer.

Instead he pulled out his wand and before Phil could react or brace himself against a spell, he lifted the tip of the wand to rest gently against his temple and in a murmur of too-familiar words and an explosion of pale green light that left spots of dancing shadows in his eyes, the boy before him slumped in his chair. Phil didn’t move, didn’t breathe, as those haunting green eyes bore into him unseeing. Everything Harry had warned him of before had fled from his mind and he was at a loss. He was moving before he could really comprehend what was happening and his two fingers pressed into the pale, slender neck, seeking a pulse that was no longer there.

The breath was punched out of the older man and he stumbled back—away—knocking over tea cups and furniture that got in the way of his retreat. He wanted to bolt, to dive for the nearest bottle of fire whiskey and forget that he’d ever met the mysterious and deceivingly angelic-looking boy. He had yet to leave the room, eyes still fixed on Harry, when the corpse jolted upright in his seat and heaved
in a breath like a drowning man. Phil nearly leapt out of his skin.

Harry fought to get his breathing back under control, his body sucking in air desperately and edging on hyperventilation if he didn’t calm down in time. The killing curse had perhaps one of the most disorienting revivals, but it was the only death he could think of that wouldn’t leave a mess or force his body to heal quickly before he returned to it, which always left him drained.

“How?!” Philias’ voice was pitched high and almost comical coming from the hulking Auror, were it not for the unhealthy pallor his face had taken on.

“It is a rather long story that I’d rather not get into at the moment, but all you need to know is that I cannot die. Well, technically I have died many times before, but I always come back. Voldemort has attempted something similar, but he did not have sufficient information or guidance, which has led to his mind becoming so broken. I wish to undo that damage. As I said before, I can do this without you, but the more I put myself in these situations, the higher risk I will be at of my secret being discovered. I may not be able to permanently die, but if the Ministry were to find out about my abilities, I would be hunted for all of my days and everyone I’ve come to care about would be in danger. I have my gifts because I would not use them to rule the world or something else equally damaging; the same cannot be said for others and if I were discovered, others would certainly try to take my gifts for themselves.

“I understand that I am not being completely clear or transparent in how I’ve gotten these abilities, but I am hoping that this is enough for you to trust that I will be okay in what is to come, I am asking for your help. Voldemort will rise no matter what, but we may just be able to bring forth the man and kill the beast. I know that this will not be easy and it is not the life you have fought so hard to maintain, but will you help me? I cannot offer you the same protection as I myself have, but I will be watching over you and will pull you out as soon as it becomes too dangerous.” Harry assured, even though Philias didn’t really seem to need it.

“Alright, alright! Enough with the speech kid.” Phil grumbled as he took his seat across from Harry once again. “I’ll help you. Can’t exactly say I want to be an Auror full time and yet turn away little brats like you, can I?” Phil teased, some of the color returning to his face. Harry grinned and moved on to his plans quicker than a whip.

“Now, I know you are probably a bit drained by now, but it’s best that you deliver the package as soon as possible, which would be tonight. The less time spent between the public delivery of the box and you giving it to Voldemort, the better. Especially if he’s going to be looking into the box and me —the sender. The more time that passes, the more he’ll wonder why I would have put such a large gap between giving you the box and us having our ‘meeting.’” Harry thought aloud as he pulled out an envelope identical to the one Phil had vanished earlier. Harry pulled out the note within and wrote the time and place into the blank spaces of the letter with quick, elegant scrawl.
When he handed it over, Phil read the note and was surprised to see that the location was in a town, but not a magic one. ‘Voldemort is hiding out in a Muggle town?!’ Though, on second thought, it was more inconspicuous for someone who ‘hated muggles,’ what with there only being a few all-magical residential communities in Britain.

Phil was pulled out of his mind by the strange boy across from him standing up from his chair and straightening out his robes.

“I should be getting back, I don’t want to risk being caught out of bed in the middle of the night. Remember, Mr. Green, you’re supposed to be expecting your blackmailer, be careful of what you say—you’re not supposed to know anything about his return—he may be weakened and in a temporary body, but he is just as insane as before and a crucio is a crucio no matter how magically weakened the Dark Lord is, and finally, I will have an eye out for you and will be there in moments if anything goes wrong. Be careful, Mr. Green, I will send you a letter a week from now to discuss what happened and that we’ll do next.” With that, Harry pivoted and disapparated with a soft pop.

Phil shook his head, telling himself to just stop expecting anything when it came to the young Ravenclaw because, clearly, he would otherwise never stop being surprised by him. Moments later, a second pop sounded in the room and Phil was whisked away to Little Hangleton.

The abandoned manor before him loomed in the darkness like a great big beast, one glowing eye flickering with the light of a lantern behind the tarnished glass window. The moon was eclipsed by the towering silhouette of the manor, casting the nervous Auror in deep shadows. Phil could not linger outside for more than a few moments to take in the intimidating building before him—that would rival even then Malfoy Manor were it upkept the past few decades—because the time Harry had written on the note was almost up and he had to hurry inside before it ran out.

Inside, it was clear that the place hadn’t seen an elf or muggle cleaning staff in many years. Actually, Phil was rather surprised to be able to wander in unimpeded. Perhaps Harry hadn’t been exaggerating about Voldemort’s current state and they were relying on the obscurity of the location rather than actual wards. Immediately inside the door there were wide open archways and long corridors leading off in all directions, as well as a grand staircase that led up to the other levels. Phil quickly ascended and moved towards the area where he saw the light through the window before. He soon came upon a cracked door which he could hear voices and creaking floor boards from within.

Trusting in the vow he’d taken earlier that night and calling up the same emotions he’d had before
entering the Leaky Caldron, Phil nudged the door open and entered the room without hesitance. The two people he spotted first froze, cold eyes digging into him as he frowned in faux confusion. He recognized them both immediately as the high-ranking Death Eaters Bellatrix Lestrange and Barty Crouch Jr.—who was supposed to be dead. Then he turned and saw the large plush chair which held a loose draping of dark cloth around the shrunken and skeletal form of what Phil assumed to be the Dark Lord in his weakened state. Even in such a state, Phil could feel the thick aura of power that coagulated in the stagnant air that sent shivers down his spine and Phil suddenly felt little pricks of doubt and fear in his chest at the thought of Harry facing him.

“M-My lord!!” Phil croaked, dropping down immediately to kneel and hopefully stave off what would otherwise be a certain *Avada Kedavra*. The sooner he identified himself as a Death Eater, the better. Voldemort leaned forward slightly and Phil could feel those glowing red eyes cut down him as sharply as the back of a hand.

“What is the meaning of this?” The mini-Dark Lord hissed, edging on the snake-language he was so fond of. Phil allowed himself to flinch slightly, if only to make himself seem like less of a threat. His broad shoulders curled in and his head ducked to make him appear smaller.

Phil paused for a moment before jolting—as if remembering something—and then frantically began rooting around in his pockets until he found the note and pulled it out, all the while willfully ignoring the fact that the two other Death Eaters had pulled their wands by now. Handing over the note, Phil waited anxiously as the man he’d thought he was finally free of once and for all decided whether he lived or died.

Forcing himself to push those feelings aside and maintain the act he was putting on, Phil remained silent on the floor until Voldemort seemed to finish reading the note and gestured towards his left arm. Phil obliged, pulling up his sleeve in order to reveal his dark mark—though faded from years apart from the Dark Lord, the snake still shifted and writhed on his skin in the presence of Voldemort.

Voldemort hissed in satisfaction before barking out his next command.

“The box! Give it to me.” The rustling, sibilant tones would never cease to unnerve him. Phil hurriedly fished the fancy leather box out of his pocket and handed it over, his own curiosity surging up at the prospect of finding out what was in the box and why it would be so valuable.

Phil’s curiosity wasn’t immediately quelled, however. Instead, Voldemort closed his eyes and lifted the note up to his nostrils, inhaling deeply across the face of the note. Without opening his eyes, Voldemort then turned to the box and did the same, though he spent more time on the box. When Voldemort opened his eyes, there was a hint of consternation that was overclouded by intense curiosity.
“The sender of the box is . . .” Voldemort pondered aloud and Phil held his breath, waiting for the other shoe to drop. “‘Undetectable.’” He finished with the faintest notes of awe in his serpentine voice. Phil inwardly sighed in relief.

“My lord?” Barty’s confused tone broke the heavy silence, but Voldemort only glanced briefly at him before turning back to the box and note with reverence.

“There isn’t even a flicker of a magical signature that could belong to them. I do not recognize the signature blocker, but it is a powerful one.” Voldemort mused, his eyes growing greedy as he set the box down in his small lap.

With a delicacy befitting the stroking of a moth’s wing, Voldemort pulled the bow tail until the silver silk fell away and pooled over his dark robes. As Voldemort lifted the lid, there was a distinct pop that indicated the breaking of a magical seal that would keep anyone but the intended from opening it. Just all the more conformation for the others to know that whoever had sent Phil their way had known exactly what they were doing.

When the lid was removed, the Dark Lord’s eyes grew wide and a breathless laugh slipped unchecked past his thin lips. Voldemort forgot about everyone else in the room as he pulled out the large, uncut scarlet stone from within the black silken inlay. Never before had any of the Death Eaters ever seen their lord so . . . giddy.

Phil was dumbfounded. He knew what the stone was, but only because he’d been privy to the case of the missing stone three years back. ‘Of course, Harry Potter had the ruddy stone! Honestly? He’d rather not know how the raven had come across it—for that sake of his own sanity.’ Now he was starting to understand what Harry had meant about the value of what was in the box—Merlin, all of that talk about resurrection fit perfectly with his little ‘gift.’

When Voldemort was done pawing over his new toy, he turned his bright eyes back on Phil.

“It would seem that I have a new ally. What is your name?” Voldemort asked him, gaze far more keen than it had been when he first walked in.

“Philias Green, my lord.” Phil answered automatically. When Voldemort gestured for him to continue, he went on with more basic information about himself. ‘I’m not a member of your inner circle, but I am quite skilled, so it was my job to work for you from within the DMLE as an Auror. I have been there ever since and still hold a respectable position there.” Phil answered, relieved by the
blank look he received from the Dark Lord that was as close to ‘impressed’ as he was going to get.

“Yes, well, there’s a reason They sent you to me, if only to be a means of interacting with me. What do you say, Green? Will you continue to assist me and keep an eye out for my anonymous ally?” Nothing about the words or tone led Phil to believe that he had a choice in the matter anyway. Harry’s plan had obviously worked even better than he thought; not only was the Dark Lord curious about him, but he could see the budings of fascination and fixation behind those twin rubies and he prayed that the little enigma would tread carefully from then on.

“Of course, my lord. I would be so honored to return to your service.” Phil answered with conviction and the shrunken Voldemort looked pleased.

“Good, now, come closer.” Voldemort beckoned him forward and he moved to just before the chair and knelt once again. Phil did not react when too-long, bony fingers with long, sharp nails touched the bottom of his chin to lift his head and make him meet Voldemort’s gaze, no matter how much it uneased him.

Phil remained open and still as he felt the pressure of *legilimency* behind his eyes and images began floating through his head.

Voldemort picked through every detail of the past twenty-four hours, trying to pick up on anything Phil hadn’t, but without success, the vows held true. Voldemort began sifting through older and older memories, occasionally lingering on important cases and interactions from his cover job. Phil tried not to panic when Voldemort stopped on Phil’s memory of Sirius’ Black’s trial and Harry’s testimony in particular. And then again when Phil had escorted the young Ravenclaw to Azkaban to see his godfather.

Phil could understand, the young teen was impossible to pin down, a contradiction gift wrapped in an enigma. He just hoped that Voldemort would not see the mature and calculating behavior and deem the boy as a far bigger threat than anticipated—a big enough threat to eliminate immediately. Even if the kid was infallible, an old Auror could worry, alright?!

Eventually the Dark Lord seemed satisfied with what he’d seen and retreated from Phil’s mind.

“*Our luck is turning, my faithful followers. This body will not last long now, I have a few plans to deliberate on. Leave me, I will call you back when I need you and I trust that none of you will make me wait.*” The last bit was directed at Phil and the man bowed his head in acknowledgment of the threat.
With that, the three Death Eaters left and Phil once again found himself pleading with fate to let him make it through this endeavor alive.
Chapter Summary

In the last chapter: Harry and Philias make an Unbreakable Vow and Harry convinces Phil to deliver the stone to Voldemort after showing Phil he is invulnerable by . . . well, by dying. Phil takes the stone to Voldemort and is accepted into their little band of Death Eaters for the time being. Voldemort now has the Philosopher Stone and Phil is working undercover for Harry.

A week after Harry gave Voldemort the Philosopher Stone, the teen sent a letter to his informant, Philias. According to the letter he received the next day, nothing really definitive had happened yet. Voldemort didn’t call on Philias often, but the few fleeting times he had, Philias had caught wind of him sending Barty Crouch Jr. to the Ministry several times while under polyjuice potion as different Ministry employees. The Auror didn’t know the details, but he did know that Voldemort was trying to do something that involved their government.

When Philias met with Voldemort, mostly the Dark Lord would have long conversations with him about the state of the Ministry and general public—since the other two Death Eaters had spent their time either in Azkaban or in hiding. He also seemed to be testing Philias to see where his own sympathies lie. Harry was mildly concerned when Green said that he had been relatively honest with the Dark Lord about things less sensitive (unlike blood purity and muggles, which would be big no-no’s with a red slash through them on the list of things safe to talk about) but Philias insisted that Voldemort was alright as long as he didn’t sound like he’d turned light and nothing suggested that Philias planned on getting in the way of any of his plans.

After that, Harry continued to contact Philias Green weekly to keep updated on his plans. During that time, Harry threw himself back into studying Death’s book and learning Necromancy. The spells and rituals grew more complex and Harry had to push through his own limitations many times in order to wield his magic with the accuracy of an adult. Never before had it been so important or dangerous for him to have control over his magic so that he didn’t over or under power a spell. And never had it felt so amazing to do magic.

If he had to put it into words, he would describe it as being a flightless bird all his life and then one day suddenly being able to soar above the sky. The magic wasn’t addicting or harmful to him, it was more like stepping into a warm bath after a long day or having sore muscles rubbed into utter relaxation—not something he needed to feel, but something he very much wanted to feel.

Harry didn’t get as much time to himself to learn, though. That summer, the Malfoys had decided not
to go on vacation because Lucius’ work had become quite busy in the warming months. This meant
that not only was Harry getting visits from Anthony and Hermione, but also Draco, who was quite
headstrong in his need to spend time with Harry—which usually meant either flying around on
brooms in the wide expanse of grass behind Malfoy Manor, or going from shop to shop so that
Draco could satiate his hunger for material things.

Harry enjoyed every moment he spent with his friends, but between his secret life with trying to save
Voldemort and his busy public life with his friends and family, things were becoming hectic.

Which only got crazier when, during the third week of July, Harry had a dream that was anything
but a dream.

Harry didn’t dream often, but when he did it was usually either of the ethereal scenes he’d glimpsed
of the afterlife or memories coated in the foggy haze of unconsciousness. So, when Harry emerged
from the darkness of slumber to being seated before a kneeling man with shaggy auburn hair, beady
dark eyes, and a tick where his tongue darted between his teeth for a brief moment to leave his
bottom lip shining with saliva, he knew to be concerned.

His worry and confusion only grew when he realized he could no longer control his body. A
passenger behind eyes that weren’t his. Before his lethargic mind could piece together where he was
—who he was—his mouth was already forming words in a voice that stopped all of his thoughts at
once.

“Barty, I trust that you’ve had success with your task, otherwise you would not come without being
called.” The dangerous words were only made more terrifying by the sibilant hiss they were spoken
with. The man—Barty—paled slightly but didn’t flinch or back down.

“Yes, my lord. Britain’s relations with several countries across Europe, including France, have been
deteriorating over the years and the Ministry was all too eager to approve the tournament. They have
already sent liaisons to France, America, Sweden, Spain, and China to get the two competing
schools they’ll need. I am confident that we will get at least two.” Barty answered, a twisted smile
tugging at the corners of mouth, making him look almost shark-like.

Harry could feel Voldemort’s own smile and approving nod.

“What of the school board? They will need to approve as well for it to take place and I have no
doubt that Albus will stand in the way.”
“I have already met with most of those on the board and the majority have been swayed towards approving the tournament. There’s no need to be concerned, my lord, we will easily outnumber him.” Here, Barty paused, looking highly uncomfortable and hesitant with whatever he was about to say. “My lord . . . forgive me for asking, but . . . is this truly necessary? Wouldn’t it be easier to simply grab the boy and apparate away?” The fierce glare Barty received made it clear that his lack of faith was not appreciated.

“Yes, Barty, it is! Potter is either constantly in the presence of Albus and his lackeys, his guardians, or at Hogwarts. If we were to just pluck him off the street, it would cause too big of a fight and we would not have enough time to complete the ritual before they found us. We need to get Potter off school grounds without anyone noticing for at least a few hours. Now leave me before I change my mind and see fit to punish you for your insolence!” Voldemort growled and the other man bowed with his nose close to the floor like a house elf would before fleeing the room.

In a bellow of rage, Voldemort wandlessly lashed out with his magic and the destruction around the room was devastating. The force of the malevolent magic cast Harry out and a moment later he jolting into awareness in the darkness of his room. Harry’s breathing was erratic and labored as he twisted his finger into the sweaty black locks on his head and fist his hands over his temples as they pounded something fierce. Harry’s whole body shook in pain and second-hand fury as it felt like his head was splitting open and sharp claws were plunging in.

Harry tried to orient and get himself back under control as the pain rocketed through his body and left him trembling. When he’d finally calmed down enough to think and the pain had eased to something bearable, Harry sat up in bed and dropped one hand while the other shifted to his forehead over his scar which was flushed and inflamed and damp with either sweat or blood, perhaps both.

Harry took a deep breath and swiped the errant tears from his cheeks as he cataloged what he remembered from the ‘dream.’ When he was sure that no details would be lost to his waking mind, Harry turned to his friend who had sensed his distress and waited patiently for Harry to explain what had happened. Harry quickly went through the events of his ‘dream.’

‘Interesting, you’re right, I don’t believe that what you had was a dream either. It appears that you’ve unintentionally visited Tom’s mind without him being aware.’ Death’s voice sounded intrigued if not a little distracted. Harry frowned at the answer that really wasn’t much an answer at all.

“What do you mean? How is that possible? I don’t know how to do legilimency and even if I did, that certainly was it. Is it because of the gifts you gave me, or perhaps what I’ve been learning?” Harry asked verbally, not having spoken aloud to his friend in a long time. He knew that the other two in the house were asleep and his frazzled mind made caution difficult anyways.
His companion audibly sighed and Harry’s frown deepened. He knew there were very few secrets between him and Death, so it’s reasonable that Harry worried over the implications of Death’s reluctance to answer.

“If there’s something you’re not telling me, out with it! You know that I am not one easily shaken, so do not act like I cannot take whatever it is that you have to say—especially if it concerns my ‘dream’ since that has obviously had some kind of effect on me.” Harry interrupted the silence, not having the patience for dishonesty.

‘I have never really had need to keep anything from you, Harry, but I will confess that there is something I have been withholding. I thought that telling you too early might complicate things, but since it is just about time to combine the Horcruxes, I suppose it’s as good of a time as any.’ Harry’s confusion mounted and he waited quietly for his friend to continue.

‘Voldemort’s last Horcrux was unintentional; in fact, he has no knowledge of its existence. The last Horcrux is the one I purposefully left out of our search because it is the smallest and will be useful to maintain in the future. You see, Harry, the night that Voldemort killed you—and consequently, himself—he inadvertently split his soul once more and created another Horcrux. Before your soul entered the veil, the soul fragment latched onto yours because it was not contained in a body that would try to reject the foreign entity. When I returned you to your body, it was with his soul as well. The fragment is so small that it hasn’t effected your development or character at all, but it has turned you into a Horcrux and therefore linked you to Voldemort in such a way that non-physical contact is possible.’

Harry’s mind whirled at the news and his hand still over his scar absently rubbed at it.

“How-How is that even possible? I never heard of something living becoming a Horcrux.”

‘That’s because, normally, it would be pointless. A Horcrux is a way to avoid dying, but living things are meant to die. However, because you’re immortal, the Horcrux is indeed effective for as long as you remain immortal. It is why all the other Horcruxes can be returned to Voldemort, because they are no longer needed.’ Death answered, sounding calm and casual about a topic that was anything but casual and calm-inducing.

“So, what you’re saying is that, as long as I’m immortal, he will be as well. When I decide to give up my immortality, he will be mortal when I die.” Harry reasoned and Death didn’t comment on his use of ‘when’ and not ‘if.’ Knowing that it was inside him did not suddenly make him aware of the Horcrux as one might think they feel when they find out that there is a fetus or tumor inside them, convinced that they can feel it ‘growing.’ Harry felt no ‘dark’ influences growing like a parasite on his soul, infecting it and changing him from the inside out. He felt like . . . Harry, just Harry. Considering the way in which the soul splits with each Horcrux, there was only just over one percent
of Voldemort’s soul within him, assuming that it hadn’t grown or fused with his own by then.

‘Correct, and should you ever need to make him fully mortal, all you would actually need to do is die and then ask that I remove the fragment before you return to your body. This way, we know that the last Horcrux is safe and will never fall into the wrong hands.’ Which meant that the Horcrux was still removable and probably unchanging over the years.

“It must be the reason for how I react to the other Horcruxes.” Harry pondered aloud, not even contemplating that his friend would purposefully tell him anything but the truth. “And what of Voldemort, will we be telling him about any of this?” Harry decided to ask, his mind already working through the possible repercussions of being Voldemort’s Horcrux.

‘Well, that all depends on circumstance, on how Tom is after the resurrection. Either he will take the easy route and see his actions as justified and not his responsibility, or he will acknowledge what he’s done and change his path. The way I see it, you have four viable options with their own different outcomes. You could tell him about the Horcrux and not your immortality, which would probably lead him to protecting you or hiding you away whether or not you want that because he will see you as a vulnerability. You could tell him about the Horcrux and your immortality, which would let him know about his own immortality and may not effectively change that path he decides to take while also allowing him to know of your abilities.

‘The last two options are perhaps the riskiest. You could tell him about your immortality and not the Horcrux, it would make him think he’s mortal and he’d probably seek out your abilities—either through me or taking them from you, which is not possible, I assure you. Lastly, you could tell him about neither and he would believe his is truly mortal. The last option could go either way—he could accept his mortality and become more cautious and rational, or he could once again seek out immortality through Horcruxes, thinking that by making only a few this time around, he will be fine. In truth, he would still become insane, but more powerful and intelligent than last time around.

‘All of these options have both pros and cons, so it truly depends on the circumstances after the resurrection and what you decide to do. Ultimately, it is your decision to make and there is no ‘right’ answer. After the resurrection, I have no doubts that Tom will not be in a right state. He was not even fully grown when he began halving his soul and meddling in dangerous and self-destructive magics, so it will take time for him to re-find himself and reestablish his own personal view and belief system. He will have more experience with the world than he’d had as a bitter young man in the middle of two devastating wars in both of his worlds. We will not know the outcome of rejoining his soul once again until the time comes, but I am confident that something will change for him.’ Death finished.

Harry sat in silence for a long while, trying to contemplate on all of the enormous things he’d learned in such a short amount of time. By then, the young Ravenclaw had summoned a cool damp hand towel to wipe away the drying sweat on his face and back of his neck and to then press it to the still
inflamed scar on his forehead. Leaning back against the headboard, he thought.

Suddenly remembering the ‘dream’ he’d explained to his friend earlier, Harry sat up straight again and asked Death what he thought about it.

‘Ah, yes, that’s right. Well, considering what they’d said, I would say that they are talking about the Triwizard Tournament.’ Death sounded intrigued once again.

“What’s that?” The name sounded vaguely familiar, like Harry had skimmed over a page without really reading it and only remembers the image of the word in print rather than what it meant. It was not a feeling he enjoyed.

‘It’s a tournament that would take place between three competing schools over a century ago. A tournament of dangerous feats in uncontrollable environments led to the death of many students, so it was eventually disbanded. From what they had said, it would seem that they will be using the tournament to capture you for the resurrection. They may use the events as a distraction to take you while the wards are allowing so many non-students to come and go, or they might want you in the events themselves to somehow get to you then.

‘However, if my memory serves me right, the last few tournaments had strict age restrictions on who could enter to be a champion and represent the school. They are most likely to use the former, so you would probably do best to avoid the events and stay somewhere safe and unexpected like the room of requirement or the Chamber. Either way, it is good to know what they’re planning and relatively how soon the resurrection will take place.’ Harry nodded along, suddenly agreeing with Barty in how unnecessary and complicated the plan was, especially if Harry was going along with it and could make it easier for them to just grab him.

But the plan of a madman was unlikely to make sense.

‘You should rest, Harry. You will need your strength if we hope to combine the Horcruxes soon and you will probably want to owl Phil in the morning about what you’d learned.’ Death was already easing away, deeper into the veil and a bone-deep exhaustion once again claimed Harry as he shuffled back down into his warm covers. Harry fell asleep on his side, the damp towel pressed between the side of his forehead and the pillow as his legs subconsciously curled up close and the thick down duvet was a welcome weight all around him.
Philias was certainly surprised when he found out from Harry about the tournament, if his letter back was anything to go by. A week later was his birthday, which brought the various friends and their families over to celebrate and reconnect. Even Ginny had shown up with Luna and Ginny’s parents.

Molly Weasley certainly lived up to her reputation as the over-protective and mothering matriarch of the family. She had pulled Harry into a crushing hug when he offered his hand and had muttered into his ear how grateful they all were for what Harry had done for Ginny her first year and the year following. Harry had been red-faced and highly uncomfortable by the time Mrs. Weasley finally released him—thanks to Ginny coming to his rescue and batting her mother away in embarrassment.

Mr. Weasley made Harry far less uncomfortable and thankfully only shook his hand when it was offered. The two of them got on quite well as Harry politely asked him about his work and listened to the fascinated ramblings of a man who truly loved his job. Eventually, Arthur told Harry about the invitation he and his family received from his work to attend that year’s Quidditch World Cup. He asked that Harry join him and his family—Hermione had already been asked by Ginny, who she’d grown closer to recently, and would be joining them—apparently, Ginny wanted to ask Harry as well but was a little shy about it since they usually only wrote once a week over the summer instead of visiting each other. His son, Ron, had been all for Hermione joining them, Mr. Weasley informed Harry of Ronald’s ‘little crush’ on Hermione with a teasing smile and some reminiscent sighing about ‘young love.’

Draco had been passing by when Arthur had mentioned the world cup and soon ducked in on the conversation—even though he looked reluctant to be chatting with Arthur—informing them that Draco would be going as well with Lucius. Before Harry could politely decline, Draco jumped in by offering to take Anthony with as his guest so that they could all go together. Harry sighed inwardly, knowing that his friends would never allow him to opt out of a big gathering between them, so he accepted gratefully, cloaking the reluctance in his voice.

Aside from that small encounter, the Weasleys and Malfoys pointedly avoided and ignored each other the entire time to circumvent any nasty fights that might break out. Harry was grateful, not liking it when one or the other would stay away just because of an old family feud that had started with their ancestors. Otherwise the rest of the party went swimmingly.

Sirius and Remus had been incredibly excited about Harry being able to go to the World Cup. Harry had wanted them to come as well, but Sirius had a mind-healer session that day and it was a full moon for Remus. Sirius had yet to miss a single session with his mind-healer and Harry along with Remus couldn’t be prouder of him. Every day that Sirius got a little bit better, something tight in Harry’s chest became a little bit looser and a little bit easier to breathe. There were still rough days, but they were become less and less frequent and the good days were getting better.

He knew that mind-healers were not the cure-all and Sirius would never be as he was before Azkaban. To completely forget all of the time he’d sacrificed there would be to disregard what he’d
survived through and hiding away a part of himself that would never go away. Wounds may heal but the scars were always with you. As cliché as that was, it was true. As Sirius got better, his mind-healer sessions became less frequent, but he still never missed a single one or complained about having to go.

The day after Harry’s party, Harry received his slightly belated birthday gift from his companion in the form of a thick piece of parchment laying on his pillow when he awoke. When Harry realized what it was, he nearly had a heart attack and jumped out of bed to get dressed. Thankfully, both of his guardians were preoccupied when he got up. Remus had way too much to drink the night before and had thought that firewhiskey and birthday cake were a perfect mix, so the wolf had locked himself in his room with a bucket beside the bed so that he could alternate between throwing up and passion out. All the while Sirius reverently took care of his partner—since the man had given up alcohol recently since he did not trust himself not to make it a habit, another thing that they were both incredibly proud of him for.

Since they were both busy, it was easy for Harry to collect a few of the items he needed and to disappear upstairs into his ‘training room.’ They morning was shining bright in golden iridescent beams coming through the windows and cutting out rectangular shapes on the wooden floors. Harry’s bright and eager fair face glowed in the reflection of light off the floor boards as he knelt to begin setting up.

His companion had finally given him the spell that could reconnect the Horcruxes. Harry had already skimmed through the book at one point, curiosity making him seek out the spell to study it early, but a page had clearly been ripped out close to the end of the last chapter, much to the young teen’s ire. The instructions and incantations were rather simplistic, but it was a dangerous spell to get wrong and required enormous amounts of magic—more than Harry had ever performed before!

Harry could feel the excitedly buzzing magic within the Horcruxes as he set them aside to set everything else up.

With him, Harry had also brought a large ceramic mixing bowl from the kitchen and a few other ingredients. Harry quickly filled the bowl with water and performed a small cleansing spell on both to rid them of any traces of magic that they may have been in contact with so as not to compromise the sensitive spell.

Once that was done, Harry grabbed his first ingredient that had come from his own personal secret stores and had been used in a few other Necromancy rituals—Thetral blood. The blood was dark indigo in color and would serve as a conduit or transference fluid for the soul magic. The water immediately turned nearly black in color before he added the next ingredient. Harry added dried flakes of crumbled mint leaves, several roots from a belladonna plant, seven flight feathers from a raven, and three drops of venom a poisonous snake (his animagus form). When Harry was done, the mixture inside the bowl turned as white and opaque as milk without a single clump floating on the
Next, Harry grabbed his customary charcoal stick for spells and began drawing a large circle around the bowl, making it about five feet in diameter so that there’d be enough room for him to sit with the bowl at the dead center. Along the outside of the circle, Harry drew the necessary runes with absolute accuracy as he willed all of his focus into getting them right. Along the inside, he wrote the given passage in the language of the dead, coming to an end right where he started. The circle was not only to amplify Harry’s powers and aid in the actual spell, but also to protect everything outside of the circle from possible destruction if the spell were to go wrong, which he greatly appreciated.

With everything set up, Harry exhaled sharply and sat down before the bowl with anticipation squeezing his heart extra hard with each pump. One by one, Harry placed the Horcruxes into the bowl. He placed and stacked them in order of when they were made, with the diary at the bottom and Helga’s cup at the top. The only one Harry left out was the locket, which would be what Harry was transferring the others into since it would be the easiest to carry on him and conceal. The ring may be smaller, but it would be difficult to explain away the ring if Dumbledore caught him with it, while he had the excuse of just happening upon the locket while exploring his own house.

Taking a deep breath to prepare himself, knowing that he would only get one shot, Harry shook out his limbs, grabbed the locket, held it by the chain directly over the bowl, and began the first incantation.

The swell of magic was immediate and a little alarming, though Harry focused harder so as not to react. The magic collected in his chest until he couldn’t feel himself breathing or his heart pumping over the peculiar sensation that came along with Necromancy that was suddenly being amplified, by a lot. Harry moved onto the second incantation and the magic slowly began to descend down the inner curve of his spine until it reach low in his gut below his navel and continued to grow. A warm and pleasant sensation began to bleed out into the rest of Harry’s body.

He was thankful that the next incantation was only a few short words, as it would seem his concentration was slipping through his fingers by the moment and soon the spell would come to a point where all he had to do was hold the locket over the bowl and let the spell do its work. It was also the most dangerous point in the spell because if one didn’t have enough magical stores, the spell would drain them to the point of magical exhaustion and eventually take their life in an attempt to finish the spell.

Harry’s breath became more of a pant and his eyes slid shut as he finished the last word and the magic continued to build inside him like the gathering of a tsunami that would eventually hit his shores and drown him in whatever this was. His spine started to arch and his head tilted back as his breath began to flutter in and out, his mind drowned in something he’d never felt before. Like the intoxicating tingle of honey wine had submerged all of his synapses and he could barely do anything other than sit back, keep his arm aloft, and drift into oblivion.
Harry felt his cheeks flush and his long-sleeved robes suddenly felt too hot and constricting as sweat beaded on his brow and dip of his lower back. Magic clogged his every vein and he wasn’t sure how much more he could withstand when there was this sudden overflow of magic and sensation and he sucked in a breath as his eyes flew open and time seemed to stop while his body opened up like a bird pushing out from a too-small shell and for a moment Harry was weightless and mindless and moments dragged on for eternity as he didn’t dare breathe and disrupt whatever was happening. It was like everything he was feeling—everything he was seeing—was just too much and yet not enough at the same time. Harry released the breath in his lungs and was too far away from himself to note the strange sound that came out of him when he exhaled. It didn’t matter right then.

It was amazing. Amazing. Amazing... .

He never wanted it to end. His head canted to the side and his toes curled as his empty hand fist his robes tightly, until his joints ached and forearm began to cramp.

But all too soon, he crested some invisible hill and began his decent back down as all the energy was sapped from Harry’s body and he collapsed to the side, breathing heavily like he’d just ran laps around the black lake. Harry curled his legs up close to him and settled on the wooden floors like they were the softest bed he’d ever had the luxury of lying on. The ghost of sensations still drifted through his veins like thick honey and he pressed his flush cheek against the cool wood as he tried to settle his racing heart.

Harry’s mind slowly came back to him in little pieces that had to glue themselves together and when he remembered what he’d been doing, he panicked for a moment, worried he had fallen over before the spell had completed, but when he pulled the chain still clutched tightly in his hand up and touched the warm surface of the locket, he felt the surge of magic immediately and pulled his hand away like it had burned him when he felt the magic race up his arm, close to overstimulating his already spent body and mind.

Harry set the locket down a foot away from him and stayed on the floor, feeling pleasantly drained and completely unwilling to move a muscle for the rest of his life. Eventually, though, Harry was settled enough to let his own befuddlement at the back of his mind rush to the forefront. Harry sat back up and when he spoke aloud (thankfully the silencing spells were all up and in place) his voice was higher than he’d expected and his cheeks warmed even more.

“What in the bloody hell was that?!” Harry demanded of his companion and glared at the open air before him when he heard his friend chuckle in response.

“That would be what I had mentioned before, sometimes this magic—depending on the type of spell
and its strength—can be . . . ‘rewarding.’ As I mentioned, some are more rewarding than others.’ The smug teasing in his friend’s voice made Harry scoff.

“’Rewarding?’ That was more than ‘rewarding’ and you know it! I have never felt that before in my life!” Harry exclaimed, ignoring the stubbornly insistent burning in his cheeks that was climbing down his neck.

‘Well I’d say it was about time! You’re well into puberty and most humans your age are already engaging in a healthy amount of self-exploratory behaviors to help with easing the influx of horm-’ Harry quickly cut him off.

“Wait a minute, you’re telling me that that was-. . . that I-. . . I-?” Harry couldn’t choke the words out as realization dawned on him and his eyes went huge and he felt like running back to bed and going to sleep to hide from his own mind.

Death chuckled heartily. ‘If I do recall, haven’t you been the one who’s been quite the advocate for everyone’s healthy sexuality?’ Death teased and Harry really wished he could throw something at him like a child.

It was true, though. He had always been the one to think about sex with clinical logicality without ever really being able to reflect what he knew onto himself because he didn’t think he would experience it with the same ferocity as the other boys in his year who were beginning to notice girls like someone would notice a sledge hammer to the face. Harry knew he was going through puberty, he was having growth spurts and the childish roundness to his face was becoming sharper and more mature in appearance—and how he wished he could forget the way attention from the majority of the other students was morphing into something not so much the innocent fascination that he’d been used to.

But Harry didn’t think he was experiencing the other more . . . unsavory bits of puberty like the sudden appearances of acne that seemed to come overnight, the uncontrollable body odor that refused to lose the battle to deodorant and spells alike, the sparse hairs that some boys displayed proudly on their chins or chests as a sign of ‘manhood,’ the barrage of mood swings and the seemingly random bouts of pink cheeks and hunched postures when a certain ‘mood’ hit them.

Harry hadn’t noticed any of these in himself aside from perhaps a few uninvoked cases of irritability, so he figured he’d either be a late bloomer or one of those lucky few who coasted through the distasteful period in life known as puberty. But now, as he furiously cleaned up the spell supplies and shoved the locket into his pocket so he could make a quick escape, he wasn’t so sure and he was terrified of what may come.
{Now leave me alone you fiend!} Harry shouted into the open air and fled from the room as raucous laughter trailed after him and mocked him all the way down to his room where he could finally escape. His friend took mercy and left Harry alone to deal with his strange mix of embarrassment over what had happened and excitement over having successfully combined the Horcruxes into one.

Harry buried his burning face into his soft pillow and groaned, trying hard to forget the noise he’d made earlier that could only be described as a ‘moan.’ He wished he knew how to obliviate himself and un-realize that perhaps the spelled shut and silenced curtains in his dorm might not have always been just the other boys wishing to have some alone time to study in peace like he had. And then he thought about the weird looks he got all of the many, many times he’d done that to his own curtains for long periods of time, he suddenly longed for his mortality if only to be able to die in that moment.

He had a long year ahead of him. . .
Chapter Summary

In the last chapter: Voldemort’s plans for the next year are set into motion. Phil and Harry keep in touch. Harry has a vision of Voldemort talking to Barty about the Triwizard Tournament. Harry finds out he if Voldemort’s most recent Horcrux. Harry gets invited to the Quidditch World Cup by Ginny. Harry finally combines all of the Horcruxes together into the locket.

Chapter Notes

Hello guys! So sorry this chapter is so late, though I tried to make it longer than usual to make up for that. The next chapter will start off Harry’s fourth year! How exciting! Hope you all enjoy this chapter, if you have any questions, comments, or concerns, please let me know.

-Pleasant Readings!

Halfway through the last month of summer holiday, Harry was sent through the floo to the Weasley residence—so endearingly dubbed the ‘burrow’—the night before the Quidditch World Cup. The stacked, lop-sided house was lively with a bustling pack of Weasleys when Harry stepped through. It was such a contrast to Grimmauld Place with his guardians that Harry just stood there for several solid seconds as his brain tried to quickly figure out what to do next. Before he had enough time to do just that, he was spotted by Mrs. Weasley and pulled into another uncomfortably ‘familial’ hug like the one he’d been given at his birthday celebration.

As soon as the hug ended, he was swept away into the kitchen and pushed down into a seat at the table, across from what he could only assume to be the two eldest Weasley children. Mrs. Weasley soon disappeared, leaving Harry alone to introduce himself to the others, though she could be heard berating the twins the next floor up for their mischief.

The burrow was in constant motion as people went up and down the stairs, weaving around each other in the small space with natural ease, nicking bits of food while Mrs. Weasley wasn’t there to see it. At one point, Harry even saw Hermione and Ginny, but they were only passing through and were discussing something with ducked heads, conspiring smiles, and faintly pink cheeks. Harry had caught bits that sounded suspiciously like the names of a few of the quidditch players Sirius had tried to teach him about since finding out that he’d be going to the World Cup. They gave him a brief greeting, then disappeared back upstairs with their stolen snacks in hand.
Harry didn’t mind, though, because his attention was caught by the two eldest Weasley brothers. William—who insisted on being called ‘Bill’—and Charlie. Harry knew vague details about them from what Ginny had told him, but he was eager to discuss more with them now that they were there.

Bill worked as a renowned curse-breaker who traveled all over the world for his work, freelancing with most of his work coming from various goblin banks and government establishments. Harry had been fascinated to hear about some of the more obscure curses Bill had come across and how he was able to break them without having the counter-curse most needed to get rid of a curse without fulfilling it. Bill was soft spoken and a little closed off, but exceedingly polite and definitely someone very easy to like.

Charlie was more of a half-way point between the twins and Bill, personality wise. He was just as kind and polite, but clearly an extrovert and had undoubtedly spent quite some time in the past as a prankster just like his brothers. That mischievous and calculating glint in his eye was something he saw almost exclusively with the twins and Sirius—notorious pranksters that they are.

Charlie worked as a ‘dragonologist’ studying dragons at a preserve in Romania. Although Bill clearly enjoyed his work, Charlie seemed to be the one that lived for his work. It was clear after only a few minutes of conversation that the younger of the two was devoted to his career and had that same sense of fascination for dangerous creatures as Hagrid seemed to have. While chatting, Harry couldn’t help but think of the Gringotts dragon that he’d laid to rest while retrieving Helga’s cup.

Harry didn’t regret what he’d done—if given the chance to go back, he would have done the same thing all over again—but he did regret that it had been necessary in the first place.

Weighed down by his own thoughts, Harry didn’t contribute much to the conversation. He just nodded and threw in a brief question here and there, but Charlie did well enough on his own. Clearly, he was excited to finally have an open ear that hadn’t already heard everything he had to say. Bill had listened along for a while, contributing a little as well, but eventually he was enlisted by Mrs. Weasley to set up tables in the back yard for dinner, leaving Harry and Charlie to it. So, Harry just listened and only interrupted when something Charlie said caught his attention.

“Dragons are truly fascinating creatures! They have a universal hierarchal system for all dragons. Dragons are especially territorial creatures, but in order to keep from going extinct through fights for dominance among themselves, they’ve adapted an instinctual hierarchy to ‘keep the peace’ as they say. Spanning across all species of dragon, it is simply intuitive for them to know who is stronger than them, and who is weaker.” That bit drew Harry back on topic.
“You say that as though dragons will never turn on each other. I’ve read before that certain species can be particularly vicious and can even become cannibalistic with their prey.” Harry left the statement open, knowing that he didn’t really know much about dragons and could easily be wrong.

“Ah! Yes, but there’s something those books probably didn’t mention. The only dragons that will act outside of the hierarchy—or even ignore it completely—are female dragons. Specifically, nesting or pregnant female dragons. As I mentioned earlier dragon populations have been on the decline, which has brought on these atypical behaviors in order to protect the young as much as possible. In fact, that is used as one of the most harmless ways to get close to a dragon in order to treat or study it! Wizards have come up with a synthetic scent that simulates the scent of dragon offspring, which allows them to get close enough without being dismembered.” It was rare that Harry came across someone who could talk so inconsequentially about dismemberment.

The Weasleys are certainly an interesting bunch. . .

“That seems like a rather simple solution to the supposed ‘threat’ that dragons seem to pose to wizards, why are they still considered so dangerous then?” Harry inquired, thinking back once again to the Gringotts dragon and how the thought of that creature facing such cruelty when it might not have even been that effective of a defense, caused something sharp akin to dread twist in his gut.

“Oh no, don’t get me wrong, dragons are still plenty dangerous! Not only is this . . . ‘potion’ let’s call it, extremely expensive and difficult to make, but it is still a great risk to the user. If the wizard can get close enough to the dragon to be scented without being harmed, then they’re golden, but most dragon’s sense of smell is not very good and they can easily kill you if they don’t smell you first. You have to get fairly close to be scented. It’s not much of a problem in the preserve, because of the magical and physical barriers, but in the wild there’s no guarantee of safety.”

Harry was in the middle of thinking on what Charlie had said, when their conversation was interrupted by Mrs. Weasley calling everyone out to dinner. Sandwiched between Hermione and Ginny at the dinner table, Harry didn’t really have another chance after that to chat with the two elder Weasley brothers, as he was either pulled into a conversation with the girls on either side of him, being relentlessly questioned by Arthur about different muggle peculiarities, or being interrogated by Ronald about his life as the Boy Who Lived.

The last was Harry’s least favorite part of the meal. Harry so rarely interacted with those outside of his circle that it sometimes caught him off guard when people treated him like the ‘Savior,’ a role he thought he’d done a fairly good job of shedding up until that point. However, it wasn’t so hard because, during Ronald’s inquiry, it became quite clear that his interest was completely impersonal and Harry didn’t often get hung up on the opinions of strangers. Not when it was obvious that they had no interest in knowing the truth. And Harry was not typically generous enough to correct the mistakes of others.
It did come as quite an annoyance later, though, when Harry was made to share a room with Ronald because his was the only one open—Percy was adamant about having his room to himself. Harry wished he could have spent the night at home and then simply come early the next morning, but Sirius and Remus were pushing him to step outside of his ‘comfort zone’ and he secretly suspects that they wanted a night to themselves. With Remus teaching at the school last year, him and Sirius only really got to spend time together this summer and Harry wasn’t really one to venture out of the house often, which left little time truly alone for themselves.

Harry thought it was only fair to give them these next two nights to themselves.

Thankfully, Ronald didn’t try to talk to Harry again as they prepared for bed and the night ended early and as silently as one can in a house full of so many occupants. As Harry lie in the darkened room under the worn quilt blanket that had been provided him, his fingers automatically tugged gently on the thin but sturdy chain around his neck until the heated metal locket was in his grasp. Clutched in one hand, Harry felt himself finally relax into the unfamiliar bed, taking comfort in the action he’d become accustomed to since combining all the Horcruxes earlier that summer.

Harry was awoken by the pained groans of the room’s other occupant, who had just been woken up himself by Ginny. When she saw Harry lift his head, she decided to give up on trying to communicate with her half-asleep brother and instead talk to Harry.

“Mum sent me to wake you guys up, breakfast is down stairs. You should hurry, though, because we’ll be leaving soon.” Harry nodded and waited until the youngest Weasley left before getting out of bed. Harry ignored the early morning chill in the room that seemed to come from an ever-present draft, and got dressed as quickly as he could to avoid losing too much heat.

By the time Harry was ready to go downstairs, Ronald had just sat up and was blinking the sleep from his dazed eyes. If it was Anthony or Draco, Harry probably would have waited or even tried to help his friends wake up a little more by talking to them. However, this wasn’t his friend, so Harry just left him, figuring that if he was sitting up he was less likely to fall back asleep.

Turns out, Harry was wrong.

Ron came half-running, half-falling down the stairs as Arthur was pulling on his coat and telling everyone to prepare to leave. The young redhead had hair plastered to one side of his sheet-creased
face and his clothes looked like they were haplessly tugged on mere seconds ago—which they probably were.

When their little troop left the Burrow, Harry took to walking behind Hermione and Ginny, not really feeling comfortable enough to talk to the others. It was only Harry, the girls, Ronald, the twins, and Mr. Weasley. The two eldest Weasley brothers would be apparating to them a little later. Harry knew that they were going to one of the two hundred portkeys that had been placed all over Britain to transport people to the World Cup, and the prospect of using a portkey did not sit well with Harry. Personally, he much preferred apparation—he was far more practiced at it and less likely to fall flat on his face—but, for obvious reasons, he couldn’t let anyone know about that little achievement of his.

Eventually, they came across Amos Diggory, who worked in the Department of the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, and his son, Cedric. Harry knew more about Cedric than he did Amos. Cedric was a seventh-year seeker and prefect for Hufflepuff and as far as Harry knew, rather popular. Not that Harry really needed any prior knowledge on the boy, since Amos immediately dove into bragging about all of the many accomplishments of his son—much to said Hufflepuff’s embarrassment.

Knowing it would be a long walk and not really having any interest in the conversation between Ginny and Hermione—which fell more along the lines of blushing and gushing about the attractiveness of the young Hufflepuff in their midst—Harry decided to distract Cedric from the spectacle his father was making by striking up a polite conversation. For all of Cedric’s popularity, he was rather soft spoken and seemed to do better with one on one interaction. Harry was surprised by how shy he seemed, but then again, he truly didn’t know him. Either way, Cedric seemed to latch onto Harry’s calm acquaintanceship and stick near him even when the conversation lulled comfortably into silence.

They eventually arrived at the portkey—which, much to Harry’s disdain, happened to be a dirty old boot at the crown of a hill. They all circled around it and touched some part of the grimy surface. Mr. Weasley checked his pocket watch one last time and warned everyone that they only had a few moments left before it activated.

Cedric, who was right beside Harry, turned to him with anticipation dancing in his grey eyes. “You ready?” He asked Harry, sounding a little breathless as they waited, only seconds left now. Harry opened his mouth to respond, but was interrupted by the spinning, dizzying, nauseating magic of the portkey activating. The breath was stolen from his lungs and he wasn’t prepared when Mr. Weasley told them all to let go. Harry pulled back like he’d been burned and was spit out onto unfamiliar grass.

Harry winced at the various dull aches smarting all over his body from the rough landing as he pushed up onto his elbows. He wouldn’t bruise or anything, it just didn’t feel great at the time. He sat
up more fully just in time to see the graceful landing of Arthur, Amos, and Cedric, who had far more experience with portkeys than him.

Cedric walked up to Harry, immediately helped him up and brushed the errant grass from his shoulders.

“All right?” He asked, glancing Harry over to make sure he hadn’t broken anything. Harry refrained from rolling his eyes.

“Fine, just not used to portkeys is all.” Harry answered lightly, almost outwardly cringing when he heard the petulant and indignant complaints from Ronald, who refused to be helped up by a cackling pair of twins. Cedric nodded and smiled at him, glancing over when Ron’s temper got the best of him and huffed lightly under his breath at the display.

Amos called out to Cedric, planning to go their own way from there on. Cedric offered Harry a quick goodbye and hurried off after his father.

Lingering at the back of the group of Weasleys, Harry silently took in the chaotic festivities of the grounds outside the stadium. Actually, it reminded Harry a lot of the huge football games Vernon and Dudley would watch on the telly. The masses of people in face/body paint, fancy dress, and toting around various signs and banners and flags. The grounds were raucous with the bellowed and taunting chants that everyone seemed to already know, ranging from rude to downright incomprehensible.

Walking through, every three meters seemed to have another witch or wizard that was selling something: team merchandise, flags, face painting, food, noise makers, rattlers, horns, and plenty of alcohol. The crowds were so thick, Harry was almost separated from the group twice. Aligned in relatively neat rows were hundreds—perhaps thousands—of magically expanded tents. A sea of billowing green and red fabrics, with more neutral colors between.

They came to a tent rather far from the stadium and everyone piled in. The expanded tent reminded Harry a lot of the Burrow with its homey, warm, and lived-in décor. The game wouldn’t be starting until after sunset, so they still had the rest of the day to partake in all the revelries.

The twins were quick to drop their stuff off and scurry out of the tent to begin spending the money they had saved up on Merlin knows what was being sold out there. Ronald had his nose buried in a quidditch magazine. Ginny and Hermione were sitting on one of the bunks, chatting quietly to themselves. And Arthur announced to the tent as a whole that he was going off to go meet Charlie and Bill and then get some water to bring back to the tent. Which left Harry to his own devices.
‘Do you think anyone would mind if I went off on my own?’ Harry absently asked, looking at the canvas flaps of the tent in bored contemplation. His companion chuckled from over his shoulder.

‘Perhaps, but as long as you return before the match no one can really be aggrieved.’

Harry pursed his lips for a moment, before following the twins example and heading back out into the pandemonium.

He didn’t really have a preference for teams, but he knew he needed to don some sort of team colors to avoid whatever the more . . . enthusiastic members of the Weasley family had in store for him later. So, walking down one of the wider channels of traffic, Harry eyed some of the merchandise being sold. However, soon Harry found himself less concerned with which team the items supported and more with finding something less ridiculous. Harry was not invested enough for face paint, nor would he ever consider any of the many atrocious hats that seemed to hold true to the notion that ‘bigger is better’ even if Harry didn’t agree.

After almost an hour of aimless wandering, Harry finally spotted a simple red and black striped scarf that seemed to be the last one on a man’s small table of goods. When he paid, Harry knew it was outrageously overpriced, but he honestly didn’t care at that point. Lifeline finally draped loosely over Harry’s shoulders, the teen continued his walk at a more sedate pace.

Harry had almost reached the stadium again and was about to turn around and head back to the tent, when a familiar face caught his eye in the crowd heading towards the enormous structure. Curious, Harry followed at a distance behind the Auror. Philias Green’s form disappeared into one of the stadiums’ many entrances. The stadium was currently open, but it was too early for anyone but the truly obsessed fans to wander in, and Harry didn’t see Philias as that big of a fan.

Harry entered the Stadium after Philias and followed for a while until the Auror made his way out to a row of cheap empty seats low to the ground. When Harry sat next to Philias, the Auror gave him a shocked and worried look.

“I didn’t peg you for much of a quidditch fan, Mr. Green.” Harry said casually, watching what he suspected to be the Bulgarian team practicing high above them.

“Harry! What the hell are you doing here?” Philias asked in a hushed and panicked tone. Harry raised an eyebrow and glanced at the man beside him.
“I was invited by a friend, why?” Harry grew more serious as the shock faded from Philias and the worry left there was genuine. Something was wrong.

“You can’t be here!” Harry finally looked at him, giving him his full attention. Harry put a silencing charm up around them.

“What’s happened?” His voice was severe and left no room for anything but straight forward answers.

“It’s not what’s happened, it’s what will happen. Tonight, there’s supposed to be a Death Eater raid, here, after the game. Which means you really shouldn’t be here!” Philias was looking around them wildly, as if a Death Eater would pop out at any moment and kill them both. Harry frowned.

“Why didn’t you tell me about this before?” Harry’s voice had a hard edge to it, but Philias didn’t seem to notice.

“Because, I didn’t know about it until a few hours ago!” Philias shot back. “These Death Eaters are acting independently, they still don’t know about the Dark Lord’s return. They’re apparently upset about the reinstatement of the Triwizard Tournament, something about not wanting to better the relationships between outside countries as it could mean foreign allies against any of their future attacks. They think that this might scare the competing countries away, but the tournament is a done deal, the contracts have been drawn up and there’s no backing out now. Ridiculous, really.” Philias scoffed at the end, rolling his eyes.

“So, if Voldemort isn’t a part of this, then what are you doing here, trying to stop it?” Harry asked skeptically, doubting that either Voldemort or the Death Eater beside him would really care about a raid at a sporting event.

“No, they can’t know about my involvement and it would only drive them to do something more idiotic later on! The only reason I wasn’t found out during the Death Eater hunts a decade ago as some sort of plea bargain for another Death Eater, is because I was deep undercover and none of the other Death Eaters knew about me. I don’t want to risk that yet. So, instead I’m here to turn this to our advantage. I’m going to up the fear-part of it and hopefully scare one person in particular into action.” Harry’s brows drew together in puzzlement at the last part.

“How so?” Philias smirked at Harry and he felt that this was more of the man’s ‘Death Eater’ side.
“Dumbledore’s been on the fence about inviting a certain Ex-Auror friend of his to teach DADA this upcoming year and we think that a bit of a scare might help him make his decision.” Philias didn’t have to say who he was talking about, it took a moment, but soon it clicked for Harry the meaning behind the man’s words.

“The one Barty’s going to impersonate in order to get close to me.” Harry said knowingly. He and Philias had been talking about Voldemort and Barty’s movements all summer, it didn’t take much work on Philias’ end to find out who Barty had kidnapped and impersonated the most.

Philias nodded.

“What about Lucius? I know that he and his family are here—or will be here later—will he be a part of the raid?” Harry asked, curious to know the answer, what with Draco and Anthony being with him.

“No, he has no idea about the raid. Apparently, a few Death Eaters didn’t want to involve him because of you. It’s no secret that you and his son are close friends and he has been publicly seen offering you help and being friendly. Some are worried about his loyalties.”

Harry nodded to himself. Good, one less thing for Harry to worry about.

“Now that I’ve answered your questions, it’s time to get you out of here. I can apparate you once we leave the stadium.” Philias began to stand up but Harry made no move to leave.

“I’m afraid I can’t leave yet Mr. Green. As I said before, I came here with several friends and have been seen by many people already. If I left before the game even begun, people would get suspicious and wonder if I knew about the raid beforehand. Contrary to what you might believe, popular opinion of me is not exactly trusting nor is it forgiving. Being invited to the World Cup—and into the Minister’s Top Box no less—is no small thing, it’s not as though I can just feign a headache and ask that everyone go home, and I will not leave my friends here alone during the raid. Besides, you, more than anybody, know that I am not exactly fragile and will be just fine. So, Mr. Green, why don’t you go about your business, relax, enjoy the game if you can, and stop worrying about me.” Harry warned without any real bite in his tone.

Harry cancelled the silencing charm and stood just as the Bulgarian quidditch team were descending on their brooms, finished practicing and making way for the Irish team. The low seats weren’t good for viewing the game itself, but it did mean that they were very close when the Bulgarians landed.
That fact wouldn’t have mattered to Harry normally, but when he glanced over at the group of red and black uniforms, Harry was stopped from leaving by the gaze of one player in particular that was watching him.

He looked a little younger than the other players, but he was still an intimidating sight with his tall stature, broad shoulders, lean muscle, and piercing gaze. The team was loitering on the field, catching their breath and rehydrating, giving the young man plenty of time to watch them. And he was looking right at Harry and Philias. Philias followed Harry’s line of sight to the only person who seemed to notice them. Harry cleared his throat, drawing Philias’ attention back to him.

“I don’t much appreciate an audience to my private affairs. If you stick around, keep an eye on that one.” Harry glanced back at the quidditch player, their eyes met and the elder’s gaze narrowed slightly. “I have a feeling he sees too much.” And with that Philias nodded, stepped out of Harry’s way, and followed the teen back into the bulk of the stadium.

When Harry returned, Arthur didn’t even seem to have noticed his absence, which was good for Harry. Hermione, however, did and he received a thorough reprimand from the young witch.

The twins were busy painting each other’s faces green, while Ronald had gotten significantly further in his magazine and had acquired some red and black face paint of his own while Harry was away. Bill and Charlie had shown up and were chatting about something while sipping at their frothy green ales. All in all, Harry hadn’t missed much in his absence.

Though, when Ron finally did look up from his magazine and saw Harry’s scarf, he gave him a wide grin and tried to pull Harry into talking about the different players on the team—with an especial kind of attention on the seeker, Viktor Krum—but Harry was quick admit he didn’t really know anything about either team. Unfortunately, that only made Ron set down his magazine to ‘enlighten’ Harry to the wonders of the Bulgarian National Quidditch team.

Harry was only released when it was finally time to make their way to the stadium. As soon as they entered the inner part of the stadium, Harry could feel the thunderous cheers vibrating through the cement under his feet. The same chants he’d heard out on the grounds echoed. It was like nothing he’d ever witnessed before. They soon began their ascent to the Ministers Box, which was all the way at the top and set perfectly between the two goal posts.

It was a long way up, but halfway, the Weasleys ran into the Malfoys and Harry was glad to have the rest of his group of friends together again. He liked Hermione just fine, but Hermione seemed a
little distracted by the other gender at the moment to have fulfilling conversations with Harry like they usually did. The Malfoy lord and lady greeted Harry politely, but ignored the redheaded troop altogether and vice versa, which was probably the closest to ‘civil’ as they were going to get.

When they finally reached the Top Box, it was clear that there wouldn’t be many more joining them, just the Ministers for Britain and Bulgaria, the commentator, a few officials from the Bulgarian Ministry, and a small security team for each Minister. Harry hid a smirk when he saw Philias as one of the two Aurors in the box watching Cornelius Fudge. While the ‘adults reacquainted’ Harry was able to take a step back and speak discreetly with Philias.

“What a coincidence, Mr. Green.” Harry remarked with a small smile on his face, looking out into the stadium without glancing at the man next to him. When Philias spoke, Harry could hear the smirk in his voice.

“Yes well, one of the appointed Aurors suddenly fell ill and I suppose it was a rather fortunate coincidence that I happened to be attending this year’s World Cup.” The willful innocence in his voice almost made Harry laugh aloud. Suddenly, the entire stadium exploded with roars as the Irish quidditch team came soaring over the lip of the stadium with all of the fireworks and fanatics as were expected. Harry looked at the hidden Death Eater next to him with something conspiring behind his eyes.

“Careful, Mr. Green, or someone might realize you are not much of a quidditch fan.” Philias’ only reply was a raised eyebrow right before Harry moved over to the railing where his friends were cheering.

Draco shouted over the noise, chattering on about how he’d personally met the entire Irish team and received one on one advice from their seeker. Anthony wasn’t impressed—being that he was a bigger fan of the Bulgarian team—but neither boy told the young blonde to stuff it. In a blur of red and black, the other team swept onto the scene with just as much dramatics as the first.

The masses only erupted into more chaos when the Bulgarian team’s mascots—a group of Veela women—came out and began cheering on their team. All around, men seemed to move closer and cheer louder as they fell under the Veela’s allure. Ronald nearly climbed over the railing as he drooled and the twins had to hold him back. The adults were far better at controlling themselves, but even Draco and Anthony stared fixed on the beautiful women, eyes wide and glazed as they inched closer.

Harry didn’t fully understand it. Sure, he could see how beautiful them women were, but it certainly didn’t consume him like it did the others. He didn’t dwell on why he might not be affected in the same way, since Harry already knew that he was different from most his age. For one thing, most his age did not converse regularly with Death, nor could they say that they were immortal like he.
Harry’s circumstances were just different, and perhaps that meant that he wouldn’t feel the same things or act the same way as his peers. Or maybe it had nothing to do with any of that and he was simply not attracted to them.

The allure didn’t last long as the game was kicked off and everyone became refocused on the players.

Harry knew from his own experiences playing quidditch that the game could be absolutely brutal, but professional quidditch was something else entirely. There were less crashes and haplessly ramming into each other, and far more calculated, dangerous moves. Halfway through the game, Harry realized that the world class Bulgarian seeker, Viktor Krum, was the very same player that had been watching him and Philias earlier. It was then rather easy to get Ronald to tell Harry what he knew about the young man. Harry was surprised to find out that he was younger than he’d thought —only seventeen and still a student at Durmstrang. Harry kept a close eye on him.

Eventually the game ended with Viktor catching the golden snitch, even though the Irish had racked up enough points to win by then. The twins were overjoyed, apparently having won some kind of bet. Ronald was morose, but still happy to have been able to see the Bulgarians play. Everyone else seemed anxious and excited for both teams to visit the Ministers Box for the award ceremony. That seemed to be the time for everyone else outside of the Top Box to leave, the masses slowly trickling back out onto the grounds for post-game celebrations.

Harry once again found himself stepping back from everything and watching with mild amusement. The teams entered a few minutes later and Viktor was immediately snatched from his group and pulled to the Bulgarian Ministers’ side so that the raucous man could boast about his young star. Harry would have laughed when Fudge did the same, except that Fudge didn’t grab one of the Irish players, instead he guided Harry up to the little group and proudly introduced the famous Harry Potter!

Harry was flushed and incredibly uncomfortable with the attention. Which, ironically, seemed to have been Viktor’s exact reaction until he’d spotted Harry and his attention was devoted solely to him, occasionally flicking to Philias in the background. Harry did his best no to react to the scrutinizing, penetrative gaze and focus only on the idle chatter between Ministers. Harry was eventually able to dismiss himself when it looked like the others from his group were ready to leave.

Harry was grateful for the chance to escape. If there was one thing he’d learned over the years since joining this world, it was that Harry much preferred silently watching from that shadows, rather than being in the lime light. He’d spent enough time already trying to disappear into the stitch work of society and become inconspicuous.

The whole way back to their tent, Harry was on edge. Sneaking glances around as he waited for the
raid to begin. The celebrations were so loud that it was hard to tell the difference between screams of joy and screams of terror. They were supposed to spend the night in the tent and then return to the Burrow in the morning. Harry knew that they wouldn’t be staying the night, but without knowing the exact time that the raid would start, he began to worry that it would be hours still.

He entertained himself for a while just talking to the others, but eventually he grew tired of that and just receded into himself as he waited. He wasn’t worried about drawing suspicion, since it was almost expected at this point for Harry to retreat into his own mind when around so many people for so long. Harry just hoped that the plan would have its desired effect and Dumbledore would bring the Ex-Auror in. *Now if only it would start before everyone started going to bed!*

Harry knew the *exact* moment the raid had started, since he was the only one listening so closely to what was going on outside. Mr. Weasley had left only a few minutes prior to go talk to Amos about something, so it was just a tent full of minors and two—intoxicated—adults. So, it wasn’t much of a surprise when the screams went unnoticed by the others.

Harry pulled on a mask of concern and slight fear as he stood from where he’d sat closest to the tent opening. Moving over to the rowdy group, Harry spoke above them to get their attention.

“Something’s wrong! That doesn’t sound like people enjoying themselves anymore.” When they registered what Harry had said and the scrunched look on his face, everyone was finally quiet for the first time all night as they listened. Sure enough, the music and chants had disappeared and been replaced by the sound of roaring fire, rapidly thudding feet, and petrified shrieks.

Bill and Charlie shot upright just as the eldest Weasley burst into the tent with wide, frightened eyes and told them what was going on outside; *they were under attack.* They grabbed their absolute essentials—wands, shrunken bags, etc.—and Mr. Weasley did the one thing Harry had been hoping he wouldn’t. Split them up.

“Oh, alright, Charlie and Bill, you two come with me. We’re going to do what we can to help. Everyone else, you need to get back to the boot as quickly as possible. I won’t be far behind, then we’ll go back to the Burrow. Fred, George, make sure to look after your little sister. Be careful!” With that, the three eldest left and the others scrambled out of the faux safety of the tent and into the chaos.

It was completely disorienting, the smell of smoke choked the air from the many tents set ablaze and people were sprinting between the tents like the frantic stampede of prey animals, crushing anything in its path. Harry had come out last and only had a moment to register his surroundings before he had to snap out of it and run after his already moving group. Even at a run, Harry was a little behind the others, not that anyone noticed in the rush of things. Harry really didn’t want to get separated from the group, but it was looking more and more likely as he was bumped and elbowed and shoved in other people’s careless fleeing.
He could hear the explosions all around him, knew that the Death Eaters were close and it would not be good if any of them saw and recognized him. The whole point of him even being here during the raid was to stick with the Weasleys and make sure none of them got seriously hurt. The crowds were finally beginning to thin out when something caught Harry’s eye and stopped him in his tracks. The group of wild red hair disappeared from his peripheral, but they were close enough to the edge of the grounds and the tree line that it wouldn’t be long until they reached the boot, he would be close behind them.

What had caught his attention was a familiar dark tangle of thick curls only several meters to his left. Harry stood there and watched as Bellatrix Lestrange seemed to sense his gaze, stopped, and slowly turned around. When their eyes connected, the witch’s lips pulled up into a manic grin, a wicked light sparking in her eyes that was seen all the way from where Harry stood. Bellatrix lifted her hand that didn’t hold a wand and slowly waved in what was no more than a tiddling of her fingers.

She was just standing there, not making any move towards him. But just then, Harry’s shoulder was knocked painfully back as one of the last stragglers zoomed passed carelessly. His eyes only left the witch for a moment, but when he looked back, she was gone. Harry wasn’t naive though, he knew she hadn’t just left him on his own. Just as he thought this, a long arm snaked across his chest from behind and pulled him back against the front of what he knew to be Bellatrix. Her other hand came up on his other side and slid up to his neck. Strangely enough, the touches were gentle—tender, even—and the position of the hand around his neck should have been threatening, but it was too loose to be anything but Bellatrix’s twisted form of an embrace.

“Oh, Harry darling, how I’ve missed you! And look how you’ve grown! Turning into quite the handsome young man, yet still such a pretty thing.” Her reverent words were accompanied by the gentle graze of her thumb over his cheek before it returned to being the loose hook around his throat. “You know, I owe you so much, dear Harry. You brought me back to my lord. It’s unfortunate that I cannot tell him about how you’ve helped me, he wouldn’t understand. But, if you come with me now, I know our lord will be merciful and welcome you with open arms.” She emphasized the last bit with the brief tightening of her own arms.

“I’m afraid it’s not my time yet, Bellatrix. Besides, what could the Dark Lord possible have use for a fourteen-year-old? I may be a Ravenclaw, but that doesn’t mean I’ll be all that useful.” Harry said calmly, even though they both knew his words not to be true.

“No need to be humble, darling, I know you hide—and hide well. You would be an invaluable ally. If you were truly the harmless fourteen-year-old you claim to be, then perhaps I should just take you back to my lord right now.” She considered, pulling him back a little tighter. Knowing that the witch might actually do it just to prove a point, Harry stopped with the games and pulled on the cold, swirling magic within him that he knew worked best with Necromancy.
Bellatrix laughed loud and breathlessly into the cool night air as she felt the press of that delectable magic. Poised, ready to strike and just as dangerous as pressing a blade to her throat. It was a clear warning to not even try, but it did little to deter the witch. In fact, it only made her want to take Harry more! To whisk him away to her lords Manor and show her master just how incredible the young man truly was. She knew her words to be true, the Dark Lord would be ecstatic once he knew of Harry’s potential. Her master would treat him well.

“*There it is!* My lord would seek you to the ends of this world and the next if he could feel this for himself. I know you are hiding amongst those boring and insignificant wizards for now, but I will not remain silent forever. As glad as I am that you are not the enemy, I will not allow you to remain neutral for long. So, prepare yourself Harry, because you will be in the grasp of our lord soon enough.” Before Harry could even reply, Bellatrix’s arms retreated and when he turned around, she was gone.

Harry knew she was talking about the resurrection. Which meant she knew what was to come and fully expected for Harry to join Voldemort afterward. Which, depending on how that went, wasn’t completely out of the question. Harry would never be a Death Eater—he wasn’t even sure if he could bow before Voldemort as another follower—not after all he’d done, not after being the one actually bring him back, not with the power Harry holds—but perhaps he will lend his aid and become more of a ‘connected third party.’ If Voldemort ever found out about his gifts, it would be best if Harry wasn’t marked and under the complete control of Voldemort.

Harry was broken out of his thoughts when a flash of a spell shot up into the night air and the writhing snake and skull loomed overhead. Harry knew that the quiet of the grounds meant that the other Death Eaters were either retreating or already gone and that the Ministry would show up at any moment.

Harry pulled out his invisibility cloak from his expanded pocket and threw it on before making his way quickly towards the woods. There were people still in the woods, so Harry quickly took his cloak off once he was in the cover of trees and made his way back to the boot. It was more difficult to navigate back in the dark, but he eventually arrived. Everyone else was already there and waiting on him with panicked expressions that immediately eased when he appeared.

Harry spun a vague story about being knocked out while running and waking up after the place was nearly empty. Moments later, they had taken the portkey back and were trekking back through the woods to the Burrow. Sirius and Remus were both waiting outside when they arrived and nearly crushed Harry when they got their arms around him.

Harry didn’t think he’d ever seen either man look so terrified before, Remus’ eyes were even suspiciously wet and red. It pulled hard at something behind Harry’s ribs when he was pulled into their encompassing arms and not let go for anything, even as they told Mr. Weasley thank you and goodbye before apparating back to Grimmauld Place.
Harry found out later that they’d gotten word about the raid only a little bit ago from an Auror acquaintance who’d apparently been there and had seen Harry. Harry didn’t need to ask who to know who it was. He would probably have to have words with Philias later about worrying his guardians needlessly, but for now, he would stay with them. They didn’t know what he got up to in his spare time, they didn’t know how invulnerable he really was, so what had happened tonight had probably scared the daylights out of them. To them, they’d come so close to losing a child that night.

Remus continued to hold Harry close, growling softly in the back of his throat when the teen attempted to pull away, so Harry just gave in and held him in return. Burying his face in Remus’ shoulder, he closed his eyes and breathed in the comforting and familiar smell of one of the two closest people Harry had ever had to a parent. It was rapidly becoming clear that a parent had almost nothing to do with DNA, and everything to do with who held you close in moments like these. It had to do with who was willing to sacrifice their own happiness and wellbeing for you, and who would remain by your side unconditionally. Taking those few things into consideration, it was unquestionable who that was in Harry’s life.

Harry had never really had that in his life before, so he found it to be completely new territory for him and he had no idea how to act around them; whether to start referring to them as his parents or ‘dad’ or something. So, Harry just settled on his usual way of communicating such things; through action. Harry squeezed Remus a little tighter and said nothing when Sirius pulled them both close. It wasn’t much and Harry knew that they deserved more, but it was all he could give right then. Harry wasn’t like other fourteen-year-olds.

He knew that there were parts of himself that were so tangled up, locked away, or even extremely underdeveloped. It made it hard to connect to others and convey that he actually cared. But he was working on it, trying his best to open up as they had and communicate what he felt. Harry didn’t know if he would ever be completely open and vulnerable with anyone, it seemed unlikely, but no one seemed to blame him for that or get frustrated. Perhaps one day it would be different.

When Harry was finally released to go to bed, he laid there for several hours, awake and restless. Eventually giving in, Harry got up and pulled out a few supplies from his desk. In quick, elegant script, Harry wrote a brief note and sealed it in an envelope. He wasn’t sure when he’d send it, but he knew it’d be soon.

The gentle wrapping on the office door pulled Voldemort’s attention away from the ritual book he was referencing to get a more well-rounded idea of his plans for his resurrection.
“Come in.” His sibilant voice seeped through the door to the person standing outside and the Dark Lord was surprised to see Green walk into the room. The ‘Auror’ never came unless Voldemort summoned him, which made his curiosity immediately spike at the sight of the man. Especially since there was only a few days left until the new school year began and Voldemort was quite busy with Barty. Green looked nervous, but confident in being there. He must have some important business. Voldemort quickly waved away the deep bow dismissively, his impatience so very fleeting these days.

“What is it?” He snapped out, deep red eyes boring into him.

Green snapped up and quickly placed an envelope on the desk before him with a quick explanation before he touched it.

“It arrived on my desk this morning with no magical trace and the same privacy spell as the box had.” Green answered and Voldemort caught onto the implications immediately. With bounding anticipation, Voldemort forgot all about Green’s presence as he tore open the envelope and pulled out the sturdy piece of parchment. His crimson eyes swept over the single line with careful reverence and surprisingly hearty laughter filled the room, causing Green to flinch slightly.

The Dark Lord grinned as he read the note again, filling with amusement and bubbling excitement.

*Let the games begin.*

-A Friend
Harry’s fourth year swept in on the whispered tides of excitement from those students ‘in the know.’ Each table in the Great Hall was buzzing with overflowing excitement—including the staff table—as everyone anxiously waited for Dumbledore to make the announcement. Which didn’t happen until after dinner, causing the room to become more and more tense as the minutes dragged on.

Harry simply sat back and watched with masked mild amusement, absently listening to the musings of his chilling companion over his shoulder. As time went on, Death was becoming more and more begrudgingly fond of the students of Hogwarts. He often spoke of how endearingly ignorant they were, with their—supposedly—long lives still ahead of them. Harry lightly teased him, ignoring the subtle shiver of Hermione next to him as she tugged at her sleeves with a frown forming between her brows. Those in Ravenclaw often complained about drafts, but it was none of Harry’s concern.

The only one who could come even close to suspecting it had something to do with Harry was Anthony, and the other boy was the last person to stir up trouble when it came to his friend. As the years ticked on by, Anthony never grew apart from Harry and with the life Harry’s had, he found that fact indescribably comforting. Even though he knew that at some point he would tell Anthony the truth about himself, Harry didn’t necessarily feel that same clamping guilt in his gut that he felt around the others when thinking too hard about his own secrets.

Despite the fact that Harry didn’t get to spend as much time with Anthony as he had last summer, they were still as close as ever. On the train, while the others were occupied either talking with each other or reading, Anthony told Harry about some of the practicing he’d been doing on his own and Harry had to admit to being impressed with his friend. Anthony had spent his summer searching for and learning obscure spells from a variety of different countries. Harry made him promise to give him a demonstration at some point when they returned and had smiled fondly at the lively spark behind the other boy’s eyes.

Harry was drawn out of his head when Dumbledore stood up and finally began his announcement.
Halfway through, however, the Headmaster was interrupted by the dramatic appearance of a rain-soaked ex-Auror, Alastor Moody, who would take up the position of the DADA professor that year. Only Harry was aware of the disgruntled man’s true identity.

Because almost everyone else in the room was also staring at the man, Harry was allowed to openly watch him as he took a seat and slipped a hidden sip from a flask. However, when the secret-Death Eater’s gaze scanned the sea of students and landed on Harry, the young Ravenclaw had to be careful about the expression on his face, so as not to set off any red flags for the man and possibly scare him away. After all, it was Harry’s goal to allow him to capture Harry.

When Dumbledore reached the part about the age restriction on entering the tournament, he was relieved, even said so to his group. Not relieved for himself—no, he knew that there was no way he would volunteer for the tournament—but for his friends. He wasn’t worried about Anthony or Hermione, but sometimes he worried about just how Slytherin Draco really was. The tournament was supposed to be incredibly dangerous, and he didn’t want them anywhere near it. If he had his way, they wouldn’t even be able to watch the events—not trusting whatever protections set in place for the audience if these people were alright with sending near-children into some sort of ‘death-match.’

Dumbledore also announced that the other schools wouldn’t arrive until the end of October, when the champions would be chosen. Which had the effect of dampening everyone’s excitement even further, knowing that the tournament madness wouldn’t begin for another two months.

On their way up to the dorms after the welcoming feast, Harry absently touched the locket hidden under his clothes and wondered how long he would have to wait, and how long he would have to prepare for the resurrection.

If there was anything to be said about ‘Moody’s teaching methods, it was that they were certainly ‘unconventional.’ From the very first day in DADA, the eccentric man had made it abundantly clear that he didn’t give a rats arse about the Ministry approved curriculum and would be teaching them more about the dark arts than how to defend against them. Not that Harry could complain, considering all of illegal spells he’d learned on his own over the years—not to even mention the morally-unsound things he’d had to do while learning and practicing necromancy.

At the end of the first week, Moody introduced the class to the unforgivables. Moody’s chosen victim being a small blood red bird with black wings and even darker eyes. It was sat innocently in a cage atop his desk at the beginning of class and most didn’t notice the timid little thing’s presence until the professor brought attention to it by flicking open the cage. The bird was in the middle of its desperate escape when it was hit by a plume of hazy yellow smoke and changed courses, slowly flying back to Moody’s desk.
From there, the wizard’s mismatched eyes filled with wild anticipation as his fun began and he made
the bird fly all over the room. It nipped at fingertips and tittered cheerfully in ears, eliciting a
wonderful chorus of laughter and shouts of surprise. At one point, it even attacked a Slytherins
immaculate hair with its small wings, ruffling the smooth locks much to the squawked indignation of
the young boy. Harry was one of the few who watched in apprehension, knowing that the Imperius
curse was no laughing matter, could make people do horrible things, and that there was a reason it
was called an ‘unforgivable.’

Something darkened in Moody’s expression as he forced the bird over to a basin of water and it
flapped helplessly over the still surface, unable to fight against the curse. Laughter dried up quickly at
the panicked chirps coming from the small creature.

“Shall I make it drown itself? I could.” The simplicity of the statement had the entire class slowly
realizing the power of the curse and just how dangerous it could be. After a moment of silence,
Moody brought the bird back to his desk and looked out over the room of pale faces that didn’t meet
his eyes. “Some might say that the imperius curse is the least harmful of the three, but I’d beg to
differ. Every day, we take advantage of our free will, unable to imagine what it would be like to be
imprisoned within our own bodies, completely at the mercy of another.”

As he spoke, Harry couldn’t help but reflect on what he’d learned about Barty Crouch Jr. How he’d
spent years under the imperius curse, cast on him by his own father who couldn’t accept what his
son had become. In a way, Harry could relate. He’d spent most of his life under the thumb of the
Dursleys. Trapped and controlled by his own family, completely voiceless without any visible way
out. In the end, Harry had been set free at the price of his mortality. He could almost laugh at the
poetic justice of being liberated through his own death.

Moody looked down at the bird on his desk, still under the influence of the unforgivable.

“Over the years, many witches and wizards have claimed to have only done You-Know-Who’s
bidding while under this curse. Does anyone know how they sort out the liars?” Moody spat out in
distaste as he scanned the room. Knowing where he was going with that, Harry allowed his own
hand to slowly rise among the few others. Moody’s eyes immediately snapped to him and a grin split
his scarred face as he ushered Harry up to the front of the class. Harry moved forward and spoke
after Moody prompted with an impatient gesture.

“The cruciatus curse, sir.” Harry answered blankly, hoping that he was wrong about what might
happen next. Harry felt no fear nor disdain for death, he wouldn’t shy away from it, but he was not
one for unnecessary suffering. He would not react well if Barty tried to torture the bird, in front of a
class full of near-children, no less.
“Crucio!” Harry didn’t blink as the bird he had been looking at began to screech and flap helplessly against the desk as it suffered unimaginable pain. He heard the startled and distressed complaints of his peers at the gruesome display, even though their ‘instructor’ seemed to be lost within his own mind as he tortured the innocent creature.

Realizing that ‘Moody’ would not be stopped any time soon, Harry took matters into his own hands. Not moving an inch, Harry reached out with his magic, feeling the brush of the veil on his fingertips as a cool presence shifted closer to his stiff back. His magic and the veil wrapped around the bird and with a quick tug, the little creature crumpled onto the desk, suddenly still. Moody jolted, shock momentarily sparking in his face before he seemed to come back to himself and clear his throat as he realized what he’d done.

Moody looked up at Harry, then, something unreadable in his eyes as the air slowly warmed. Harry’s face remained completely blank under the other’s scrutiny. Their staring was interrupted by one of the other students speaking up in the otherwise silent class.

“Professor, does the cruciatus curse usually kill its victims like that?”

When Moody’s attention was drawn away to answer the question, Harry silently returned to his seat where he gave a few quiet assurances to his very worried friends.

“Only if the victim is very weak or ill before-hand and after a long period of time.” He answered distractedly. The same student spoke up again.

“Was the bird sick?”

At this, Moody’s eyes shifted to chilling glacial green that pierced through him and left a cold sweat on the back of his neck.

“Perhaps.” Was all the man said before returning to his lesson—though he seemed rather distant for the rest of it—choosing to teach the last unforgivable only in theory, since his test subject was already gone. At one point, the ex-Auror brought up Harry’s peculiar encounter with the killing curse. He refrained from correcting Moody about him being the only person to have ever ‘survived’ the curse since, in actuality, he hadn’t.
The week following was far more interesting than the first, seeing as Moody made it his duty to make sure that his students knew how to actually fight off an *imperius* curse. After the rather grim note the previous lesson had been left on, Moody had decided to once again aim for a more light-hearted approach and kept the commands he made of the students under the curse quite silly. Such as, jumping on one foot or making animal noises.

