Fate and Choice

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Summary

Harry was born a Hotchner. After a painful twelve years of separation, Hotch decides nothing is ever going to divide his family again. Not the looming threat of Tom Riddle, not the benevolent concern of the Hogwarts staff, not Hotch's own demons. Meanwhile, Harry struggles to balance his American family with the growing responsibility he begins to face in Britain.


Chapter Notes

Warnings for the whole story: Gore, a couple character deaths but not anyone you would probably really be concerned about (except...well...spoiler), attempted rape and mention of sexual assault (for long-term plot reasons in both cases and nothing too explicit), and a lot of people attempting to murder a lot of other people because CM and HP characters are involved. I think that’s it. If you want to ask about something specific or find out what chapters a certain warning is in so you can skip it/get a summary, feel free to message me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"There are things we don't want to happen but have to accept, things we don't want to know but have to learn, and people we can't live without but have to let go." - Criminal Minds

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twelve years ago

Haley wept quietly in his arms, her own clutching uselessly at her belly. He dipped his head into her hair, eyes squeezed tightly shut, as the door quietly closed behind the doctor as he left to give them privacy.

"What did I do wrong?" she sobbed.

Hotch didn't trust himself to speak, just clutched her closer as his shoulders shook.

"I thought it was just a fever, I should have- I should have-"

"Haley-"

"Aaron, I'm so sorry."

"It wasn't you," he whispered, voice cracking painfully. "It just-"

People just died, sometimes. With his job, that should have been easy to say. He'd held dead children before, reported their deaths to parents. It had been much simpler to tell them what had happened, coax them through the shock, and get the necessary information he needed from them. Empathizing was necessary, but truly understanding their pain was impossible.

He had never been on the receiving end until now. And the grief tore him apart in a way he would have previously been unable to imagine.

"Harry," she cried out softly in a last requiem. What did you say about someone you'd only known for less than a year? Someone who had unconsciously trusted their entire lives to you, helpless as they were? Someone you had failed? "Harry..."
"It's him," Petunia said, horrified, as she backed away from the baby Vernon was holding at arm's length. It was nothing short of a miracle that the baby did not survive the last dark lord's curse only to meet his end by falling to the tiled floor and cracking his head open. "It's that monstrous child my blasted sister took in."

"Well," Vernon snapped, "what do we do with it?" Dudley was screaming in his crib upstairs and both parents glanced up. "We're not raising two, we're certainly not raising your dreaded sister's boy. Hardly our fault she..." He cut himself off, seeing the muted pain in Petunia's expression.

She blinked rapidly, ferociously ridding herself of any trace of mourning. "Without that child, she would probably still be alive."

"What do we do?" Vernon repeated. He paused. "No one knows it's here, right?"

She stared at him. "Perhaps..." A few knew. But this was the muggle world and accidents happened...

Yet the magical freaks knew things, and they could do things Petunia could only dream of.

"We'll...watch him for a little while. Any signs of...freakishness and we'll..." She sniffed, hiding the sign of sorrow with a disdainful look. "Well, we'll deal with it then."

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The bedroom was empty when he woke up. There was a dim light coming from under the door, and he quietly got up. It was too faint to be the hallway light; upon opening the door, he saw it was coming from another room. He left the master bathroom and passed a bathroom, intended to be shared by children, and came to a stop outside one of the vacant rooms. As the closest, it had been designed as a nursery.

Haley was sitting in a rocking chair by the unused crib. Her hands were limp in her lap, eyes staring morosely at the folded baby blanket in the crib, new two years ago and never wrapped around a child. She looked up when she heard him enter, then turned back to the crib.

"I don't want to try again," she said quietly. "I know... I know you wanted to..."

He shook his head, moving to rest his hand on her shoulder. She clasped hers over his. "I don't think we could survive this again," he replied, just as quietly. "I don't even know what we'd do if it miscarried."

"He was so healthy," she whispered. "Even the doctors... Even they said they'd never seen anything like it. Not even the smallest sniffle or fever... He should have made it." He squeezed his hand briefly and she rested her head against his arm, taking a deep breath. "Let's adopt."

"No," he said gently. She looked up at him in surprise. "You're just saying it because of me."

She frowned. "We could do it."

"We couldn't do a baby," he pointed out, silently adding not after Harry, "and any older would be
much more difficult. Especially if I get this job at the BAU - you would be raising him or her mostly by yourself."

She sighed and turned back to the crib. "I suppose." She gave a short, mostly humorless chuckle. "We'd probably be helicopter parents after Harry anyway. What kid would want us?"