Harry lingered near the back of the class, trying—*unsuccessfully*—to go unnoticed, as he despised the idea of being under the influence of the curse. Harry would be the first to admit that he had problems relinquishing control to another. If it could be helped, he knew he would never do as such unless it was to someone he *completely* trusted. And Moody was certainly *not* someone he trusted!

Eventually, though, Moody called Harry forward with an interested light in his eyes. Harry barely had time to prepare himself before a plume of diluted yellow smoke was racing towards him. He hadn’t even meant to do it. Being caught off guard, his magic reacted before he could and he felt the raw, undefined power pool under his skin like freezing electricity that almost burned. The only one that reacted to it was the person nearest to Harry at the time—Anthony. Harry heard the almost imperceptible intake of breath as his friend went utterly still next to him.

Harry could feel the insistent press of Barty’s will against his own, but his magic was unyielding and he remained outwardly unaffected. Barty grinned at the challenge and doubled down on Harry. A faint sheen of sweat formed on Harry’s smooth alabaster forehead and delicate cupids-bow as he continued to resist. Harry had very little practice with the *imperius* curse—which meant none—and so he was putting unnecessary amounts of energy and magic into resisting the curse. He was doing it with brute magical force, and it was already beginning to drain him.

He only technically needed to shield his mind, but he couldn’t risk shifting his magic while the blunt edge of the curse was pressing in on him. The briefest moment of hesitation could allow the Death Eater in to control him. By the time Moody finally relented, he was also sweating and a bit red-faced as he grinned almost victoriously. Harry was breathing a little heavy and had to quickly swipe the sweat from his brow, but was composed once again after only a minute or two. Moody had boasted to the class about Harry’s success in resisting and even made Harry share some techniques he’d used.

Much to Harry’s ire, word of his little display spread quickly through the school and he received many admiring gazes later that day during lunch and dinner.

Moody’s approach to teaching DADA was undeniably rough and brazen. Harry had even heard from Draco—who was in the other class with the Gryffindors—that one of the Gryffindor students had had a particularly hard time with the initial *unforgivables* lesson and had to be comforted after class. However, nobody dared go and complain to their head of house or another professor about the unconventional methods. Because, despite the slight danger and uncomfortably gruesome topics, none of them could deny that Moody was an amazing instructor. Moody didn’t tiptoe around anything because of their age and was working hard to make sure that they knew as much as
possible. Which especially impressed Harry, knowing that he was secretly a Death Eater with his own agenda at the end of the day.

Don’t get him wrong, Remus had been one of the best DADA professor’s they’d ever had. But, unlike Moody, Remus had to be very careful about what he taught because of what he was. And in the end, it still hadn’t made a difference. Speaking of, Harry had almost forgotten about his ‘conversation’ with the Potions Professor at the end of his third year.

Harry was surprised that what he’d said had—on some level, at least—affect Severus Snape. The man was not suddenly his friend, by any means, but Snape had gone from viciously targeting Harry in attempts to humiliate him, to treating him more like any other student in class. Harry even noticed Snape being a little more attentive to the rest of his students instead of sneering all the time and insulting them for every little mistake. He had no idea if it would last, but Harry hoped it was a step in the right direction for the man.

Philias Green continued to send Harry letters each week to update him, even though there wasn’t much he could actually share with Harry now that the school year had begun. Almost everything in Voldemort’s plans had been taken care of—anything truly important being done by Bellatrix—and they were now just playing the waiting game as said plans unfolded. Still, that didn’t stop Philias from writing Harry each week.

His letters became less and less about Voldemort and more about warning Harry to be careful and generally mothering the young Ravenclaw almost as much—if not worse—than his guardians already were. Harry had to repeatedly remind the Death Eater that he wasn’t as breakable as everyone liked to believe and Philias would do well to remember that before Harry truly became irritated. Philias ignored him and just continued to fret.

As the weather slowly withered into something cold, damp and rich with the vibrant hues of wilting leaves, Harry found himself gradually regretting bringing the ridiculously worrisome Death Eater into the fold.
No Time For Losers, 'Cause We Are the Champions

Chapter Summary

In the last chapter: Harry’s fourth year begins and Moody/Crouch Jr. begins teaching as the Defense Against the Dark Arts professor. They learn more about the Unforgivables, as well as the Triwizard tournament taking place later on in the year.

Chapter Notes

Hey guys! Just a brief note, in the last chapter I mentioned Draco being in the same DADA class as Harry, but he was actually in the other class with the Gryffindors. Just a little slip up, it’s already been changed so don’t worry about it :) I hope you enjoy this chapter!

The night of October 30th was charged with the frantic anticipation of the arrival of the two challenging schools: Beauxbatons and Durmstrang. They were expected to arrive just after dinner. Harry didn’t think he’d ever seen the students of Hogwarts finish their dinner so quickly before. He was reminded of the welcoming feast two months prior, though the wait seemed to only rile the students up even more. He vaguely wondered how any of them would manage through the year—having to attend classes and live with these students all year round if they acted like this.

He just didn’t understand it. But then again, Harry wasn’t one to easily excite.

Hagrid, who’d left partway through the meal, returned through the staff entrance and quietly relayed something to Dumbledore before sitting back down in his seat with a beaming smile on his face. A moment later Dumbledore stood, dessert disappeared, and the room fell silent as they watched their Headmaster step out in front of the staff table.

“Let us all give a warm welcome to the ever accomplished and elegant students of the Beauxbatons Academy of Magic and their lovely Headmistress, Madam Maxime!” Dumbledore exclaimed as the doors suddenly opened. A group of powder blue uniformed students strode in with chins high, backs straight, hands folded behind them, and unified, near-silent steps that barely brushed the ground. A sigh of fluttering skirts and impeccably tailored blazers as they swept into the Great Hall. Every student was mesmerized by their graceful movements and breathtaking displays of wandless magic in the form of winking blue lights and little blue butterflies. They all moved in sync, bodies looking too light and defying all logic.
Halfway down the aisle, several at the back broke away—two guys and two girls—to take the performance even further by dancing together. The boys—if they could truly be considered ‘boys’ since they were all likely of age—effortlessly lifted the girls into the air and then they shot them forward, as one would toss a bird into open air so that it could take flight, the two girls lifted their legs before and behind them in a beautiful arch of streaming fabric before landing with little more than a soft thump and a few graceful turns before they made it to the end of the aisle with their male partners.

The towering—yet no less poised—Madam Maxime followed her students with a proud gleam in her eyes. The applause that followed was near deafening, with many male students standing up with brilliant grins as they took in the beautiful and elegant Beauxbaton girls, while the female students were a little less rowdy in their appreciative gazes on the equally impressively attractive Beauxbaton boys. Harry didn’t put any thought into the way his gaze may have lingered on the broad shoulders, narrow waists, and sharp aristocratic features of the boys.

Next, Dumbledore introduced the students from Durmstrang. The Scandinavian school was nearly a polar opposite to Beauxbatons. They burst through the doors with a deep and aggressive shout as their boots echoed loudly on the stone followed by the sharp clash of their wooden staffs striking the ground in a small explosion of sparks. If Beauxbatons was soft summer rain, then Durmstrang was deep rolling thunder with flashes of lightning. Everything about them seemed hard and intimidating.

Their performance was full of harsh cries, thumping staffs, wild displays of fire-magic, and incredible feats of athleticism as they flipped and tumbled to the end of the aisle with streams fiery blaze racing alongside them. The Durmstrang students were not at all shy about releasing their magic into the room to demand the respect of everyone near. Even Harry could feel it, sitting nearest the center aisle with the other Ravenclaws and Gryffindors framing each side.

When he looked at Anthony next to him, remembering how sensitive his friend could be to magic, he noticed how overwhelmed Anthony seemed and quickly took his hand to try to help ground him. Anthony met his cool verdant gaze and nodded slightly in appreciation, though his face was still pinched in discomfort. Going one step further for his friend, Harry carefully wrapped them both in his own magic and hoped that the familiar magic would be enough to drown all of the rest out. Anthony immediately exhaled and closed his eyes in relief. Harry waited until Anthony opened his eyes again and verified that he was feeling better, before turning his gaze back on the Durmstrang performance just as it was ending. Harry kept their fingers loosely intertwined and edged off a bit of his magic without uncovering any of his friend.

Just then, the last Durmstrang student strode confidently into the Great Hall, followed by a professor and Igor Karkaroff. Harry, as well as the rest of Hogwarts, immediately recognized the student as world-famous, Viktor Krum. Unlike the other Durmstrang students who only wore the dark brown wool uniforms of their school, Viktor also wore a heavy and expensive-looking coat and fur hat. He strode quickly down the center aisle, his eyes glaring straight ahead of him and jaw clenched as if he
wanted nothing more than to be done with this and out of the public’s eye.

However, Viktor’s conviction to ignore everyone and everything didn’t save Harry from his notice as he passed. For a brief moment, their eyes locked and Harry felt the blunt press of powerful magic against his own, almost trying to engulf him from his lowered sitting position. And then, a moment later it was gone as Viktor passed and he was no longer within the Bulgarian’s sights.

There was more cheering and applause before Dumbledore said a few more words of welcome and the foreign students were sent to go sit amongst the Hogwarts students. Since the Beauxbatons students would be staying in the Ravenclaw dorms, they took up the very front end of their table, looking only a little dismayed at being right next to the bright-eyed first years who tried fruitlessly to strike up conversations with the seventeen-year-olds. Meanwhile, the Durmstrang students took up the center spot cleared for them at the Slytherin table, where they found their new temporary dormmates for the year. Harry smiled when he saw Draco sitting right next to them and already slithering his way into their ranks.

Dumbledore introduced the other two additions to the staff table, Ludo Bagman and Barty Crouch, who would also be judges during the tournament. Then, he brought out the traditional Goblet of Fire and explained how it would choose each school’s champions. An age line would be drawn by Dumbledore himself, then the students would have until after dinner the following night to enter their name. Harry already spotted a few students itching to find some parchment and a quill in order to enter their names.

They were dismissed and the Beauxbaton students followed the group of Ravenclaws up to their dorms, telling them how the ‘password’ worked and assuring them that they would be given riddles in French so that they didn’t have to worry about anything getting confused in the semantics of a different language—even though they were all quite fluent in English.

Once they were inside, the Beauxbaton students politely excused themselves and went up to their new dorms in order to get settled and rest after their journey.

The next day was filled with excitement as student after student bravely dropped their name into the goblet. Harry didn’t go and watch during his free period like a lot of the other underage students did—standing by to enviously witness the older students volunteer for the tournament—but he heard plenty through the chain of consistent gossip running through the student body. He even heard about the incident with the twins trying to dupe the age line by taking aging potions and needing to be escorted down to the infirmary with their long, grey beards.
With all the stagnant energy in the air, Harry found himself already drained before supper from just being near it all. He slowly ate his fill, still absentmindedly picking at his mashed when all of the plates disappeared and the lights dimmed almost to nothing. ‘At least the dim lighting is helping to ease this blasted migraine!’ Harry thought as he slowly turned to watch Dumbledore put everyone on edge by announcing that it was time to find out who would be their champions.

Harry sighed as the first bit of parchment shot out of the goblet and fluttered down to Dumbledore’s waiting hand, Beauxbatons had their champion. His eyes drifted from Dumbledore as he lost interest. They slid almost unseeingly over faces until one in particular caught his attention because it was staring directly at him. Harry froze, the first inklings of dread blossoming in his gut as he took in the barely-contained vicious grin tugging at Moody’s face. He looked like the definition of the ‘cat who caught the canary’ and Harry didn’t like that look at all. The next champion, from Durmstrang, was chosen.

‘Death?’ Harry asked warily, worry ringing through his thoughts.

‘It seems that things are not going quite as planned. . .’ Death replied hesitantly. Harry’s concern mounted as he looked at Moody, barely even registering the applause around him as Cedric Diggory was named the Hogwarts champion.

‘What’s going on? What do we do?’ Harry began to panic.

‘I’m afraid it’s too late, Harry. I had not been paying close enough attention to that one’s movements and it seems that they are taking a different route than we anticipated in order to capture you. . . You might wish to brace yourself.’

‘What—‘

“Harry Potter . . . Harry Potter?” Dumbledore’s disbelieving voice cleaved through the silence and Harry was jolted from his internal panic.

‘No.’

Harry could feel the blood drain from his face as the situation he was in suddenly became painfully clear, seeing Dumbledore’s confused eyes boring into him as he clutched another piece of parchment in his hand. It took all of Harry’s will to force himself out of his seat and he immediately felt Anthony’s hand on his wrist, as if silently telling him not to go. Harry looked down into his friends
terrified eyes and knew that he was not remaining as stoic as he’d hoped. Anthony gave the minutest shake of his head. The fear in his friend’s face clamped something painfully in his chest.

“It’s okay.” Harry couldn’t raise his voice above a wavering whisper, which only made the hand on his wrist tighten protectively.

Having no other choice, Harry stepped away from the table, his hand slipping through his closest friend’s grip as he approached the dais where Dumbledore still stood. Harry chanced a glance at the students around him as he walked on numb legs, mostly they looked confused, but a lot also looked increasingly concerned for the fourteen-year-old that was just announced as another champion in the infamously deadliest competition to every be held at the ancient school.

If Harry had tried to live up to the reputation he’d had when first entering Hogwarts, if he hadn’t spent the last three years doing everything he could to convey that he was no Savior, that he was just another kid, perhaps their reactions would be a lot different. Perhaps he would be met with disdain and mistrust as his peers assumed he’d illegally entered for the glory. Instead, he was faced with a sea of horrified expressions, as there wasn’t anyone in that room who hadn’t heard Dumbledore’s many warnings about just how very dangerous the tournament could be. Everyone had liked to groan and complain about the age restriction, until they had to look into the frankly terrified eyes of a fourteen-year-old who’d just been told he would have to partake.

It felt like far too long until Harry finally reached Dumbledore and was handed the partially-burnt parchment that held his name in someone else’s handwriting. Before Harry followed the other champions into the antechamber behind the staff table, Dumbledore laid a gentle hand on his shoulder and gave him a concerned, yet encouraging half smile.

When Harry entered the antechamber, all three champions looked at him in confusion, having not heard the commotion happening on the other side of the door after they had left.

Harry was still clutching the offending parchment in his trembling hand, knowing his face was stark white with an unhealthy pallor. Harry knew he could muster more composure even in the most dyer of times, but he also knew that everyone didn’t need to see the composed, impassive mask of someone far beyond his years. They needed to see the shaken, petrified boy just barely out of childhood who had no business being in such a tournament.

Harry felt a slight burn behind his eyes just as Cedric surged forward, concern shining through his face as he glanced between Harry’s stricken expression and the parchment in his hand. Harry met Cedric’s gaze and pulled in stuttering breath as he felt moisture gathering in his eyes, though he knew it wouldn’t turn into anything more than a visible shine that caused the older boy to grab his shoulder and the hand clenched tightly between them.
Harry didn’t get the chance to say anything as the door to the antechamber burst open and the attention was pulled off of him and cast on the five future judges that had just entered the room, along with the Depute Headmistress and Moody. Maxime and Karkaroff were arguing furiously and demanding that Harry be removed from the competition, as it gave Hogwarts an unfair advantage. Understanding dawned on the other two champions, but Harry didn’t take notice, as his back was turned to them.

Harry stayed close to Cedric, hoping that his small frame would look even more timid next to the older boy’s considerable height and build. Dumbledore was the one to actually approach Harry, even though the other school heads looked ready to shake him into telling the truth. Dumbledore gave Harry another sympathetic look and when he spoke, he spoke softly to the clearly rattled fourth year.

“Harry, you must tell me truthfully, did you put your name in the goblet? Did you ask someone of age to put it in there for you?” When Harry met the Headmaster’s eyes, he felt a slight pressure in his head. Having already guessed what Dumbledore would want before meeting his gaze, Dumbledore slid into his mind without any resistance and was allowed to see only enough to verify what Harry said. Everything important was locked away behind shields nobody but Death could break through.

“No, professor, I would never!” Harry’s voice sounded wrecked and utterly frightened at the same time, out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw McGonagall press a hand to her mouth and shake her head, as if she couldn’t believe they were even considering such thing. Dumbledore nodded and broke their gaze by turning back to the others in the room.

Their attention turned to Barty Crouch, all wondering the same thing. Crouch seemed reluctant when he informed them that Harry was magically bond to compete, or else risk losing his magic. When that happened, Harry made sure to grab onto Cedric’s wrist as if it were a lifeline and bite down on his trembling bottom lip. Cedric looked back at him, eyes pained, and reached over with his other hand to pat the bone-white hand gripping his wrist almost painfully tight. Harry loosened his grip and reigned it in a little as everyone seemed to accept his blatant fear.

The adults began to bat guesses at how on earth this could happen. Moody spoke up during a lull and captured everyone’s attention.

“Someone probably put Potter’s name in hoping he’d either lose his magic or die in one of the trials, entering him as a separate school.” The grim statement was followed by silence as several around the room realized just what this was—an attempt on Harry’s life—and now they would have no choice but to allow it and hope that they could intervene in time before something irreversible happened. Harry started at the ground, not fully trusting himself not to glare at Moody if he looked at him right then.
Dumbledore called the ‘meeting’ to an end by informing the four champions that the first task would take place on November 24th; they would have until then to prepare themselves, and they weren’t allowed any outside help for the tasks. They were dismissed without any signs of the celebration that this time was supposed to be.

They exited through another door out into a side corridor, so as to avoid any students that might be lingering in the Great Hall to gossip about what had happened. The adults didn’t follow the champions, so they all stopped out in the corridor and introduced themselves to each other. The Beauxbatons champion was a polite girl named Fleur Delacour, though there was an underlying severity to the girl that told Harry instinctively not to underestimate her. Viktor also introduced himself to Harry, and as his sharp and penetrating gaze bore into the youngest wizard, Harry began to wonder if all the suspicious looks he’d gotten from the quidditch player were actually just his neutral expressions, and it had been unintentional. Harry wasn’t sure about that one.

Cedric told Harry he would walk him back to his dorms, still wearing a slight crease between his brows as he watched the raven-haired boy worriedly. Harry only agreed to set the older wizard at ease and because he knew it wasn’t too far of a walk to the Hufflepuff dorms. Cedric probably felt responsible for his fellow Hogwarts student, that and perhaps the short, amicable conversation they’d held on their way to the Quidditch World Cup over the summer. Whatever the reason, Harry was grateful for the support.

When they reached the stairs, Viktor descended into the dungeons and Fleur moved on ahead of them, leaving Harry and Cedric to ascend in companionable silence. Harry was glad Cedric didn’t try to fuss over him or asking him how he was holding up, he knew he would get enough of that in the time to come. When they reached the Ravenclaw entrance, Cedric stopped Harry before he went in.

“I know we’re not supposed to, but just know that if you need help you can come to me. You’re not even supposed to be in this tournament, so I guess it doesn’t really matter if I help you or not. Just... I’m always here if you need me.” He offered haltingly, looking a bit unsure of himself and Harry suddenly wished he’d been paying attention during the selection ceremony so he could have seen Cedric right when his name was called, because the boy before him didn’t look all that enthused about his own participation in the tournament. He wondered how much outside pressure took a part in Cedric submitting his name.

Harry smiled gratefully and bid Cedric a goodnight before slipping into the Ravenclaw common room.

As he’d expected, there were quite a few worried faces waiting for him when he entered. Harry wasn’t surprised when Hermione jumped on him in a tight hug and nearly squeezed the air from his lungs, mumbling something against his shoulder about how awful the situation was.
When she finally pulled back, Harry was surprised when he was pulled tightly into the arms of another. It only took a moment for Harry to settle into the uncharacteristic ‘public’ show of affection from his close friend. Anthony was taller than Harry—no matter how many growth spurts Harry hit, Anthony was always several inches above him—which meant Harry’s face ended up pressed against the blonde’s chest as he held the smaller wizard close. He closed his eyes for a moment and allowed his friend to comfort him just as he had comforted Anthony the night before in the Great Hall.

When they pulled apart, Harry looked Anthony in the eye and whispered an honest ‘thank you’ before they stepped apart and faced the rest of their house still lingering in the common room. Harry noted another group in the back of the common room that were observing them curiously. Among the small group of Beauxbatons students were several boys and girls, including Miss Delacour. Harry ignored them for the time being and focused on the ones talking to him, telling him how worried they were when his name was called and filling him in a bit on what happened after he’d left.

Apparently, there were some students in both Hufflepuff and Gryffindor that believed Harry might have actually cheated. He could understand the mistrust from both houses, one was the house of the ‘true’ Hogwarts champion, and the other was infamous for jumping to conclusions, and stubborn to boot. However, both Ravenclaw and Slytherin didn’t even dare to entertain the idea, which made Harry feel slightly proud.

Harry was glad he had their unwavering trust. It would make his job of actually trying in the tournament a lot easier, not worrying about having the entire school pitted against him.

Now, Harry just had to go get some parchment and a quill so he could write to his guardians, as well as Philias, and inform them of the situation. Knowing how protective both parties were, Harry knew that the backlash would be great and that it would be best to get it over with as soon as possible.

When Harry finished writing his letters, his dormmates were already asleep, so on a whim he decided to write one more. Using the same cardstock that the other note was on, no larger than a postcard, Harry wrote,

_Tread carefully, for this game now has untold dangers. Not all bishops can survive the board._

_-A Friend_

Harry was sure to attach a note for Philias, telling him not to give the note to Voldemort until the papers released who the champions were. If Harry couldn’t outright share his displeasure with Voldemort’s plans, then he would warn him that ‘Harry Potter’ might not live through the trials and
Voldemort needed Harry to survive till the end—or at least until Voldemort did the ritual—in order for it to work properly. Harry knew Voldemort had too much pride, heightened by his current insanity, to allow anyone or anything other than himself to kill Harry.

Hopefully it meant Voldemort would hold off on any added trouble until the ritual—or better yet, actually help Harry in some way.

Harry sighed and slumped back onto his bed. ‘It’s going to be a long month.’
Wand Weighing & Wicked Winged Beasts

Chapter Summary

Beauxbatons and Durmstrang arrive at Hogwarts. Harry’s name comes out of the Goblet of Fire. Everyone is shocked and also worried for our little Savior. Harry writes Voldemort another note.

Fleur Delacour had been the official champion of Beauxbatons for roughly a week now. They were still weeks away from the first task and she could already feel the constant eyes on her from the other students. However, that was nothing she wasn’t already used to, considering her heritage. Even back in France, she’d always stood apart from everyone else. Not above or below, really, just . . . apart.

France was far more tolerant of creatures and ‘half-breeds’ than Britain. She’d known that before agreeing to travel to Hogwarts with the other top students of her year. She was just glad that her quarter-Veela side didn’t immediately make her a target for discrimination, even if it did invoke unwanted attention.

Thankfully, over the years at Beauxbatons, Fleur had been able to slip her way into a small group of friends so that she would not be completely isolated during school. Fleur counted her lucky stars that most of those friends had also come to Hogwarts with her. Currently, she was sat at the Ravenclaw dining table across from her good friend, Armand, while they ate breakfast.

Fleur was tearing off some fresh bread for herself when she spotted one of her fellow champions—and arguably the most interesting out of the bunch—entering the Great Hall with a small group of friends. Her sharp, deep blue eyes tracked the graceful movements of the fourth year as he took a seat at the Slytherin table next to a blonde she’d often seen in his company. Looking a little further down the table, she noted that she wasn’t the only one watching Harry Potter. Viktor Krum sat in the middle of a cluster of Durmstrang students that seemed to be trying to talk to him and get his attention, though he completely ignored them.

Armand turned to look over his shoulder and see what had captured his friend’s full attention. He turned back with eyes alight with intrigue.

“Now there is one of Hogwarts’ more interesting peculiarities.” Armand leaned forward as he spoke in their native language, the corner of his mouth perking up in what could only be described as
Fleur nodded in agreement. When she first arrived at Hogwarts, she had known a little about the boy—but really only the tragic story of his parents’ death and the fall of a rising dark lord. She had expected the arrogance and pitifully lack of ability that came with a life of fame and reverence. Fleur had only been there a day before the selection ceremony, so she hadn’t really the time to notice Harry Potter. Afterwards, though, he had her full attention.

It wasn’t that she believed his fear to be ingenuine that night, or that any of this had been planned on his part, but there was far more to Harry than what coalesced on the surface. After the selection ceremony, Harry seemed to return to what was considered his ‘normal’ behavior which consisted of blank stares, cold temperance, and sharp intelligence. Fleur was older than him and therefore couldn’t observe the young champion during his classes, but she really didn’t need to. She could see everything she needed to by watching those around Harry.

Harry was a cool mask of indifference, but the others were not always so subtle. Fleur noticed almost immediately how ridged the ‘houses’ could be around each other—some even going as far as being blatantly antagonistic—and yet, Harry Potter moved through them as if he was following a different current. Harry had friends from other houses and other years, and if he wanted to sit with them for a meal, nobody even batted an eye. People didn’t hesitate to move aside to make room for Harry at their table. Everything about Harry didn’t just command respect, it made people eager to give it.

That was the thing about the Ravenclaw. He didn’t rule over the student body with an iron fist, they all just willingly bent over backwards for him. Fleur would even go as far as to say that Harry Potter—and not just the legend, but the boy—was adored. That night in the common room, most of the house had waited up for him and when he finally returned, they had mussed over him like a bunch of overprotective siblings.

The image of a terrified Harry Potter with glistening eyes and trembling hands popped back up in Fleurs’ mind and she knew just how easy it was to slide in amongst them, to wish to protect the angelic-faced boy. Harry Potter just looked so... delicate. Harry wasn’t frail by any means, and he was growing just fine for a boy his age, but so many things about him made him appear too soft to be a part of something dangerous: the smooth alabaster skin, full lips that almost always looked stained by the blush of red berries, a fan of long dark lashes framing striking light green eyes, gleaming raven black curls that looked too tempting not to touch.

Harry Potter might not be part Veela like Fleur, but she could recognize the innocently beautiful trap that could be lying behind such a face. If her suspicions about the boy were correct then she would need to be extremely cautious around him during the tournament. Fleur returned to her breakfast with the buddings of respect unfurling in her gut.
Harry had not known exactly how his guardians would react to the news that he was forced into a dangerous competition. He did not expect, however, for them to try to take on both Dumbledore and the Ministry for what had happened. They were calling for disciplinary action against Dumbledore as well as the department that even allowed for the tournament to be reinstated. They knew that they couldn’t take Harry from the competition because the consequences were too great and Harry refused to allow them to risk it, so they took it out on the only people they could.

With Sirius’ reinstatement as Lord Black, they almost won, too. However, both endeavors didn’t really get anywhere. Dumbledore would have to plead his case before the ethics board, but he would be able to finagle his way out of that mostly unharmed, and he would also have to go a while without pay, but that wouldn’t be a problem for the famed wizard. The Ministry department fared even better, getting away with only a small fine and offering financial compensation to his guardians, which they immediately refused to accept on principle.

Harry tried to comfort them by assuring that he would only have to do the bare minimum to pass the tasks and that the other champions had offered him help—only a partial lie—throughout the tasks. The tasks may be dangerous, but he would play it safe.

Unfortunately, his guardians weren’t the only ones to react badly to the news. Little to say, Philias had not been happy. Thankfully, Harry was able to talk the ‘Auror’ out of confronting the dark lord by reminding him that Voldemort was—in fact—not himself. They were both well aware of the decline in the man’s mental stability, leading him to make irrational decisions. A point which Philias heartily agreed with. They had decided to do this on Voldemort’s terms, so they would just need to adapt and be prepared for anything.

Harry would seriously rather not partake in the tournament, but if it was going to get him to Voldemort’s resurrection, then he would not only have to partake, but do well enough to reach the end. He didn’t know if Barty would be taking him during one of the trails, but if that was the case, he didn’t know which one. He heard from his companion that, traditionally, the last trial would start off with handicaps on champions who did not do as well in the previous trials. If Voldemort’s end game led all the way up till the third task, then he would do his best to get every advantage he could and reach the end.

That being said, Harry would also have to hold back to a certain degree, of course. Harry had abilities that could give him an incredible advantage, but there was also a lot of drawbacks and things he couldn’t do.

For example, he couldn’t die.
During the tasks, all eyes would be on him and he couldn’t risk giving away too much. Which meant a severe limitation in the spells he could use, no manipulation of the veil, and no necromancy or soul magic. Best case scenario, Harry used simple (fourth year, maybe fifth year) spells, and pulled off the task at an average time while making it look like he only succeeded by the skin of his teeth through sheer dumb luck. That being said, Harry knew he couldn’t just hop into the tasks blind and hope for the best. He would have to try to cleverly solve the tasks beforehand so that he could make it through without huge displays of magic and control.

Not only would the school be watching, but all of Britain, France, and Scandinavia.

Two weeks before the first task, Harry was pulled from his potions class to attend the ceremonial Weighing of the Wands. Though tedious, Harry hadn’t really minded the interruption, except that when he got there, the infamous Rita Skeeter was also waiting in the small classroom. She was in the middle of trying to coerce an impassive Viktor into giving her an interview when Harry entered and she pounced.

Before Harry could react, his arm was grabbed and he was dragged forcefully off to an adjoining broom cupboard. The shrill-voiced blonde reporter was just about to shut the door when Harry regained his wits wedged his foot between the door, preventing him from being closed in with the shark of a woman.

“Pardon me, Ms. Skeeter, but I am abstaining from giving any statements at this time.” He spoke in a deceptively calm voice, irritation already lighting up inside him as he remembered all of the . . . distasteful articles the woman had written about both him and Sirius during his trial. Since his debut in the wizarding world his first year, Skeeter had been out for blood, scavenging for any bit of dirt on Harry for her bloodthirsty readers. Harry refused to play into her hand and risk the gamble that would be allowing her to write an article about him, so he needed to end it right then and there.

“Mr. Potter, I’m not sure if you’re aware, but this and the photoshoot are just as important to the wand weighing ceremony as the wands! All four of you will be giving me an interview, you’ll weigh the wands, and then comes the photoshoot. I’m afraid you don’t have much of a choice, dear.” Everything about Rita was utterly patronizing, talking to him as if he were simple. However, she failed to realize that Harry was far from concerned and did not consider her to have any kind of authority over him.

“Ms. Skeeter, interviews and photoshoots have nothing to do with the tournament itself. I will not be disqualified for not taking part, clearly, as I saw that I am not the only one unwilling to give you an
interview.” Harry’s face remained blank as he spoke and he noticed the flash of hesitance in Skeeter’s expression. “Also, I think it is fair of me to inform you that I am still underage and can invoke the protective rights as a minor if something is written about me without my consent. I want to stay as far away from the media as possible during this trying time and do not give you, or anyone, the right to speak on my behalf, publish my words, or speculate about me in the papers. Now, if that is all.” Harry stepped out of the still-open cupboard door before Rita could retort, and joined his fellow champions near Ollivander, who would be assessing the state of their wands.

Rita attempted to drag off the other champions a few more times, but just like Harry, they all refused.

Listening to Ollivander rambling on and on about the different designs and properties of their wands did little to hold Harry’s interest, so he soon turned his attention elsewhere.

Harry silently began inquiring about the first task from his friend. Death didn’t say much, other than that Harry should remain patient, as the answer would reveal itself soon enough. Used to Death’s frustrating antics, Harry reluctantly conceded to wait just as the strange old wandmaker asked for his wand.

Harry’s wand was deemed just fine and the gruelingly long photoshoot began. They had arranged them in so many different poses and positions that it made Harry’s head spin as he swore that they did identical poses at least five times. In many of the pictures, Fleur was allowed to sit in a comfy armchair as they stood around her. Harry soon began to envy the blonde girl as his limbs started to get stiff and cramp.

Harry, from the very beginning, had refused to smile for the pictures as he was reluctant to be there in the first place. He was immensely glad for that decision as, only a few minutes in, he noticed Cedric’s smile dimming with each shot until it turned into a full-on grimace and after a thorough reprimand from the photographer, he gave up entirely and went for a more stoic look like the rest of them.

They were finally released a little bit before dinner and Harry was thankful, for if it had gone on any longer, he would surely began shooting curses at anyone who even mentioned a camera! He was sure to let Anthony know just how horrid the experience had been afterward when the other Ravenclaw had made a comment about Harry being lucky to have gotten excused from classes for the rest of the day. Not much of a promising start to the tournament.

The weekend before the first task was the first official Hogsmead trip of the year and although Harry
had never been overly fond of the trips, with the goading of his friends he caved rather quickly. He
did have to say, however, there were parts of the trip that he actually quite enjoyed. It was nice to
spend time with his friends outside of the castle.

With the pressure of the first task looming over Harry’s head, he was rather tense the past few
weeks, and rightly so. It was nice to be able to do something that didn’t involve the tournament.

The only minor setback that morning happened as soon as they sat down for breakfast that morning.
Moody strode down the center aisle with his customary limp and stopped at their group. Harry
waited curiously to see what the disguised Death Eater would do, but was quick to hide his shock
when Moody spoke to Ginny instead of him. His tone was firm yet quiet as he barked at the
youngest Weasley to follow him to his office.

Slightly worried for his friend, Harry wanted to secretly follow them and find out what’s going on,
but he couldn’t easily duck away from his friends and if he told them, they’d just want to come along
which would only spell trouble. Unfortunately, Ginny didn’t return in time and they had to go to
Hogsmead without her so he couldn’t ask her about the meeting immediately after.

With nothing to do about it, Harry just focused on the trip and tried to push his curiosity to the back
of his mind.

Thankfully, Ginny didn’t miss out completely on her first Hogsmead trip and was able to rejoin them
halfway through as they sipped warm butterbeers at the Hogshead. However, Ginny was not in the
excited and exuberant mood she’d been in before breakfast and it quickly drew Harry’s attention to
her. When asked, Ginny told them that Moody had brought her up to his office because her brother,
Charlie, had made a surprise visit and Moody was allowing them to see each other even though the
tournament made it so guest access to the school was rather restricted during the time between events
and they wouldn’t have been able to see each other otherwise. Everyone else just figured Moody,
being acquainted with the Weasleys, was doing them a friendly favor, only Harry knew better.

The young Gryffindor seemed to once again get into the spirit of things as they moved on to browse
a few shops. However, the moment she was able to speak to Harry without being overheard, she
quietly instructed him to go down to the forbidden forest that night after curfew and to bring his
invisibility cloak. Harry immediately agreed and soon found himself wishing for the trip to come to a
swift end and for night to fall. Obviously more had happened in that meeting than she’d let on and he
had a feeling that with Moody’s involvement it might be the result of the dark lord’s idea of ‘help.’

When they returned to the castle that afternoon, it became clear that Ginny had no intention of
discussing the matter further until nightfall. With thoughts devoted solely on the meeting, Harry was
in no state to enjoy the company of his friends and managed to slip off, spouting something about
wishing to practice some more spells before the first task.
Harry kept himself busy for the remainder of the evening by going down to the Chamber to continue preparing a few ingredients he would need for the resurrection. He didn’t have everything just yet, but there were only one or two things he was missing and only because he hadn’t had the time to go out and retrieve them yet.

As is, the resurrection ritual didn’t require very complex ingredients—relying mostly on the magical power of the caster—but one had to also consider Voldemort’s . . . *unique* predicament with the state of his current ‘body,’ the damage he’d done to himself both through dark, counterfeit rituals and what pitiful lengths he’d gone to just to cling to life, as well as the fact that Harry would be simultaneously combining all of the horcruxes at once into an almost complete human soul, giving said soul a ‘permanent horcrux’ to ensure immortality, *and* creating a fully functional body untainted by the man’s past mistakes to house that soul. All of that taken into consideration, Harry had to make a lot of revisions and alterations to the original ritual and those revisions meant far more complex and delicate ingredients had to be used.

Since Harry didn’t know when he would be taken, he could only hope that it wouldn’t be until after the first task because his job would be *much* harder if he didn’t have all of his ingredients on hand. Once they were finished, he would have to start carrying everything he needed around with him in the small, undetectable and magically expanded pouch he’d gotten from Gringotts that was supposed to hold his money but would serve another purpose just fine. Harry would need to add additional wards to it, since he would need to be able to bring it with him into the tasks and they would likely be checked with very thorough spells to make sure they didn’t sneak anything in to give them an upper hand.

Harry was so caught up in burning an assortment of animal bones until they turned black and could be ground up into bone char that he missed dinner and it was nearing curfew. Cursing under his breath, Harry quickly placed the bone char under a stasis spell that would remain until he lifted it himself, and cleaned himself off as he hurried out of the chamber. If Harry didn’t share a room with Michael and Terry, he wouldn’t have bothered returning to the dorms to keep up appearances, but despite what had happened the previous year and the fact that his three housemates still had trouble meeting his gaze, Harry didn’t trust either boy enough to not take any opportunity he left dangling for them to get him into trouble.

So, Harry ascended through the near-deserted castle and made it back into the common room just as curfew hit. When he saw Anthony, already wearing his usual loose t-shirt and boxers with a drying white smudge of toothpaste at the corner of his mouth, he made sure to apologize aloud about missing dinner and disappointing the two eavesdroppers with a rather dull story about a night of research in the library. Anthony gave Harry a pointed look once the other two had their backs turned, it told the raven-haired boy that he knew that he hadn’t been anywhere near the library and he knew that Harry was up to something.

Harry turned away just as his lips involuntarily curled upwards, but he didn’t turn fast enough for his
friend to miss the brief slip of his cool composure.

It wasn’t long before they’d all gone to bed and Harry heard the slow breathing from the one half of the room he’d been concerned about. Harry quickly transfigured his pajamas into plain black robes, pulled his invisibility cloak over his shoulders and was slipping quietly out of his curtains when the bed next to his creaked lightly and the blue curtains moved aside to reveal the heavily shadowed face of his friend.

“Where are you going?” Anthony’s soft whisper drifted only far enough for Harry to hear, however, Harry still slipped fully from his bed in order to move closer to Anthony so as to guarantee that they wouldn’t wake the others. There was still a lot that he couldn’t tell Anthony, but if he was right and this was about the upcoming task then it wouldn’t hurt anything to allow his friend to join him.

“A little nightly excursion, care to join me?” Harry whispered back in a slightly playful uptick, his smile mostly masked by the darkness.

Anthony’s answer came in the form of him moving silently out of his own bed and transfiguring his clothes into robes that would protect against the cold night. Harry didn’t waste another moment and quickly threw his invisibility cloak over them both. Anthony was getting to be rather tall, but thankfully the cloak was made to cover a full-grown man, so it covered them both from head to foot —though they had to walk almost front to back as they crept out of the dorms.

It was a little slower getting out of the castle with Anthony also under the cloak since they often stepped on each other’s feet in the close quarters, but by the time they made it outside, it thankfully wasn’t too-late into the night. When they found Ginny hiding behind a tree right at the edge of the forest, she barely even blinked at the additional company and just slipped under the cloak as well and pulled both boys immediately into the forest. Harry didn’t have time to ask what was going on seeing as they were practically jogging through the immense forest with Ginny mumbling under her breath about ‘catching up’ and ‘almost missed them.’ She didn’t slow down until they spotted the towering forms of two very imposing figures slowly making their way through the forest as well. It took only a moment to match the silhouettes to the only people tall enough to fit them—Hagrid and Madame Maxime.

They stayed a good 5 meters behind the pair that looked as though they were taking a romantic stroll in the clear night. Harry could feel Anthony beginning to get antsy behind him, either from the cold seeping through the thin cloak or the fact that minutes were draining away while nothing of interest was happening. But just as Anthony opened his mouth to probably voice such complaints, the thick trunks to the trees ahead lit up in the dim light of something flashing in the distance. The light clearly didn’t come from a spell as it wavered and flicked in a warm amber glow before slowly fading.

Madame Maxime froze for a moment before gliding forward to see what that distant sound of
commotion was all about. Hagrid, as well as the invisibly trio, quickly followed the entranced Headmistress and the sounds of shouts, heavy chains straining their links, and groaning wood filled the night air as clouds of breath were ignited by a bright blaze of light.

Through the trees, a clearing was beginning to come into view the closer they got and they moved off to the side so that they could get closer to the clearing without getting too close to the couple they had been following. Harry first noticed what looked like a temporary camp site, with small tents scattered all about the half of the clearing they were closest to. Then his attention was captured by the brilliant eruption of fire and smoke from the other half where four large wooden storage containers sat, trembling from the force of whatever was inside. One container in particular shuddered violently before the wood finally broke apart to reveal the thick iron cage within that seemed about the same size as the wooden container had been.

Harry’s eyes widened and for a moment his lungs froze as memories soared through his system with the same force as lightning. Memories of scarred pale flesh and the weak tremble of a long-abused body. The beast filling his vision right then was nothing like the creature he’d brought peace to in Gringotts. This one was powerful, muscled limbs and black and russet scales broke through with stark white spikes around its head and along its tail.

Harry absently cast a silencing charm around them and turned to Ginny.

“Dragons?!” His voice was high and incredulous. Ginny grimaced in sympathy and nodded.

“When I got to Professor Moody’s office earlier, he left me and Charlie alone to talk. Apparently, with the unexpected fourth champion they needed to quickly adjust and the reserve Charlie works at had one of the closest dragons available that fit their criteria, so he arrived just last night. In the chaos of it all, they had neglected to include Charlie into the privacy wards that would prevent him from telling anyone about his business here and came straight here to tell me so that I could pass it on to you.” She explained, looking slightly guilty that she hadn’t told him sooner, though Harry didn’t notice as he’d been caught up on something she said earlier.

“Wait, what ‘criteria?’” At this, Ginny’s grimace worsened.

“All of the dragons need to be different, dangerous, healthy, and . . . nesting.” That final word had Anthony draining of color and Harry’s brow to scrunch up in consternation. That certainly complicating things. If these dragons were new mothers, then it didn’t matter how ‘benign’ of a species he faced, they would be incredibly dangerous and would try to kill him just on principle.

“They’re absolutely mad!” Anthony finally spoke, still staring at the enraged dragon that used what
very little space it had in the cage to beat against the bars and blast fiery plumes out at the frantic caretakers trying to contain the beast. The thought of Harry being anywhere near such a creature made him physically ill. Not for the first time, Anthony wished he could take his friend’s place and protect the one who was so precious to him. Unfortunately, the goblet didn’t allow for trading places and it was abundantly clear that nothing would be held back in the tournament just because of the one too-young champion now in their midst.

Harry had been silent for several minutes, frowning as he stewed deep in his own thoughts. Although he was not exactly optimistic about the first task being in any way ‘easy’ at least now he had a key bit of knowledge about it and could begin the process of running through scenarios and possible plans in his head. He’d finally got what he’d asked for and could now formulate the best way to get through the task without any ‘impossible’ feats of magic or revealing his immortality through an undoubtedly gruesome death in front of hundreds of spectators.

Harry was combing through what he knew about dragons off hand when something in his memories caught his attention and he immediately felt the first inklings of a plan forming. At the same time, Hagrid and Madame Maxime seemed to have got an eyeful and were making their way back towards the castle. Harry noticed and turned towards the other two under the cloak with him.

“You two should follow them back to the castle to make sure you don’t get lost, I’ll be a few minutes behind you.” Harry was already casting strong disillusionment spells on them both that would last for the next half-hour. “I suggest you hurry, those spells won’t last long.” Anthony immediately began to protest.

“I’m not leaving you out here in the middle of the forbidden forest with a bunch of dragons, Harry!” As he spoke, Harry pulled the cloak up and off of them, letting his face show through the edge of the cloak as his back was to the clearing. Harry could still see the edges of where his friends were as he was connected by his magic to the very spells concealing them.

“I’ll be fine! I have my cloak and certainly know my way around spells if anything happens. There’s just one small thing I need to see to, then I’ll be back at the dorms before you can even fall asleep, and we both know how quickly that can be.” Harry finished with a teasing smirk and heard a small derisive snort from the smaller concealed figure.

A heavy sigh clouded in the air as Anthony succumbed to the unshakable will of his best mate. Reluctantly, Anthony took a small comfort in this particular trait of Harry’s, knowing that some of his worries were eased by the knowledge that Harry was neither easily manipulated nor easy prey for those with harmful intentions.

“Promise?” Anthony’s tone was softer than before and in turn it caused Harry’s expression to soften as well. Harry nodded.
“Promise.” And with that, the pair hurried after the two half-giants that already had quite the head start on them.

Harry turned back to the clearing as he once again lowered the cloak into place. The encampment wasn’t as hectic as it had been a few minutes ago when one of the dragons was attempting to escape or take them all down trying, but most of the caretakers and other various staff were still outside and quickly working to subdue the dragons for the night. Harry carefully moved between the tents on silent feet until he got to one that had just been vacated with lights still on inside.

Harry slipped inside of the magically expanded tent, which looked relatively similar to the Weasley’s tent at the Quidditch World Cup the previous summer with its multiple curtained off rooms and plenty of furniture to bring comfort to the temporary accommodations. Harry didn’t stay idle, moving quickly into the tent and beginning his search of the few chests and wardrobes around the tent—having to carefully disarm wards and protection spells to get inside.

Thankfully, there weren’t many places that could hold what Harry was looking for so it didn’t take long for him to determine that the tent didn’t have what he needed. He soon moved on to the next, and then the next. Knowing that time was ticking by and Anthony would not be happy if he remained out any longer, Harry sincerely hoped that the fourth tent would yield a different result.

It would seem that lady luck was finally favoring Harry in this small instance. The fourth tent was a bit more lavish and finely furnished than the others, with a table in the center piled with open texts and unrolled scrolls. It also had not only two trunks and a wardrobe, but also a clear cabinet that seemed to hold row after row of various potions. Harry bypassed the trunks and wardrobe and went straight for the cabinet.

The cabinet also seemed to be the most heavily warded, so it took more time and effort on Harry’s end, but soon he was slicing through the last of the wards like butter and opened the glass doors. But Harry seemed to be faced with yet another problem, while all of the potions seemed to have their own unique bottle, vial, or jar, nothing in the cabinet was labelled. Either the owner of the tent was incredibly paranoid, or very well versed in potions and too lazy to bother labeling what they could already easily identify.

Harry bit his lip and slipped his hand out from under his cloak in order to shift around the bottles and try to get a look at their contents, even though he knew he wouldn’t be able to identify it by sight alone. Harry was about to give up and move on to the next tent in hopes of actually labelled bottles when he felt the cool silky touch of the veil wrap around his wrist, the faint unyielding pressure of a bone hand beyond the phantom touch, and guide it gently over to the very back corner of one of the cabinet shelves, his fingers were pushed down to graze against the cool glass stopper of a bottle so that there was no mistaking which one it was.
Harry grabbed the bottle, as well as the identical bottle right next to it and pulled them both out. Inside was a clear liquid that looked no different than water, but Harry knew that what was inside was not something one should drink. Harry slipped one into his pocket and then cast a duplication spell on the other, placing both the real and the fake back in the cabinet. The duplication spell would only last until someone tried to pick it up, and then it would disappear, so no one would be in danger if they tried to use ineffective duplicate.

Having retrieved what he’d come for, Harry quickly made his way back to the castle under the cover of his cloak. On his way back, however, he noticed another figure moving through the forest, away from the encampment. Once they both moved out of the line of trees and into the dim light of the moon, Harry identified the other as Igor Karkaroff, the Durmstrang Headmaster. ‘Well, I suppose that means that three of the champions already know about the dragons, only leaving one in the dark.’ Harry thought as he slipped into the castle. He decided that he would need to pay a certain Hufflepuff a visit before the first task. It was only fair.

When he finally made it back to the dorms, Anthony was sitting up and awake on his bed with the curtains pulled back. They didn’t say anything, Anthony just gave Harry a questioning look and Harry nodded once. They both went to bed that night, but it was a while before either boy was able to quell the never-ending tide of thoughts and drift into the solace of slumber.
Chapter Summary

In the last chapter: Fleur contemplates her fellow champion. Sirius and Remus take action against the Ministry and Dumbledore for Harry’s sake. Harry attends the weighing of the wands and refuses an interview with Rita Skeeter. Ginny meets with Charlie when he shows up and later on shows Harry and Anthony the dragon encampment in the forbidden forest. Harry sneaks into the camp and steals a potion. Harry realizes Cedric will be the only one that doesn't know about the dragons and decides to tell him before the first task.

The next morning at breakfast, two of the four champions grabbed a small meal before leaving almost immediately. Harry observed this from his seat at the Ravenclaw table and figured that Fleur and Viktor had already had a chat with their headmasters and would be spending the next few short days until the first task, reading up on dragons. Harry would be doing the same as soon as he finished his breakfast, but before that, he had to speak with a certain Hufflepuff about the first task.

He looked across the hall and spotted the caramel-haired boy amongst his usual group. Harry was too far away to hear what they were saying, but he could pick up a few things just from watching them. It was clear to Harry that Cedric was distracted, although that wasn’t at all surprising considering, Harry could see the anxiety lining his ridged form and how he kept seeming to slip away into his thoughts even as his friend tried to distract him and keep his spirits up. Cedric didn’t yet know anything about the first task and it was taking its toll on the older boy.

Harry sighed. He liked Cedric well enough, since the World Cup and the beginning of the tournament they’d been on rather amicable terms, but that didn’t change the fact that they were still practically strangers and Harry has always been reluctant to interact with those outside of his close-knit circle. Cedric Diggory, despite the aura of approachability surrounding him, was still considered firmly outside of that circle. The tournament had only started a month ago and already Harry could tell he would be interacting with the Hufflepuff more than he did with most within his own house.

Not just Cedric, either. The tournament was putting Harry directly in the international spotlight, the absolute last place he wanted to be. He’d done a fairly decent job thus far of staying out of the papers and not giving the wizarding world anything to build their ridiculous gossip on. Now . . . there would be no escaping the scandal-hungry gazes.

If Harry was completely honest with himself, it wasn’t even just the need to protect his secrets that kept him so private. No, it went much deeper than that. For as long as Harry could remember, he’s
been a very distant, detached, and resilient person. Living with the Dursleys, Harry had always been shamefully hidden from the community and scorned behind closed doors for his unusual ‘temperament.’ He’d always been ‘cold’ and ‘apathetic’ but as a young child he of course had the potential to change, to manually build those bridges himself that others seemed to form naturally with their fellow humankind.

However, under the firm hand of his relatives, after years of being demonized and made to believe that Harry was ‘evil,’ that potential—that will to change—wilted and he settled more firmly into his frigid behaviors. Coming to the wizarding world had changed a lot for Harry, but there was still so much of him that remained unchanged. Harry now had those he cared for and he was slowly learning the same things that came naturally to others—empathy, compassion, hope, trust—but he was still so different from his peers and he felt that constant barrier between himself and the rest of the world.

For all that he was improving, Harry was still ‘Harry, Master of Death, traverser of the veil, and many times un-dead necromancer’ and there were certain things that felt fundamentally wrong for him. One of the most prominent examples was the public. Harry took so much comfort and stability from his solitude and privacy that having his every movement on display for hundreds of thousands—if not millions—of witches and wizards made him feel like crawling out of his own skin. Which made him automatically abhor the entire tournament and everything and person to do with it.

During the selecting ceremony, a lot of that anxiety had been real—although his external reactions were obviously exaggerated. Harry still had a hard time grasping appropriate emotional responses to certain circumstance, so until he learned it himself, he had to do quite a lot of pretending. He didn’t yet have a very good gage on authentic fear around others.

Harry resented the fact that he’d been forced into such a nightmarish situation and he would certainly be having words with the Dark Lord after the resurrection.

Harry was brought out of his thoughts when the brunette he’d been absently staring at suddenly stood from his table and left early, none of his friends joining him. Seeing his chance, Harry excused himself as well, promising to meet up with the others later after a short trip to the library, and calmly made his way out of the great hall after Cedric.

He caught up with Cedric as he was slowly strolling out onto the grounds in the direction of the black lake.

“Cedric.” Harry greeted as he slowed down next to the older student. Cedric startled slightly, clearly having been too lost in his own thoughts to hear Harry approaching.
“Harry! What are you doing out here?” Cedric asked politely as he continued walking slowly towards the lake. The biting chill in the late fall air left pluming vaporous clouds trailing after them and filled the grounds with the crisp scent of frost and decaying leaves. Neither boy seemed perturbed by the less-than-inviting weather and continued down towards the calm shore.

“I wanted to speak with you about something.” Harry answered after a moment, looking out towards the water instead of at his walking companion. “Krum and Delacour already know, so it would be unfair if nobody told you.” By then he had Cedric’s full attention and they had just reach the lake, stopping on the bank of tide-smoothed stones and pebbles.

“Told me what?” The apprehension in his voice caused Harry to look over and carefully take in Cedric’s expression. Harry had known that Cedric was uneasy about the tasks, but he had not realized just how worried the other might actually be. Cedric looked paler than normal, his grey eyes wide with worry and his whole body strung tight like a bowstring. When Harry finally spoke, he did so softly, feeling a small amount of pity for him.

“The first task . . . will involve dragons . . .” The air seemed to finally unload from Cedric’s lungs as he exhaled and his posture deflated. Harry turned his piercing green gaze back towards the water to allow the Hufflepuff a moment to process. It was, after all, worrying news.

After a while, Cedric straightened up once more and asked Harry how he knew about the dragons. He still looked a little green from the revelation, so Harry didn’t play any cryptic games and just plainly explained how Charlie had met with Ginny and Ginny brought him out into the forest the night before to see for himself. When he was done, Cedric thanked Harry vehemently and mumbled something about needing to visit the library, but Harry stopped him with a gentle hand on his arm before he could dash back to the castle.

“One more thing.” Harry let go of his arm and reached into his expanded right pocket and pulled out a small green vial and handed it over to a confused Cedric. Harry had transferred a decent amount from the bottle he’d taken last night into this smaller one. He hadn’t been positive whether he would share it with the other champion when he woke up that morning, but after talking with Cedric, he knew the boy needed all the help he could get.

“What is it?” Cedric scrutinized the label-less vial and then the Ravenclaw before him.

“A synthetic pheromone created by wizards—specifically, dragon trainers—that simulates the scent of infant dragons and allows the trainers to get close to the volatile nesting mother dragons relatively unharmed.” Cedric’s brows shot up at that but Harry continued on like he hadn’t noticed. “It works with all dragons, but especially nesting females. Though, be very cautious, it is not infallible. There are quite a few species of dragon that have a fairly weak sense of smell and even if you bathe in this stuff, it still might not scent you and is still extremely dangerous. The hope is just that, if you end up
too close to a pair of jaws, this might help you avoid losing limb.” Harry warned seriously and Cedric nodded in understanding. The potion was a last resort, but it would help to ease some of the older boy’s fear and hopefully allow him to think clearly when the task actually started.

Harry was surprised when Cedric unexpectedly pulled him into a hug—though it was brief and didn’t aim to squeeze the very breath from his lungs like Mrs. Weasley’s often did. Just as soon as it had begun, Cedric pulled back, looking embarrassed by his own actions but not lowering his gaze from Harry’s when he spoke, needing the younger boy to see his sincerity.

“Thank you, Harry. I know that it’s against the rules for us to get help like this, you really didn’t have to do this, and it probably would have benefited you to keep this all to yourself, so thank you for doing it anyways. Merlin, I told you I would try to look out for you, should have known it would end up the other way around.” Cedric gave him a self-deprecating grin at the end which caused the corners of his mouth to curl as well. Still feeling the uncomfortably heavy air of Cedric’s gratitude, Harry tried to combat it by lightly hitting Cedric’s shoulder with his knuckles.

“I told you already, I don’t care about winning. I just want to make it through this mess with all of my fingers and toes still intact. I know the point is to pit all of the champions against each other for some ‘healthy competition’ but this tournament is already dangerous enough without that ‘every man for himself’ mentality on top of it.” Harry’s expression became more serious then.

“It’ll be alright, you know. Just spend a little time reading up on dragons, practice some shielding spells or fire-retardant charms. Perhaps something to camouflage you or distract the dragon. Even though using new mother dragons in a tournament is highly unethical and bordering on creature-endangerment, I sincerely doubt they intend for us to fight the dragons, at least not as a primary goal. They were brought here from reserves with their trainers and caretakers, so I don’t think they’ll risk any of us possibly causing serious damage to them. So, focus on strategies and tactics to avoid them as best as possible.” Harry advised, knowing that he would be taking his own advice and doing his best to prevent a confrontation between himself and a dragon.

Cedric seemed to think about what he said for a moment, as if checking to make sure that his logic was sound. Harry didn’t take offence, considering he had a number of years on Harry and adults weren’t exactly quick to accept the guidance of a fourteen-year-old. Eventually, though, Cedric nodded and thanked him once again before leaving Harry alone at the edge of the lake.

Harry remained out there, finding an odd comfort in the chilling damp air, watching the faint shifting under the surface of the water as the giant squid twisted and swam around below. The wind had picked up a bit and was blowing at his back, causing his inky curls to lash forward against his pale cheeks and forehead, like creeping black tendrils at the edges of his vision. Gazing out at the wistful scenery, Harry tried to bleed the anxious thoughts from his mind until it was full of wind and he could let go of some of the tension wreaking havoc on his body as of late. His deep sigh was swept away soundlessly with the restless gale and steel grey tide.
Needing to feel grounded, Harry automatically slipped his cold fingers beneath his tight shirt collar—
trying not to shiver at the near painful contrast of his frigid fingertips brushing against the heated skin
under his clothes—and pulled on the gold chain that nearly scorched his fingers with the heat it had
sapped from his skin. The locket slipped free and Harry immediately wrapped his hand around its
heated surface. Harry’s breath caught when all the cold around him seemed immediately chased
away by the overwhelming aura coming off of the locket now that he was giving it attention. It was
warm and filled him with a strange sensation that only could be described as *honey-wine*—rich,
sweet, and warming like a strong drink.

The only time Harry felt anything close to the sensation was when he was reminded of certain tender
moments he shared with his guardians—his *family*. It took many long nights of puzzling before he
found a half-decent label for the feeling: *nostalgia*. A peculiar feeling that coursed through his system
and wrapped around him, a feeling that he had never experienced before until very recently.

With the locket, however, it was slightly different and *far* more intense. Having so much of
Voldemort’s soul contained within the small horcrux was something that definitely took him a while
to get used to. The soul, since it wasn’t contained within a body and had been moved too recently to
obtain the same sentence as the diary had, only really reacted when Harry focused on it and fed it
little bits of his magic to build its strength over time in preparation for the ritual. Still, it was more
than 90% of a soul and, as Harry had recently realized, was connected with the majority of the Dark
Lord’s magic.

It was a very strange notion to comprehend. Harry had thought that the man’s magic would be cold,
biting, vicious in nature just like the current Dark Lord. In actuality, it was quite the opposite. To
Harry, whose own magic was incredibly cold—most likely due to his death and resurrection as an
infant, forever changing his magic as a whole—Voldemort’s felt warm and comforting; like the soft
embrace of a well-worn blanket or the radiating heat of a hearth in a dim room. It felt like early
morning sunlight washing over his skin and dripping down his throat, raking through his hair and
coasting over his skin until he was near boneless.

Voldemort’s raw magic burned brightly like a small sun, brilliant and illuminating. Harry could only
imagine what that meant for the one currently holding onto life by a frail thread of such brilliance. He
wondered how it would change him—*if* it would change him—and if Tom Riddle would be able to
shine back through the wretched existence Voldemort had become.

Harry’s fingers tightened around the locket as it pulled its magic back within itself, leaving Harry
feeling once again cold and uncomfortably hollow. He knew that the indulgence of the horcruxes’
raw magic was fleeting and could only synthesize sensations within him that he was incapable of
producing himself in his everyday life. He knew that eventually he would have to perform the ritual
and this small, private comfort would be lost to him, so he indulged when he could. Even though
afterwards he always felt the ill pangs of discontentment swirling in his chest, knowing that he was
lacking in something basic and fundamental that seemed to be natural in every single person around
It seemed that every day that passed only made that realization more painfully apparent. . .

“Potter! Come back inside before you catch your death out here.” A rough voice bark out behind him, effectively startling Harry out of his heavy thoughts. Harry whipped around to see Moody a few paces behind him. The man’s magical eye moved before the other and soon both eyes were trailed on Harry’s closed fist raised close to his chest. Just as they began to narrow, Harry slipped the locket back under the collar of his shirt and turned more fully around to face his DADA Professor. Moody looked back at Harry’s face and continued to speak as though he hadn’t seen anything, which Harry seriously doubted.

“Follow me, boy, I need to have a word with you in my office.” Not waiting for a reply, Moody turned and began a fast stride—though slightly inhibited by the awkward motions of the prosthetic leg—back towards the school. Harry immediately followed.

When they reached his office, Harry felt apprehensive for two reasons. One, it would be the first time he’d entered that room since it had belonged to Remus and the pair had shared quite a few pleasant memories of bonding and floo calling Sirius there, he didn’t know how different it’d be and wasn’t sure he wanted to know. Second, and the considerably more important reason, was that he had yet to ever truly be alone with the Death Eater in disguise and he was unsure of what was about to happen.

When they entered the office, Harry took a moment at the doorway to fully take in the interior of the room and was relieved that it looked completely different with the heavy curtains spelled closed and the messy piles of books, strange contraptions, a few empty potions bottles, and caged and silenced rodents and insects scattered all over the room. Everything familiar was blanketed in shadow or covered in the man’s possessions, making it seem like an entirely different room. Aside from all of that, there was another addition to the room that captured the young raven’s intrigue; a large chest that seemed four times the size of Harry if he curled up, was pushed against the wall and sealed shut with a very heavy and complicated looking lock.

“Take a seat, Potter.” Moody snapped once he sat at his desk and realized Harry had yet to move away from the doorway. Harry began to move, but as if the loud bark of Moody’s gruff voice had awoken something within the chest, it began to tremble violently and what sounded like the angry roar of something vaguely close to human emitted from it. Growling in frustration, Moody whipped out his wand and whatever nonverbal spell he shot at the chest, it immediately went still and silent. Harry was not at all settled when his companion confirmed that what was contained within the chest was in fact the real Alastor Moody. Most likely kept close for polyjuice ingredients and because Barty wouldn’t risk keeping him elsewhere when his position made it difficult for him to leave during the school year. He sat down gingerly and waited for the other man to speak.
“So, had a little midnight excursion did you, Potter?” Harry didn’t react to Moody’s grating voice, even as he felt the growing pressure at the base of his skull that spelled one hell of a headache in the future. Harry nodded mildly, his curiosity overshadowing the constant apprehension he felt around the polyjuiced man. Moody seemed to relax just a fraction.

“Good. While it’s clear to me that you’re more than proficient in my class, that means little in comparison to your fellow champions who have years of experience and education on you. So, don’t try to get fancy with it, Potter. You won’t be able to learn all the spells they have at their disposal, but just keep it simple and you’ll manage. Play to your strengths, use those quidditch skills and dodge. Trust your instincts and don’t stop moving. You may not get the most points, but you’ll get out alive.” Moody cautioned, not looking very comfortable doing so.

‘Ah, so it seems the Dark Lord has taken your message into consideration.’ Breathed a familiar rasp over Harry’s shoulder as the office seemed to cool slightly, not that the Death Eater reacted or showed that he’d noticed.

‘This is his idea of helping? Some vague and half-arsed advice from a follower that would rather see me dead as a doornail?!” Harry silently scoffed at the incredulity of the situation. Harry had given advice better than that to his bloody competitor less than half an hour before! Pushing down the frustration swelling in his gut, Harry forced himself to give the other man a grateful smile.

“Thank you, sir. I’ll keep that in mind and do my best. If that is all?” Harry inquired, ready to be on his way as his patience drained away with each passing second. He couldn’t help but internally grumble at the fact that the very person responsible for him even being in this mess was now trying to give him advice to save his hide! The hypocrisy!

“One more thing.” Moody’s face turned grave and Harry internally sighed. “Watch yourself, Potter. These champions aren’t your friends. Do not expect any special treatment because of your age. Durmstrang is notorious for its teaching of the dark arts and that Delacour is about as fragile and harmless as a Hippogriff scorned! And make no mistake, the Hufflepuff is still your enemy, you cannot rely on ‘school-comradery’ when—for all intents and purposes—you don’t represent Hogwarts in this tournament.” Moody’s eyes narrowed slightly and he leaned forward a bit. “I saw you and Diggory together by the lake. I assume that, by the looks of it, you were sharing last night’s findings with the boy? While your concern is... ‘heartwarming’... I would refrain from doing such in the future. A bleeding-heart during this tournament will only get you killed! They’re looking out for themselves, I suggest you do the same.”

With that final warning, Harry thanked the professor and took his leave.
Harry went down to the chamber and missed both lunch and dinner as he continued to work on modifying and combining the runes for the two separate rituals—one for mending a soul, and another for the resurrection itself. Harry worked tirelessly to both finish as much of the ritual as possible, as well as keep his mind off the first task, which was only a couple of days away. Only time would tell if his plan worked.
Chapter Summary

In the last chapter: The night after Harry learns of what awaits them in the first task, Harry pulls Cedric aside and shares in what he found. Harry also gives Cedric some of the baby-dragon-scent-potion to help him. Then Moody/Barty comes along and half-heartedly tries to give Harry advice about the first task. The four champions prepare.

Chapter Notes

Hey guys! I am SO incredibly sorry that it has taken This Long for me to update! I just never imagined how busy the end of the year would be for me and with finals only days away it has been very hectic. I also refused to just sit and power something out quickly to get it over with because I have been So excited to write Harry's fourth year and I refuse to give you guys anything but my best effort!

I promise that it will never be such a long gape between updates and I hope you guys stick around until the end of this school year when it's summer and I might finally have more time!

Also, side note, I know that in cannon it's Crouch that does all of the talking in the tent before the first task, but I went with Ludo instead for this. Not a big change. Hope you guys enjoy the first task! Please leave me some comments (I absolutely love hearing from you guys). Have a wonderful evening everybody!

-Pleasant Readings!

November 24th, the morning of the first task, Harry awoke nearly an hour before dawn and could not find it within his restless body to try and return to sleep. Getting up before anyone else, Harry dragged himself into the bathroom to chase away the early morning chill and lethargy by standing under the hot spray of the shower. Staring up at the tiled ceiling, Harry released a loud sigh as his shoulders drooped a little lower than normal and nerves began to wreak havoc on his empty stomach at the prospect of what would come later in the day.

When he finally dredged up the will to begin cleaning himself, he made sure to wash with a scentless soap. He’d already made sure the night before to call up a Hogwarts house elf to wash both his simple black and dark blue uniform for the task, as well as his school uniform for the day, in scentless detergent separate from the rest of the clothes. Harry was unsure how strong his own scent might be against the fragrance of the potion, but he didn’t want to take any risks when he got into the arena.
When Harry returned to his room and dressed for the half-day of classes, he couldn’t help but silently bemoan the still-dark sky outside of his window. The sun should have already begun to rise, but the heavy darkness outside indicated a morose day of thick cloud cover and possible downpours. Of course.

However, as the morning progressed and true to his predictions, the deep rolling rumble of thunder echoed through the castle ominously, the buzzing excitement of the student body could not be subdued. Feeling spiteful in the face of his peer’s glee, Harry quietly hoped that it would rain harder and that the stands wouldn’t have any charms up for protection during the task. It would serve them right to have to suffer too. Harry thought a bit vindictively.

Though, in truth he wasn’t feeling as anxious as he’d thought he’d be. In fact, he felt a little detached all morning. It was not necessarily a pleasant feeling, but it was a familiar one. It was second nature to him . . . before, when he didn’t have anyone to try to drag him out of his own head.

That morning, however, he was grateful for it. Anything was better than fear at that point.

Though, it seemed that while he was ready to put his focus into his studies for the day, nobody else could get their mind off the first task. When lunch time finally came, Harry was the first one out of the class so that he could get changed and still have time to eat a decent lunch. Though to others it probably appeared as though he was just as excited as them, he really just wanted to get away from the constant whispers and pointed glances at him and the other champions that they passed in the halls.

Thankfully, when Harry entered the dorm it was empty and he was able to dress in peace. Once dressed, Harry locked the door with a quick spell and got out a few items from his trunk:

The first being a small leather pouch, no bigger than a galleon, that he had shrunken down and magically expanded within to fit all of the materials he needed for the ritual. It wasn’t everything, as there were a few more things he needed to prepare—but it would be sufficient if he needed to perform the ritual last minute. That being said, Harry doubted he would be seeing Voldemort so soon. The pouch was heavily warded, undetectable, invisible once worn, and was tied with a long leather cord so that he could wear it around his neck and under his clothes during the tournament. The locket was also inside the pouch, which meant that for the first time in months, Harry could not feel the magical presence of the locket—which was uncomfortable, if he were being entirely honest.

The second item he withdrew was the remainder of the potion he’d stolen from the dragon trainers that would mask his natural scent and simulate the pheromones of an infant dragon. Harry transfigured the bottle it was in into a spray bottle and quickly made work of spraying down his
clothes and then coating his skin, hair, and concentrating the rest on his pulse points where the scent would be the strongest.

Harry was immediately relieved to note that the potion didn’t smell overpowering or foul—as it would draw far more attention than it was worth. Instead, it was quite light and smelt faintly of some sort of wildflowers with something a bit deeper and more earthy underneath with the subtle undercut of smoke throughout. If anyone got close enough to smell him, it could easily be mistaken for the scent of the outdoors and Harry being in the general vicinity of a fireplace recently.

Harry just hopped that the potion wouldn’t fade too much before the task itself. Just to be safe, Harry cast a few stasis spells on his clothes that made them a little stiff, but would hold the scent until he removed the charms.

Once finished, Harry made his way down to the Great Hall and resolutely ignored the way that half of the hall’s eyes turned towards him when he entered. When he sat down, a quick glance around the room verified that the others were also wearing their uniforms, so he knew all the looks had nothing to do with his clothes.

The hall was louder than ever before, yet, in contrast his friends were almost silent as they ate, offering gentle smiles, the brush of a hand on his shoulder or forearm, or small offerings of support and encouragement. It spoke volumes about how well they knew Harry, knew what he needed at that time. He was an unwilling participant in a deadly competition that could very well take his life. He needed their understanding and support. What he didn’t need, was hundreds of students cheering him on and trying to get him ‘excited’ to face such dangers.

Anthony sat on his left, Draco on his right, and the girls across from them. Both Anthony and Draco sat close enough that their arms brushed as they ate and were it anyone else, he would probably feel cramped and uncomfortable with so much physical contact, but from his close friends, it only relaxed something tight inside of his chest and allowed him to get some food down without it making him feel sick.

Then, just a few minutes before lunch officially ended, four people descended from the head table and made their way through the students to escort them out of the hall. Harry supposed that had Cedric been the only Hogwarts student in the tournament, Dumbledore would have escorted him out, as the two-foreign headmaster and headmistress did with their own champions, but apparently, they didn’t want to show any sort of favoritism between him and Cedric, because instead they were escorted by their heads of house.

Since Flitwick’s legs were much shorter than the others’ he reached Harry last and so he was the last to leave the Great Hall. His head of house offered a few solemn words of encouragement as they stepped out of castle and into the rain-trodden landscape. Harry was quick to cast an umbrella charm
that sprouted out of the tip of his wand and protected him—and more importantly, the potion—from the rain.

He could just see the back of Ms. Delacour disappearing between the towering dark trees of the forbidden forest.

Looking up at the sky through the invisible cover of his umbrella charm, Harry took in the flashes of lightning that flickered within the clouds and the low tremble of thunder that he felt through the soles of his boots more than he heard with his ears. ‘Seems rather fitting, doesn’t it?’ Harry mused silently as they moved over the soft, wet ground, ever closer to the cover of the trees.

‘And what might you be referring to, little one?’ His companion inquired, the rumbling rasp of Death’s voice carried on the building breeze. Far off in the distance over the tree tops, the air was ignited as the sky met the earth in a bolt of light, electricity, and power with a resounding crack. He wondered if one of those ancient trees had met its match and had been cleaved down its center.

‘The storm. If I didn’t know any better, I’d think that those trainers released their dragons into the sky. Roaring and beating their wings with all their might as they spewed white hellfire between the clouds of smoke and vapor. By Merlin, it must be some kind of blasted ‘divine foreshadowing!’’ Harry refrained from rolling his eyes, but only just.

The constant percussion of the thunder was accompanied by Death’s chilling laughter, which tugged at the corners of Harry’s mouth and made him feel a little more himself as they entered the tree line.

They didn’t walk very far before they came to the start of an enormous clearing that had not been there when Harry last entered the forest. Directly before them was a large tent that seemed to reside in the shadow of an enormous arena that no doubt would hold the first task. Harry tried to ignore the hulking structure as he entered the tent where the three other champions were currently waiting. Like the others, Harry was left there by his escort.

The uncomfortable, nervous silence was broken when Cedric quickly made his way over—looking incredibly relieved to see a familiar face—and greeted Harry warmly. However, it wasn’t long until the fidgeting was back and the older male became once more ridged with tension. Harry noticed and inwardly sighed. With a gentle hand at his elbow, Harry maneuvered them over to a more deserted side of the tent to speak more privately. He silently thanked the universe for such a thing as magical expansion, allowing them quite some distance from the others.

“It’s going to be alright, Cedric. Remember what I told you? We will most likely be required to dodge the dragons for this task, also there’ll be trainers waiting on the sidelines to intervene if it
becomes too dangerous. Just don’t think about the time or the scoring; take your time, play it safe, use those shield charms as often as necessary, and keep moving.” Harry’s voice belied a confidence that was not entirely authentic. Don’t get him wrong, he had confidence that Cedric and the other champions would hold their own and make it through, he just didn’t have as much faith in the spectators’ willingness to step in. No, the wizarding world was not known for its ridged safety standards, nor its compassion for that matter.

None the less, Cedric seemed to believe something in Harry’s voice and appeared to settle a little more. Harry smiled encouragingly and lightly squeezed his arm. The contact was brief, costing Harry a little to step outside of his comfort zone, but the uncharacteristic gesture in and of itself seemed to hold significance to the Hufflepuff. Cedric must have seen this as well and gave the younger champion a grateful smile and nod before walking back over to the sitting area where the others were congregating on the other side of the tent.

Harry remained there for a while, still feeling quite separate from the other champions, knowing he was not meant to be there.

It was then that Harry noticed what sounded like hundreds of feet making their way through the forest at a sedate pace and eventually parting around the tent to get to the arena. Must be the crowds filing in. With his focus momentarily captured by the sudden noise outside the tent, he then realized that the soft slapping of heavy raindrops hitting the canvas had faded out into only the occasional patter of a droplet most likely coming from the sopping treetops above. Harry sighed as he let go of a worry didn’t even realize he had until then—that it would be pouring when he faced the dragon, therefore rendering the potion he’d covered himself with useless. Despite his earlier vindictiveness against his peers, Harry wasn’t brazen enough to truly wish away any advantage he might have.

The snippets of conversation were still seeping muffled through the cloth walls from the outside when the tent flaps were thrown aside and in came the five judges with expressions of forced jovialness to mask any doubts or nerves they may have for their champions’ first task. The only one that seemed genuinely excited was Ludo Bagman, who beamed at them all as he clutched a velvet bag in his hand that almost appeared to be squirming.

“Good day, champions!” Dumbledore exclaimed, gathering the attention of the tent’s occupants. “Now, you’ve waited, you’ve wondered, and finally the first task is upon us. Ludo?” Dumbledore stepped back to make room for the overly-eager man to sweep in and usher the champions closer to make a circle around him.

“Miss Delacour, if you please.” Ludo held the wriggling, slightly smoking bag before the French student and gave her an encouraging nod when she hesitated, looking at Bagman as if he were mental.
With a slight flinch at whatever her fingers found, Fleur carefully extracted her hand along with the agitated little creature that was the shrunken image of a Common Welsh Green if Harry wasn’t mistaken. A very lucky draw if he were honest, since that particular breed tended to be rather skittish of people and was less prone to provocation.

Ludo swiftly moved on to Viktor, who retrieved the Chinese Fireball—a scarlet beast that was slightly bigger than the Welsh Green and notably more aggressive in nature. Viktor’s constant look of consternation only deepened the slightest bit when the miniature dragon blew little mushroom shaped plumes of flame at his fingertips and singed the leather of his gloves.

Cedric was next to stick his hand in the bag and Harry silently admitted to feeling relieved when he ended up with the Swedish Short-Snout. It was a little smaller than the Fireball, though its distinctive blue fire burned far hotter and it was quite an agile beast. Still, Harry was relieved because that breed had a particularly good sense of smell for dragons and Cedric would have a better chance then.

But Harry’s relief was short lived when Ludo turned to him and he realized that by being the last to pick, he knew exactly what dragon he would be facing. Double the size of Viktor’s Fireball at a terrifying 50ft in length, bronze spikes on both its head and tail for defense, it could also spit its flames in jets as long as its body, arguably one of the most aggressive of its kind, and incredibly fast and agile. Harry had his work cut out for him.

Reluctantly, Harry reached in the bag for the small dragon and was rewarded with a few sharp punctures in his palm from both spikes and long teeth. Harry ignored the few grimaces sent his way when the little beast came into view. Ludo drew back everyone’s attention as he spoke up once again.

“There you have it. These represent four, very real, dragons. Each of which has been given a golden egg to protect. Your objective is simple! Collect the egg. This, you must do, for each egg contains a clue, without which you cannot hope to proceed to the next task. Any questions?” Bagman’s question was barely heard as the four teens absorbed the information and tried to quickly formulate a plan using what they’d practiced and studied the past few weeks. They weren’t given much time at all.

“Mr. Diggory, I believe you are up first!” Crouch chimed in for the first time just before an explosion went off just outside the tent, it had sounded more like a thunderclap than the cannon Dumbledore had immediately assured the startled occupants of it being.

Cedric turned stiff and pale, but there was a determined set to his shoulders and a hard light behind his eyes that was commendable as he was led towards the opening at the back of the tent that Harry had not noticed before that he assumed led straight to the entrance of the arena.
Only a beat after Cedric left the tent, the rumbling of hundreds of voices chanting his name reached them. It soon dissolved into screams of excitement and fear, accompanied by the enraged bellows of the dragon. Harry had already been informed that he would be going last, so he didn’t have to fret as much about his own performance and was able to listen closely to the commentator as well as the reactions from the audience to try to piece together exactly what was going on.

It all seemed to be going fine up until the very end when Cedric made a daring move for the golden egg without fully distracting or incapacitating the dragon first and—if the commentator was to be believed—came out a bit worse for wear with burns that were immediately being treated. He succeeded though, even if he had lost a chunk of points because of the injury, and soon Fleur was striding confidently through the tent flaps following the second cannon firing. The temporary ‘infirmary’ must have been in a separate tent because the Hufflepuff didn’t return to their current tent.

Fleur’s task went a bit faster, but apparently, she was also unable to escape the flames from her dragon and ended up with Cedric in the infirmary.

Viktor was up and waiting by the opening before the scores were even finished being given.

“Oi, Krum.” Harry called out. Viktor’s head snapped up from where he’d been straightening out his gloves, a hard-straight eyebrow quirked up. “Good luck.” Harry hadn’t the chance to wish the same for the others, as they had distractedly marched out before he could even open his mouth. Krum, on the other hand, seemed far more level-headed than the others and wouldn’t be knocked off-balance by the slightest disruption.

Viktor didn’t respond for a moment and Harry wondered if he would be snubbed by the Bulgarian who had continuously acted rather unfriendly towards him since the beginning of this mess. A few beats later, though, he received a curt nod and Viktor left the fourteen-year-old alone in the tent.

Almost as soon as Viktor left, Harry was hit with the deafening roar of the crowds, screaming louder for their famous quidditch player than for either of the other champions that went before him.

Harry soon cast his focus inward, however, and began mentally preparing himself to face the most fearsome of the four dragons. He would wait until the very last moment to cancel the stasis spell he’d placed on himself to protect the scent from fading away. Though he wasn’t sure how much it would really matter once he got into the arena and had to put all his effort into not dying.

In a familiar gesture, Harry closed his eyes and gripped the small pouch that hung around his neck through his shirt. He couldn’t feel the power like he usually did when touching just the locket, but there was a faint pull that soothed him, if only a little. Harry focused on deep breaths, letting his mind follow the current of air that slipped passed his lips, down his throat, and pooled in his lungs before
slipping back out through his nose.

It felt like only seconds had gone by, but Harry was suddenly startled from his focus when the announcer exclaimed Viktor’s praise and gladly stated that Viktor was currently in the lead. Harry wasn’t surprised when Viktor came striding confidently back into the tent with a large golden egg under his arm and hardly a scratch on him. Though, he was caught a little off guard when Viktor paused, met Harry’s gaze, and gave what could barely be considered a nod of acknowledgement.

The announcer informed the still-cheering audience that their youngest, and last champion was up next. There was a bit of a commotion from within the stadium as Harry imagined the Horntail was being brought out and not exactly thrilled about its predicament.

The cannon sounded took a deep breath, set his shoulders, and wandlessly cancelled the stasis charm. Harry took a moment of comfort in the smell of the potion that wafted up to him from his clothes before exiting the tent, holly wand clutched tightly in-hand. There was a short canvas tunnel that led straight up to the entrance of the arena. Harry moved cautiously and at the first glimpse of the crowds, the arena erupted into cheers and shouts. He winced slightly at the noise, he could only imagine what all that noise did to the already-aggravated dragon. All in all, it probably wasn’t doing him any favors.

Harry stepped out of the archway and quickly took in the arena. It was about the size of a quidditch pitch, but instead of a flat stretch of grass, it was full of jagged boulders and sharp juts of rock from the ground. There was barely any flat ground and Harry wondered if they had simply used the naturally rocky, uneven, and treacherous landscape of the forbidden forest where the mountains pushed up through the ground. Just minus the trees.

The raining had—thankfully—softened into only a light misting, but the previous downpours—as well as the previous forays between champion and beast just before Harry—had made the compacted dirt soft and muddy, and all of the rocks were dangerously slick. The mud would swallow his footsteps, slowing him down, and the rocks would be even harder to climb. It was not a promising turn of events.

Harry had only a few moments to take that all in before he was violently ripped from his thoughts by the sudden appearance of an enormous tail with spikes as long as his arm that slammed into the rock next to him, breaking through it as if it were nothing, and causing him to fling himself off of the ledge at the entrance and drop down to the muddy space between rocks and run to escape the next few attempts to turn him into minced meat. The screams and gasps from the stands became background noise as Harry turned all of his focus on the dragon.

He stopped behind a boulder when the beast released a jet a fire at him that would have left him charred if he tried to continue running. His chest was heaving more from adrenaline than exertion.
The drab pallet of the scene around him was cut through by the brilliant orange flames licking around sides of the boulder. Waiting until the very second that the dragon stopped to take another breath, Harry shot around the side and cast a quick shield and then several overpowered *stunners* and *bombarda* spells at the creature as he ran for the next closest cover. Both of which barely gave the enormous creature pause.

As soon as Harry reached cover, he was dismayed when he was not followed by flames, but the thumps and scrapes of claws against stone as the Horntail decided to come after Harry and use its other defenses instead. Cursing under his breath, Harry forced his body to move as fast as possible without slipping, hoping to put more space and physical barriers between him and the dragon. He was almost to the next cluster of boulders when he noticed the sudden increase in shouting from the crowd, and how it had sounded more panicked than excited. That had been Harry’s only warning before the dragon, that was much closer than he’d anticipated, hit him from the side with the back of its foot and swatted him aside as if he were nothing. Harry was airborne for only a moment before he connected with a rock face and tumbled off the side.

Where he fell left him mostly hidden from the crowd’s view, making the arena go eerily quiet. Harry was thankful for the cover, because it meant that nobody saw his expression of intense pain when he sat up. His impact with the unyielding rock face came with the gut-wrenching *pop* and an explosion of pain through his shoulder as it felt like the muscles were being torn apart. The pain was so intense that Harry immediately felt the blood drain from his face and the first warning shivers of shock up his spine. When the arm connected refused to move at his command Harry instinctively knew that it have been dislocated.

Reaching across his chest with his good arm, Harry carefully slipped his fingers under the collar of his shirt and ever so gently prodded his shoulder. Sure enough, where there was usually the firm curve of his shoulder, there was now a soft and malleable indent of space. It was good news, in that he hadn’t broken anything, and it wasn’t his wand arm, but it would also cost him dearly in points if the judges saw.

Taking several deep breaths, Harry cast a powerful numbing charm on his shoulder and tucked it close to his body. He knew that the rest of his body would be aching something fierce as well, had his system not been flooded with adrenaline. He only knew how badly he’d been banged up by the numbness in certain areas, as well as the warmth at points of his body that had been cut or scrapped and now oozed lethargic crimson into his blue uniform. But nothing they could take points for, unlike his shoulder.

The dragon hadn’t turned his little shelter into a furnace of hellfire yet, so Harry assumed that it had retreated to the center hill of shale where the make-shift nest resided. It was on the defensive and Harry knew his minutes were ticking by, he would have to make an attempt for the egg soon if he had any hopes of not being last.
Slowly peaking over the top of the rock, Harry ignored the raucous cheering and shouts of relief as the audience finally caught sight of his very-alive form. As he’d expected, the Hungarian Horntail sat perched on the center-most rock, tending to its eggs. Making sure that it was looking away when he did so, Harry carefully climbed out of his hiding place and silently slipped over the back of the rock and down to the muddy earth.

Keeping an ear out for the dragon, Harry quickly made work of producing a suitable distraction. Finding a large rock roughly the size of his head, Harry quietly transfigured it into a rubber ball about the same size and charmed it into a fleshy peach color. Shrugging carefully out of his outer robe, Harry levitated the ball, slid the hood of the robe over the ball and stuck them together with a household spell he’d learned first year. A few more spells and it filled into roughly his height and weight.

He was incredibly grateful that he’d taken the time to look through different variants of levitation spells when preparing for the first task. During his search, he’d found the class of magic used for toys and other inanimate objects given a very low caliber of sentience so that it could move on its own. Harry wasn’t very well versed in that particular magic, so he knew it wouldn’t hold for long, but if he moved quickly it should work.

With that final spell, Harry’s decoy turned around and shot off in the opposite direction. It would stay close to the wall and dodge whatever came at it the best it could. Harry waited, watching the dark hulking figure in the distance until it suddenly perked up and shot off of the rock with a bellow. Not wasting another moment, Harry set off towards the nest at a dead sprint, though he kept light on his feet.

Unfortunately, the ground was still too wet and slippery underfoot and he dropped to the rocky floor a few times, no doubt bruising his shins, cutting his hands, and scraping his knees even further. Each time though, Harry was careful not to break his fall with his left hand. As such, he wasn’t making nearly as good of time as he’d hoped. Though, he could still hear the dragon chasing his decoy and spewing flames around the edges of the arena.

Finally, Harry came to the base of the pile of boulders that led up to the nest and he felt a surge of energy at being so close. Pushing everything else out of his mind, Harry began his mad scramble upwards, climbing each boulder as fast as he could with his injured shoulder. However, Harry froze only halfway up when his ears rang with sudden silence. Heart clenching hard and blood throbbing in his veins, Harry slowly turned to look over his shoulder, as if afraid any movements would bring everything crashing down around him.

For the second time during that first task, Harry felt all the blood drain from his face and extremities. The sight that greeted his back was heart-stopping. The Hungarian Horntail was at the other end of the arena and its large gold eyes were trained right on the young Ravenclaw, glistening like galleons in the pale overcast light. Even from that distance, Harry could see its pupils dilate and its entire
frame become still as stone, ready to attack.

For three solid beats, Harry didn’t dare breathe. But when his mind started to function again, Harry knew he needed to move before the dragon decided to. Making sure he had a solid foothold in the rock still, Harry tensed his body and then a second later all hell broke loose as Harry put all of his strength into turning and launching himself over the rocks to get as high as possible. All the while he heard the crunching of rocks and claws and bone-chilling growls as the dragon also surged forward.

Harry forced his every muscle and joint into working overtime to get him up the rock faster, but it didn’t seem to matter. The dragon was moving too quickly, his injured shoulder greatly impeded his movements, and there was no way he’d be able to grab the egg and make a run for it. On the other hand, he knew that the trainers wouldn’t think to step in until it was too late and Harry had a dozen new holes impaling his body, so he knew he had to do something.

Putting all of his inhibitions out of his mind, Harry gritted his teeth and pushed up the last foot he needed until he was on top of the rock. Leaning into the large nest of sticks and branches, Harry reached over the other eggs and grabbed the golden imposter. But he was too late, he could practically feel the hot breath at his back and before he could leap to the other side of the rock, a long claw swiped down and caught the leg of his trousers—thankfully not piercing his actual leg—and dragged him down so that he lost his footing and fell onto his stomach beside the nest.

His eardrums protested painfully when the dragon roared at his back. In one final last-ditch effort, Harry rolled over and flung out his good arm with his wand held tight. In a desperate and determined shout, Harry’s voice barely broke through the sound of the dragon’s cry as he used the only spell that came to mind in that moment of panic. It was very complicated and certainly above the level of someone his age, but he had to throw caution to the wind if he wanted to protect his biggest secret.

“CONFUNDO!”

The lightless spell exploded out of Harry’s holly wand with so much power it sounded like a thunderclap and the air was visibly disturbed by the magic. The dragon jerked back as it was hit and shuddered violently as it blinked and tossed its massive head about. Harry didn’t waste the opportunity, though his trousers were still caught by the massive claw and he couldn’t go anywhere, he truly hoped his efforts hadn’t been for naught and that this would actually work.

Using wandless and nonverbal magic, Harry wove his magic out and through the strands of wind and tugged a strong gust down towards himself. It hit his feverish flesh in a painfully icy blast that permeated his clothing and swept down his skin. Then he used his magic to guide the currents up into the face of the confunded beast just as it ceased its wild shudders and uneasy movements. Harry noted the way its almond-shaped nostrils flared at the end of its snout with bated breath. Then came the fluttering dilations of its slit pupils as it, hopefully, processed the scents it’d received.
It huffed a few gentle breaths before its enormous jaws snapped shut and the head that was larger than Harry, came forth and softly nudged at his abdomen as it snuffled and took in his scents. Harry practically collapsed against the rock in relief, his head hitting the hard surface rather painfully, but he couldn’t care less. He breathed hard and huffed out a few shaky laughs as the nesting Horntail continued to sniff him curiously.

The stadium, which had gone deathly quiet right at the end there, burst into cheers louder than he’d ever heard. Even the announcer was shouting and exclaiming how Harry’s impressive confundus was powerful enough to stop the dragon—only partially true. Harry only thought to move from his exhausted reprieve when the dragon started to focus its sniffing-business on his dislocated shoulder—which had started to truly throb again now that the numbing spell was wearing off—and was making high-pitched whining noises that Harry really didn’t need anyone noticing.

Sitting up carefully, Harry held the egg under his bad arm—as it would give him an excuse not to move it—and started sliding down the rock. The dragon, in turn, moved up the rocks and began to tend to its eggs once more as Harry made his way out of the arena, keeping his back straight and his posture relaxed. The pain in his shoulder was starting to really take up all of his attention, so Harry only vaguely took in the score the judges had given him, which left him tied with Viktor for first.

The stands continued their loud celebrating and Harry slipped back through the arena entrance and into the champion’s tent, where only Viktor resided still. The Bulgarian champion seemed ready to ignore him, but Harry had other plans. Dropping the golden egg on one of the transfigured couches, Harry looked over at Krum and sighed with what he was about to do.

“Krum.” Harry called, pulling the distracted gaze of the older boy who’d been studying the designs on the outside of his own egg. It was then that Viktor looked at Harry for the first time and truly took in the muddied, slightly scraped up, and haggard appearance of the young champion and one of his dark brows rose. Harry spoke before he could comment. “Mind helping a fellow champion with something quick before the others get here?” The last part of his proposition seemed to elicit enough curiosity for Viktor to actually stop what he was doing and approach Harry.

“What do you need help with?” He asked, his English quite good and clear despite his deep accent.

“It’ll only take a few seconds, but can you come stand right here?” Harry indicated to his left side, pretending not to notice the perplexed look the other was giving him until the seeker complied. “Brilliant. Now I need you to do exactly as I say and this’ll be over in a jiff.” Harry kept his upper arm pressed to his side and bent his elbow at a ninety-degree angle and rotated it until it stuck out in front of him like he was about to shake someone’s hand. At that point, the pain flared up so intensely that Harry had to stop and he could feel his face blanch and beads of sweat form all over his body.
“Okay, I need you to take ahold of my hand and elbow, and slowly turn it until my hand is closest to you. If you feel resistance, stop for a moment then we’ll start again. I’ll be keeping my upper arm against my side. I’ll tell you what to do once we get there.” Harry explained, his voice sounding strained even to his own ears. It took a moment, but eventually the confused champion complied.

Harry closed his eyes and breathed through the pain as his arm was turned. Once it was in the proper position, Harry opened his eyes once more and continued to instruct the larger boy, still sounding rather choked.

“Alright, next I need you to, slowly, lift my arm whilst keeping it bent like this. Move it upwards as if I were trying to touch my other shoulder over my head. Again, if you feel resistance, stop for a moment then start again.” Harry watched as Viktor’s eyebrows shot up and comprehension filled his face.

“You dislocated your shoulder?!” It was not really a question, but Harry answered anyways. Giving a wry smile that probably looked more like a grimace.

“It would seem so, wouldn’t it?” Harry’s attempt to make light of the situation went right over Krum’s head and the older boy just frowned.

“Why didn’t you go to the infirmary tent like the others?” His tone was accosting and Harry was reminded of how lucky he was that Viktor was the one there to see him hurt and not one of the overprotective devils he tended to keep in his company. Harry did not let himself be cowed by the other’s tone and leveled him with a deadpan look.

“Isn’t it obvious? The judge’s doc points for any even remotely serious injury and Merlin knows Mr. Karkaroff and Madame Maxime are just itching to take as many points as possible from the ‘extra champion.’ I need any advantage I can get in this tournament if I’m going to make it out alive. And besides, it’s a dislocated shoulder, not a broken bone. I don’t even need magic to fix it and as soon as it’s back in place, I’ll barely feel it—certainly not worth losing so many points over. Speaking of, I’m in quite a lot of pain right now and would appreciate if we finished this conversation after.” Harry reminded and Viktor seemed to jump as he realized Harry was still very injured.

Refocusing on the task, Krum slowly raised Harry’s arm, pausing twice when there was a tug of resistance and Harry hissed in pain. This part was by far more painful than just turning it had been. Harry’s elbow was almost above his head before there was a sudden pop as the joint slid back into place and Harry sucked in a harsh breath through gritted teeth. There was only a flash of bright pain before it suddenly dropped down into a heavy throb that was far more bearable.
Viktor helped him lower his arm, even though he could technically move it now. It felt like all of the muscles in his shoulder and upper arm had been strained and stretched too far and now he would just have to wait a few days for the ache to go away. Harry got his hard breathing under control and managed to shoot Viktor a grateful smile just before the flaps to the tent opened and in came an entourage of people.

Fleur and Cedric shuffled in, already smeared with a glistening healing salve for their burns, which looked nearly gone. They were followed by the five judges. Viktor was moving back over the table that he’d deposited his egg upon when Cedric made his way over and quietly asked Harry how he was doing.

“I could hear the crowds through the tent and bits and pieces of what the tournament commentator was saying, but I’m still not really sure what happened. All I know is that there was a whole lot of screaming.” Cedric admitted, looking weary from his own run-in with a dragon. Harry nodded, even though he wasn’t fully aware of just how much screaming had taken place, he recalled it being loud.

Harry shifted closer and lowered his voice so that he wouldn’t be overheard by the others.

“That potion, it really saved my hide back there.” Harry confessed and Cedric matched the small secret smile they shared.

“Good. I guess I didn’t really need it, as I never got that close to it, but I have to say that it was certainly comforting while I was in there.” Harry didn’t tell Cedric just how close he had to get and what he had to do in order for it to work, and instead just nodded in acquiescence.

“Ladies, gentlemen, if I may have your attention for a moment.” Ludo called for attention. “Now, as I mentioned before, these eggs each contain a clue as to your next task. The second task will take place on the 24th of February. Quite a-ways away, but do not slack, for time will pass before you know it!” There was a pause and Bagman’s serious expression gave way to amusement and jubilation. “I’m sure you’ll all be wishing to celebrate your victories with your friends and peers now so I’ll cut you loose. Off with you!” Ludo Bagman exclaimed and the champions ambled out with their headmasters and headmistress.

Harry ignored the twinge in his shoulder, as well as the gaze he could feel on his back from an undoubtedly curious Viktor Krum, as he made the short walk through the trees towards the castle. At that point, the crowds were in the middle of evacuating the arena and bringing their celebration into the warm confines of the castle.

Harry was soon joined by his frantic friends and two fatigued guardians who had watched from the
stands. Harry’s procession was stopped by the several pairs of arms that encapsulated him, though he couldn’t find it in him to complain. Most of the crowds had dwindled to nothing by then anyways. Harry was only chided a little by the worry warts as they squeezed and lamented their fears at seeing Harry in such a situation. Soon his friends decided to give them some space and said that they would see Harry inside, leaving the three to themselves.

Remus, who was holding Harry tightly, pulled back a little used his fingers to brush away some of the dried mud on Harry’s cheeks and soothe back his wild hair. It was such a strangely affectionate and parental gesture that a solid lump formed in Harry’s throat and he had to look away from the odd glisten in his guardian’s eyes for his own seemed to burn slightly in response to the sight. Remus pulled him closer once again, one arm around his shoulders and the other with a hand on the back of his head to press his cheek to the wolf’s chest. Harry fist his hands in Remus’ robes and listened to the rapidly pounding heart against his ear, as well as the soothing rumble of the wolf behind his ribs.

“You’re going to give me a heart attack, pup!” Remus whispered into his hair. Harry’s only response to that statement was to turn his face away from the cooling evening air and press his forehead to Remus’ chest to that he could better surround himself with the scent of home, instead of fear and potions and smoke.

In that moment, Harry desperately wished for a night off. To be able to leave Hogwarts for one evening, go home with his family for a quiet night of food that always tasted better on his own plates and lighthearted discussions by the fire. To reconnect with what grounded him through all of the chaos that was his life. Harry’s chest swelled and for a moment he felt hesitance, knowing that this had nothing to do with his goals, would not bring him any closer to resurrecting Voldemort, would gain him nothing. And yet . . . when he pulled back and asked to do just that, for the first time in a very long time, Harry felt small and dependent and filled with such unabashed longing that it nearly took his breath away. It was something completely new, untraversed territory, to put himself in the care of someone else so willingly.

Remus didn’t even hesitate to nod firmly and look at Harry like he would like nothing more in the world. Harry went in for another hug and his eyes burned once again because finally, finally, he felt like he was becoming a part of this little family. That he was finally allowing himself to be a part of it instead of just going through the motions. It wasn’t just ‘Harry and Guardians,’ bound together by the broken shards of past ties and friendships Harry never witnessed or bindingly legal duties to provide. They were a family, and they were his parents.

Harry felt gold running through his veins, molten and beautiful. The very air he breathed turned into vaporous honey in his lungs and his fingers and toes tingled with the intoxicating feeling of it. Now he understood what drove people to do anything to protect this. It felt so delicate yet so powerfully grounding. Harry would do anything to protect it as well.

It was a tiny, flickering flame in the palm of his hand and more than anything, Harry wanted to share
it. He wanted to carry it in his palm through every trial and tribulation, keeping it lit and bringing it to another who despained in darkness for so long. Harry would light that flame so that they too could feel this warmth, this sense of belonging. Even if he had to do it himself and remain right there the make sure it stayed alight. His other would be ignited.
Yule Ball

Chapter Summary

Harry completes the first task with the other champions and is ready for the long break between tasks that will follow. Exhausted both physically and mentally, Harry goes home with his guardians for a short reprieve.

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone! Yes, I know, I know, it's been FAR too long! I am so incredibly sorry for the long wait! This is just the longest fic I've ever written (it's been an entire year since I started this now!) and I didn't realize I needed a bit of break until I was on one!

I have so many plans for the rest of this fic and can't wait to dive in. Thank you all for being so patient with me. I really hope you enjoy this chapter, it'll probably only be about another chapter until the second task. If you have any questions or rants or even mild threats for me, feel free to comment and lay it on me! Again, I am so sorry for not updating in so long!

Welcome Back! I love and appreciate each and everyone of you so much! You are all my little lovies, and I hope you all have a fantastic day!

-Pleasant Readings!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

With the end of the first task and the second task not to take place until the spring, Harry figured he would at least get a little more peace and quiet. However, to the young Ravenclaws utter dismay, the official announcement for the Yule Ball had ushered in a kind of frantic excitement he’d never seen before. Because, although the tasks were something that seemed to set everyone’s blood alight, they were—ultimately—a spectator’s sport and they couldn’t really take part the way they could with the ball.

But even more than that, it was like an infection was rapidly spreading throughout the student body. In only 24 hours, the student population as a whole seemed to have gone absolutely mad!

Harry saw groups of girls meticulously planning ambushes and preemptive strikes on their prospective dates. He saw groups of boys nervously asking their older peers how in the hell they secured dates of their own. Meals in the Great Hall became almost entirely occupied by either gossip on who would ask who or eagerly scanning the room for potential dates.
There were those that were less interested in the whole affair, but it was too small of a percentage. In his opinion, at least.

There seemed to be a few days of just people trying to decide who they would ask, but after, Harry began to see his fair share of nervously shouted invitations in the halls, swift and brutal rejections, and gestures of such grandeur that Harry wondered if one night felt like a lifetime of commitment for these individuals.

It's not that Harry thought less of those who put their all into the event—in a way, their earnestness was rather endearing—it just seemed to be another one of those things that kind of went over his head. Endearing, but still not something for him. No, instead Harry had been planning on going home for Holiday as he usually did, and getting a break from—well, everything.

Unfortunately, some bad news came to Harry about a week after the first task in the form of a Ravenclaw prefect interrupting his Arithmancy class and saying that he needed to follow her. Harry obliged, but when he asked her what it was about, she said she didn’t know. A few short minutes later, Harry arrived at an unused classroom and the prefect was already leaving before he’d even opened the door.

When he entered and saw the three other champions, Madame Maxime, Karkaroff, and McGonagall and he sighed internally. Harry seemed to be the last to arrive, so once the door was closed behind him, McGonagall took charge by welcoming them and jumping right into the matter at hand.

“As you all should know by now, because of the tournament, by tradition, we will be hosting the Yule Ball on December 25th. Because it is considered an official event in the tournament, you four will be required to attend.” She paused for only a moment to let them process her words. Glancing at his fellow champions, Harry didn’t see outright disdain, but it was clear that attending a dance was not high on any of their lists of priorities. McGonagall cracked a rare and subtle smile as she continued.

“It is more than just a social event and a duty for the champions to attend; ultimately, it is a dance!” Harry had never seen the depute Headmistress so . . . giddy. It was quite the sight. “You will be leading the ball into the first dance with your dates, which means you will have to learn the steps. It is the reason you are gathered here right now. You will meet a total of three times following this meeting and Madame Maxime will be your instructor. I am requiring all Gryffindors, fourth and up, to take these lessons as well with me. I cannot speak for the other head of houses, but if Pomona or Filius plan on giving lessons of their own you could choose to attend those instead.” McGonagall was speaking to her two Hogwarts students at the end.
They both nodded, even though it was unlikely either professor would do such a thing, and even if they did it was far better to fumble and embarrass themselves in front of only a handful of people rather than their entire house.

Harry was not looking forward to the Yule Ball. He’d seen how rabid his peers had become over the past week and now he’d been thrown right into the thick of it. It sounded chaotic and migraine-inducing, not to mention that eventually he’d have to find a date and Harry had a bad feeling that that in and of itself would be a nightmare.

‘I think it’ll be entertaining.’ Harry mentally scoffed at his companion knowing that Death would take great amusement in his suffering. The cold rattling chuckle echoed in his head and he had to push Death out of his mind so that he could focus on the rest of what McGonagall was saying.

They set up the dates, scheduled for each Saturday up until the ball, and then they were all sent back to class.

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Just as he’d expected, the ball was already taking a toll on his life. News about the champion’s required attendance had gotten out almost immediately and apparently Harry had done a good enough job up till that point of making it clear he had no intention of attending (as had one or two of the other champions). However, once everyone knew they were required to go and to bring dates, it was utter madness. Everyone who didn’t already have a date—and even a few that had—wanted to attend the ball with one of the champions. For the majority of them, Harry honestly doubted it really mattered to them which one, as long as they were a champion.

The first time Harry was asked to the Ball, he had been stopped in the middle of the hall by a sixth-year girl from Hufflepuff. She’d been a mess of nerves and red cheeks as she stumbled over her invitation. Harry had been polite and direct in turning her invitation down, saying that although he was flattered, he didn’t know her and would rather attend with someone who was not a stranger. Personally, he’d thought he’d been gentle and considerate. Though, the fountain of tears that rained down after that may have indicated otherwise. The girl thanked Harry for being honest, apologized for the inconvenience, and promptly fled in the opposite direction before he could even respond.

Later during lunch, Draco informed Harry that people had heard about the incident and that damned aggravating nickname had returned: ‘Ice Prince.’ Harry silently cursed whoever came up with that ridiculous name.

Although, he thought that perhaps it might do well in discouraging anyone else who thought to ask
Harry and that was a plus.

Unfortunately, he wasn’t so lucky. Harry was approached six more times that following week. Though, some were worse than others. The best was a simple note that would disappear back to its sender as soon as he wrote his answer, no face-to-face interaction at all. The worst was being caught off guard in the bathroom by a group of Gryffindor girls who each asked him out hoping he’d chose one of them.

Harry started to avoid going anywhere alone and taking different routes to his classes, as well as eating at least one meal a day in the kitchens since meal time sometimes meant multiples.

By the time Saturday—and his first dance lesson—came around, Harry was mentally and emotionally drained. The only upside being the knowledge that he wasn’t alone. As they waited for Madame Maxime to arrive, Cedric grumbled about a group that had been following him around for days on end and how he felt he’d never get a moment of peace. In solidarity and a rare show of companionship, Fleur confessed to being nearly late to every class because of how often she’s stopped in the hallways to listen to another sorry sod’s stuttered proposal.

Viktor didn’t say anything, but Harry could tell that he was still engaged in their conversation by the way that his eyes always followed whoever was speaking at the time and a few raised eyebrows or the twitched echo of a smile here and there.

When the French Headmistress arrived, they all fell quiet once more, but the air between them wasn’t nearly so stifling.

They were immediately partnered up—Harry with Cedric, and Fleur with Viktor—and began the meticulous task of learning the first part of the steps while listening to the same twenty seconds of an old song over and over again. Thanks to all of Harry’s extracurricular dueling sessions, the young Ravenclaw was able to avoid the quick whacks of Madame Maxime’s wand on the back of the head, that which she delivered without fail when one of them made a grievous mistake. Mostly, that was Cedric. The Hufflepuff just seemed to have grown a little too quickly and wasn’t entirely used to his own limbs.

Though, since it seemed that Cedric needed the most help, Harry barely got a chance all lesson to practice leading. Not that he minded too much, it was just that the dance called for quite a few lifts that had Cedric putting both hands on his waist and lifting him up as they turned, as well as the fact that one hand never left Harry’s waist for the rest of the moves. Harry had always been rather reluctant to physical contact and though he’d shared a few brief touches or hugs with his friends and family when the moment called for it, he still had little to no experience with someone—especially someone he wasn’t overly close with—touching and holding him in such a way. Harry was just glad Cedric was too busy staring at his own feet or looking straight over Harry’s head when Maxime
snapped at him to stop looking down, so that the Hufflepuff didn’t notice the warm flush in his cheeks.

As for the other ‘pair,’ Fleur seemed to already know the movements—not much of a surprise—and although Viktor wasn’t graceful in any sense of the word, he moved quickly, lifted Fleur when he needed to, and never once stepped on the girl’s feet. He was completing each move with the sharpness and precision of it being an exercise rather than a dance. He’d be lying if he said Madame Maxime didn’t appear a little hopeless looking at both Viktor and Cedric by the end of the lesson.

In the end, they rehearsed for far too long—in Harry’s opinion—and by the time they were finally released, none of them wanted to ever hear that bloody song again. When he reached the dorms after rehearsal, he feigned a migraine and spent the rest of the evening in bed as he felt too drained to try to deal with anymore cursed invitations.

The winter morning was surprisingly brilliant and warm that day, as it streamed in through the high Great Hall windows in banners of transparent gold, illuminating breakfast tables, gleaming off gold plates, and haloing some students in its exuberant light and causing them to glow.

One student, dressed in a pale blue satin uniform, had abandoned his breakfast in favor of staring at one particular student illuminated by such light, who sat a little further down his table.

“What about him?” He asked the similarly dressed boy next to him without dropping his gaze once. The other boy glanced up from his food for only a moment before sighing.

“Out of all of the people you could possibly want to invite to the Yule Ball, it just had to be a champion! Not even our champion, but one of Hogwarts’—who also happens to be the youngest, by the way.” He spoke bluntly to his friend, feeling exacerbated at his friend’s antics.

His attention finally shifted from the young Ravenclaw in order to glare at the boy next to him.

“Does any of that really matter? I mean, we are supposed to be promoting ‘inter-institutional-comradery,’ or what have you. Besides, it’s not like our own champion will be taking any of us.” He didn’t bother lowering his voice, despite the fact that Delacour sat only a few seats away and clearly heard him if the dark glower she sent him was anything to go by.
She wasn’t the only one listening in on their conversation, it seemed. An older Ravenclaw girl huffed in amusement and when both Beauxbatons boys looked at her, she leaned in with a smirk.

“No offense, but I think you’d have better luck asking a Hippogriff to tango!” She stated in a lowered tone that caused the girl next to her to snort and nod emphatically in agreement.

“Oh? And what makes you say that?” The French student asked, the slightest hint of defensiveness slipping out under his tone. The girl glanced down the table at her young housemate before looking back at the Beauxbaton boys with an unimpressed gaze.

“It’s Harry Potter. Never mind that he’s been famous since he was in nappies. He’s the heir to both the Potter and Black lines—and who knows what else—he’s also incredibly wealthy, has very close ties with the Malfoys and Goldsteins, is top of his year academically, is thought to be practically a prodigy in Defense, and overall Harry is considered to be the most unobtainable student we have!” By then, she’d gathered the attention of even more Beauxbatons students as they looked from her to the current subject of their focus, who sat silently unaware. The boy who’d started the discussion frowned and spoke up once more.

“‘Unobtainable?’” He asked.

“Unobtainable. Don’t get me wrong, he’s perfectly polite and courteous to everyone he meets, however . . . there’s clearly a ‘distance’ between him and everyone else. There’s a reason he got the title of ‘Ice Prince’ so soon after coming here. The only ones he allows close to him are his friends—he only keeps a few—and those that he keeps, he is fiercely protective of. In the four years he’s been here, he has never once dated, shown interest in someone, went out of his way for someone outside of his group, or paid mind to any kind of predetermined social structure.” She confessed with obvious admiration. The girl next to her nodded eagerly and jumped in with her own information.

“I heard that he was singlehandedly responsible for freeing his Godfather, Sirius Black, from Azkaban and now he lives with him and a werewolf!” A lot of the French students were surprised by that, as they had been warned before traveling to England that Britain’s Ministry’s laws against magical creatures were far more ridged then their own. Overall, most looked impressed to hear about the boy’s living arrangements.

The Beauxbatons boy looked back at the younger student once more with a mixed expression of admiration and disappoint that he probably would not be taking the beautiful and impressive young man to the Yule Ball.

There was also another Beauxbatons student who was now looking at the champion with curiosity,
though what she would do about the information she’d just received about her fellow contender, she
didn’t know just yet.

Meanwhile, a little further down the table, Harry was just feeding a bit of his breakfast to an
unfamiliar standard post owl before carefully retrieving the bundle of post from its ankle. It flew off
just as Harry unshrunk the bundle and frowned at its significant growth. Lately, the number of letters
—as well as some very unwanted gifts—he’d been receiving from ‘admirers’ had more than doubled
with all of the media attention he’d been getting because of the tournament lately. He was getting
more secret portkeys than ever and had to spend even more time checking over each and every letter
he’d received. Especially since one of his more aggressive ‘fans’ had smarted up and began labeling
the return address being to ‘Sirius Black’ in hopes that Harry would open it without checking for
spells or portkeys.

Reluctantly, Harry had reached the point that he had to send a letter to Philias to inquire about getting
an official targeted postage-block—which was usually reserved only for high-ranking politicians and
Ministry Officials—which would work much better to keep out those who were determined enough
to get passed the general postage-block he had for everyone but those he actually wanted letters
from. Philias had been nearly immediate in his response and had told Harry to make a list of those he
specifically wanted to block, and also to send him the unwanted gifts and letters so that he could
investigate, give out warnings, and file restraining orders for the worst of them (such as the ones who
sent threats and curses and edged on actual offenses by talking about kidnapping and pedophilia).

They were still in the process of sorting that mess all out, so he was still getting quite a lot of mail.
All in all, it was yet another big headache to sort through. Though, at least with this he could get
outside help and put most of the work on someone else.

Amongst the mail that he didn’t even bother to open—especially not there in the Great Hall when he
had no idea what they contained—Harry finally hunted down the letter from Sirius and Remus and
vanished the rest up to his dorm room for the day while he was in class. They were only about a
week away from the start of winter holiday and Harry’s last letter home had been to inform his
guardians that he would—unfortunately—be unable to return as he was being forced to attend the
Yule Ball celebration. He’d made it very clear in his letter that he very much did not
want to attend,
and was hoping that the letter he held would be his guardians sharing his opinion and would be
offering to possibly get him exempted from the event.

However, what awaited him was not that at all. Apparently, Remus and Sirius had been over the
moon at the news and informed him that he was to meet them at Hogsmead for the next Hogsmead
trip they had at the end of the term and they would apparate Harry to Diagon Alley to get him fitted
for new dress robes. Harry groaned inwardly and targeted his frustration at his invisible friend.

‘This is all your fault, you know?’ He silently grumbled.
'Oh really? And how do you figure, little raven?' Death inquired with seemingly perpetual amusement woven between his lipless teeth.

'This whole ordeal could have been avoided, had you helped me go after Voldemort sooner, *before* he put this ridiculous plan into motion!'

'Despite what you may think, I cannot actually see the future, and therefore I can only infer about Tom’s behavior after the ritual. He will be disoriented, possibly in a lot of pain, and might lash out violently afterwards. At that point, you definitely weren’t ready to face him in that state. Not only that, but you do not yet fully understand your connection with Tom and how it may affect you. It would not do well for you to hesitate in the moment because of it. Also, from what I’ve seen, you’re only just finishing preparations for the ritual. Be angry all you like, but this tournament has put you where he needs you in order to access you, and it’s given you the time you needed to prepare yourself.' Death argued back calmly, causing the majority of Harry’s frustration to fizzle out.

Death was right, although it all seemed so tedious and unnecessary now, there was an end goal to it all that he kept letting slip his mind. He would endure the long dance lessons, the embarrassing and bothersome date-proposals, the fussing and robe-shopping with his guardians, and all of the other little annoyances along the way because in the end, all that mattered was the ritual. Harry would finish what he’d started and make sure that he did something useful with his immortal life.

Harry ignored the echoes of smugness he could feel radiating from the veil at his back, and continued to work through his breakfast before his first class began.

Several days later, the last Hogsmead trip of the term came and Harry reluctantly dressed and readied himself with the rest of his dormmates—dressing in his thick winter robes, water-resistant dragonhide boots, and a matching set of thick and very dark blue gloves and scarf that Remus had gifted him the previous Christmas. It had been snowing for the past few days and the recent temperatures had even the most eager third years feeling a little reluctant to make the trip.

Harry, however, slipped into an unused room on his way out—since his friends would be going together after breakfast and weren’t currently with him—and donned his invisibility cloak before leaving Hogwarts. That way, he only had to walk to the edge of the wards before he could apparate the rest of the way. It didn’t shave off much time, but even a single minute more not spent outside was a minute worth saving.
In Hogsmead, Harry found his guardians waiting at The Three Broomsticks and after a brief reunion, Sirius apparated to Diagon Alley and Remus followed soon behind with Harry on his arm. They headed straight for Twilfit & Tatting's, a more high-end tailor that had clientele such as the Malfoys, Zabinis, and most prominent families in Wizarding Britain, as well as some international connections.

Honestly, Harry didn’t understand the need to purchase all new dress robes when he had perfectly fine ones he’d almost never worn waiting for him at home. When he brought this up to his escorts before they’d reached the shop, however, he received only a grin from Sirius and a soft tut from Remus. When they entered the shop, Harry could immediately see the difference between it and Madame Malkin’s. Instead of large sections of pre-made clothes one could buy or have tailored for them, Twilfit was significantly sparser with the majority of the clothing around the shop serving only as samples for customers to see and help with customizing their garments.

The head seamstress was a severe, no-nonsense woman with grey hair and a tight expression despite the wrinkles. Harry allowed his guardians to do most of the talking as he just stood on a little platform, followed her instructions and tried not to squirm as the enchanted tape measure flew about and took all of his measurements. The only time they really involved Harry in the deliberations came when selecting from a bunch of different swatches of dark fabric. Most were black or charcoal grey, with a few dark blues, greens, reds, or browns. Harry didn’t pay much attention to color, and instead focused on the feel. If he would have to wear the robes all night and even dance in them, then he’d want something light and non-abrasive. In the end, he chose a black silk that caused the adults to change a few of their plans for design, but ultimately, they seemed rather pleased by his choice.

Harry was just thankful when they finally left, their order placed and the robes set to arrive at Hogwarts a few days before the ball. He hadn’t paid enough attention to the discussion to know exactly what his robes would look like, but he knew that both the seamstress and his guardians were confident that he would turn heads.

They were about to all go get lunch when the door behind them opened once more and the seamstress called after them, they were in a less populated branch off of Diagon Alley and were able to hear her well enough from where they stood. Apparently, they’d forgotten a few details. Sirius quickly made his way over, but when Remus moved to follow, Harry stopped him for a moment to say he didn’t want to go back in—it felt too stifling in there—and would wait outside while they finished up. Remus glanced around them at the nearly deserted alley before agreeing and telling Harry that they’d only be a moment.

Once alone, Harry breathed in the winter air deeply, even though it stung his lungs a bit. It was quite warm in the shop and now that his winter wear was back on, he definitely didn’t want to step back into that furnace. After a moment, his attention wandered and he looked around at the buildings surrounding the shop, as it was his first time in that section of the alley. He could hear the busy rush of people a distance away at the mouth of the small branching alley he stood in and he wondered at the lack of people there.
Though, from what he could see, many of the buildings there were either offices with the curtains drawn, or empty and available for purchase or rent. Wanting to make sure the blood kept flowing to his limbs in the cold weather, Harry slowly began walking a bit deeper down the alley, making sure he was still in sight of Twilfitt should his guardians step out soon.

He was perhaps a good twenty meters away when the door to a shop to his right suddenly opened and a figure came out in a rush, startling Harry and catching him off guard so that he didn’t move quick enough to avoid bumping into them. The other person’s leather bag hit the ground and Harry apologized as he knelt to retrieve it for them.

“My apologies, I didn’t mean to knock into you.” He remarked politely as he stood and handed over the bag to a man who looked to be in his thirties with a very tall and thin build with a plain and unremarkable face. The man was in the middle of waving off the apology as he took his bag back when he actually looked at Harry and went completely still. His eyes wide and unblinking.

Harry wasn’t really sure what to make of the reaction, so he kept his expression neutral and bid the man farewell, but before he could take a step away, the man dropped his bag once more in his haste to grab onto Harry’s shoulders with both hands. He still didn’t blink as his face stretched into a wide grin of pure glee.

“You’re Harry.” His voice was low with unmistakable awe and wonderment. Feeling highly uncomfortable with the physical contact, Harry gave a hesitant smile of acknowledgment as he tried to step out of the man’s grip, with no luck. The man licked his lips nervously and squeezed his shoulders, causing an unpleasant chill to run up his spine.

“You might not recognize me, but it’s me, Jonas. I know you’ve gotten my letters, right?” Harry felt his smile slip and the blood drain from his face.

Jonas Bellmore. He was one of the very reasons that Harry had to talk to Philias in the first place. Since Harry was twelve, he’d been receiving letters from Jonas. At first it had been nothing more than the typical fanatic letters that praised him for his ‘accomplishments’ and went on about his future successes. Nothing truly concerning. But then, even though Harry never replied to any letter that wasn’t family, friends, or official correspondence from Gringotts or the Ministry, Jonas would talk about things in his letters as if Harry were replying to them, talk about their ‘growing bond.’ Jonas seemed to truly believe there was some kind of relationship between them.

Jonas had also been one of the firsts to send him a portkey, in the form of what appeared to be an engagement ring, so that they could ‘run away together.’ The reason Harry even remembered the letters’ contents was because of the way they grew more and more aggressive as he assumed Jonas devolved mentally. Fantastical and outlandish plans to sweep into Hogwarts and take him away for a life of luxury transformed into woeful laments about his ‘beauty’ and then into how dashing he
would look with a ring of hand-shaped bruises around his fair neck, and so on.

His most recent letters had been so disturbing, Harry had to stop reading them and instead immediately got rid of them. And now, Harry was standing in the grasp of a clearly deranged man who had fantasies about hurting him in the most violent ways just to see his expressions or hear the noises he’d make. Harry’s heart began to thump painfully in his chest and his breathing became shorter and stuttering as the panic set in.

“Release me, Jonas. If you truly knew me the way you claim to, you would know I don’t like to be touched.” Harry demanded fiercely, his voice coming out stronger than he felt capable. Jonas didn’t let go, instead he took a step closer.

“But it’s different for me, right?” One hand moved to caress his cheek and Harry felt ill as he turned his face away. “It must be fate for us to meet here like this. Merlin, you’re even more breathtaking in person.” His wide, glassy eyes took in his every feature with reverence and he moved even closer so that his hot breath hit Harry’s cheek and the young Ravenclaw tried once again to pull away. Jonas leaned in to whisper right into his ear. “I’m going to take you home, Harry. . . I bet once I get you to bed you’ll open right up for me, huh, like a delicate lily. . .” Harry stilled at his words. A strength filled his limbs and the miniscule tremble in his hands ceased. A familiar cold wrapped around him and he felt entirely calm once more. Because he wasn’t alone. Never alone.

His mind cleared out the lingering panic and he could once more think clearly. With his next inhale, magic spilled over and bled into his bloodstream until it was nearly dripping from his fingertips. Lifting his hands, Harry wrapped his cold, thin fingers around Jonas’ wrists and the man immediately jerked back at the sensation of pins and needles penetrating where Harry touched him. Harry pushed the offending appendages away from him but didn’t let go. Jonas looked at his wrists in confusion, then in growing panic as the skin under Harry’s smooth pale hands began to turn blue, then purple, then dark grey as the cells died, veins closed, and bones dried and became brittle.

Jonas tried to rip his hands out of Harry’s grasp, but the young boy was far stronger than the man had anticipated. The air around them seemed to thicken and darken. Jonas choked as the decay then spread up his forearms, creeping ever closer. Harry’s magic had almost reached Jonas’ shoulders when he leaned in, capturing the man’s attention once more. Gone was the admiration. Gone was the adoration. Now it was fear. Only fear.

Harry stared wide and unblinking into Jonas’ eyes, searching as the man trembled. Jonas no longer saw the graceful and fragile boy that had been the target of his affections over the past couple of years, instead he felt small and weak under that gaze.

{How many?} Harry’s voice was low and thick as it rolled over the language of the dead. Unnecessary, perhaps, but he was far too angry to bother. His rage boiled slow and burned in his gut
like fire whiskey. Either way, he was certainly heard.

‘Three. Three children before you.’ Death answered emotionlessly and Harry had to close his eyes and grit his teeth to keep from releasing his rage on the man before him right there out in the snow.

“No.” He spoke aloud, startling Jonas as his cold verdant eyes flashed open and landed on him once more. “Perhaps something else.” And without any other warning, Harry gave a little grunt and he ripped open the veil behind him, taking a moment to watch Jonas’ gaze shift to what lay behind him, before Harry stepped back into the veil, dragging Jonas with him as he sucked in a breath to scream. They were floating in a never-ending blackness; the only light came from the tear in the veil Harry had made.

A familiar presence rushed towards them and Jonas jerked back at the sensation before it converged on the man and Harry let go as Death wrapped his skeletal arms around the frantic man. Harry met his friends empty gaze as his anger slowly eased, abated by the sight of the predator’s clear helplessness.

{I don’t care what happens to him, so long as he never thinks of another child again.} Harry’s cold voice echoed through the space and he caught the flash of a bone-white grin amongst billowing obsidian robes before he moved back towards the tear and pulled himself through, leaving Jonas behind. Harry calmly mended the tear seamlessly, cast a cleaning charm on every bit of himself and his clothing that Jonas had touched, straightened out his robes, and began the short stroll back towards Twilfit’s just as his guardians were stepping out.

Later that evening, Harry attended his second dance lesson, ate a meal of roasted chicken and potatoes for dinner, and went to bed early after some light reading.

Chapter End Notes

Welcome back my precious readers! I send you all of my love! Stay healthy and I look forward to showing you all what I have in store for our favorite little wizards!
Chapter Summary

In the last chapter: The announcement of the upcoming Yule Ball has cause wide-spread hysteria. The champions start their dance lessons. Harry gets bombarded by invitations. The Beauxbatons students learn why Harry is called the ‘Ice Prince.’ Sirius and Remus take Harry shopping for his dress robes, and Harry has an unpleasant encounter with one of his ‘fans.’

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone! Sorry for the late update, though this one is about three times longer than my typical chapters, so hopefully that helps.

Also, I wanted to take a moment to tell you all that Maya_0196 has begun the insane task of translating this fic into Spanish I believe, so if English isn't your first language, or if you're just curious, go and check it out!

Link to Maya_0196 's page: https://archiveofourown.org/users/Maya_0196/pseuds/Maya_0196

Link to Translation: http://archiveofourown.org/works/11513127/chapters/25836819

Thank you all for coming this far!

-Pleasant Readings!

Fading evening light swept through the tall windows and stretched their tired fingers out toward the impossibly tall book cases that occupied the library. An insidious chill carried on the back of a draft drifted around like a phantom and chased away most of the lingering students who wished to get a head start on their winter break course work. One student in particular, though, didn’t seem to even notice the cold as he sat at a small table pushed up close to a large window. He worried his bottom lip between his stark white teeth and rubbed absently at the glossy black bristles on the feather end of his quill while his eyes raked over the crowded page of the plain school journal he’d been pouring over for months now.

It held all of his notes, plans, and work for the ritual that was meant to bring back Tom Riddle. He had all the ingredients and supplies ready to go in that little expanded pouch he carried on him at all times, the only thing he had left to work on was the arithmancy and rune work. Unfortunately, as helpful and informative as the Book of the Dead was to Harry, there was no set spell or ritual for exactly what he needed. Since Horcruxes were not an actual form of proper necromancy, there was
no way to reverse the damage completely—at least, not yet.

So, Harry has to build his own ritual essentially from scratch—and spell creation was incredibly difficult, it involved an extensive knowledge of the practical and mathematical side of magic. And, as with any form of science and discovery, it took a whole lot of trial and error to gain such an intimate knowledge of the different runes and how they interacted with each other to make sure that there wouldn’t be any disastrous results from using them together.

He’d spent months secretly working it out in his free time and recording it all in that notebook to ensure he could look back on his notes if there were any issues. Now, he had every rune carefully planned out for the circle he would have to draw and it would get the job done, but there was something missing. Adding too many runes would make any circle more unstable—which it was already turning out to be—but Harry also had an issue with the strength of the runes. They simply weren’t powerful enough as is to hold out long enough for Tom’s new body to fully form and be capable of magic. Harry’s worried it might weaken and stutter out halfway—which was certainly a problem.

It was teasing his mind and remained just out of reach, he couldn’t quite reach it. . .

Harry sniffed and absently rubbed his nose with his hand as the dry scent of parchment irritated his nose and broke his intense concentration for a moment. Harry was about to curse under his breath in frustration at not being able to think properly when his eyes caught on something on his page and he zeroed in on it. He relinquished his swollen lip as a disbelieving smile tugged at his lips and he grabbed the note book as his eyes flitted excitedly over the page. ‘Yes! That’s it!’ He thought as he quickly jumped into the calculations that suddenly seemed so simple now that he was looking at it.

It wasn’t really simple, it was actually only by chance that Harry had remembered reading some short passage from a book he’d found while exploring the Black library. It had been a book on the more experimental theories of runes and spell creation, and though they weren’t entirely proven, the evidence was all there and reliable enough for Harry to trust it and implement it in his ritual.

Harry sat back with a breathless laugh, not really seeing the writing in the notebook anymore so he shifted his gaze to the dying light outside the window as he felt something tight inside loosen for the first time since taking up the challenge of helping Voldemort.

He was ready.
The last week before the Yule Ball was a mess of emotions running high, anything but a restful winter break atmosphere, and a mad dash to find a date for those who hadn’t yet.

The first of the champions to find a date was, unsurprisingly, Fleur—who had perhaps the most abundant and impassioned ‘suitors’ out of the four. Though, no one who knew the girl even half decently was surprised to find that she decided to attend the event with her friend, Armand. It was understandable, really. Being part-Veela, Fleur was undoubtedly the victim to constant unwanted attention from those incapable of resisting the allure, it’s easy to see why she would prefer to go with someone she knew and trusted well, so that she could let her guard down a little in all the chaos. And if there was more there, no one could deny that the French boy was quite attractive and seemed to make her happy.

Next came Cedric. Apparently, he’d caught the amorous attention of the popular Cho Chang, a pretty fifth year from Harry’s own house. When it had come up in a short conversation between Cedric and Harry, the Hufflepuff had admitted to not knowing her very well but thinking the way she’d approached and asked him to the ball had been rather sweet and ‘cute.’ Harry hadn’t said anything to that, as he didn’t quite understand what Cedric had meant and what motivated him to decide to take an all but stranger to the ball, since he seemed pleased enough with his choice.

Viktor was third on the list to get a date . . . assumedly. The Bulgarian had never announced who he was taking, but he had confirmed he’d found someone. Though, Harry didn’t have to be overly observant to find out who considering the knowing glances and slightly pink-tinged cheeks exchanged between Viktor and the curly-haired raven amongst his group. He’d been surprised, none the less, by that development. He hadn’t been aware of any sort of relationship between the seeker and Hermione, but then again, Hermione—like Harry—valued her time alone and didn’t spend as much time around Harry as say Draco or Anthony did. It was plausible that they’d met around the castle at any point over the last few months and had just kept it a secret to preserve their privacy.

As for Harry’s group of friends, Draco had confidently secured a date with one of the more lovely and fair ladies from Beauxbatons and had smugly flaunted that fact—even if she was a few inches taller than him and made him look quite young in comparison. Also, in a surprising turn of events, Ginny would also be going as she had been invited by a timid Gryffindor in Harry’s year, since she was too young to go on her own as a third year.

Harry seemed to one of the last amongst them that finally found the right someone to take him to the Yule Ball. It was a few days before the ball and Harry was sitting on his bed in the dorms, curtains drawn back and reading an interesting book on old wizarding custom before bed when there was a tapping at the window and he opened it to let in an unfamiliar owl that had a shrunken package tied to its foot. Harry took it from the owl and sent it on its way with a few owl treats. As he sat back down on his bed with package in hand, Anthony sat up from where he was lounging on his bed next to Harry’s with a spark of interest.
There was a small note attached and after reading it, Harry discovered that the package contained his formal robes for the Yule Ball. Anthony must have guessed as much.

“Your robes?” He asked, head slightly cocked and an interested glint in his warm eyes. Harry nodded, and since they were the only two currently in the room, he sent the package floating wandlessly over to his trunk and sealed it away until the time he had to put them on. Anthony didn’t even pause at the action. “Have you found someone to go with yet?”

“No, most of the people who have asked me are those who I’ve never even spoken to before and I doubt most would be able to hold a right interesting conversation with me throughout the night so that I don’t end up losing my mind before the first song is even over. That is, seeing as how all of the ‘interesting’ things I wish to talk about are things I can’t with other people. Plus, having to be polite and courteous whilst also getting to know someone new sounds dreadful. Most of the time I handle myself perfectly fine around other people, but with all of the fanfare and pandemonium, I fear I’ll forget myself, lash out in frustration, and end up sullying my own reputation in the matter of a single night.” Harry vented with more passion he realized he felt for the subject he’d been pointedly pushing out of his mind for the past few weeks.

Anthony released burst of unchecked laughter and looked at Harry’s contrite—not pouting, mind you—face with something akin to a mix of amusement and fondness. There was a pause, while Harry released some of the residual energy that had built up during his rant and Anthony settled a little more without losing that bright glint in his eyes. Then Anthony broke the silence.

“Then don’t.” He said, pulled Harry’s attention back from whatever he’d been thinking about.

“What?”

“Don’t take a stranger.” He stated so simply that Harry just blinked. Anthony’s familiar little smirk appeared then. “I’ll take you. You said you don’t want to spend the night with someone you don’t know and can’t talk to, and I still haven’t found a date either, so let’s just go together. That way we can both be comfortable and you don’t have to worry about ruining that precious reputation of yours.” He finished with a cheeky wink and Harry would have sent a vengeful stinging hex his way for that alone if he weren’t in the process of thinking over the offer. He didn’t have much to think about.

“I have to partake in the opening dance, do you know the steps?” he asked curiously, feeling the dread that had been hardening in his gut the past few weeks beginning to loosen at the prospect of attending the ball with his closest friend.
“Of course, Draco would have my head if I embarrassed myself—and by extension, him—by not knowing the correct steps. He already taught me a week ago.”

Harry looked over at his friend with a smirk. “Good. It’s set then. So long as you don’t have a problem with us leaving before the night is over, I’m none too fond of crowds.” Anthony grinned and Harry suddenly got the impression he was going to say something stupid again.

“Brilliant! Just let me know what color of dress you’re planning on wearing so we can coordinate.” For that, Harry forewent the hexes and instead lobbed his pillow at the blonde, causing him to fall back in a fit of laughter moments before Harry followed the pillow and leapt from his bed to Anthony’s in order to good-naturedly hit and poke the blonde’s ribs until he took his foolish words back. The dorm room rang with a chorus of laughter and shouts from both boys in a rare moment of utterly free and mindless joy one could only find in youth.

The twenty-fifth of December was the set date of the Yule Ball, but it was also a holiday. It had snowed all throughout the night previous and in the morning, it blanketed the grounds thick and untrodden, reflecting the light of the clear blue sky and beaming sun up into the windows of the castle and making the ancient walls seem brighter than they had ever before.

The Great Hall that morning had been utter chaos as almost all of year four through seventh had stayed for the ball and were all receiving their Christmas presents from friends and family during breakfast as they would all be too busy preparing for the ball later on. The food began to disappear under the layers upon layers of packing parchment and discarded boxes. It was such a mess that Hogwarts house elves began to be called up to deal with clearing away rubbish as well as helping to transport students’ gifts up to their rooms for them. Harry had chosen to open everything when he got back to the dorms, as had his friends—except for Draco, who was too impatient.

His gifts were of the usual variety: books, scarves, gloves, an odd magical item or two, and plenty of letters of well wishes. Though, there was one gift that stood out amongst the others. Along with the other gifts Remus and Sirius sent him, there was a small box with its own note attached. In the note, Sirius explained that inside was a sort of pin and that the style of Harry’s formal robes could be worn as they were, but it was custom to wear them with certain adornments as well. He explained that they could get to be quite ornate, but he’d gotten Harry something a bit simpler to suit his tastes. Curious, Harry flipped open the lid.

Lying on a bed of black velvet, the ‘pin’ was about the size of a thumb. It was a small rose cut from crystal, the centermost petals were a deep indigo and became more translucent each petal that curled
outward until the outermost petals and leaves were completely clear. The short stem was a delicate silver cut through with veins of more clear crystal. It was small and looked so fragile and though it wouldn’t draw much attention, once someone actually looked, it was quite captivating. Harry wasn’t much for accessories, but he liked it, oddly enough. It looked like it had been carefully carved from ice, so cold to the touch, and could melt away at any moment.

Once Harry had put his gifts away, he went down to the Ravenclaw common room to secure a spot by a window and work in some leisure time just reading and sipping the sweet milk and honey tea he liked. He was joined by Anthony at some point, but didn’t really pay attention to his surroundings until the grandfather clock in the corner had only just struck noon and he noticed most of the girls in the common room started getting up and moving up to their dorm rooms in clusters with excited murmurs passing between them.

Then Harry realized that they were leaving to go start getting ready for the Yule Ball. Passively, Harry wondered exactly what went into preparations that getting ready for one event became a day-long endeavor. Should he start getting ready then as well? Harry looked around but none of the boys seemed to be in the same kind of rush, so perhaps not. Harry shook his head and went back to his reading, he still had plenty of time until the ball.

Apparently, someone of the more outspoken Ravenclaw girls that came down—hair curled, styled, and make up half finished—saw none of the boys had moved much when it was nearing seven (an hour before the start of the Yule Ball) and thought that they had wasted enough time already and went about shooing them up to their rooms to get ready, much to many of their chagrin.

Harry grabbed what he needed from his trunk and since he had the bed closest to the wall, he didn’t wait for a turn in the bathroom—or just changed out in the open like some of the other boys might—and instead just drew his bed curtains on one side and the end of the bed to act as a partition. Speaking of the others, from what he knew, Terry Boot had found a quiet Hufflepuff to take to the ball—a rather plain girl, but he’d heard she was nice—and Michael was going stag, which Harry thought had a lot to do with both the boys recent skittishness as well as his nasty temper that seemed ingrained into his personality.

Harry didn’t really care, ever since the night Michael, Terry, and Morag decided to take things a little too far and pushed him down some rather unforgiving stone steps, causing him to perish and scare the living daylights out of them by coming back, the little trio had been the furthest thing from his mind, as they had been doing a rather good job of staying out of trouble and not crossing Harry’s path anymore. Also, it was no secret that they were not in Harry’s favor and—as much as Harry liked to deny it and pretend it wasn’t so—he had significant influence in his house and his behavior affected the others quite a lot. In short, it meant that those three would continue not being much of a problem for him, and he was certainly okay with that.
Harry reached for the lid to the box that held his dress robes and suddenly felt a little anxious, as it would be his first time seeing the robes Sirius and Remus had helped design for him. If they were truly dreadful, he could always make last minute adjustments and transfigurations for the night. The lid slid off, was left off to the side, and the thin protective white cloth was lifted away to reveal glossy black silk with intricate embroidered designs done in even darker opaque black thread that was visible, but subtle. It was the top robe, so Harry moved it aside for later without unfolding it and moved on to the other garments that had come in the box.

Harry stripped and quickly got dressed in the tailored black trousers, and the light weight black dress shirt with the same style of short banded collar he’d spotted on the outer robe. Harry slipped on a fine pair of glossy black dress shoes he’d already owned, but had never worn. Finally, Harry picked up the outer robe and let it unfold in his hands so he could get a full look at it before sliding it on easily over his clothes. The top robe was of luxurious taste to say the least.

The black silk was thin and expertly tailored to conform to Harry’s arms and torso. Like his shirt beneath, the collar to the robe was banded, though a little taller, and hugged his long, pale neck comfortably. Instead of the robe opening right down the center, the fabric overlapped a little and fastened closed—with hidden buttons on the inside—a little off to the right so that the seam of the opening followed a straight line from the end of his collar bone to the inside of his hip. The hidden buttons ended horizontal to his belly button and the rest of the fabric fell loose to the floor, with the opening seam following his right leg and there being enough loose fabric to allow ease of movement for his lower body.

Overall, it was quite an impressive piece, being light weight, breathable, elegant and yet still masculine. He conjured a mirror to examine his appearance. Harry knew he wasn’t exactly ‘tall’ for his age, but even he could see he cut an impressive image in those robes. Out of his normal plain school robes, it was clear that Harry was growing up, and fast. He was of average height, but his form was still rather slim and his limbs were long and the way that he moved made him seem taller than he was. His face had lost quite a bit of the soft-roundness of childhood and his more imperial and regal bone structure was coming through each day. However, his black lashes were still just as long and thick around his haunting pale green eyes and his lips soft and rounded, especially his top lip, which made him look more feminine and doll-like.

His face would probably always be a blend of both soft and hard, both masculine and feminine, both innocent and knowing. However, his shoulders were a bit broader than before and there were lean and subtle muscles taking shape on his body that moved him further away from the image of a skinny child and closer to an actual adult. At least, as close as Harry would ever come, being that his genes had decided to favor his mother’s willowy, slight form over his father’s naturally broad, muscled, tall, and intimidating form. Harry liked to think that for what he didn’t accomplish in physical size and physique, he made up for in magical prowess, burning cold gaze, and overall regal demeanor when he needed it.
Harry shook his head, thoughts running wild and unchecked in his mind. Harry adjusted his robe sleeves and smoothed down the front with his hand before he turned back to the bed and picked up the small box that held the gift he’d received earlier. Taking the small crystal rose out of the box, Harry made sure he followed Sirius’ instructions on where to place it, which was on the front of his robes over his left pectoral muscle. Perhaps it was just his imagination, but once the rose was pinned in place, it seemed to sparkle and gleam a little more, and the blue center of the rose almost had the faintest inner glow to it that made it stand out a little more against the black silk back drop of his robes.

After taking a brief moment to adjust his silken black curls so that nothing was overtly out of place and they looked a little more intentional, but still a little unavoidably wild, Harry slipped his wand into a hidden pocket in his robes and stepped out from behind his bed. Anthony wasn’t in the room and Harry assumed he’d finished getting dressed and had moved down to the common room. Michael was still in the bathroom, and Terry was hopping around on one foot as he fought a losing battle to wrestle his dress trousers up, even though, from what Harry could tell, they were on backwards to begin with. Harry ignored his struggles and moved on without breaking pace.

Harry had thought most of those who were ready would have already moved down to the Great Hall where the Ball would be hosted for the evening, but he was surprised to find it bustling with quite a few people either socializing as they waited for their date or to go down as a group, or were getting last minute help from their friends to fix snagged zippers, find missing shoes, or lend a bit of makeup. However, it only took a moment for Harry to be noticed and it suddenly went quiet as people stared, blinking in a daze or turned to their friend to exclaim about something under their breath. Ignoring their ridiculous reactions, Harry scanned the crowds until he found Anthony standing close to the door on the other side of the room, staring at Harry as well.

Harry smiled as he walked over to his friend, taking in his clean-cut appearance. He wore a more common style of dress robes, but they were clearly well made, expensive, and very sharp indeed. Anthony was still growing like a weed and was half a head taller than Harry, with broader shoulders and more visible muscle than him. His blonde trusses were combed neatly back, though still wavy and relaxed, not slicked back like some of the other boys around the room who looked like they had more product than hair.

“You look quite handsome, my friend.” Harry said with a bright smile and the spell on the room seemed to break as the noise picked up once more, though Harry still caught quite a few gazes following him still. Anthony unfroze as well and grinned cheekily, hoping to cover the slight heat creeping along his neck and curling over his cheeks as he forced himself not to dwell for too long on the way Harry’s dress robes were incredibly flattering or how his eyes almost seemed to glow in the dim light of the common room.

“You’re quite a vision yourself!” Anthony returned with something light and playful in his voice that caused Harry’s smile to widen a bit, amusement bright in his eyes. Harry glanced around the common room before looking towards the archway that led to the dorms for a moment.
“Do you think we should wait for Hermione and walk down with her?” He asked Anthony, thinking silently about how glad he was that Anthony had asked him and he would be able to feel more comfortable that night because he knew he wouldn’t have to fake anything and the two of them knew each other well enough that not much had to be said for them to pick up on what the other needed or wanted.

Anthony nodded and the two stood off to the side and waited for the other Ravenclaw to come down from the dorms. For as punctual as Hermione was known to be, that occasion seemed to be the one exception. By the time she finally came down, the common room was mostly empty, everyone else too eager to get down to the Great Hall early. Harry had to admit to himself that Hermione looked very different than she had that morning. Her frizzy mane of light brown curls had been tamed into a cascade of loose curls half pinned up and the makeup she wore did quite a lot for her usually plain face. Harry and Anthony both complemented her before leaving a bit hurriedly in order to make it down on time.

If Harry’s observations were correct, then all three of them would be starting off the first dance and McGonagall would have their heads if they were late.

As they neared, Harry could hear the impressive volume of voices echoing out from the main doors of the Great Hall. There was still a pretty steady flow of people entering the Great Hall, so unfortunately there was a bit of an audience when they arrived and they had to walk through a repeat performance of the silent stares from the common room. Only, this time Hermione’s drastic change drew enough attention to take some of the weight off Harry, which he was glad for, even if Hermione’s cheeks turned an unnatural shade of red.

McGonagall spotted them as well and Harry found himself nearly dragged over to the side of the doors where the other champions stood with their dates. McGonagall was berating Harry for being so late—even though he wasn’t technically late—and when Anthony and Hermione walked up, she must have confused things, for when she was placing Harry at the end of the little line, she then grabbed Hermione and put her next to Harry, causing both of them to look at her perplexedly while Viktor turned with a crease between his brows. Hermione spoke up first, cheeks becoming red once more.

“Um, excuse me, professor, but I’m not here with Harry, I’m here with Viktor.” She stated in a slightly meek voice. McGonagall blinked as Hermione stepped up one spot and stood next to her date. McGonagall turned back to Harry.

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“Then where is your date, Harry?” Her voice was high and sounded a little panicked, as if she feared he’d decided to come alone and force her to exempt him from the opening dance. Before he could answer, though, Anthony cleared his throat politely and moved to the spot beside Harry.
meaningfully. Understanding blooming in the Deputy Headmistresses eyes after a moment and there was a slight blush high on her cheeks when she spoke next.

“Oh my! I see, well . . . I wish you boys a lovely evening.” She sounded flustered for the first time in the years that Harry’s known her and he almost wanted to laugh at the reaction. Instead, he offered a polite nod gently placed his hand on the crook of Anthony’s elbow when he offered it. The professor burst back into motion and began ushering students into the hall as it was almost eight and the opening dance would begin. When she was far enough away, Anthony leaned over to speak quietly in his ear.

“You know, if you get too nervous, my robes have protective charms on them in case you vomit. I won’t be mad.” He teased, earning a subtle, yet well placed jab in the ribs from Harry’s elbow. Anthony coughed, which immediately turned into a laugh.

Before he could say anything back, McGonagall appeared at the front of the line next to Fleur and Armand just as they heard the first joyous and bouncing chords of music and suddenly they were moving in a line into the Great Hall. The hall had been transformed into a breathtaking world of frosted walls and windows, white and silver stone, glossy floors, pale light shining through the enchanted snowfall overhead that disappeared before touching the tops of their heads, towering snow dusted Christmas trees at the other end of the hall behind the orchestra, and the frigid glimmer of light reflecting off icicles hanging off of everything—some even reaching over eight feet in length. The frost had created glimmering ghostly swirls and leaves in pale patterns, like the first night of winter. It was all dazzling and looked nothing like the same hall Harry had eaten nearly every meal in for the past four school years.

At the center of the room was a dance floor where almost everyone had gathered and cleared a wide circle of space that the champions and their dates then walked into and took up their positions. Harry placed a hand on Anthony’s firm shoulder and put his other in Anthony’s slightly larger hand as Anthony took his waist. There was a pause in the music as they all took up their stances, and the moment it started again, they all burst into a whirl of movement and steps and turns. Harry allowed Anthony to lead and wasn’t disappointed when the blonde took to it like a fish to water. Anthony, for all of his joking before the ball, was a very impressive dancer and led him well.

When the first lift of the song came, Harry wasn’t in the slightest bit worried and trusted his friend as he moved both hands to his shoulders and kicked off the ground at the same time that Anthony hoisted him up and turned on his heel. The dance was full of many turns and quick steps and if Harry hadn’t had the lessons he would have gone completely dizzy while dancing.

It wasn’t long before Dumbledore stepped out with McGonagall for a dance, and other staff and the first few brave students followed. Soon the champions were no longer a spectacle for all their peers to stare at like zoo animals and the dance floor filled with spinning and quick stepping couples while a good amount hung back, either not wanting to dance or not knowing how.
When the first song came to an end, Harry and Anthony—along with quite a few others—stepped out of the fray of moving bodies to the cleared off area just as it filled with round tables covered in light blue cloth and people began taking seats. Once more people had begun to sit and chat, food and drink appeared on each table, which Harry gladly took part in.

Harry and Anthony enjoyed themselves and spent most of the night at their table, chatting, eating, saving each other from the occasional daring person who came to ask either of them for a dance, and quietly pointing out certain incidents of hilarity they spotted throughout the room as teens spilled drinks, were slapped by their dates for saying the wrong thing, or made an utter fool of themselves on the dance floor. Draco and his date—a girl who didn’t speak much English but introduced herself as Veronica—joined them at some point for a while before moving off to socialize (Draco’s favorite pass time). Hermione was so caught up in dancing with Viktor—and blushing so much Harry almost feared she had a fever—that they never left the dance floor.

Eventually the orchestra was swapped with the popular wizard band strangely named Weird Sister and the music became much louder. The students rushed to the stage and went mental over the band. Anthony laughed at the sight of his poor head of house being swept up in the stampede and disappearing for a few moments before suddenly reappearing on top of the crowd in what the muggles referred to as ‘crowd surfing’ he believed. He glanced around absently, Harry had gone to the bathroom a few minutes ago, leaving him without someone to talk to and occupy his time. He spotted Harry just as he came back in and was stopped by Hermione, who seemed to be away from Viktor for the first time all night and was gushing to Harry with an ecstatic grin on her face.

Anthony smiled at the sight and his gaze shifted to Harry while the brunette was busy and wouldn’t notice his avid attention. He didn’t allow himself to watch Harry as closely as he wanted. Anthony wasn’t ignorant, he knew himself well enough to understand that his feelings for his closest friend had changed at some point—or perhaps they’d always been heading down that road. Even though he knew Harry didn’t feel the same way about him.

Anthony’s motivations for inviting Harry to the Yule Ball had not been unselfish, it wasn’t just to make Harry comfortable. No, Anthony had an ulterior motive, a question he wanted to answer without Harry knowing, without his say. He wanted to know if there could ever be anything more between them. Even if Anthony had to wait a lifetime, even if the secrets Harry was keeping were heavy enough to crush him. . . if there was even the tiniest chance that Harry might one day reciprocate, Anthony was selfish enough to hold onto that and hold onto his feelings for his friend for as long as it took.

From the very beginning, he’d known that his friendship with Harry wouldn’t be . . . ‘normal’ exactly. ‘Normal’ friends didn’t know without a shadow of a doubt that they would die for their friend if they had to, normal friends didn’t crave to protect said friend like it was more natural than breathing, normal friends didn’t listen to their friend breathing at night because it soothed their insomnia like no potion ever could. And Anthony knew that Harry had never had a normal
friendship before him and that his childhood left one hell of a learning curve for his friend when it came to interacting with people and all of that meant that Anthony could push boundaries and stand closer than a normal friend would because Harry didn’t know any better.

Maybe it made Anthony a bad person, to indulge in Harry’s presence and attention and trust, but he knew he would never do anything to hurt Harry. . .

Anthony refocused on the pair still talking in the distance, and the small fond upturn on Harry’s full lips. Anthony pulled in a deep breath and smiled softly on an exhale as something settled in his chest. He’d invited Harry to the ball, put them in a situation where they would be considered a ‘couple’—even if not officially—for just a few hours. Anthony looked his best and had spent secret hours practicing dancing to sweep Harry off his feet during the opening dance, but . . . Harry never reacted to it, not any differently at least. Anthony had Harry in his arms but the other boy’s heart lay somewhere else, somewhere hidden.

Anthony wasn’t sure if Harry even realized it himself, but his heart was closed off in such a sure way that it could only come from it belonging to someone else. His question had been answered and now he had to own up to it.

And when Anthony realized that . . . it was so easy. So easy to let his own heart settle and the anxious creature inside his chest that had been wreaking havoc on his nerves and thoughts for months now, to dissolve and feed into his bond with Harry. The bond that made him wish to support and protect Harry, but not necessarily be the one at his side. Anthony felt that he could finally stand at Harry’s back instead and guard that little flame kindled in his friend that he’d been missing for so many years. He would protect Harry’s happiness. Which meant that whoever took the steps that he couldn’t, would have to gain Anthony’s approval. Anthony would never allow someone else to hurt Harry either.

Besides, Harry’s heart was much like a star—it was so beautiful glittering in the night sky, but getting too close could burn right through you. The one who was allowed closest would have to burn just as brightly.

Anthony felt warm and calm, the ache inside of him dying out like an unpleasant dream he would finally awake from, as Harry gave Hermione a small pat on the shoulder and began walking back towards Anthony.

“Do you suppose Krum would take any warnings I might give him on treating Hermione good seriously?” Harry asked as he took he seat next to him and Anthony grinned.
“With you? He’d better, if he knows what’s good for him. I’ve heard that those who get on your bad side often end up rather misfortunate.” He teased and received a mild glare in return.

It was nearing the end of the night and a handful of couples here and there had snuck away for some private time with their dates, though there were still quite a few going strong in the Great Hall as they danced and talked and ate until the buttons of their shirts or zippers of their dresses strained. The amount of people that approached him and Anthony had more than tripled in the last hour as less and less people occupied the dance floor and so many random and sporadic conversations had begun taking their toll on Harry and it had become hard to get through introductions without grimacing as a tired headache flared up. Anthony seemed to be enjoying a conversation he was having with a Slytherin sixth year about some book that had just come out by a well-respected author, so Harry didn’t wish to bother him and instead just cut in long enough to say he wanted some fresh air and moving away while the other was still distracted and probably hadn’t heard Harry properly.

Harry stepped out without catching the attention of anyone else, thankfully, and escaped out onto Hogwarts snow-covered grounds. Harry casted a warming charm on his robes, but that didn’t help much considering the silk robes were made to be light weight and stylish, not cold resistant.

So, Harry decided to walk the short distance to the Herbology outdoor green house for at least some protection from the wind and falling snow (plus, it’s just far enough away that he can’t hear the blare of music that was doing nothing to help his head ache). Harry walked slowly towards the green house, allowing the frigid air to fill his lungs, soothe his flushed skin, and numb the sharp edges of pain in his head. Just a few moments of the dark night, cold air, and serene silence already had him feeling worlds better, though Harry didn’t stop his trek to the green house to go back.

Harry reached it and was surprised to see the door half open and foot tracks of snow leading in. Stepping inside, Harry didn’t see anyone at first, until he moved to the last row of plants, sitting along the wall of windows that looked out towards the lake. Harry took a few steps forward and the dark silhouette looking out over the grounds turned and Harry relaxed a bit when he recognized the figure as that of Viktor Krum. For a moment, Harry thought about apologizing for intruding on what must have been the others own escape from all the uncomfortable and draining socializing, but then thought better of it, as there was something he wanted to say right then.

Viktor’s dark eyes watched him closely as he walked up and turned to look out the window as well, not saying a word to the smaller champion yet.

After a moment, Harry took a breath and broke the silence.

“I wanted to thank you, for what you did for me after the first task.” Harry paused for a moment before adding at the last minute, “And also for not telling anyone about it. You could have helped yourself and got the judges to doc me points for injuring myself, but you didn’t. So, thank you.”
said again, feeling a little uncomfortable thanking the stoic teen so much, but feeling it was necessary. Viktor didn’t say anything for several long moments, then he turned his gaze away to look out the window and Harry felt more comfortable without those dark, penetrative eyes boring into him anymore.

“How is your shoulder?” Viktor asked shortly and Harry was surprised he even said anything at all.

“It’s fine now, thank you for asking.” He replied and they lapsed into a long, uncomfortable silence as Harry debated with himself whether or not he should leave, and Viktor seemed on the brink of speaking up.

“I don’t trust you.” The quiet, yet firm statement took Harry completely off guard and he turned to stare at Krum, wide eyed and lost in how to even begin to respond to that. Thankfully, Viktor didn’t seem to be expecting a response, as he went on to talk even more.

“I’ve never shared this with anyone before, and only a few people from my family know, but when I was very young I was in an accident. I was seven years old and I was spending a week with my cousins over the summer because my parents wanted to go on vacation for their anniversary. My cousins were thirteen and fourteen, and they didn’t like the idea of having to look after me but my aunt made them take me with them wherever they went.” Viktor huffed at some memory, though not quite looking humored by whatever it was. Harry listened silently, wondering why on earth Viktor was sharing it with him of all people, but not wishing to stop him either.

“I was like a little puppy, trailing after them wherever they went, no matter how much they pushed me around and told me to get lost. One day, I followed them to go see their friends and the other boys didn’t like me hanging around them and getting in their way, so they told my cousins they didn’t want them around again until they didn’t have to ‘babysit’ any more. My older cousin, Vasil, had had enough and wanted to make me give up on following them around, so he told me that if I really wanted to go with them, I’d have to do something to prove I could be just as daring and strong as the other boys. My cousins took me out into the woods near their house and walked me all the way to the biggest river around. It was deep and the currents were strong, too strong to fish or swim in, so it was always avoided by the locals, but I didn’t know this.” Viktor’s jaw clenched and he looked down for a moment.

“Vasil wanted to scare me into leaving them alone, thinking that if he gave me an impossible task, that I wouldn’t go to my aunt when they left without me. So, he found where the water was the strongest, nestled between two short cliffs connected by a fallen tree covered in moss and slick from the constant spray of water below. He told me, if I could cross the river, then I could join them and the other boys would want to play with me too. However, he didn’t count on my foolish, childish will.” A bitter smile twisted his lips as he continued.
“My legs were shaking and I thought my heart would break right out of my chest and run away, but I still climbed over its roots and onto the trunk. My other cousin was yelling at Vasil and telling me to come back, but I didn’t stop once I had started. The water was so loud. I was determined to earn their respect and prove I was just as strong as they were. But . . . even if I was strong enough, even if I was brave enough, none of that mattered because when I was halfway across the log, the rotted wood gave out and I fell straight into the river. The current swept me away immediately, too strong to swim against and too deep to catch my feet on anything. On top of that, I didn’t know how to swim and was unable to keep myself above the surface.” Viktor trailed off, standing completely still, eyes looking dim and far away in the darkness.

His next words were spoken quietly, almost too quiet for Harry to hear, if the winter night weren’t deafeningly silent around them.

“I remember thrashing under the water, panicking as it clawed its way up my nose and down my throat. I remember everything fading in and out, like I was tilting on the edge of sleep. And then I remember darkness, and a cold that felt nothing like the water. It burrowed beneath my skin and I forgot what it was to feel warmth. I remembered drifting, not in any certain direction, just movement. I felt . . . something coming towards me, something inexplicable. All I knew was that it was something and that it saw me in the darkness, even though I couldn’t see it. . .

“The next thing I know, I’m throwing up water on the river bank with my aunt kneeling over me, soaking wet, and everything just hurt. After that day, I put my memories of that incident out of my mind and moved on with my life, which was easy since I was young and any adult I told about the experience just dismissed it as my imagination.” Viktor turned then and looked Harry right in the eye when he spoke. Harry felt like too transparent in that moment and felt the urge to storm out of that green house and turn his back on whatever Viktor was going to say.

“Not once, in almost a decade since that incident, have I thought about that day. . . Not until you. It’s been so long, I wasn’t certain about it at first, but now I am. You hide it well, but I can feel it. It’s in the very essence of your magic, it surrounds you like a cloak. The same cold presence I felt in the darkness. I didn’t know what it was back then, didn’t have a name for it, but I do now. Death.” Harry didn’t move as single muscle and he felt his companion drift ever closer in sudden curiosity. Viktor swallowed and shuddered a little as, apparently, he too felt something in the air shift. “I don’t know how it is possible or what it means, but you magic is both of the living world and the afterlife—like you are half in one and half in the other.”

‘Interesting. I certainly didn’t see this one coming.’ Death said from over his shoulder and Harry tilted his head slightly to the side as he listened.

‘What do I do? Clearly, he is somehow sensitive to magic, like Anthony, and he can feel you. What do I tell him?’ Harry asked silently as he turned back to look at Viktor, the other boy still watching him intently as he waited for a response.
‘They say that the best lies are hidden in the truth. So, tell him the truth.’ Death advised with amusement in his low voice as he watched the scene fold out. Harry sighed inwardly. Harry took a moment to gather his thoughts, and then a serene calm settled over him and he exhaled quietly as he looked back out over the snowy grounds.

“I suppose you could say I experienced something similar. When I was very young, I died for a short moment and came back.” Harry stated vaguely, voice even and rather emotionless. He obviously couldn’t tell Viktor the whole truth, just enough to keep from assuming something ridiculous, like Harry is Death or something. That’d be the last thing he needs!

“Ever since then, I’ve been able to sense the veil; the barrier between our world and the next. It’s all around us, just out of reach from our physical bodies. As for my magic . . . perhaps my near-death experience is partly to blame for what you feel from it. However,” Harry met Viktor’s gaze again with conviction in his eyes, “They also say that the development of one’s magic has a lot to do with one’s upbringing. Now it’s my turn to share something with you. I didn’t grow up knowing about magic. My aunt and uncle who raised me knew, but their experiences with this world had left them bitter and resentful towards magic. I grew up in a very cold home with people who despised me. Without a drop of affection as a child, I never learned how to relate to other people properly or form any sort of attachments. I was a ghost living as an intruder in someone else’s home.

“Perhaps my experience with death and sensitivity to the veil wasn’t a good basis for my magic to start on, but everything after that was environmental and throughout all of the key magical developmental years of my childhood, I was in an oppressive and loveless place that became an irreversible part of my magic.” Viktor looked away, seeming to be going over what he’d come up with in his head, as well as realizing then what Harry was implying about his past circumstance. “I don’t know what exactly you’re looking for, or what you believe I am and what I can do, but I’m telling you now that it is not as grand and fantastical as you’re imagining.

“The truth? The truth is that I had a shite childhood and people around here like to joke that I’m so cold and untouchable like an ‘Ice Prince,’ but really, I’m struggling every day just to make sure the people I’ve grown to actually care about know that they matter to me because I can’t show it the way other people can. I don’t like to be touched because I went years without it and I have no idea what I’m doing! So yes, I’m different and my magic is strange, but what you all seem to forget is that I’m also fourteen. How threatening am I to be the source of such suspicion? The world is full of strange things that we don’t understand, magic most of all, and my advice to you is to leave room for the world to prove you wrong, because things are constantly changing and shifting and if we remain too rigid, it will break us.” Viktor shifted uncomfortably under Harry’s piercing gaze.

Viktor closed his eyes and sighed deeply, seeming to be second guessing his words and actions. Harry knew he was manipulating the older boy in order to divert him from his suspicions that hit too close to home. Harry turned Krum’s assumptions on their head to make him seem to be more similar to Viktor’s experience rather than the close relationship he had with Death in reality. Though, what
he was saying was all true, it was just used as a decoy for the more vital secrets he held.

“My apologies, I was out of line.” Viktor said after a while, still looking a bit unsure of himself, but also appearing to be slightly more at ease in Harry’s presence than he was before. “If you wish to return to the ball now, I’d be glad to escort you.” Viktor spoke politely—something not common for the gruff quidditch player.

Harry realized then that he’d been outside for quite a while and though it hadn’t been the complete silence he was looking for; his headache had subsided significantly. Harry agree graciously and the two began walking back towards the entrance, taking their time as they knew the very entrance was lined with the Hogwarts carriages, which were occupied by students looking for some intimate moments with their dates and neither boy wanted to linger once they reached that area.

They had just reached that section, and were making their way down the walkway behind the carriages when they heard two familiar voices having an argument. They both seemed to have similar ideas as they cast disillusionment spells on themselves to listen in on the odd exchange secretly. Snape was going from carriage to carriage, ripping open the doors and docking points from each panicked teenager that fled.

“It’s happening again! Like before . . . and soon neither you or anyone else will be able to deny it.” Karkaroff hissed in a mix of fear and frustration. Snape’s expression twisted into an aggravated sneer as he slammed the carriage door shut.

“I told you already Igor, I see no reason to discuss it.” Snape spat out, already striding off to the next carriage. Karkaroff stormed after the professor and waited until the next unsuspecting couple scampered off before speaking again.

“It’s a sign, Severus. You know it is!”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Severus stated evenly as he side stepped the man. Igor gritted his yellow teeth and his eyes gleamed in the dim light.