Hotch smiled slightly. "Probably."

She patted his hand and stood up. "That's that, then. I'll clean out this room over the weekend."

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nine years ago

At two, Harry was deemed old enough to move out of the crib. Vernon immediately deposited him in the closet under the stairs after Petunia gave it a very brief cleaning. A full year later, Dudley was finally getting his own bed, his restlessness giving them cause for concern as he tried to escape the crib.

"Do you think it's sanitary in there?" Petunia asked nonchalantly, gesturing with a spatula towards the closet under the stairs.

Vernon didn't even look over. "Probably not. Maybe he'll get sick and die."

Petunia smiled briefly. "We wouldn't even have to do anything. He's quieter than I expected."

Vernon grunted, pulling out the paper. "Seems just quiet enough to me. Out of the way is just the place for him." He turned the page, not finding anything of interest on the front. Then he paused. "He isn't... unusually quiet, is he?"

Petunia stopped. The bacon hissed on the pan in front of her. "I don't know... But that can't be... that, could it?"

Vernon frowned.

In the closet, Harry was listening carefully to the voices. He didn't quite understand what they were saying, but he knew that he needed to hide the books if they came closer. They didn't like it when he came out, but it just got so boring sitting there in the dark. People kept giving his cousin all those gifts, and he played with the games all the time and never even glanced twice at the books. He never noticed when Harry swiped them and brought them down to his closet. They were small enough that he could hide them under his blanket or under loose flaps of wood and his aunt and uncle wouldn't notice if they looked in.

Usually, the light through the grating on the door was enough for him to see by, but when it got dark in the evenings he had more trouble. Just when he couldn't read anymore, a small ball of light formed over his head, and he could continue flipping pages until he couldn't keep his eyes open. He didn't think his aunt and uncle would like to hear he was up late reading - they sometimes got upset at Dudley (for being up late, not reading) - so he never mentioned it.

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eight years ago

Haley closed her eyes one moment, head rested against her pillow and arm across Aaron's waist. Then she opened her eyes and she was sitting in a cramped space, faintly illuminated by light
filtering in through a grate on a small door beside her. She was facing a small boy, maybe four or five, with a book in his lap. His head drooped down comically, slower and slower until it hit his knees, and then he jerked upright and shook himself firmly.

"Go to sleep," she said, and he jumped at the sudden voice. He looked around wildly, as if he couldn't see her.

"I can't," he finally replied, still bewildered. "Where are you?"

"I'm right here," she said, similarly confused. "What's your name?"

"Harry," he said bluntly and something lodged itself in her throat.

She had to clear it several times before she trusted herself to speak, and even then her voice broke halfway through. "Well, Harry," she said, "why can't you go to sleep?"

"Because I have to put my books back tomorrow," he said sadly. One finger mournfully traced the edge of the cover in his lap. "They didn't know I took them in, and I'll get in trouble if they find out."

She smiled even though he couldn't see her and swiped a stray tear off her cheek. He looked like such a beautiful young boy... "Who will be upset?"

"My aunt and uncle," he said. "They already found out I took some food today and they weren't happy." He shrugged. "They're sending his books to a distant relative, since Dudley doesn't use them."

Her hands passed through the bangs she tried to move from over his eyes, and she frowned in frustration. This was her dream - she should have been able to interact with it. She had dictatorial powers here, right? "Do they ever read to you?"

"No..."

"Well, how about this. If you put the book down and turn it towards me, I can read it for you. You're just going to have to turn the pages when I'm done with them."

He looked up, eyes almost meeting hers but not quite on target. "Are you a ghost?" he whispered.

She laughed, successfully managing to keep the bitterness out of her voice at the unfair irony. "No, no..."

He put the book on the floor between them, and she started reading out loud. Once they were done with it, she tried to convince him to go to sleep, but he was adamant that he go back through all of them. They were the only thing he had - there weren't any friends to speak of. Finally, what felt like hours later, he was beginning to slump backwards as she read until he was resting against the wood behind him.

Haley reached for him and was shocked to find, in his unconscious state, that her hands were able to touch him. His skin wasn't quite smooth, due to a layer of grime from the conditions of the closet, but it was pleasantly warm, not like the overwhelming heat she had felt the last time she held him. In the awkward confines she found herself in, she managed to maneuver him until he was resting against the wood behind him.

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seven years ago

Petunia was correcting his handling of the spatula for the sixth time in two minutes. "Get it right," she snapped. "Don't burn anything!"