“Really? Then, perhaps you wouldn’t mind rolling up your sleeve?” Karkaroff challenged. Igor reached for Snape’s left arm but the other man stepped out of reach before he could grasp it. “You don’t fool me, Severus.” His tone dropped down low as he stepped closer, eyes narrowed and posture dangerous. “You’re are scared. Admit it!” He growled, hands curling into fists at his sides. However, Snape remained calm and still. There wasn’t a doubt in anyone’s mind that Severus was the more dangerous of the two—he was more skilled in dueling and exceptionally powerful and intelligent.
“I have nothing to be scared of, Igor. Can you say the same?” That last phrase struck something in the other man as he shifted back and seemed to shrink down in his tall frame as the fear inside him grew. Before he could be entirely overwhelmed, Karkaroff turned on his heel and stormed off towards the open grounds. After a moment, Snape made his way back into Hogwarts.

Once alone, both boys undid the disillusionment charms and turned to look at each other.

“What do you think they were talking about?” Viktor asked, a shallow crease appearing between his strong brows. Harry knew, of course. They were talking about Voldemort. The two Death Eaters had felt their connection to him flare up, perhaps through their dark marks. If he had to chance a guess, Harry would say Voldemort had done it as a warning. A caveat to his return. He wanted his loyal followers ready, and the ones who hadn’t been loyal, to be afraid. For a moment, Harry wondered if the tyrannical relationship Voldemort had with his followers would change after the ritual. He certainly hoped so.

“It seems the adults are keeping secrets again.” Harry said finally, still partly in his own head as he spoke. Viktor’s frown deepened. Krum shook his head and started walking back in the direction of the ball. Harry didn’t follow right away, taking a moment to collect his thoughts before returning to the celebration. Right before he did, though, something caught the corner of his eye and he looked just in time to see Moody turning a corner out of the courtyard, having probably also witnessed Snape and Karkaroff’s little chat. Which meant that soon, Voldemort would know as well. He wondered how that would affect both men in the time to come.

Lingering not a moment longer, Harry returned to the ball and Anthony. The rest of the night went smoothly and they returned to the dorms nearly an hour early—thankfully—and they were both asleep before midnight. The night was over, the Yule Ball had been conquered, and Harry could rest for the rest of winter break. Now all he needed to do was figure out how to obtain the clue from the egg and begin planning for the second task.
Harry finally finished working out the details of the ritual. Harry and Anthony attend the Yule Ball together. Anthony has a few realizations about his feelings. Harry has a confrontation with Viktor that reveals the real reason for Viktor’s suspicion and Harry deflects when the other gets a little too close to the truth. Harry and Viktor witness an interesting conversation between Snape and Karkaroff on their way back to the ball.

Yule left the residents of Hogwarts drained and sated. Most attendants had spent the few days following in the dorms to recuperate—or to either avoid/deal with the consequences of whatever happened that night. From what Harry had heard from Draco—ever the one for school gossip—quite a few students had snuck alcohol into the ball, or partook afterwards, and with wizards as their chaperones, most of them were caught. Madam Pomfrey had been forbidden from doling out any hangover-relieving potions. Which meant that on top of a heavy amount of detentions, students were also dealing with quite the after effects of a night of too much fun.

Harry would have thought it served them right and would have found it amusing if it weren’t for the fact that this meant that most of these students were now bound by their symptoms to the dorms, with him. The grumbling, irritable Ravenclaws were enough to chase Harry out of the dorms and common room most days.

It was because of this, that Harry found himself spending much more time out of and about in the rest of the castle than he usually would and then coincidentally running into Cedric who stopped him in the hall to speak quietly.

“Harry, it’s good that I ran into you, I didn’t see you at dinner, so I feared I might have had to wait until tomorrow to tell you since it’s almost curfew.” Then, in a more hushed tone as he leaned in, Cedric said, “I had a little help recently and was finally able to figure out the clue.” Harry was immediately alert at the news, but then he saw a small group of Hufflepuffs coming down the hallway the same way Cedric had come from and he noticed the other boy panic a little when he caught sight of them as well. Cedric had promised that he’d aid Harry in the tasks as best as he could, but they still weren’t supposed to get help from others—officially—and Hufflepuffs might think to ‘help’ Cedric along a bit by trying to get Harry in trouble.

“The egg, Harry. Put it in water, someplace private.” Cedric hurriedly whispered before spouting off something about the Yule Ball louder for the other Hufflepuffs who had noticed them as well at that point. Cedric was pulled into the current of the others as they passed and tugged him with them,
sending Harry a few abrasive glances that went ignored by the young raven. Harry waited until they were gone before changing directions from a quick trip to the library to check in some books to go back up to his dorm. He had nothing else to do at that point and knew everyone else expected him to be out so he wouldn’t be missed if he snuck down to the chamber with his golden egg.

At first, Harry had thought about going to the washroom with the egg, but that certainly wasn’t ‘private’ enough and he wasn’t sure yet what exactly would happen when he put it in the water. The chamber was still half flooded with water and would be far enough away from everyone that if the screeching continued, he wouldn’t have to worry about anyone hearing—save for perhaps the Basilisk, but then he only had to explain to it what he’d been doing and maybe apologize.

When Harry got to his room, he retrieved the egg and wrapped it in his invisibility cloak so no one would see it and slipped in the Marauder’s map for good measure. He could just walk out with the egg and no one would stop him, but he still didn’t wish to stir up any suspicion if those Hufflepuffs from before told someone else about his little chat with Cedric—which would put them both in a difficult position if people thought they were working together. He imagined it would end up coming out as some sort of conspiracy of Hogwarts—and Britain in the broader sense—to get a leg up on the foreign schools. The fact that there are two Hogwarts students even in the tournament has already cropped up enough rubbish. Perhaps Harry was overthinking the whole thing and being too paranoid about walking around with an egg under his arm, but one doesn’t hold as many world-changing secrets as he does and not end up just a little irrational.

Halfway down, he slipped into an alcove and pulled on the cloak before going the rest of the way to the chamber. He hadn’t been down there much since the visiting schools had arrived and the number of eyes on him had more than tripled with the tournament, but he was there every now and then to work on the ritual or train to keep himself sharp or when he wished to convene with Death in privacy. Which he did so that he didn’t have to always go the route of mentally communicating while others were around.

Harry reached the chamber and found the Basilisk lounging lazily around Salazar’s statue. When it noticed Harry, it made sure to flick down its translucent eyelids to protect Harry from its lethal effects, keeping to the truce they’d drawn between them for the time being. Other than that, there was no other reaction.

Harry found a deep pool of water off to the side of the main walkway and knelt next to it. Pushing up his sleeves, Harry slowly moved the egg into the frigid water that already had his fingers feeling numb from only a few moments, and cautiously turned the little gold clasp on top of the egg to release its shell. When he did, the egg slipped from his cold fingers and sank about five feet to the bottom, but not before he heard the muffled but entrancing noises of music or singing of some kind, a far cry from the horrendous painful shriek.

However, he wasn’t able to hear if there was anything being said since it was so muffled, so he knew
he would have to get in the water to hear it. Problem was, he didn’t exactly wish to get soaked, nor did he wish to strip down to go for a swim. The water was cold enough to freeze over if it were only a degree colder, and if Harry went in as is, he’d either get sick or freeze to death. Without many other options, Harry transformed into his animagus form, knowing that it’s magical qualities would make it far more resistant physically than his human form.

This, however, seemed to garner the attention of the Basilisk and its massive head perked up to look at Harry’s significantly smaller black snake form. By now, Harry was roughly thirteen feet in length, scales completely black with their iridescent gleam, and had more developed and larger venom glands. To a human, he would probably be a rightly terrifying sight, but to a basilisk? His only intimidating factor would be his potent venom.

“Speaker, I did not know you could be a snake as well.” The basilisk stated, sibilant tones even and unfazed.

“I don’t spend much time like this, but I will admit that it is quite freeing and comfortable as long as I can find warmth.” Harry conversed casually, not wishing to spite the large creature, for even if death was not permanent for him, he remembered vividly what it felt like to be crushed by its jaws and did not wish to repeat such an experience any time soon.

The serpent seemed pleased and settled back down to doze at the base of the statue.

Harry descended into the dark cold depths and listened carefully to the enthralling voices coming from the lazy dance of the glowing bubbles within the egg.

_Come seek us where our voices sound,_
_We cannot sing above the ground,_
_And while you're searching ponder this; _
_We've taken what you'll sorely miss,_
_An hour long you'll have to look,_
_And to recover what we took,_
_But past an hour, the prospect's black,_
Too late, it's gone, it won't come back._

Harry listened to the tune several times just to be sure he didn’t miss anything and would remember it clearly. Gliding from the chilling pool, Harry transformed back once he was out and shivered slightly as he tried to regain some feeling in his cold limbs. Harry began contemplating with his companion.

“Given the nature of the clue, I’d say the screeching outside of the water was actually the infamous
Mermish. Which means that the second task will probably center around the black lake and we will have to recover whatever they plan to take from us.” Harry concluded aloud as he cast a warming charm on his clothes, and then the lethargic basilisk as a second thought, much to the snake’s appreciation.

‘I’m sure you wish to spend more time sorting that all out, but I think there is something more pressing that requires your attention, young raven.’ Death’s words had Harry freezing.

“What’s happened?” His voice sounded hard and fearsome, earning him a curious glance from the basilisk.

‘Mister Barty Crouch Jr, it seems, has been filching ingredients for his polyjuice potion from Snape’s general stores but has gone through them all and has now decided to go through the professor’s personal stores. Severus, though, has placed a few undetectable alarm wards on his personal stores and will be headed back to his rooms to catch Barty the moment he triggers them—which will be very soon. As we still need Barty to fulfill his duty here and take you to Voldemort when the time is right, I suggest you get there before he does and aid the little Death Eater.’ Death had barely finished speaking before Harry was cursing viciously under his breath and racing out of the chamber.

Harry shouldn’t have to protect an adult wizard—who, might he point out, is considered one of Voldemort’s more competent and trusted followers—from getting discovered. Mainly, Harry was angry that someone was making him sprint through the castle while almost tripping because he was under his invisibility cloak and trying to keep an eye on the Marauder’s map in his hand at the same time to watch Snape’s movements. At least his friend was able to tell Harry the exact moment when Barty triggered the wards. Snape was currently patrolling one of the towers, which gave Harry a head start, but only barely.

Harry may have cheated a little and used the veil and a bit of wandless magic to cushion him when he jumped down whole flights of stairs to save time, but he didn’t care.

Finally, Harry reached Snape’s office and made sure his breathing was near silent and the cloak was covering him completely before stepping inside just as Barty walked out of the private potion store closet checking over what he’d grabbed before sliding into his pocket without paying any mind to the time. It was the first time Harry was seeing the real Barty Crouch, and not the polyjuiced face of a scarred Auror over it; he was quite thin and much younger than Harry had expected, no older than thirty. Harry had hoped the naive man would leave before he had to intervene, but one glance at the map told him he would not be so lucky, as Snape had just reached the dungeons and would be there in a manner of moments.

Harry stepped back towards the wall closest to the door and used powerful wandless magic to summon Barty to him and before the man could panic and reach for his wand, Harry threw up a
necromantic disillusionment spell over the man so that it couldn’t be dispelled by Snape. Harry heard a sharp intake of breath when he cast the disillusionment spell.

“Don’t make a sound.” Harry whispered to the other man a moment before the door beside them flew open and the furious potions master stormed in with his wand raised and murder in his black eyes.

With a strong silencing charm on them both, Harry grabbed Barty’s arm through the cloak and carefully pulled him out of the room and then ran with him out of the dungeons. Harry led Barty all the way to a secret passageway close to Moody’s office before he stopped and dismantled his spells on him, though he didn’t remove his cloak, and when he spoke, his voice was no more than a whisper.

“I will get you the ingredients you need, so don’t break into his stores again. It’s far too dangerous and you will be caught.” Harry warned and turned to leave when Barty told him to wait.

“Who are you?” The man asked, sounding confused and wary, but also somehow impressed.

Thinking for a moment, Harry answered shortly, wondering what his response might kick up all the way over at Riddle Manor.

“A friend.” And with that, he disappeared into the sleeping castle.
Hogwarts without notice, but also protected and offered assistance to his Death Eater.

Voldemort also found himself wondering after the strange magic they had used to disguise Barty, as the man reported to have never felt or experienced anything quite like it before. He hoped that one day all of these little encounters would accumulate and he’d be able to meet this person for himself. They were certainly proving themselves to be a powerful ally and despite his eagerness and anticipation, there was a part of him that also recognized that this person, whoever they are, had just as much potential of being a powerful enemy and the fact that he hadn’t been able to gauge this person himself yet left him slightly unsettled. At what point did the thrill of the mystery no longer outweigh his own paranoia? One could only handle so much cloak and dagger for so long before worrying about just where that dagger might really be pointed.

Voldemort dismissed Barty for the moment but instructed him to stay within his manor for a while longer in case he had any other orders to give him later. Alone, Voldemort allowed his muddled mind to consume itself in an infinite loop as he lost himself to the ever-encroaching fog that had lingered around him for so long he was no longer sure if it wasn’t just truly a part of him now.

His dry, brittle bones creaked and groaned like the aging manor encapsulating him and he felt all of his breath stolen on the long-winded sigh that seeped from him. His power was growing stronger each day, but there was a weary fatigue that never truly left him and built up deposits in his brain. It was like his time away from physical form had caused him to forget some sort of basic need for survival—like sleeping or eating—and the strain on him was building with each day because that something was neglected. Though, he tried to keep himself from getting too caught up in those thoughts and what they could mean and instead looked at it as; either he’ll figure out what’s wrong and fix it, or he’ll just have to hold out until the ritual and hope that regaining his full form would fix it for him. It had to.

The silence resounded in waves and he could almost hear the echoing vibration of a voice hidden between the layers, it made him want to spend hours peeling back those layers in order to chase that voice to wherever it would take him, but every time he started to drift, he would snap back with the ringing absence of sound in his ears.

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Groaning, Phil dropped the letter he’d been reading on the desk and pinched the bridge of his nose with two fingers hard to relieve some of the pressure that built over the short course of him reading its contents. Harry sent him a letter that morning filling him in on Barty Crouch Jr’s mistake and how Harry had to interfere and would now need a steady supply of ingredients for polyjuice potion for the man to make sure he didn’t try to sneak back into the ex-Death Eater’s office. Philias agreed with Harry that going out to buy the ingredients himself so often would be needlessly risky and it would be better if Phil got what was needed and sent it to Harry.
That didn’t mean that Phil was really okay with Harry risking himself in any capacity for the other man, but he knew his opinion would not change his mind and they both knew how integral Barty was to their plan. His words didn’t hold the weight of an adult speaking to a child, no matter how he saw it, it was more like a worker speaking to his employee.

The Auror ran a hand through his thick hair as he opened his eyes again and sighed. He had a feeling he was going to meet an early grave because of that kid—and not by being at the end of another wand, it was more along the lines of a stroke or a heart attack. He envied Sirius and Remus for being in the dark about all the things their adopted son got up to when they weren’t looking. Philias’ role as Harry’s partner in all of this, hearing about nearly everything going on, made him feel like a third, unseen parent, the way he worried about the little brat. If those two ever were to find out about even half of the things he knew, he’d be waiting with a brand-new bottle of fire whiskey to ease them into it a little and also welcome them into the club of worry warts who were going prematurely grey because of one particularly danger-prone fourteen-year-old.

His life had been so quiet before in comparison, and he was an Auror so that said something.
Second Tasks & 'Harry-the-Heart-Stopper'  

Chapter Summary  

Cedric helps Harry with the egg. Harry gets the clue from the egg. Barty almost gets himself caught stealing from Snape’s personal stores but Harry saves him and promises to get his ingredients for him. Voldemort gets one minuscule step closer to figuring out who his ‘friend’ is. Philias starts getting grey hairs before he’s forty.  

The frozen grip of the harsh Scottish winter eventually thawed and gave way to chilled grey mornings with stubborn, dirty patches of snow refusing to disappear completely dotting the grounds. Thick clumps of plush verdant grass that were threading through the layer of its brown dead predecessors that had carried the weight of the suffocating snow on their backs all winter. Spring was dragging its feet lazily around the school.  

The four champions had become noticeably withdrawn in the last week or so leading up to the second task, which took place on the twenty-fourth of February. They were tense about the notion of something precious being taken from them—and possibly never returned if they failed—wondering over the ‘when, where, and what’ almost constantly. As well as doing their bests to prepare themselves for the task, as they’d all figured out that they would be in the Black Lake for an hour, searching for what they’d lost and would therefore need to be able to breathe under water for that long.  

Harry had been in the middle of researching a complex charm that would form a bubble around his head while underwater, when he received a surprise visit from a Hogwarts house elf by the name of Winky. The little elf was in a right state of drunkenness due to recently being publicly fired from service with Barty Crouch Snr after being instigated in the Quidditch World Cup the summer previous if the papers were to be believed, and had absently set a small package on his table before popping off without a word. Curious, Harry checked the little package for any curses or jinxes, but it was completely clean, so he felt it was alright to open it. Inside, Harry found an odd, slimy green plant, and when he checked that for spells, the only one he could find was a preservation charm to keep it fresh.  

Harry immediately set aside the book he had been reading and began to scour the library for herbology books that might tell him just what exactly he’d been given. It took a frustrating amount of time—two days-worth of searching—before he found a book on very obscure Eastern Europe Herbology that detailed a plant called Gillyweed. According to the book, the plant was meant to have certain specific transfiguration properties. Supposedly, it would give the person who ingested it things like gills and more amphibious appendages to move through the water quickly. That peeked Harry’s interest, considering that it would not only allow him to breathe under water, but also aid him in moving through it quickly, which would be suited perfectly for the task.
However, there were a few grey areas when it came to quantities consumed and how the environment and state of the water might affect the Gillyweed. So, Harry kept the Gillyweed, but also continued to search for any other, more reliable options.

It wasn’t a question of where the Gillyweed had come from, though, as Harry knew exactly who had given it to him. He had to say, becoming the provider of Barty’s polyjuice ingredients had paid off now that the man was able to focus on something else and do his job of helping get Harry through the tasks and to his lord when the time was right. It went far in redeeming the man in Harry’s eyes after his last near-devastating cock-up. Gillyweed was not an easy solution to come by, and he had to admit that the older man would know of things he did not with both his age and his many years working with dark wizards.

In all honesty, Harry didn’t know much about ‘dark magic’ and their practices. No, his knowledge revolved mostly around necromancy with a bit of it composed of what Hogwarts had to offer. That fact didn’t bother Harry, though. Harry was still quite young and relatively new to the wizarding world. Logically speaking, he had the rest of eternity—should he wish to live that long—to uncover every little secret the world and everything beyond that had to hide.

‘All in due time, little necromancer.’ Death input gently.

The night before the second task, Harry returned from a day of looking into everything he possibly could about Gillyweed—as, in the end, it had come to be the most viable option for him—only to find someone missing from his dorm room. Harry had asked around for any indication as to where Anthony had gone, but it had yielded little and when curfew came and went, Harry realized exactly what had happened, and to say he was displeased would be putting it very mildly.

The precious ‘item’ that would be taken for the second task was not an item at all, but a person. They were taking the person most precious to them at Hogwarts, and sticking them at the bottom of the Black Lake with the threat of never returning them. Harry was livid. He knew that wizards in general willfully ignored the notion or their own mortality and fragility—unlike muggles, who tried to make their children aware of it as soon as possible to protect them—because they liked to think that magic could fix everything, even death—which Harry knew better than anyone that Death was not to be toyed with, and he could be mercilessly vindictive if you got too flippant with your own safety. And here they were, putting children at the bottom of a lake full of dangerous creatures, where if something were to go wrong they could easily drown before the task even began!

Harry was ready to storm out of the common room and up to Dumbledore’s office tell him just what
he thought of the ridiculous task when a cold, comforting and invisible force stopped him before he’d even left his dorm room. Harry paid little mind to the way his two other roommates shivered and made a beeline for the door with their toiletries in hand. The gentle weight of large skeletal hands settled on his shoulders and Harry closed his eyes as he took a deep breath and felt the soft brush of robes against his cheek. His forehead tilted forward slightly until it met the hard surface of a cold sternum under the soft fabric. He calmed his breathing down slowly as Death continued to sooth him.

‘It is alright, child. Worry not, as you know, I always have an eye on those you favor. We cannot do anything at this point, as the cup has chosen the task and the champion’s people have been collected. I know you are concerned for the young wizard’s safety, but know that I will be watching him closely and will not allow any harm to befall him. However, if you truly wish it, I can bypass the enchantments of the cup and remove him from the task—though, that would also mean dismantling the entire tournament and missing the opportunity to perform the ritual in such favorable conditions. Is that something you would like?’ Harry was shocked by the offer, as Death was not particularly compassionate and usually did not care about someone meeting an untimely end. With Harry, probably being one of the few exceptions.

Still, as much as the offer comforted Harry and allowed most of his anger to abate, he trusted his friend to watch over Anthony during the task and knew that the conditions Voldemort would be providing for them would never be more favorable than during his own ritual. Voldemort would never again allow himself to be so vulnerable if they let the opportunity to pass them by.

“Thank you,” Harry said aloud, softly, allowing himself to grip the otherworldly robes and soak in the presence of his companion for a while longer before releasing his grip and letting the unseen being gently guide him over to his bed. “But no, we’ll continue on as planned. We’ve come too far to just let it slip away.” Harry laid down and pulled his warm covers up as the exhaustion began to pull more forcefully on his mind.

‘Very well, Harry. Rest, now, as tomorrow will be hard on your body and you will need your strength.’ Harry felt the cool touch of a smooth bone finger against his cheek as he drifted into a deep sleep.

The morning of the second task began with Harry almost falling out of bed. Eye’s wide, vision blurry from sleep, and one hand pressed against the cold stone floor to keep himself still halfway on the bed. Harry climbed back onto his bed fully and inwardly groaned. Despite falling asleep at a decent time the night before, Harry had periodically woken up throughout the night to roll and toss himself about to try to drift back into sleep as a certain Someone had been rather active and irritable throughout the early hours. Before, Harry had only a few vague dreams here and there where he seemed to connect with Voldemort’s consciousness and be able to see through his eyes while he was
asleep. Recently, though, with Voldemort’s growing power and incurring restlessness, Harry was being drawn into scenes of mundane or mildly interesting busy work more and more frequently over the past month or so. It was how Harry figured out that Barty Crouch Snr had been placed under the Imperious curse by Voldemort at the beginning of the year, before Death had even told him.

And last night, Voldemort had apparently reached a point of boredom strong enough to push him to really diving in to trying to find the mysterious associate that had been helping them recently and the man had grown rather incensed when he came back with nothing. None of that really mattered, though. The important thing, was that Harry was woken again and again throughout the course of the night so that he was unable to get anything remotely close to a restful sleep.

On top of that, Harry was feeling anxious about the task and second guessing his decision to use the Gillyweed or trying his hand at the bubbleheaded charm instead—which he only had a little practice with and was unsure if he’d be able to maintain it for an entire hour if he happened to become distracted by anything.

At breakfast, Harry ate his food silently without really tasting it. Hermione was apparently missing as well and one look at Krum’s worried expression as he scanned the Ravenclaw table told him where she’d gone off to as well. Draco asked after Anthony and Hermione and he explained to him exactly what had happened. The Slytherin didn’t look at all surprised that Anthony had been deemed his ‘most important person’ at Hogwarts—though Hermione being Viktor’s, despite them attending the ball together, was quite a shock to him—but he was almost as angry as Harry had been about the champion’s loved ones being used in a dangerous task.

Just like with the first task, right after breakfast, everyone was led outside and walked down towards the shore of the Black Lake where the same boats that brought first years to the castle on their first night at Hogwarts, waited to be filled and then carried its occupants to the newly built stands further out in the frigid waters. Harry and Draco bypassed the mischievous Weasley twins who were taking down people’s bets for the outcome of the task to make up for the loss at the hands of a certain Ludo Bagman, who’d copped out of paying a debt to them—or so his companion explained.

They took a boat to the main platform where the judges, champions, and other staff were situated on the bottom level. Draco wished Harry luck with an earnestness in his eyes—now that he knew that not only Harry, but two others from their group were at risk—that told Harry of his worry. Then Draco was shooed off to the upper levels of the platform and out of the way as the champions prepped.

Harry was the last champion to arrive and despite the season, the air was still exceptionally frigid. While the other champions were bundled under large coats and thick robes over their swim wear, and were continuously casting warming charms on their wears, Harry was more comfortable with the chill and absently began slipping off his shoes and socks while they waited for the stands to fill. Besides, Harry knew that the water would feel far colder and the sooner he got used to the cold, the
less he’d have to worry about warming charms or potential shock once he got into the water.

Shrugging off his thin jacket and loose pants to reveal the light-weight shirt and shorts he would be swimming in, Harry began to stretch out his body. He received a few odd looks from those around him at his seeming ease in the cold, but his sole focus was on preparing to dive into that icy water and return with his friend.

The only time his focus was interrupted, was when Sirius and Remus visited him for a moment, giving him a few tight hugs and some last-minute advice about staying safe, being on his guard, and never being afraid to back out if there was something down there he couldn’t handle, as he was clearly at a disadvantage to the other champions. They, thankfully, were allowed to stay on the bottom platform like the other parents of the champions, though they stepped back to allow Harry to get back into the mindset of the task.

The last of the boats glided up to the left-most platform and the sound of the crowd as they screamed and cheered and chanted was a familiar roar Harry was starting to drown out after several minutes. Dumbledore cast a *sonorus* on his voice and announced the commencement of the official Second Task of the Triwizard Tournament. He quickly explained the objectives of the task—that something had been taken from each champion, hidden at the bottom of the lake, and they would have an hour to retrieve it or risk being disqualified from the task.

As Dumbledore’s speech about integrity and playing fairly began to wind down, Harry noticed ‘Moody’ step up to his right and was watching him intently. Knowing what the other man was expecting, Harry plucked his discarded jacket from the ground and grabbed the Gillyweed from his pocket. Harry had it unwrapped and in his mouth in a matter of moments without anyone really taking notice. The Gillyweed was bitter, salty, and slimy on his tongue and it almost seemed as though it was *moving*, but Harry forced himself to swallow without chewing—to be sure the effects would last the entire hour. Harry remained as clam as possible, even though it felt like he’d swallowed an entire live fish and it was now writhing around in his stomach and trying to squirm back up his throat.

He saw Moody glancing away with a small pleased smirk on his mouth from the corner of his eye. Harry could feel himself turning pale at the sensation in his stomach, but made himself listen carefully to the world around him as they were told to get ready. All four champions crouched with their hands gripping the edge of the platform, ready to dive in the moment the loud crack coming from the tip of a wand signaled their start.

Within the span of a breath, the signal was given and all four champions were diving down into the painfully cold waters and casting their various charms to help them breathe and keep themselves warm. The moment Harry was submerged, the wriggling in his stomach calmed and dissolved into a thrilling warmth. Pain lacerated the sides of his throat and Harry saw the small smoky red cloud of blood drift in front of his face for a moment. The pain dug a little deeper and then suddenly cold-
water was filing his lungs and then *whooshing* out gently. The need for oxygen died and Harry reached up to feel smooth patch of scales where gills had formed.

Then Harry noticed the difference in his appendages as a dull ache took over them for a moment. His thin fingers elongated slightly and the spaces between them became webbed pale skin covered in tiny white scales that nearly reached his elbows. His feet lengthened and thinned out with flexible bones that acted more like cartilage. They were scaled and webbed just like his hands, but much longer, like flippers. Harry took another moment to adjust, before testing out his new physical additions by propelling through the water at a faster rate than he’d expected and disappearing into the thick forest of kelp before him like the other champions.

The downside to having gills was that Harry could *taste* the water he was taking in, and it wasn’t very pleasant. On the upside, the Gillyweed also seemed to lower his core body temperature until the water around him no long felt more than a little uncomfortably cold. His companion sent him in the right direction to find Anthony and he started swimming quickly. Gliding past the slick kelp leaves that threatened to wrap around his wrists and ankles like hands. The light trickled out amongst the thick plant-life overhead.

Harry had been making his way through the kelp forest for several minutes when he heard a strange noise. Hesitating for a moment, Harry cautiously moved in a different direction off to his right until he found what was making all that commotion. Fleur appeared to be tangled in the kelp and surrounded by small, pale green creatures with little horns, rows of sharp teeth in their large mouths, frog-like eyes, and octopus-like tentacles that were currently trying to wrap around Fleur’s rams and legs to impede her struggles. *Grindylows*. Hagrid had mentioned them once, something about the merpeople keeping them as pets and being one of the only beings that could tame the little water demons.

*These* Grindylows, however, were clearly not very tame. Harry wondered for a moment if it was because they were agitated with such drastic changes and invasions to their habitat, or if it was done on purpose—*perhaps by a certain Death Eater that liked to meddle with the tournament*—either way, it was quite the nuisance. Harry pulled his wand from the holster strapped to his thigh and sent out a few blasts of red sparks that quickly scared off the little water demons. Then with a few well-placed *diffindo’s* Fleur was free and looking at Harry curiously as she pulled the loosened kelp from her limbs. Harry just pointed in the direction he was heading, waiting until she nodded in understanding, and swam off.

He didn’t care about getting first, and as long as all of the people were collected, he only had to worry about Anthony’s safety. Harry continued to swim through the dark waters until finally the thick kelp strands came to an end at the edge of a steep drop off. Following the directions of his companion, Harry began the descent into colder, darker waters.

At the bottom, it was like swimming through the shadowed ruins of some ancient society. Pillars
rough and jagged rock shot up and towered over him, most of it looking like the natural eroded away landscape, while other structures looking a bit more hand-crafted. There were plenty of little and big fish swimming by in schools or alone. Shadows darted around below him or at the corners of his vision, making Harry increasingly uneasy. Harry felt something cold and slick brush his foot, but when he whipped around, he saw nothing there.

Pushing on, the structures looked less and less derelict and the area seemed almost to be brightening up, more light from above cutting through the deep lake waters. As Harry began to spot what looked to be caves off to the side and odd hut-like structures made of piled stones and soft, flexible wood, he realized just where he was. The village of the merfolk. He’d had his suspicions with the egg’s message, but he had no idea where it had been located in the lake. Plus, with the guidance of his companion, it really didn’t take him long to reach the village anyways.

Harry looked around him as he proceeded a bit more slowly, 
cautiously,
and got his first decent look at the merpeople. There in Scotland, they didn’t have the siren-like beauties that were said to enchant men right off their boats and into the waters just by their looks and their voices. 
Those merpeople were only found in warmer climates, these were Selkies, their cold-blooded and more frightening cousins. Selkies were slightly smaller in size, with sickly inhuman grey flesh, thick and matted dark green hair, broken and rotting teeth, and bright yellows eyes. Around their necks they wore large ropes of pebbles, and a few small unidentifiable bones.

Harry wasn’t sure if the bones held any magical significance for the merpeople, but they 
did remind him heavily of the totem he’d made what felt like many years ago. The grounding necklace made of shrunken skulls from witches and wizards not properly buried, painted with ruins in his own blood, strung with beads of black volcanic glass on a braided lock of a woman’s hair who’d died in childbirth. He had not used the totem nearly as often as he would have liked—feeling his magic imbuing itself into the totem each time he used it to help with another spell or ritual. He eagerly awaited the moment when he could use said totem at Voldemort’s ritual.

Shaking his head to collect his thoughts from where they had wandered, Harry continued to swim towards the center of the village, where most of the merpeople had gathered with the little Grindylows at their sides as well as a few huge dark grey eels with sharp teeth and massive bodies covered in loose flesh. In the very center near several tall, crumbling archways he could see the still, floating forms of four people in dark robes. The first one he identified through the murky water, was Hermione, looking as though she had been turned into a statue with color. Her thick curls drifted lazily around her, as did her dark blue and black school robe. Beside her was the much smaller form of a young blonde girl Harry vaguely recognized as Fleur Delacour’s sister. He didn’t remember her name, nor did he care to. On the end, off to the right, was an older boy in gold and black robes that he didn’t recognize. Probably Cedric’s ‘person.’

Lastly, on the end off to the left, was Anthony. Harry was making his way towards Anthony when a selky swam into his path and leveled him with a severe look and a spear tip pointed at his chest.
“Only one!” It hissed out at him. Harry frowned, not quite understanding why it felt the need to say such a thing, but nodding in affirmation all the same.

The selky moved away slowly and Harry swam down to Anthony’s ankle where he was bond by a single rope, keeping him from floating to the surface. Harry untied his friend and then moved up to make sure the spell hadn’t worn off yet and his friend was fine. Once he was sure he still had time, Harry turned and looked out over the village, searching for a sign of the other champions.

Harry was there for a few minutes and no one else had come yet, when suddenly he heard an odd noise off to his left. Turning, Harry spotted Fleur’s sister next to Hermione, instead of the blank almost corpse-like expression she’d held a moment ago, there was a slight furrow between her pale brows and a few bubbles were escaping her closed lips. Harry shifted closer a little when the small girl gave a sudden jerk and bubbles poured from her nose and mouth as the water filled with a horrifying muffled choking sounds.

‘What the hell is happening?’ Harry shouted in his mind and his companion was quick to answer.

‘I believe that the girl is a quarter Veela. Veela have a rather strong resistance to spells and if the girl is too young to have learned how to allow her barriers to lower enough for magic to have a full effect on her, it is quite possible that the spell placed on her to keep her in this stasis is wearing off quicker than expected. She is waking up. She is drowning.’

Harry only spared a moment to look at the surrounding area to see if another champion would come help him, but there was no one and he’d already freed Anthony. He’d already chosen. Cursing under his breath, Harry grabbed Anthony and gave him a hard shove towards the surface with an added wandless ascendio to make sure he reached the top on his own. Then Harry moved over to the girl as quickly as he could, casting a panicked wandless bubbleheaded charm over her face. It wouldn’t be enough though, the girl had already swallowed too much water and wasn’t breathing, she’d need immediate medical attention once he was done. Harry placed a hand over her chest right on her sternum, and the other went on her back and he closed his eyes and allowed his magic to guide him as he pushed both physically, and with his magic, to expel as much water from her lungs as he could.

The merpeople were swimming towards him and so he gave one last push of magic to strengthen her vitals before casting another ascendio on the girl and watching her shoot up through the water. He was grabbed by strong hands before he saw if she made it or not. Death assured him that she did. Before Harry could feel any kind of relief, he was jerked down deeper into the water by dozens of hands until he was pinned against the bottom of the lake. The same selky who had warned him before got within inches of his face, bright yellow eyes boring into him.

“I said one.” And then there was a harsh press of magic against his abdomen and before he could fight off the foreign creature magic, he felt a sudden violent thrashing in his stomach. It squirmed and
crawled its way up his throat until suddenly it was sliding over his tongue with the taste of bile and sea water. Harry opened his mouth and the selkies hand raced forward and in a flash the Gillyweed was stolen from his mouth and he immediately felt the effects of the plant fading. His gills and enhanced appendices disappeared and water was rushing down his throat like a sentient creature seeking asylum inside his body.

Harry’s body jerked as it fought against itself to cough out the liquid, yet only finding more liquid on each inhale. He knew that this hadn’t been the intention of using the merpeople in the task, but merfolk—selkies specifically—were dark creatures and very tricky to deal with. If someone had said to make sure the champions only took one person each, they might take the liberty of interpreting that as ‘do absolutely anything necessary to make sure they only took one.’

Harry’s insides burned and he lashed out with his magic to try to prevent what was happening, but only the selkies closest to him were blown away, drifting limp and lifeless in the waters. More selkies came and took their place, now angered that he dared to harm their own. Thin hands wrapped around his throat and the encroaching darkness rushed in faster. Knowing he wasn’t going to get out of this one as easily as he’d hoped, Harry allowed it to over-take him and he fell through the veil and down into the euphoric afterlife.

Surfacing the crystalline blue waters of a warm tropical lagoon, Harry sucked in a large sweet tasting lungful of air again and again as he trudged up onto the near-blinding white sand that had been worn down into such a fine grain that it felt soft against his skin. Harry took a few moments as he felt through his strong connection to his physical body that it was rapidly repairing the damage done to it. Death appeared before him after a moment.

“You need to return, now. The other champions will arrive shortly, the merpeople are tending to their dead.”

Harry huffed in annoyance and ran a hand through his wet curls before taking another deep breath and grabbing the fabric of the veil around him and splitting it open so that he could dive back into its obsidian depths. When he opened his eyes back in his body, there was a persistent pounding inside his skull and continuous drain on both his energy and his magic as both fought to continue to heal him, but were impeded by the water currently inhabiting his lungs, like a wound that couldn’t heal because the knife was still in the way. There was an odd lethargy and buzzing numbness to his limbs. He wouldn’t last for very long under water in his not-quite-alive state, but he had a few minutes at least before his body ran out of energy and he was booted once more until it healed again.

Harry blinked and sat up, looking around he saw that the area was indeed empty except for him, Hermione, and the Hufflepuff floating above him. A few moments later, a large figure came swimming up from his right seemingly out of nowhere. From what Harry could see, based on the clothes it wore, it was Krum, who had transfigured his head into that of a shark—interesting. The Bulgarian champion spared Harry a single glance, and what might have been a nod if he hadn’t had
a shark head, before slicing through the rope around Hermione’s ankle with his teeth and hooking an arm around her waist as he began swimming towards the surface with his powerful, muscle-corded limbs.

Harry was about to give in to the exhaustion and ache in his body by following Krum when a pale form caught his eye in the distance. Finally, Fleur seemed to have caught up and was swimming quickly towards him. When she reached him, she looked at the last statuesque student, then at Harry, then all around her in confusion. Harry swam closer to get her attention, then he tried to convey what he could by pointing at Fleur, then point directly up. It took her a moment, and she did a few last thorough scans of the area before seeming to trust Harry and started swimming upwards.

Harry could have sighed in relief if he had any air left to do so, but instead he just used all of his strength to keep up with the blonde and swim towards the surface as the magic leaked from him like an open wound. The moment they surfaced, Harry’s body violently coughed out the water trapped in his chest and Fleur, who’d been about to swim back to the platform, turned with wide and worried eyes as Harry choked and coughed. At that point, they were still pretty far from the platforms and the waves licked up by the wind kept them from being spotted just yet.

“Are you alright, Harry?” Fleur asked as she reached out and grabbed his elbow when he started to sink down a little due to the lack of energy in his limps.

Instead of answering her question, Harry answered the unspoken one.

“Your sister’s part Veela, isn’t she?” At the confusion in Fleur’s eyes, Harry continued in the raw, hoarse voice he’d earned for his troubles. “The stasis spell was wearing off when I reached the village. She was waking up and would have drowned if I hadn’t sent her up along with my person as well. I’m not telling you this to make you thankful, just to make sure she gets the proper medical attention once we reach the platforms. Also, I used up too much magic trying to revive her down there and I might pass out before we get there. So, instead of any nonsense about favors or life-debts, can you just make sure I don’t kick it before we get out of his damn lake?” Harry asked casually and Fleur looked startled by his words, but also kept glancing towards the platforms, clearly too eager to go take care of her sister to question his blasé words. With a short nod from the witch, she and Harry began swimming back and were soon greeted by the thunderous roar of the crowd when they were spotted.

They were only about five meters away when Harry lost the strength to swim on his own and Fleur had to practically drag him. The sight changed something in the throngs of onlookers as they realized that something wasn’t right and the cheers lowered into worried murmurs. When they reached the center platform, Harry was pulled up by his two guardians as they called the Medi-Witch over to begin working on Harry. The wind and light began to be blocked out around Harry as they were joined by a worried Cedric and a panicked Anthony—both wrapped in thick towels and blankets with dripping wet hair—as well as Dumbledore and Moody.
Harry started coughing up more water that he hadn’t realized was still in his lungs and he felt himself drifting into unconsciousness—or perhaps it wasn’t unconsciousness, as Poppy had shouted something about vitals, a heartbeat, and then shouted for everyone to step back. And then it felt like someone had stuck a lightning rod right into his brain and sent him out in the middle of a lightning storm. Electricity, or something similar, shot agonizingly through his every nerve and his body bent off the wet wooden planks below him as it felt like every muscle cramped at once.

And then it was over just as quickly as it had begun, and Harry’s heart was beating as fast as a jackrabbit’s and he shot upright with gasping breaths.

“Bloody hell, that hurt!” Harry exclaimed and everyone seemed to be utterly still as they watched the boy unsure for a moment, then Harry was crushed between the bodies of his legal parents as they clutched him and soothed his wild wet hair and muttered things about him never scaring them like that again. They held him so tightly that the shivering that had started up was nearly forced into stillness by their binding arms. The crowds had gone mostly silent and were trying to figure out what was going on, leaning over railings and trying to push down the stairs to get a peek.

After a few suffocating—and admittedly, warm and comforting—moments subject to the fussing of Sirius and Remus, Pomphrey couldn’t wait any longer and shooed the two-fretting parents away enough so that she could continue to check Harry and keep his heart from stopping, again.

She determined that Harry had a fairly severe case of magical exhaustion which, after Harry—with Fleur’s permission, of course—explained the situation with Fleur’s sister, became quite understandable. Harry was also physically exhausted and had nearly asphyxiated from the water he’d taken in while saving the younger Delacour. He would undoubtedly be put on bedrest in the infirmary for the next few days, but he didn’t argue with the matron on that, knowing it would be useless.

Before Harry was moved to the infirmary, Dumbledore cast a *sonorus* and announced the scores. Harry was technically the last person to surface, but because he’d saved two people instead of one—some bollocks about bravery or heroics—and because his saved ones reached the surface long before anyone else, he and Viktor tied for first. Fleur took second place. Cedric was disqualified since apparently the Grindylows Harry had scared away from Fleur had found another prey and he’d been forced to back out—and his person just naturally floated to the surface once the hour was up.

Countless people tried to visit Harry in the infirmary later—both student and not—but thankfully Pomphrey was one wicked witch when it came to taking care of her patients and kept her space on a strict lockdown. She’d only let Sirius and Remus see him—even going as far as barring Dumbledore from seeing him—and any other patients, including the young Delacour, and any clever students that tried to get a peek at Harry by claiming head aches and stomach aches, were kept on
their own cots behind their own privacy curtains, and physically couldn’t get within a few feet of another patient’s curtains without expressed permission from Pomphrey.

That night, Sirius dragged the neighboring bed (much to Poppy’s ire) up against Harry’s and he and Remus stuck as close as they could to Harry. Remus sat on one side, an arm wrapped around his shoulders, occasionally leaning in to quietly nose at Harry’s hair or press his lips to his temple, to settle Moony who’d gone a little crazy with almost losing his cub earlier. Harry didn’t mind the closeness, even leaning into the man every now and then when he got too wrapped up in his thoughts and started to frown again.

Sirius sat on his other side, legs fold up criss-cross as he taught Harry how to play a few car games—both wizard and muggle. Sirius wasn’t nearly as obvious in his mother-henning as Remus, but Harry still picked up on a brush of their knees here or a quick squeezing hug as Sirius teased him there. Harry silently basked in the attention, and though his face remained mostly neutral, his smiles came easier and there was a soft glow of color high in his cheeks that was a mix of mirth and contentment.

Harry couldn’t wait for his life, if these people were his family. . .
"Surprise?"

Chapter Summary

Harry starts the second task, using the Gillyweed Barty had given him. He saved Fleur from the Grindylows, but Cedric ended up their victim instead and was disqualified. Harry reached the merfolk village first, but when Fleur’s sister starts to drown due to the spell wearing off, he had to save both Anthony and her. Which invokes the mighty wrath of the merpeople and they drowned Harry in revenge. Harry returns to his body just as the other champions show up, but had yet to fully heal with water still in his lungs, so when he reaches the platforms, his heart stops and he has to be revived. Harry and Viktor tied for first again, Fleur is still in second, and Cedric is last.

Harry set down his cup of milk and honey tea just as the seat across from him was claimed by Ginny, who was holding a letter in her hand one hand and a croissant in the other, with a slight frown between her brows.

“Is something the matter, Ginny?” Harry asked politely, the redhead shook her head distractedly, but the shallow crease in her brow deepened for a moment before disappearing as she finally looked at Harry.

“No, it’s just Percy. He almost never writes to us, but ever since his boss started staying out sick, he’s been writing to everyone in the family just to brag about moving up in the ministry. As if he’d actually taken the man’s job already!” Ginny grumbled, crumpling up the letter in her hand with a sour expression on her face.

“Boss? Doesn’t Percy work under Bartemius Crouch?” Harry asked, feeling suspicion prickle in his gut. Barty Crouch Snr was one of the judges for the tournament and from what he’d been told, the man had been avidly against Voldemort and his Death Eaters. Crouch even went as far as to advocate for the unforgivables being used against Death Eaters during the first war. Discovering his son was a Death Eater had done nothing to change his views, as he’d gone so far as to imperio his own son for years and keep him locked up in his home.

Unless Barty Jr had something to do with the man being away—though, he hadn’t been reported missing, just out sick so there must still be some sort of correspondence to dispel suspicion. But with the up-tightness of the man, Harry highly doubted he would really take any length of time to be out of work.
“Yeah, he does. The bloody knob won’t let any of us forget it, either. I mean, he barely talks to any of us, and when he does come home all he can do is stare down his big stupid nose at us and make not-so-subtle jabs about us dragging down his career. What a wanker.” Ginny growled and began to viciously tear into her croissant.

Harry went back to his tea to let the young Gryffindor seethe silently. It had been a little over a week since the second task and despite Harry been good-as-new after only a good night’s rest, he’d been kept in the infirmary for several days afterwards for observation. He was only released a few days ago and had been spending most of his time in the library either catching up on missed coursework or avoiding those who wanted to hear more about what had happened to him during the task—as the staff and other champions had been blocking people’s view and were keeping it under wraps. Harry suspected that the biggest motivation was the backlash the tournament and those who orchestrated it would have if the public found out that one of the champions—and specifically Harry, the beloved Boy-Who-Lived—had nearly died in one of the tasks.

Harry didn’t care why they were keeping it quiet, he just knew that it was much better than having people know and hounding him for answers or trying to pick a fight for him where there was nothing to really fight about.

Unfortunately, that didn’t keep Harry out of the papers, as it seemed that Rita Skeeter had been cooking up a scandal of her own for a while. It was only days after Harry had left the infirmary that he found his face plastered all over Witch Weekly as Skeeter apparently ‘unveiled the truth’ about the private and mysterious Harry Potter. Harry had stolen a copy out of a giggling third-years claws at breakfast one morning and was dangerously silent as he sat down and began to flip through and read, his friends cautiously dropping down around him as they sought out copies of their own—Ginny being the only one among them actually subscribed to the drivel.

Going by the numerous pictures scattered all over the glossy new pages, it was clear that Rita had been there at the Yule Ball and had then been following Harry around ever since as every single picture included not only him, but Anthony as well. Skeeter fabricated a long, woeful, and utterly rubbish story about some secret love affair between Harry and Anthony, accompanied by images of Harry walking close to Anthony and looking up at him for a moment, or Anthony putting a hand on the small of Harry’s back to guide him out of the way of oncoming students, or dozens of other little moments slowed down to make them look far more intimate than they were in reality.

It was all blown way out of proportion and Harry could just feel the awe-filled gazes of girls imagining him and Anthony together, cooing over them like they were some blushing newly-weds. When Harry was done reading, he tossed the magazine carelessly into the center of the table, moved the empty plate before him aside, reached into his bag and pulled out parchment and a quill. The others around him watched silently as Harry continued to stay quiet and penned out several letters.

Once they were all written and sealed, Harry excused himself from the table to go straight to the
owlery. He'd warned Mrs. Skeeter the last time they'd come in contact that were she to write anything about him without his consent, he would invoke the protective rights of a minor and although Harry didn’t particularly mind his relationship with Anthony being confused or the clear implications of his sexuality, he knew enough about how information spread and was received in the wizarding world to know that if he didn’t nip it in the bud, he would be pestered for the next year or so on when the two of them would get married. Besides, the thought of so many people knowing about and being avidly interested in his love life when he had yet to even turn 15 was unsettling in so many ways.

Harry knew that the wizarding world was still so behind in their ways, because they felt that there was no reason to change, and that though he had never encountered any outright disdain for homosexual relations like in the muggle world—and therefore cannot predict the consequences of that aspect of the rumors—he did know that most wizards and witches of prominent families didn’t simply date casually. Harry wasn’t exaggerating with the notion that people would soon expect them to become engaged if they were led to believe that there was some type of relationship between them. Harry was the heir to several prestigious, wealthy, and affluent lines including both Black and Potter, and Anthony’s family was well off and influential enough for people to expect thorough marriage negotiations.

And so, to prevent that horrid headache from ever occurring, Harry sent out a letter to Sirius, a second to Phil, and a third to the Ministry’s Department of the Protection and Care of Magical Children. Harry didn’t really expect Phil to have much involvement in the matter, but Child Protections and the DMLE worked together often and it wouldn’t surprise Harry if the case crossed his desk if they decided to take any legal action.

He hoped that Skeeter had one hell of a lawyer, because he was not letting her get by so easily this time. It wouldn’t just affect him if rumors got out of control. Any future courtships or potential engagements for Anthony could be sullied by past rumors, especially if he gets entangled with a pureblood since the Goldsteins weren’t a part of the sacred twenty-eight.

Everything was fairly quiet during the spring term, that is, until April 24th when all four champions received a notice to meet one of the judges, Ludo Bagman, on the quidditch pitch after dinner. They walked out of the castle and over the darkened grounds in a loose group, Cedric amiably discussing with Harry about the reason why they might have been summoned and the chilled night air tugging at their clothes.

Bagman was waiting at the entrance of the pitch for them, looking over the unused but still kept grounds. Harry didn’t really miss quidditch per say, but he did feel the absence of the physical endurance training. When he found time to himself to practice, he usually only focused on his magical abilities, not his physical ones—it’s caused a slight loss of muscle mass, but he was still
growing at an acceptable rate and his developing magic certainly made up for whatever he might have lost in physical prowess. Though the tasks were hardly a stroll through the park.

“Ah! Good evening, champions. I do hope that your studies and time off between the tasks has treated you well so far.” Ludo beamed at them, eyes glittering and wispy white hair curling out from under the edges of his stiff charcoal-grey cap. Bagman half-turned back around to look out over the quidditch pitch. “I called you all here to give you information on the next task, as the last one did not off any clues. Over the course of the next month, Madam Professor Pomona Sprout will be growing a magical hedge maze right here on the pitch. Within the maze will be a multitude of obstacles and creatures set up by the staff that you must surpass in order to reach the Tri-Wizard Cup and win the tournament. So, I advise you all to brush up on your knowledge of defensive spells while the other students prepare for final exams.”

Ludo winked at them, dismissed the group, and then proceeded to try to talk to Harry alone while the other champions began the walk back to the castle. Ludo seemed to be trying to give Harry ‘helpful tips’ for the next task, but Harry carefully withdrew himself from the conversation and ended up the second to last person off the pitch, with Ludo lingering behind on the field for whatever reason.

Harry sighed, seeing the closest champion was nearly at the castle and he was barely halfway there. Ludo Bagman was about as subtle as a rock to the face and Harry definitely didn’t need help from someone like him, he’d do fine enough on his own.

Harry slowed his steps as his gaze shifted up past the castle to the vast sky over head. The air was comfortably chilled with a gentle breeze and a dewy dampness that clung to his skin and dripped down his throat pleasantly. There were only a few murky clouds in the sky to obscure his view of the overwhelming sea of stars and constellations overhead. Without the light pollution of the cities or suburbs, the night was dazzling here. Clusters of stars glowed brighter than others and knowing just how far away they were and how endless the space above his head was, that he was looking out into a brilliant and endless abyss made his world feel so immense. Harry stopped walking all together, his neck craned and eyes wide to try to take in every little bit.

Harry’s lips parted and cool air pooled in his mouth. He felt like at any moment his feet could detach from the solid compacted ground beneath him and he’d go floating up and out amongst the stars. And maybe someday he would . . . grab ahold of the veil and drift out into space just to see what it was like, to see how far he would go.

‘It would seem that one, Bartemius Crouch Snr has entered the Forbidden Forest and is currently rushing here with urgent news for Dumbledore. I suggest we take a little detour.’ Death interrupted Harry thoughts and one dark brow quirked up as Harry turned to look at the darkened forest beside him.
'Curious. I thought Mr. Crouch was out sick.' Harry thought blandly as he glanced around himself to make sure nobody saw him before dowsing himself in a disillusionment spell and entering the forest.

'It appears that he has been keeping Tom company these past few weeks and has just escaped. Perhaps Crouch has not been exactly himself lately.' Death suggested as Harry quickly and soundlessly made his way through the night.

'Imperio?' Harry huffed quietly. 'Rather fitting considering what he put Jr through, don’t you think?'

Harry was getting deeper and deeper into the woods and was starting to hear the sounds of life—though he doubted anything human. Suddenly, Harry felt a warm quiver in his magic and slowed his trek as the distant sound of a gruff, low voice cursing could be heard.

'The man’s son has reached him first, it appears.' Death announced as Harry crept closer. Between the towering, elderly trees, Harry came upon the sight of an un-polyjuiced Barty Jr pacing by the foot of a still, sprawled figure Harry took to be the elder Crouch. Barty hissed out a breath between his teeth and fisted a hand in his muted brown hair as he cast glances at the man at his feet. Barty looked anxious, angry, and slightly distraught. It was only another minute of pacing and tugging at his uncombed locks before the Death Eater cast one last hateful glower at his father before turning on his heel running back towards the castle.

Once the man was out of sight and earshot, Harry sighed deeply, wondering just what kind of mess he was getting himself into by meddling with Voldemort, if this was one of the people he took council with. Then he turned back to un-moving man laid on the smooth ground between the twisted roots of two dark giants. Harry moved over to the man and knelt down next to him. His skin was paler than a sheet in the light of the moon, brown eyes glistening like black onyx in night and form so still he looked like he’d been turned to stone. Harry’s hand moved out to hover barely an inch above the man’s face and slowly moved downward over every feature—careful not to touch—until Harry reached the center of Crouch’s chest where his sternum lay beneath his robes and layered dark suit and cooling skin.

Harry’s eyes drifted closed and he felt magic gather between the thin bones in his hand, cold like the near-frozen waters of a lake. Harry’s index and middle finger curled down until they pressed against his chest and like closing a circuit, magic poured from his fingertips into the dead man and he sucked in a breath at the odd sensation of suddenly being consciously aware of every little still mechanism within Crouch down to the soft tissue fibers in his organs or the dead neurons in his brain. Beyond that Harry could also feel the residual sharp tang of the killing curse coating his insides and clotting in his blood. Harry could also feel the faded and older clouds of the imperious curse caught in his lungs and wrapped around his spinal cord and brain like a parasite. Focusing on those, Harry drew out the residual foreign magic, carefully extracting it without leaving any behind or damaging the body any more than necessary.
When both of the curses were removed completely, Harry dissipated the magic before turning back to the body underhand. Gathering his magic, Harry shifted his hand up from the chest—his magic following from within the body like a magnet—and then rested it once more on his cold forehead. Carefully, Harry sought out a blood vessel within the brain, nicked it, and then pulled blood out to flood that section of the brain. Harry made sure that the flooded part was a bit more damaged than the rest of the brain and then withdrew his magic.

Harry opened his eyes and pulled his hand back with a sigh. At least now Crouch’s death would be wracked up to a stroke and there wouldn’t be any unnecessary investigations, hopefully. It wasn’t Harry’s place to say who lived or died—he was not death—and he knew for a fact that death was hardly the end, nor was it any sort of punishment.

Harry stood and looked down at the man one last time. It wasn’t about light or dark, good or bad, everything was just different variants of grey. The only true cycle was life and death and everything that happened in between. Life will always greet death and death will bring about the fertile soil for life to grow once more. Once simply cannot be without the other, so how could one be condemned or hated while the other celebrated?

Harry turned away and began walking back through the forest, eyes catching the patches of starlit sky through the gaps in the trees and wondering once more to what lie beyond.

Bartemius Crouch Snr was discovered two days later by Hagrid when he’d been notified by the acromantulas that reside not too far from where he was found. News spread fast, but was glossed over quickly by the news that Percy Weasley would be taking over Crouch’s duties at the Ministry as well as filling in as a judge for the tournament.

As far as Harry could tell, there wouldn’t be any sort of investigation as it was concluded that Crouch had been having a stroke when he had apparated into the forbidden forest and tried to reach the school in his disorientation but never made it. The only ones who didn’t seem entirely convinced of the man’s coincidental demise were Severus Snape, Igor Karkaroff, and perhaps Dumbledore, but less so.

Two weeks following the death of Crouch, Harry was taking advantage of the lack of classes on Sunday and spending a relaxed day indoors when he got a warning from a third-year Ravenclaw that Anthony was looking for him but that it wasn’t urgent. Despite that, Harry didn’t really have much else to do, so he went in search of Anthony, but it was after lunch and he had a hard time tracking down the blonde in the enormous castle. After a while, Harry gave up looking and figured he’d find
Anthony at dinner at the latest.

Once more alone, Harry passed the library and instead headed up the endless steps to the astronomy tower, knowing it would be deserted since it was not a journey most would want to take in their leisure.

At the top, Harry moved over to the metal railing and leaned against it, taking in the sight of Hogwarts at dusk and the fresh air. After several minutes, the sun having just disappeared beyond the horizon and vibrant red hues giving way to the encroaching muted periwinkle of the sky, Harry hooked a finger under the collar of his shirt, caught onto the warm chain there, and pulled out the locket that had hardly left his presence in nearly a year’s time. The locket on the end clicked softly against the gold chain until Harry took it in his hand and looked down at the worn but still brilliant surface.

The soul within had become so strong in comparison to when he’d first combined the horcruxes into one. It was becoming harder and harder to keep it sedated and not fully-sentient. The magic and soul still reacted to Harry, but if he just let it be the soul would be a talking, conscious Tom Riddle that would undoubtedly use the magic at his disposal to cause a whole slew of problems for Harry before he could get it contained within a physical form.

Harry brushed his thumb over the embedded emeralds that comprised the snake on the front and as always, was hit with a wave of magic that grew stronger each day. The magic swept through him and curled around the small piece of soul that had fused with Harry’s own. He shivered slightly at the feeling of being open and bare for another soul to reach inside of him.

Like a hesitant hand, it grazed over his cheek and tickled through his thick black curls. It dipped down out of his hair and over the slight pale knob of his spine until it slowly traced down his vertebrae like fingertips, spreading breathtaking heat in its path that curled around Harry’s ribs, seeped down into his lungs, and drifted out between his lips. It circled around his waist to his navel and deliberately drew upwards over his stomach, skating past his sternum, and running along the canals of his clavicle, over his shoulders and down over his arms until the magic was surrounding him and felt like an invisible barrier, glass armor.

Harry gripped the locket tighter and the heat around him intensified, causing sweat to form on his brow and his fair cheeks to flush. He didn’t like warm weather, he’d always preferred the cold, but this heat was different, it was the heat of a warm bed on a late December’s night, it was the warmth of fresh tea slipping down your throat and pooling in your stomach. It didn’t burn away the cold, but mingled with it and created something comfortable.

“Harry?”
Harry’s head snapped to the side and his fingers closed fully around the locket just as he caught sight of curly dark blonde hair and confused hazel eyes. Anthony stood in the doorway to the Astronomy tower, looking like he was in the middle of saying something but stopped as his attention was focused solely on his closed fist. If it were anyone else, perhaps Harry could brush it off as just some old necklace he’d found while exploring Grimmauld Place—not entirely untrue—but Anthony wasn’t just anybody. Not only was he Harry’s closest friend, but he was acutely sensitive to magic. Usually Harry had the locket hidden under his clothes and the magic tightly contained so that it was undetectable, but not at that moment. Right then, the magic was free and wild and overwhelming even for him.

Words failed Harry as Anthony’s gaze slowly shifted from the locket to his face. His mind blanked and all he could do was wait for Anthony to come to some sort of conclusion, speak, and then hopefully be able to right any misconceptions afterward.

“Harry, what is that thing?” Anthony sounded tense and worried and more than a little like he wanted to grab the locket, toss it over the balcony of the tower, and drag Harry as far away from it as he could. He could only imagine what the other teen was sensing from the immense power.

Harry looked down at his own hand and his fingers uncurled, revealing its gleaming surface to him and for several moments Harry fumbled in his mind for some out, some explanation he could give that would make the whole situation disappear. However, every time he tried, it brought him right back to the same conclusion—that it would involve lying, and he refused to lie to Anthony. Sure, there had been little cover ups in the past, omissions, but Harry hadn’t blatantly lied. He always told Anthony ‘later’ and ‘now is not the right time.’

But how would he make it past this without lying, and what about the future? After Voldemort’s resurrection things may change drastically and Harry didn’t want to unintentionally push his friend away just because he might have his hands full with other matters.

Releasing a weighted breath, the brunette let the locket slip from his fingers, falling back against the soft material of his dark blue jumper. Harry met Anthony’s gaze and beckoned the blonde with a small gesture.

“Come here, I think it’s time we talked.” His voice sounded calm and relaxed, which went a long way in making the other boy less tense and Anthony didn’t hesitate to join him—though he did continue to shoot the locket several uncertain glances. Harry turned back towards the railing and rested his forearms against it, looking out at the darkening landscape before him instead of at his friend.
Silently, Harry constructed strong privacy wards around them to make sure that their conversation remained private, and said nothing when he saw Anthony shudder slightly from the corner of his eye. Silence settled between them like a small pool that had been disturbed and neither spoke while they waited for the ripples to disappear.

“I suppose I should just start at the beginning.” Harry began after a while, and then chuckled under his breath, because the ‘beginning’ went back a lot further than Anthony would be expecting. “Well, before I can really delve into my involvement, I need to explain a few other things first. Primarily, this all started with Voldemort—or more accurately, the man he was before Voldemort.” Harry glanced at his friend to gauge the others reaction, Anthony looked confused but determined to remain silent and listen to everything Harry had to say, at least.

“Before you or me—or even our parents for that matter—were born, Voldemort was just a very intelligent and powerful half-blood wizard named Tom Riddle. An orphan in the middle of WWII who knew nothing about our world until he received his Hogwarts letter. Now, I’m not going to go into his entire life story, but I will mention the important bits. Growing up the way that he did, and in the middle of a war, there was one resounding thing that Tom feared above all else—death. So, when entered the wizarding world, he soon sought out a way to make himself invulnerable.

“There are ways to stave off death for quite some time, but those teachings fell under the old and obscure branch of magic known as necromancy, which has been lost to wizards for a very long time. Instead, what Tom found in his incessant search was a counterfeit, sloppily constructed, and dangerous shortcut that was nowhere near authentic necromancy. But he was still practically a child, scared out of his mind of dying, and without any proper warnings to keep him from trying it. The magic he used is called a horcrux. It is meant to be a last resort that tethers a person’s soul to the living world so that if they die they have the chance to build up strength and power over time and hopefully regain a body.

“What hadn’t been explained was the numerous consequences that far outweighed any gain. You see, in order to create a horcrux, one would need to split their soul and place it into an object to act as the anchor. What necromantic teachings would have taught anyone curious about horcruxes and soul magic in general, is that a person’s soul and their magic are intrinsically intertwined. The soul is sort of the conduit between the physical body and the magic. So, to cast out half of one’s soul would be to cut off access to half of their magic and loosing that sets the body completely off balance and would significantly cut down on a person’s cognitive reasoning.” Harry paused to take a deep breath, it was his first time ever telling someone so much and his own thoughts were getting a little tangled and off track. Once he was back on his chosen path, he continued.

“But Tom knew none of that and after accidentally creating his first horcrux, his mental and emotional stability took a nosedive and he became so paranoid about it being discovered and destroyed, that he finally decided that just one horcrux wouldn’t be enough, and then he planned to create seven. Something about the number being powerful or some other rubbish. And so, any future goals he might have had about changing our world or making something great of himself were put on the wayside as his focus centered on creating more horcruxes and he spiraled further into insanity.
with each piece of his soul he hacked away at.” Harry stopped again, this time for Anthony’s sake, as he’d just laid out a whole hell of a lot of information and wanted to give him a bit of time to process before he continued.

“How on earth do you even know all of that?” Anthony’s voice was low and incredulous. Harry quirked a small half-amused and half-sympathetic smile.

“I’ll get to that in a moment. Anyways, so Tom continued to create his horcruxes and became more of what we recognize as Voldemort now. But at the root of it, he was still a half-blood who’d been raised in the muggle world for the first decade of his life. His construct of ‘Death’ was more of a concept than a being as wizarding children are brought up to believe, so he thought little of what other consequences his actions might have. But Death is a conscious being, and he felt scorned by Voldemort’s complete desecration of his own soul and preventing himself from running the natural course of life and then death. . . And then Voldemort slipped up. He allowed his irrational paranoia to get the better of him and began chasing after a child over half a prophecy that was likely self-fulfilling anyways. It led Voldemort to me and that night he came into my home and killed my parents,” Harry’s tone had become hushed and the only other sound to be heard was the gentle wind ruffling their clothes. He turned and his vivid green eyes locked with Anthony’s as he took a moment to convey his honesty before speaking.

“And me. . .” Anthony blinked and his brow scrunched, as if he wasn’t quite sure if he understood or not. “He succeeded in taking my life but the residual protective magic of my mother took his life as well. I’ve been hailed as the ‘Boy Who Lived’ and ‘Savior of Wizarding Britain,’ but what happened that night had nothing to do with me.” Harry broke eye contact and fixed his gaze on some blurry spot out in the night. “However, Death had been watching and saw an opportunity. He knew that Voldemort would eventually come back and he would continue to evade Death’s clutches, so he decided to even the playing field a bit and offered me a deal. The deal was, he’d bring me back to life, give me a second chance, and if I lived to see my eleventh birthday when my magic finally settled, he’d give me a gift. It was settled, I was brought back and went about my life from then on out.

“Several years later, Death returned to me and began to guide me, teach me. He taught me about magic and wizards and my parents. He prepared me for the world I would be entering once I received my Hogwarts letter and taught me wandless magic long before that so I wouldn’t be helpless. And then, when the time came he told me all about the deal we had made and the gift he was giving me.” Harry’s lips quirked at some thought. “Ironically, he was giving me the one thing Voldemort would have torn the world apart for—immortality.” His words trailed off and a harsh exhale could be heard from the body standing beside him.

“I’m not really sure what to say.” Anthony finally burst after a few moments, voice sounding higher and more breathless than normal. Harry huffed and smirked, hoping that his light-hearted demeanor would help smooth the transition for the other teen.
“Neither did I. I couldn’t believe it at first—sounded mental to me—but then I turned eleven and for the second time in my life, I died, and then came back. So, technically I can die, I just never stay dead.” Harry mused and grinned when Anthony made a pained sound and lightly hit his shoulder. The silence stretched on as he gave Anthony another minute to soak it in and allow his mind to even accept the unbelievable information.

“Is that why you never seemed to hold any normal amount of self-preservation? Because we play quidditch together and nobody should be taking that many dives if they truly value their life!” Harry burst with genuine laughter, feeling freer than ever before, finally having someone to share everything with so fully felt like he could indulge in a bit of the normalcy that everyone else but him seemed to have in abundance.

“Perhaps, or maybe I’m just that good.” Harry shot back with a little wink that had broken through some of Anthony’s shock and pulled a livelier smile from his friend. Anthony scoffed and pushed his shoulder back gently.

“Cheeky.” The blonde seemed much more comfortable after that and eventually warmed up to asking a more serious question. “So, how does that connect with the locket? Because that thing is like a mini sun!” Anthony exclaimed, looking down at the gold locket still looped around Harry’s neck with a slight wince.

“Well, after I came in to my gifts, Death made it clear that they were mine to use as I’d like, but there was something I could do in the meantime. Because of Voldemort’s horcruxes, it’s inevitable that he’d eventually regain his strength and come back, right?” Harry began carefully, knowing that he was once again walking on uncertain ground and didn’t know how Anthony would react.

Anthony nodded so Harry kept on. “Which means that he’d return just as mad—if not even more off his rocker—as before and probably bring about the second wizarding war. It would mean the light and the dark going back at each other’s throats—possibly countless deaths—and I honestly doubt that everyone here would be safe just because it’s a school and we’re underage. Hogwarts has already been the venue of multiple dangerous altercations between the light and dark just in these past few years alone”—most of which were unknown to everyone but a select few—“and will undoubtedly become a battleground in the future. And if Voldemort returns, he will have every motivation to pick me as his enemy. No matter what I say, people will elect me as their ‘champion’ to face him when the time comes.” Anthony expression soured at the truth behind Harry’s words and a cold anger lit behind his hazel eyes.

“That will happen with or without my help, so Death offered me another option.” Anthony perked up at that, but looked hesitant. “He told me that if I were to follow his guidance and begin learning the magic he had gifted to humanity so long ago and then took back when it was squandered, I could right Tom’s mistakes from so many years ago, undo the damage he’d done unto himself, and in doing so hope that his sanity will return and prevent the next war.” Harry pursed his lips for a
moment. “And if it doesn’t work out and he decides to continue on down his path of tyranny, then I have all the means to destroy him. Quietly, though, as I refuse to add any more fuel to the fire of people’s overinflated image of my ‘heroism.’” Harry rolled his eyes at the thought.

“So . . . you’d be helping Voldemort?” Anthony asked slowly, unsure of himself, but thankfully not looking at Harry as if he’d proposed the idea of murdering their classmates and running naked through the school.

“Sort of. Though, to say I was helping him would be oversimplifying it, I think. I am not really his ally. Think of it this way: if Dumbledore is considered the leader of the light, and Voldemort is the leader of the dark, I’m sort of the figure of an independent, one-man party that pulls a few strings behind the curtains to offer opportunities to both sides to make things even. I’m not light, dark, or grey. I am outside of the playing field at the moment and will only intervene to restore balance.” Harry gestured to the locket resting against his chest.

“And this is the key to changing it all. Voldemort has already found a temporary physical form and very soon he will attempt to regain his body so he can continue with his plans. However, I’ll be stepping in just when the time is right and return what’s in this locket to where it rightfully belongs.” It only took a few moments for Anthony to seemingly catch on to what Harry was implying and his eyes zeroed back in on the locket.

“That’s his soul?!” He shouted, mouth agape and looking more than ever like he wanted to rip it from Harry’s neck and lob it as far over the balcony edge as he could.

“Correct, but in this state, it is harmless. I keep it on me for safe keeping, as well as the fact that I’m unsure when exactly I’ll meet Voldemort face to face. Though, I know that it will be before school let out for the summer.” Harry omitted some private—and frankly embarrassing—truths he hid about why he kept the locket on him. Anthony may have paled slightly at his words, but in the darkness, Harry really couldn’t tell.

“I thought . . . I thought it’d be dark and sickly-looking, like tar. It’s actually really bright and warm, fresh like cut grass and the thick aroma of sweet grass. Reminds me a lot of summer, actually. And no wonder they say he’s powerful! I’ve never seen so much ambient magic. I couldn’t possibly imagine what the guy was like before that horcrux business.” He admitted, sounding grudgingly impressed. Harry smiled and bumped shoulders with him.

“You’ve taken this amazingly well so far, are you sure you’re alright?” Harry asked tentatively, unsure.
“Probably not, but I’ll get there. I think I’m just a bit overwhelmed right now. Also, I think we’re going to miss dinner because we still have a lot to discuss.” He stated honestly and Harry had the grace to look a bit sheepish.

“But we’re alright?” Harry asked in a small voice, fearing for the first time since starting the conversation that his secrets may impact their friendship negatively. Anthony smiled warmly, grabbed Harry’s shoulder and before the brunette could say or do anything, pulled him into his arms for a warm embrace. Harry was shocked at first by the sudden contact, but didn’t take long to return the hug.

Annoyingly, it was times like that when Harry was reminded that no matter how much he sprouted up over the past couple of years, Anthony was clearly ahead of the game with generations of tall Goldstein men and women in his gene pool and would probably always be taller than him. Harry’s chin rested on Anthony’s shoulder at an angle and he silently cursed his own genetics as he felt dwarfed in his taller, broader friend’s hold. He must have said something aloud about Anthony’s height because he felt the deep tremors of laughter against his abdomen and a gust of breath on his ear.

“Yeah, Harry, we’re alright.”
Rumors start up about Harry and Anthony due to Rita Skeeter. Bagman gives the champions information on the third task and the maze that will be grown on the quidditch pitch. Barty Jr kills an escaped Barty Snr who’d been held captive by Voldemort, and Harry gets rid of evidence. Anthony and Harry finally have their heart to heart and Harry reveals all his secrets to Tony.

Moisture hung in the still air, coating everything in its dampness and stale fragrance. Cool black stone gleamed muted green and wet with the slow drip of water in the enormous chamber, flickering with the light of a single fire near the end of the chamber. The fire was no ordinary fire, though, instead of burning its usual organic orange, the flames were a deep ruby red, burning higher and flicking about slowly like feline tails. The fire should not have been able to burn, as it seemingly came from the wet stone floor and had no wood to sustain it.

The reason for the fires life sat only two feet away, staring entranced into the flames as low, rolling words dripped incomprehensible from the boy’s dry lips in a chant made quietly thunderous by the magic coagulating in every syllable.

Harry felt the low pulse of power through his body as he continued with his ritual—which was meant to strengthen his body and magic for a short amount of time, just long enough to get him through the third task and whatever may follow. Harry braced his hands against the floor as the magic overwhelmed him and wrapped around him in an embrace that was both constricting and exhilarating. Warmth curled deep in his gut and though normally he might have been embarrassed by the knowledge of just what that sensation was and how the magic was affecting him, he was still too deeply entrenched in the ritual to hesitate even a moment.

Harry reached the peak of the ritual and the invocations stilled on his tongue as his head fell back and his eyes stared wide and unseeing at the distant ceiling. His spine arched to its limit and his body was taut with the strain as Harry tried to cope with the flood of ambient magic into his system. For a moment Harry thought that perhaps his body wouldn’t be able to handle the strain on his muscles and that something would give, painfully, but then the magic settled to a low buzz and he nearly collapsed when every muscle relaxed at once.

Harry panted and wiped away some of the sweat that had collected on his face. The fire had gone out and the ritual was complete. Harry was now ready to bring back Tom Riddle when they finally met. The third task was set for the very next day after dinner. The magical maze had been grown, the
champions had—assumedly—prepared, and everyone else was anxiously anticipating.

Once Harry had composed himself and cleaned up the remnants of the ritual, he promptly made his way back up to the Ravenclaw dorms. The common room was relatively empty, as many people were decompressing after having just taken their final exams. Harry spotted Anthony alone by a large window, book in hand. Harry took a seat in the armchair across from the blonde and he looked up at Harry with an inquisitive raised brow.

“Just some last-minute preparations for the task.” Harry answered his silent question. He had told Anthony enough for him to know that Harry didn’t just mean practicing defensive spells, and that it wasn’t really the task that he was preparing for per se. Anthony closed his book and set it to the side.

“You know, perhaps it would be a little easier if you’d let me help you?” Anthony prodded, it not being the first time he’d asked to assist Harry in any way he could ever since finding out just what Harry was up to. Harry leveled his friend with a knowing look.

“We’ve been through this already Tony, I can handle this on my own. I’ve been preparing for a very long time and I won’t be alone, I have help on his end as well, so everything should go smoothly. Besides, there really isn’t much to do. I’ll do my part and then be out of there before the dust even settles. If you really wish to help me, then keep yourself safe and don’t get into any trouble. Everything is laid out according to plan and we just need to let the pieces fall where they may.”

Harry assured, still feeling the dull hum of magic in his limbs from the ritual he’d done.

Anthony looked like he wished to push the topic, but also didn’t look confident that he’d win. Anthony sighed and moved onto another, less weighted topic.

“Have you heard back from Sirius on the issue with Skeeter?” He asked instead, the mood shifting immediately. Harry’s expression lightened and he nodded.

“Yes, he went straight to the Ministry after hiring a legal consultant. I also notified the Child Protection Department within the Ministry so they were expecting him and collaborated quite well together to sort the matter out. Sirius is going to levy she be charged with slander, exploitation of a minor, and breech of the privacy clause set for minors. Apparently, they’re also bringing in other people and even other underaged wizards who’d been featured in her rubbish articles to make their case even stronger. From what I could tell, it won’t be dragged out for long and hopefully the witch will stop being such a nuisance.” He could only hope.

Anthony nodded. “I wrote to my father as well, just in case. I’m sure he’ll help where he can. Skeeter has been trying to smear his name for years, ever since he started having success with his
company and gaining the public’s attention. My mother says that people like Rita Skeeter care nothing for the truth, and probably don’t even know what things such as honesty and loyalty truly mean.” Harry huffed and nodded in agreement.

The next day, the four champions were excused from lessons for the day to give them time to prepare themselves, and also spend time with their families before the final task. Harry thought it came off as a little grim that they were allowed the day with their families because it made it feel like they were saying their goodbyes to each other just in case something was to go wrong.

That being said, Harry was also glad to spend time with Remus and Sirius as he hadn’t nearly as much time before the tasks the other two times. They roamed the castle without a clear destination in mind while the two older men reminisced about their own days at Hogwarts and the mischief they used to get up to. Eventually Harry showed them the Room of Requirement, which they hadn’t been able to find in their own time, and they settled down there for tea and relaxation.

Their conversation had just lulled into a comfortable silence when Remus, who was sitting beside Harry on one of the conjured couches, suddenly leaned over and wrapped his arms around Harry. With one hand on the back of Harry’s head and arm hooked around his shoulder, and the other arm wrapped around his back, Harry was pulled into a warm and protective embrace. Remus released a shaky breath and sounded suspiciously congested when he spoke.

“Sorry Harry, I know you’re not much of a hugger, but . . . we just came so close to losing you last time and the thought of sending you back out there for a third time has me going crazy. I can’t wait for this bloody tournament to be over! I want you to keep in mind that, win or lose, it really doesn’t matter, as long as you come back safe.” Remus squeezed a little tighter as he spoke.

“You have nothing to worry about, Remus. I’ll play it safe, take my time, and if it gets to be too much, I’ll withdraw from the task.” Harry insisted, but even as he spoke, he wrapped his arms around the man who had become such a comforting and important figure in his life. Harry stayed there for a while, drawing strength from the easily given affection, before he started to pull away. Before he’d fully managed it, though, Remus suddenly turned his face and smacked a big, overexaggerated kiss on Harry’s temple with a cheeky grin. Harry groaned and whined about Remus treating him like a stuffed teddy bear, even as he fought against the indulgent smile pulling at his lips.

Sirius hopped up and joined in by giving Harry another smothering hug and wet kiss to his other temple. The three distracted each other from the coming night with lighthearted teasing and stories of grandeur and hilarity involving four mischievous boys in a magical school.
Dinner passed in a blur. Harry had never been so out of it waiting for the first two tasks, but this time was different, because this was it, wasn’t it? The tournament was nearly over, and Harry would be almost completely isolated and unsupervised while within the maze, the perfect time to get to him. Harry ate a simple supper automatically, not really seeing or tasting what he was eating, mind flipping between a thrilling buzz of thoughts about what might happen and finally accomplishing a goal that had been years in the making, and a distracted stillness within his skull where thoughts blended together or stilled completely and left him thoroughly blank.

Anthony noticed Harry’s behavior and did an impeccable job of deflecting attention and the erratic questions people directed towards him, while also making sure Harry wasn’t completely out of it and occasionally putting something else on his plate so that he’d have at least a half-decent meal. Once dinner commenced, Harry sort of came out of his fog and realized that over three-quarters of the Great Hall had emptied as most people had scurried off to the stands to take their seats. This included Harry’s friends, minus Anthony, who had stayed to walk down to the quidditch pitch with Harry.

When they exited the castle, the sun had just dipped below the low peaks of the distant mountains and the grounds were awash in muted tones. As they walked silently, Harry’s eyes tracked the wide path of recently trampled grass they were following, they were amongst the last to make their way towards the pitch. Standing outside of the entrance to the stands was a loose gathering of the champions, the headmasters, and a few family members of the champions—such as Cedric’s father, Fleur’s little sister, and even Sirius. Once they were spotted, Sirius took Anthony’s place so that the young Ravenclaw could go join their friends in the stands.

Sirius settled a hand on Harry’s shoulder and squeezed gently. When Harry looked over, the man gave him a relaxed smile and a cheeky wink that was perhaps meant to help rid Harry of any pre-task jitters.

Harry could hear the exuberant bouncing instrumentals from the Hogwarts band and various chants from groups of students cheering on their favorite champion. Dumbledore looked over their group one last time to make sure everyone was there before announcing that they could enter. Amos Diggory, who appeared to be ready to bounce right out of his robes ignored the exasperated protests from his son for whatever they’d been discussing, and bounded away, through the entrance, and into the waiting cheers of the crowd. Cedric grimaced at the sound of his father attempting to start his own chants for his son amongst the audience and raced in after the man.

Fleur’s entourage glided in elegantly, with sharp, determined, and ravenous eyes that seemed to fit well with the two younger Delacour girls’ Veela heritage. Viktor’s large, slightly encumbered gait stomped in behind them with Igor Karkaroff sneering smugly at the crowd, reveling in the fact that his student was in first place—never-mind the fact that he was also tied with Harry. Each champion received their own round of boisterous cheers and clapping and rattles of noisemakers that seemed to
appear from nowhere.

When Harry and Sirius stepped out, they received their own enthusiastic wall of noise, but both generally ignored them while Sirius pointed Remus out of the crowd for Harry so he could smile and wave at the man who sat with an anxious smile of his own, gripping his coat in his hands tightly and attention solely on his adoptive son. Dumbledore followed up the end of the line and soon made his way to the little podium at the center of the small clearing and began to wrangle in the crowd’s attention.

While he did that, Harry glanced around and took in the impressively tall wall of foliage at his back. It was as he was watching the wall that the hedges parted and out stepped Moody. Moody caught his gaze and sent him a mischievous smile that could have been taken as a professor trying to encourage his favorite student, but Harry knew the true intentions behind it. He knew it meant that whatever Barty had been doing within the maze, it would guarantee he reached Voldemort and Harry couldn’t help but feel relieved.

Moody had just wiped the smile from his face when Dumbledore turned and brought everyone’s attention to the man by announcing that Moody had been entrusted with placing the Triwizard Cup somewhere within the maze and only he knew of its location.

“Whichever champion reaches the cup first will be declared the winner of the Triwizard Tournament and be granted the monetary prize of one thousand galleons, but perhaps more importantly, the glory of generations to come as a Triwizard Champion. Now, as Mr. Potter and Mr. Krum are in the lead, they will enter first, followed by Miss Delacour, and then Mr. Diggory. The staff have been instructed to patrol the perimeter, so, should any of the champions wish to withdraw from the task, they need only to send up red sparks and they will be escorted out of the maze.” Dumbledore then turned to face the champions and beckoned them forward so that he could speak to them directly.