"He's useless," Vernon muttered from the table. "Why did we keep him?"

"Because it was that or an orphanage, and you know what the orphanages are like." She didn't know the first thing about the situations in orphanages, but it sounded good. More importantly, Harry's eyes widened at the scary word he didn't know. His next attempt to shuffle the eggs around was much better.

Vernon scowled at his paper. Dudley was scribbling with crayons next to him, oblivious to the frustration of his parents or the dilemma of his 'cousin.'

There was a screeching of metal and Petunia looked back just as Harry yelped, drawing his hand back. Too much pressure on the spatula at one side of the pan caused it to tilt precariously, and it had finally slid off and splattered the eggs onto the floor. While he'd tried to steady the pan, Harry had grabbed the hot base and was now curling his fingers around his red palm. Petunia scowled at him and snatched the spatula away. She smacked him over the head with it and he stumbled back, more out of reflex than anything else.

"Stupid!" she hissed, then pointed down. "Look at this-"

But the mess was gone.

Her eyes shot to Vernon, and he got slowly to his feet.

"What did you do?" she demanded.

"Nothing!" he insisted, still cradling his hand. "I didn't do anything!"

Her other hand tightened around the handle of the pan. "What did you do?" she demanded again.

"Nothing! It-it just happened..."

And Lily's death had "just happened" too, all because of the wretched boy.

She swung the pan and Harry threw both arms up over his head. The first blow collided with his shoulder and he stumbled to the side, hitting the island in the middle of the kitchen. She smacked him again and it hit lower along his exposed rib cage. Harry tried to keep covering his head while now protecting his stomach, but he had to curl up to do so and he left his back completely exposed to Petunia's rage.

The pan smashed down on his back-

And shattered against something, a barrier, that flashed blue for the faintest of moments before it vanished.

Petunia stared at Harry, who tentatively looked out from between his arms. Vernon stalked around the island and grabbed Harry by the back of the shirt, dragging him out of the room and into the hall. "Don't upset your aunt," he snarled. "She's done more for you than you deserve!" He threw the closet door open and shoved Harry inside. "If you come out before we let you, you won't be eating
for a week."

Petunia was waiting with the handle of the pan in one hand and a spatula in the other. "He's got to go," she whispered as Vernon came to a stop in front of her.

"Are your sister's freaky friends still watching?"

"I don't know... But it's been years. Maybe not."

"Let's try it now."

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six years ago

Since the first dream, Haley regularly found herself encountering Harry on what was almost a monthly basis. Usually it was fleeting, and she only saw him for the briefest of moments. Almost every time he was in the confined space, often on the brink of sleep, and if she knew she didn't have long then she would just sing softly for what little time she had. In all, she'd only had three conversations with him that were as long as the first one, and that was over two years. She never mentioned it to Aaron; she couldn't even imagine how she would broach the subject of her wistful dreams.

"Harry," she said warmly as he began to wake up. He blinked - adorable! - and rubbed at his eyes.

"Good morning, miss," he said courteously and she grinned.

"My little gentleman," she replied, grinning. What she wouldn't give to see that boy every day while she was awake. He began changing clothes, and she did her best to duck out of the way of his swinging limbs even though he couldn't touch her. "In a hurry?"

"I have to make breakfast," he whispered. "I'm still not very good at it, though. Can you help me?"

She frowned. "You have to make breakfast?" He couldn't be more than six now. "Says who?"

"Says Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon."

Her frown deepened as Harry finished changing and opened the closet door. Haley had to get down onto her hands and knees to quickly crawl out after him before he shut it, and she got to her feet as he closed it quietly. For the first time, she was able to get a good look at the house. Only once before had she seen it without Harry, and that had been when he was upstairs swiping some more books from Dudley. (The Boxcar Children series. Haley was beginning to wonder if Dudley could even read.)

No other sounds came from the house, and she assumed everyone else was asleep as she watched Harry start to get eggs and bacon from the refrigerator and bread from the counter. "Did you finish the books from last time?" she asked. He had read them out loud to her that time, and she had smiled through each of his stumbles over unfamiliar words.

He nodded quickly and whispered, "They were good. I got a few more from the library. I told them I don't have a card but they don't mind."

"Oh? How far is the library?"

"Um, half a mile, Aunt Petunia said."
Her eyebrows came together. "They let you go there?"

"Yeah, Uncle Vernon said it would be good. He said I hoped I got caught in a car accident." He frowned in concentration as he broke an egg on the side of the pan and opened the contents on it. Behind him, Haley clasped both hands over her mouth in horror. "What's a car accident?"

"Something you should never get into," she whispered. "Be very careful when you walk to the library, okay?"

"Okay," he replied, sounding confused.

"If a stranger offers to take you somewhere other than the library, or here, or-or the police station, don't go with them. And stay away from the street. Only cross when the cars aren't moving."

Harry split another egg into the pan. "Miss, you don't sound okay," he said carefully.

"Promise me you'll look both ways before crossing the road?"

He nodded. "I promise."

She glanced down the hallway. No one, and it was still quiet. "How early do your aunt and uncle get up?" she asked.

"Soon. Is everything okay?"

"Harry, put down the spatula and come with me," she said urgently.

"But...breakfast..."

"Never mind that," she said. "Turn off the stove." He did so and rested the spatula on the counter, a look of complete befuddlement on his face. "Okay, okay... Be quiet, but follow my voice. We're going to go out the front door. Don't say anything until we get outside."

Harry silently went with her, but tugged uselessly on the door. "The lock," she whispered, although she knew no one but Harry could hear her. "Above the handle, get the- Yes." The door opened, squeaking slightly and causing both to wince, and then Harry was stepping onto the front porch. He shut the door behind them. "Okay, let's go. Do you know any of your neighbors?"

"Mrs. Figg," Harry said uncertainly, "but she's kind of strange."

Haley wracked her brains for an idea. If Mrs. Figg knew Harry, she might be more likely to believe him, but if she knew his aunt and uncle well, she might also be more inclined to believe them. "We're going to go to the library, okay?"

"Miss, I can't leave breakfast to go to the library," Harry said.

"We'll just walk in that direction, okay?" This town couldn't be that big. Hopefully they would pass a police station and she could direct him in, and she could tell him what to say and-

The door swung open, revealing a portly, red-faced man.

"No!" Haley screamed in frustration, uselessly throwing out a hand to try to push him back. It went straight through him.

Vernon grabbed Harry and dragged him in. Haley shoved herself through the fat man to get in, wincing at the discomfort of walking through him, just before the door slammed shut. "What the
bloody hell are you trying to do?" Vernon demanded, shaking him roughly. Harry moved limply with the rough action, unable to do anything against his much larger uncle. "Just thought you'd wander around the neighborhood, did you? Show everyone how freaky you are?!

"I'm so sorry, Harry," she whispered. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry..."

"Uncle Vernon, I-I just- I thought maybe-"

"Speak up!" he roared.

"You thought he'd want more bacon and maybe Mrs. Figg had some," Haley said suddenly.

Harry glanced in the direction of her voice before looking back to Vernon. "I- I dropped some bacon on the floor, so- so I thought, maybe Mrs. Figg had some more... I thought I would be back quickly..."

Vernon huffed and shoved Harry towards the kitchen. "Don't bother Mrs. Figg at this time of day. She deals with you enough," he ordered. "Go back to making breakfast."

Haley let out her breath and followed Harry back to the stove. Vernon went upstairs. "I didn't mean for you to get into trouble," she whispered. "I'm so sorry..."

"It's okay," he murmured.

A woman who could only be Petunia came down the stairs, a box of sleeping pills in her hand. From the look on her face, she knew what had happened. She only briefly glanced at Harry when he greeted her with a "Good morning," and then grabbed a few glasses out of the cupboards and carried them over to the faucet. She filled all of them up with water, then brought them to the kitchen table.

Haley frowned and glanced at Harry. He had breakfast well in hand, so she moved over to watch whatever Petunia was doing. The aunt opened the box she'd brought down and dumped out a handful of sleeping pills, then tipped them all into one glass. Haley stared at her, shocked, and then quickly moved closer to peer at the instructions. One was the recommended dose for an adult. There were six in the glass, slowly dissolving.

With Harry focused on the stove, Petunia grabbed a spoon and began stirring the drugged glass. Haley had a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach, and she glanced at the front door again. Vernon was coming down the stairs now, and he met Petunia at the table. She muttered something to him, too low for Haley to hear.

Harry glanced over his shoulder, and Haley realized what he was looking for. She moved to stand on his left and watched him cook for a moment. He had grossly underestimated his own skills, especially considering he couldn't quite see the contents in the pan. "I'm still here," she whispered comfortably. "Still here..."

Haley glanced back to the Dursleys, but they were still muttering to each other. As if sensing the observation, Petunia nodded sharply to Vernon and turned away as she fell silent. "Boy," Vernon said sternly. "Come here."

Harry set down the spatula carefully and walked over. Haley followed him nervously, eyeing the drugged water again. "Yes, sir?"