Dumbledore gave them a few warnings that there were dangers lurking within the maze and to always be on their guard. With that, Harry and Viktor were nudged towards the two separate entrances that had opened in the hedge at some point while Dumbledore was talking. At Harry’s entrance stood Sirius and Barty. When Harry approached, Sirius gave him once last tight hug, the roar of the audience and blare of the instruments at his back. Then Sirius let go reluctantly and Harry stepped through the entrance.

Harry felt like he was stepping into another world, the cold press of the night air hitting him and dampening the sound already. Harry turned to look back through the entrance, just in time to see Barty subtly point off to Harry’s left, his body blocking him from sight so that only Harry caught the action. Barty gave him a wink and a little smirk and a moment later the hedge closed behind him, completely shutting out the sound and blocking all light from the well-lit clearing, causing Harry to realize just how fully night had fallen since dinner had ended.
Harry took a deep breath as he settled back into the sensation of no longer having so many eyes on him. A moment later, his barriers slipped away like a falling curtain and a perpetual presence took ahold of his attention.

‘Barty seems to have enchanted the cup into transporting you to Tom, you will need to reach it first before anyone else.’ His companion told him and just like that, they were off.

Harry moved at a steady jog, guided by Death to take the right turns and move past any obstacles that could be avoided. However, in order to reach the cup in time, he knew certain things couldn’t be bypassed without confrontation. Harry met his first obstacle in the form of a Bogart that was blocking the long, narrow path that was the only direct way to reach the next section of the maze. Harry spotted the creature lurking in the form of a faceless man of impressive stature, pacing up and down the length of the path in long midnight blue robes. The Boggart’s posture was severe and seemed to represent a particular person, but the boggart’s last encounter with another person’s fear must have been a while ago since the details of its appearance had faded, causing the face to have receded into a terrifying blank mask of skin with only vague ridges instead of any actual features.

Having already faced his own boggart, Harry jogged forward resolutely and then the boggart noticed him and transformed into a hole in the hedge filled with an endless black and haunting tones that were all too quick to bring back memories of his first encounter. Pushing onward without pause, the sound soon faded and Harry was once more progressing.

It was only a few minutes after facing the boggart that Harry heard a distant yell and a loud crash of something large hitting the earth. Harry couldn’t quite identify the owner of the voice, but he suspected Cedric and worried slightly that the surprisingly uncoordinated and mild-mannered champion would actually survive the maze.

The next obstacle he faced was a rather simple—if fairly disorienting—challenge. The path was now blocked by thick golden mist hovering two feet above the ground. Limbo mist. Whoever entered the mist would have their senses fooled and the world would seem to have turned upside-down, making one feel like at any moment they would fall straight on their head and break their neck. Wizards had gotten stranded in the mist before, only getting out when someone dispelled it with magic. However, Harry wouldn’t get stranded because he knew about the effects of the mist and knew that the simple way through it was to just enter it at a run and not stop until you were out.

Which is exactly what he did. It was certainly an odd and rather nauseating feeling to have his entire equilibrium flipped on its head, but his feet carried him all the way through regardless. Next were a cluster of blast-ended skrewts—Hagrid’s strange hybrid cross of a manticore and a fire crab—they had grown to be about ten feet long with shiny dark grey armor all over their long-crab like bodies, with a large scorpion-like stinger on one end and the other end gave a blast of flame and sparks that
would propel them at their prey and had given it its name. They were quite aggressive creatures and probably very lethal, their armor reflecting most spells.

Harry took out his wand and when the first skrewt launched at him, he took advantage of the angle and threw a powerful cutting curse at the creature’s vulnerable underbelly, splitting it from one end to the other. Not waiting for the others to attack, Harry used both his wand and powerful wandless magic to cut, blast, and eviscerate his way through the deadly creatures.

Afterwards, there was yet another unavoidable obstacle that stood between him and the cup. A sphinx. Sphinxes were intelligent, loved their puzzles, and prone to violence. With the face of a human woman and the body of a lion, the sphinx stood tall, guarding the shortest path to the cup. Harry approached and waited. He had to answer riddles everyday just to enter the Ravenclaw dorms, he doubted he’d be stuck there for long. The sphinx offered him the chance to turn away and find another path, but he only had the vague assurances that Viktor had yet to reach the cup and he wouldn’t take any chances by taking any detours.

“First think of the person who lives in disguise,
Who deals in secrets and tells naught but lies.
Next, tell me what’s always the last thing to mend,
The middle of iddle and end of the end?
And finally give me the sound often heard,
During the search for a hard-to-find word.
Now string them together and answer me this,
Which creature would you be unwilling to kiss?”

The first line referred to a spy, then ‘d’ and the last clue probably being ‘-er.’

“Howl.” Harry pronounced after a moment and the sphinx reluctantly stepped aside. Harry picked up his pace and ran through the last winding path of the maze, hoping he was close to the center. Harry felt a slight stitch in his side by the time his path crossed another and he saw the pale blue glimmer of the cup all the way at its end. Harry put on a last burst of speed as he sprinted towards the cup.

However, it seemed that the riddle the sphinx had given him had also been a clue. When he reached the clearing where the cup sat atop a stone pedestal, he was not alone. A large acromantula stepped into his path, blocking the cup from view. Harry sighed, frustrated that he was so close but yet another tedious obstacle impeded him. Except, that from somewhere over the hedges, not far from
the clearing, Harry heard a low grunt, the snap of a powerful spell, and then feet running quickly over the compacted earth. Panic rose like bile in Harry’s throat at the thought of another champion—likely Viktor—arriving soon and taking advantage of the distracted acromantula to take the cup themselves.

Without time to think about other options, Harry shoved his wand back in his pocket and focused solely on the intimidating and deadly creature before him. With his magic crawling up his spine and wrapping around his tongue, Harry spoke with purpose, hoping what he was about to try would actually work.

{Sleep.} His tone resonated through the clearing and the beast stumbled, but regained its balance after a while. Forcing more strength into his voice, Harry tried again.

{Sleep!} The spider swayed and its legs bucked as his magic influenced it. With one last forceful shove of power, the acromantula crumpled, unconscious. Harry wasted no more time and sprinted around the creature, his hand reached out and he was so close to wrapping his fingers around one of the silver handles.

“Harry!” At the last second, Harry turned his head just to see Viktor several meters away, running towards him, eyes ablaze in determination. Viktor’s arm was already rising, meant to be pointed right at Harry, but the teen was too late as Harry’s fingers grasped the handle and he was jolted forward into a violent twist of blurred scenes and portkey magic that had his stomach feeling like it was tearing from his esophagus.

A moment later, Harry tumbled into thick, damp, overgrown grass and rolled until his back hit solid stone. Harry coughed from the impact as pain radiated through his back. He slowly sat up, careful not to touch the cup lying beside him, and took in his surroundings. The first thing he noticed was what he’d crashed into; the dark granite base of a headstone—specifically, Tom Riddle’s headstone. Based on the dates, Harry knew it was Tom Riddle Snr’s grave. He also noticed that it wasn’t the only one, that he was in a small unkept cemetery not too far away from a vaguely familiar manor he knew belonged to the Riddles.

The next thing Harry noticed was the largest cauldron he’d ever seen in use, hovering over blue flames. Harry wanted to get closer and check that the cauldron only included the base materials for the ritual and that Voldemort hadn’t yet added anything that would be detrimental to Harry’s ritual, but right when he was about to get up, the familiar silhouette he’d been counting on stepped out from behind a stone tomb holding the tiny deformed husk the last piece of Voldemort’s soul was residing in. They stepped out of the shadows and into the pale light of the moon and Harry was sure to make a show of widening his eyes and shuffling backwards a foot at the sight of Voldemort and Phil.

Harry had been sure to make Phil convince Voldemort that he would be a better fit for assisting him
during the ritual as it would demand sacrifices that were better suited for someone more . . . 
**expendable.** In Harry’s opinion, Philias’ position in the Ministry and non-fugitive status made him far more valuable, but Voldemort was not exactly in a rational mindset.

Philias held his wand aloft, pointed at Harry as he approached, and it was a good thing that Voldemort seemed more concerned with getting on with the ritual so that he didn’t look at Phil and see how uncomfortable the man looked pointing his wand at Harry.

“**Hurry, Green! Do it now.**” Voldemort hissed impatiently once they stood beside the cauldron, and without much else fanfare, Phil dropped Voldemort into the bubbling cauldron and Harry jumped up from his place on the ground and hovered over the cauldron to get a good look and make sure he wouldn’t have to do any last-minute improvisations to make sure Voldemort didn’t come out with a tail or some other horrendous deformity. Thankfully, they were safe and Harry stepped back.

“Well, what now?” Phil asked, peaking at the contents of the cauldron with a mix between curiosity and disgust. Harry reached inside the collar of his shirt and pulled out the leather pouch he had around his neck and quickly unshrunk it. Harry pulled it open and the first thing he tugged out was a long and thin black ritual robe. Harry slipped off his shoes and socks while also tugging his shirt over his head and pulling the robe on quickly. The material did little to protect from the chill of the night, but Harry didn’t mind.

“Now you allow me to do what I have to do, and only step in if I ask for assistance.” Harry answered seriously.

Next, Harry pulled out his single most important ingredient for the ritual, the locket. He would need to put it in with Voldemort before throwing anything else into the cauldron. Harry stood over the cauldron and slowly pulled his magic away from where it had intertwined with that of the locket, and before the soul within the locket could regain any sort of sentience, he dropped it into the viscous bubbling liquid and went back to his preparations.

Harry retrieved his totem from the pouch and put it on before doing anything else. Carefully, Harry made a runic circle around the cauldron roughly fifteen feet in diameter. But instead of just carving the runes into the damp ground, Harry had already prepared twelve moon stones carved with the ritual and protective runes he needed, and then proceeded to bury them a few inches down into the soft earth equidistant to each other to make up the circle.

Harry went back to his bag and brought out a jar of thick pale grey liquid that he would be using to paint several spells written in the language of the dead on the outside of the cauldron. The mixture was made of crushed, powdered bone, and water from a natural spring. The heat of the cauldron didn’t burn him, thankfully. As Harry began to dip his fingers into the jar and then draw around the rim and midsection of the cauldron, he felt the draw on his magic with every word he wrote. As he
near the end, the blue flames flickering below the cauldron turned purple, then red when he finished, burning higher and behaving very similarly to the flames he’d seen just the other night while performing his strengthening ritual.

Harry straightened back up, placing the closed jar back in his bag and then pulling several more jars out. The jars consisted of all of the precious and painstaking ingredients he’d been gathering and making over the last year. Harry spoke lowly in the language of the dead, stating that each ingredient was a willful offering that had been gifted unto him and he was gifting in return, before adding it to the cauldron. It was a slow process, but necessary.

Finally, Harry reached the end of his prepared ingredients and approached Phil, who stood quietly outside of his circle, looking fascinated and more than a little out of his depth.

“The stone, please.” Phil fumbled for a moment with his pockets before finally pulling out the philosopher’s stone and handing it over to Harry. Phil seemed like he wanted to ask or say something as Harry walked back over to the cauldron, it wasn’t until Harry pressed the stone to his lips and whispered a silent blessing before holding it over the cauldron that Phil made a sudden noise of protest, but Harry dropped the stone in without remorse, even as Phil grumbled about it being ‘a damn waste.

Lastly, Harry positioned his arm over the cauldron and with small flick of his wrist, wandlessly cut a deep scarlet divot into the sensitive pale skin of his forearm and spoke as the dark rivulet dripped steadily into the bubbling liquid.

{And with this blood, I bind soul to form, I demand this magic’s obedience to my will, and I bless the rebirth of balance} Harry’s arm slowly closed as he took a step back from the cauldron, sank to his knees, and sat back on his bare feet, his ritual robe pooling around him on the damp carpet of grass. Now comes the hard part. . .

Harry let the world around him slip away as his focus turned fully towards the cauldron before him and his own magic within. He began the intricate invocations he’d constructed and memorized in the language of the dead. The first part was devoted to declaring his right to wield the temperamental magic as the hand of Death, as well as drawing out the properties of the ingredients within the cauldron so that they might begin to mingle and mix together. It was a process that required little power and only needed to be spoken once, unlike the other parts.

At the end of the first section, Harry bent forward until his forehead kissed the soft cool blanket of grass. The contact drew a sudden pulse of energy from the buried stones of the circle. Harry’s magic awoke inside of him like a slumbering beast to answer the call of the energy from the stones and suddenly he could feel everything within the circle. A flicker in his stomach went willfully ignored as Harry mentally prepared himself for what was to come.
Harry continued to chant, his magic rising with every word, both urging his body to relax and tense at the same time. It curled inside of him and expanded until it had soaked into every single cell in his body and then it pulsed. Harry’s breath stuttered but his words continued to come out strong, he tried to steel himself and focus through the distracting sensations building like a tsunami on the distant horizon.

It was different from what he’d felt just the other night when doing the strengthening ritual. While that had been like a burning flame encased within his chest cavity, an internal burn that left him flushed and sweating, he could tell almost immediately that this instance would be different. Instead, it felt like he was immersed in a strong river with the current not pulling him in a singular direction, but instead swirled around him like an anxious, powerful beast, it moved through him. His fingers curled into the thick strands of grass to ground himself as he continued to chant, believing that if he didn’t, he would be swept up from his hunched-over position low to the ground and would float, immersed in the slow ripples of magic.

Harry completed another section finally, straightened up and tilted his head back so he was facing the inky dark blue sky. The star-flecked expanse above him wavered and lazily shifted in Harry’s vision, like the slowly rolling waves only seen from under the water. The swell and glide something enchanting and sensual as the movements mimicked the mannerisms of a lover. He chanted into the night air, breathing heavier than when he’d started and fingers trembling slightly.

Magic seemed to draw up from the earth and continue to feed into the endless rapture within Harry. His tongue curled around two powerful invocations and warmth poured down over his body and set his nerves afame in a way that had nothing to do with pain. Harry’s voice became thick and reverent as honey and wine coated his tongue and bloomed in his lungs. The spike in magic and pleasure combed through Harry’s breaths, making them leave heavier and more encumbered, and Harry’s body shifted restlessly, knees shifting apart slightly without meaning to.

The stars danced in his vision and his breath fogged in the night air. Harry felt his awareness expand beyond the physical world around him as the restless thrills and dancing warmth fed into the tension and low current of giddiness that was taking hold of the young raven. The words continued to pour out automatically as he lost himself in the never-ending flow of everything. Harry had never felt such an immense build of power and he felt like the edges of himself were unraveling under the gentle and insistent fingers of sensations, coming undone and like soon he would find himself unmade. His breaths came in ragged and he was on the precipice of his undoing, the chanting just a low undercurrent drowned out by the overarching tide of noise and energy.

Every inch of him, down to the smallest expanse measurable, was alive and singing and his head dropped forward until his chilling pale green gaze locked on the large cauldron before him. The power continued to grow inside of him until Harry felt like he contained a heavily compacted star within his small human body and that in a matter of seconds it was going to explode into a supernova. And then something inside of Harry that had otherwise remained untouched and
unaffected by his magic was suddenly connected and Harry’s very soul had communication with the magic. It became the heavy blast of wind to the precarious house of cards and Harry threw his hand forward as the tidal wave finally hit and the magic needed to be channeled or it would surely kill him.

Harry’s fingertips made contact with the cauldron and the magic gushed out of him and into the being within the cauldron. Harry trembled as the magic continued to flow and Harry vaguely noticed the grass within his circle flicking around like flames, not at all behaving as it should in the gentle wind. Tension was drawn out of his body with the release and his heart pounded hard with the heavy reverberation of a drum in his chest that shook his bones and pulsed behind his ears. The last of the magic escaped from his oversensitive, ravaged body and the magnetic like force connecting him to the warm metal surface ceased and his hand dropped immediately. Harry used the hand to brace against the ground and help hold him up as he watched the events unfold before him, barely able to keep himself up.

The red flames at the base of the cauldron suddenly grew and engulfed the entire thing until it melted away, leaving behind a large ball of rolling shadows and opaque black smoke that spun and twisted around the ball as it hovered in the air. The ball slowly lowered to the ground and became more and more translucent by the moment until Harry could spot a flash of pale limbs and dark hair from within it.

By the time the smoke finally dissipated, a figure knelt before Harry, only a foot away, in much of the same position as him. Harry gazed wide-eyed at the figure before him and took in every detail, breathing still labored and limbs quaking minutely. He was a young man, clearly no older than 18 at most with broad shoulders, endless smooth pale skin, and compacted with hard lean muscle that spoke of natural physical strength and athleticism. His eyes were closed but his face was a smooth, impeccable cut of hard planes, symmetrical bone structure, and immaculate fair skin. His lips were full, appearing soft but capable of a hard set at a moment’s notice. His hair was so dark it looked black in the night’s lighting, with a natural lax wave in the parted hair. Harry could also see the small dark dots of beauty marks all over him that were pointedly distracting.

And then his chest expanded with a sudden breath and his eyes opened and Harry couldn’t see anything else. A depthless dark blue that he swore mirrored the cloudless night sky above them. Harry held his steady gaze and even when he’d spent hours staring up at the sky from the Astronomy tower on clear nights, never had he seen a sky so dazzling. The enthralling dark gaze was framed by long black lashes and the small shadowy dot of yet another mole hiding just below the lashes at the bottom outer corner of his right eye.

And then, as a bit of Harry’s strength returned and he was able to straighten up without bracing his arms against the ground, he then seemed to realize for the first time that looped around Tom Riddle’s neck was the familiar gleam of the locket, but . . . that seemed to be the only thing Tom was wearing. With a sudden heat in Harry’s cheeks, Harry conjured a simple black robe and reached around Tom to pull the robe over his shoulders and conserve a bit of his modesty by pulling it closed around him.
However, the use of magic and sudden physical maneuvering that simple act took after his body and core had just been through so much seemed to have been too much too soon, as Harry suddenly felt light headed and his muscles gave a weak tremble before it all came crumbling down. Harry only had a moment after closing the robe to see Tom’s slightly furrowed brow of confusion before he made a noise that was somewhere between a small grunt and a sigh as he crumpled and ended up falling forward right into Tom, his face ending up right in the juncture of Tom’s neck as the man seemed to grab him on reflex and hold him steady.

“Harry!” Phil rushed forward with heavy concern in his voice and pulled Harry from Tom’s arms carefully. Harry went easily, limbs loose at his side and his head lolling slightly. “Are you alright? Don’t overdo it, okay kid?” The Auror fretted, looking Harry over as if he’d find a way to fix the teen right then and there.

“. . . Why . . .?” The rough, unused, baritone voice immediately caught both of their attentions and Harry looked over to see Tom still staring at him, looking disoriented, confused and thankfully nothing else—like, for example, genocidal. Harry gave Phil’s hands a thankful pat for supporting him, as well as a reassuring smile and nod when Phil sent him a questioning look, before pulling out of the man’s grip and moving closer to Tom once more—though, thankfully Harry saved face by staying out of the man’s lap!

“You have many questions right now, but I cannot stay for much longer and you need time to heal, recuperate, and regain your strength before we meet again. When you’re ready to hear the truth, ask and I will come to you.” Harry stated simply and even though he wasn’t sure how much time had already passed, but knew his was running out, he felt an overwhelming urge to stay. His gut clenched at the thought of leaving right then, it didn’t feel . . . right to go somewhere where Tom was not. Harry had never really expected to feel such strong concern for somebody who he didn’t consider family, but he supposed he did invest an abundant amount of time into this and leaving without really seeing the fruits of his labor flourish would of course have some effect on him.

‘You and he will not stray far from each other, young Harry. There is no need to fret your parting.’ Death soothed with absolute assurance. Harry supposed his companion was right, they still had important matters to discuss and Harry’s involvement had not entirely concluded itself.

From just beyond the veil, Death sighed at the naivety of his little necromancer.

Harry, slightly assuaged by his friend’s words, pulled away from Tom and accepted Phil’s assistance in helping him to his feet. His head swam once he was upright, but thankfully Phil seemed to have thought ahead and pulled out a pepper-up potion for him. Harry downed it in one go and felt the immediate effects of energy and strength once more returned to his limbs.
Phil walked Harry back over to the cup and Harry made quick work of pulling off his robe and totem and stuffing them back in the pouch before putting his shirt and shoes back on. Once Harry had everything essential back in his bag—not bothering with most of the ritual materials and ingredients as none of them were crucial and he didn’t have much use for them anymore—he turned his attention back to Phil.

“Take him back up to the manor and be sure that he rests as much as possible and eats plenty. Check his vitals and the health of his magical core every few hours to make sure there are no issues.” Harry glanced over at Tom, who was still watching him, but looked more and more out of it as time went on, the man would probably crash soon. “I give you permission to tell him anything he wishes to know about me and what I did to him. If he has any questions you can’t answer, send me a letter. I’m sure he’ll be curious, but if he wants to know everything that will have to wait until we meet again, face to face.”

“Harry, are you sure? Everything?” Phil sounded uncertain and slightly incredulous.

“Yes, everything. Although the hope is that he will be quicker to thought instead of violence now, it is best not to keep answers from him when he knows he’s missing something. Though, you will be watched over, so you needn’t worry about him being a danger to you while you take care of him.” Reluctantly, Phil nodded and took a step back, giving Harry room so he could use the portkey. Harry looked back at Tom once more, before he gave Phil a thankful look and grabbed onto the handle of the Triwizard Cup.

With a gut-wrenching twist, Harry left the quiet cemetery and was spat out into the brightly lit and incredibly loud entrance to the maze. When people saw the cup in his hands, their cheers increased triple fold and Harry had only a moment to try to regain his bearings before he was swept up into the crushing embrace of Sirius and Remus. While his adoptive parents fussed over him, Harry took a look around and saw that Krum stood next to his brooding headmaster, arms crossed and silent. Fleur was also with her headmistress, looking more than a little ruffled with leaves in her hair and dirt smearing her cheek. Cedric was absent, but Dumbledore then turned and told one of the professors to go fetch the boy and after a few minutes, Harry was relieved to see the boy come out of the maze looking a little embarrassed and worse for wear, but relatively unharmed.

Harry was starting to hear questions directed at him about what kept him so long, but before he could fumble away with his tired mind to try to come up with some explanation, Moody appeared next to Harry and shooed those trying to crowd him away.

“Can’t you see the boy is practically dead on his feet? He’s exhausted and probably pretty banged up. I take him up to see Pompfrey and then you lot can pester him to your heart’s content!” Moody barked in a no-nonsense tone. Sirius immediately began to protest but Harry raised a hand to stop him in his tracks.
“It’s fine, Sirius. He’s right, I’m a little bruised and scratched and dog-tired, but you know that Mediwitch will have me good as new within the hour. It won’t take long, so you and Remus should head up to the Ravenclaw common room with the others and I’ll meet you up there in a minute so we can celebrate properly.” Harry smiled, feeling an avid excitement in his system that had very little to do with winning the tournament, but no one else had to know that.

Reluctantly, Sirius agreed with Harry—though it took some finagling and a whispered excuse about really wanting some time and space away from the crowd for a few stolen moments before he had to partake, as well as the intervention of Anthony who had picked up on the situation, if only partially, and urged both men away to join the group of Harry’s friends. Dumbledore was still in the middle of making a grand speech to conclude the tournament while he and ‘Moody’ slipped out and made their way back to the castle.

Harry held no illusions about actually going to the infirmary, he knew that Voldemort had been planning on calling his Death Eaters to him after the resurrection, thanks to Phil’s intel, but they hadn’t been summoned and Barty would have realized that. So, when Barty started heading towards his office instead of the infirmary, Harry just quietly followed.

When they finally reached the office, Barty ushered Harry over to a comfortable chair and sat in the one across from him, expression bright and eager.

“What happened, Harry? You were gone for quite some time and Krum withdrew from the task fairly early but wouldn’t say why. Did something happen?” Barty probed, too impatient for much subtlety. Harry wasn’t there to play games, so he answered fairly honestly.

“Actually, yes. It turns out that the cup had been a portkey and transported me to a cemetery. Voldemort and one of his Death Eaters were waiting for me there.” He stopped there and waited for Barty to pry deeper.

“And?”

“And it would seem that Voldemort was trying to create a new and more powerful body for himself since the one he had was weak, barely human, and would not last long. He was doing it wrong, though.” Barty paused at his last utterance and his brow creased in confusion and curiosity.

“How so?” The man asked, growing less concerned with his assumed persona as they continued to talk.
“Well, Voldemort has had a . . . long-standing affliction, one that affected both his mind and body. If he were to try to regain a body without first fixing this affliction, the results would be dangerous and would only later lead to his ruin. However, thankfully, before he could do such, I stepped in and offered my assistance. I have a particular set of resources and contacts to aid me, and I was able to fix the problem and assisted with the rest of the process.” Barty’s brow puckered and he scrutinized Harry.

“And why exactly would you help the dark lord? He killed your parents and is the light’s biggest enemy.”

Harry pursed his lips for a moment before choosing his next words carefully.

“I believe, Barty, that everyone could use a friend in times of need.” The man tensed at his words, but Harry was standing and half turning towards the door before he could respond. “Oh, and I would suggest you soon turn in your resignation. Your lessons were undoubtedly interesting, but you cannot pretend to be Alastor forever and you are needed more by your lord. Besides, I really don’t think teaching children suits you.” Harry turned fully and began to exit the office. He was almost at the door when Barty seemed to thaw from his shock and blurted out the first question to pass over his mind.

“What do I do with Moody?” His tone sounded unsure, like he didn’t even realize he’d spoken aloud.

Harry cast the man a look over his shoulder, thinking of all the blunders he’d had to clean up over the year from that man alone. Sighing warily, Harry spoke in a flat tone.

“Ask Phil, I’m sure you’ll come up with something. Just remember, it’s all about timing.” Harry allowed his still-weak legs to carry him swiftly down into the empty Hogwarts halls on autopilot, only slowing when he was halfway to the dorms.

Ducking into an alcove to assure his privacy, Harry took several deep breaths and allowed the nights events and his own jumbled feelings elicited by them to finally come pouring in. Harry pressed a hand to his chest as he leaned against the cold stone wall to take some of the weight off his weak muscles. Harry distractedly fingered the fabric of his shirt just over where the locket usually rested and he wondered dazedly if the next time he saw Tom, he could trade his knowledge for the locket. He knew it no longer held the soul that had given him comfort for so long, but the object itself had become something of a calming influence and he felt bare without it.
Harry’s mind drifted to the successful ritual and for the first time that night, Harry reflected on the feeling of the ritual with a clear mind and his cheeks immediately inflamed with bright scarlet heat. Harry could even clearly recall echoes of the sensations that had his knees feeling a little weak. Harry hunched forwards and buried his face in his hands with utter embarrassment. Merlin, he’d- . . . it had been far more intense than any other time! And then there was Tom, who’d not only been there while he was still under the influence of the soul magic, but had also caught Harry when he fell on him because of it and he was still practically naked.

Harry groaned and crouched down with his face still firmly buried. Harry silently cursed Death, his bloody magic, suicidal tournaments, teenage hormones, resurrection rituals, stupid blasted moles, and dark captivating blue eyes that seemed to hold a magic all their own. Harry whined petulantly and let his head fall even further so that his fingers sank into his hair so that he could tug on the locks in frustration.

He needed a vacation.
Chapter Summary

Harry goes into the third task and makes it to the cup first. Harry shows up in the cemetery where Voldemort and Philias are waiting for him and he successfully completes the ritual, telling Tom to contact him when he wanted answers before leaving the cemetery. Harry returns and is announced as the winner of the tournament. Barty confronts Harry about Voldemort’s resurrection and Harry reveals that he actually helped Voldemort. Barty scoots it.

The antique grandfather clock’s hands ticked on in circles with the rhythmic assurance of a metronome. Contrasting the measured clicks were the chaotic and sporadic taps against the tall window panes as gales blew large rain drops into the glass and battered the manor in an early summer storm. Thunder echoed hollowly in the distance and the faint flickers of lightning shot light through the dark clouds and almost green atmosphere.

Tom watched the building storm from his window, his tangled strings of thought reflected quite ‘poetically’ in the turnout of the morning’s weather. The wooden frame of the window raddled and groaned against the wind. A soft knock had Tom turning as Philias Green slowly stepped into the room, closing the door behind him with his gaze lowered but spine straight.

It had been several days since the perplexing events of Tom’s resurrection. The first two days saw him all but confined to his bed as he recovered both inside and out. After that, Tom spent the next few days trying to sort through what had happened on his own, but eventually he reached the end of what he could conclude on his own with this limited information and summoned Green to him. It was time he got some answers.

“Sit.” Tom spoke as he made his way to one of the firm leather armchairs in his office, his tone was authoritative, but . . . not exactly unkind. Philias hesitated before taking the seat opposite him, nervous about what was to come but knowing he couldn’t avoid it. “I’m sure you know why I called you here, Green. You may work for Harry Potter, but you are still my-- . . . subordinate, and you will tell me everything you know about him.”

Phil felt like his stomach was turning inside out, he hadn’t had any contact with Voldemort after escorting the nearly unconscious man back up to the manor and putting him in his room and under the care of the house elves. Harry had seemed convinced that whatever he’d done to Voldemort would change him more than just physically and certainly implied a change of temperament, but Phil knew that Harry had never done something like this before—how could he—and so he couldn’t
exactly put all his faith in that.

He had to admit that Voldemort had definitely changed *physically*. The once wrinkled little homunculus form he’d held before was now an utterly *normal*-looking man—well, actually Phil didn’t know if he could really be called a ‘man’ anymore, since whatever Harry had done had made Voldemort look more like a lad barely out of Hogwarts! He was tall and well built, but there wasn’t a single line to his face and if he traded out the expensive pureblood robes for a Hogwarts uniform, he could have easily fit in amongst the sixth or seventh years.

More than the sheer astonishment from this feat, Phil felt . . . *disconcerted* by this development. If he’d learned anything from his time working with Harry, it was that he had a bit of a soft spot for children—as embarrassing as it was to admit—and seeing the man who could very easily kill him in one fell swoop looking like a bright-eyed lad practically still wet behind the ears, could get him into some serious trouble if he started to develop yet another guardian-complex for someone so dangerous.

Actively pulling himself from his troubling thoughts, Phil nodded and tried to quickly gather his words before he spoke. It felt entirely *wrong* to talk about Harry to the one who’d just recently been trying to kill the young Ravenclaw, but Harry had given him clear instructions to tell Voldemort—or ‘Tom’ as Harry so brazenly refers to him as—everything he wanted to know. Harry had even followed up a day later with a letter to Phil telling him once again that Phil wasn’t meant to hold anything back and that Harry would be just fine. So even though he didn’t want to, he really didn’t have a choice in the matter.

“Before your . . . *disappearance*, I worked for you, but I was still pretty young, had only just entered the Ministry as a rooky Auror and had almost no power or even skill, magically. So, when the Ministry started combing through its own departments looking for Death Eaters, I went unnoticed and was able to keep my position there without a problem. I had never really been given any orders other than to get into the DMLE, so when no one was running the show anymore, I just . . . stayed. I continued to work there and slowly climb my way up for ten years. Everything was quiet, until Harry Potter suddenly reemerged in the wizarding world. There seemed to be a new article about him in the paper everyday leading up to the first of September. Then he was sorted into Ravenclaw and nobody really knew *what* to think! On top of that, the boy turned out to be an extremely private person and no one had even gotten a photo of him until just before his second year.

“The first time I ever met Harry, though, was during his first year. He was only eleven years old and had shown up at the DMLE unaccompanied to ‘inform’ me that I’d be escorting him to *Azkaban* of all places! Since he’d already somehow had it cleared with my supervisor, I couldn’t say no and had to bring this strange, *quiet* little lad to a notoriously dreadful prison to visit his Godfather, who was believed to be the Death Eater that had betrayed his parents and killed a family friend along with many innocent muggle bystanders at the time. I had no idea what to make of the boy, but all I could say for certain was that he wasn’t normal.
“The next time we crossed paths was during Sirius Black’s trial where Harry had all but singlehandedly released his Godfather from prison to be his guardian, convicted Peter Pettigrew, and established himself as the young Heir to house Potter and Black. However, our meeting was brief and was over almost before it began.” Phil paused a moment and chanced a look up to see how Voldemort/Tom was taking in all this information. His brow was slightly furrowed, but he showed no signs of an imminent violent outburst, so Phil continued.

“At the beginning of summer last year, I received a package and a letter on my desk at the DMLE. In the letter, it said that the sender knew about me being a Death Eater and told me to meet them later that night to discuss payment to keep them quiet. I wasn’t about to allow myself to fall into the endless pit of blackmailing and being under someone else’s thumb, so I went to go meet them with the intent to either _obliviate_ or kill them. I’m sure you can imagine my surprise when I arrived to find none other than Harry Potter there, waiting for me. Harry told me that you were not, in fact, as gone as everyone thought and that you’d return. He also told me that you were unwell and that when you came back the war would start anew, many people would perish, and you would eventually be destroyed again.

“So, instead of bringing this information to the light, he decided to take matters into his own hands so to speak and help bring you to a more neutral ground where you hopefully won’t face your own end. I didn’t know how he’d gotten this information, or why exactly he decided to help you, for that you’ll have to ask him yourself. Of course, at the time I told him that he shouldn’t have anything to do with this, as he was only a child. However, Harry was quick to prove just how powerful and capable he was. He was telling me to trust him and the next thing I knew he’s turning his own wand on himself and casting the killing-curse.” Tom’s head snapped up and Phil found himself under the Dark Lord’s chilling dark gaze, penetrating through him as he sat forward in his seat, silently commanding him to continue.

“I panicked—_rightfully so_—and the first thing I did was check to see if the boy was really _dead_ and . . . he was. . . . Then, a moment later he opens his eyes and sits up like nothing had ever happened. In all my years, I’ve never seen anything like it. I mean, there’d always been rumors of the Potter child having survived the curse the last time you two met, but most people just chalked it up to exaggeration for shock appeal at the time, and I was one of them. But seeing it with my own eyes . . .” Phil shook his head, still unable to fully wrap his head around that night.

“I don’t know all the details of _how_ he does it, but one thing I can say with certainty—_Harry Potter cannot die_. Again, I don’t know why, but that boy is exceptional beyond compare and as much as I might wish to dismiss and not have to listen to him because of his age, it’s just not possible.” Voldemort lost to his own thoughts, but Phil knew he was still listening, so he carried on.

“I decided to help Harry, if not just to protect him, then to see what such a peculiar boy could do and if he could really pull it off. That very same night, I swore a vow of secrecy to Harry and then came to you. Over the months that I’ve been working for you, I have also been corresponding with Harry, telling him what you were having me do, your physical and mental conditions, and what you were up to. But even with me here, he always seems to know what’s going on before I could every tell
him. That’s another thing you will come to learn about Harry, I don’t think he has any seer abilities, but he tends to know things he couldn’t possibly know and can get around without ever being seen or heard.”

Voldemort’s straight, dark brow curved upwards. “The tournament?” was all he said. Phil sighed and pressed his lips together, looking almost bad for the man across from him as he nodded.

“Yes, he knew long before he returned to Hogwarts about the tournament and that you’d use it as a chance to get to him for your resurrection. The only thing he didn’t know, was when.” Voldemort’s stern look seemed to slowly drain into something resembling more of fatigue, Phil could sympathize.

“What about the ritual? He’d obviously done something very different from what I had in mind, but you were there to witness it, tell me what you remember of it.” Voldemort queried, hoping for something. Phil looked slightly sheepish before he answered.

“There isn’t much to say, I’m afraid. Harry may share some things with me, but he is very tight-lipped about the kinds of magic he does or how he gets his information. From what I remember of the ritual, it involved a lot of complex runes I didn’t recognize, and some sort of long incantations, but I didn’t understand a lick of it.” Voldemort cursed under his breath and one of his hands curled into a for a moment.

“Right before Harry left, though, he made me promise to answer all of your questions. He also told me that when you choose to, he will meet you in person to talk about the rest and all the things that I can’t answer. He’s on summer holiday now, so if you want more answers, I can write him.” Phil offered, already standing from his chair, eager to pass on the responsibility of explaining things to someone else. Not that he was exactly thrilled about leaving these two alone to sort out where they stood in correlation to each other, but Phil honestly felt like those two stood on equal platforms in ways he could never even hope for. Harry had told Phil in the beginning that if it came down to it, he could and would kill Voldemort, and say whatever you like about Phil’s judgment, but he believed him.

Voldemort stopped him with the raise of his hand and Phil froze.

“Not—Not yet. I have many things to think about first. For now, leave me.” Voldemort ordered distractedly as he rose from his own seat and moved back over to the window he’d been at when Phil had entered. Phil nodded to the other’s turned back and left quietly.

Tom rested a long-fingered hand against the dark wooden window frame as his midnight gaze swept over the rain-trodden countryside beyond his property. Slowly, his eyes drifted up to the unending
cover of dove grey cotton clouds above, the storm having settled to a drizzle. The wind was no
longer ripping leaves from the branches or rattling front doors in their frames. The gales within Tom
had also hushed, and with his eyes no longer squinted against their assault, he found the destruction
of his mind and memories left to collect dust and wore down over so many years of rage and
thunderclaps.

Now he had to sort through it all, figure out what was salvageable from the wreckage and what
would be left to fade with all the rest of it. He had to rediscover his lines and edges. He had to create
all new morals, because the ones he had before his horcruxes were those of a child; they were naive
and didn’t fit with all he knew now about the world, and the ones he had after his horcruxes had
been bent, skewed, and melted down to fit his own insanity and never-ending wrath. He wasn’t
suddenly some newborn child to be remolded into a saintly and pious man, but he was . . . lost. His
old behaviors and ways of thinking wouldn’t work anymore, and he needed to rethink what his goals
were going to be, what he wanted in this life, and how to get it.

Tom didn’t know how long it would take him, but until he knew with absolute certainty, he couldn’t
move forward. Until then, he wouldn’t seek out Harry Potter.

Soft pale green eyes blinked open, glossy like polished turquoise stones amongst the warm white
sheets, pillows, and duvet. Harry hadn’t just awoken, he’d been awake for hours—since the dark,
dusty purple morning hours—trying in vain to capture just a little more sleep. It wasn’t the first night
since summer holiday had begun that Harry had gone with only a few hours of sleep. It had been
weeks since he’d returned to Grimmauld Place and the comforting company of his guardians, and yet
. . . even as he sank into the relaxed routine of leisure and bright afternoons with his family, an
uncomfortable and anxious stone had begun to form behind his stomach, growing with each passing
day.

It made him restless and chased away the relent of sleep, leaving him too tired to do anything
productive to distract him, but at the same time too wound up to get any rest. He knew the cause, but
unfortunately, he also knew there wouldn’t be an easy fix for it. Ever since Tom’s resurrection, the
only thing that had occupied Harry’s mind was their next meeting. He’d done everything he could,
and now he had to wait to see if Tom would choose a new path, or continue down the road to self-
destruction. If he chose the former, they would meet, and Harry could continue to guide the other
man if he so chose. If he chose the latter . . . then Harry had no choice but to kill Tom and prevent
him from causing the world more ruin.

Harry softly groaned and turned over to push his face into the cool swell of the pillow. He had
dedicated so much time into this task, the thought of throwing it all away had his gut turning over
once again. With his eyes closed, his mind unhelpfully provided the vivid image of rich dark blue
eyes taking in the sight of his face, smooth pale skin marked by a few small dark moles here and
there. Treacherous, was the only word for his own mind right then. Harry quickly rolled out of bed, physically trying to shake the image from his head.

Phil had been sending Harry letters almost daily—which he appreciated more than he would admit, even if it was mostly the same news every time. Phil had told him when he’d been summoned to Tom’s personal office and had repeated a summary of everything he’d said to Tom during that meeting. Since then, Tom had apparently locked himself in his rooms and hadn’t been seen outside of them at all. Harry had made a reluctant Phil go and question the house elves about how often they brought Tom food and what they were feeding him.

Harry told himself it was purely concern for the recipient of his untested ritual and that he only cared about Tom’s physical well-being. Neither Phil nor his invisible companion seemed convinced, but they didn’t venture to question it. When Phil had reported back that the man in question was only calling the elves for one meal a day of less than acceptable nutrition, against his better judgement, Harry had intervened.

With the help of Phil, Harry had covertly met with the elves in charge of the new-bodied dark lord’s meals and had explained to them that their master was currently very weak and needed proper meals to recover quickly. Using the care-giving nature of the elves, Harry was able to convince them to work outside of their Master’s explicit orders to make larger, more healthy meals and to bring them at least three times a day. Harry purposely ignored any thoughts about what he would say or do if Tom ever discovered this fact and confronted him about it.

It didn’t exactly uphold the hands-off approach he’d been attempting while waiting for Tom’s decision, but he had to admit that it had gone quite far in appeasing the boiling anxiety. Unfortunately, though, it wasn’t a permanent fix. Soon he found himself once again going long nights without sleep or the opposite and sleeping for far longer than was normal, and thoughts of Tom never strayed far from his mind for too long.

By the end of June, he was driving Phil up the wall with his constant prodding for information and had to cut back significantly on his letters when the man threatened to send him a howler—Harry’s privacy be damned!

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Remus and Sirius were quick to catch on that something wasn’t right with Harry, but had difficulty approaching such a topic. Ever since they’d been reunited with the boy, they’d been thrown through hoops trying to figure out how to offer any sort of help or comfort. Harry . . . he tries, but they both knew he had problems with opening up to people or relying on them.
Getting the truth from the young Ravenclaw was like pulling teeth. They knew Harry had secrets, about his life before they took him in, secrets about what he was up to now, but they also knew to tread carefully. Harry was a very independent boy and might not take their prodding as concern for his safety. It was a mutual, unspoken truth that the pairs biggest fear was waking up one morning to find Harry gone, having left home. They knew that if they pushed too hard, Harry might think it better to go off on his own. Perhaps it was the paranoia of two men who’d had abrasive and/or neglectful home-lives as children and had left before coming of age.

They had been as understanding and patient with Harry has they could, and they knew that Harry cared for them, but even though they’d never talked about it, they could tell that Harry’s life before Hogwarts—before them—had been harrowing. Harry had already had that look about him when they first started living together: the look of someone who was here for today, but always had a way out. It was something that stayed with you for a very long time.

And over the last few years, they’d thought they would just wait until Harry came to them for help and advice, or whatever he might need. However, whatever Harry was hiding, it was affecting him now in ways that had begun to worry the two new parents. He was looking more and more tired as days went on, despite this being his break from school and supposedly time for rest. On several occasions either Sirius or Remus had gone looking for him in the library—as that was where he spent most of his waking hours—only to find him instead in the drawing room, a cold cup of barely touched tea set in front of him, and gazing unseeingly at the blank expanse of wall, not even noticing their arrival, eyebrows pinched together as he was lost in thought.

Sirius and Remus had begun talking at night about what to do. Sirius had wanted to just sit Harry down, tell him that they will love him no matter what, and then ask him what the hell was going on. Remus thought that that would just scare Harry off and that they needed to think it through thoroughly before they carefully broached the subject, making sure Harry knew that he didn’t have to tell them if he didn’t want to but also, they were worried about him, is all.

What the pair didn’t know, was that a floor above them, Harry was in bed listening to the silent council of his hallowed friend and turning over onto his back with a sigh.

_You’re right, before things become even more complicated, I should tell them._ Harry spent several more sleepless hours imagining just what he would say, what they would say, and then contemplating whether he could get away with saying nothing at all. It was an effective distraction from his other problem . . . but, unfortunately, not one that allowed sleep to come any easier.

Every moment he felt more and more anxious about finally being called to meet with Tom and he counted the hours endlessly, hopelessly, but he also knew that it meant he was slowly running out of time. If things went the way he’d hoped, then his days may become more occupied and he couldn’t excuse the missing hours for just needing time to himself or going to visit his friends.
It was more than that though, it wasn’t just about not having to come up with excuses for where he was. It was like there was this slowly growing ache in his lungs that begged him to confide in his parents. It was unfamiliar and perplexing in many ways to the young raven, but the more he thought about telling them, the more that ache eased and the surer he became.

These weren’t just friends, they weren’t just an avenue to release some of his stress by confessing his secrets, they were his family, and with each passing day that was beginning to mean more and more to him. These were his parents. Not the people who had conceived and loved him for his first year of life, no, and not the ones he physically resembled when he looked the mirror. But more his parents than Lilly and James were anymore.

He resembled his parents not in looks, but ways that mattered more to him—in his mannerisms and morals and personality. He recently discovered that even his laugh had changed, resembling Remus’ quiet, soft rolling laugh that always reminded Harry or the warm hours they’d spent together in Remus’ office when he still taught DADA and how close they’d grown during that time. He resembled Sirius in the way his nose would scrunch up a little when he smiled genuinely, or his open, dry humor that was a bit on the side of juvenile when he was in a lighter mood.

It had taken Harry a while to really understand it, but now he knew that parents and family had a much bigger effect on you than you realize and that when we allow it, we reflect the people around us like a stone. We aren’t mirrors that show only the other person before us, but we aren’t so dull as to show nothing but ourselves either. We have small and big facets facing all sorts of directions that show little bits of the world around us without overtaking our overall colors and dimensions.

This meant that Harry’s parents were a part of him that he would never forget or be rid of and he simply could not hide the rest of himself from them forever and he sincerely didn’t wish to. So, he would tell them, and soon, because his life was only going to expand and become more complex and it just wasn’t a question of whether or not they would have a place in it. He couldn’t move forward without them.
The Black Crow

Chapter Summary

Days after his resurrection, Tom summons Philias to him and has some of the blanks filled in about Harry. Though, ultimately not all of his questions are answered, and Phil tells Tom that if he wants to know more he’ll just have to meet Harry himself. Tom shuts himself away in his room to think things through. Weeks later, Harry has yet to have heard from Tom, but has been getting constant updates from Philias and even a few of the house elves residing at Riddle Manor. Harry is anxious about seeing Tom and as such has been restless and increasingly distressed. Sirius and Remus noticed and became more and more worried about Harry. Having put it off for long enough, Harry decides to confide in his parents at the next opportunity.

The passage of time could be a dreadful thing. The soft ticking of iron clock hands and the gentle sway of the pendulum never seemed steady or equally measured out when someone was listening. Harry closed his eyes and attempted to quell the rampant fidgeting of his limbs by purposefully dragging in and out his breaths to be out of sync and much longer than the rhythms of the clock.

As his thoughts quickly bypassed his attempts and consumed his attention once more, Harry sunk his blunt white teeth into the delicate warm flesh of his lower lip and sprang up from his bed to resume his pacing, imagining each step stripping yet another thin layer off the gleaming floorboards.

“Are you absolutely sure that this’ll be alright?” Harry hissed into the empty evening air as his cold thin hands wrung together, squeezing as if he could rearrange the bones under his skin.

There was a deep exhalation of air that ruffled a few small black curls atop Harry’s head, though the young man paid the disturbance no mind.

As I plainly told you before, it matters little to me whether you tell them or not. It will hardly change anything for me no matter the outcome. Harry huffed in annoyance, thinking that he probably should have gone to Anthony for advice. Instead of an immortal celestial representation of the end of all things. It wasn’t easy being mates with Death.

However, if you’re asking me about my opinion for what would help you emotionally . . . I hold very little doubt that those two wizards will continue to support you and if their support is so important to you, I’m sure you’ll have no trouble gaining their approval. Death added moments later with a slightly begrudging tone.
Harry ceased his pacing and took a bit of comfort in the rare offering of consoling words from his longtime companion.

“You don’t think it may be too soon?” Harry inquired tentatively.

If you are going to venture down this path with those two even partially aware, you will need to take action now as things will be changing rather soon.

Harry’s attention immediately shifted.

“Why? Do you know something? About Tom?” Harry’s questions whipped out and in his distracted state, the temperature in the room suddenly dropped dramatically and the lights overhead waned and flickered for a few moments.

With ease, child, it would serve no one to work yourself up and draw unnecessary attention. Harry exhaled roughly and forced a bit of self-awareness back into his frazzled mind, so he could reign his magic back in. As time went on and Harry grew more and more exhausted and agitated with each day since the resurrection, he found that his carefully maintained control on his magic had also been suffering.

There are no changes yet, but it won’t be long now, and you will need to be ready. Death amended, and Harry felt an unexpected wave of respite overshadow his apprehension. He straightened his spine and let his shoulders drop back into his usual refined posture as he took a few steps towards the door.

“Then I suppose I’d better deal with matters here first.” He spoke aloud, firmly, though it was more to himself than to his impassive friend. Harry didn’t leave himself another moment to hesitate and swiftly left the asylum of his bedroom to join the festivities in the lower levels of Grimmauld Place, where celebrations for his fifteenth year were just beginning. Death lingered in the room a moment longer, unmoving skeletal grin gleaming in the soft light as he watched his young protegee leave.

Tom will certainly have his hands full.
Despite Harry’s fierce determination at the beginning of the night to persevere through all the tiring interactions and social niceties, it didn’t take long for his resolve to disappear with his patience and he withdrew into himself much quicker than he usually did at such events. His mind had been poisoned by rogue thoughts, whispering to him all the things that could go wrong with the important conversation he was planning to have later that night. By the time everyone had sat down for supper, Harry had thought through dozens of different outcomes or questions and exactly what his responses would be.

Anthony ended up cornering Harry and wringing out of him what was wrong. When he explained to the blonde just what he was going to do and how worried he was, Anthony gave him a sympathetic look and offered to be there with him while he sat his parents down. However, as much as he appreciated the support, Harry knew it was something he needed to do alone and that they may not take it well if they find out someone else had been privy to such information about their own adopted child before them. Harry thanked Anthony, but told him that they should wait a while before bringing anyone else in.

Also—and Harry didn’t say this to Anthony—if Harry were to bring someone in to help explain things to Sirius and Remus, he’d most likely bring in Philius first. They might not trust a practical stranger who’d apparently been meeting up with their underage child behind their backs, but there was something to be said about the way adults trust each other’s judgment over a few teenage boys. Though, if Harry were to introduce them, he’s certain it wasn’t going to be anytime soon.

Eventually the night came to a close and everyone was sent home. Remus had apparently noticed Harry’s behavior and mistook it for feeling unwell, so he tried to send Harry off early before Sirius could try to suck them all into a few more hours of eating leftover cake sitting on cushions in the living room as they were known to do. However, Harry was quick to get the attention of both adults and ask them to sit with him by the fire instead. His serious demeanor had them shooting him curious looks but also not saying a word as they complied.

It didn’t begin as smoothly as Harry had hoped. There were a few false starts and he stumbled over his words a bit as the nerves got to him. Remus, though, seemed to catch on that Harry was planning on telling them something important and had offered his warm comfort by reaching over from his spot on the couch and briefly squeezing one of his hands. He told him to take his time and that they would listen to everything he had to say until he was done. Those words had gone a long way in helping Harry speak, and once he got going, it just rolled on out as if his mouth had disconnected from his brain and he was just a passenger in his body as the long tale unfolded.

He started with telling the truth of what had happened that night in Godric’s Hallow, not allowing himself a moment to linger on the way his two beloved guardians paled and had mixed expressions of part disbelief, part horror. This lead to his years after that night and unexpectedly, Harry found himself going off into a tangent about his relatives. He’d never thought he’d be revisiting that part of his past again—not willingly, at least—but it just came tumbling out unrestrained. Whatever came to mind was immediately output without any deliberation or delicacy.
But then his stories of isolation, resentment, and strict lessons with religious overtones became interwoven with his first encounters with his companion and later, magic. It was a surprise to both adults when he revealed he was a parslemouth, but Harry wasn’t very shocked they didn’t know, as it was a language he used sparingly, only when entering and leaving the chamber, as well as talking to the Basilisk. Besides, it is hardly the most interesting and rare language he was fluent in, minding the language of the dead.

Then he talked about his eleventh birthday and the gift he’d been given by Death. Hearing of his second death, Sirius closed his eyes and covered his face with his hands while Remus looked like he was fighting the urge to reach over and pull Harry from his chair, so he could hold him in his arms protectively like a child. Harry did his best to explain the parameters and process of his immortality, but he knew he wasn’t the best at explaining something that, to him, felt so intangible and inexplicable—though, perhaps at that point it was falling mostly on deaf ears.

The next few years were summed up sparingly, as Harry still wasn’t sure exactly what he wanted to say about the whole ‘Tom’ situation, so he went with saying nothing at all. Mostly, he talked about how Death had protected him and guided him throughout the challenging years and even played a big part in Harry reuniting with Sirius and Remus.

By the end he was left with two very concerned and bewildered adults.

“But what does . . . *he* want? Is this temporary? Will he suddenly take it away? Are there any side effects? Does he have you do anything for him?” Remus asked, leaning forward in his seat.

“It is hard to say what Death might want exactly, but I can say with confidence that he has my best interests and wellbeing in mind. No, it is not a gift he can take back. There haven’t been any side effects to my knowledge. And the only things he has ever asked of me have been for my own benefit and gain, it has also always been clear that I don’t have to do anything I don’t want to.” Harry tried his best to answer and appease his anxious parent.

Both adults continued to question Harry for quite some time and at a point Harry offered to allow them to safely meet and converse with his companion so that they might be able to ask more questions. However, when the room suddenly grew cold and the fire dimmed as his curious friend drew close, they both assured Harry that wouldn’t be necessary and the conversation soon shifted to something else, everyone feeling drained and emotionally wrung out from the intense moments of openness they all felt.

Harry could tell it would take them a while to even wrap their heads around what they had learned, much less come to accept it. They both seemed to be beginning to realize the magnitude of Harry’s
situation and what he’d been through. Despite this, though, they knew it would be impossible for them to completely treat Harry like an adult, even if he had every right to be, considering what he’d experienced.

Harry soon excused himself, knowing that the pair had a lot they wished to discuss with each other in private about what he had told them.

The gentle sound of wings beating the air and the sharp ring of a beak pelting the glass had Harry looking up from the book he was reading, expecting to see his owl had returned from her trip. However, instead of large pale feathers glistening in the midday light, he was mildly surprised to see a shock of pitch black. Curious, Harry approached the window just as the large crow had settled onto the old sill just beyond the glass. It couldn’t be an animagus, as the wards would never permit it to enter if it were, so Harry figured it to be just a regular animal.

Harry waited for the bird to fly away when he approached the window, but instead its head only tilted so that one of its glossy black eyes was trained on him. Intrigued to see just how brazen the animal would be, Harry wretched open the old window, ignoring the horrid screech the metal and wood gave when being forced into motion. The bird, however, didn’t fly away at the ruckus, it simply stepped over the lip of the sill so that it was mostly inside.

After a few more moments of them both just watching the other, Harry broke the stillness and extended his hand out to the crow and watched as the creature wrapped its feet around Harry’s hand, surprisingly mindful of its own sharp talons, with almost practiced ease. Harry wondered if the bird was perhaps trained to be so well behaved.

As the crow had been completely civil up until that point, Harry chanced a tentative stroke across its feathers and it was then that he noticed what had felt so off about it. Harry froze as he interpreted the odd information his magic was telling him. This crow was dying. He could feel it. As surely as he could feel the heat of a flame or brush of fabric against his skin. He knew that the crow was of decent age and quite ill. And, for some reason, it had come to Harry.

But just as he knew of the bird’s imminent demise, he knew that it had come to Harry because it was dying. Harry looked down at the creature still perched on his hand with a swell of understanding. This was just one of those things he couldn’t entirely explain, but also knew he held some sort of responsibility. Just as he had a couple of years ago when he had broken into Gringotts and ended the suffering of another unfortunate creature.
This was not quite the same though. The crow was in little pain and had not been abused and tortured as that dragon had been. As the dragon’s death had been a mercy, the crow felt more like a gift, an offering. Harry continued to soothe the crow and gently stroking its feathers as he moved deeper into his room, away from the window.

The crow seemed to revel in the reverent touches and Harry smiled softly and whispered words of comfort and assurance to it. Then after several minutes, the dark creature fluttered its wings and sat itself comfortably in Harry’s hands. Harry silently called out into the empty air and felt a disturbance in the space around him, his eyes never leaving the crow.

The crow’s dark eyes shut, and Harry leaned down to place a gentle kiss atop its smooth head, which then sank down onto his hand. He then carefully shifted the crow in his grasp and laid it gently in the awaiting skeletal hands. He looked up into the eyeless gaze of his friend.

“A gift.” Was all that he said, his friend nodding once and swept back beyond the veil where he belonged, Harry watched as the translucent barrier slid over the still little creature and it suddenly opened one glassy black eye. The veil thickened, and the last thing Harry saw before he could no longer see through it, was the flutter of onyx wings just as it took flight.

After several moments of deep thought, Harry was about to return to his book, when a familiar white owl came swooping through his open window. Harry smiled and quickly relieved the tired bird of the small note attached to it’s ankle. Half of Harry’s mind was still on the crow as he opened and began to read the letter—which was from Philias, he realized—but as soon as he processed what he was reading, all other threads of thought ceased.

The time had finally come, he was to meet Tom.

Harry dropped the letter on his bed and moved to his wardrobe. The letter from Philias had told him to come only when he was absolutely ready—the hesitancy in Phil’s words were not subtle—but Harry had been waiting for more than two months and he would not wait another moment, even if he weren’t really thinking about what he would say once he was actually once more face to face with Tom.

Harry sifted through his clothes looking for something appropriate to wear. It was midsummer, so the heat that day had led him to wear a thin white linen button down and light grey trousers, but the sudden news had his magic unexpectedly lively and uncontrolled, which was causing the air around him to plummet in temperature and knew that he could certainly stand to wear something a bit more formal and appropriate for meeting company. Harry quickly changed into clean clothes with thin dark blue robes over it in case the heat was to return, he wasn’t stuck in thick sweltering robes.
Harry was about to apparate out when he remembered his parents and left a hastily written note stuck to his door saying he had gone out to meet a friend. It had been several days since he’d confided in Sirius and Remus and they had yet to bring it up again to let Harry know where they stood on the matter and how they felt about it—though Remus did seem to have mostly accepted it, as he wasn’t avoiding Harry as much and had begun treating him mostly as he used to. Sirius, however, seemed to be having a harder go at things and would perhaps need more time.

Harry wasn’t completely comfortable going off on his own without telling them beforehand that he was leaving—not with how up in the air things were right then between them—but this was something he could not let wait any longer. So, with one last determined sigh, Harry turned on his heel and disapparated with a quiet snap.

The small village of Little Hangleton was colder and damper under the cover of thick dove grey clouds and fearsome gales of wind. Harry apparated to the edge of the Riddle property and only took a brief moment to glance around him at the surrounding area before he made a swift path towards the Riddle Manor that stood tall and impassive in the distance. He felt the wards hinder his stride as he passed slowly through them, like walking through molasses as they carefully checked over him.

Harry assumed that him being invited to finally meet with Tom meant that the wards had been altered to allow him entry, but if they were still so slow at clearing him, then the wards must have been very powerful. Though, he expected no less from Tom, he couldn’t help but wonder if the wards had been like that before the resurrection or if Tom had erected these particular wards afterwards. Harry knew that, logically Tom would be both physically and magically recuperated enough after two whole months to be doing any sort of magic or activity that he wished, but a part of him still held on to his deep concerns about him doing anything to overexert himself and would continue to do so until he could confirm in person that Tom was ready.

As Harry approached the set of large doors painted in a blue so dark it almost looked black, he cast out all other thoughts than just the present and preparing himself for meeting the newly resurrected Dark Lord.

Harry was met at the doors by a house elf with a low bow. It was one he recognized and had met with several times to ask after Tom and make sure the other was eating properly. A small flicker of heat warmed his cheeks at the reminder of his rather uncharacteristic fussing right before he was about to meet with the man who had unknowingly been subject to Harry’s worry.

Composing himself as he walked behind the excitable little elf, it was a full minute later that Harry began to even notice his surroundings and only got a good look at one long hallway of the Riddle Manor before he’d arrived at a nondescript door and was motioned in by the elf before it popped
Harry quietly entered the room and cataloged the space in moments. Steely grey blue walls, rich wood flooring, a single fireplace at exactly half the length of the room, a small table at its very center with a chair set up on either end. Other than that, the room was barren; no paintings, rugs, plants, other furniture or decoration of any kind. Absently, Harry wondered if the room was ever used outside of this instance as it was so sparsely furnished and the small table at its center was too small for any sort of meeting beyond two or three people.

The second thing Harry noticed, was that Tom was not seated at the table, but was instead off to the right, gazing out of one of the large windows. For a tense moment, Harry feared the other wizard had watched him walk up to the Manor and hastily tried to recall if he'd done anything embarrassing during those short moments when he didn't think there might be eyes on him. Fortunately, Harry then remembered that the way the room was situated, it would have its windows facing the land opposite of the long gravel driveway.

Harry waited silently several steps from the door, not planning to take a seat before it was offered.

Tom turned at the sound of the door opening and closing softly, and in the pale light of day, he caught his first proper look at Harry Potter. The last time they had been face to face, it had been under the veil of darkness and Tom had been too disoriented and confused to remember anything other than a flash of pale flesh and glassy, startling light green eyes. He had vague memories of a time before that, years ago when a piece of him had possessed a professor at Hogwarts, but since that had happened after his almost-death, those memories crumbled like sand between his fingers whenever he tried to grasp them too tightly.

His fair skin was smooth and even, like porcelain, though it looked soft to the touch and almost seemed to glow in the somehow flattering cool overcast light coming through the window. His features were elegant and without lines or wrinkles, but also sharp and attractive.

His expression was carefully blank, but even then, his eyes held such intensity. Cold, vibrant green bore into him, made all the more haunting by the contrasting black veil of long lashes. Those eyes didn't look real—in fact much of him didn't look real. As if Tom were examining the expertly crafted visage of a doll—it made it hard to look away, to not seek out imperfections for your mind to process that what you're looking at was, indeed, alive.

Tom's gaze settled on the soft violet hue curled under his bottom lashes, barely there like faint lilac petals had bloomed under his skin, but the sight did not bring relief. The proof that Harry was indeed there and real, and had obviously been troubled by some hardship that softened his stare into something more human and frail. Instead he felt curious about what it could possibly be that had chased away the young wizards sleep and then Tom was remembering that night again.
In his disorientation and fatigue, he distinctly recalled the way this strong—powerful wizard had fallen against him and he had to support him to keep the boy upright, it had been an instinctual response. Even though the wizard before him was maturing and coming into his height and build well, when they had been so close, pressed together, Harry had felt so small and delicate in his grip.

Looking now, he could see it even from that short distance. Harry's posture was straight, confident, with long limbs and a decent height for his age. However, looking past the other's prevailing and poised presence, there were many things about him that would otherwise contradict the image he tried to portray. For example, his long, slender neck and thin shoulders, his full round lips gave his mouth an innocent natural pout and were a dark pink like they'd been stained by sweets. His hands were small and thin and almost feminine in nature, like they had only ever moved with grace and been held with great care.

Unknowingly, Tom glanced down at his own hand as if to seek the differences. Although his hand was smooth and without callouses from his recent rebirth and apparent youth, it was certainly bigger, and the hard lines of bones and tendons made them look powerful and capable—imposing.

Catching himself in his own odd behavior, Tom resisted the draw to keep analyzing Harry's features and instead met the young wizard's gaze straight on. He made a low sweeping gesture towards the table and chairs he had prepared.

“Please, have a seat.” At the rich dulcet tones of Tom's low baritone, they both quietly took a seat and Tom waited silently for Harry to speak first, too curious to know what might be on the other’s mind to interrupt.

“I will say that I have been anticipating your invitation. I hope that my being here means you are ready to speak with me?” Harry asked calmly, looking completely at ease sitting across from someone so undeniably dangerous, however, if most of what Green had said was to be believed, then Harry was not one to be taken lightly either.

Harry knew what Tom was doing, letting the moments of silence stretch on. Tom wanted Harry to fill it, to come pouring out with all his answers without any sort of resistance. However, Harry’s objective was not to only share his knowledge with Tom and hope for the best. He was also looking for answers of his own. He needed to discern what the other wizard was thinking and what path he was looking at for the future. Harry had already concluded long ago that depending on Tom’s choices and actions after the resurrection would determine whether he told Tom the truth about his last remaining Horcrux still living within Harry, whether he supported Tom in his endeavors, or whether he deemed the other too big of a threat and had to get rid of him before he could mutilate this world any further than he already had.
Finally, Tom conceded and spoke up.

“Yes, well, I heard some rather interesting things from Philias and I can’t help but wonder if there is any real truth to them.” Harry’s dark eyebrow rose and touched one of the low hanging sable curls on his forehead. Tom was playing it safe, being vague in his approach in case he was wrong. Though, if they were going to dance around each other that early on, Harry feared he would never get the answers he needed. So, he cut past the rubbish and chose words he didn’t have to chew on long before speaking.

“I do hope he was able to answer some of your questions. I told him quite clearly to answer anything you asked. Although, I’ll be honest, I didn’t think he had enough to offer to warrant you waiting so long to meet with me. I assure you I have much more to say.” Harry caught the small tug at Tom’s lips as he turned slightly as if to hide the gesture. Perhaps it was a little early to be subtly scolding him, but Harry couldn’t help feeling a little upset still with how distressed he’d been while waiting for Tom to make up his own mind.

“Then I suppose we should actually start. Forgive me for making you wait.” There was a small atmosphere of rare, non-mocking amusement to his words that had Harry automatically relaxing and debating whether or not to respond in kind.

“The resurrection ritual . . . tell me what you did.” His words were not hard nor cold, just calm and curious.

This was the third time Harry would be revealing his secrets to someone—and in such a short amount of time too, considering how long he had kept them hidden for—however, when Tom asked his first question, Harry found that the words came easily and didn’t tighten nervous knots in his stomach or cause his fingers to tremble as they had the other times. Curious. Somehow, Harry didn’t believe that it was just Tom’s natural ability to coerce or manipulate that had made him feel at ease, as those things tended to feel very obvious to Harry in the past and always made his skin crawl.

“Well . . . when I heard that you were going to attempt to resurrect yourself, I knew I had to intervene.” He started, but paused at the slight furrow that appeared between Tom’s straight dark brows.

“Why?”

“Because I knew that the magic that you were attempting is incredibly complex and that there are little to no reliable resources out there for you to get it right. You were using methods from a very old form of soul magic, but one that had come from rumor and word of mouth, combined more
prominently with a form of transfiguration that is very dangerous. Over all the ritual was likely to either kill you or leave you horribly disfigured and magically crippled.” Tom seemed to absorb his words and took a moment to think before refocusing and speaking up once more.

“I can accept that, looking back, the ritual I had planned out probably would have been as dangerous as you said, but what I want to know is how? How did you know? And how did you find a ritual that would work this well?”

Harry took his time before answering.

“I knew it wouldn’t work because, through the guidance of a friend, I have been studying a far more reliable form of soul magic. As for the ritual itself, it was not something I found, rather, it was something I made.”

“Who is your ‘friend?’” Tom spoke quickly in the break between his words before Harry could continue explaining. If he was not talking about something serious, Harry might have been half the mind to smile at Tom’s sudden impatience.

“Now that is quite the question, isn’t it? My friend is someone who has been with me for almost my entire life and is responsible for pretty much raising me throughout a large portion of my childhood.” Harry paused briefly, scrutinizing Tom’s open expression for a few beats before diving right in. “Philias informed me that you are aware that I cannot die, correct?” Tom seemed surprised that he would be talking about something of such importance so soon, but Harry was not one to hold out for dramatics.

There was a short nod from Tom.

“Good. But what Philias doesn’t know is how. You see, the night you attacked me, we were not alone. Just beyond the shadow of the veil, Death had been there to see the both of us die. However, since he couldn’t take you, he decided to take action of his own and brought me back with the intent to one day give me a gift that would ensure the world would not fall to ruin so soon because of the mistakes you had made. Ever since that night, he has watched over me, guided me, protected me, and eventually befriended me.” He waited for Tom’s reaction, watching patiently as the other was quick to grasp the information he'd provide and come to his own conclusions.

“Which means that Death is the one who has been teaching you soul magic.” It wasn’t a question, but Harry nodded in confirmation. He was also glad that Tom had linked it back around to what they’d been talking about originally.
“Yes, I’ve been learning it for roughly two years now and that is what I used to create a far more reliable ritual. In short, I used a combination of runes, soul magic, and a potion to bring you back.” Harry hesitated for the first time in their conversation before he went on. He hoped his impression of the man across from him so far wasn’t wrong, or what he was going to say next could turn out quite disastrous. “However, no matter how much time and effort I put in to creating the perfect ritual to restore you to your peak physical and magical condition, it would have would have all melted away like wet clay in a river had there not first been a solid foundation for the body to form itself around.”

His carefully spoken words caught Tom’s attention and had him settling his deep, dark blue gaze on Harry.

“What do you mean?” His words didn’t have the dangerous bite Harry was expecting, which at least allowed him to hold the others stare without faltering.

“I mean that soul magic is finnicky stuff and I’ve learned that it is at the core of all magic. Something that is not widely known, is that the soul and magic are not the same, but so closely interwoven that one cannot be without the other for those of us born with magic. One way to look at it would be a sponge. If the soul is the sponge and magic is the water, then without the sponge the water would simply slip away, formless and without anything to properly wield it. On the other hand, without the water, the sponge would dry up and become brittle and unusable. For someone with magic, the same could be said. All past experiments and explorations of wizards attempting to forcibly take magic away from another by draining their core, have all resulted in that wizard’s death. Now, if a wizard were to damage and remove portions of their soul, it would mean causing a complete unbalance of the mind and body and would result in a large portion of that person’s magic becoming untethered and therefore unusable.” Harry could tell as he spoke, that Tom knew exactly what he was referring to.

“The Horcruxes. That’s why it feels this way. Like I’ve been half asleep for years—decades even—and only now feel like I can think again. I’ve never felt stronger or more in control of myself before this.” Tom sounded like he was speaking more to himself than to Harry.

“I figured just as much, that it would have this type of effect.” Harry’s voice brought his attention back to the conversation and Tom leaned forward in his chair slightly. Harry was surprised that the conversation so far had been so civil, and he had yet to see any sings that might point towards Tom being unstable anymore.

“How? How did you undo the Horcruxes?” Harry could hear more behind his words, something he wasn’t asking, but only just. He wanted to know what this meant as well, was he no longer out of Death’s reach? For a moment Harry wanted to say ‘no’ that Tom had one Horcrux left and that he shouldn’t be afraid, but he knew that he couldn’t, not quite yet at least.
“Soul magic. I tracked down the Horcruxes and when I had them all, I placed them all in one singular vessel.” Harry remembered that summer afternoon when he’d done his first bout of soul magic on a large scale and the memory of how it had . . . affected him had heat rising in his cheeks but he avidly ignored it as he went on, forcing the memory down so that he could focus. “With them combined, I kept them close and protected while I waited for the time when I would need to perform the ritual and could combine all the Horcruxes in with the original soul so that the rest of the body had something solid to form itself around.”

Harry watched as Tom lifted a hand to the collar of his clean dark robes and gently pulled on a familiar gold chain until the gold and emerald locket came free. Harry himself was shocked to find how much he missed the locket. Even if he knew most of his comfort had come from what had been housed within the locket for so long, the locket itself felt so familiar to him now and had been a source of comfort and strength for so long that it was hard looking at it only a few feet away, knowing it had been warmed under Tom’s robes and that he would perhaps never feel the smooth surface under his fingertips or the weight of it against his sternum as he slept. Seeing as the locket was also a Slytherin heirloom and was clearly important to the other man if he was wearing it even now, he doubted he would ever be able to ask for it in the future, no matter how good of terms they are on later.

Tom spent a long time staring at the locket, brows furrowed, lost in thought, but this time Harry let him be without interruption. Tom had a lot to think about and rushing it would help no one.

“Why are you helping me?” Tom didn’t look up for a moment as he spoke, but when their eyes did meet, Harry felt slightly overwhelmed by the intensity he saw there. It didn’t feel like they were several feet away in an almost uncomfortably large, empty room. No, it felt like Tom was only inches away and it was doing dreadful things to Harry’s composure and focus. Harry felt a low current of warmth and he suddenly wasn’t sure if it was Tom’s magic, which he knew from experience to be smoldering like a small compressed sun, radiating immense power, or if they really were as close as it felt and what he was feeling was Tom’s body heat. Either way, it was quite distracting.

It took Harry a moment to gather his thoughts and even had to look away to clear his head a bit before he looked back up and was able to actually answer Tom.

“Because you made a mistake. . . You were young, trapped between two worlds, both at war, and you were scared. You were scared and, so you sought out a solution, but it was misleading and deceptive. I’m helping you because you lost yourself somewhere along the way and I need to know if Tom Riddle—not Voldemort but Tom—can survive this world without giving in and devouring himself to get rid of his fear.” And now it was Harry’s turn to let his stare settle heavily on Tom and the other shifted his eyes down to where one of his hands rested on the table.
“I don’t care if you wish to live a quiet life, or if you want to follow your ambitions and bring about the biggest change to our way of life that the wizarding world has ever seen. I’m not here for my own political goals, because I have none, I’m not here for my own moral’s sake either to try to turn you ‘good.’ I’m here for two reasons, one to make sure you don’t destroy this world out of fear, and two, because Tom Riddle deserved better than this. Say what you will about my motives, but I’m not here for my own personal gain, I’m not here to guide you to the light, I’m not here to be your moral compass or to convince you to be a good person. I have laid the pieces out in front of you, it is up to you to mend them. I’m not going to fix you, Tom, that isn’t my job.” Tom looked up and something heavy crossed the space between them and settled over their shoulders.

Harry let the silence draw out for a while before asking a question of his own for the first time since they started talking.

“So, tell me, in the two months that you’ve been on your own, what did you decide? Now that your Horcruxes are gone, are you going to keep trying to find ways to make yourself invulnerable? Are you going to continue trying to conquer this world and get it under your thumb so that it can’t bite back, or are you ready to let go of your fear and not allow it to consume you anymore?” Harry asked. They weren’t easy questions, and he hadn’t planned on asking them so outright when he’d arrived. He’d hoped to subtly coax out the answers he needed without Tom knowing what he was doing, but after explaining why he had helped Tom, he felt too open; the atmosphere was too thick and raw for him to pull any punches right then.

It had been a risk to be so forward and invasive with Tom, especially when he wasn’t sure of the others character after the resurrection, but he was feeling more confident when Tom didn’t immediately close off at his questions.

Tom released a breath and Harry could tell that this was something he’d thought about a lot in the time since they’d last seen each other. It was a promising sign. If this had been the first time that Tom had thought about it, it would be likely that he felt no regret or remorse for his mistakes—would have perhaps not even seen them as mistakes.

“What happened before . . . I cannot hide behind the excuse and say that it doesn’t count for anything because I wasn’t myself. I did terrible things, I made mistakes that will never leave me, and I can’t promise that I will be able to fully atone for them, but I can promise that they will never happen again. Death is not something I can avoid forever and in the most literal sense, it has found me; in the form of sending you to me. I cannot yet say what will become of me in the future or what I will decide to do, but I know that I never wish to fall so low again. I believed that because magic can do anything, that it meant there was no limit to what I could do—I didn’t think about whether there were certain things that no matter how tempting they are, shouldn’t be touched.

“I just . . . I was terrified that one moment I would be here, with plans for the future, desires and goals still unfulfilled, and then the next I would be gone and none of it would matter. To think that
this breath could be my last, or that song, or that laugh, or that drink. The possibility that when it all ends, that there could be just nothing and I could be stuck, in the darkness, alone. Thinking about it had nearly driven me mad, but now . . . now I know that there are worse things than death.” Harry’s jaw clenched as he watched Tom, seeming almost unaware that he was talking aloud.

There was an unfamiliar earnestness in his dark eyes that pierced through his chest and for some reason he felt like if he were someone else, he would not have seen this, that Tom would not behave like this. Tom would not have shown this to someone weaker than him, it was hard to describe but Harry understood it, strangely. Because of their strength, because of their power, they could be honest—they could be vulnerable around the other. Harry didn’t need to use Tom’s fears to overpower him, and Tom didn’t need to use what Harry cared about to attack him. They didn’t need to hold blades to each other’s throats because they had something stronger that could do far more damage.

But even still, Harry had gotten his answer. He could feel the approval of his companion in the back of his mind, reassuring him that he wasn’t letting his emotions get the better of him and that Tom was being genuine.

Once he felt that he’d given Tom enough time to sort through his thoughts, Harry spoke up in a lighter tone than before to work as a gentle hand to guide Tom out of his own head.

“It’s not.” His words brought confusion to Tom’s expression and he offered a small smile, just barely a tug at his lips. “You said you wondered if, after you die, it’s just going to be darkness and nothingness, but it’s not. I’ve died quite a few times and I assure you that the afterlife is not to be feared. To be honest, it’s almost hard to leave it each time, it so indescribably beautiful and peaceful. It captures the most dazzling and marvelous parts of this world and embodies it to the fullest.”

“Then why do you come back?” It sounded like the first thing that had popped up in his head and Harry’s smile deepened when he saw the small flash of what could have been a wince or embarrassment in Tom’s expression. The question sounded insensitive, but Harry didn’t mind.

“Because I have things I still wish to do here, and . . .” His gaze turned to the window, catching the lush green tops of trees and distant hills, “This world can hold just as much beauty if only you allow yourself to see it. Things are wondrous, not because we look at them and deem them that way, not because we allow them to be—they will be wondrous whether we think so or not, it is our choice to understand it and see it, or to ignore it. I am still learning to see.” When he looked back, Tom was watching him.

He didn’t want to break the moment, the air heavy with something he couldn’t quite place, but he had one last question. When he spoke, it came out as almost a whisper.
“Do you still fear death, Tom?”

However, that feeling lingering in the air didn’t dissipate or crumble, the words simply floated through it like fog and reached the other a little slower than they should have.

“No.”

Something brushed over his shoulders and an easy breath loosened itself from his lungs. He once again felt relaxed—almost serene—sitting across from Tom. What he said next was easier than he’d thought it’d be when he’d left Grimmauld Place earlier.

“Not all of your Horcruxes were used in your resurrection. One was left out.” Tom tensed, and a wash of conflicting emotions crossed his face, but whatever he settled on, didn’t look quite like relief—more like, concern? “It won’t affect you, physically, mentally, magically since it was the smallest one you had created and is less than one percent of your soul. I’m sure you weren’t even aware of its existence before now.” Tom seemed dumbfounded—well, as dumbfounded as someone can look when they’d all but mastered the art of composure and self-control—by this news.

“Why would you—how did you—Why?”

“Because, I put a lot of time and effort into saving you from the brink of complete destruction and it would be a shame for all of that to go to waste if you were to get hit by a bus or accidentally ate some expired meat or something.” His light attempt at humor didn’t penetrate Tom’s shock, but then again, he really didn’t expect it to. “And you needn’t worry, it is as safe as it can be. Only I have access to it.” He heard a short, amused huff from the back of his mind, but ignored his friend.

“Where?” At Harry’s faint smile, Tom blinked several times, still as confused as ever.

“Exactly where you put it, fourteen years ago.” And with that, Harry reached up to gently touch the scar that he would never lose no matter how many times he died and came back. Tom’s eyes brightened with realization, though he still didn’t seem to know how to feel about it. Harry’s expression became more serious then.

“For as long as I am your Horcrux, there will be a way for me to bring you back. . . However, I am just as capable of leaving that piece behind in the afterlife should I choose to and make you actually mortal. I of course will never hold that over your head as a threat, since destroying your last Horcrux
can’t kill you, I hope that you never mistake it as a threat and misunderstand my intentions. I just hope you understand that you are not invincible and if you decide to go back down that path you were on before, I will not hesitate to do what needs to be done—everything else is your choice.” Harry said, and the strangest thing happened, Tom almost looked relieved by his words, as if the thought of being bound to immortality and Horcruxes permanently had frightened him. Then again, he could only imagine how horrible they had been for him before, or how hellish it had been to drift bodiless and helpless for a full decade.

“Then I will trust that it is in good hands.” Tom said smoothly, appearing more relaxed than before. Tom smiled easily at the other boy and Harry suddenly felt a soft brush of warmth up his spine at the sight, accompanied by the ever-pleasant low baritone of Tom’s voice that tickled the insides of his ears.

Seeking a quick path out of the lingering words of trust and commendation, Harry snatched one of the absent thoughts that had been floating around his head for so long that he didn’t really think twice before giving it voice.

“Actually, while I’m here I’d really like to check you over to make sure everything with the resurrection ritual went alright. Considering that the ritual was something I had constructed, there was no way to properly test it all the way through and I’d like to be sure that everything is working properly. Would you mind terribly if I indulged my worries and did a short work up? Nothing too invasive, I promise.” Harry spoke quickly, already standing up and preparing to round the table on Tom. He was determined to do his examination whether Tom liked it or not. Harry had been driving himself up the wall for two months now, aching to get a proper look at Tom to be sure that his spells and preparations had worked.

Tom quirked an eyebrow but already amusement was tugging at his lips. Remembering his few trips to the infirmary during his Hogwarts years, Tom merely expected for the raven-haired boy to cast a few examination spells and be done with it, so he nodded in assent. However, when Harry pulled his wand out, it was to cast a tempus charm and set it on the table with the time still hovering above the tip of the wand.

Harry then stepped up to Tom, who was still seated, and reached for his arm but paused at the last moment.

“May I?” the other boy looked confused, but raised his arm slightly and allowed Harry to gently grasp his wrist. Tom remained still as he felt soft, slightly cool fingers slip under the edge of his sleeve and seek out the thrumming vein just below his palm. Suddenly, he realized that Harry was going to be checking his vitals, by hand, as he either didn’t know the healer spells, or knew the muggle way better. Tom blinked and unconsciously swallowed as he shifted his gaze away from the other boy’s face, which was far too tempting to examine, this close.
Harry pressed his fingertips into Tom’s pulse point and turned his attention to the tempus still being displayed above his wand and began to count the beats, and keeping in mind the rhythm and strength of the pulse. He was glad to note that there were no irregularities in the rhythm and that Tom’s resting heart rate was strong and steady.

Harry was already moving on from there, absorbed in collecting and remembering data instead of his proximity to Tom. Squeezing his fingertips to check capillary refill and make sure that his circulation was doing alright.

Harry asked Tom questions as he worked: was he experiencing any numbness or weakness in his limbs or muscles, how much and how often was he sleeping, how often did he eat in a day and how was his usual apatite, had he used his magic yet, was it working properly for him and how long did it take him to reach magical fatigue, did he have any health concerns or things that seemed odd? Tom was fairly good at answering all of his questions, as the wizard seemed quite in tune with his body and had been keeping an eye on his health well enough—though not as closely as Harry would have hoped.