"You're in trouble for this morning," Vernon snapped, then picked up one of the glasses of water and
handed it to Harry. There was a faint tremor running through Vernon, apprehension. "Drink that and get back under the stairs. Don't come out for anything."

"Harry, stop!" Haley hissed as Harry tilted his head back and made to sip some of the water. "Don't!"

He stopped, eyes flickering to the corner of his eye to try and see her.

"What are you waiting for?" Vernon demanded. A sheen of sweat had begun to break out across his forehead and Haley glared at him. They knew what they were doing. "Drink it already!"

"Come on, get it over with!" Petunia snapped. She was tightly gripping the back of a chair. "We don't have all day!"

"Harry, please, don't!" Haley begged. She couldn't handle losing him again, not even in this terrible dream. Harry hesitantly lowered the glass from his lips, but he was cowering in on himself, shoulders hunched as if it would make him less noticeable to Vernon and Petunia.

"Drink it!" Vernon shouted. "Now!"

"If I have to tell you one more time," Petunia started.

"Come on, already!"

"Don't drink! Harry, don't!" Haley shouted over the other two.

"Do it!"

"You'll regret it if you don't!" Vernon hollered, reaching out grab Harry by the scruff of the neck. Harry grimaced in pain and raised the glass again. "All of it!"

"Yes, there you go," Petunia said as Harry glanced at the glass.

"Don't, Harry!" Haley screamed. Vernon shook him and Harry hurriedly raised the glass again. "No, put it down! Harry-" He opened his mouth. "Harry, stop! It's poison!"

His eyes widened and he startled, the glass dropping from his hands and shattering to the floor. There was a moment of silence as Petunia and Vernon glared at him, and then Vernon threw him to the side and into a wall. It stunned Harry long enough for Vernon to swing a fist at him, connecting solidly with his stomach and knocking the breath out of him.

"No!" Haley tore at Vernon frantically, hands passing through him uselessly. She screamed in frustration as he kicked out, driving his foot into Harry's crumpled form again and again. "Leave him alone, you monster! Get your hands off my son!"

Vernon glanced at Petunia, who pointed with both hands towards the set of kitchen knives and the box of sleeping pills. Vernon hesitated, then gestured towards the latter. She nodded and dumped a handful of the pills straight from the box into the glass. It was more than six.

"Stop, you bitch! Don't you hurt him!" Haley screamed, fingers stretching through the air and through an oblivious Petunia. "No!"

"Haley- Haley!"

Her eyes flew open and she heaved in deep gasps. She was still struggling, still fighting, but now she realized her hands were still clenched into fists and she was beating them against Aaron's chest. In
such close quarters, there wasn't much damage she could do, but he was staring at her in concern while he tried to soothe her down.

"Haley, what's wrong?" he demanded, finally succeeding in grabbing her fists.

Her breath came out in a sob. "It's- It's Harry, they're going to kill him, they're going to- It's my fault, I told him to leave the house and get the police, and they- they caught him- Aaron, they're going to kill him, they-"

"Shh," he whispered, pulling her close while she held onto him. "He's gone. He's gone, Haley."

She screamed in anguish, muffling the sound against his shoulder.

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five years ago

He hadn't heard from the mysterious woman in over thirteen months. He was beginning to think he'd just imagined her, had made himself believe he could feel a warm, loving hand stroking his hair or rubbing his back in the minutes before he went to sleep. All until that last fateful day...

On the fourth night under the stairs as punishment for not drinking either glass of water, Harry had begun sneaking out and getting food when no one was awake. By the end of the week, he was growing desperate, and he began frantically hoarding food in the closet to eat during the day. They must have begun to suspect what he was doing, because a lock was put on the door and was firmly set in place. A few days passed in which he hung on by a thread, eating the last of the food he had stored away and mulling over the books he'd read at least three times by now.

Finally, there was a sharp knock on the door and Vernon's snapped, "Boy."

"Yes, Uncle Vernon?" Harry weakly croaked out.

There was a surprised pause on the other side, like he hadn't been expecting an answer.

"Are you thirsty?" Petunia asked, a strange tone to her voice.

"Yes, Aunt Petunia."

There was movement, and he could hear them filling a cup with water. The lock was opened and Harry took a deep breath of fresh air as the door swung out. He immediately coughed as the air hit his dry throat, and when he opened his eyes he saw Petunia offering him a glass of water. His gaze flickered uncertainly between the two, and he hesitantly reached out to take the glass. He quickly drank it all down, though there was a strange taste to it, and handed back the glass. Vernon nodded to himself and shut and locked the door again.

Hours later, he'd begun to throw up violently. Despite his weakened state, he had pounded frantically against the door. He had figured his body just didn't know what to do with the water after so long without it. Vernon had finally opened the door, muttered something about him just needing food, and shoved some bread at him. Harry thought it crunched strangely on the way down, like there was something else in it, and there was another strange taste, a metallic tang. An hour later, he was throwing up again, but this time, blood came out. The Dursleys didn't open the door to his renewed banging.

Three days later, he woke up to hear a loud curse overheard. His head rolled weakly on the floor and he looked up, but saw nothing. "Are you back?" he whispered.
"What?" was the response. It was male.

Harry didn't say anything, instead clamping a hand over his mouth to stop himself from hurling. It felt like his throat was all scratched by throwing up so much already.

"Are you okay?" the voice asked, bewildered. It was much deeper than the woman's had been, and it was a bit unsettling to hear so close to him. The only three men he had ever met were the postman, who ignored him; the librarian, who was cheerful towards him but had bad eyesight and was likely to accidentally hit him with a stack of books; and Vernon.

Harry moaned softly. He just wanted this to be over. If they offered him the glass of poison again, he'd gladly drink it.

"What did you eat?" the voice asked. Harry swore he could feel a faint pressure on his shoulder, like someone had their hand there.

"Bread," Harry whispered softly. There was a long pause. "What is it?"

"Where did you get the bread from?" The voice was urgent now.

"My aunt and uncle."

"Don't take anything they give you to eat," it ordered. "Did they give you something to drink?"

"Mnhmm. It tasted funny."

"When was this? Did you throw it up?"

"A day ago? And yeah..." He jerked to the side as his stomach rebelled against him again, expelling clear liquid flecked with something dark.

"Don't eat anything they give you," the voice repeated. "They're trying to kill you."

The voice had coaxed him out of his misery and stayed for an hour, talking to him in a soothing tone and, after an awkward pause, singing in a rather untalented but surprisingly endearing tenor. It vanished mid-stanza in one of the songs Harry had heard from the woman. He later followed through on his promise, refusing the food and water Petunia tried to give him the next day, and he somehow managed to pull through. A week later, he actually felt mildly alive, much to his surprise.

With his strength back, he began trying to get out of the cupboard again. Sometimes, it seemed like the lock hadn't been put in place - or at least, he thought so, but it sounded like the lock was moving out of place when he needed it to - and then he would go get food. A month after they had put him in there, the Dursleys relented and let him out entirely. The first thing he did was clean up the dried puke. The Dursleys treated him more warily after that, but they kept offering him food for the next few months. Harry refused each time, no matter what punishment he got, until they finally stopped. Somehow, he had managed to survive without food and water for days, and the Dursleys now only used the threat of taking them away sparingly. Instead, Vernon got more and more violent, and Petunia took to hitting him with the hot frying pan at the slightest mistake.

The man's voice appeared again early one morning. He entered by making a startled noise, like he hadn't expected to be there. Harry was in his cupboard, nursing a split lip. The man spent the next half hour describing to him how to get some good elbow and knee strikes in to protect himself, and later that day when Vernon grabbed him, Harry elbowed him in the gut and forced him to let go. He heard from the man one more time, a few months later when Harry was in his cupboard panicking.
over Vernon's rage that he had instigated by dropping a pot of soup. Once more, the man took him through some basic strikes he could do, but he was cut off mid-sentence. Harry never heard the voice in the cupboard again.

And then today happened.

Vernon swung at him again, aiming at his already blackening eye, and Harry flinched away even as the blow landed. He staggered back and held up his arms against the next one...and it never hit.

Vernon shouted in pain, holding his hand. Harry opened his eyes a fraction. Vernon swore, glared at him, and then punched out with his next hand. To Harry's shock, the blow hit a barrier between them and bounced off. Vernon grunted and stepped back, face turning red in fury.

Harry stood there, frantically hoping that the barrier never fell. Vernon tried everything to get at him, grabbing pots and pans, and even snapping a few knives on the invisible force. Harry was beginning to feel drained the longer this went on, and he was almost about to slip off into unconsciousness when a pan broke through and caught him in the chest. He shouted, in surprise and pain, and staggered back. Vernon made to hit him again...and everything went black.

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four years ago

Hotch held up his hands in a panic as Haley screamed incoherently at him. Her arms were up and waving, and Hotch was almost tempted to start looking for medication from the way she was acting. Finally, he managed to grab her wrists to steady her, but the result enabled her to yell closer to him.