Harry signaled for Tom to lift his chin by giving it a gentle nudge with his knuckle and then bent down a little while his fingers prodded and pressed along the softer underside of Tom’s sharp jaw to feel his lymph nodes. Once he was sure the lymphatic system was just fine, Harry turned his face towards Tom’s and pulled his chin down slightly so that he could get a good look at Tom’s eyes, trying to get a glimpse of his pupils and make sure they were working alright, as it might indicate something was wrong with his brain or nervous system if they didn’t respond right.

However, it seemed right at that moment, Harry came out of his own head and his focus on tests and data shattered as he realized just how close he was to Tom and the position they were in. Tom was still sat in his chair, head tilted up at an angle and Harry bent down over him, their faces only inches apart and captivating dark blue eyes having arrested him. Harry was once again reminded of the night of the resurrection, when he’d first looked upon Tom’s face and had been enraptured by him.

Harry’s lips parted every so slightly, eyes wide as he tensed, as if afraid he’d sway closer if he didn’t hold himself rigid. His gaze moved from the penetrating beam of midnight blue to the dark little mark at the corner of his eye and sliding down the smooth, flawless expanse of alabaster until it found another little dot on his jaw, and then another just barely visible from that angle, disappearing around the bend of his sharp bone structure. Harry felt gentle whisper of breath along his chin and skating under to brush down the skin of his throat and slip over the collar of his robes. From this close he could smell the clean and alluring scent of eucalyptus and something deeper, richer that he couldn’t name but desperately wanted to know right then.

Harry’s gaze moved back up to Tom’s eyes, which had not left him once and seemed to have been
looking back at him just as avidly. After a few more pulses, Harry blinked and straightened up, out of Tom’s personal space. He could feel the heat tickling up throat and blooming high on his cheeks. Tom turned his face away slightly and coughed into his hand to clear away some of the tension that had grown moments before in the silence. Harry didn’t think he imagined the slight color in his face as well, but he wasn’t exactly looking at Tom’s face anymore, instead looking somewhere off to the right.

“Thank you, I think that was enough to answer my worries. Your vitals are strong and healthy, from what I can see, there’s nothing to worry about. Though, I will still suggest that you be sure to eat proper meals regularly, get more sleep on a regular basis, and do not overexert yourself magically. It’s only been two months since you did the impossible and essentially came back from the dead, it would be alright to take your time and allow yourself rest every now and then.” Harry spoke as he turned around to pick up his wand from the table and stuff it back in his robes.

“If you don’t have any other immediate questions, I think I should be on my way, as I have people expecting me to not be out for too long.” Harry was already walking towards the door without looking back, feeling the heat in his cheeks grow with every passing moment. However, before he made it out of the room, Tom called his name and, hesitantly, he turned to find Tom standing as well, looking a little out of his depth and not quite sure what to say.

After a moment, his shoulders dipped a little as he didn’t seem to find the right thing to say exactly and just came out with it, not nearly as guarded and composed as he had been at the beginning of the meeting.

“Tomorrow-- . . . would you be able to return tomorrow at around noon?” No talk of unanswered questions or more to discuss, just a simple invitation. After a moment, Harry blinked and nodded, looking at Tom once more before slipping from the room before his brain caught up with him and did something stupid, like turn the offer down. This was just their first meeting, there would certainly be more to follow. Harry left the Manor in a daze, barely being of enough mind to get himself safely apparated back to Grimmauld Place.

In the raven’s absence, the remaining boy dropped heavily into his chair, eyes blankly watching the empty chair across from him. His mind was still buzzing with what it had learned, but most of all, it was reeling from the thunderstorm of a boy that had just left him. He wondered if his absence would always feel like the content and fatigued lull after a ravaging storm.

He turned his head and looked out the window, searching for what the other boy had seen earlier when he had smiled so softly, wistful, and his words danced through his head like bells.

“Things are wondrous, not because we look at them and deem them that way, not because we allow them to be—they will be wondrous whether we think so or not, it is our choice to understand it and
see it, or to ignore it . . .”

“I am still learning to see.”
Dad-Hugs

Chapter Summary

After Harry's birthday, he finally tells his parents about his immortality, but not about Tom. Harry has a curious encounter with a crow. Tom finally invites Harry over to talk. Harry tells Tom everything, including that Harry is Tom’s last horcrux, so he’s also still technically immortal. Harry and Tom play doctor, things get tense in the best of ways. Tom invites Harry back the next evening.

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone! Just a short chapter this time. I know my updates have been pretty infrequent lately and I'm sorry about that, especially now that we've reached the parts we've all been waiting for. I hadn't really thought much about what I wanted to do with the plot outside of what is going on between Tom and Harry, so I felt kind of stuck and unsure about how to proceed. But, I've sat down and thought through basically all of the plot that I want to happen in the next year at Hogwarts so I'm a lot more confident about moving forward!

I can't guarantee that I'll update more often again or that they'll be regular, but I just wanted you all to know that I am still working on this and I won't just up and abandon it any day now. We've come so far, almost two years and +200k words! That's insane! I never thought this story would become this long or be so well liked! I want to sincerely thank everyone who has come this far with me and stuck with me despite all of the times of radio silence. I hope everyone is having a wonderful evening and a happy new year! Thank you again, I love and appreciate every single one of you and am excited to go into the new year and continue exploring this strange and wonderful world of Harry Potter.

-Pleasant Readings!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Harry pursed his lips at his reflection and picked a bit of near-invisible lint off his sleeve before deeming his appearance appropriate for the meeting he was about to have. It was only a few minutes to noon, but Harry knew that was all he needed to apparate to Little Hangleton and find his way through Riddle Manor to have his second meeting with Tom. Actually, Harry had been in the process of getting ready all morning, but had purposefully kept himself as busy as possible with making sure every little detail was perfect, in order to prevent himself from arriving much too early and putting himself in an awkward position.

Only a day had passed since their first meeting, but Harry was almost just as eager to go back and
continue to ‘get a feel’ for what Tom was thinking. In all honesty, their first meeting had gone far better than he’d expected. He thought Tom would hang on more desperately to what he knew in order to ground himself, that Harry would have to pry his beliefs and thinking models from his stubborn grasp but the Tom he’d met yesterday seemed reluctant towards his past-self. Harry really hoped that was the case. He dared to hope that he wouldn’t have to destroy what he’d spent so long trying to mend. To him, it felt like he’d spent months tending to a sick, broken bird, waiting so desperately to one day see it fly. . . Only to have to snap its delicate neck because it pecked at him. Harry swallowed hard around the stone in his throat at that thought and straightened his robes as he looked to the clock.

With it being time for him to leave, Harry stepped away from his mirror and was about to apparate when there came a knock on his door.

“Come in.”

Sirius slipped into his room, expression solemn.

“Harry, can we talk a bit?” He asked. Harry hesitated at the sudden request from his parent. For, he could sense that this conversation wouldn’t be a short one and Harry would surely be late to his meeting. But Sirius had been oddly quiet over the last few days and Harry could recognize that the conversation was going to be important. He nodded and gestured toward two armchairs he had in his room that faced each other. They took a seat and Harry allowed his mind to go blank of any other duty he had that wasn’t listening to Sirius, as he didn’t want to give the other man even an inkling of his drifting attention.

“You and I haven’t really talked since . . . since you told us about your abilities. Now, I’ve done a lot of thinking over that time and I want you to know my thoughts on the matter. I know I haven’t been a parent for very long in the grand scheme of things—most parents get quite a few years of childhood before they have to be ready to deal with more important things—so I know I’m not the best at knowing what I’m supposed to do. Especially with you, Harry. From the moment I met you again, it was clear you’ve been doing things on your own, your way, for quite some time and I had no idea how I was supposed to support you, to give you what you needed.

“Over time, though, I realized that you are still a kid and even though you can take care of yourself for the most part, that doesn’t mean you should have to. There’ll be times when you know you can do something on your own, but you know it would be easier and less burdensome to have someone do it for you, or at least be with you to have your back. . .

“I realized that that’s what you coming to us was. You’ve been handling it on your own for years without a problem, and you could probably continue to do it for years to come, but you allowed us in and now you’re not alone.” Sirius’ dark eyes were earnest as he held Harry’s gaze, even if his
expression was tinted with an inner pain.

“I’ll be honest, hearing what you had to do and what you’d been through . . . it was hard. And although I’m sure I can’t understand all of it fully, although this thing with Death and his ‘gift’ are confusing and thoroughly terrifying, although I know that this isn’t everything and there are things you’re still holding close to breast right now, I need you to know something. Even though it wasn’t easy to hear, you need to know that I will have your back. I need to make sure you understand that no matter what you tell me, or what you do, I love you Harry.

“I didn’t understand what it meant ‘unconditional love’ before I became a parent, because even my own parents had never held such feelings for me. I’d grown up believing that all love was conditional, some love was just stronger than others and could withstand a lot more. Like with your father, James, I knew that I cared about him enough to do most things—would even kill or die for him. But even then, that love wasn’t entirely without limits. But with you, Harry . . . I understand it . . .

“You are my child and I know my love for you is absolutely unconditional. I didn’t know what that meant before, but I do now. Not only would I do anything for you, I would do the impossible, because you’re my son and that is a magic all its own. So, I don’t want you to ever worry that something you say or do will ever change that.” Sirius quirked a small, genuine smile that somehow seemed so much brighter than any of the joyous, blinding grins he always donned. “Being a parent means that, in my own way, I’m a bit invincible too. So, don’t ever be afraid to lean on me or even hide behind me, because there are more ways to get hurt than just physically, and you may have a guaranteed way back to the land of the living, but that doesn’t mean you should always have to put it to use.”

When Sirius finished speaking, Harry didn’t say anything, but Sirius seemed to already know what he wanted because he stood up opened his arms to his son. Harry jumped up and was in the other man’s arms in a flash. He had grown quite a bit in the last year and was only a few inches shorter than Sirius, so he had to duck his head a bit to bury his face in Sirius’ shoulder, lip clamped between his teeth while he took in his adoptive father’s warmth and scent of firewood and the shortbread cookies Remus had made. He felt just as much as heard the deep chuckle resonating through the chest close to his cheek. Sirius stroked his back with one hand like he was a child, while the other soothed over his onyx curls. Harry didn’t mind the gestures, they made him feel safe and comforted.

After a moment, Harry withdrew from the embrace and offered his adoptive father a thankful smile. Sirius clapped a hand on his shoulder and kept it there as he spoke.

“No, I don’t want to ruin it if and when Remus comes to talk to you later on, but I promise he feels much of the same. We were going to sit down together to talk with you, but I think it’s better to have a little one-on-one talk in private in case you have anything specific you want to tell either of us and also because I knew I had a lot to say just from me.” And after Harry nodded his head in
understanding and gratefulness at being able to hear from Sirius alone to be sure that this wasn’t just something Remus had prodded him into doing, Sirius’ face brightened, and he clapped Harry’s shoulder once more before dropping his hand.

“Now, I’ll let you get back to what you were doing while I go and nick a few more of those cookies.” He winked with a mischievous smirk and left Harry to himself.

At the reminder of what he’d been up to before Sirius had knocked, Harry cursed when he checked the time and found he was already ten minutes late. Harry disapparated with a small pop and reappeared at the edge of the Riddle property like the day before. Once again, he was led through the manor by a house elf, though this time he was of half the mind to actually pay attention to where he was going to try to regain his bearings a little. Also, if he continued to come back, he would be able to make the trip on his own.

However, instead of being brought to the same near-empty room as he had been in before, Harry was brought to a more nondescript door in a hall far away from the central area of the manor. He rapped his knuckles on the door twice to politely announce his presence before entering. The first thing that he noticed was that the room was significantly smaller and more intimate than the other he’d seen. A mix of rich stained wood floors and furnishings with cream colored walls peeking through the various book shelves, mirrors, and paintings. With the desk and leather chair on the far end of the room and comfortable looking armchairs at its center, the room appeared to be a personal office. Harry’s curiosity was interrupted when Tom stood from the chair behind the desk and moved to sit in one of the armchairs. His posture and movements relaxed, inviting.

“Apologies, I was a bit held up by a personal issue. I hope you didn’t wait long.” Harry said calmly as he took the other seat. The room was a comfortable temperature, despite the summer heat outside, and the chair he sat in was upholstered with clean, soft fabric the same dark blue shade as his favorite robes. His fingertips trailed idly along a tight seam at the end of one of the arms and he wondered if any of the armchairs at Grimmauld Place were that comfortable. When he looked up, he found himself the subject of Tom’s rapt attention and warm honey pooled in his lungs, slowing the air’s path back out with sweet vapors that made his tongue taste saccharine and his mouth water.

Harry returned all of the attention he got. Eyes trailing down the gentle wave of his dark hair, skating over his smooth cheek and along the line of his jaw in much the same way his fingers had explored the texture of the fabric beneath his hands. He wondered which would feel softer and his breath caught a little in his throat as his heart began to race. His thoughts had strayed. He should not be having such thoughts. These were not things to let one’s mind linger on in polite company, not when they needed to have their wits about them for conversation.

“Not at all.” Tom finally replied, but the moment refused to dissipate, and Harry swallowed to try to rid his mouth of this strange and alluring taste. His mind continued to work and string along conversation from his frazzled thoughts even while his body seemed thoroughly distracted.
“How are you feeling? Not just physically, but about everything we talked about yesterday.” Harry asked, knowing that he’d shared far more with Tom than he had with those he considered closest to him. Tom looked down in thought, a moment of reflection before he spoke. Harry took the moment to collect himself.

“It was . . . a lot to take in at once. So many things have changed, shifted around and beneath me and it’s hard to determine where I stand. Though, I’m grateful you were honest with me and it really seems that you have helped me in a big way. Thank you, Harry, it couldn’t have been easy. About . . .” Tom hesitated, looking uncharacteristically unsure of himself. “About what I’ve done, to you and your family, I am sorry. I’ve come to deeply regret many of the things I’ve done—most of the things I’ve done—but especially what I’ve taken from you.”

Harry listened patiently, feeling like maybe these words were more important for Tom to say aloud than they were for him to hear. After a moment when Tom met his gaze again, Harry offered a small, kind smile and spoke.

“Thank you for that, but I’ve had many years to think about my life and what could have been done differently to change certain events or prevent some aches. If I had grown up with my parents, I suppose my life would be very different than it is now, but that is not something that burdens me. I may have lost one family, but I have found another,” Harry’s mind drifted to the interaction he’d had just prior to arriving, “And I can’t imagine any parents caring more for me than they do. It is unfortunate that I won’t get to know my birth parents in this lifetime, but if there is anything I’ve learned over the years, it is that death is not so unforgiving nor so permanent as people tend to think. I know that one day, when I decide that I have done all that I could in this world and wish to move on, that I will find all the closure I need in the next world.” Harry assured, wistfully imagining the beautiful afterlife he’d seen again and again and what it would be like when he finally went there, and it was not just an empty space, like an antechamber, and he could reunite with those connected to him.

“Then you don’t plan to be immortal forever.” Tom took the offered subject change in stride, feeling the strange, heavy weight of his apology. It was said as a statement, but Harry could hear the inquiry between the words. He huffed a gentle laugh.

“Certainly not. To live forever would be awfully lonely existence. How long could one endure? To pull people in, love them, and then have to eventually see them off into the next world? I still have much to do here, so I won’t be leaving any time soon, but . . . eventually. . . Immortality is not a gift fit for us humans, if we lived forever, we would eventually stagnate the world and humanity would devour itself. If we never passed on, how could we become the soil for our children to flourish? Just existing would be awfully heavy responsibility.” Harry shared, it wasn’t often he thought about things such as that. He liked that he could discuss it with Tom. He felt . . . comfortable, in a way he usually didn’t around others.
For the rest of the afternoon—edging on the first signs of the approaching evening—Harry and Tom talked about anything that came to mind, no silence was too long, nor topic untouchable. There were times when Harry hid behind his hands as laughter came unbidden and free, or Tom’s low timber bounced with unexpected mirth of his own. Occasionally the threads of conversation would lead into something heavier, but nothing so weighted that it kept either of them from continuing onto lighter and less consequential things.

It wasn’t until the natural light in the room had dimmed too much for either of them to see very well and Tom stood to turn on the lights that they both reluctantly agreed that perhaps it was time for Harry to depart for the evening and return home in time for supper. However, just like the meeting before, that wasn’t until a promise for another visit was made and both wizards were practically glowing from the encounter. Harry made his way out of Riddle Manor, heart pounding in his chest, mind buzzing, and a slight twinge in his face as his lips tugged into a small, secret smile to remind him that the not often used muscles had been exerted during his visit.

Before he apparated, Harry turned back to look upon the manor, a playful breeze tugging at his robes and raven curls. He spotted the form of Tom in one of the windows, watching him and bit down on his bottom lip before he began to smile like a fool again. Harry turned and popped away.

As Harry quickly made his way through the house towards his room, he heard Remus’ shout from down in the kitchen telling him dinner would be ready in ten minutes and to wash up before he came down. Once he reached his room and closed a door between himself and the outside world, Harry sighed and moved over to his bed to fall back over the covers, robes and shoes still on, but he paid it no mind.

Every inch of skin felt alive and humming with magic and excitement. It felt like at any moment light would come cracking through his skin, the thriving verdant vines and leaves come flourishing out from between his ribs and turn his body and the entire room—the entire house—into a garden. His breath huffed out of him like a puff of laughter and he could practically see it curling in the air like it was the dead of winter. He felt like he had swallowed a tiny sun and now it was hovering in his center, just behind his navel, where it would stay permanently. He felt . . . warm. . .

From just beyond the veil, Death watched his innocent little necromancer with a profound fondness and amusement. Death had not quite had this in mind when he proposed the quest of saving Tom to
young Harry, but . . . he knew that this was much better. He just wondered how long it would take those two to see what he could. Death sighed, wondering if his robes would turn grey waiting for them to realize.

Chapter End Notes

Leave a comment telling me what you guys did for new years! Or just how your day's been, I don't get to check in with you enough. :)

What do you guys think so far about Tom and Harry? Anything you're looking forward to?

Also, I love to read almost just as much as I love to write! If you have a favorite work, or even a work of your own, leave it's title or link(can we do that on Ao3?? I know some sites don't to prevent spam) in the comments below and I'll definitely check it out. :)

Chapter Summary

Sirius and Harry have a heart to heart and he reassures Harry that he will love him no matter what. Harry and Tom have their second meeting and seem to be getting along quite well.

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone!

It's been a hot second, and for that I would like to apologize for everyone anxiously awaiting these updates. I am so sorry it's taken so long for me to update. I've been having a lot of computer troubles lately, so it's been a struggle. To be honest, I'm sort of still having computer troubles, but I've found a small, temporary solution for now. I can't guarantee that updates will immediately pick back up to a regular schedule, but I definitely won't be letting this much time pass again without updating if I can help it.

Thank you all for being so kind and patient with me. You all are truly so lovely and understanding and I wish all of you the absolute best! Now, enjoy the chapter!

Harry held out his hand to catch a few of the heavy raindrops from the downpour just beyond the protective awning he stood under. The sky was filled with thick purple-grey clouds, but strangely enough, the afternoon sun was out and turning the summer shower into a warm haze of golds and green foliage. The air was alive. The refracted light of a hazy rainbow no more than a thin veil of color over the clouds overhead. The onslaught of rain was so heavy it was hard to see through it very far.

“I suppose that walk will have to wait,” came the low timber of mild disappointment from beside him and Harry turned to look at Tom, arm still outstretched, and shirt sleeve already soaked through. Tom was watching the rain as well, but instead of seeing the brilliant force of nature, he was staring at the rapidly growing puddles on the lawn with distaste and took a small step away from the splattering drops at his feet that threatened to wet his gleaming oxfords.

It had been a week and half since their first meeting and so far, each visit had ended with the invitation for the next day. They had eaten lunch together, taken several walks around the glorious grounds around Riddle Manor, taken a tour or two of the manor, even ventured into the town of Little Hangleton to explore a few shops. All the while sharing an easy flow of conversation that started the moment they met and petered out reluctantly when Harry knew he couldn’t avoid
departing any longer.

It had been strange at first, how easily they communicated, how much they had in common, and how well their personalities fit together, but either was too afraid to stop it and pull back from what was happening. Before meeting and getting to know Tom Riddle, Harry would have never imagined that Tom could be so . . . bright. Not bright as in intelligence, the man clearly had that in droves and from what he already knew about him, it wasn’t a surprise at all just how knowledgeable he truly was. No, he meant ‘bright’ in a more literal sense. The wizard shown like a blazing sun in the middle of a void, his very company was invigorating, the way he spoke was elegant and collected but there were moments when a fantastic, whip-like humor would poke through and catch Harry completely off guard in the best ways.

In all honesty, it was hard to stay away from Tom. He was magnetic. He felt himself coming alive when he was around the young man and more comfortable and like himself than any other time. It was bizarre and beautiful and a flourishing gift of friendship he hadn’t known was possible. He didn’t have to hesitate, think, calculate when he was with Tom. He was already dreading the approaching end of his summer.

Today, Harry and Tom had spent time wandering around the manor for a few hours, exploring. Tom had admitted that he hadn’t really looked through the entire manor, as he only ever had need for the main amenities and a few rooms to hold any guests he had. When Harry heard that, he suggested they take a better look around and checked every door they came across. Most of the rooms were either empty, a guest bedroom, a closet, or a bathroom. Though, every once in a while, they encountered a room that they either didn’t know the purpose of, or held some new, hidden surprise. They even found one room filled with dusty muggle instruments. Many were out of tune, but that didn’t stop them from plucking the strings or dancing their fingers over ivory keys.

Eventually they returned to the more familiar parts of the manor and had a delicious—but healthy—lunch. Once they were full of food and slight restlessness, they had decided on a short walk through some of the gardens behind the manor, not anticipating the shift in sunny weather while they’d been indoors, which led them to now.

Harry turned his eyes away from the put-out expression on Tom’s face to look back at the rain. It was warm on his hand and the mist in the air was curling over his tongue in vaporous clouds. His heart was pounding with excitement and before he gave his mind another moment to think it through, Harry reached over without even looking, wrapped his fingers tightly around Tom’s wrist, and ran out into the rain.

“Harry!” Tom exclaimed as the rain immediately began to soak them both. Harry laughed high and breathless and continued to run over the grass. Once they were both thoroughly soaked, Harry let go of Tom and turned to face the brunette while still walking backwards, a brilliant smile beaming through his cheeks and bright green eyes almost glowing in the light of the sun and utter joy coursing
through him. Tom, on the other hand, looked baffled as to why Harry had done that and seemed to be searching through his now heavy wet robes for his wand to dry himself—or hex Harry, either one.

“What the hell are you doing?” Tom barked out, absent of any real heat. Harry laughed as he toed off his shoes and tilted his head back to feel the warm rain against his face. Raindrops sliding over his forehead and into his hair like an anointment from the sky. He dropped his head back down and looked at Tom, who had stopped trying to find his wand and had instead tore his outer robe off in frustration, leaving him in a soaked dress shirt and trousers like Harry—though Harry had rolled his sleeves up hours ago due to the heavy August heat. Tom turned his attention back to Harry, waiting for an answer, almost squinting through the thick downpour.

Nature. It was the purest form of magic Harry had known before he knew about the core living inside of him. A magic witches and wizards often forgot about and took for granted. The rain didn’t know, nor care, for blood status or wealth. It didn’t care who or what it fell on, it just did.

“I’m living, Tom! I think it’s about time you joined me.” Harry said through his smile, still breathing heavy and buzzing with energy. In response, Tom looked around at rain and golden and emerald landscape surrounding him, before looking straight up, tilting his head back as Harry had done moments ago and closing his eyes. Like he was trying to feel it, whatever it was that Harry felt. Harry stayed quiet and watched.

For a few moments, Tom’s brows scrunched together like he was getting frustrated, but then . . . his face relaxed, his lips parted, and the breath whooshed out of him. Then, slowly, his head lowered while his eyes slid open, looking straight at the raven-haired teen. Through the rain, Harry could see something alive in Tom’s gaze and his face bloomed with a glowing smile before Harry turned on his heel and broke out into a run, knowing Tom would be right on his tail.

“You can’t run from me Harry!” Tom yelled playfully, and Harry’s shouts of laughter rang through the white noise of the rain as he legged it towards the gardens, bare feet occasionally slipping on the slick grass.

Thus, the chase really began. Tom followed Harry through wild over grown hedges, over stone paths, and around thick bushels of flowers, both natural and planted. Tom couldn’t, nor did he want to, stop the grin that had over taken his face as he pursued the spritely Ravenclaw through the gardens as the rain continued to soak them both to the bone.

His eyes never leaving the thin form as it fled from his reaching grasp, white dress shirt clinging to his back and shoulders, black curls still springing with each movement. Even as they dripped and some stuck to his forehead and neck. Sometimes Harry would look back over his shoulder at him, eyes alight and straight white teeth appearing between his soft rose pink lips as he beamed and lightly
taunted Tom into catching up.

When they left the gardens and Harry tried to run across the lawn towards the front of the property, Tom finally caught up and in a blink of an eye he was grabbing Harry around the waist from behind, swinging him up off the ground and using their momentum to spin Harry around while he shouted at Tom and bubbled with unrestrained laughter, Tom's own dulcet chuckle pressed into Harry's clothed wet shoulder blade. Tom didn’t want the sound pouring from the younger male to end, so a moment later, he let Harry go and they continued to run around in the rain, chasing each other or just simply soaking in the otherworldly feeling of letting go and being out in the middle of the summer storm.

Eventually, though, they exhausted themselves and walked back to the manor, sopping wet, cheeks sore from grinning and bellies tight from laughter, a rosy flush on their faces. Tom scooped up his abandoned, dripping robe as they walked, and Harry summoned his shoes. Harry spent the last minute it took to walk to the back door they’d come out of, appreciating his last few moments of the rain.

They entered the house and the difference between wet and dry became all too apparent when Tom’s shoes audibly squelched from all the water and Harry snorted before he could help it. Tom glared, though his lips twitched as well to give him away. Tom finally freed his yew wand from the dripping robe and was about to cast a drying spell on them both when footsteps came hurrying down a hallway and a moment passed as he and Harry turned to the sound before Philias came into view.

“There you are, Tom, I was looking all over for you.” Phil sighed in relief, looking like he’d searched nearly every room in the manor himself before coming upon them. Though, considering where they were currently, that wasn’t unlikely.

“What’s the matter?” Tom asked, once again serious, even as water steadily dripped from his dark locks. Phil seemed to just then notice the state Tom was in, and then he noticed Harry beside him, just as wet. Phil seemed to conclude that it wasn’t worth asking about and instead kept on topic.

“It’s actually good you’re here as well, Harry, as I was going to send you a letter about it later. I came here because I have been hearing rumors at the Ministry about Fudge trying to pass a law to give himself the authority to go over the official Hogwarts Board of Governors to make changes to the Educational Decrees and even add his own. Usually I wouldn’t worry about Fudge being able to pass anything on his own, but this time it seems important enough for him to pay his way into the fast lane and get it approved in just a couple of weeks.” Phil informed, Harry frowned.

“Looks like Fudge’s paranoia that Dumbledore’s trying to take his job has met its breaking point. With that kind of authority, he could make any changes to the school he wanted, if he’s crafty enough. Probably trying to get Dumbledore sacked.” Harry said, feeling annoyance prickle through the back of his mind. He knew it would only be a matter of time until Fudge and Dumbledore went
at it, he had just hoped Hogwarts wouldn't be between them when they did.

“Well, Dumbledore isn’t making it very hard for him. From what I’ve heard he hasn’t even been trying to find a replacement professor for Moody. He’s passed the date in which he needs to officially appoint someone so that they could be approved by the Board of Governors and apparently, he’s been ignoring all summons to the Ministry. I wouldn’t be surprised if he found himself out of a job by next summer.” Phil shook his head, looking both stressed and exasperated. Then the older man gave Harry a look of concern.

“You should be especially careful, Harry. Fudge has always disliked how much influence you hold over the public, just by nature of your history. If he’s making a play for Hogwarts, then I worry just what he’s willing to do to gain back control.” Philias’ words sparked a wariness in Harry. He’s perfectly content with letting Dumbledore and Fudge go at each other’s throats, but he’s about to be returning to Hogwarts in a few short weeks and he’d really prefer to not have his own life affected by their tantrums.

“I’ll keep that in mind. I have a few people I can talk to in the Ministry, I’ll contact a few and make sure I have one ear to the ground from now on.” Harry assured. Though, really his ‘contacts’ consisted of Lucius and Death, that would hopefully be enough.

“Thank you, Green. We’ll talk more later.” Tom politely dismissed Phil when they had lulled into a contemplative silence. Phil seemed ready to say something, but another glance at the pairs' soaked appearances had him closing his lips and giving a curt nod before walking away.

They both dried off and began walking towards a comfortable sitting room they had each come to favor over the past few days. As they walked, a thought struck Harry after seeing Philias.

“What are the others?” He looked over at Tom curiously, noting that the other young man still looked more relaxed than usual, despite the earlier news.

“Hmm?”

“You know, Bellatrix and Barty. I’ve seen Philias are here plenty, but I have yet to see those two. I know that they were staying here before the resurrection.” For a brief moment, Harry wondered if Tom might be keeping them away because of Harry—either not wanting Harry to see them, or them to see Harry—but Tom knew that Harry had interacted with them before and surely they knew about Harry by now, right?
“Ah yes. That.” A shallow frown pulled at Tom’s face as he thought for a moment. “In the beginning, after the resurrection, I kept everyone away so that I could figure a lot of things out—mainly, who I am now and what I believe. That being said, there’s still a lot I’m unsure of, a lot I have yet to figure out. What I mean is . . . before the resurrection I had many plans—granted, they were horrible plans, but they were plans—and those two were very much looking forward to those plans. Green is an exception because he was working for you and obviously wouldn’t have been receptive to what I would have done if I hadn’t changed directions. It’s just that, I’m not sure how they would react if I told them of these changes, and if my future goals turned out to be something they don’t agree with.” Tom’s voice was calm and careful, but a small tint of real anxiety bled through enough for Harry to see it.

Harry took his time thinking about what he’d said and deciding how to respond. He was beginning to consider Tom a friend, though, so he would be honest with him.

“I think . . . you’re a very powerful man, Tom. No matter what your goals and actions were before, you cannot deny that you built your own empire. You were insane and merciless, but I don’t think that was the reason you gained such a following, I believe it was despite all of that which allowed you to reach the position that you did. The way I see it, people joined you because you’re a natural leader and have a way of invoking loyalty in people—it’s something that I think you started when you were young that just became twisted and warped over time.” Harry looked over to see Tom listening to his words and truly digesting what he was saying. Tom wanted to learn.

“I think you may have allowed your people to indulge their dark appetites far too much. I think that there will be those who don’t agree with whatever direction you decide to take, but the ones who will be of any value to you moving forward—both as an ally and a friend—are those that are willing to adjust and will understand whatever decision you make. That goes for your former followers as a whole, for Bellatrix and Barty specifically, those two seemed particularly invested in you, Tom, not just your goals. I don’t believe you’ll have any issues from those two. If you are eventually planning on meeting with the others, then they are definitely a good place to start.”

They arrived at the sitting room, Harry was about to enter when he was stopped by the light weight of a hand wrapping around his elbow. He turned back and looked up at Tom, who stood no more than a foot away. The height difference had never felt so prominent until then, standing in the doorway, his chin tilted back so he could look up into the enrapturing depths of midnight blue. Harry blinked, all his lingering thoughts fizzing out in his skull.

“Thank you, Harry. This past week or so, I have enjoyed your company more than you could know. You are fast becoming one of the greatest friends I have ever had and I appreciate everything you’ve done for me.” He gently squeezed Harry’s arm with a small smile before letting go and entering the room. Harry smiled at Tom's back, something swooping in his stomach like a bird curving through the air.
After that day, Harry started spending almost more time in the Riddle manor than at home. Any lingering uncertainty between them disappeared with that summer storm. The conversations grew longer. The casual touch on the arm or hand became familiar and was no longer followed by a note of hesitance. Tom was more open to talking about his private thoughts and how he was adjusting to everything and possible ventures in the future. Harry was more forthcoming about his past 'adventures' and experiences and even his time spent pouring over Death's book in order to master necromancy.

It took only a day for Tom to bring his two faithful followers back to the manor. Harry had arrived for his visit and Tom had immediately jumped into the conversation he had with those two. He eagerly told Harry that, in the end, it went just as he said it would. When Tom told them that they would not be going forward with their previous plans, they had been surprisingly complicit. Barty had only been slightly disappointed by the news, but only for a moment, and Bellatrix apparently hadn't batted an eye.

After being pushed away for so long since the resurrection, the two Death Eaters had been relieved to see that Tom was doing so well.

Tom then warned Harry that both of them were currently staying at the manor once more and that he had told them both that Harry would be visiting frequently and that they weren't, under any circumstances, allowed to hurt him. They both knew quite well that Harry couldn't die, so it pleased him to know that Tom was trying hard to make Harry comfortable in his home.

It was just as Tom had finished speaking that the door of the sitting room they were in was suddenly opened, without a polite knock to warn them. In came Bellatrix. She was looking far healthier and more cleaned up than the last time he'd seen her—which had been the Quidditch World Cup, if he remembered correctly.

Her hair was still a wild mane of dark curls and ringlets, but now they looked glossy and like they had finally met a comb while still wet. Her fair skin had a peachy hint instead of ghostly grey. Her cheeks were no longer sunken around her sharp bone structure, her frame wasn't so skeletal anymore, and her clothes—though still dark and eccentric even for a witch—were cleaner and neater without the tears and holes in her skirts. She still looked predatory and dangerous, but she no longer seemed a moment away from throwing off her clothes and dancing around a raging fire under the full moon.

Overall, an improvement. Considering that Harry had been there to watch the grueling process of trying rehabilitate someone after a decade in Azkaban, Bellatrix was doing well. Even with the wonders of magic and potions, it was not a simple process, nor an easy fix. Every now and then,
Sirius would still have days when his joints would ache something fierce, which had nothing to do with his age, considering the wizard was still considered quite young for their kind. A mix of the harsh conditions, lack of proper food, and even past injuries that never healed properly while incarcerated—it had left its mark on the man, that was sure.

Bellatrix bent into a deep, respectful bow. It was far less subservient than dropping to the ground before the mighty Dark Lord as Harry knew the old Voldemort had made his followers do. A glance at Tom told Harry that the bow was not something he had asked Bellatrix to do instead, it seemed that Bella was not quite ready to let go of some habits. She seemed perfectly happy to keep treating Tom as a master instead of an ally. Which was confirmed when she spoke.

"My lord, I--" She stopped talking the moment her dark eyes landed on Harry and her lord seemed to completely escape her thoughts.

"Oh Harry." There was revelry in her gaze and tone as she swept over to the couch he was sat on and seated herself right beside him. "The beautiful bird has finally returned." She mused as she watched him without blinking. Harry smiled pleasantly at the woman.

"Hello, Bellatrix."

"It has been a year since I've seen you last, sweet Harry." She lifted a hand to brush her fingertips under his chin, lips pulling back over her teeth in a wide grin. "You have grown so much since then. One day, the world will come to its knees for this face." The surety in her voice amused Harry. He was sure she was imagining it now as her eyes became slightly unfocused; crowds of people dropping down before him in some grandiose display of worship. Bellatrix had always been peculiar.

"Then, I will count on you to protect my honor from the masses." Harry played along, a smile curving over his lips as he spoke.

"It would be a greatest pleasure, little bird." Bellatrix looked ready to reach out towards Harry again to either caress his face, or maybe embrace him. However, she was stopped by the gentle clearing of a throat. She looked to her lord, clearly unapologetic in her wandering attention.

"Was there something you needed, Bellatrix?" Tom asked, slightly intrigued by the interaction between Harry and Bellatrix. She seemed rather taken with his younger companion. Not in a romantic way or anything, more like . . . more like one would be enchanted by a beautiful flower or a rare and valuable songbird in a gilded cage. The latter thought almost had Tom huffing under his breath at its connection with the witch's previous words, referring to him as a bird.
Not that any of Harry's features were bird-like, the younger male was clearly very lovely and attractive. It was more that there was something distinctly elegant and almost delicate to the boy and the way he moved. Which, in and of itself, is an absurd thought because Tom knew how powerful and capable Harry was. There was also something freeing about Harry. The way he saw the world, the way he experienced it, it was like he had a connection to everything in a way no one else did—like he had another sense that allowed him to interpret his surroundings at some unknown angle. It was enticing to parts of Tom's mind he hadn't known were even there.

"Not particularly, I was just curious to know what had captured our Lord's attention rapely enough to cause him to forget breakfast. Though, now I see exactly how one could have been distracted." She said while turning her attention back towards Harry, reaching out to touch one of his onyx curls almost adoringly. His hair did look quite soft. Tom blinked.

When he processed her words, Tom felt a flicker of surprise. He had been planning on waiting for Harry and then moving down to the dining room as soon as he got there. But the moment Harry arrived, he'd been completely absorbed in their conversation. At the reminder, his stomach gave a dull twinge and he could already see Harry turning a critical eye on him.

Ever since Harry had started visiting him, he had not relented in his self-imposed-duty to always be sure that Tom was taking the utmost care of himself. At first it had been a little strange—since never in his life had anyone come close to 'doting' on him the way Harry had. Not from his followers, not from his Hogwarts friends, not from the Matrons of Wool's Orphanage. Now, Tom found it a blend of unorthodox and endearing.

"Then I supposed now is as good a time as any.‘ Tom relented, fighting off an amused smile as he watched Harry's stare immediately soften into a pleased, triumphant expression at not having to coerce Tom into going now.

The trio shared light, friendly conversation as they walked to the dining-room. Bellatrix doing most of the talking as she walked with her arm looped around Harry's, them being nearly the same height with Harry an inch or two taller, and Tom walking behind the pair. Secretly, Tom observed Harry's profile as they walked. He was truthfully going to despise the day when Harry returned to Hogwarts and he could no longer see the raven every day.

If he wasn't who he was, if his past wasn't what it was, if he had never donned the title of 'Dark Lord,' Tom probably would have found a way to sneak onto Hogwarts grounds to at least continue to have tea with Harry once a day. If he was just a normal adolescent who had met Harry over the summer, he knew he would be there at every Hogsmeade trip, using one of the many secret passages and tunnels to discreetly get into the school and steal just a little bit of the boy's time. Tom knew that because of the circumstances, he would have to be careful corresponding with the other
while he was away at school, but he also knew he would still take every opportunity he got.

For now, he would bask in the long hours of the raven's company until his time ran out. And when he left, Tom would write to him until his hands cramped and hold on tightly to memories of warm rain against his skin, melodic laughter, taunting and invigorating words, and a clothed, wet shoulder blade pressed against his cheek.
Late Bloomer

Chapter Summary

Harry and Tom enjoy a summer storm. Phil warns them that Fudge is making a move for control over Hogwarts to try to get Dumbledore under his thumb. Tom has a talk with Barty and Bellatrix about his new mentality and they move back into Riddle manor. Bellatrix and Harry reunite. Tom is going to miss Harry.

Harry turned on his heel, pale green eyes flitting over his surroundings with a growing smile on his face as the taller male stood quietly beside him, drinking in his wonder with an amused quirk to his lips. It was late afternoon, only a half hour from sunset, and Tom had suddenly stood from the loveseat in their favorite sitting room and had told Harry to follow him. Tom proceeded to lead Harry to the rarely used east-side of the manor. There, Tom ushered Harry into a room he hadn't seen before in their previous explorations of the estate.

It was a greenhouse.

The planthouse was perhaps the largest one he'd ever been in. Truly something magnificent to behold. It was a wonder it had stayed out of sight on that side of the manor, but he knew that the woods beyond those walls came closest to his side of the estate and probably hid the beautiful monstrosity from prying eyes.

The room was cylindrical, with dark cobblestones underfoot laid in a circular mosaic pattern. All of the walls were a work of wrought iron and cloudy glass—even the ceiling was a dome of glass panels laid into the dark iron frames—and some of the glass was broken, bringing in cooling air from outside and keeping the greenhouse from becoming too muggy as well as letting in enough rain to allow for the tangled overgrown mess of plants that had overtaken the place to thrive.

Unlike the neat rows of plant life in the Hogwarts greenhouses, this was more like an indoor garden that had grown wild from neglect. The high ceiling accommodated the ever-growing trees spaced throughout, their thick roots curling up over the brick ledges surrounding the soil they were planted in and twisting over the cobblestones. Vines hung from their branches, creeped up the walls to hang out of broken windows, and covered large patches of the floor. There were more ferns and bushes and weeds than there were flowers, but it was no less breathtaking. Harry smiled as he caught the high trill of songbirds somewhere up in the trees.

When they slowly reached the center of the room, Harry's breath caught in his lungs for one
stuttering moment. At the very heart of the greenhouse stood a magnificent weeping willow. Through the curtain of long green strands—covered with thin, narrow leaves that cascaded down like a waterfall—Harry could just make out the thick twist of the trunk and its many branches. Harry carefully parted the strands that brushed the ground and stepped through.

Inside, it was slightly warmer with the insulation of its leaves. Right in front of the trunk sat a wide stone bench, lit by the hazy warm afternoon light coming through the leaves. He turned to Tom and found the other male watching him with open amusement and fondness.

"I found this place last night after you left. You seem to like nature in its more wild and untamed form, so I figured you'd like this as well." Tom nodded to the greenhouse as a whole as he followed Harry fully under the cover of the willow. Harry took a seat on the bench, Tom doing the same.

"It's beautiful. I'm glad you decided to show me." Harry spoke with warmth in his voice that matched the beaming of the sinking sun as he continued to take in his surroundings.

They sat there for a while, discussing whatever came to mind as the light filling the greenhouse slowly grew richer with gold and red tones and sunset approached. Somehow, their conversation turned to Harry asking Tom about how he was adjusting in terms of his magic. By now, Tom seemed completely recovered and even said that he felt more in tune with himself and his core than he had before the Horcruxes.

Harry wasn't surprised, but he was certainly pleased.

"Mmm. Yeah, that sounds about right. I mentioned it before, but the soul plays a very big part in us being able to access and control our magic. It's the reason why Soul-Magic, or Necromancy, is so powerful. If one can learn all the little nuances of their soul and others' souls and learn how to control and guide it, then they can push the boundaries of magic far past what we consider possible. That's also what makes it so dangerous and feared." Harry's tone turned slightly somber, thinking of the magic that had become such an integral part of himself, but also had made many people uncomfortable to even be near it that they bodily avoided the young Ravenclaw without really realizing what they were doing or why.

"People . . . people mostly see Necromancy as 'death-magic,' something evil and corrupted. They only see how it can harm and destroy. They don't know just how much it can heal and create. I cannot even blame them for their ignorance. How could I when they've been told for generations that Necromancy is dark, forbidden? How can I, when the magic itself feels so revolting to them?" He could feel Tom's dark gaze on his profile, but he kept his eyes locked on the curtain of green before him.
Little hazy flashes of 'Ice Prince' being spat at him like an insult instead of the endearing nickname it was originally meant to be, and moments when one of his peers gotten close enough to touch his skin and shuddered with a disinconcerted frown as they quickly withdrew from the touch. Even before he had truly come into his gift, while he lived with the Dursleys, he could remember times when his sharp-tongued muggle classmates had recoiled in disgust as his touch and asked him if he was dead. His internal temperature was perfectly normal, it was more that his innate magic gave off the feeling of cold and dangerous and off. Not all that dissimilar to the aura of a Dementor. Harry thought with the slightest bitter tone to his own thoughts. He sighed internally, immediately knowing that his thoughts were mainly a product of his frigid and disdainful childhood. His insecurities stemmed mostly from years under the disgusted and fearful eyes of his relatives.

"Will you show me?" It was spoken so softly, barely a rustling in the quiet air, but Harry heard it just fine. He turned to look at Tom with wide, confused eyes. He had gotten lost in his thoughts and had a bit of trouble back-tracking to what they had been talking about. Thankfully, Tom spoke again, clearer and more determined this time. "You've talked about your magic and this Soul-Magic quite a lot over these past few weeks, but I have yet to see you do little more than a few wandless spells when it was convenient. You don't have to if it makes you uncomfortable, but I'm quite curious." His expression was open, Harry noted, and there was only a hint of curiosity and genuine interest in his dark eyes. Harry licked his lips, catching the faint trace of honey from his tea earlier, and fidgeted a bit with his robes. "I . . . I don't know if that would be a good idea. As I said before, it can make people fairly uncomfortable--" Harry started, but the other interrupted him gently. "Does it make you uncomfortable?" He asked, holding Harry's gaze and searching his face for answers. "No." Harry found himself answering honestly. Tom smiled, nothing but honest fondness in his gaze. "Then I would very much like to see it and decide for myself whether it makes me uncomfortable or not." He encouraged, patiently waiting for Harry to either refuse or show Tom his magic. Something inside Harry was excited, he recognized. A part of him was eager to share his magic in a way he'd never been able to or felt comfortable enough to do so before. Especially with Tom, his brain unhelpfully supplied. Harry swallowed his nerves, sat up a little straighter, and shifted his body to face Tom more fully on the stone bench. The sun had cast its last few rays into the darkening
greenhouse as night crept in, cool against their slightly flushed skin.

"Hold out your hand..." Harry instructed in a barely audible hush.

Tom readily obeyed, raising his left hand to hover in the short distance between them, palm facing down. Harry kept his breathing calm as his magic readily raced through his frame, like a pent-up animal eager for freedom. The raven reached out his hand as well, positioned just an inch below Tom's outstretched one without touching, palm facing up. Tom's hands were larger than Harry's and seemed to eclipse his completely. Tentatively, Harry coaxed out his magic from his palm to gather in the place between their hands.

It was just as cold and invigorating as he remembered. Harry watched Tom's face avidly, waiting for the vaguest hint of discomfort to pull away. Instead, the other wizard's breath stuttered with a barely-there, breathless laugh. Watching Tom so closely, Harry's mind began fade into a low hum without any real direction as he stared. With the dying light cloaking them and Tom's face close enough to touch, Harry felt like he was back to the night of the resurrection.

Tom's fair features almost seemed to glow in the cool light, the undeniably handsome cut of the alabaster planes of his face were captivating. The shape of his surprisingly pink lips. His strong, straight, immaculate brows over midnight blue that was so dark and vivid that each look felt like cool, richly dyed silk over his skin. The soft swell and curve of his dark hair as it lay against his head and the side of his forehead in a lax wave. And of course, the interspersed dot of small, dark moles that did nothing but emphasize the man's beauty.

Harry was pulled out of his reverie by his own involuntary sharp intake of breath at the sudden blossom of heat at his wrist, threading between the small, delicate bones like warm honey. His gaze flickered down to their hands and he saw that Tom's long fingers had curled down slightly and were resting over the sensitive skin on the underside of his wrist. The touch was ever so light, but surely intentional.

His magic curled up around the digits, welcoming the contact in the only way it could—by pulling for more. As he watched, frozen, the fingers brushed down to his palm and back up in a light caress, almost tracing the blue and purple veins that just barely shown through his fair skin in the evening light. The touch was so careful, but it was filling the bones in his hand with molten heat.

Harry pulled in a heavy breath, the magic Tom was touching, the power he was coaxing to the surface of his skin with each little glide of his fingertips was dangerous. It was magic Harry had used more than once to release a soul gently from its body. It was not just Harry's bare magic, it was the darker, richer, more wild part of his magic that clogged his lungs and flooded his mouth with the taste of rich cherries and spring rain when it tingled in his lips as he kissed away a creature's pain forever. It was the delicious curl of heat between his hips when he wielded the soul-magic with a
heavier hand. Tom did not know how dangerous it was to be drawing that out of Harry's magic, but somehow, Harry wasn't afraid. Oddly enough, something in his gut told him that Tom could plunge his hand right into that magic and be just fine. He hoped for both of their sakes that this wasn't just a hunch.

Harry's chest was thrumming with the rapid pounding of his heart. He swallowed thickly as the hand over his continued to brush against his skin. It took him another moment to realize that the heat he was feeling was not just the temperature of Tom's skin—as he had touched the other briefly here and there over the past few weeks—but actually his magic.

At that realization, Harry automatically moved his hand up until it was pressed fully against Tom's. Warmth immediately curled in his chest and sank into his gut until he felt almost dizzy as it settled behind his navel. Long fingers curled around his hand until their palms were aligned in a breathtaking buzz of the two magics intermingling. It was like he could feel Tom's core; a condensed blazing sun was oh-so-enticing. As wild and devastating as fiend-fire, but to Harry the warmth was intoxicating, clouding his thoughts like fire-whiskey, soothing his body like a bath so warm it was almost too hot, but also set his brain on fire and made everything he felt ten times more intense.

"It's incredible." Tom hissed in parseltongue, seemingly unaware that he had even spoken aloud. Harry looked back up at the older, feeling a strange mix of so many different things at once that it all sort of became white noise in his head.

Most of all, though, he felt wonderstruck. By Tom. Tom wasn't repulsed, he wasn't uneasy because of Harry's magic—his touch. Tom looked . . . enraptured. His eyes staring down at their clasped hands as Harry had been just moments ago. Harry could feel Tom's fascination and his delight at the feeling of Harry's magic. There was this odd urge in the back of his skull, as he sat there watching Tom, to gather as much magic as he could and push it towards the other. Like . . . he wanted to unload every little bit of himself and hand it over to his friend for the other to marvel over—because that was exactly what Tom was doing right then, marveling. And for the first time, Harry felt like being marveled at.

"It truly is." Harry replied, causing the wizard before him to look up in surprise. All he did was smile brighter at Harry, though. Harry wanted him to always smile like that—eyes squinting a bit as his cheeks pushed up, dazzling straight white teeth on display, and the faint indent of an absolutely endearing pair of dimples. Smiling like this, Tom looked like a little kid. He looked . . . cute.

"Show me more." Tom insisted eagerly, making Harry smile.

Harry pulled his hand away so he could begin showing Tom bigger, more impressive displays of magic, occasionally pulling the other in to feel it for himself or even try to replicate—something he
was hilariously abysmal at—and when Tom got fed up with Harry's teasing jabs, he showed Harry spells he hadn't even thought possible (some Tom had created himself during his youth) with wild displays of magic that sung like sunlight and left the faint taste of honey on the back of his tongue.

Sitting in the darkened greenhouse, the pair joked and shared and comforted. They did so until Harry eventually had to leave. They parted on the promise of tomorrow, both baring the secrets they knew of each other like trophies. Tightly held knowledge of what they had explored and discovered of each other, together, was carefully wrapped in their thoughts and guarded by the walls of their minds.

Instead of just *apparating* straight into Grimmauld Place like he usually did, Harry instead decided to *apparate* a bit of ways away from his home so he could walk, get some fresh air, and think.

Mostly, his thoughts were too jumbled to really focus on anything, but one thing that broke through the mess loud and clear, was just how *good* it felt that his friend not only accepted his magic but *enjoyed* it.

Anthony didn't seem to really mind the nature of his magic, but it was certainly too overwhelming for the magic-sensitive wizard to really let it loose. Draco seemed to have become used to it and learned to ignore it for the most part—but Harry could tell that the blonde was a little unnerved when Harry used more than a spell or two. Hermione, as a muggleborn, didn't seem to really understand why she sometimes felt *off* around Harry—not realizing it was because of his use of soul-magic—so she mostly just shrugged it off.

They were his friends and he knew that they cared deeply for him, but he also knew that there were certain parts of himself that were a little . . . *too much*, so it was something he always had to work around and pack away for when he was alone. With Tom, though, there was nothing to hide, nothing to hold back. Because, Tom had parts of himself that were *too much* as well, and by some beautiful miracle, their *'odd parts'* seemed to work together perfectly—as was iterated by what had happened earlier that night.

Tom had confided in Harry earlier that when he was in Hogwarts, his magic had been compared (on more than one occasion) to *hellfire*. To Harry, though, it had felt like a soothing warmth that sank into his bone marrow and had made it oh-so-very hard to pull away. In contrast, Harry's magic was known for being as glacial as his pale green gaze, but according to Tom, it had been refreshing and a relief to the burning heat of his own magic. What others had always thought to be *'too much'* Tom and Harry seemed to find solace and respite in. It took a huge weight off his shoulders to have--

Harry was jolted from his thoughts when he felt the sudden, familiar chill draped itself over him like a cloak. Chasing away the last dregs of precious heat he had managed to harbor like a fugitive inside him after leaving the manor. Tensing, Harry halted in his steps and waited on the deserted sidewalk.
Only a moment later, two Dementors drifted down from the black sky and settled in front of him.

{What's going on, here? Why are you so far from Azkaban unescorted?] Harry's tongue easily rolled over the language of the dead, his firm tone resounding through the budding night. He remembered his previous encounters with Dementors, and how they acted more as a 'hive-mind' than as individuals, so he had no doubts that these two knew him.

{Apologies for the disturbance, Necromancer. We are only here on orders.] One of them answered, drifting a little closer but keeping a comfortable distance from the young wizard. Harry felt his features tighten into a frown at that. Orders? Were they looking for another escaped prisoner? But that didn't make any sense, considering Azkaban was nearly impossible to break out of (the powerful and insane Bellatrix seeming to be the exception) and even if they were after a prisoner, they would certainly be escorted by an Auror through the muggle city.

{Whose orders? What is your purpose?] Despite their orders, neither creature made a single movement to attack Harry.

{We do not know who specifically made the call. All we know is that we have been discretely moved from our posts and have been relocated to this area. The instructions were vague, but you seem to be the target, young Necromancer.] Despite their orders, neither creature made a single movement to attack Harry.

{Is it safe for me to assume that this encounter will not be known by anyone else?] Harry asked carefully. Both Dementors immediately bowed their clothed heads.

{Of course. Until the moment of your departure to Hogwarts, we will continue to be thwarted by heavy protective wards.] Harry dipped his head in gratitude.

This complicated matters immeasurably. If someone had sent Dementors after him, that meant that they either wished to kill him via their cold kiss, or they wanted to get the underage wizard in heaps of trouble for using magic in muggle London. Whether he was defending himself or not didn't matter if they attacked him while he was alone—as he was now—since Dementors left no magical or physical trace (the frost from their presence melts away within minutes of their departure) so it could be easy to argue that they weren't even there. The one who sent them clearly didn't care whether he died during the encounter. Which begs the question, who wants to kill him?

Harry was fairly private when it came to the media and had yet to take part in or even show an interest in politics. He did his best to fade into the background—the only exception being his academics, but he seriously doubted one of his classmates had the kind of power and sheer hatred
towards him to actually try to make an attempt on his life.

Not only that but, \textit{who has the power to discreetly move Dementors without anyone else knowing?} The first name to pop into his head was Fudge. He knew that the Minister of Magic had a bit of sore spot when it came to Harry, but was that enough to wish to kill him? He needed more information on the matter. If someone was trying to kill him, he needed to deal with it quickly and quietly before he died in front of someone who didn't know his secret and then came back to life before their eyes.

‘Death? Would you mind?’ Harry asked silently, knowing that the other had been watching their entire encounter curiously from just beyond the veil.

‘I’ll look into it, little raven. We’ll know soon enough who’s trying to harm you.’ There was a sharp edge to Death’s rattling tone and Harry knew that this mess had made the other upset. Harry sighed as he felt his companion’s retreat. His friend’s protective side seemed to have grown passed \textit{constantly passive about anything and everything} over the years. A vindictive Death would not be a comforting escort into the afterlife. Harry almost felt bad for those who would eventually move on that had unknowingly irked the immortal being. But then again, Harry had always found it difficult to pity others. He tended to be just as passive as his companion most days.

Well . . . Harry thought back on willow leaves under the light of the half-moon and the cling of wet clothes in warm rain . . . \textit{perhaps not so much recently}.

Harry shook himself from his drifting thoughts and turned his attention back on the two dark creatures still waiting before him with endless patience.

\{Thank you for warning me. You can be on your way.\} He politely dismissed the Dementors and they immediately obeyed.

Harry only lingered on the street a moment longer to breathe in the cool night air before \textit{apparating} back to Grimmauld Place. He was welcomed home by the thick, savory scent of roast beef and other mouth-watering side dishes permeating the air. Harry was mildly surprised by the sounds of the meal still being prepared in the kitchen, since this was one of those times when he’d returned home a little later than usual even though he hadn’t eaten dinner at the manor. He had just planned on eating whatever left-overs they had when he got back.

Harry quickly located his adoptive parents; Remus moving around the kitchen with a glide in his step as upbeat but slightly outdated music played through a radio that had been modified to not short out in the magical household, all the while Kreacher watched in disdain from the corner as the werewolf
took over 'his bloody kitchen,' and Sirius rendered himself blissfully useless as he sat at the dinning room table with a beaming grin as he waited for the food. Harry rolled his eyes at Sirius and pushed up his sleeves to begin helping Remus cook.

Remus didn't really need the help—or he would have allowed Kreacher to aid him—but this was something he and Harry did together sometimes. It was relaxing and a way to spend time together that was just for them (Sirius liked to act like he'd never picked up a cook book or used an oven in his whole life) it was a way for them to bond. Cooking wasn't Harry's favorite thing to do, as it had been one of his main 'chores' back with the Dursleys and could sometimes bring up old feelings he'd rather not relive. However, Harry liked cooking with Remus.

The older man often played music when he cooked and would sometimes dance and sing along, usually playfully trying to goad Harry into joining him. Whether it be bright mornings filled with sweet breakfast foods and solos yelled at the tops of their scratchy sleep-roughened voices, or nights where Remus popped open a bottle of rich, dark red wine that he sipped at while swaying to the grand orchestral flow and splashing more and more wine from his own glass into the dishes he cooked as the night went on to 'give it a little something.' It was all loud and warm, the memories soothed like a balm over the places where Harry's hard edges seemed to scrape himself a little too raw.

Eventually they all sat down to eat. Harry was too caught up in his own head to notice that his parents were quieter than usual and were exchanging meaningful glances every few minutes. It was as Harry was almost finished with his meal that he caught them in the middle of one of these glances and watched in confusion as the pair seemed to sort of panic for a moment (there may or may not have been a kicked shin under the table and a cleared throat before Remus took the mantle and spoke up).

"So . . . Harry," Remus' tone was too stiff to be as casual as he seemed to be trying to make it, and there was an anxious restlessness to his fingers as the knotted together or drummed against the table, "Sirius and I have noticed you've been out a lot more than usual—which is to be expected of someone your age! We're not saying that it's a bad thing!" He quickly backtracked, Harry remained quiet as the older man floundered.

"No offense, kid, but you hardly left the house during break before, and now it's like you're hardly here." Sirius input bluntly, followed by a choked yelp as the sound of a shoe against a shin once more resounded from under the table. Remus quickly tried to salvage the conversation.

"We don't mean to pry, we know you're nearing adulthood in two years, we were just curious about what has kept you so busy lately." Remus sent the boy a smile that looked a little more like a grimace. Sirius huffed a breath beside him and spoke under his breath, but the others still heard what he said.
"I was already disowned by my family and kicked out by the time I was fifteen. *Merlin knows* all of the other shite I got up to at that age." He shook his head as if remembering and was quick to retract his hands from the table when Remus' grip on his fork tightened in warning, not wanting to find himself with four new puncture wounds through his hand.

"Anyways, we know you said you're usually with Anthony or Draco, but you never seemed to spend so much time with them before during your summer break. Have you . . . met someone new? A girl, perhaps? O-or a boy? You know we wouldn't mind something like that." All at once, it hit Harry right over the head what they were implying—Remus' awkward, stilted and vague attempts at wringing an answer out of him, Sirius' sly smirk and almost-proud gleam in his eyes. Involuntarily, Harry felt his entire face flush an unnatural bright red that bloomed in his cheeks, spread down his neck and chest, and set the tips of his ears aflame.

"You think I'm—t-that I'm *dating someone*?!" He sputtered, voice becoming shrill with pure incredulity. He gaped at them.

"Well, yes, Harry. You're gone before I can even make breakfast most mornings, and don't return until right before or even after dinner. Also, when you *do* return home, you're almost glowing. Honestly, I've never seen you this way. I've seen you interact with other people—I've seen you interact with your friends—and I know you care about your friends, but you've always been someone who eventually needs a break from people. I've never seen you seek out one person's company so willingly and so often as well. Harry, believe it or not but Sirius and I were teenagers once too, we know what we're seeing, we know the signs quite well." Remus spoke gently, as if trying not to spook the clearly shaken teen. Harry's mind was full of cotton and sticky wet glue as he tried to force thoughts through.

"Yeah kiddo, you aren't fooling us. We may have been out of the game for a little while, but we can recognize moon-eyes when we see 'em." Sirius grinned.

"You don't have to tell us anything yet if you're not comfortable!" Remus rushed to say, trying to be understanding. "We just want you to know that when you're ready, we will be here to listen and would love to meet the lovely person to have made our son so happy." Remus seemed to realize after he spoke that he had openly referred to Harry as their 'son' but after a moment to reflect, the wolf smiled and didn't take it back.

Harry blinked, mouth slightly open as his brain slowly came back online. They thought he was dating. They thought he was in a secret relationship with someone. They figured that all of his time outside of the house was used to see someone in secret that he hadn't wanted to tell them about yet. But . . . actually that was *exactly* what he was doing, wasn't it? Not the dating-bit, but he had been going out to see Tom and had kept it from them because he was worried about what they would
think. So, that part was technically true.

Though, what was all that about him being 'happier' and 'glowing' and 'moon-eyes' for Merlin's sake!? Yes, he had been sneaking around about who he had been seeing, but was he really behaving differently when he returned home? Because of Tom? Tom was his friend—that he knew for certain—but the possibility of his feelings surrounding Tom being anything other than friendly had never even crossed his mind.

Harry had known very early that his friendship with Tom wasn't the same as it was with Anthony or Draco. Harry had just assumed that it was different because it was Tom. Everything about Tom was different, so it was impossible to compare his relationship with him to any of his other friends. Harry hadn't even thought. . .

His mind swam with memories, moments over the past few weeks. Endless conversations, a fleeting touch, unbroken eye contact, a comfort to the other's presence. There was so much laughter and aching cheeks and private thoughts shared without hesitance and always, always a reluctance to part.

Harry hadn't seen it, because his friendship with Tom was still so new and, well, Harry had never really been engaged in a romantic relationship before for reference. Looking at it objectively with what he knew already, it was pretty obvious now that Harry was interested in Tom. The attraction was certainly there—that could not be denied—but he knew it already went far beyond that. If it was simply a physical attraction to the other, he would have probably ignored it in favor of their growing friendship.

Harry had attractive friends, but he had only ever held feelings of platonic affection towards them. The same could not be said for Tom. As Harry sat there, silently analyzing his past feelings and thoughts, he concluded that the affection he held towards Tom was warm like a friend, but it also was partly made up of a richer, stronger bond that he associated with what he might feel towards a potential lover—had he a frame of reference to lean on.

It was early, and Harry had only really started to think about his own feelings minutes ago. However, thinking it over, Harry knew that what he was feeling wasn't one-sided. He had grown to know Tom quite well over these few weeks and he knew that Tom was also just as attracted to and taken by him. And because Harry knew Tom so well, he also knew that the other was completely blind to what was happening between them.

Harry mentally sighed in fond exasperation. He was in no rush, though. He and Tom technically had all of eternity to sort things out—not that he would be waiting that long—and he would give the other time to come to his own conclusions. In the meantime, it would probably be entertaining to observe the other's actions in this new light and watch Tom get confused time and time again by his
own doing. Besides, Harry would be leaving for Hogwarts in a few short days and things were certainly too new to try to begin something significant. For now, he would just play it by ear and enjoy watching the other remain oblivious.

Realizing he had remained silent for too long as Remus cleared his throat quietly to gain his attention without scaring him while he was distracted, Harry spoke up.

"I am not dating someone you gossiping biddies!" Harry admonished light-heartedly with a roll of his eyes. "Though, I will admit to having met someone and have gained a new friend recently. Someday I do hope to introduce you, but our friendship is still quite new and he is a bit . . . shy." Sirius looked mildly put-out that Harry hadn't confessed to having a secret relationship with someone—as that was probably what most adults expected of normal, eager teenagers the moment they discovered the concept of sexuality.

Harry was pretty sure that his parents would rather him be rebellious and driven by sex and too many hormonal chemicals in his blood than his continued un-teenager-like-behavior. Because the chaos of being a teenager was normal, and familiar to them and something they could navigate. Harry's lack of interest in such behaviors worried the adults—he knew that—and he knew it made him an oddity and indicated that he was not a normal teenager. Adolescents might be difficult to control, but like the first few wails of a newborn to prove its lungs were working, teenagers needed to go through the tough and emotion-wrought bits to prove that everything was functioning normally.

So, no. He hadn't started dating, but he was sneaking out, connecting with someone else, letting loose, and was starting to develop a romantic interest in someone. Instead of saying he was emotionally inept, or that his childhood and circumstance had ruined him, one could say that Harry was just a late bloomer. Things were coming slowly, but surely. And if he didn't really escape the 'oddity' part because of the subject of his interest being the former Dark Lord, well . . . details.

And, if anything ever came of his and Tom's feelings, then he would introduce his parents to Tom—because he simply couldn't deprive his parents of the awkward-near-painful experience of meeting their son's lover—but as always, Tom was different and the circumstances would require a delicate hand and time. Both of which, Harry felt he had in excess.

Unlike Sirius, Remus hid any disappointment he might have held very well behind his signature understanding smile. When Harry excused himself and went up to his room, he collapsed onto his bed, over the covers with a deep sigh. It had been a long and eventful day. And yet, Harry still found himself smiling as he rolled over and pressed his face into his pillow. Phantom caresses of heat over his palm and a heavy warmth bleeding behind his breastbone, Harry bit down on his plush lips, his thoughts miles and miles away, staring up at a darkened ceiling in a bigger bed, in a more cavernous room, between sheets that felt a little too warm and a little too empty.
Departure

Chapter Summary

In the last chapter: Tom and Harry discover a greenhouse in the manor. Harry and Tom bond over sharing their magic with each other. Harry has a run in with two dementors someone sent after him. Sirius and Remus think Harry is secretly dating someone. Harry realizes, though is isn't dating anyone, he might want to. Tom is preciously oblivious.

The remaining days of summer slipped away like sand through his fingers. The more he tried to grasp them, the quicker they spilled over. Each day, Harry met with Tom, neither of them bringing attention to his upcoming departure. Once Harry had realized his budding affection for Tom, he was much surer of himself around the other. His thoughts and actions made more sense and he wasn't stumbling around blindly anymore.

As much as he would have liked to only focus on his time with Tom with what little remained of his summer, his last few days became quite busy. After such a relaxing and relatively easy-going last month of holiday, Harry wasn't surprised when the last few days burst into pandemonium.

It started with a letter.

Ginny had been relatively quiet during the summer, sending only one letter at the beginning of holiday and then dropping off for the remainder. Harry was curious to see why she had sent him a letter when they would be seeing each other in only days. However, when Harry felt the hefty weight of the envelope, he realized the girl probably needed to ruminate on something. He hadn't been wrong in that assumption, either.

After knowing Ginny for so long, Harry was not surprised to find that her main source of ire was, one Percy Weasley. He had known that there were tensions between Percy and the rest of his family, but it seemed to have reached a breaking point. In her letter, Ginny detailed a loud and heated argument between Percy and Arthur after the younger man's visit home.

Percy had been promoted to Fudge's Junior Assistant and Arthur was convinced that Fudge was using his son, just another cobble under Fudge's expensive Romanian dragon-hide soles. Arthur believed that Percy was intelligent and talented and could easily climb the ladder of the Ministry on his own, but he was also greedy and impatient and with little to no sense of dignity when it came to his superiors, clinging to Fudge like a parasite and happily bending to the man's will. Percy argued that he wouldn't have to grovel if he wasn't born to such a poor and unrespectable family. Things
escalated from there.

Ginny told Harry about how her mother had nearly fainted as Percy shouted himself red in the face at them, raving about how they were lead weights around his ankles and he must be cursed to have been stuck with such a wretched lot. In the end, Percy disowned his family and left, hissing at them that he hoped to never see any of them again. It had been an ugly and vicious fight.

It wasn't hard to see where the tensions had come from, though. Fudge was taking aim at Dumbledore before the school year even began. Fudge was not being coy in his hatred and distrust towards Dumbledore, and as a result, those that supported Dumbledore were also feeling the flames. And it just so happened that one of Dumbledore's most loyal supporters was the Weasley family.

Percy no doubt knew that the Weasleys would soon become rather loathed and an undesirable bunch to be associated with, so Harry concluded that the recent fight had not been purely an in-the-moment event. It had been a strategic play, though a rather useless one with little reward and devastating consequence. Disowning his family would only bring an inkling of favor from Fudge, but his bonds and trust of his family was likely permanently broken and damaged. Fudge's ignorance, impulsiveness, and bigotry were already chipping away at the public's approval by the day; he would not last, and Harry doubted Percy will be kept on with the next Minister.

The further he read, the more it seemed that Ginny seemed to share some of his thoughts. Ginny expressed no small amount of worry for her family, knowing they would support Dumbledore to their dying day (save for the twins and Percy).

Dumbledore was not the only one feeling the brunt of Fudge's anger either.

Ever since Harry'd had a surprise visit from the two Dementors, it seemed that the Daily Prophet had been repurposed as an outlet for Fudge's thinly veiled slander against Harry. Each daily issue plastered with the few photos taken of Harry in the last year, along with at least three separate articles dedicated to gossip and calumny against Harry.

It was all hearsay about how Harry was really a delinquent and that he was using his money and influence to cover it up. There was even one with a false testimony by some girl he'd never met saying Harry had harassed her and tried to pay her for sexual favors. There may have been something about an illegitimate child born out of wedlock? But mostly, it was blather about dark dealings and corruption, secret involvement with politics.

The articles weren't picking up much traction with the public as there almost always seemed to be such nonsense printed and then disproved soon after that even some of the most gullible witches and
wizards had given up on believing what they read. Now, however, it was more than a nuisance with how frequent these articles were being published. It was a direct attack on Harry's character and credibility.

Hogwart's Headmaster always seemed to own a spot on the front pages as well. And Harry was positive that one of the main reasons he was being targeted was because Dumbledore had not-so-subtly hinted at Harry being a supporter of his—or at least implied that Harry was a supporter of the light. Dumbledore was the light's figurehead, so it was practically the same thing in the old wizard's muddled head. Harry had just let it be since publicly denying the claim would bring unwanted attention to him and cause people to ask what he did support if not the light.

It had been a headache and a half.

Fortunately, Ginny's letter seemed to end on a high note. The twins' business venture seemed to be a booming success so far. They were keeping it a secret from their parents and most of their family of course. Molly wanted her bright sons to settled down and get respectable, well-paying jobs either in the Ministry or something else that was worlds safer than Bill's job with curse breaking and Charlie's dragon handling.

Not only would their parents not approve, but Ginny expressed the boys' reluctance to confide in them because their business needed money to take off—not only did they not want to burden their parents, they also felt guilty for the fact that they had money saved up but were putting it into their unsure future with the joke shop instead of helping out the family.

Apparently, the twins were biding their time with Hogwarts. Using their last year of schooling to secretly build up their business so that it had legs once they left. Their chosen career paths didn't necessarily need NEWTs, but it would keep their parents' suspicion off them until they could stand on their own.

Harry had little doubt that the duo would be successful. Pranks weren't exactly Harry's forte, but the pair were brilliant and he knew that some of their products could serve great use to the every-day witch and wizard outside of just practical jokes.

Ginny had mused in the end of her letter about how, now that the twins had begun to seriously develop a few products, they had been trying to stealthily test them. Most of it was tested on each other, but the rest were usually tested on their younger brother. Ronald. Harry remembered the few times he'd interacted with the Gryffindor of his year. The young man was quite . . . something. A thrill seeker, a troublemaker, fixated on a life of adventure instead of fulfillment. Harry had long since ceased keeping up with Ronald Weasley's escapades during the school year. He'd brought a lot of trouble to the house of red and gold and didn't seem to have any qualms with dragging others into his messes.
Well... it wasn't as if Harry's life was trouble free...

After the past few day's events, it just seemed too much of a coincidence for the Dementors to *not* have been sent from someone high up in the Ministry. With the current running defamation of his name, Harry had been fully expecting Fudge to have been the one behind the attempted attack. If Harry had fought off the Dementors, he would likely have been charged with the use of underage magic, and probably even charged with using magic in front of a muggle since the Dementors had been patrolling the *muggle* streets outside of his residence.

Harry wasn't worried about not being able to defend himself to the Wizengamot or having any sort of criminal record—*much less having his wand snapped*—but the charges would be just what Fudge needed to thoroughly raze him before the public eye. The only reason Harry had been able to so easily combat the constant onslaught against his character was the fact that he kept his name so clean.

Harry also had friends in very high places, but that could only get him so far.

However, Harry had found out only a day and half after the encounter with the Dementors, that someone else had been behind the *'attack.'*

*Delores Jane Umbridge.*

A half-blood witch. Employed as the Senior Undersecretary to the Minister. Harry had heard of her here and there within the Ministry—a slippery bureaucrat within the Ministry whose blood status did not dampen her reverent support for anti-muggle and anti-muggleborn legislation. Harry even recalled that the woman had attended Sirius' trial before his second year.

According to what his companion had discovered, the woman had acted outside of the Minister's knowledge. It's not that Harry didn't know that Fudge would be willing to do it on his own if he knew how it could benefit him, it just seemed that the Minister was not as clever as he'd thought. Delores Umbridge had clearly done it in favor of the Minister—he'd never personally interacted with the woman and highly doubted he'd done something damning enough to incur her to attack him with such little regard to his life.

Umbridge was too unfamiliar to him, and he would have to keep tabs on her to see if she made another attempt at him. Though, now that he could at least *see* the pieces on the board, he wasn't nearly as anxious.
He had later told Sirius and Remus of his encounter with the Dementors—Sirius had nearly had a heart attack until Harry explained that his magic, nature, and relationship with Death meant that he could communicate with them and his interactions with them had never been anything but completely amicable.

Remus, after the initial shock, was fascinated to hear that Dementors could actually talk—just not in a language anyone but Harry understood—and he'd gone into his scholar-mindset, asking Harry question after question about them. Which led to a slightly more in-depth discussion about Harry’s affinity for Necromancy in general—but it had still been quite vague and ended quickly when he saw that his parents didn't really grasp what he spoke of and it made them quite uncomfortable.

Their concern soon shifted, though, when he told them about who had been behind the attack. Add onto that what was being printed in the papers, and his parents were thoroughly livid. There had even been mention of Harry not returning to Hogwarts if Fudge was going to be taking the reins that year. Harry gently reminded them that he was perfectly capable and could not be permanently harmed (a small consolation to the pair).

Sirius had already been in contact with Lucius, working with the man to see what could be done about the Daily Prophet. It would take time, though. The Daily Prophet was the biggest publication in wizarding England, they had many ties and backing within the Ministry, and they had the best magical lawyers on retainer. The Prophet was a beast many had tried to conquer and failed.

It was through Sirius and Remus that Harry finally got some insight into what had kept Dumbledore so busy over the summer, enough so to neglect his duties as Headmaster of Hogwarts. And to say he was unimpressed with what he discovered would be one hell of an understatement.

According to his parents, Dumbledore still believed that Voldemort was out there, somewhere. That the Dark Lord was slowly biding his time, gathering both his strength and his followers, and would soon wage war on the light. Dumbledore had been traveling all over England and the continent, trying to reconnect with old allies and supporters during the first war. Dumbledore was once again trying to reassemble the Order of the Phoenix in earnest—but with very little success, apparently.

Dumbledore had once again approached Remus and Sirius about getting them to join, but they quickly declined. They had made it clear the first time he'd gone to them, asking them to join the Order and requesting Harry be left in the care of the Weasleys, or even himself, while Bellatrix was still at large.

Harry had told his parents that, in no uncertain terms, that Voldemort would not be starting up another war and Dumbledore was throwing himself into a wasted cause. They had been
apprehensive at the fact that Harry had not said anything about Voldemort actually being dead, just
that he wouldn't be starting a war.

Sirius had hesitantly asked, but Harry had only reiterated that the Dark no longer had a Lord and
Voldemort would no longer be a danger to society. It was vague and didn't really soothe their
concerns, but Harry wasn't ready to reveal the whole truth yet—especially in light of his recently
discovered feelings. It was his way of softly opening up the doors for a conversation he would be
having with them at a later date. It hinted that Voldemort was alive, and Harry knew enough about
him and his activities to be certain of what he would and wouldn't do, but that was the extent.

After Sirius and Remus shared with Harry what they knew about Dumbledore's movements, all that
was left was for him to pass on the information to Tom.

It was the last day before Harry would depart for Hogwarts, and also his last visit to Tom until his
next opportunity to leave the school. Harry hadn't even been able to spend the day with the other as
he'd liked to have, since his parents had given in to their natural coddling tendencies and had forced
Harry to stay with them most of the day so they could spend quality time with their son before he left
for yet another school year.

Harry hadn't been able to slip away until after the sun had already set. Despite the late hour, Tom had
looked relieved when Harry had finally shown up and easily welcomed the Ravenclaw in to eat
dinner with him. The moment they had set eyes on each other, they seemed to gravitate towards the
other, walking a little closer than usual, a slightly firmer hand on the arm or back as if to memorize
the architecture of the other man's body and the swell of their breathing.

There was an ever-present ache in Harry's diaphragm during the visit, like his body had picked up on
his thoughts—knew that Harry would soon be leaving and was pleading with him to reconsider.
Even if he hadn't discovered the true nature of his urges towards Tom, he was Harry's friend and
he'd grown so used to his constant presence that—. . . he just didn't want to leave. . .

They ate their dinner while discussing various things, but none of it reflected what they were
thinking or feeling. Eventually, they finished eating and began to walk through the manor at a sedate
pace. Without the distraction of the meal, Harry began to fill Tom in on what he'd learned about
Dumbledore and the Order. He also briefly went into the mess with Fudge and Umbridge—during
that discussion, a formative furrow had appeared between Tom's brows as he lost himself in thought
and Harry could practically feel the apprehension, concern, and low boiling anger stewing inside of
Tom.

Harry let him sink into his own thoughts for a while. When they entered a large room with a high
ceiling, they both slowed. The room bore enormous windows to the right that bathed the darkened
area in dim, cool light from the night beyond. Shadows of the iron framing holding the panels of
glass cast long shadows on the floor, the soft moonlight illuminating patterns and warm colors on the floor. The room had likely been used for grand parties filled with dancing, laughter and too much alcohol for 'proper society.'

Harry stopped in the middle of the room to gaze out the window at the land beyond. Tom followed suit.

"I have something for you." Harry's soft words parted the silence and Tom turned to look at him in surprise. Harry reached into his pocket and pulled out a shrunken bag. "It's not much, considering it never really belonged to me in the first place, but think of it as a parting gift, of sorts." Harry mused as he unshrunk the bag and handed it over to the stunned male.

Harry watched with fondness in his pale green eyes as Tom curiously pulled open the bag and peered inside. Suddenly, Tom's midnight blue eyes widened a fraction and flicked up to him.

"Harry this--" Harry's lips flourished into a beaming smile. Tom reached in and pulled out a familiar black leather diary. "My Horcruxes. . ." Amazement threaded itself between his words on the heavy exhale.

"Technically, not anymore. All of the soul fragments were transferred to the locket for the ritual. These are just as they were before they became Horcruxes." Harry paused and thought for a moment, letting Tom riffle back through the bag to look at the other objects before speaking again, tone hesitant.

"I wasn't sure if you'd want them back, because of they might only serve as reminders, but I also knew it wasn't up to me to decide whether you kept them or not. After all, each of these held some form of significance to you if you chose them to be your vessels all those years ago. They weren't mine to keep." Harry finished with the slight lift of his shoulder in a shrug.

When Harry looked away from the bag, he found Tom was watching him with a strange expression. Was it mirth? Endearment? Something in between.

"What is it?"

Tom shook his head with an airy chuckle under his breath as he slipped a hand into his robe. His hand came back out with a small, nondescript box the size of Harry's palm. Harry blinked. What's this?
"It seems we had something similar in mind this evening. I got something for you as well." Harry took the box from Tom's outstretched hand automatically, mind not really catching up with what was going on until he was already pulling the black lid up and revealing its contents.

Out of everything Harry might have imagined Tom might think to give him as a parting gift, he certainly hadn't predicted the man would be handing over an all too familiar Slytherin heirloom. His breath stuttered out of him and he reached in to scoop the locket up from within the dark confines. His confusion only mounted when he felt a telling rush of heat up through his arm to saturate the rest of his body in toe-curling warmth. Harry turned his questioning gaze back up to Tom, prompting an explanation.

"I might have added a little something for protection." Tom admitted casually, as if it had been an afterthought. The strength of the magic Harry felt, though, told a completely different story. A small, genuine smile formed on Harry's lips and it mirrored the bloom of warmth in his stomach and behind his ribs that had nothing to do with the magic swirling around him from the locket.

"May I?" Tom asked quietly as he took a step closer to Harry, filling his space and capturing all of his focus so easily. Harry nodded, but didn't break eye contact with Tom's enrapturing deep blue gaze as his felt Tom's fingers brush lightly over his hand, taking the locket from his hand. They both watched each other as the taller male reached around Harry's slender neck to clasp the thin chain of the locket securely around his throat.

Harry was flooded with warmth and was almost distracted enough to not notice when Tom was retracting his hands and he felt the graze of fingertips against the juncture of his shoulder up across the sensitive flesh of his neck, as if to feel just how soft the untouched alabaster skin was against his own. Harry felt his bones grow hollow and light and his muscles involuntarily loosen at the intimate touch. Warm breath fanned lightly across his face and Harry wanted to capture every moment for himself, to never forget a single second.

"This will be an awfully dreary place without you, Harry." The dulcet tones were weighted with honest emotion and it gripped Harry at his core. Before Harry could muster up a reply, there was a large, gentle hand at the back of his head and another on his upper arm, pulling him forward until he was flush with the large body. Tom was tall, broad, strong, physically very fit, and characteristically intense and charismatic. But right then, Harry only felt Tom's slow, delicate embrace. His touch was so light—tender—that it took Harry's breath away. Tom didn't hold him like he was breakable, he held him like a homecoming . . . like a greeting and a farewell at the same time, like something new and inevitable, like a promise.

Harry lifted his arms and encircled the other's middle, thin fingers splaying over the firm clothed planes of Tom's back. His chin laid on Tom's shoulder at a slight angle, but he
soon turned his head so it could rest on his shoulder in a comfortable position.

The large hand on his arm slid around his back to hold him closer, and long fingers slid into his soft black curls. The caress of fingertips against his sensitive scalp sent a shower of pleasant chills and little shivers through Harry as his eyes closed at the sensation and he curved his shoulders in slightly to push himself further into the embrace.

It was something Harry had never felt before. Not just the touches, but his own reactions towards them. Harry had always pulled away from contact with others, even those he deeply cared about. He tolerated most of it because he knew physical affection comforted others, he knew that it reassured his loved ones and strengthened their bonds. Though Harry had sometimes found certain touches or gestures to be soothing and the meaning behind them made him truly enjoy the experience—that didn't change the fact that the contact on its own had always felt off to him and made him uncomfortable.

But Harry-- . . . Harry had never before craved it like this before. He had never sought out the attention, affection, and touch of another person before. However, as Tom held him flush against him, slow breaths threading through his hair from where Tom had unconsciously turned his lips towards the crown of his head, unabashedly holding him despite not even knowing his true feelings, Harry felt a heavy sort of reluctance at the thought of pulling away.

He was so sinfully comfortable and blissfully soaking up the feeling of Tom's sweet and gentle touch like a feline in the hot, bright beams of the midday sun. Harry honestly believed that, if it weren't for the fact that he was currently standing, he might soon drop off into a deep sleep.

Harry turned his face until it was facing the other way and his lips were just an inch away from Tom's throat.

"I'll miss you too, Tom." Harry whispered, knowing well that his words were heard by the other.

The school term had never looked so long to the young immortal.
In the last chapter: Harry receives a letter from Ginny, explaining a mighty fight between Arthur and Percy. Fudge if making an enemy out of Dumbledore and anyone affiliated with him. Fudge is also targeting Harry and slandering him in the papers. Harry discovered the person who sent the Dementors if Umbridge. Sirius and Lucius begin working on taking care of the Daily Prophet. Dumbledore is trying to reorganize the Order. Harry meets with Tom, gives him back the vessels for his Horcruxes, Tom gives Harry Slytherin's locket. They hug goodbye and are generally heart-achy-losers.

Harry pulled back from Remus' warm embrace, giving the man a soft smile as the older soothed his hands over his son's glossy black curls to brush down any wildly out of place locks from their recent apparition. Settling on the soft porcelain cheeks that weren't nearly soft and squishy enough for the fretful father, having formed into harder and more mature plains—pulling his son further and further from adolescence.

Remus pursed his lips in a slight frown for a moment before teasingly pinching one of Harry's cheeks. He laughed at the disgruntled expression on the young man's face. Remus released Harry, but not before his fingers brushed proudly over the gleaming silver badge pinned to the front of the robes Harry had to put on before they left since he had a meeting to attend as soon as the train started moving.

When Harry had received his Hogwarts letter over the summer, he'd been surprised by the extra letter folded inside along with his list of required textbooks and school supplies. Also, inside the envelope had been a small silver badge with an elegantly engraved "P" on it and his house colors of blue and bronze, meant to go on the front of his robes to signify him as the male fifth-year Prefect for Ravenclaw that year.

He had the chance to turn the position down, but Harry had not minded taking it on, at least for that year. In his house alone, there would be five other prefects—two from each year, fifth through seventh—and then there were three other houses. So, in total, there were twenty-four prefects at Hogwarts at all times, plus the head boy and head girl. Which meant that he would not be swamped with duties each day and would just have a little more authority and ability to watch over the students around the school. He didn't care much for bullies and being able to take away house points was a fairly effective and easy way of diffusing a situation instead of trying to threaten and intimidate someone into backing down.
"I'll write to you once I've settled in after the feast." Harry promised as he's become accustomed to doing, since his immediate letter after leaving for the school year seemed to work wonders in alleviating some of the strain and ache his parents felt parting with him each year. Of course, he couldn't send them a letter every single day, but he'd been told that his letter waiting for them first thing in the morning the day after they drop him off at the station made them feel worlds better. Who was he to deny them any sort of comfort when he knew there wasn't much else he could do about not being able to see them so much.

Honestly, even though there was usually not much at all to put in that first letter, Harry also felt good being able to reestablish his connection with his parents so soon.

As his parents shooed him off towards that Hogwarts Express with twin smiles hiding the familiar reluctance to part, Harry didn't check his stray thoughts and tried not to linger on one that said he would also want to send an additional letter that night to the recent captive of his internal affections. And he certainly didn't allow himself to linger on that thought and question which letter he might be more eager to send.

As he was stepping onto the train, he almost ran right into the other fifth-year Ravenclaw Prefect. He gave a polite dip of his head when the timid but undeniably capable young Patil stepped back from his personal space with stuttered words.

Padma instantly grew flustered as she tried to apologize to the beautiful, brilliant boy she'd shared a house with for the past four years. Harry had only ever been kind—if not a touch impersonal and distant—but Padma had never the courage to approach and try to befriend the boy. Even though her sister had spent so much of their time together outside of classes lamenting about the 'sinfully handsome trio' comprised of Draco Malfoy, Anthony Goldstein, and of course, Harry Potter (who was undoubtedly the most prominent of the three).

Due to her sister's outgoing tendencies—being a Gryffindor through and through—Padma also had a pretty good foot in the group of girls, spanning all of the houses and from every year, that seemed particularly keen on those boys. Unlike some of the other boys from their years who slowly grew out of their soft cheeks and endearing quirks into awkward teens whose features were no longer 'cute' and just seemed odd on their stubbly and unfortunately hormone riddled faces; those three friends seemed to only refine and grow more enchanting each day. It truly wasn't fair.

The sharp-tongued and equally sharp-faced Draco had caught quite a few growth spurts, growing tall and filling with just enough definition to give his features a less pointed and more fearsome intensity. Coupled with his naturally white-blond hair and piercing cold-grey eyes, body long and lanky, and always fitted in only the most luxurious and expensive clothing and he looked exactly like one of those famous models that graced both muggle and magical magazine covers.
Anthony had grown as well. Sprouting up almost to the height of the Slytherin but also becoming much broader than his lanky, high-end friend. Anthony had grown into a more traditionally handsome young man—with natural and firm muscle filling out his frame nicely, fierce bone structure, and a smoldering gaze that seemed to shroud his alluring light hazel eyes whenever he lost himself in thought, which happened a lot.

Most of the girls in their unofficial 'group' swooned over Goldstein on a regular basis. Some of them even seemed like the more jealous and obsessive type, so Padma was truly grateful that he never showed any interest in someone outside of his group and instead seemed to exert all of his attention on Harry (who everyone was more than alright with, since they certainly understood the feeling). Otherwise, she feared for the poor unfortunate soul who caught his attention with the fanbase he'd already unintentionally acquired. The same went for the other two as well. Draco had flirted with a few girls and perhaps a boy or two, but nothing serious as far as they knew, though the ones who admired Draco were far laxer. Harry never showed interest in anybody and that was a saving grace, considering his rather rabid admirers who stretched far and wide, from every demographic and reached well beyond the walls of Hogwarts.

That brought it around to Harry, who had just offered the still fumbling Padma a charmingly pleasant and unassuming smile as he suggested they walk to the special Prefect's carriage at the front of the express where their first official meeting would be held. Harry's looks had always been prominent and enchanting.

Soft and perfect with smooth fair skin any girl would be envious of if it belonged to anyone else and not Harry Potter, who seemed not of this world. Plush, peach-pink lips that were never chapped or torn from being nervously bitten, looking so soft that they might bruise if you even so much as tried to kiss them. Haunting pale green eyes that were obviously the genetic lottery for having been possibly produced in one human. Harry's looks had refined, losing just a bit of the softness from his youth but still looking impossibly gorgeous, otherworldly, and as though his features would never know age.

Harry had grown as well, not quite bringing him to the height of the other two fifth-years, but still average-height, if not on a bit of the taller side. Harry did not gain as much muscle definition nor shoulder-width as Anthony, but he wasn't quite as lanky and narrow-shouldered as Draco. He was slim, perfectly proportioned, with an elegant frame but one that also spoke of hidden strength and capability. Overall, Harry was the most intimidatingly beautiful of the three—of the whole school, in fact—in a way that was mesmerizing, though almost hard to fully comprehend, and also absolutely unobtainable. At least with Draco and Anthony, they could see themselves having a chance if they were lucky; with Harry, it was better to only look and not attempt to touch. They knew that their wax wings would never hold up against his brilliance and if they flew too close, they would melt and drown in the tumulus seas below.

Which is why Padma was already dreading the year ahead now that she knew who the other Prefect would be. Why had Morgana cursed her to such a torturous fate?!
Harry walked with Padma in silence, stepping back and behind her whenever another student came down the narrow halls of the train and had to slip past them. Perhaps the silence would be considered uncomfortable to others, but Harry didn't really know Padma and didn't feel the need or urge to try to make small talk with the furiously blushing girl as they made their way.

Originally, Hermione had been offered the position as Prefect instead of Padma, but his friend had also taken more classes than were strictly allowed and knew that she wouldn't be able to take on any extra duties just yet. At least, that is what she had told Harry in the letters they had exchanged after Hogwarts letters had been sent out. Secretly, Harry knew that Hermione had gotten more wrapped up in independent study. He knew she spent nearly all of her free time either revising or picking up new areas of study to obsess over until she'd had her fill and could move on to the next. Which led her to hastily turning down the position when it came her way.

Harry also greatly valued his free time, but a lot of his time had cleared up now that he was no longer constantly preparing for Voldemort's resurrection. Now, Harry could practice Necromancy at his leisure and explore it more thoroughly and not with a set purpose. Though, he'd probably still practice it just as much if not more, his necromancy had started to feel like breathing to him and it had fast become the first time in his life that he'd felt . . . passionate about something. Not in the way he had needed to bring Tom back as that had always had an end in which he would either succeed or fail, but in that way he felt a bottomless well in his stomach of that seemed like it would never empty and always fuel him forward in his endeavors. Necromancy was something he knew he would do for the rest of his life. That sort of thing.

However, even with him still planning to practice Necromancy in private, he knew that his Prefect duties would not be so time-consuming as to interfere drastically with it. Hell, he'd even managed it while taking part in the Triwizard Tournament. Besides, being a Prefect would allow him a lot more freedom in that he could be out after curfew without risk of being caught and reprimanded and would have other privileges that would allow him more time to himself and even more trust from the staff of Hogwarts.

They arrived at the Prefect's cabin as the Express was slowly gliding out of Kings Cross Station and gradually gaining momentum each passing moment. They also seemed to be the last to arrive. Seeing Draco—as the chosen Prefect for Slytherin—Harry easily slid over and took the vacant seat next to him, while Padma—seeing Parvati, as the Gryffindor Prefect—sought out her sister. A quick glance around the full carriage told him who the other Prefects of his year were.

In Slytherin, it was Draco and Pansy (much to Draco's ire as the girl still seemed to harbor quite a flame for the young Malfoy). In Hufflepuff, there was Ernie Macmillan and Hannah Abbott. If he remembered correctly, Macmillan was a decent enough fellow and his family was included in the Sacred Twenty-Eight. For Gryffindor, the prefects were Parvati Patil and Ronald Weasley. From what he knew of Ronald, he was quite surprised to see that he had been picked for Prefect over perhaps Dean Thomas—according to Ginny, Ronald's grades were atrocious. Prefects were a joint
decision between the Headmaster and the Head of House, so maybe McGonagall just had one hell of a soft spot for the boy.

After a few moments, two seventh-years—Angelina Johnson from Gryffindor and Roger Davies from Ravenclaw—stood up, introduced themselves as the Head Boy and Head girl for that year and began to go through explaining to them just what their duties would be. Most of it, Harry had gleaned from over the years of just being in Hogwarts. Duties such as, patrolling the corridors of Hogwarts at night to make sure students didn't break curfew, aiding in preparations and decorations for holidays and events, and most notably: keeping students in line, helping them when they need it and doling out punishment when necessary.

The last part, Johnson and Davies spent the most time going through, since abuse of one's power would immediately cause said student to be stripped of their position as well as any other consequences seen fit. To keep Prefects from deliberately taking away points from other houses to help their own house, a Prefect was only allowed to take points from students of their own house and couldn't take any from other prefects. Points could only be given by staff as well, too keep them from giving out points carelessly. However, they could give out detention to a student from any house. Though, a professor or the Head Boy and Girl always had the ability to nullify it if it wasn't deserved.

There were of course other things, like how they were expected to take up responsibility in various situations and watch over the other students. If the professor or staff in charge had to leave the students unattended, if there was a prefect in the class, they would watch over things until they returned. If the students needed protecting and an adult wasn't there, they would also take on the job. Prefects could also be asked by staff to run errands—within reason, Angelina affirmed.

They were also considered the liaison between students and their Head of House. If something happened in the dorms, or if a student had an issue that they didn't wish to go to their Head of House with directly, the Prefects would either handle it themselves or find and talk to their Head of House for the student.

Overall, it didn't sound like anything Harry couldn't handle and although he knew he wasn't the most approachable person, there had been times throughout the years that he had taken up the mantle of protecting other students or helping them with their studies and what not. Case in point, during his second year, with Lockhart, Harry had worked with many different students when they soon realized how useless the man's lessons would be for their exams and practical knowledge.

Angelina finally got to the end of the meeting and brought about the last piece of business before she could release the Prefects—the ones who had been Prefects last year and maybe even the year before looking bored out of their minds.
"Now, since the only 'staff' on the Express is the trolley lady and train conductor, it is our jobs to patrol the halls during the trip and make sure nobody blows chunks or curses another student's head off." She intoned flatly.

They were quickly dismissed after being numbered off to determine the order of shifts to patrol. Since he wasn't first, Harry moved down the train until he located the compartment with his friends and settled in until Hannah Abbott came looking for him in a few hours.

The train ride had always been a long and tiring endeavor, but this one felt especially taxing. Just so many hours cooped up in an enclosed space would wear on anyone's mind, but Harry found it worse because he kept slipping back into himself, loosing himself to staring out the large window at the rapidly passing greenery, hills, and trees. Every time his attention began to fray, he was submerged in his memories of the night before.

Somber dark blue eyes and an embrace that had carved its claim into his bones, forbidding them to every forget. Soft baritone words hushed into his ear, bidding him farewell and promising him reunion at the same time. Sometimes his eyes would slip closed as he leaned his head against the cool glass of the window, chasing his memories so he could find comfort in the phantom thread of long fingers in his hair or warm breath against his temple. All too soon, though, conversation around him would snap him back out of his mind and he would try to refocus on his surroundings so that the others wouldn't take notice.

However, despite his attempts at stay engaged, he could see in a few subtle looks cast his way that a few of the others had noticed his absent-mindedness and seemed slightly worried. Anthony, who knew the most of anyone about his situation and Tom, seemed keen on offering little comforts to his friend. Taking his hand, giving his shoulder a gentle squeeze, or shifting closer to press their arms together. Harry was grateful he didn't push him—especially in front of the others—but it was not enough to keep his mind from traitorously wandering off once more.

From what he'd shared in his letters, Anthony knew that he had met with Tom again after the resurrection and that the older wizard was worlds away from the insane and bloodthirsty creature he had been before. Anthony still seemed quite uncertain about Tom—especially since the two had yet to meet—but he thankfully trusted Harry enough to not attempt to intervene when he shared that he and Tom were meeting on a regular basis and he even considered Tom to be somewhat of a friend.

Harry knew that his friend was quite uncomfortable with the prospect of him growing close with Tom, but he also knew that Anthony understood that this was a matter that was out of his depth. When it came to Harry, the rule book was usually thrown out.
His other friends of course didn’t know about Tom yet. Harry hadn’t really thought much about telling them either. Could he really explain everything about Tom’s complicated past and their new developing relationship without also revealing his abilities and subsequent friendship with Death? It was one thing to tell Anthony—who he confided almost every little hidden part of himself to and knew his friend would always be unfailingly loyal to him—and it was a whole entirely different thing to tell the others. The others, who knew nothing of his secret life. And although he trusted them all and cared for them deeply, a part of him—perhaps the part that had yet to let go of the guarded and paranoid side of him in order to survive resentful relatives—was reluctant to share this part of himself.

It wasn’t that he wasn’t close with the others, there was just a definite security to those he had told. Anthony, Tom, his parents, Phil. They were all clutched so tightly to his chest, and he knew without a doubt that anything he told them would be guarded and protected to the best of their ability. Not to mention, all of the people he told were well versed in occlumency—Anthony having received help from both Harry and his father—so he was assured that his secret couldn’t be pried from any of their heads forcefully.

His friends were gifted in many ways, but most of them hadn’t even heard of occlumency, much less having practiced it. Also, Harry knew for a fact that any attempt that Lucius had made at teaching Draco had been thwarted by his son's flippant attitude towards anything he didn’t find interest in first.

That is not even to mention how his friends might react to discovering Harry had . . . intentions towards the former mighty Dark Lord Voldemort. Harry was suddenly grateful that the name ‘Tom Riddle’ was never affiliated with Voldemort. If anything ever really did come of his feelings for Tom, he did not intend to keep his friends in the dark completely. He just might have to fib a few details pertaining to Tom's past, is all.

Harry’s fingers absently sought out the ridges of the warm locket hidden under his clothing, finding a surge of comfort in the familiar blazing heat of Tom's magic. It wasn’t nearly as strong as it had been when the locket was a horcrux, but it was certainly better than nothing.

The remaining hours of the train ride passed in blur.

Eventually, the overcast sky slowly dimmed to a muted haze of night and they pulled into Hogsmeade Station. Detachedly, Harry followed his group of friends onto a carriage and up to the impressive stone castle for yet another year of his magical education.

Perhaps it was just Harry's dower mood, but as they made their way through the castle and towards
the Great Hall, he couldn't help but pick up on something . . . off in the air. It wasn't the sense of 'danger' necessarily, just off. As if all of the decor had been shifted one foot to the left, or there was a slight tilt to the floor that was just barely noticeable. Something felt out of place, and it was beginning to pick at Harry's nerves as he walked.

He continued to puzzle over the sensation until they meandered into the Great Hall and a few of them had to splinter off to sit with their own houses for the welcome feast. The vague air of unease was then overshadowed by the feeling of eyes on his profile. Frowning, Harry skimmed the sea of faces until his eyes caught on a particularly ghastly splotch of bubble-gum-pink that had been dulled by a few too many chews, amongst the usual line of professors and other staff. The woman looked away the moment he glanced in her direction, but even from a distance it was hard to displace the flash of disdain he saw in her wide-set eyes.

Clad in an itchy-looking set of pink robes with short hair curled and styled so stiffly Harry doubted even a rogue bludger could withstand hitting it, the woman sat with the straightest spine he'd ever seen. The constant pert curl of her lips, rosy roundness of her cheeks, and glittering alertness of her eyes made her look artificially joyful. Harry got the impression that this expression only slipped away in times of true distress. He also felt like beneath all the pink tweed and nectarous smiles lay something bitter and spitting like a furious viper.

Unfortunately, that suspicion was confirmed when his companion drifted forward and whispered to him that the woman he was looking at was indeed Dolores Umbridge, the very same woman who worked closely with Fudge and had sent two Dementors after him not too long ago. The fact that she was the only new face at the head table also brought him to the conclusion that she must be the Ministry's choice for their new DADA professor. There was an ominous tightening in his gut at the thought and he felt confident that he'd just found what had made him feel so ill at ease earlier.

The new batch of first years were led in by McGonagall and they all listened to the song of the sorting hat. Unlike previous years, this time around, the song was much longer than before. It spoke of how the Founders of Hogwarts decided who would be taught here and how their differences led them to dividing not only themselves, but their students as well almost causing Hogwarts to close down before it even really started. It spoke of the Founders' ruin and how they ended up passing on without sorting their differences. The hat spoke of how it had to sort students every year but was conflicted over whether it was right to divide students in such a way and how dividing everyone only led to pain and fighting. It ended its song by warning them that these divisions would one day lead to their ultimate end.

It was a foreboding and grim song that had more than one professor frowning and looking concerned—all except for Umbridge, who seemed unfazed by its warning. A murmur swept through the students, as they had never heard the hat speak of such things, and the group of first years looked positively petrified. Not even the sorting of the first-years could bring everyone's minds away from the song. Everyone was seated. A few moments—too long—later, Dumbledore stood and began to pull everyone's thoughts from the dark places they were venturing by beginning his customary start-of-year-speech. It mostly worked.
However, Dumbledore was only about halfway through his light-hearted musings about getting the
giant squid several pairs of wool socks for the upcoming winter, when a sharp—and certainly rude—
cough interrupted him and drew everyone's attention to the witch at the head table who was primly
rising from her seat.

"Ah yes, let me introduce to you, Dolores Umbridge, the new Professor to Defense Against the Dark
Arts. I'm sure that you will all join me in welcoming and wishing the Professor good luck."
Dumbledore announced with a sweeping hand and just a flicker of a smile that didn't reach his eyes
before it fell away. The Headmaster's attention was clearly elsewhere as he sat back down and stared
into the depths of his cup.

The curl of Umbridge's lips almost seemed to hide a grimace just beneath it and her gaze guided over
the students without really seeing them. When she spoke, her voice rang like out of tune bells that
pierced the eardrum. Harry felt tense in his seat and the others had picked up on it rather quickly,
Anthony giving him a concerned glance and Draco's gaze flickering between his friend and Dolores,
and then back again. Draco was sitting at his own table, but since the Slytherin and Ravenclaw tables
were right next to each other, they still had a good view of each other.

"Thank you, Headmaster, for those kind words of welcome." She began, stepping out from around
the table and moving to the center of the dais the head table was on, turning to face the still
disgruntled and impassive student body, addressing the students now. "And how lovely, to have all
your bright, happy faces smiling up at me." Her eyes continued to slide over the tables before her, the
disconnected cheer in her gaze once again making Harry feel as though she wasn't really looking at
anyone, not seeing them.

"I am sure we are all going to be very good friends." From the table next to Harry's, he heard the
Weasley twins lean into each other and muse a mocking 'that's likely' in unison. It was a little too
loud in the near silent room and Harry saw a waver in the woman’s false grin as her gaze flickered
over to the pair, before she carried on as if they hadn't said a thing.

"The Ministry of Magic has always considered the education of young witches and wizards to be
of vital importance. Although each Headmaster has brought something . . . new to this historic
school," Dolores paused and turned to give Dumbledore a shallow dip of her head, though the
gesture felt more like it had been scripted and rehearsed than any real show of respect. "Progress for
the sake of progress, must be discouraged. Let us preserve, what must be preserved. Perfect, what
can be perfected. And prune practices that ought to be . . . prohibited." The last word was squeezed
out in a faux-conspiratorial whisper as she scrunched her pointed upturned nose as if talking to very
young children. Her words held an ominous ring to them, though.

The noise that bubbled from her lips after her little speech could only be described as a cross between
a snicker and a squeal. The laughter was obnoxiously 'dainty' and unquestionably false. After a few beats too long, a few hesitant claps followed the speech and died a quick death before the woman had even sat down.

Finally, with a few grand words and the wave of Albus' hand, endless platters and bowls of food appeared on their tables, commencing the feast. Conversation shakily picked up after that and everyone slowly began to settle back in to the celebration of the starting school year. Trying to get his mind off of his troublesome thoughts, Harry engrossed himself in the conversation around him. Draco had moved over to their table to join them as soon as the food appeared.

"Did you hear? Since this is our fifth year, we're going to have our first Career Advisory Sessions with our Head of House." Anthony announced, looking brighter and with an excited gleam in his eye. Draco pursed his lips and Hermione perked up a bit.

"Right! Because they need to know what classes we have to take next year so we have all of the ones necessary for the job we take on." Hermione filled in with what she had read about.

It made sense. Next year they would prepare for their N.E.W.T.'s in their seventh year. Their O.W.L.'s later on that spring would test them on their merits of basic magical education—just enough for them to legally keep their wands—but the N.E.W.T.'s tested their secondary education, which took place over their sixth and seventh years.

For their sixth and seventh years, they could pick and choose which classes to take, a plethora of independent study courses and smaller, more detailed and challenging courses opening up as they weren't available before. Usually, people took most of their core subjects—if they tested well enough on their O.W.L.'s—and then a few auxiliary courses more focused on their chosen career in the future.

If you left school and wanted to enter a certain field but didn't have the N.E.W.T. credit for it, you would have to take classes at the Ministry or learn on your own and then test at the Ministry. In short, if you didn't take the correct classes while at Hogwarts, it would be one hell of a headache for you later on. The Career-Advice sessions were very important.

"What do you guys want to do after Hogwarts?" Hermione asked, eyes curiously flitting from person to person.

Like the others, Harry had known vaguely about the sessions and that they would come around during the spring of his fifth year. However, the whole point of the meeting with his Head of House was for him to tell them what he wished to do after school and have them suggest the classes he take
in order to achieve it.

The problem was . . . Harry had never given any thought to what he wished to do after graduation . . .

The goals he always had in front of him had never really involved his distant future. It had been things like getting Sirius out of Azkaban, or collecting the Horcruxes, or learning Necromancy, or resurrecting Voldemort. Not whether he preferred politics over private business or being an Auror over the chef at a restaurant. He was rather accomplished academically, but nothing had really caught his attention other than Necromancy. Nothing else challenged him or evoked a sort of passion within him.

He had wealth, stature, fame. He could probably go into any field he wished, but the moment he actually started thinking about it and what he wished to do, his mind went completely blank. So, intrigued, Harry focused on his friends’ answers instead.

"I'll probably either take over the family business or start up my own. I've had a few ideas spinning around in my head for a while of what I might do." Anthony shrugged, though from the sound of his voice, they knew he was actually quite serious and excited about the prospect.

Draco sagged dejectedly in his seat.

"Well I'm definitely going to be following in my father's footsteps. Not that I don't want to, it's just my father's been pestering me for months to start going with him to work to learn about his job —especially over the summer—and all I want to do is continue what I've always done: being a rich heir that goes to parties, sleeps through the day, and only has to answer to my parents and not a blasted boss!" Draco whined, an infamous pout to his lips that had grown out of 'cute' and into 'ridiculous' the moment the teen shot up in height to tower over most seventh-years.

Hermione nodded and pressed her lips together, patting Draco’s shoulder in faux-comfort for a moment before giving an answer of her own.

"Well, I've always thought I'd go into some form of research, so I was quite interested in the Department of Mysteries at the Ministry." Hermione mused looking wistful, a little smile on her face as she scooped another forkful of potatoes into her mouth. An Unspeakable. Undoubtedly an interesting job, but Harry wasn't really fond of the thought of working so tightly under the Ministry's thumb. Harry might not know what he wanted to do just yet, but politics didn't really appeal to him and working as an Unspeakable would mean that red-tape was a daily occurrence.
As he was thinking this, three pairs of expecting eyes turned on him, waiting for his own answer. Harry about to explain that he didn't know yet but was saved from having to by a quick shadow passing overhead before they looked up just as a beautiful Eurasian Eagle Owl began to descend on their section of the table. Quickly shuffling plates and drinks out of the way, Harry watched with wide, blinking green eyes as the creature landed right in front of him. The bird had fearsome scowling amber eyes, a sharp black beak, and the flick of horn feathers slicked up from its head. Over two feet high and a wingspan that had to be six feet long, it was a massive bird.

Unafraid, Harry reached out thin, nimble fingers to brush over the cream and brown spotted plumage of the bird's chest. Then, while feeding the owl some food from the table, Harry used his other hand to swiftly and carefully untether the letter from the bird's ankle. The creature nudged his fingers twice before spreading its enormous wings and taking off from the table.

It was only after the owl was gone and plates were moved back into their places that Harry inspected the letter in his hand. He heard his friends around him inquire as to who it was from, but Harry didn't pay them much mind. The elegant, sweeping letters of his name on the front caused a shower of sparks and full bloom of warmth to erupt inside his chest. He could feel his lips pulling into a wide and free smile because the person who sent this must have sent it not long after he stepped onto the train for it to have arrived just now.

*Tom.*

It seemed he wasn't the only one needlessly and foolishly yearning for the presence of the other when such little time had passed since they'd seen each other last. Remaining scraps of dinner forgotten, Harry stood from his seat and left the Great Hall with an absent-minded 'good night' thrown over his shoulder. He didn't run to the dorms—he wasn't a child—but he did find he made it there much faster than usual. He was also only one of six prefects from his house, so he definitely didn't have to worry about walking the first-years up after dinner.

In his wake, two Ravenclaws and a Slytherin blinked at the odd behavior of their friend. Draco leaned over to whisper to the others.

"Think Harry's been hexed or something?" Hermione elbowed the blonde playfully in the ribs for his lack of tact.

"Hardly, Draco. Either that letter contained a whole bunch of new and rare spells for him to learn, or ..." The girl's lips curled in a knowing, teasing manner, "Or Harry's found himself one hell of a pen-pal!" She finished with a burble of laughter, but there was also a note of hope in her words. Her friend had always been a bit . . . unreachable, so for someone to have made him that excited with
just a letter, she was really hoping that things worked out for them.

Anthony smiled, looking back at the empty doorway where Harry had disappeared from moments ago. He hoped so. He'd gotten past his own feelings for Harry back in fourth-year and in the end, he'd come out of it with only a stronger sense of friendship and love—platonic now, he swears—for the smaller raven-haired boy. More than anything, he wanted Harry to be happy. Though, that being said, if it was more than just friendship between Harry and the sender of that letter then Anthony knew he wouldn't be able to hold back an enormous amount of scrutiny for whoever it was. There simply was no equivalent to Harry, so he knew it would be quite tough to find someone deserving of him.

*However, Anthony thought with a sudden flicker of apprehension, he knew of only one person Harry had been meeting and writing to regularly and if the sender of the letter was who he was now thinking it might be . . . Anthony just might not make it out of 'scrutinizing' them with his life. He felt a wave of fear at the thought of trying to intimidate the Dark Lord into treating Harry respectfully, but he knew his affection for his friend would drag him even to such lengths.*

Anthony wasn't even legally an adult but suddenly . . . he was seriously considering taking out a life insurance policy . . .

Back up in the dorms, Harry was already drafting a letter of his own before the first boy came up to bed.
Bloodquills for Good Boys

Chapter Summary

Harry is made Prefect for his fifth year, along with Padma Patil. Umbridge makes an appearance and Harry realizes she was the one who sent the Dementors after him. His friends mention their prospective career paths, and Harry receives his first letter from Tom for the school year.

Chapter Notes

Hello everybody! Sorry it's been an eternity since I've updated. I've been busy lately and haven't had a whole lot of time to write as much as I would like to. Thank all of you guys for being so patient with me. Even when I did have a minute to sit an write, I kept wandering back to other stories without really making much progress on this one. Please don't hate me!

Also, I have a few things to say down in the notes at the end of the chapter, so give a look-see when you get there (nothing too serious, just a few questions for you guys).

Leave me a comment if you please, I absolutely adore hearing from you guys and it really brightens my whole day when I get one! Otherwise, please enjoy the chapter and have a wonderful day!

P.S. I wrote half of this on no sleep and haven't the alertness right now to try to proof read it, so I apologize if there are more mistakes than usual. I'm going to go sleep as long as humanly possible now!

-Pleasant Readings!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

A finger of dread hooked deep into his gut as he took his seat at the familiar richly stained wood desk, scarred and scuffed from years of use and students' carelessly aimed spells. Harry could feel the tension in the air as the last of the fifth-year Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs shuffled in under the unsettling watch of the newly appointed, Ministry-approved DADA Professor. It was the first Defense lesson of the school year for them, but talk had already been circulating the school about the woman's 'unique' way of teaching and now the students felt little hope for a reliable or competent curriculum.

Of course, they also didn’t know what Harry knew. Didn’t realize that the witch donning muted flamingo-hued wool and a tart smile was more ruthless than she seemed.
Tap. Tap. Tap. . .

The blunt tip of his nail came down against the polish surface of the desk at a steady beat, tapping like a droning metronome as the tension along his spine slowly tightened. Harry saw several of his peers glance at him from the peripheral, but he didn’t look away from the hole he was boring into Umbridge’s temple with his stare. He wasn’t even fully aware he was doing it, or that his dower mood was subtly effecting the rest of the class.

Harry typically prided himself on how calm and collected he could be in most situations. There wasn’t much that could ruffle the Ravenclaw’s feathers. However, already this woman had raised his defenses and prodded a little too sharply at his patience. Even with every seat in the class filled, everyone quietly waiting for the lesson to begin, Umbridge stood there stiffly, obstinately refusing to speak until the hour officially began. And when all of the hands on the clock on the side of the room met under the eleven, as if she had suddenly been powered on, Dolores twitched into motion and greeted the class.

Harry’s finger finally stilled against his desk top.

"Good morning, children!" Lifting her wand in her stubby little fist, Umbridge began to flick her wand and speak as neat text appeared on the black board behind her. "'Ordinary Wizarding Levels Examinations,’ more commonly known as 'OWL's.' She finished with a saccharine twist to her lips. There was a subdued murmur through the class, a mixture of complaints and worries at the mention of examinations on their first day of lessons. The woman at the front, however, went on as if she hadn’t heard them.

"Study hard, and you will be rewarded. Fail to do so," the syrupy expression never slipped as she spoke her next foreboding words, "And the consequences may be—severe." She finished with a small scrunch of her nose, and another flick of her wand had the rigid stacks of text books gliding off of her desk and levitating out to the class. It had been the first time for any of them that a professor had given them their texts instead of them purchasing them over the summer for themselves. Because of it, most of the Ravenclaws had been quite curious to get their hands on the learning material for the year.

Though, considering the outdated cartoon pasted on the cover the seemed more befitting a children’s book rather than a fifth year Defense text, Harry did not hold out much hope for a productive year. Harry looked up to see the reactions of his friends—Hermione looked as though the book had tried to bite her and was glaring at the cover, Anthony's brow was pinched and he was already leafing through the book, scanning its contents. Whatever he found, only seemed to deepen the boy's frown.
"Your previous instruction in this subject has been disturbingly uneven. However, you will be pleased to know that from now on you will be following a carefully structured, Ministry Approved course of Defensive Magic." Anthony's hand was in the air before she had even finished speaking, still bent over his book when Umbridge called on him with a pert 'yes?'

"There's nothing in here on using defensive spells." It wasn't a question, and Harry immediately picked up on the thread bare note of accusation in his voice. Everyone was watching him curiously, as Anthony was usually quite quiet in class and often was off in his own world, learning things at his own pace and only ever really asking Harry if there was something he was stuck on.

Umbridge turned towards Anthony and took a step forward.

"'Using spells?"' She tittered a disbelieving laugh and continued to approach. "Well I can't imagine why you would need to use spells in my classroom!" She stated, as if such a thing were obvious. Harry's jaw clenched and his eyes narrowed on his 'professor.'

"We're not going to use magic?" A Hufflepuff student inquired, incredulous voice conveying just how ridiculous that sounded. It was exactly how every young witch and wizard there were feeling in that moment: confused, affronted, and indignant. Umbridge pivoted to seek out the student who had spoken before answering. Her sickly gaiety never faltering.

"You will be learning about defensive spells in a secure, risk-free environment." Her gaze slid over the class, taking in their stricken and harried faces with a deep breath as if she were basking in it. It all felt wrong and morbid under such innocently construed pretense. Then, her eyes settled on Harry and he didn't miss the twitch at the corner of her mouth before she was turning to walk back to the front of the class and speaking once more.

"The Ministry has stood by long enough and watched the education of our future be put in the hands of the unqualified, the immoral, and the unclean. Children should not be taught by degenerates and criminals." As she faced the class once more, there was a sour pinch to her usual smile and a pointedness to her gaze as it fixed on Harry. The implications of her words were clear. She was not speaking of Quirrell's disappearance, Lockhart's self-inflating ego, or Moody's daring lessons on dark magic. The way her eyes bore into Harry, he knew that her jabs were aimed towards the man you had become a beloved parent to him. The one who's past had been dug up spread to the people like the latest piece of gossip, preventing the afflicted man to find work elsewhere and keeping him mostly bound to Grimmauld Place each day.

Remus.
Harry was speaking before he could think to restrain himself.

"If the Ministries' concern is the safety of students," —it wasn't— "Then is it not better to allow us practice and perfect our casting here, in a safe environment, before we face a very real, and very dangerous situation outside of school? The point of school is to prepare us as best as possible to enter the adult world as a witch or wizard." Harry stated coldly, keeping his voice as even as possible, all the while his anger burned like ice-chips under his skin and had his hair practically standing on-end.

"Students will raise their hands when they speak in my class." Umbridge responded fiercely, her tone both scolding and something more dangerous and loathing underneath her words. The sharpness of her words took a few people off guard, her persona slipping for a moment before, in a split second, it was back as she smiled down at them sweetly—even if it was more strained than before.

"It is the view of the Ministry, that a theoretical knowledge would be sufficient to get you through your examinations. Which, after all, is what school is all about!"

"I'd hardly consider that 'sufficient!'" Harry snapped, his frustration fraying his nerves and eroding at his temper. His peers sat stiffly in their chairs, unaccustomed to the raven-haired boy being so outspoken. The tension in the room was clotting and only becoming more dangerously charged with unchecked magic as Harry's aggravation grew.

"Theoretical knowledge is only half of learning a spell, and only a fraction of using it. Practice and experience are the only way to know for certain that a spell will work in your time of need. No matter what field of work we go into after this, everyone needs to know how to properly cast the spells that may just save their lives—" Umbridge interrupted him mid-rant.

"Who could possibly wish to hurt children such as yourself?!!" Her voice was pitched high and shrill, her glassy eyes bulging and wide, silently commanding Harry to back down.

Harry was baffled. Did she seriously expect them to just soak up the Ministry's mindless, 'risk-free,' propaganda bollocks?! Ever since the summer, the Ministry had begun to wield its iron fist. For the first time in Fudge's administration, he has been utilizing the power he held, and not in a good way. If Fudge was truly as paranoid of Dumbledore as Harry suspected, who was to say he wouldn't suspect his students as well? Keep students from learning how to use defensive magic and you start producing generations of witches and wizards who can’t defend themselves—and more importantly, who can’t move against the Ministry. Fudge was trying to bind both their hands behind their backs.

Harry obstinately hated politics, but to keep life-saving information from students—they being in fifth-year meant that they wouldn’t be harmed too badly by this change, but what of incoming first-
years—was unacceptable.

'Most agreeable, my little necromancer. I believe that this year may be one of very unbefitting-Prefect behavior.' His companion whispered into his buzzing ear.

Harry resigned himself to that fact as well, though, he couldn't help but say one last thing, knowing it would get under her skin.

"The Ministry has no right meddling with the education of children for their own blasted agenda!" His tone was low and seething, but in the deadly silent room, it was heard by all.

"ENOUGH!" The horrid screech was enough to make several students closest to her flinch back. Her face had turned furious and a faint shade of purple. Her frame trembled slightly with rage and reigning in her anger was a slow process.

She spoke again once she had composed herself—her face returning to a normal shade of peach once more, but her ghastly smile didn’t come back.

"Detention, Mr. Potter. Be in my office after dinner tonight or you will face a whole week of detention." She said resolutely.

The class was shocked into silence as Dolores finally began their first DADA lesson. Though, nobody could focus on the watered-down drivel, because Harry Potter just received detention! On the first day, no less! The strange occurrence would be the talk of the school by lunch.

Harry was pulled from his silent, blistering conversation with Death by the gentle hand on his wrist. Turning, Harry was met with the soft, comforting gaze of his friend. The little smile on the other Ravenclaw's lips melted away enough of his anger to no longer feel like there were hot iron bands wrapped around his chest. It reminded him that he wasn’t alone anymore and had people willing and eager to help and support him no matter what.

Anthony gave his wrist a light squeeze before pulling his hand back. Though, Harry briefly brushed their shoulders together, silently promising to talk to him later about what was going on. The rest of the hour was quiet and tense.
"Come in." Harry didn't give himself a moment to hesitate, quickly entering the office before his reluctant thoughts could consume him.

He had done his best, throughout the remainder of the day, to calm down and keep a level head about him in preparation for what was surely going to be a dreadful hour spent with Umbridge after supper. It had been a . . . tentative process, so Harry had made sure to put some space between him and his friends so that he didn't snap at them or say anything untoward.

Harry had seen the office above the DADA classroom many times over the years—especially during his third year when Remus still taught—but the wasn't a single familiarity about the office he now stood in. The pale stone had the faintest hue of pink, and the walls were nearly entirely covered in novelty kitten plates, emitting soft squeaks and mews every so often. The stone floor was now taken up by a stiff lilac rug and the usual leather chairs had been replaced by uncomfortable wooden chairs, painted white with the backrest in the shape of a heart. Harry also immediately noticed just how warm the room was—uncomfortably so—heat already staining his cheeks and perspiring on the back of his neck.

Honestly it looked like the stale aunt of Madam Puddingfoot's in Hogsmeade.

"Welcome Mr. Potter." Umbridge drew his attention away from the room itself as she slowly stood from her desk. "Why don't you have a seat." It wasn't a request, her stubby little hand gesturing towards the single, plain desk shoved up against the wall and the wooden chair there that somehow looked even less comfortable than the ones stationed in front of her desk.

Reminding himself that, at the moment, there wasn't much he could do and needed to behave like a normal student, Harry gave a silent nod and took his seat. Harry was a prefect, after all. Even if he had publicly argued with the woman just hours previous in her own classroom, there was only so much Harry could get away with—and he'd really rather not be forced to sit yet another detention with the woman.

Harry tried not to tense visibly as he heard her moving around behind him, keeping his eyes locked on the seldom bare stretch of wall before him until a hand entered his field of vision and neatly placed a piece of parchment on the desk before him. Writing lines, how . . . mundane. . .

Before he could bend down to retrieve a quill and ink pot from his bag, however, a pristine-looking black feather quill was set down beside the parchment and the hand quickly retreated. Frowning, seeing as it wasn't a muggle pen and he had not been given ink, Harry turned to question the Ministry worker when his fingers accidentally bumped against the quill and any words that had been blooming on the back of his tongue dissolved when he felt a vicious pulse of dark magic from the ...
seemingly innocuous item.

The oppressive heat cloaking Harry was suddenly chased away by a familiar, comforting cold. However, the chill was also accompanied by an ominous rattled of bones and a vicious anger that he rarely felt from his otherwise passive friend.

'A Bloodquill?! To use such a vile device on children. . .' Death seethed, the veil around Harry blanketing his shoulders as if trying to protect him from the quill still sat atop his desk.

Harry knew little about the illegal item that had been outlawed more than a century ago, but what he did know about bloodquills had his stomach turning over nauseatingly. The original intent behind their creation had something to do with using them to carve runes into the body with precision—he only knew of them because they were yet another disastrous attempt at necromancy by wizards who knew nothing of the craft—but they had eventually become a horrific tool for self-inflicted torture.

Harry knew from his encounter at the end of summer with the Dementors, that Umbridge was an extremist and was willing to do dreadful things in the name of her beliefs and furthering her own agenda. He had not, however, foreseen that she would go so far as to use such a disgusting object on children in some twisted version of corporal punishment. Just the thought of some younger boy or girl sitting in that very seat, forced to carve words into their own bodies over some miniscule offence such as speaking out of turn, caused his head to swim and bile to rise in the back of his throat.

It may have been Harry's first day of class with her, but the fifth-years had DADA at the end of the week. There was no telling if any students had earned a detention before him, and whether or not this was a punishment chosen specifically for Harry, or if there were children out there in the castle right at that moment, tending to healing cuts.

He had not heard anything about this from the staff or students, but it honestly wouldn't be the first-time professors had undermined or flat out ignored the complaints of students. On top of that, Dumbledore seemed to have disappeared not even hours after the welcome-back feast, absent from every meal in his pointless venture to gather support from old allies. Or it could simply be that Umbridge had not been brazen enough to try such a thing on other students.

Clenching his jaw hard at the anger that threatened to boil over within him, Harry didn't so much as touch the quill on his desk. Instead, he quietly reached down and pulled out his own quill and ink pot. What Umbridge had attempted to do was barbaric and sickening, and he would be having words with Dumbledore as soon as he left the office if he was available—if not, he would find someone else. But in that moment, he couldn't just jump up and attack the woman behind him. She was looking for any excused to use her wand on him, and it could not be ignored that she was still Undersecretary to Fudge.
Fudge had, essentially, seized control over Hogwarts and with Dumbledore's little disappearing act, it would be so easy for him to run amuck of the school. Fudge was looking for any reason at all to publicly crucify Harry. By now, everyone in the school knew Harry was currently serving Detention with Umbridge, and anything that happened to her right then would be put on Harry's shoulders. It was one thing for the public to speculate and shoot aimlessly in the dark about what nefarious activities he got up to, and it was something else entirely to put himself in a position where people had an actual reason to be suspicious of him. Umbridge wasn't stupid, if she was acting this bold on their first one-on-one encounter, then she had some form of insurance in case anything happened to her.

Doing his damnedest to keep his voice even and neutral, Harry spoke up over his shoulder, his own quill poised in his hand.

"What do wish for me to write?" There was a slight strain in his voice, but Umbridge only turned from where she had been straightening a few items on her immaculate desk and smiled at him. Until she spotted the quill in his hand and it faltered with a little tick of her right eye.

"Oh no, that won't be necessary." She waddled over and plucked the quill from between his fingers. "I would like for you to use a rather special one of mine." She iterated with a gesture towards the bloodquill, as if scolding a daft child. She watched him pointedly, not even blinking as she nodded encouragingly at him. His teeth audibly ground together as he slowly reached for the wretched quill. He was stuck, at the moment; drawn taut between his silent rage and the wrongness of the entire situation, and his conflicting need to keep out of trouble and try to salvage the situation he had put himself in because of his temper.

Umbridge had only been there for a few days, and she already had her fingers on the pulse point of Hogwarts. Harry needed to tread very carefully in every future interaction with the woman. Because, she was not only facing off Harry alone, there were also hundreds of innocent students at her mercy and Harry knew it would not be so simple as to make the woman disappear in the night. Fudge might not be fully aware of her extracurricular activities, but she still had his backing—which meant the backing of the entire Ministry—so he would need to remove her publicly and without killing her. And he had no guarantee that he would be able to do it quickly enough to prevent her from harming anyone in retaliation if he acted out. Harry couldn't afford to be suspended or expelled either, not with a beast residing in the castle now.

Inwardly, Harry sighed resignedly. Removing Umbridge would take patience, wit, and most importantly—politics. Harry hated politics. But at the moment, he was stuck. His biggest concern was the other students—even if Harry wasn't much of a 'people person' and thought of most of them as sodding brats—he wasn't all too worried about himself. There was little left in the world to personally fear when one could not die. Harry found that fear for his vulnerable loved ones, was far more potent than the fear of a little pain.
And so, with that resolve in his brain, Harry finally grasped the cursed quill and attempted not to shudder as the dark magic spread through his opposite hand with a dull throb before disappearing.

Smiling approvingly, Umbridge turned and walked back towards the window.

"I would like you to write . . . 'I will know my place.'" She eventually answered and Harry prickled at the message.

"How many times?" He gritted out, bracing himself for the unpleasant experience to come. When Umbridge spoke again, her tone was dripping with amusement, which only made what she said all the more disturbing.

"For however long it takes for the message to . . . sink in."

With hatred fueling his nerve, Harry took a deep breath and wasted no time into pressing the quill to the parchment and beginning to swipe the crimson letters into its soft surface. It didn't happen immediately, just a breath of heat under his skin at first. Then scratching at the skin on the back of his hand that immediately irritate his smooth pale skin. By his fourth line, Harry stopped in order to watch the deliberate, quick tears appearing on the back of his hand.

It felt like his hand was on fire as the words began to take shape along the gentle ridge created by the bone under his skin. The blood that surfaced was bright and fresh against the surrounding inflamed skin. There was a slight tremble to his hand as the pain continued to worsen until it felt like he had plunged his hand into the bright white coals of a fire and let it stay there as the flesh charred and flaked away.

Clenching his hand into a fist, determined not to make a noise and feed the horrible woman's mounting delight, Harry returned the quill to the parchment and continued writing.

Eventually, he had nearly filled the parchment with repeated statement. Scarlet rivulets trailed over the back of his hand, sliding down his wrist and his long, thin fingers to create violent smears against the wooden surface. The pain had steadily worsened until it began to slowly turn to static in his nerves and a sharp, buzzing numbness that he welcomed. He didn't know how long he sat there writing, but Harry came to the conclusion that Umbridge would not willingly end the session until he either yielded to the pain and let her devour his suffering like some sort of dementor-like creature, or until the quill succeeded in what it had been trying to do for the last twenty minutes and severed the tendons in his hand. Causing what might have been permanent damage were Harry not
And so, when Harry reached the bottom of the parchment and wrote the last line that would fit on the page. He set the quill down, grabbed his school bag from the floor, and stood up. Umbridge turned to look at him, glancing first that his dripping hand, and then to the full parchment. There was a flicker of disappointment in her eyes that her brutal power play had not succeeded in breaking him, but she seemed satisfied enough to not demand he sit back down and continue.

"Good evening Mr. Potter." Umbridge dismissed him, moving back to her desk where a cup of tea was waiting under a stasis spell.

Harry slipped the parchment between his body and his school bag as he turned to leave. He wasn't going to leave the pink-clad monster a trophy of his pain.

The moment Harry was out of the office and back in the silent corridors of the castle, his mind was invaded by white-hot loathing—the kind that felt explosive and suffocating all at once. Needing to expend any form of energy, Harry broke into a brisk pace through the castle, his magic reached out around him and scrapped along the walls and ceiling like fearsome claws, fraying and eroding at the magic that had been embedded in the stone over centuries of harboring witches and wizards of all manner.

He didn't stop or slow until he stood before the familiar gargoyle statue, only to be informed by the stone beast that Dumbledore was not currently on school grounds. 'As I figured.' Harry growled and spun back around to storm away. He wanted to go straight to Flitwick, to show his kind head of house the wound still dripping on the back of his hand, to hand over the bloodied parchment he had slipped into his bag.

He wanted to thrust the matter into the hands of an adult—any adult—and try to trust that they would be able to handle it without him. Unfortunately, Harry had long since come to the conclusion that some things he just had to do on his own, and that some situations wouldn't resolve without his particular capabilities. Besides, Flitwick may be a good man and rather protective over his students, but he was not so willing to do what needed to be done and perhaps take a less-than-legal or morally-sound approach.

Harry, was.

After all, he was the game master. He held the cards and manipulated the pieces. Harry resided in grey and exhaled hazy clouds of smoke over the board. He could certainly handle this.
Changing routes, Harry began to slowly make his way back towards the Ravenclaw dorms. He needed to think.

Glancing down at his hand, watching the dark magic ravage the wounds, keeping them from clotting and doing its best to scar his flesh. He knew that it would not heal properly, even with the most powerful healing spell Madam Pomfrey had floating around inside her skull.

Luckily, Harry knew a bit of magic that the seasoned mediwitch did not. Trying not to think too long on his next set of actions, Harry lifted his hand licked a wet stripe over the wound, immediately spitting the dark magic-tainted blood out of his mouth and then lifting the back of his hand up to his lips, almost kissing it as he began to whisper in the language of the dead. A deep, relieving cool flooded his hand as he used necromancy to strip the wound of the powerful dark magic and begin to knit the flesh back together without a single trace of the words that had been carved there.

He didn't know much about the healing aspect of necromancy, but it was powerful and not only a wonderful contradiction, but also a fascinating conceptualization of magic. It was not something that had been explored in depth—as necromancy was used for very different purposes in the past—but the basics were there and Harry had been itching to delve into studying and expanding on the branch since the resurrection and he became freer to study what he wanted of the lost art. In that moment, he was just glad he knew even a basic necromantic healing spell.

If that woman had managed to leave such a horrid mark on him permanently, he wouldn't have been liable for his actions anymore.

'Death?'

Harry called to his friend, still feeling the tumulus displeasure rolling off of his long-time companion. Though, Harry was calmer now, and it seemed to do well in settling his friend as well—even if just a tiny bit.

'Yes, young one?'

'When she leaves, take the quills. I don't know if I'm the first she has used them on here, but I'll be damned if I'm not the last.' Harry knew that taking her quills would not be a permanent solution. There were more ways to hurt someone than with cursed quills, and he understood that Umbridge would know Harry had taken them the moment she found them missing. But it would buy him time, and those wretched things would likely cause serious damage to anyone else's hand. Harry would
even be better off healing broken bones than trying to remove the powerful curse from their hands and still avoid their questions.

Even so, Harry would keep a keen eye out for any student that spent even a moment alone with that woman.

'Of course, consider it done.'

Harry sighed as he came closer to the dorms. A weariness slithered through his bones and clotted the flow of thoughts through his mind like the anticoagulation of venom. He felt like he was setting himself up for a long and exhausting fight, one that would surely take its toll on the young man before the year was through.

At times like this, he was tempted to kiss the verdant flash of the killing curse just to bask in a few moments of peace in the afterlife. Like meditation, only more lethal.

Chapter End Notes

Alright! Question time:

So, I’ve recently had a bit of a persistent plot bunny hopping around in my mind and have managed to write a half-decent chunk of the story but I'm not sure whether or not to post it. It's another Tomarry story and I have a good five chapters written up so far. This one is a little more . . . 'out-there' than Death is but the Next Great Adventure, and might not be for everyone, but it's got lots of action, world building, some wholesome angst, chest-fuzzy-fluff, (and even pirates!).

Anyways, I don't know how long it will be, or how often I will be able to update it, but my question is: Would you guys be interested in checking it out? I know it might not be for everyone and you certainly don't have to, but I would like to know if you guys were even a bit interested.

If not, I'll probably just continue working on it in my spare time and not start posting anything until I'm much further on in the story. Or maybe it'll just stay in my files like so many others. Who knows!

Please let me know what you think! Or if you want to leave me a comment on the above chapter, I would absolutely love that as well!

Thank you for your time!
Hello everybody! I hope you enjoyed the latest chapter. The feedback for both that and the other HP story I posted recently have been very positive and encouraging. I just wanted to speak to you briefly about something that came up in these last few chapters. I have always been very open to criticism, it is important and most of the criticism I get is very helpful and genuine and I appreciate it very much. However, I have recently gotten some comments that are not so helpful. There have thankfully been very few in comparison to all the good and positive you guys have shared with me, but I do wish to address this issue before moving forward with the story.

While I understand that I don't always write what you want me to, please understand it is impossible to write as a reader. Try as we may to anticipate how certain things will come off, I will only ever know how something will be received after I post it. Also, I have been writing this story for over two years. It is something I love and it has allowed me to connect with so many wonderful people who share my love for the Harry Potter world. However, I've never beta-ed this story, and I'm not always at my peak when writing each chapter. I'm not perfect, I forget details, my mood or circumstances can affect how I write a character from chapter to chapter, and the points I'm trying to convey sometimes completely miss their mark.

Understand that, I did not write this story for money, or recognition, or gratitude. I wrote it for myself because writing is something I love and always will love, and I posted it because I hoped that it might make someone's day a little less troublesome or tedious if they had something to entertain them.

I get that you may be annoyed by the choices I make with plot lines and characters, but that does not mean I welcome being berated and called an 'idiot' or 'moron' or being told I know nothing about writing just because the lenses we write and read through are not the same. We are all on different paths in our writing and creativity. We all have different levels of experience and education. What you find to be the ideal writing style likely isn't what I look for in writing.

To address the recent chapters and some of the feedback I have received (I'm talking about the ones who were confused, frustrated, or simply just concerned with the direction of the story, not those who came off as antagonistic) I would like to talk with you as the author of this story quick. From the very beginning, this story has been about connection and people. One of the biggest themes of this story is the choice to empathize and be apart of the world instead of just adjacent. Harry starts off as cold, detached, and apathetic; and while he will always remain rather aloof, passive, and a bit on the chilly side of things, over the years he has been developing and growing as a person. He genuinely cares about those around him and has been actively trying to reclaim a bit of normality and a healthy psychology. Harry is not one-dimensional, he is complex, he has emotions, he's still young and he is entitled to feel anger and joy and love and fear. He's allowed to make mistakes and be irrational. We all are. It's what makes us human and what makes us better than the alternative.
So, yes, Harry will get angry, he will say and do things that are not the wisest, he will not always have the answers--not even Death is omnipotent. It doesn't mean he's 'turning into a dumb Gryffindor,' it means he's a person. And, yes, he cares about the other students at Hogwarts because he has Never been alright with the harm of children. It was never my intention to lead anyone to believe that Harry doesn't feel empathy or compassion for other people. He sometimes struggles with it, but he has always made an effort to be better and not allow himself to completely detach. While, resilience is important, it is not the ideal. It is not the best thing to not feel anything. I have struggled a lot over the years with this exact thing; because not feeling is easy, but it destroys relationships and makes you feel like you're watching life, not living it. It doesn't make you 'more Slytherin' to dissociate and compartmentalize, or 'more Gryffindor' to allow your emotions to guide you no matter the consequences. I just earlier read an article on the validity of Hagrid being a Slytherin, and nobody is more emotional than that oaf! Life is about balance, and putting yourself too firmly on one side or the other only keeps you from enjoying it to the fullest.

It does not make you weak to feel, or to be effected by things. I see a lot of fanworks that look at the original canon content and demonize optimism and trust and faith. I hoped that my story would be different in that I took Harry, started him off as jaded, detached, and pessimistic, and then had his main character-arch be his slow healing into accepting himself and learning to trust and enjoy life without negativity. Instead of going from the more naive and bright Harry, into the broken and angry man. While stories like those are very entertaining--I've written stories like that!--I think we need to also remember that this isn't applicable to real life and one should not be glorified over the other.

Look, I know I can ramble and this is getting very long-winded already, but my main point is: if you do not like to read my story, if it frustrates you, if it angers you, then I ask you either quietly give me another chance, or you leave. I like the way a write. And though I don't know how I will write a year—or ten years—from now, I am comfortable in my writing style right now. So, while it is hurtful to be berated, I do not let it break my confidence in my writing. But, I am not the only writer on this platform and there are many out there who are new to writing in this way or are trying out styles to see what fits them and damaging someone's creative self-esteem can be harrowing. I ask that you always respect those who take the time, the effort, and the courage to write and post it on the internet without any sort of compensation in return. You gain nothing from your barbed words, but everything from what you say and do to build someone up.

I've always tried to refrain from saying too much in the notes or in my replies to comments so as not to push my own opinions of you guys, but these are things I've been wanting to address for a long time and if you've come this far in the story, and yet you still only see this as a work about how Harry is better and superior to everyone else and they should all 'bow down or be slaughtered for their insolence' then I felt I needed to step in and say it most certainly isn't. There are dark themes and concepts in this story, but overall it is fairly optimistic. So, no, he's not going to gut Umbridge like a pig in front of the whole school and dance around her remains, he's not going to take over the world and become the next dark lord. He's going to drink his honey tea, do what he can, and love the absolute shite out of Tom.

I hope that everyone has a wonderful day, that you love and appreciate those who are in your life, and that you create without fear, because the world will only ever see itself through your eyes if you
show them. I will get back to working on the next chapter soon and I am always so grateful to have you wonderful folks around to ready my stuff!

-Pleasant Readings!

From Yours truly, The ObsidianQuill.
My Little Bird

Chapter Summary

In the last chapter: Harry and Umbridge argue over the changed curriculum. Umbridge gives Harry detention. In detention, Umbridge makes Harry use the Bloodquill. Harry has Death steal the Bloodquills from Umbridge.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Harry squinted down at the smooth stone floors beneath him as he walked, glaring at nothing every time he passed a window that brought in blinding pillars of morning light and caused a sharp stab of pain to flare up in his brain. He hadn't caught more than a few brief moments of sleep the entire night before. Either because of the tireless anger that he had to keep dismantling in the hopes of finally settling down for the night, or in the stretches of silence that Harry stared up at the darkened canopy above his bed and tried to think of the best solution to deal with Umbridge.

He couldn't just run into this mess blindly and hope that his efforts would prove fruitful. His anger and impulsiveness had already reared its dangerous head when he had Death confiscate the bloodquills. Harry didn't regret his actions, not when he knew what was at stake if he allowed her to keep them, but he did wish he had thought it through before-hand. Were Umbridge to discover Harry had taken her quills, he knew that her fury would hold no bounds.

It was in earliest reaches of the morning, while the sky outside the castle was still a lethargic and muted deep blue, that Harry sat up in bed and grabbed his school bag from the floor next to his nightstand. He pulled out all the quills he could spare and with a bit of transfiguration, he had an impeccable replicated set of quills that one wouldn't be able to differentiate from the bloodquills until they went to use them. He then had Death replace the bloodquills before Umbridge would notice their absence.

It wouldn't take much for her to discover that her quills no longer carved into flesh as it was supposed to, but either she would think they were broken or someone had tampered with them. It would help—even minutely—to abate her suspicions. Suspecting tampering was a lot better than plain theft, and the presence of the quills meant that there was a chance that they were just broken.

It was only a temporary measure and did little in the way of actually deposing Umbridge, which meant that even after replacing the quills, sleep was a fleeting creature for Harry.
Harry sighed and tensed as he neared the Great Hall, already hearing the loud buzzing of conversation and the jostling of plates and silverware. He was headed for the entrance to the main hall when his path was abruptly blocked by four third-year students he recognized from his own house.

"Can I help you?" Harry inquired politely, aware that he had been given the title of Prefect and no matter how irritable and sleep-deprived he felt, he had responsibilities he could not shirk. The third-years looked to each other, as if silently urging someone to take the lead. Just as Harry felt his patience begin to fray with another painful thrum of his head, a wiry boy finally spoke up.

“We just . . . we heard from a fourth-year that—that you helped out a few people a when Gilderoy taught here. We heard you helped them study since Lockhart was a bit of a sod. And we just wanted to know if you could, maybe, you know, do the same for us?” He ended with a meek shrug of his shoulders after having stumbled over his words and refused to fully look Harry in the eye.

Harry was surprised—though, on second thought he probably shouldn’t be. Umbridge had made it clear to the entire school that they would only be learning ‘risk-free’ spells and wouldn’t even be able to cast them. Theory of spells was such a small part of actually learning them. It was quite plausible that those worried about both their exams and just their learning in general, would be looking into alternative routes to getting what they needed.

“I am already very busy this year. . .” Harry sighed, he had begun to seriously consider quitting Quidditch before the season began. He hadn’t been allowed to take part his fourth year due to the Triwizard Tournament, but if he were being candid: he hadn’t missed it. To add on top of that his duties as a Prefect, his worries with Umbridge, his own studies, and then possibly the studies of others? It was already turning far more chaotic than he had been hoping for with his fifth year.

Their beaming faces dimmed in unison and Harry groaned internally.

“But . . . I will see what I can do. Just give me a bit of time to sort out my affairs.” And with that, he gave a polite nod and entered the bustling Great Hall.

Harry had hoped to be left alone with his ruminations, but it seemed that every few minutes he was approached by students of varying subtlety, asking for help as well. Harry could only promise to look into it and quickly wave them off before anyone from the staff table took too keen a notice of all of his visitors.

Over the course of his meal—which he only managed to pick at—it became apparent just the
magnitude of students who were desperate to actually gain a decent education (especially in how to defend themselves). Even if Harry dropped everything, he would not be able to teach half the school DADA. Besides, if he even tried he would surely be discovered by Umbridge. And if he tried to do it in smaller groups, it would take an abhorrent amount of time just to teach and practice one spell. Nothing would get done!

But, Harry couldn’t just ignore them either. There were probably a few who would do fine studying on their own, but the majority needed the aid of a teacher. The thing was . . . Harry wasn’t a teacher, he felt it in his bones, if there was one thing he knew he could cross off the list of potential careers, ‘teacher’ was one of them. Even from long before Hogwarts, Harry had always been someone who did best learning on his own, he was rather pants at trying to relay what he knew to someone else.

Something flashed in Harry’s field of vision, pulling his attention away from his thoughts and making him look up to see the glint of a Prefect's badge in the morning light as Padma Patil walked by. The cogs were already turning in his head even before he stood up from seat and sought out the Head Boy. Harry had a meeting to call.

Harry sighed in relief when he saw the last of the prefects turn the corner, arriving just a minute after the scheduled meeting time. Harry offered them a pleasant smile and opened the door to the room of requirement for them. It was just after classes had let out for the day and nobody would be expected for at least another hour.

With one last glance down the length of the hall, Harry stepped through the door as well and pulled it closed behind him. There was a soft murmur of conversation flittering about the room as the Prefects turned to each other and tried to figure out why the impromptu meeting had been called. However, when Harry walked in, the noise withered in the still air and all eyes turned on him. The Head Boy and Girl may have been the ones to officially call the meeting and tell them when and where to go, but they had little doubts of who really assembled them.

“I would like to first thank you all for coming here on such short notice.” Harry began, mentally organizing what he had to say even as he spoke. “This meeting is to address a certain . . . obstacle that has recently come up. As I’m sure you know, the curriculum that Umbridge has presented us with this year is severely lacking. It may simply be an overreaction to our turbulent education in the past, or it might even be the action of the Ministry attempting to produce less dangerous—but also more vulnerable—witches and wizards. Either way, I think it is quite clear that this type of theoretical education simply won’t work.” Harry stated firmly but with diplomacy.
He could tell by the silent head-nods that the other prefects agreed with him, but he was not rallying soldiers, he needed everyone to approach this with a cool head and not end up making the situation worse by landing themselves in detention with the vile woman.

“That is why I think it is best that we begin as system of ‘study groups.’ For first through fourth-years, they should be put into groups with their year and house-mates to study. Later this evening, I will be contacting our former DADA professor, Remus Lupin in order to get information from him. Such as syllabi, text-book lists, and lesson plan’s he may still have from his time teaching. The study groups can follow that set lesson plan and then each week a Prefect from their house can check their progress, practice casting and deflecting the spells, and answer any questions they may have. Otherwise, I think the groups should rely on each other and be fairly independent in their learning.

“They can, of course, join a study group from other houses, but it might be easier to work within that same house as they can meet in their common rooms and don’t have to find a public place to meet. As for fifth through seventh-years, study groups are a good idea, but I understand some will prefer independent study. I think as long as we all meet once or twice a week to discuss the material and to help others when they need it we will be fine.

“We should try to encourage students to go to each other and help one another as much as possible. Also, I want you all to go to everyone in your houses and ask that, if they still have any of their DADA text books from previous years, that they please donate or temporarily borrow them to us so that not everyone has to buy all new text books as there are those who can’t afford it on their own sickle.” Harry finished and took a deep breath while scanning the thoughtful faces around him to be sure there wasn’t already kickback before they had even started. When he spoke again, it was in a more soothing and reproachful tone.

“I understand that this will go above and beyond what you have agreed to as Prefects.” There was a slight tension in the air as he spoke, in the space of his pause, there was only the sound of breathing and the barest shifting of weight.

“You didn’t sign up for being tutors to your class mates and I know it might be a bit daunting at first. . . But it must be done. I don’t know if Umbridge has been given clearance to change the curriculum this much or if the altered lesson plan will show up on the exams—but this is more important than that. The Wizarding World is dangerous, it’s full of the unexpected and spectacular and that is what makes it so wonderful to be a part of. But because of that, we need to counterbalance it with being able to properly protect ourselves from when things get out of hand. I’m not saying that the moment you leave these walls you will be attacked by Death Eaters, but what if an argument gets out of hand? Or you’re just taking a walk through the woods and come across an acromantula? Or a bogart? Or any number of creatures and situations that would require you to protect yourself?”

Harry looked around, being sure to meet the eyes of those who hadn’t cast their gazes to the stone floor beneath them.
“And what of the first years who just entered Hogwarts? We might be fine considering we’ve already been here for five-six-seven years, but those first years are coming in without having ever done proper magic and this is that start of their education. So yes, it is a bit of extra work, but we’re certainly not doing it alone. If everyone participates, we will have six prefects for one house to delegate the work and it really shouldn’t be much of a hassle once we get things moving.” The nods and mutterings of agreement were a bit firmer, a bit surer this time around and it made Harry feel confident that this was the correct route of action.

“Now, there are just a few more things I need to discuss and then you will be free to ask questions, make suggestions, or be on your way if you are busy. To start, all study groups and matters regarding said study groups need to be kept private. I’m sure you all understand why Umbridge must not find out about them. She has been unyielding in the curriculum and do not doubt that she will shut this all down if she catches on to this. You must make that clear to all of the students as well, no one should talk about these groups in the halls, the library, or even the Great Hall. Outside of the privacy of the common rooms, these groups don’t exist.” Harry emphasized.

He hesitated before discussing his last matter of business. It was one of the most important points of this meeting as a whole.

“Lastly . . . I will need you to reach out to each and every student in your house—I’m sure you will hold a house-meeting after this in your common rooms to discuss what we have went over, but I need you to make sure that you spread this information to every student without fail. They are not, under any circumstances, to get detention with Dolores Umbridge.” His statement caused several students to frown in confusion and look around to see if someone else knew why this was deemed so important. Everyone knew Harry had served detention with Umbridge the night before.

Harry caught movement in the corner of his eye and watched as Draco broke through the ring of people, taking a step towards him with a concerned light in his grey eyes. Harry held up a hand to stop one of his closest friends. He had not yet told anyone about what had happened, but not because he was trying to hide anything or cover it up, he had just needed to sort through his thoughts himself before he allowed those closest to him to fret. Draco reluctantly held back, but he didn’t step away, standing as a pillar of silent support to Harry’s left.

“As I’m sure you have all heard, I acted rather . . . unbecoming during my first lesson with Umbridge and it led to me receiving a detention with her. It would seem that Umbridge is an avid supporter of corporal punishment.” Harry paused as the room filled with a frantic buzzing of questions and incredulous statements surrounding a professor of Hogwarts being allowed to physically punish a minor. Eventually, Harry cut through the noise and drew attention back to him.

“I do not believe she is acting on behalf of the Ministry in this regard, but we must proceed with
caution. I will be actively working to get her removed from her post as a professor here at Hogwarts. However, as we all know these things do not happen overnight, unfortunately. So, for now I need you to tell everyone in your house to avoid detention at all costs. If, for some reason, they find themselves with a detention anyways they should either go to you or go straight to another professor—preferably their Head of House—and request that they take over their detention instead. Students should not be alone with her, and they should never go to her office unaccompanied. If you or someone else sees anything, or if anything happens, they should reach out to both their Head of House and write a letter to their parents.

“Umbridge may not have the permission of the Ministry, but she is wielding their authority and when this becomes public, there will be a lot of people—powerful people—who wish to cover up this mistake. The more public support and well-informed parents are, the easier and quicker it’ll be to remove her. Always keep an eye out for any unusual behavior from her. She thinks that she is untouchable with the Ministry at her back, but nobody is invulnerable.” Harry heard the low, rasping chuckle from the space behind his right shoulder and chose to ignore his companion’s amusement at his proclamation.

When he finished speaking, several Prefects approached him with questions about the study groups, a few others expressed their concern for Harry after his admission of his detention with Umbridge, and fewer still had offered a few suggestions to improve the efficiency of the study groups. Though, they were soon shooed away by a particular tall blonde who had a few words for Harry.

“Anthony is going to burn this castle to the ground when he hears.” Draco offered unhelpfully when he stepped up to his side, watching with Harry as the other older students continued to talk to each other and trade ideas. Harry released a put-upon sigh.

“Perhaps, but there are more important things than vindication.” At least Harry hoped so. Anthony was not one quick to anger, but like Harry, he was very protective of those closest to him. He’d never seen Anthony truly enraged, but he hoped for all of their sakes that it was not a blinding anger and he didn’t do anything irreparable.

“Then the greatest luck to you, Harry, in making him see that.” Harry could hear the amused smirk in his words without having to turn and look. After a moment, Draco spoke up again, tone more serious than before. “I don’t know exactly what you have planned, but you should know that my father with not sit idle in this matter. He and Fudge may be in each other’s pockets, but a Malfoy would never endanger his heir. And a respectable pureblood would not endanger children.” Harry turned to study his friend’s profile.

“If I remember correctly, your father once slipped a . . . questionable dark object into the cauldron of a work enemy’s child, for the express reason to cause mayhem.” Harry retorted good-naturedly. Draco chuffed.
“I never said *my father* was a respectable pureblood.” Draco turned his nose up haughtily, though the quivering at the edges of his mouth as he fought a grin gave him away. Harry laughed and bumped his shoulder against Draco’s.

“Well, tell the **not-so-respectable-pureblood** that I’d gladly accept his help, considering how much pull he has in the Ministry.”

Once everyone else eventually filtered out of the room of requirement, Harry and Draco walked leisurely through the halls. Chatting about less consequential matters and sharing a laugh or two, before having to go their separate ways in order to organize a house meeting as soon as possible. Harry felt that the crushing weight he had woken up with that morning had been significantly lessened by the numerous hands now helping him to bear it.

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Harry greedily inhaled the refreshing night air, the cold humidity felt dewy on his skin. It was relatively calm up in the high reaches of the Astronomy tower. The wind wasn’t deafening, as it usually was. The cool air felt like a balm on his tired mind. He had already repeated to his own house everything he had to say, endured a *long* ‘talking-to’ from Anthony about not going to him immediately after his detention and telling him about what happened, and had long since written and sent out his letters to Remus and Tom.

He had considered keeping the truth from Tom, since he knew that the other man had enough to sort out on his own, but that wasn’t the relationship they had developed over these past few months. They didn’t lie and hide things from each other in hopes of not burdening the other. If anything, Tom was the one-person Harry could tell absolutely anything to and trust that the other would both understand and be able to offer advice.

In so many ways, Tom was his equal. And Harry didn’t need to protect him from his problems.

And so, Harry told Tom everything, but also clarified that he wasn’t in need of interference. At the moment, Harry had things under control.

Harry sighed and leaned forwards against the railing, gazing out into the night without really seeing anything. He had long since fulfilled his duties as a Prefect, patrolling the halls before going to bed.
However, he had lain in his warm coverings for nearly two hours before restlessness coaxed him from the dorms. Which brought him all the way up here, dressed in only his night clothes and a dressing robe as he basked in the still night. He was secure in the knowledge that the following day was Saturday and he could sleep in during the morning. So, for now, he reveled in the ethereal sliver of a moon hung high in the sky and the trickle of wind that flutter up his sleeves and danced across his skin.

His mind was empty, but his heart was a wild creature he had no hopes of taming. It was all he could do to keep it contained within the ivory cage of his ribs, for he knew that if he released it, it would drag him halfway across England in search of what it had already claimed as its own.

A subtle change in the wind, a soft brush of warmth in the constant stream of cool, caught Harry’s attention just before a voice spoke up from the depths of the shadows behind him.

“Harry. . .”

Harry whirled around, the breathless name already falling from his lips before he even took in the man at his back.

“Tom.”

And there he stood, cloaked in night and a wild concern in his dark blue eyes. Harry was rushing forward before he could stop himself, and it was only when engulfed in the blazing embrace of his sweet Tom that he finally felt like his head was above frigid waters once more and he could breathe. Tom’s arm pressed tightly against his back to devour the space between them while his other hand reverently cradled the back of his head. It sounded like the air was knocked from Tom’s lungs and Harry could feel the slight drop in his broad shoulders.

“My little bird, it seems that you left merely a week ago and already you are getting caught up in all sorts of trouble.” His low soothing baritone filled Harry’s mind like a sigh. Harry’s hand tightened around the fabric of Tom’s cloak where it had been clutching at his front, before his fingers were suddenly unwound from the material and Harry looked up as Tom brought the hand up in order to look at it with a crease between his brows as he inspected the smooth stretch of skin. Bleached bone white in the moonlight, but without a single scratch.

When he seemed sure that Harry’s hand was completely healed from the bloodquill and otherwise unharmed, Tom released a relieved breath and seemed to react without even realizing it. Harry’s breath caught in the closing cavern of his throat as warm, soft lips pressed gently against the back of his hand and he felt the release of a heated breath against his skin. The wild creature in his chest was
howling at the moon in his eyes and thrumming through his veins. Harry turned his hand over and pressed it to Tom’s cheek, a small sweep of his thumb over the delicate skin under Tom’s eye as he guided his face back up to meet Harry’s gaze.

Harry’s lips bloomed into a small, honest smile and the large hand that had been holding his before now carefully took his wrist, as if he didn’t want Harry to remove his hand. Harry’s mouth went dry and couldn’t stop his traitorous eyes from flicking down to the velvety soft pink lips he wished to taste, and back up to the enrapturing gaze made him feel as though he was caught in the eerily calm eye of a raging storm.

“I’m a lot stronger than I look.” He had meant for it to come out bold and teasing, but the words floated on a whisper from his lips, refusing to permeate the charged air between them. Tom smiled in return.

“You’re feathers may be made of steel, dear raven, but even steel can bend.” Tom taunted playfully, voice just as hushed as Harry’s. Harry’s lips pulled back in a beaming grin. He gave one last swipe of his thumb across the smooth skin under hand before pulling away and stepped back, motioning for them to move over to the railing.

“Why are you here?” Harry asked lightly, the glowing joy in his tone making it clear that he was glad Tom came, just curious as to what the other risked getting caught by sneaking into Hogwarts in the middle of the night for. Before he answered, Tom unclasped his cloak and draped it over Harry’s smaller and thinner shoulders, surprising the younger man as Tom re-clasped the cloak. Tom cleared his throat—almost seeming, dare he say, nervous—and cast his gaze out into the night while Harry stared wide-eyed at his profile, before answering.

“After I read your letter, I knew I had to make sure myself that you were alright. I know that you don’t want me to step in yet, but I needed to be certain you weren’t hurt or in pain. I would have never been able to focus on anything else if I had to wait until winter holiday to see you again.” Tom then looked back at Harry, who was still shamelessly staring at the other.

“I have never met anyone like you, Harry. You’re extraordinary, but more importantly—you are inexplicably important to me. I— . . . I don’t really know how to define it,” A crease appeared between his straight brows once more as he stared down at him, “I’ve never had anyone I’ve cared about this much. You are the closest friend I have ever had.” Even as he said it, the frown between his brows deepened, as if the words didn’t seem quite right once said aloud.

To Harry, it was actually quite endearing in that moment to watch Tom struggle so much to understand himself and his emotions. Harry felt assured in his words and what he saw before him that Tom reciprocated all that Harry had come to discover he felt for Tom. Tom just wasn’t quite ready yet. And that was just fine, Harry thought with a small smile on his lips as he
reached out and intertwined their fingers, seeking the warmth and contact of the other. *It was alright if Tom needed time, Harry wouldn’t force a revelation on him. Harry had all the time in the world, after all. Tom would come to him with what he felt when the time was right, and Harry would cherish every moment leading up to that.*

He and Tom stayed in the astronomy tower long into the night, talking about anything that came to mind, discussing what Harry planned to do about Umbridge, or what Tom would or wouldn’t do about the still-active Death Eaters, or even the fact that Terry Boot snored like a damned thunder storm and Harry was tempted to skelo-tape his mouth shut. Eventually, Harry reluctantly gave into Tom’s urging for him to go to bed and Tom walked him all the way up to the door to the Ravenclaw common room. Tom left him with a warm embrace and the promise of a letter waiting for him when he awoke.

Harry practically glided back through the common room towards his dorm, still wrapped in Tom’s fine cloak that smelt of something heated and nearly intoxicating. Something delicious that made Harry’s mouth water as he burred his nose into the soft collar in the privacy of the darkened common room. He had been tempted to sleep with the fabric pressed to his nose, but he worried he would pass in his sleep due to heart-palpitations.

The next morning, as expected, Harry woke up late, the dorm empty and the blazing light of the late morning streaming through the windows. If Harry awoke with a smile on his face as well, he was sure to clamp his plush lips between his teeth before anyone saw or he did something ridiculous — *like laugh.*

It was Saturday, though, and Harry had business to take care of.

Since he was in no rush, Harry took his time showering in the empty bathroom and dressing in the vacated dorm room. He was dressed in a comfortable rich dark blue sweater, and soft grey slacks for the day. He grabbed his school bag before he left, his glossy black curls left to their devices as he didn’t bother to make them a bit more presentable with some rearranging. Harry left the dorms with a certain glimmer in his piercing pale green eyes and a confident squaring of his shoulders.

On his way to his destination, Harry made a slight detour to the kitchens to grab a light breakfast to eat on his way to the infirmary.

He was just vanishing the orange peel and the juices from his fingers when he came upon the infirmary doors and entered to find Madam Pomphrey restocking a few potions on the back shelves.
that were there for emergency use—the more dangerous or expensive potions undoubtedly locked away in her office at the back of the room. She turned at the sound of his approaching steps.

“Mr. Potter? Is something the matter, how can I help you?” She inquired, clearly surprised by Harry’s presence, since he almost never found himself in her care—not nearly as often as the other students, at least.

“I’m fine, Madam Pompfrey, I assure you. I just wanted to discuss some rather . . . worrying matters with you. Might we speak in private?” He asked calmly, hoping that the lack of urgency in his voice kept the older mediwitch from panicking.

“Yes—Yes of course, Mr. Potter, follow me.” Pomphrey turned and led Harry towards her office at the back of the room on the right-hand side, with private and quarantine rooms on the left, and storage in the center. The inside of Pomphrey’s office was cozier and more cluttered than most of the professors’ offices—Dumbledore excluded. With shelves of reference texts, potions, medical supplies and equipment—both magical and muggle—and walls full of various diagrams and charts. The room was an odd cross between a regular doctor’s office and a comfortable sitting room, with couches in the center of the room full of mismatched pillows and a multitude of rugs covering the hard wood floors.

Off to the side of the room, before one reached the sitting area, was a large wooden desk with a couple of chairs in front of it. More of an ‘office area’ section of the room, rather than the whole thing being the office. It made sense though, as the only mediwitch employed by Hogwarts, Pomphrey spent nearly every moment of the school year stationed in the infirmary to always be on call and available. It was likely that the door at the other end of the room led to her personal quarters, as well.

Pomphrey told him to sit down in one of the seats next to the desk before taking the seat across from him.

“Now, what was it you wished to discuss with me, Mr. Potter.” She prompted warmly. Harry took a moment to straighten his thoughts before he spoke.

“I recently came into the unfortunate knowledge that our newest professor here at Hogwarts is already abusing the power that has been given to her.” Harry began, all the while watching the older woman’s expression as he spoke. He didn’t know if Umbridge had used the bloodquill before him, but if she had, his best bet would be finding out through the first person who would see an injured student in this school. Though, the immediate confusion and then concern displayed on the witch’s face gave Harry hope that he was, in fact, the first—and only—student to receive such punishment. After a pause, Harry continued carefully.
“Madam Pomphrey, have you ever heard of a ‘Bloodquill?’” The way the rosy glow to her round cheeks blanched away, Harry had his answer.