"Why couldn't you just answer your phone like a regular person?!!" she shouted, trying to yank her wrists away. He let her.

"I was at a crime scene, and then I was flying back!" he tried to explain.

"And you couldn't stop between the crime scene and the plane to call?!!"

"Haley-"

"Did you think this wasn't important? Why can't you be more responsible? Why is it always me? Again, and again, why is it always me who gets sacrificed?"

"Haley-"

"Because it's me again, and I'll bet I'm going to be doing this on my own again, and-"

"Doing what on your own?"

"I'm pregnant."

He froze.

She stared at him with blotchy eyes and a pale face.

"Are you sure?" he whispered.

"If this one dies too, do we count as neglectful parents or murderers? I can only be so unlucky, right?"
three years ago

Harry slipped a scrap of bacon off the frying pan when Petunia turned her back. The hot grease burned his fingers, but he was too hungry to care. He was still in trouble for burning toast a few days ago, and he hadn't had breakfast since.

Unfortunately, he hadn't taken Vernon into account, and a harsh blow caught him in the side of the head as a meaty hand shoved into his pocket and pulled out the strip. "Thought you'd steal from us, huh?" he demanded, waving the bacon in Harry's face for a moment. "I should call the police on you. They'd take you straight to a penitentiary for people like you."

"Uncle Vernon, I haven't eaten since two days ago," Harry said, trying to sound as respectful as possible. It felt like his legs were shaking.

Vernon didn't usually hit him anymore, not unless Harry didn't see it coming. That time, years ago when Harry had been protected by a mysterious force, had resulted in both Vernon and Harry being knocked unconscious. Vernon had ended up in the hospital with what the doctors said was a fractured sternum. The Dursleys had given him a wide berth after that.

Vernon sneered. "And who are you going to tell? No one's going to believe you. And even if someone did, you know what would happen to you? They'd send you to your parents."

Petunia gave a dismissive 'humph' sound behind him. "No, they'd send him to his father. His mother was a prostitute - last I heard, they had no idea where she was at. I think his father managed to bribe his way out of sexual abuse charges, though. I'm sure he'd love to take someone like Harry in. After all, the police wouldn't believe him if he said what his father was like at home."

Harry felt the blood drain from his face. "Sexual...abuse...?"

"Against one of his kids. Don't remember if it was his daughter or one of his sons," Vernon said gleefully.

---

two years ago

Jack was born healthy. It felt like Haley and Hotch were watching his every move, waiting for some horrific disease or accident to crop up and snatch him from them.

In the end, they should have watched each other more carefully.

"Mom?!" Jack screamed over Hotch's shoulder as the agent carried his son from the house. His gun was two bullets lighter, but one had missed its target completely and the other had only hit a shoulder, and the perpetrator of the crime had vanished. "Mom!"

A few agents looked at the pair with pity as Hotch took Jack to an ambulance to have him checked out, but neither noticed any of the glances. Hotch was thinking about the cooling body inside his home as Jack broke down and sobbed into his shoulder.

"Mom..."

---
Harry stared at Hagrid in horror as the giant man shook off his theory, stating how well-respected Snape was and how much faith Dumbledore entrusted in the potions master. "You don't believe me," he finally said when the grounds keeper paused for breath.

"Harry, it's just... Well, you see..."

Harry shook his head and walked away, Ron and Hermione pausing for a moment in surprise at the abruptness of his action before quickly following behind. "Harry, what is it?" Hermione asked.

"Why did they have to be right about this?" Harry was muttering to himself. "Why doesn't anyone ever believe me?" He looked up at the other two, jaw set. "We need to get the stone ourselves, before Quirrell gets to it."

Ron and Hermione glanced at each other. "Okay," Ron said and Hermione groaned in resignation. "How?"

An hour later, both of his friends had been forced to turn back while he went on alone. He didn't think to wonder if he was going to make it out alive or not, and it was only when Quirrell was bearing down on him that he began to truly panic.

Then Quirrell was screaming, and so was someone else-

The woman.

"You will not touch him, you shit!"

"Get him!" Voldemort howled.

"Yes, master!"

Before Quirrell's hand could touch Harry, he was staggering backwards from some force pushing against him. "Don't you dare!" the woman shrieked furiously. "I'll break your nose off, and you'll match the ugly thing on the back of your head!"

Quirrell pushed forward a step, using all his will and magic to manage it. Voldemort was shouting orders, though he was unable to see quite what was going on.