“Heavens no!” She gushed under her breath, not to deny that she knew of them, but in utter dread at what Harry was implying.

“I’m afraid,” Harry began as he pulled his school bag into his lap and gently slipped out a piece of parchment he had been wise enough to save after his detention, “That Dolores Umbridge has gotten her hands on something she shouldn’t have.” And with that, Harry set before the startled witch the parchment that was filled from top to bottom with the same demeaning line ‘I will know my place’ in a morbid rusted brown. Pomphrey pressed a small, but experienced hand to cover her mouth in horror as she took in the sight before her. The parchment still imbued with cloying, putrid dark magic from the quill. Harry gave the mediwitch a few moments to process before speaking.

“I have already removed and destroyed the bloodquills she had in her possession. I am telling and showing you this because I know that she is not above physically harming and torturing the students that find themselves alone with her. I have already spoken with the other Prefects and all of the students have been warned against getting detention or being alone with her. However, I cannot have eyes everywhere and there may be incidents I cannot prevent. I am already working with several people outside to get her removed, but as I’m sure you understand, these things are never so quick and simple—especially someone so highly ranked in the Ministry as she.

“If something else happens, the first person the student will see might be you. All that I am asking is that you keep what I have said in mind and document every injury that comes through with the possibility in mind that it might be called in for evidence. I’m not asking you to exaggerate or omit anything, just that nothing gets dismissed or ruled out as accidental until we know for sure. I don’t want anyone else getting hurt, but I have a feeling that won’t always be under my control.” Harry finished, taking the offending parchment back and carefully sliding it back into his bag.

“Of course, I will. I take my job very seriously and am oath bound to document every time a student enters those doors for treatment.” She stated firmly with a slight nod towards the large infirmary beyond the office. Now that she seemed to had composed herself a bit from the earlier shock, she appeared much more the stern and unrelenting mediwitch Harry had heard about from his peers who had the honor of being under her care at one point or another.

“May I ask, Mr. Potter, were you the one who wrote that?” She asked tentatively, gesturing towards his bag. For a moment, Harry considered lying and saying it was another student, but then he knew she would ask to see them to treat their wounds—since it was obvious that they hadn’t been treated by her.
“Yes, it was me. I believe that since this is the first you are hearing about it, that was the first and only time she had used the quills on a student. Thankfully.” Something in his words piqued her interest, as she then leaned in a bit closer and asked,

“Mr. Potter, did you heal your own wounds?”

Harry unconsciously glanced down at the back of his left hand—the very same one that Tom had tenderly kissed the night before—a private thrill run up the length of his spine and Harry had to immediately wave away the sudden less-than-appropriate thoughts threatening to steal his attention and instead answered the question still hanging in the air.

“They did heal, yes.” Harry said ambiguously, though the intrigue lingering in Pomphrey’s gaze didn’t dissipate.

Before she could probe him for more information, however, there was a sharp ringing of an unseen bell somewhere in the room and the sound of heavy footsteps entering the infirmary. The bell was likely a warded alarm system to alert Pomphrey when someone entered. The mediwitch was up and out of the office faster than a woman of her age should be able to. Harry set his bag on the floor and quickly followed Pomphrey out into the infirmary.

The scene unfolding before Harry was chaotic and bloody. At least four students—all boys appearing to be a year or two younger than Harry—were being helped in by Hagrid and two frazzled-looking Hufflepuff girls, while Pomphrey quickly got the injured students into empty beds.

“What happened?” Pomphrey demanded sharply over the moans and broken cries of the boys she was coaxing into laying down on the cots. Without much hesitation, Harry pushed up the sleeves of his sweater and stepped in to carefully assist the last boy onto a cot of his own. Hagrid frantically wrung his hands together and stuttered out an explanation.

“Th-Them boys be m-muckin’ round too much by . . . uh . . . b-by the Whompin’ Willow!”

Harry exhaled harshly through his teeth as he took in the injuries of the last boy, just from what he could see, the boy must have been bludgeoned by one of the wicked knots of the willow. With a broken leg, arm—and from the sounds of his breathing, several ribs—the bloke was lucky to be alive. Harry pulled out his wand and cast a diagnostic spell to be sure.

Harry hesitated for a moment and glanced behind him at Pomphrey, who was removing a jagged
shard of wood from another boy’s side and quickly repairing internal damage before she could close
the wound. Harry knew he shouldn’t be doing this—he wasn’t a licensed healer and he certainly
didn’t know as much about healing as Pomfrey. But, it would be a while until the
only mediwitch at the school would get to the boy before him, and the with the way his breathing
was getting shorter and shorter, Harry was worried he may have punctured a lung.

Gnawing harshly on his bottom lip, Harry glanced at the other three in the room, but they were all
solely focused on the gory mess Pomfrey was tending to, nobody was paying attention to Harry.
With his mind made up and a mix of adrenaline and determination coursing through his veins, Harry
turned back to the boy beside him and sliced open his shirt with a quick spell so he could get a better
look. Already, Harry could see the red and purple flush of discoloration under the skin over his ribs
and down his side.

His mind going a million miles a minute, Harry tried to quickly think of a solution. Harry knew a few
simple healing spells, but he wasn’t trained in this stuff, he would have to think of a better way. As
he desperately combed his mind, peeling through layers and layers of cataloged knowledge
for something to help the boy. After a moment, the answer finally came—just not from where he had
expected.

Harry spent nearly an entire year scouring every corner of the vast and veritable art of Necromancy,
looking for the best way to resurrect Tom’s body. One of the many components that went into that
was restoration. Mainly, that branch had to do with taking the remains of the dead and then restoring
it to a previous state to be used in many other different types of rituals. A way of using a fresh corpse
for a ritual without having to kill someone. It wasn’t intended to be used on a living person, but if
Harry didn’t act quickly, then he wouldn’t have to use it on someone still breathing.

With one last glance behind him to be sure everyone else was occupied, Harry turned back to
the unconscious boy and carefully splayed both hands over the boys’ ribs and wasted no time in
silently mouthing the words he had read only once as a gentle pulse of magic moved from his hands
into the broken body underneath him. Harry only needed to repeat the incantation twice before he
felt the ribs snap back into place with a low pop and the boy sucked in a full, unimpeded breath. Not
punctured, then, just weighed down.

With a little shake of his hands to expel the excess energy and magic, Harry grabbed his wand from
where he had tucked it into his back pocket and moved down to the boy’s leg, thankful that at least
he knew this spell. Harry healed both his broken leg and arm before moving onto the next boy. The
other still had bruises and cuts, but none of those were dire and with the boy already unconscious
they could wait until afterward.

The next boy was not in such bad shape as the first, but he had a concussion—something he would
leave to Pomfrey, as he didn’t know how to fix that—and a large gash on his upper arm that had
probably happened at the same time as his head wound. The gash on his arm was bleeding steadily, a
gory, fleshy mess that would turn the stomach of those unaccustomed to blood and carrion.

“\textit{Vulnera Sanentur.}” Harry hovered the tip of his wand over the gash after a quick antiseptic spell taught to first years in a short first aid course all students got. He watched the ravaged skin knit seamlessly back together until it was just a faint pink line under quickly drying blood and grime.

Harry straightened back up and was about to move onto the next student when he caught Pomfrey watching him thoughtfully as she tended to the last student, whose arm was bent at an odd angle and a heavily bruising stomach spoke of unseen internal damage. However, with the light touch of her wand, the splotchy red and purple marks faded away and the slight bloating of the boy’s stomach receded until it was gone and Pomfrey helped the boy drink a potion to make him sleep so that his body could recuperate. The worst of his injuries might be healed, but the shock of the event and the initial shock to his body would take its toll.

For the moment, Harry ignored her penetrating glances and instead followed her example and assisted the other one into drinking a sleeping potion as well. Pomfrey rounded the bed to stand beside Harry as the boy dropped off into a dreamless sleep and she casted a full diagnostic spell, humming every once in a while—when she found something interesting—but otherwise seemed satisfied, seeing as she only healed a few minor cuts and bruises, as well as the minor concussion, and didn’t redo any of the work Harry had already done.

Harry felt inexplicably nervous.

She moved onto the last boy without commenting and cast another diagnostic spell. This one she spent a little more time analyzing, particularly, his ribs.

“The bruising here suggests he has several broken ribs.” She pointed out the same bruises Harry had looked at, before turning to look at him. “And yet his ribs aren’t even so much as distressed, as would happen with any sort of healing spell that wasn’t of very high caliber.” She stated pointedly with a slight lift of her eyebrow.

“It would seem so.” Was all Harry said. Which, for some reason, made the older witch smile before she turned to the other people still taking up needless space in her infirmary.

“Thank you for your help, had you not gotten these lads up here as quickly as you did, I’m afraid it would have been a very somber dinner this evening. If you would like, I can offer you a calming draught before you go to soothe the nerves, but unless you are injured yourselves, it would be best that you went on your way.” Her tone was amicable, but her words were firm, her authority undeniable.
Hagrid took the draught, but the other two girls kindly refused and soon it was just him, Pomphrey, and four unconscious boys. Under the instruction of the mediwitch, Harry helped clean the newly admitted patients of dried blood and dirt with a well-placed *Tergeo*, which he promptly used on his own dirty hands when he was done. Then he pulled the white sheets and thin blankets up over their forms since most of them had their clothes cut away in places to aid in healing them. Once they were covered from neck to toes in the sheets, Pomphrey cast a helpful spell on each that stripped and redressed them in clean, light blue pajamas.

“Come now, dear. I think a bit of tea to soothe our own nerves is much needed.” Pomphrey herded him back towards the office, all the way to the plush couch deeper into the room before moving about in order to make them each a cup. She could have just called for a house elf to do it, but Harry figured Pomphrey was a woman who preferred to do things herself.

A few minutes later, a steaming cup was placed on the low table before him, along with several different sweeteners and creams to add to his liking. Pomphrey sat across from him and added only a bit of sugar to her tea before taking a small sip. Harry hesitated a moment before giving in and spooning in enough honey into his tea to make the woman’s lips twitch in a smile she tried to hide behind the rim of her cup. Harry added a bit of milk and took a drink of his sweet and creamy drink, feeling the warmth slide down his throat and pool in his stomach pleasantly.

For a while, they just sat in silence and seemed lost in thought until Pomphrey eventually broke the silence.

“You know . . . you would make a hell of a healer.” The statement was musing, but also said with conviction. Harry was taken completely off guard, nearly swallowing his own tongue, causing him to set down his drink before he dropped it in his own lap as he coughed.

“*Pardon?!*” He couldn’t help the shrill note to his voice, his throat feeling tight as he fought down a coughing fit. Pomphrey looked far too amused, but nothing about the way she spoke suggested she wasn’t completely serious about what she said.

“A healer, I think you would make a rather incredible one.” She set down her own cup and her smile faded into an expression of open sincerity. “Healers are ‘cut from a different cloth,’ as they say. It takes intelligence, intuition, patience, a steel stomach, and bit of *something extra* to become a healer and to succeed in the field. I’ve heard from staff meetings that you’re top of your year, ahead of curriculum, and have the potential to go into any career you want. From what I just saw, you’re level-headed, you aren’t squeamish, you don’t let your emotions control you, and you seem to have a certain knack for this.” Pomphrey seemed to be assessing him even as she spoke.
“I’ll be honest with you, Mr. Potter. You have a brilliant mind and could probably make a name for yourself far beyond the fame tacked onto your past, you could go far in politics or start your own corporate empire if you so wished. However, I saw you out there. Healing those students, facing a problem you’d never encountered before and having your success living and breathing before you . . . you thrived.”

Harry soaked in her words and thought back to those moments, absorbed completely in the task before him, the desperation of someone’s life in his hands and the need to save them. Harry’s heart had been pounding like a drum in his chest and just reflecting on it sent something quivering through his veins. He had never even considered being a healer. But it wasn’t just the mending of bones and sealing up cuts, it was also using his magic—using magic that had been deemed so dangerous that it had been outlawed and eradicated—in order to heal someone that had set his blood ablaze.

“This is only your fifth year, you still have a long while until you need to decide on a career path. Though, I ask that you give it some thought and if you’re even a little curious, I could always use an extra set of hands down here in the infirmary. I honestly don’t know why Albus doesn’t hire a team of healers with how often students are rushed in here within an inch of their life. If nothing else, you could keep an old woman company every once in a while, over a cup of tea.” She offered with a warm smile, which Harry returned.

“I would like that, thank you.”

Harry and Pomphrey continued to sit and talk for a while, and Harry found that greatly enjoyed the woman’s company. There was a fire about her that was infectious, and the more she opened up to him, the more Harry got to see the wondrous depths of her unrelenting and disarmingly dry humor.

By the time Harry left, he was on a first-name basis with the mediwitch, and had promised to return the next day around the same time to assist Poppy in taking inventory of the potions they had on hand so that she could put in an order with Snape for the ones she was low on.

Afterward, Harry grabbed a late lunch. He then sought out his Head of House to finally quit the Quidditch team, feeling that this new opportunity before him was one he would take full advantage of. After being asked several times over by Flittwick to reconsider, Harry went back to the dorms, read the letter from Tom that had come in the post and eagerly wrote his reply with news of his encounter with the Hogwarts mediwitch.

That night, Harry caved in and fell asleep with one hand clutched around the locket he never removed from his person, and the other tangled up in the soft material of a cloak that smelled of a home he yearned to embrace. They filled his dreams with whispers of summer rain and the gentle grip of large strong hands, pulling him closer.
I just wanted to deeply thank every single person who left me such amazing and heartfelt comments on my author's note. I am so lucky to have such caring and wonderful people reading this story! Thank you from the bottom of my heart! I hope you enjoyed this chapter and have a fantastic evening!
Harry gathered the prefects and organized a study-system for the other students. He also warned the prefects about Umbridge and what she was doing. Harry told Tom about what had happened in a letter and that night Tom popped in for a secret late-night visit to make sure Harry was okay. The next morning, Harry went to see Madam Pomphrey about what Umbridge was doing and while they were talking, four students who had been messing around with the Whomping Willow were brought in and Harry stepped in to help. Pomphrey offered him a place in her infirmary when he wasn’t busy.

The days turned into leaves, plucked away by the autumn breeze. Harry traded in his quidditch gear for early mornings and afternoons spent with his hands full of gauze, potions, or rowdy patients. He had never been more aware of just how often a school of magic would produce horrific—and often times, bloody—accidents.

Of course, Harry wasn’t really allowed to treat a patient on his own unless it was an absolute emergency. Mostly, he assisted Pomphrey while she did her job, grabbing whatever she needed or helping to calm the distressed student down while she cast diagnostic and healing spells. Harry didn’t mind though, he knew he would have to go through a whole lot more training and examination before he could treat someone on his own. Healing—as he had come to discover with a little research—is an incredibly complex and intensive field of study that took almost as much time and attention as becoming a licensed doctor in the muggle world.

Unlike one would assume upon first entering the wizarding world, not everything was fixed with the flick of a wand. Most healing spells worked as a rudimentary form of time-magic—vaguely similar to the magic Harry had used to heal that boy’s ribs—healing a wound by turning back the clock on a select part of a person’s body. But when it came to anything more than superficial abrasions, bruises, and broken bones, one was entering the field of cellular and molecular manipulation.

Mending spells work wonders on bumps and scrapes, but what about an illness? Viruses? Infections? Disorders? Mutations? Disabilities? Cancer? There was no quick cure for such things. Sure, with the possibilities of magic, one might be able to find a cure for such ailments, but nothing is discovered or gained without experimentation and whether it is in the muggle world or the magical, there is always a limit to the lengths a society will go to for medical advancement.
Without a straightforward cure, there are only treatments and surgeries and potions in hopes of either slowly healing and curing the body, or at least alleviating the symptoms of said ailment. The more Harry thought about it after his meeting with Pomphrey, the more he realized that his abilities put him in a unique position. Not only did Harry have access and mastery of a whole forgotten branch of magic to explore and experiment with, but he also had the ability to go the lengths that other healers couldn’t. To heal what can’t be mended, to bring back what is thought to be lost, and to find a new way around an insurmountable problem.

Harry wasn’t going to be bringing back the dead—everyone went eventually and he would not reverse the inevitable for a few more sickles—but he would likely have a better hope of keeping someone alive than other traditional healers. And he would have the opportunity to test and experiment with healing in ways others wouldn’t dare. Since Harry could test things on himself or reanimated cadavers. Though, the research Harry would do in the field was a topic for much later.

. .

No matter how much he told himself this, his mind couldn’t seem to let it go.

Harry hadn’t really stopped thinking about it since Pomphrey had brought it up. Eating lunch and dinner in a daze as his mind whirled with the possibilities. And lying in bed, staring at his darkened curtains, Harry tried to imagine what it would be like. To go through the training, to become a resident at St Mungos, to learn every little tid-and-bit of the human body and know how to identify what might be wrong. To have patients of his own.

Harry had only held out for a day with Pomphrey before he borrowed a text from her on Cellular Manipulation & Magic.

Cellular Magic was an area of Healing that was considered very advanced. Instead of turning back the clock, it involved using magic to create, change, move, or remove cells within the body. Working on such a minuscule level had its advantages and disadvantages: since it was so small, it took incredible concentration and control only to work within the parameter of an inch, so not only was it very difficult to learn and be able to pull off successfully, but it was also immensely time-consuming and tedious.

However, it could be used to slowly break down and dissolve a tumor, or to heal and rebuild pathways in the brain that had been damaged and destroyed, or even just to help work with the body to amplify or fortify its own natural processes—increase production of serotonin or estrogen or clotting agents. It could be used to do amazing things, the only problem was how slow the process is, and therefore it was rarely used in everyday practice. The book he’d borrowed stated that, unfortunately, it was mostly used by wealthy witches and wizards for cosmetic purposes, or only used in long-term therapies (both physical and psychological).
Harry began to scour both the library and Pomphrey’s personal collection for more texts. Every day when he joined her in the infirmary to assist her, he always had a new list of questions to ask the woman. He could be in the process of shoving a bucket under the chin of a vomiting child and still look up at the witch to calmly ask, ‘Why hand-stitch incisions after surgeries? Why not use a spell to stitch it perfectly—or better yet, close the wound with a spell?’ Though, no matter how many questions he asked or principles he challenged, she never seemed to lose her patience. Pomphrey’s wrinkled face only turned fond as she answered him to the best of her ability.

“Because the body is full of curves and odd-bits, not all bodies are the same, and using one spell to stitch it up would lead to improper stitching. It requires the intuition and experience of a healer to know what stitching method is best, and how loose or tightly to do it. We also don’t instantly close surgery incisions because it has been known to cause either rather horrible and painful scars, or it can be too big of a shock to the body after so much trauma. Sometimes the best thing we can do is just let the patient’s body do what is natural, and we need only to help it along the way and make sure no infection occurs.” She instructed, heedless to the sudden green-pallor of the student they were tending to as he listened to their talk of surgeries and open wounds and such.

The sound of more violent retching soon followed.

Harry devoted most of his spare time to Pomphrey, but he still had his duties as a Prefect—which now included tutoring a small group of fourth-year Ravenclaws two nights a week. At hearing of the incompetence of his new DADA instructor, Remus had been more than happy to send Harry his syllabi and lesson plans. Remus even had a generous stock of unused textbooks he had purchased to give to students who couldn’t afford theirs or had lost their books, which he sent to Harry via a shrunken trunk in the mail.

Things were going rather well.

*But of course, peace within these halls was short-lived.*

It had only been a week and a half since Harry had called a meeting of the Prefects. Harry was out in the infirmary, taking inventory of the potions along the back wall while Pomphrey was finishing up some paperwork at the end of a long day. It was rather late in the evening—nearly curfew—and the empty infirmary was only lit by a single sconce next to the shelf Harry was standing at, and the faint moonlight that painted pale sheets on the floors from the large windows.

The flickering fire within the sconce reflected off of the rows of potions in various vials, colored glass gleaming like jewels and contents swirling restlessly within. Harry’s eyes were trailing lines of stoppers and corks as he counted, when he heard the soft shuffling of feet behind him. He turned to find a student lingering just beyond the doors, still dressed in their school uniform.
A boy no more than a year or two his junior, took a hesitant step back when he realized he’d been noticed. Even from a distance, Harry could see the shifting of his gaze, the gnawing of his lip, the listless twitching of his limbs. Everything about him shouted ‘uncertain’ and ‘scared.’ Harry briefly glanced towards the door to Pomphrey’s office, her wards wouldn’t alert her unless the student actually entered the infirmary, and Harry didn’t want to risk the boy changing his mind and running off if he called for her.

Harry stepped forward and immediately caught the spike of apprehension in the boy’s expression. Trying his best to make himself as unassuming and non-threatening as possible, Harry softened his features and posture. He opened himself up and approached the student on silent steps. Thankfully, he didn’t bolt and actually waited until Harry was just a few steps away.

“What is your name?” His question caught the boy off guard. He blinked rapidly as his brain sputtered to catch up with the present.

“G-Geoffrey.”

“Well, Geoffrey, would you like to come sit down?” Harry offered kindly, gesturing towards the office at the back of the room. The infirmary was large and impersonal, a cozier and less formal setting might soothe the boy a bit more into telling them what was wrong. Geoffrey glanced down the hallway with a furrow between his brows. “Don’t worry about curfew, I can walk you back to your dorms later.” Harry gave a small smile and tapped the silver badge pinned to his jumper lightly.

As Geoffrey seemed to reluctantly concede and finally walked through the doorway, Harry silently noted the emerald lining of his school robes. When they were about half-way across the room, Pomphrey opened the door leading to her office, but stopped when she spotted them coming. Harry caught the curious look she sent him and returned a look of his own he hoped conveyed enough of the peculiar situation.

Geoffrey seemed to shrink inside his robes at the sight of Pomphrey, head ducking low and his steps slowing as if to delay the eventual encounter with the adult, but Harry was quick to take control of the situation.

“I’ve been spending quite a lot of time here lately.” Harry began as they reached the office door. From the corner of his eye, he could see the measuring gaze of the mediwitch, trying to figure out his angle, but he ignored it to give the boy his full attention. “I’ve been helping out around the infirmary and learning quite a lot while here. Nothing official, of course, but I’ve really enjoyed the work.” Harry said as he led Geoffrey towards the couches in the middle of the office.
Geoffrey was clearly wary of Pomphrey, and Harry suspected it had more to do with her being either an adult or a member of staff. Either way, if whatever was going on was bad enough for the boy to be so worried about Pomphrey he’s reluctant to receive treatment, it was probably best for Harry to deal with him first and have Pomphrey step in if he couldn’t handle it. Harry assuring him that he wasn’t there in an official capacity might make him more receptive to actually talking if he knows there’s still a chance to back out of it. It might not be legal or ethical for Harry to even attempt to treat a patient, but if it meant the difference between him getting medical help or not, Harry was willing to bend the rules a bit.

Pomphrey seemed to grasp a bit of what was going on, as she didn’t intervene and instead moved back to her desk on the other side of the room to at least act like she was busy with paperwork. Geoffrey sank down on the couch, a glimmer of relief in his eye when he saw the mediwitch wasn’t joining them immediately. Harry sat a respectable distance away, but not out of reach from the boy.

“Now, would you like to tell me what’s the matter?” Harry asked in a hushed, but still unassuming, tone. Geoffrey’s head sank as he looked down at his school bag sat in his lap. Geoffrey didn’t speak at first, but Harry was patient and gave him time. After a while, the boy seemed to deflate and slowly shifted, pulling out his hands from under his school bag. Harry was careful not to react when he saw the red and bruising purple that colored the back of the boy’s hands in stripes. As if... Merlin... as if they had been hit repeatedly with a cane.

“I—I heard what the others were saying about her, but I—I... I just thought they were exaggerating. But then I got a detention for not turning in my assignment and I’m in Slytherin... Some of them are alright, but I didn’t think anyone would be willing to come with me when I went...” Geoffrey trailed as Harry held the boy’s wrist and carefully examined the bruises with a soft sigh.

“It’s alright. You’re not at fault for what happened. Corporal punishment is illegal and Dolores Umbridge’s actions will not go unpunished. You also aren’t the only student that this has happened to.” Harry emphasized, causing Geoffrey to finally meet his gaze, understanding growing in the depths of his warm brown eyes.

“Geoffrey, would it be alright with you if we took full documentation of your injuries?” He broached carefully. Geoffrey sucked in a breath to protest but Harry continued before he could. “That doesn’t mean we will use it as evidence if you do not feel comfortable with it. This isn’t a commitment to anything, but if you would like it to be included along with other evidence, then it is best that we have as much proof as possible. If we don’t document it now, we won’t be able to get it later. I will be submitting my own evidence, testimony, and memories, but you will be contacted and asked before anything involving you is used. Understand?” Harry didn’t mention the boy’s parents and how they might feel, because there’s always that chance that they will refuse to speak against the Ministry and won’t allow their son to be a part of this.
Geoffrey looked warily between Harry and Pompfrey at her desk, who was no longer pretending to be busy and was instead giving the boy an encouraging look. After a while, he sighed and gave a meek nod. Harry and Pompfrey were quick to snap several pictures and collect the fresh memory from the boy’s head. Once all of the immediate matters were out of the way, Pompfrey was quick to finally heal the boy’s hands. Once they were healed, the boy seemed to actually relax and didn’t look nearly so guarded.

When they were done and Geoffrey had been given a calming draught just in case, Harry stood with the boy and offered to walk him back to the Slytherin dormitories. He accepted gratefully and they were on their way. Neither of them talked during the walk, both consumed by their own thoughts. Eventually they reached the hidden entrance to the Slytherin common room and Harry bid the boy a good night. Geoffrey was just about to enter the archway that had appeared at the utterance of a password when a thought popped up in his head and Harry quickly turned to call out to the boy.

“Geoffrey?” He stopped and turned to look at the prefect with a raised brow. “By any chance, when you were with Umbridge, did she try to make you write lines first?” He asked, the feeling in his gut telling him he already knew the answer. Geoffrey pursed his lips in thought for a moment.

“Yeah, actually. That part was a little strange. She wanted me to use one of her quills, but for some reason didn’t give me any ink to write with. When I pointed it out, she told me I wouldn’t need it, but once she saw for herself just how untrue that was, she had a right fit. Why?”

Harry shook his head and waved the boy off nonchalantly. They went their separate ways, and that night, Harry spent a good portion of time mulling over and dreading what this would mean for tomorrow.

What followed, however, was nothing Harry could have anticipated. In the Great Hall the next morning, right in the middle of breakfast, Dolores stood from her chair and gathered everyone’s attention with a prim little cough.

“Ahm, boys and girls, I have something I would like to say.” Harry tensed in his seat and looked up at the staff table to find that most of the staff looked wary as well. McGonagall’s lips were pursed and her hand visibly tightened around her fork before she finally set it down. As Umbridge moved around the table to stand front and center on the dais before the table, Harry’s eyes met with Poppy’s at the end of the table and there was a flicker of dark apprehension that passed between them, remembering the poor boy they had just treated the night before.

Just before Umbridge spoke, she paused to glance over her shoulder—and Harry could only suspect that she was looking at the vacant seat that usually belonged to the Headmaster, for when she turned...
back, the smile that formed on her lips was vile and cruel.

“It has come to my attention, these past few weeks, that this establishment is in a far worse state than we could have anticipated. The lack of decorum, integrity, and discipline has been duly noted by the Minister and myself. Therefore, it has been decided that in the interest of restoring Hogwarts to its former glory and improving the educational standard, on behalf of the Ministry, I will humbly accept the position as Hogwarts’ High Inquisitor. I will conduct a thorough evaluation of the entire staff and curriculum. Also, in the hopes of eradicating unsightly behaviors before they become permanent, I will be adjusting conduct policy as I deem necessary.” She ended with a titter and returned to her seat, heedless of the ominous silence that had befallen the room around her.

Before lunch, that very same day, the first ‘Educational Decree’ appeared staked to the stretch of wall outside of the Great Hall for everyone to see.

PROCLAMATION.

EDUCATIONAL DECREE

No. 23

DOLORES JANE UMBRIDGE

HAS BEEN

APPOINTED TO

THE POST OF

HOGWARTS

HIGH

INQUISITOR

Dumbledore had hardly been within the castle walls since the first welcome feast of the year, and Dolores was certainly going to take advantage of that fact. As soon as she had taken on the new position, Umbridge made sure that at every opportunity, she sat in on someone’s class and continuously scribbled down _Merlin-knew_ on her parchment, interjecting every so often with ruthless and demeaning quips and questions. Not even the scathing Severus Snape escaped the woman’s scrutiny.

The first Educational Decree was soon joined by several more decrees. They seemed mostly harmless at first: ‘No music to be played during study hours,’ ‘All Weasley products will be banned immediately,’ ‘Proper dress and decorum is to be maintained at all times.’ Thing’s to bring ‘order’ to Hogwarts, stricter rules of conduct that elicited a few groans and grumbles, but otherwise
didn’t have too large an impact on the student body.

And then, after a little over a week, the decrees turned . . . worrying. ‘Boys and girls will not be within eight inches of each other,’ ‘Curfew will be raised to 8 pm on week days, and 9 pm on weekends,’ ‘Anyone found breaking curfew will automatically receive detention,’ ‘Students are not permitted to go outside of the castle after 6 pm.’ Until, finally, ‘Hogsmeade visitation will be summarily suspended until further notice.’

Seeing the treacherous path that the decrees were headed for, Harry finally sent a letter to his parents. In it, he explained that Umbridge was acting outside of the school’s prescribed disciplinary practices. Harry did not wish to worry his precious family, but with the increasingly unyielding restrictions on where students could be or go, he knew he would not have the opportunity to take care of matters outside of the school on his own. And so, Harry carefully worded his letter and admitted to Sirius and Remus that Umbridge had resorted to physical punishments during her detentions. He was quick to follow up that revelation with several requests.

First, Harry asked that they not attempt to remove him from the school yet, explaining that he would be safe now that he knew the woman’s intentions, and that he had a lot of responsibilities to the students and to himself that he could not abandon. Next, he asked that Sirius join Lucius at the Ministry in a few days and pay a visit to the Department of Magical Education, and the Department of Magical Children Services. The sooner the investigation into Dolores Umbridge, the better. And lastly, Harry asked that they contact a certain Philias Green—the man would be disgruntled to have visitors, but he would be plenty eager when he realized why—and to file an official complaint on Harry’s behalf of what had been done to him.

He also drafted two additional letters to Lucius and Phil—Phil’s letter asking him to keep his complaint under-wraps for a while so as not to tip Fudge off too early. Harry sent his letters but was unfortunately faced with a dreadful circumstance when all three letters returned to him only half an hour after he had sent them. Hedwig’s snowy white feathers held the telling residue of spells she must have dodged when she tried to deliver his letters. Harry asked a favor from his grim companion to deliver the letters himself, since they really could not be delayed any longer.

That night, Harry snuck out of the castle and slipped into the Forbidden Forest. His thin form under the black cloak must have made him look incredibly small amongst the towering ancient trees, but his presence was anything but. Driven by his purpose, Harry strode through the forest like a being of shadow. The wood was full of deadly creatures, but none dared to approach the trudging necromancer. His magic licked up the trees and threatened to frost the bark in the young autumn.

Harry walked all the way to Hogwarts’ boundary line, where the wards lay. He already suspected what he would find and why they were here. Harry could get a more in-depth look at the wards, but he didn’t want to alert anyone to him messing with them, so instead he would just have to test his theory. Conjuring a scrap of parchment and a muggle fountain pen, Harry hastily
scratched ‘Umbridge’ onto the parchment before crumpling it up into a ball and tossing it through the wards.

The little white ball of parchment passed through the wards but only made it a foot before vicious flashes of magenta shot out towards the parchment and set it alight. Sigh. Just as he feared. Umbridge had put up censor wards queued into her name, and perhaps even more. Which meant that, now, if anyone within Hogwarts wished to send out a letter to their parents telling them anything about Umbridge, the letters were destroyed. Umbridge knew there would be kickback for her growing boldness, but she was hoping to keep it all locked within these wards so the outside world wouldn’t know.

Harry spent another hour going through different key words that wouldn’t pass through. The wards weren’t extremely thorough, but they didn’t allow ‘Ministry’ ‘Detention’ ‘DADA’ or ‘Secretary.’ Harry then spent a bit of time sorting through different privacy charms he knew that would allow ‘banned’ content to pass through the wards.

The spell he settled on was a bit more difficult to learn but seemed the most effective. It made it so that the words blurred and jumbled for anyone who tried to read it that wasn’t the intended reader. There were a few simpler spells that set fire or destroyed the letter when someone unwanted tried to read it, but that would just do the same thing the wards were. And a very complex spell that change the letter’s contents completely to something innocuous, so an unintended reader wouldn’t realize the true letter had been tampered with.

Harry left the border and as he walked back to the castle, he made plans to call another meeting with the other Prefects to get the news out that their mail was being monitored and/or destroyed. He would then teach the Prefects a few privacy spells to either teach the others, or to cast it on students’ mail before they sent it out.

Pomphrey, for her part, was going above and beyond what Harry had asked of her. The Matron of the Infirmary had taken on a more involved role after the appearance of Geoffrey in her ward. While Harry had taken it upon himself to get word out to the students, Pomphrey had done the same with the staff. Pomphrey hadn’t shared absolutely everything, since spreading details so far and wide before the investigation had even begun would risk the information getting into the wrong hands.

So, she warned the Professors about Umbridge using corporal punishment in her detentions—Pomphrey having been the one to treat said victims—and to be sure to take on any detentions students might receive from her, to keep an eye out, and to intervene whenever they could to protect the students. Already, McGonagall and Flitwick had taken on several detentions that Umbridge had doled out under the pretense of violating her new decrees.
Unfortunately, a few slipped through the cracks. . .

In the weeks following their first case with Geoffrey, three more students shuffled into the infirmary while Harry and Pomphrey worked, in order to have their bruised and battered hands healed. One girl—rather known for her sharp tongue—not only had beaten hands, but also slowly blooming bruises on her knees, where she had—reportedly—been made to kneel for the entirety of her detention on stone floors. The places where stray pebbles and grit tracked in under shoes had littered the floor, had cut into the girl’s knees like glass and had to be dug out by tweezers in Harry’s careful hand before it could be healed.

So far, every single student had agreed to have their injuries documented and a copy of their memories extracted for further proof. The girl who had been made to kneel—Sheryl—was incensed and had been adamant that they used her case in the investigation. It took another week before things at the Ministry were starting to gain momentum and a full investigation was in the works. Once it was, Harry gathered his own and Sheryl’s evidence and gave it to Death to give to Philias.

He didn’t send it to his parents because: *one*, Harry didn’t trust something so important to pass through the mail wards, and *two*, because he really did not wish either of his parents to see his own statement, memory, or the bloodied parchment that went with it. He could tell by their letters that they already had enough to deal with.

Remus was desperate to get Harry home and away from any sort of danger. It was almost endearing—had it not been for the subject matter—how much Remus fretted over Harry. He wouldn’t lie, he missed the wolf and his gentle hugs and frothy mugs of hot coco no matter the season. Remus was all soft-edges and shining maternal eyes every time he looked at his boy. And Sirius, with his barking laughter and playful temperance. Remus always wrote of wanting to take Harry out of Hogwarts, to hold him and make sure his son was alright. While, in contrast, Sirius wrote of destroying the woman who had hurt Harry, of marching right into her office and letting her know the full extent of a parent scorned. Remus was his fortress, and Sirius his soldiers. Hiding within their walls, he knew he was safe.

But he would have to wait it out. Since this investigation would eventually lead the hounds to Cornelius’ front door, the specialized investigative unit comprised of highly trusted Aurors and department Heads from Magical Education needed to work in secrecy so that the Minister couldn’t intervene. It meant a lot of sneaking around, waiting, and paperwork. In other words, *time*. Harry just had to bide his time.

And while he did that, he also had to fend off Umbridge’s relentless power plays. It was a bit difficult, considering Harry had to work behind the scenes while Umbridge wielded her power openly for all to see. However, once word of what Umbridge was doing was thoroughly spread and
both student and staff were aware of what the consequences of interacting with Umbridge was, things actually began to smooth over.

Once students heard about the issue with the mail wards, they were finally able to get through to their parents properly and Philius told Harry that two more students came forward after having talked to their parents about what had happened. On top of that, the staff of Hogwarts seemed to collectively shake off the threat of being fired through the evaluations Umbridge was enforcing on everyone, and they were becoming bolder in speaking out and protecting students.

Professor Trelawny in particular had made quite the spectacle. Apparently, Umbridge had been growing more and more paranoid after seeing a few of the students who’d been in her detention, healed up the next day, and then also that the other professors had been taking on her detentions as often as possible.

Combined with the facts that Harry had been silent and nearly unresponsive in every class he had with her, and that her bloodquills had stopped working after using only one on him, she had thrown a fit. In a paranoid rage, Umbridge had dragged in Lisa Turpin—a quiet girl from his house and year he’d practically never even spoken to—and had administered an unhealthy dosage of *veritaserum*. All in the hopes of secretly getting more information on Harry and his activities. Umbridge hadn’t gone after his friends—thankfully—since she didn’t want Harry to know, he would assume.

Afterward, Lisa had been stumbling through the halls, nearly collapsing under the heavily sedative effects of the potion, which is how Trelawny had found the girl that evening. Trelawny, who was well acquainted with consuming various substances and potions in order to ‘*connect with her third eye*’ had recognized the symptoms of an over-dosage of the heavily regulated potion and had immediately called for Pomphrey.

Harry had been there to catch that part of the story, however, Trelawny soon left when she was sure the girl was in their care. Harry later heard from Draco that Trelawny had stormed into the Great Hall just as dinner was starting and had thrown a huge fit in front of nearly the entire school. Trelawny had been so enraged by the woman’s reckless actions she had even been going to raise her wand at Umbridge. McGonagall had intervened by standing and questioning the woman herself as to whether she had really done such a thing to a student. Of course, McGonagall was mostly aware of the ungainly things happening in private with that woman, but it was mostly to divert attention and keep Trelawny from bringing the full focus of inevitable outrage from the horrid little pink creature on herself.

It had partially worked, but the ‘*visits*’ Umbridge paid Trelawny during her lessons had apparently turned brutal thereafter. After the whole debacle, Harry had been labeling expiration dates on the new batch of potions they had received, when he wondered aloud about the drastic change in behavior on Trelawny’s part when Pomphrey cut in with an amused quirk to her thin lips.
“Sybil might not be the most conventional witch, and most may doubt her validity as a seer, but there is one thing to keep in mind, Harry, Sybil—for all of her quirks—is a professor at Hogwarts first and foremost. Her students might not hold the most respect for her practice, but she would do anything to protect them.” Poppy answered resolutely. Harry lofted her with a skeptical look.

“And what of the many prophecies I’ve been given from that woman telling of the horrible and painful end I will reach at every turn?” He deadpanned, only to see the mediwitch’s smile grow.

“Taking into consideration how many student’s we’ve receive this month alone for thinking it would be a good idea to try to slide down the railing of a moving staircase, I think it’s safe to say that a few of your peers could use a little caution in their day-to-day lives.” Harry rolled his eyes but couldn’t stop himself from returning her smile.

The more time Harry spent with the brilliant woman, learning her trade bit-by-bit, the surer of himself he became that this was something he wanted to seriously consider as his future career path. Even at the busiest points, Harry still found time to spend in the infirmary. Anthony had beamed when Harry had first told him about his prospects to become a healer one day, saying that such a profession would bring Harry joy and respect without the spotlight of other ventures. Draco had teased Harry about being so intimidating that he would give his poor patients a heart attack. And Hermione had just smiled fondly and told him it was a wonderful idea.

Since Harry spent so much time there, he would sometimes get visits from his friends when things were slow. Poppy would scold the others, either for distracting Harry when he was supposed to be learning something new, or for not tending to their own studies. Though, Harry knew the woman well enough to see that she had grown a bit fond of the group of teenagers.

She even offered Hermione her couch when the young witch came through looking for Harry, needing the comfort of a friend after having mustered up the courage to ask a bloke she fancied out, only to be turned down since he only saw Hermione as a friend. Harry had been entirely out of his depths in that situation, not having the faintest on how to comfort his friend. Fortunately, Pomphrey had picked up on it rather quickly and with a secret glimmer in her eyes, had tenderly unwound the weeping witch from Harry’s waist and guided Hermione into her office, right onto her plush couch. Pomphrey had rubbed soothing circles into her back while Harry went about making tea in the background for her.

Harry was out of depth when it came to even his own ‘love life.’ Though, Harry liked to think of himself as a quick learner.

The first time his daily letter had been accompanied by a plain brown package, he hadn’t thought
anything of it—nor what was inside of it. Harry had vaguely remembered mentioning in a letter that he needed to purchase more quills, since most of his own had been used to replace Umbridge’s bloodquills. And then, he received a package of ten brand new quills attached to his letter from Tom. They were nice, but not so much so that one shouldn’t write with them. Harry had thanked Tom in his next letter and put the matter out of his head.

And then, a week later, Tom’s letter came with another surprise: a tin of tea Tom had recently been fond of and thought Harry might like to try. Even though there was a slight tease at the fact that the raven always drank his tea with such an absurd amount of milk and honey that the type of tea didn’t matter. Harry had been strangely warmed by the mundane gift and had immediately gone down to the kitchens to prepare himself some tea.

At random intervals, with no apparent intention behind it, Tom sent him more and more packages. They weren’t really ‘gifts’ though, most of them were plain, functional, and inexpensive. But every single one of them had an oddly personal touch. Either it was because Harry needed something and Tom remembered, or something had popped up in his head and reminded him of Harry, or he discovered something new that he wanted to share. It did help a bit in easing the ache of being away from Tom for the long stretch of time, but something kept niggling at the back of Harry’s mind about it.

Between books on the growing cycle of Britain-native magical fungi, to a tin of short-bread biscuits, to a magically preserved wildflower Tom had found while walking the ground of his estate; Harry hadn’t known what to make of any of it. That is, not until he took a step back and tried to figure out why Tom might be sending him these things.

Tom could have just as easily wrote about these things instead. He could have recommended these things instead of sending them to Harry, and he hadn’t needed to send such things nearly so often. But the wizard had wanted to share it with Harry. He gave him the book he’d read and found interesting, the tea that had warmed his palate, the scarf he’d bought for himself that was softer than silk and then had given it to Harry instead, and the flower that he had thought too beautiful and fragrant to let wither. He was giving Harry the things he enjoyed, because he wanted Harry to enjoy them to.

And the most adorable part was, that Tom didn’t even seem to realize what he was doing.

He wanted to impress Harry and make him happy, but he wasn’t aware of his actions—which resulted in the strange mix of used and otherwise unremarkable items that he packaged and sent all the way across England to Harry. It was like giving Harry the food off of his own plate because it tasted good, or re-watching a movie he’d already seen with Harry just because he wanted to see him react the same way or differently from how Tom did.
His observations became all the more apparent when Tom had sent Harry his own favorite shirt, claiming he had two—*he didn’t*—and that he thought Harry might like the look and feel of the shirt as well. Never mind that Harry was significantly smaller than Tom and the shirt would probably look ridiculous on him if he wore it in public, or that the shirt was one Harry had seen him wear on several occasions over the summer and was obviously one Tom had worn before. Never mind that the scent that clung to the material was rich, mouth-watering, and undeniably *Tom*.

And perhaps the most perplexing part, had been how bemused and *flushed* Harry had been to receive the shirt. To now know that this was Tom’s strange, unknowing way of . . . well . . . *wooing* Harry, it turned the otherwise frigid teen into a beaming, flushed mess. He couldn’t help it, though. Harry wasn’t used to *anyone* having such a huge effect on him, but Tom was always the exception.

Harry had never been swayed by expensive clothes, jewelry, or the prettiest of things. He’d grown up with nothing to his name but hand-me-downs and broken toys. And then he entered the wizarding world and suddenly everything he could ever want or need was right at his fingertips. Either way, material things had *never* mattered to him.

But . . . the bubbling warmth that sizzled in his gut every time he opened another package and found something that Tom had felt the need to share with him. When he read the books and found spidery scrawl inked into the margins where Tom left notes or little messages for Harry to find. When he found a note in the tea tin with Tom’s own instructions on how to brew the tea, telling him to ignore what was printed on the side. When Harry was sent a pressed willow leaf along with the details of how the green house at Riddle Manor looked especially dazzling as sunset, and that it would be waiting for Harry’s return. Harry couldn’t help but fall deeper and deeper into a feeling that felt like a liquid sun blazing through his veins, a feeling that he was too afraid to name just yet, but one he was slowly beginning to embrace.

Harry sat on his bed that night, the lights were out and he could hear the soft, muffled breathing of his dormmates through the heavy curtains and weak privacy charm around his bed. Harry was leaned up against the narrow headboard with his legs folded, dressed for bed. Clutched in his hands, was the soft material of a dark blue shirt that was just as dark and rich as the other’s eyes. His fingers curled in the fabric as thoughts of Tom fluttered behind the curtains like flighty moths in the dim light.

Taking a breath, hidden behind his bed hangings, Harry indulged the rampant desire building in the back of his mind. Promising himself he would never tell Tom of it, Harry deftly unbuttoned his sleep shirt in the dark and slipped it off. His eye caught the faintest reflection in the dark as the locket against his chest gleamed before it was covered once more by fabric. His wily mind slipped back to a similar scene as he shifted down onto his bed and pulled the covers over him. Memories of a borrowed cloak wrapped around him as he fell asleep flitted through his mind and licked another blush into his pale cheeks.
Curling up on his side, the soft and warm smell of Tom surrounding him, Harry wondered if this would become a habit, or if he just truly needed to return home, *to his beloved*. . .
More students had detention with Umbridge and she discovers that the bloodquills were tampered with. Umbridge appoints herself as High Inquisitor of Hogwarts and starts making Educational Decrees. Harry decides to finally start off the investigation of Umbridge, so he sends a letter to his parents, but when it comes back, he realizes there are mail-wards up and spreads the news on how to get around them. Harry starts getting weird/cute gifts from Tom and realizes the clueless man is unintentionally wooing him. They’re both hopeless and adorable.

Each day came and went without fail. Short fluctuations between warm and cold weather throughout the course of the following months as summer reluctantly gave in to autumn, and autumn to winter. Students were seen ostentatiously flicking drying and heating spells at their sopping shoes and dripping hems of their trousers. The uniforms changing one by one to thick grey sweaters with the school crest emblazoned on the breast along with wool tights and trousers.

With it, came the sense of longing. Some wished for warmer months, some for the jolly days surrounding Christmas and Yule without lessons and surrounded by family. While Harry also wished to be reunited with his family, he could not deny his yearning of one particular individual.

Every letter, every package, every page of comforting words was not enough to dispel the budding tightness in his chest every time he had a moment alone and allowed his thoughts to run away from him. For nothing would satiate his enamored heart, save the presence of its captive.

Though, the distractions from such things were plentiful at Hogwarts. It was not often that Harry found his mind nor body idle. Umbridge continued to exert her power where ever and whenever she could. Berating and insulting the staff, all the while looking down on the students like they were invalid, vile creatures. Though, as time went on and the school as a whole became more aware of her actions, therein began a collective effort to keep students far from her ‘disciplinary sessions’ and to not allow her belittling of the staff to hold any weight for the students.

When Dumbledore finally made a reappearance at the school, nothing really changed. There were a few quiet days where Dolores treaded carefully, but when she—along with everyone else—saw how distracted the Headmaster was, it became clear that it didn’t matter if he had returned or not. Concerns from the staff went unheard or waved off by the unfocused wizard. And that was when anyone managed to catch Albus outside of his chambers for a few moments.
It wasn’t until Harry spoke to Death about it that he found the reason for the man’s recent absence.

‘What do you mean he was out in the country? Doing what?’ Harry’s internal voice sounded incredulous as he glowered down at his eggs, shuffling them about with the end of his fork.

‘I believe he was poking around the old Gaunt shack, searching for a ring.’ His companion answered pointedly.

Harry paused, pursing his lips at this new bit of information. Dumbledore was looking for the ring? That meant that he was aware of the Horcruxes. Enough to be searching for them. Harry turned to look at the man at the head table, who was also picking at his breakfast without really seeing it, pale blue gaze a thousand miles away.

Dumbledore was still adamant that Voldemort lived, and now he’s seeking a way to destroy him before yet another wizarding war could begin. Not that Tom had given Harry a definitive answer on what he wished to do with himself now that he could start over, but Harry had a feeling that war and gruesome conquest did not fit into his plans any longer. Harry wasn’t particularly concerned at the moment. Dumbledore may continue to think Voldemort is alive, but allies outside of Hogwarts were waning and the longer Voldemort goes without making an appearance, the more everyone will move on.

The Headmaster’s behavior had Poppy in a mood for days on end. Harry had to reassure her that when he returned home for winter holiday, he would be taking all of their compiled evidence with him to hand over to investigative unit at the Ministry. Umbridge would be dealt with, with or without Dumbledore’s assistance. If the man refused to maintain his duties as headmaster, they would go on without him and he would be ousted from his position if he didn’t wise-up soon.

There were several more meetings between Prefects over the term pertaining to different issues with the groups, around the school, or just to catch up and touch base with everyone else. The meetings became more frequent with time and soon enough all of the prefects were pretty familiar with each other and it wasn’t surprising to see them drifting around during meals and between classes, moving from house to house and connecting with all sorts.

And where the figure-heads of the houses lead, the student body followed. Students were careful to keep all discussions of the study groups quiet in public, but with a widely held secret in common, it seemed much easier for others to reach out. Under the tyranny of Umbridge, petty house rivalries temporarily dissolved. That didn’t mean there was no conflict. As the stress of extra work coming from the study groups, approaching examinations in spring, Dumbledore’s absence, Umbridge’s decree’s and curriculum, and the rising contentions in the Ministry, many students still needed an
outlet for the mounting pressure.

That was when Harry felt the weight of his role as a prefect bare down on him the most notably. It seemed every other week or so, he was breaking up a fight or duel and escorting students either to the infirmary or to a trusted member of staff to serve detention. Some of them just couldn’t control it, they kept so much locked inside that it exploded after a while.

Harry didn’t remain unaffected either.

Harry arguably had more on his plate than anyone. Being the focal point of the entire system of study groups, complaints from students and staff alike about Umbridge, collecting and holding all the files and reports from her victims, spending his free time delving into the world of healing, maintaining all of the different friendships and alliances he’s acquired over time, being a prefect, and so on. Every day it felt like he got a little less sleep the night before and the times he walked away to seclude himself and take a breath became less and less affective.

The problem was . . . Harry was discovering that he didn’t quite have the tools to deal with too much stress. He tried to take more time to himself, tried spending more time with his friends, wrote more letters to those away from him, tried to sleep more, listen to music, practice more necromantic spells. Hell, he’d even spent a few hours lazing around in his animagus form. Nothing worked for long, which only aggravated Harry the more aware of it he became.

It was like he’d spent years ignoring his feelings and the whims of his body, and now that it was turning against him, he couldn’t figure out what was bloody wrong!

It came to the point where he was only two weeks out from taking the Hogwarts Express back to London with everyone else for hols and yet there he was, sitting in the room of requirement on an exquisite leather couch and glaring into the glowing coals in the fireplace. He was sat with Draco after another one of their prefect’s meetings. The room had been transformed into a comfortable space that resembled a common room, save the school colors and instead decorated in neutral browns, blacks, and greys.

Everyone else had left at that point, having long since left for their own common rooms or to start up patrolling duty. It just so happened that both he and Draco were free of duties that night. Draco had been enjoying the warmth and comfort of the near empty room, while Harry had been too caught up in his thoughts to notice it was time to leave. And so, taking the opportunity to spend some time with his rather restrained Ravenclaw friend, Draco had ‘required’ a strong bottle of something dark from the room and had poured himself and Harry generous portions.
Harry hadn’t realized until he took a sip and jolted at the smooth, smoky burn of alcohol when it hit his tongue. He gave his blonde friend a warning glare, but a few moments later he took another larger sip and Draco hid his smirk behind his own glass. Harry wasn’t much of a drinker—a few sips here and there at parties, but never really going beyond a small warmth in his stomach—but he tiredly hoped the drink might loosen some of the tension rising inside his chest. He felt like every other exhalation was a sigh, and he felt like if he didn’t figure this out soon, he might just explode like the boys and girls he pried apart and do something idiotic.

Unfortunately, his drink only seemed to bring the problem closer to the forefront of his mind and his glower dissolved into a pout. Draco, steadily on his way to being all-out sloshed, took one look at his friend and snorted in a very un-Malfoy-like fashion.

“What’s got you so wound, darling?” The blonde mused with a devilish curl of his lips and glassy shine to his eyes as he tugged his tie looser and pulled a few buttons free.

And like the flood gates had come crashing down, Harry flew into a seemingly-endless rant. From things as big as gathering evidence against Umbridge, to the inconsequent fact that someone had eaten all of the roast at dinner before he got there. Everything came rolling out with overexaggerated severity. The only thing he managed to keep back in his slightly buzzed state was anything pertaining to Death and his abilities—which were still a secret very few people knew and would remain that way for quite a while. In the end, Harry deflated and gave his friend a harrowed look.

“It just—it keeps building up. Right here.” Harry patted his sternum with a soft thump. “And nothing I do seems to help. Am I just going mad?” Harry ran a rough hand through his hair, catching on a few curls and tugging at his scalp.

The questions had been mostly rhetorical, but the Slytherin seemed to be contemplating his words for a minute. Then, suddenly, Draco’s eyes flashed with some sort of understanding and he looked over at Harry—truly looked at him—with what felt like new eyes. A slow grin took hold of his face as he spoke.

“I know we don’t really talk about these kinds of things, but . . . by any chance, Harry, are you . . . frustrated?” Draco’s voice tilted up, as if on the edge of a laugh. Harry turned and frowned, confused and irritated.

“Yes, Draco. I believe I had made that quite clear, had I not? I am very frustrated, and stressed, and nothing seems to alleviate it.” He gritted out, folding his arms over his chest and crossing his legs, turning his ire back on the fire. He caught the other rolling his eyes from his peripheral, but decided to ignore it.
“That’s not what I meant. I mean... are you perhaps... sexually frustrated?” Harry’s head whipped around so fast he might have broken his own neck if he was of weaker constitution.

“Where on earth did you get that from what I said?” Harry balked incredulously, wide green eyes boring into the other teen. Draco broke into raucous laughter, but tried to tamper it down when Harry started to turn away again.

“No, I’m being serious, Harry!” He claimed, while forcing down another laugh and grinning hard enough that his cheeks would ache later.

“I know you don’t usually talk about these things, but do you ever, you know, relieve yourself? It’s certainly not a fix-all, but if you’ve tried everything else and still feel ‘frustrated’ then maybe you’re not looking in the right places for the problem. It’s absolutely natural! You’re a healthy fifteen-year-old boy, and as far as I know, you’ve never had a girlfriend or boyfriend—nothing wrong with that, but some things need to be attended to, whether you have someone or not. Besides, don’t think we haven’t noticed your correspondence with your little-someone these past few months, being away from them for so long, I’m sure it’s frustrating being apart.” Draco sent his friend a sly wink and Harry sputtered.

“It’s not—we’re not—he’s--”

“Come now, Harry. You receive a letter from that beast of an owl nearly every day and practically glow the moment it arrives. You look at your post the way Vincent looks at caldron cakes. It’s just fine if you don’t want to tell anyone yet, that’s your own business. Just be sure to give me a good seat at the wedding,” Draco teased and Harry turned absolutely crimson, “My point is, if you’re taking an interest in someone, knowing you, you’re probably only now going through all the hormone-driven, love-sick woes of puberty all at once! For you, things don’t tend to exist unless they’re waving right in your face.

“So, a little advice? It might help to stave off the little red monster in your belly if you took a minute to work through your frustrations instead of trying to stamp them into oblivion, mate. I’m not saying to turn your dorm room into your own blasted pleasure den, because Corner and Boot might just throttle you in your sleep if you did, but maybe find some place private, comfortable, where you won’t be disturbed, and give it a tug!” Draco finished crudely and Harry sent a vicious wandless stinging hex his way.

The blonde jumped up with a yelp that melted into laughter as he quickly began making his way towards the exit before he found himself on the receiving end of a nastier spell—wouldn’t by the first time his cheekiness got him hexed to high-heaven by his friends—it was almost always worth it, though.
As Harry listened to the trickle of laughter fade and cut off with the closing of a door behind him, he settled back against the couch and threw back the rest of his drink with a hard swallow. His belly was buzzing pleasantly and his head swam as the alcohol did its job and made him feel less connected to his thoughts. His eyes slid shut, though he silently kept reminding himself that he couldn’t stay. He had class right away in the morning, he couldn’t sleep in the room of requirement.

Still, he let his mind and body settle into the quiet. The heat of the fire was just a low brush against his limbs to chase away the harsh chill of the castle mid-winter. After a few minutes of his mind drifting aimlessly, Harry’s eyes blinked back open and he thought about Draco’s ‘advice’ if one could call it that. He’d been teasing him, of course, but maybe there was some truth to what he’d said. Harry didn’t really . . . indulge his more carnal appetites.

It had just seemed like a waste of time and energy to Harry, to do it needlessly. Harry had thought that if he was going to engage in such activities, it would be when he felt an overwhelming urge to get sexual gratification. He had thought he would be overcome by some need to touch himself and that that was sexual frustration. Not just . . . regular frustration and the call for the release of the pressure in his chest. Though, he supposed that what the other had said made sense.

Looking at it from a completely objective angle, it made sense that with all the stress he was under, and his deepening feelings for Tom, that he would start to exhibit signs of yearning for a partner and the companionship of a relationship.

Looking at it from a personal and subjective angle, this is fucked.

Harry’s cheeks burned with a mix of what little alcohol in his system was still making its course and an undercurrent of embarrassment. The more he thought about it, the more his body came alive and fixated on the suggestion of something new and supposedly pleasant. His tongue swiped out to wet his lips as thoughts churned into a tumulus mess and his eyelid drooped to let the dim firelight wash over him.

Maybe . . . maybe just once. As an experiment . . .

Harry’s hands lifted to card through his hair and push it away from his forehead before slipping down to his neck. The gentle glide of his fingertips over the sensitive skin of his throat had his chin tiling back and a long breath puffing from his lips as goose bumps broke out over his skin. The infernal heat in his cheeks continued to blaze, dripping down his spine and settling low in his belly. He tugged his tie free and began unwind the buttons of his dress shirt. Leaving his chest bear with only the warm weight of the locket against his sternum.
It seemed that now that he was pouring all of his focus into his body and the sensations, even just the brush of fabric against his stomach and arms and thighs felt like the reverent caresses of another. It had Harry’s breath coming faster as he finally opened the last button and trailed his hands all along his chest and stomach. He didn’t really know what he was doing, just that each touch felt nice and he hadn’t realized just how soft his own skin was and certain areas seemed far more sensitive than others.

His fingertips drew intoxicating circles and stripes against the flesh just above the top of his trousers since it seemed the most responsive part of his skin yet. Harry bit down on his lower lip when a thrum of desire and arousal pulsed through him reminiscent to the more intense rituals he had to perform. Which brought him around to visions surrounding Tom’s resurrection and slumping sated in the man’s arms as he looked upon his face like seeing the night sky for the very first time in those starlit eyes. And now his thoughts were consumed.

One of his hands moved back up to keep trailing over his skin while the other undid his trousers and scooted them down past his knees to fall around his ankles to the floor. His hand brushed over the hardening flesh in his pants when he reached for his thigh and found a whole new threshold of sensitivity on the untouched alabaster skin there. He hadn’t meant to, but his feverish mind latched onto Tom and his eyes slid closed as it supplied instances both real and constructed.

The rumble of a low baritone voice in his ear, soft lips tasting wherever his hands ventured, a strong grip finding its way to his thigh just below his groin and squeezing just as his own hand did, pulling a soft breathy sound from his chest and making his legs pull together a moment before he made them move apart to make room once more.

The more he lost himself to the sensations, the more his mind supplied imagined events, ones involving plenty of bared forms, sinful vocalizations, and acts made his toes curl just imagining. He delved deeper into as it he finally slid his hand into his briefs grabbed his dick, pulling it out with a loose stroke. A few strokes had his spine curving off of the couch slightly with a low moan.

His brows tugged down and his mouth fell open as hot licks of pleasure rolled through him with every push and pull of his hand. He was panting between moans and his body moving restlessly even as he fed the pulsing beast in his gut demanding more. He imagined soft sheets against his back and a heavy, warm body pressing into him. He felt the phantom puffs of breath against his collar bone as his arms wrapped tightly around the man above him.

Harry swiped his thumb over the sensitive head of his cock and keened. it was a slow build, something the was nudged up with ever pull or squeeze of his hand, but each one was worth it as it brought him nothing but more pleasure.
And in the blurry fantasy filtering through his head, Harry imagined his beloved pushing up into him slow and true, matching the pace of their heavy shared breaths. He imagined intimacy and carnal connection and something so delicate it could be crushed between their bodies with each thrust. Harry picked up the pace of his hand between his legs as something swelled in his belly and the heat surrounding him seemed almost unbearable, sweat misting his body and leaving everything a little slicker and more infernally delicious.

Harry thrust up in to his hand as pants and tight moans spilled from his lips, chasing after the little bunny in his gut offering release. The tension in his body was so taut as he edged ever closer to climax, that he gave an involuntary tired whimper as his abdominal muscles fluttered in fatigue but he was so close to something indescribable that he wouldn’t stop if the walls came tumbling down in that moment. When he finally caught it, his thighs squeezed together tight, his back arched, and his other hand pawed and grasped at the leather for something to hold onto as his release swept through him.

“Tom.” Harry gasped desperately as he shot to the peek and had a moment of unimaginable bliss, his breath stuck in his chest and his body curling and stretching as it basked in the tidal wave of pleasure. And then, too soon, he started to come down.

It was like his brain shut down for a minute, leaving him slumped and panting hard against the couch as he slowly rebooted himself. As he came back to himself, still breathing pretty hard, Harry wandlessly vanished the mess cooling across his stomach and the next thing he did was laugh airily as he continued to ride the euphoric haze thrumming through his body.

He was still totally drained, but there was a renewed energy inside his chest that left him feeling like he could float away any second. Once his heart calmed inside his chest again and he felt like he could manage proper thought, he took stock of himself and what he’d just experienced. Most notably, he could no longer feel a weight on his chest from all of his stress.

Reluctantly, Harry admitted to himself that perhaps Draco was right about what was troubling him. Not that he’d ever let him know he was right. Malfoys were prone to self-inflating egos.

As he came down from his high, recalling all of the very intimate and intense details of his fantasies and who had taken up their focus made him groan and flush in embarrassment. Harry hid his face in his hands as the heat reignited in his cheeks. He had never thought about more than what it might be like to kiss Tom, but that . . . how on earth was Harry going to get those images out of his mind and think of anything else?! Harry groaned louder and slumped further down the couch.
Tom grunted harshly and shot up in bed. He was panting as vivid images of a dark room, soft sheets, and even softer skin underneath him faded away. He rubbed the fog of sleep from his eyes until his mind seemed to finally catch up with his dream and he straightened in his bed.

‘Tom.’

The tone of Harry’s voice imbedded itself deep within his long-term memories and sent shivers down his spine. He’d never heard it like that before.

And his dream! Tom’s cheeks flooded with a rosy flush in the darkness as his mind turned over every explicit detail from his dream of him and Harry together. He . . . he’d never dreamt anything like that before—honestly, he hardly dreamed at all, much less something that had been so clear and felt so real. He could still taste Harry’s small moans on the back of his tongue and he swallowed heavily.

And then a second realization hit him as he felt the spots of warmth in his lap he hadn’t noticed before slowly cool. Ripping the thick duvet from his legs, Tom stared incredulously down at himself. Wide-eyed, he concluded that for the first time in Tom’s long life, he’d just had a . . . a wet dream.

He clamped his hands over his blazing cheeks and fell back against his bed. He stayed like that for another hour before eventually slipping back into sleep—secretly hoping that he would not go unaccompanied into his dreams.
The Calm

Chapter Summary

Harry relieves some stress, and Tom has a revelation.

Chapter Notes

Hey guys! I know, it's been a century! I never meant to take that long off of the story, however I had a few things going on in my life that kept me from writing. I don't really share much about my life but with me being gone for so long, I figured those few who are still sticking around ought to have a little insight. And sorry if this is TMI, you can totally skip this!

I have depression and very debilitating anxiety. It totally took over my life and since I've always been really bad at asking for help or saying when I'm having a hard time, it took a long time for me to start back on a road to getting better and finding my love for the world again. I still struggle a lot, and I can't promise that I won't go into anxiety- hibernation again, but writing will always be something I return to. It's my voice, my passion, my love.

As for this story, after coming out of the dodgy-mental haze, I wasn't really happy with what I had planned for the story going forward and it took me a while to realize just what was wrong and what I wanted to change. I had a plot-epiphany though! And I'm very excited for what I have lined up.

I got a new job, so I don't know how regular the updates will be, but they'll come eventually! Hope you all have a wonderful night/morning/day!

And remember, deep breaths, the world has a lot of wonderful, effervescent things coming your way.

The horrible and yet wonderful thing about Harry Potter, was that he’s inescapable. Unavoidable. He entangles himself in your thoughts and confronts you even in your dreams. He is such gentle corruption . . .

Which would have been fine, had Tom been anyone else.

But he wasn’t. He thought he had confronted his demons and his past after the resurrection. He
thought he could come to terms with who he was and still be close to Harry. However, once the truth of his draw to Harry revealed itself in the dead of night and he realized that his feelings were not quite so platonic \ldots well \ldots he could no longer cope with his relationship with Harry. It was one thing to be his friend. But that apparently wasn’t all that Tom wanted.

And he \ldots he \textit{couldn’t} \ldots

Harry was still so young and Tom \textit{killed} his parents!

These thoughts circled his mind like a murder of crows in the days following his revelation. For the first time, he couldn’t bring himself to write Harry. His chest was just too tight with guilt. For his feelings, for his desires, for Harry’s parents, for not being able to write Harry, for starting a blaze under the bridge of their beautiful friendship. But mostly, he felt guilty for not being able to stamp out his feelings despite knowing that they would eventually ruin the best thing in his life.

When he finally wrote to Harry, it was a lie about being too busy for the next week or so to be able to write again.

He couldn’t crush the beautiful thing in his chest, so he ran from it.

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Albus Dumbledore has failed. He’s looked everywhere for signs of Voldemort and the Horcruxes he knew the wizard must have made. But there was nothing. Not even a flicker of his influence or Death Eater resurgence. The incident at the World Cup was already proven to have been a few desperate ex-Death Eaters trying to spread a bit of terror again. He’s been reading between lines that didn’t exist and counting stars that turned into muggle satellites.

And with every false thread he’s followed, his only solace at the end of the night became the increasingly inviting amber pool in his crystal tumbler. On this night in particular, the flow of fire down his throat was especially sweet. He’s stopped looking for ways to stop a war that didn’t seem to be coming. Or maybe it was. Either way, he wouldn’t be saving the world this time. ‘\textit{Lost his touch}’ as they said.
And while he was chasing a ghost through rural Britain, he’d apparently left the children he was charged with protecting in the hands of a tyrant. He’d failed them as well. He’d ignored the signs and the worried testaments of his staff because he’d thought that an immortal Dark Lord was more important. However, there were still no signs that Voldemort was even alive and he had an entire school of terrified children on his hands. He was quite useless in both matters, and so he drowned his failures a glass of saccharine poison.

A few drinks later, Albus found himself digging through cabinets and storage closets in the back of his office for something he thought he’d never bring out again. It was in the bottom of an old locked chest that he found it. With leaden feet, he shuffled back to his desk and poured another drink before he even plopped into his chair.

The leather-bound photo album had faded with age and cracked along the spine. A few decades ago, when he had another Dark Lord terrorizing his dreams, he’d lose himself in this very album nearly every night. When he defeated Gellert, he promised himself that he would never let himself look again. And now his five-decade streak was broken on a whim as he flipped the cover to greet faded, sluggishly moving photos. Achromatic shots of classmates he didn’t remember the names of anymore, or scenic shots he liked to collect as a schoolboy. However, only one picture called to him that night and he flipped to the very back where he knew it was stuffed haphazardly without an official place amongst the others.

A curly-haired and bright-eyed boy he barely recognized as himself stared out from the aged film. Smile gleaming freely and arm looped loosely around the broad shoulders of a blonde boy.

“Gellert.” Albus uttered with a tangible pain still in his voice, even after all these years.

Instead of looking at the camera like Albus, Gellert was gazing at his younger self, arms wrapped around his waist and something in his gaze that Albus desperately wished had been fully captured in the photo. And now, a twisted and jaded old man, he’d give anything to go back to that afternoon. To feel the blaze of the sun at their backs, to be surrounded by Gellert’s distinct spiced cologne and rasping laugh. Before they fell apart drew lines in the sand between them that they’d never again cross.

And then Albus became a savior when he hardly felt like a proper man.

He’s starting to realize that it’s no longer his job to save the world.

But... perhaps... perhaps there was one last thing he could do for them...
Dumbledore threw back the rest of his drink and unsteadily rose to his feet.

The train ride had never felt this long before. Harry counted the hours as the pit in his stomach grew heavier and harder. After days of silence Tom had sent a short note saying he wasn’t going to be able to write to him until winter hols began. Something was wrong and his thoughts wouldn’t leave him alone even at night to sleep. He couldn’t do anything while he was at Hogwarts except wait it out. But now that he was on the train, all he had to do was get home, say his hellos to his parents, and then slip away when night fell so that he could finally go to Riddle Manor and see for himself what had gotten into Tom.

And Harry knew that it wasn’t some external problem because he’d already wrote to Philias for answers and only got vague ideas and tales of Tom holing up in his room all day similar to right after his resurrection. Frankly, Harry was a strange blend of worried and frustrated. He’d thought that Tom had sorted that all out. And even if he hadn’t, Harry had at the very least hoped that Tom wouldn’t shut him out when he went through it again. Harry needed answers and waiting for them was turning torturous.

He had tried fruitlessly to push such thoughts to the wayside and focus on something else. Like the fact that he was about to finally visit home after such a long and arduous term, or that for the first time he had prospects for the future that were promising. But all he could think about, all he could focus on, was the foreboding silence that had taken residence between him and Tom.

And as improbable as it seemed, the timing of it all coincided just a little too well with his moment of... well... ‘self-maintenance.’ That night he’d thought of Tom in a way he’d never thought about anyone ever before, and the very next day: radio silence. But he wasn’t sure of there was any validity to his concern, or if he was just being overly paranoid after doing something so unlike him.

However, if — somehow — he was correct and Tom knew of his feelings, he had to be prepared for any possible outcome to Harry confronting him later. Which meant that the majority of the train ride was spent in tense silence on his part as he ran through every horrible scenario in his mind of how Tom might react. Harry had never felt so insecure about where he stood with Tom before. It left
him feeling queasy and anxious as the hours dragged on.

By the time Harry stepped off the Hogwarts express with the rest of his friends and departed for the duo of relieved Marauders, he had thoroughly exhausted his mind of all thoughts surrounding Tom Riddle and could think only of the two men who eagerly embraced him.

“Come on, pup, let’s get you home.” Remus kept his arm around Harry as they walked.

Riddle Manor was a wonder to behold at night. The rustling whisper of wind through the trees, the silver-spun blankets of snow reflecting the moonlight, and delicate flowers of frost that crept over each window pane. Harry was almost tempted to stay in the serene night for a while longer to avoid the uncertainty that awaited him with those quiet walls. But unfortunately, his choice was taken from him as the chill began to burn his exposed cheeks and buzz numbly in his toes during his walk up the long driveway.

The darkened foyer he stepped into wasn’t much warmer than the blistering winter night, but at least the wind no longer assaulted his cheeks and nose. It was just after midnight and the nervous voice in the back of his mind hoped that Tom was asleep and Harry would be sent away by an elf. However, that was not what happened.

“Master Riddle be in the blue room. Hermie show you.” The little elf was shuffling away before he’d even finished speaking. As Harry walked the darkened halls behind the quick-footed little elf, he was reminded of his first time in Riddle Manor. In truth, it was the last time Harry had felt this uncertain about seeking out Tom’s company. However, in comparison, his current nerves seemed ridiculous. Back then he’d been prepared to have to raise his own wand to Tom if he continued his path of war and blood. He had been ready to destroy the very life he’d tried so hard to save . . .

*Why then . . .* why did it feel like there was more at stake now?

Tom looked up from his book in surprise when Harry entered the room.
“Harry? What are you doing here?” Slivers of apprehension between the shock in his deep voice tightened something uncomfortable in Harry’s gut as he donned a placid smile for a moment before it slipped too soon from his face.

“I’m home for winter break and thought I’d check in. You said in your last letter that something happened and you wouldn’t be able to write for a while. I was worried so I came to see if there’s anything I can do.” Harry took a few steps further into the room but felt too restless to sit on the armchair across from Tom. So, instead he rested a hand on the back of the chair to keep himself from wringing his hands together when Tom’s eyes left his to hide something that flickered in their depths. There was suddenly a stone in his throat he struggled to swallow around

“That’s alright, Harry. It’s nothing to worry about. I can handle it.” The lies were flimsy and Tom seemed to realize it as he spoke, his eyes closing for a beat and smooth forehead wrinkling with a grimace. The stone in his throat sank painfully into his stomach.

“Tom.”

What a fragile creature his voice made, transparent and bleeding to his own ears. Tom’s eyes snapped open and the dark stones that Harry had lost hours stargazing into now looked dark and guarded.

“Don’t, Harry.” Warned the other man, and Harry could feel the push like a real thing against his chest. But that was why he was here, wasn’t it? To push back.

“Look me in the eyes, Tom, and tell me you’re not avoiding me.” Harry demanded and advanced a step. Tom shot up from his seat and skirted the couch, fleeing Harry while roughly scrubbing his hands over his face. “Come on, we’re friends. You know you can trust me-”

“That’s the problem!” He didn’t shout, but the force of his words was just as jarring. Tom turned and finally met his gaze. “We shouldn’t be friends! Harry—I . . . I killed your parents. I murdered two innocent people in cold-blood—and many others. And you say it doesn’t matter: that you didn’t really know them, but it does matter. They were your parents and they probably loved you. I took that from you. And no matter what, no matter how much I change or regret, it was still my hands that took them from you. I’m a monster, Harry.”

A pained noise escaped Harry’s throat unbidden and his fingernails dug into the upholstery underhand.
“No.” He shook his head. “That wasn’t you. You were out of your mind and didn’t have any control. You aren’t that person anymore. You aren’t Voldemort.” Harry argued, but it felt like he was already losing a battle he didn’t know he’d been fighting.

“I am Voldemort. We aren’t separate people, little bird. I regret what I’ve done, more than anything. And I thought I had come to terms with what I’ve done—who I was and who I am now—but not with you. You’ve become my most precious person, and that’s exactly why I can’t let you get too close. I have been such a destructive force in your life—in everyone’s lives—and befriending someone like me is—. . . is fucked. You should have a problem with it, you should be angry, and just the fact that you’re alright with it means to me that you’re not alright.” Gone was the guarded look in his eye, but the sincerity and earnestness were almost worse. Harry felt the protests die in his throat and his heart tore in two at the use of Tom’s endearment for him.

“And God, you’re still so bloody young, Harry! You’re only fifteen, you have exams and school friends and growing up to worry about. I may look like a teenager, but am much older than I seem. I’ve already grown up. As mature as you seem, and no matter how much hardship you’ve faced in your life, you still have so much more to learn and discover. I care about you more than I can even say, and that’s why I never want to be what stands between you and your future.” He wanted to be angry. He wanted to shout at Tom for being an idiot and trying to tell Harry what was best for him. “I don’t want to hurt you, and that why I need to put some distance between us before you let me.” Tom’s words trailed off quietly as a dry rasp scraped at his vocal cords. His tone at the edge of a break that would have broken his heart.

He wanted to be angry . . . but . . . damnit, he was right. Harry should have a problem with who Tom was. Even more, the feelings he had for Tom had come with so little fight on his part. And if anything had become apparent since the start of the year, it was that Harry was in way over his head. In almost every avenue of his life, Harry had no idea what he was doing.

“I’m sorry—I can’t--” Tom’s head had dropped low and with a painful clenching in his chest, Harry crossed the room and lifted his chin with his fingertips.

“I know. You’re right.” It hurt to admit, knowing it would only hurt him more when he left the manor. “We have to sort ourselves out a bit. I’ll give you space, just . . . don’t cut me out completely, Tom. Because you’re pretty damn important to me too.” He caressed the soft plane of Tom’s cheek and he smiled, but it was painful and fleeting. Tom grabbed his hand as if to pull it away, but instead he hung onto it like a lifeline. With the tickle of his breath against his wrist, Tom caught Harry’s gaze and the stars brimming at the corners of his eyes gleamed in the low light.

Tom didn’t speak, but his eyes said ‘good bye.’
Harry gently pulled his hand from Tom’s loosening hold and walked away before he said something stupid. Each shadow he waded through on his way out of the manor seemed to cling to his clothes and the soles of his shoes, begging him to stay. The first harsh gust that hit him when he opened the door tried to shove him back inside. The icy breath he sucked in seemed to wrap around his core and chill him to the bone. Even still, he breathed in like a drowning man, needing that burn to clear the fog in his lungs and hitch in his breath.

When he reached the edge of the apparition wards, Harry turned to look back at the manor. He could practically feel the presence of the man within from there and he imagined Tom was looking back from one of the frosted windows as he finally let himself say what he couldn’t before.

“Not ‘goodbye,’ but goodnight, my heart.”

It took several days to smile around his parents without wincing, and a few more to go to bed without hours of tossing and turning for hours on end. Harry wasn’t okay, but distracting himself with his studies, spending time with Sirius and Remus, and focusing on the other problems he was facing kept him from dwelling too long on the sudden trench between him and Tom.

All the way up until Christmas he forcibly thought of nothing but the budding case against Umbridge. Sirius and Lucius had done as he’d asked and visited the Department of Education and Department of Magical Children Services to open a discrete investigation into Dolores Umbridge. According to Sirius they hadn’t made much headway, but with a little more time they would be able to lock down a case and get her removed from Hogwarts. Harry had hoped that they would be able to do it over break, but it now seemed likely to drag into early spring. It was frustrating, to say the least, to tip-toe around all of the legal hurdles in an effort to keep it secret until the right moment. But to rush the process would be to put many lives and livelihoods at stake.

However, with how slow that matter was progressing, there was only so much Harry could do and so much to distract him, before he found himself falling back into recalled replays of his fight with Tom. He mauled over every word, every look, every insinuation for hours on end each night until he finally dropped off into a restless sleep sometime in the early morning. Then his exhaustion had him sleeping the mornings away and staying in the comfort of his bed until midday.
He was falling into a funk that he wasn’t able to snap out of until his worried parents invited Anthony over without his knowledge.

“What happened, Harry?” Anthony asked as he sat down on the edge of his bed and Harry fought off a flush of embarrassment at being caught in bed past noon.

“Nothing, I’ve just been thinking.” He could tell that his dear friend didn’t believe him, but Anthony just nodded and went along with his non-answer.

“Oh? What’re you thinking about?” Such a simple question but he knew that Anthony wouldn’t accept another simple answer from him. Harry sighed deeply as he sat up in bed and sought after the right response.

“. . . Is it wrong to love someone you shouldn’t? If they’ve done horrible things, if they see themselves as a monster, if there’re countless reasons for you to hate each other and stay apart, should you?” As he spoke, a ripple of understanding spread across Anthony’s face.

The blond took his time answering.

“Love is never wrong, Harry. Loving and being loved is one of the easiest things in the world. It’s all the extra bits that come along with it that make it so difficult. Timing, doubt, insecurity, history, even politics can put a wedge between two people. Though . . . if it’s worth it, if you can wait for them, if you can forgive them, if you can fight with them and fight for them, if you still love them at the end of the day, then: no, it’s not wrong to love them. Give it time, Harry. Like I said, loving is the easiest part, now you have to sort through all the rest of it in order to make it work.” Anthony ruffled his hair affectionately with a warm smile on his face. After a few more heartfelt encouragements, the other boy managed to drag Harry out of bed and they spent the day together.

After that, Harry felt a lot better— not great, but a part of him had settled and accepted the situation for what it was. He could see that there was a ton of baggage and hurdles between him and Tom and ignoring it wouldn’t make it go away. Tom had stuff to sort out, and so did Harry. It would hurt like hell, but if distance and time would help them to figure it out, then he would just have to accept that.

And it was with that in mind, that Harry finally found a bit of peace at night to rest before the next school term and didn’t have to fake all of his smiles around Remus and Sirius.

For, as difficult as the past few months had been, and how hard the next few would likely be, Harry
was beginning to settle his hopes on the fact that hardship was temporary. Unfortunately, as he learned on the last day of his holiday, so was peace.

He was awoken earlier than usual by the familiar quiet rasp of his name and the brush of the veil against his knuckles. In retrospect, he didn’t know how he knew something was wrong just by that. He just knew, and he was descending the stairs with his heart in his throat until he reached the kitchen. Looking back, it was a bit like a dream, everything hazy and slow as he took in the glistening streaks lit by morning light on Remus's cheeks and the grim pallor of Sirius’ expression when he turned away from the table to look at Harry.

And there, laid out flat and innocuous on the tabletop, the source of such reactions. A newspaper.

“Harry--” Sirius tried to stop him, but remnants of his seeker training kicked in as he ducked under the man’s arms and grabbed the paper.

**DUMBLEDORE RESIGNS AS HEADMASTER AFTER TELL-ALL ABOUT ABUSE SCANDAL**

The air gushes from his lungs and he rips through the thin pages of the Prophet until he reaches the exclusive. It was so much worse than he could have imagined. Each case plastered over the page with graphic photos and testimonies complete with the identity of each student abused by Dolores Umbridge. Even his own took up a large section at the center of the page, achromatic copies of the gruesome lines he’d written there for everyone to see. But that wasn’t important, not when the identities were leaked to the whole of Wizarding Britain like some cheap scandal when over half of these students had never wanted their testimony or evidence used in the first place. *Harry had been the one to convince them to let them document it. He was the one that promised nothing would ever be done with their information without their explicit consent. He promised to protect them.* . . .

Harry barely reached the kitchen sink before he was ill.