"Harry, put up a barrier!" the woman shouted.

"I don't have my wand!"

"You don't need one! I've seen you do it before!"

Harry threw up his hand as Quirrell closed in on him, and the DADA professor hit a wall. He pounded against it futilely, but every hit burned him. A faint pressure touched Harry's shoulders. "You've got this, you've got this..." the woman whispered into his ear. "If he touches you, he's dead, okay? I won't let him."

"It's harder...to hold the barrier against him than Uncle Vernon..." Harry gritted out as it fractured under another blow.

"If he touches you...he's dead," the woman threatened again.

A hand stretched out and managed to touch Harry's forehead. He screamed as pain split his skull, but
he distantly registered Quirrell screaming in pain. Harry threw his hand up, pressing it to Quirrell's face and feeling it melt beneath his palm. He retracted it in horror, but almost immediately, Voldemort was pushing Quirrell to him again.

"Harry, don't let him win!" the woman shouted. "You must survive!"

He pushed his palm in this time, and Quirrell went abruptly quiet. Harry fell back, hitting the stairs painfully. A screaming voice flew away from him and the woman, and then vanished.

Harry turned towards the woman. "You're back," he whispered.

A hand stroked over his forehead. "Yes," she murmured. She sounded exhausted. "But...I'm afraid this may be the last time. I think...I think I have to move on now."

"Are you a ghost?"

"Something like that. I should have been gone last year, but..." He felt a gentle kiss on his head. "I wanted to see you one last time. You'll make it, Harry. Just find...oh...find him..."

"What?" he said, trying to sit up. A sharp flash of pain ran up his back and he had to stop.

For the first time, he saw the outline of the woman. Both hands were outstretched towards him, and her hair was trying to escape from the tie it was pulled back in. Her expression was sorrowful as it looked at him. She was entirely monochromatic, all of her form outlined in various shades of grey.

"I think I need to leave now," she whispered, one hand moving to clutch at her chest, as if in pain. "Goodbye, Harry." A wind, one that only affected her, tore through the room. One moment she was there, and then her hair swirled around her and her clothes were tugged to the left...

And she was gone.

---

earlier in the year

"I had a brother?" Jack said softly, eyes opening in a combination of shock and trepid hope.

Hotch paused, looking at the photo album Jack had been searching through for photos of his mother. One picture held Harry, soon after he had been born. There were very few pictures of him after he'd gotten sick, which meant they had lost the last week of his life to anything but memory. They had expected so much more time with him.

Hotch sat down next to Jack, using the time it took to buy himself a few moments to think of an answer. He had to nudge a moving box out of the way - it had been too hard for Jack to remain in the house his mother had been killed in. "You did, but he was very young when he..." Hotch sighed and wrapped an arm around Jack, who leaned into him. "He got sick, and...we lost him."

Jack rested his head back against Hotch's chest. "What was he like?"

"...Quiet, but he wasn't shy. He liked people." There wasn't a lot to say about a baby who hadn't had enough time to develop into his later self. "He used to cry whenever he heard someone else crying, but after a few months he started reaching for them. And he looked so serious when he did it, too. Your aunt's a master at crying on command, and she used to do it all the time around him to see if he still would do that." Harry had kept reaching for his mother in the last stages of his life, when he hadn't know what was going on but Haley had grown steadily more upset.
"Are you leaving too?" Jack asked suddenly.

"What?"

"Mom and my brother left, so..."

Hotch pulled him closer. "No, no. Never. I'm sticking with you, buddy."

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was fast and jumped around a lot, but you probably wouldn't want a full chapter devoted to each year of Harry's miserable life but there were still a couple important plot points you needed to see.

This story has been brought to you by - AP European History, AP US History, and Anatomy & Physiology. No, really, I went to the ultimate level of nerd. But it was fun and I have no regrets. It's also going to have an intricate plot, which is why several things don't match up here. (Yes, I know Harry shouldn't have been able to perform that sort of wandless concentrated magic, Haley shouldn't have been able to appear, and Harry should have died from starvation/dehydration. Plot. You'll see.) Most of the quotes are mainly going to be from books or movies because I feel like it and if you have time I'd advise reading or watching some of them.

To those of you coming from Rebuilt Machinery of Our Hearts: Yep, this is the promised story!

To those of you who aren't: RMoOH was an idea I had while writing this following a similar thread, but it's a one-shot that's complete if you want to go check it out.

PLEASE review. This story has taken so much time and effort that it would give me indescribable joy to know others enjoy this thing too.
The founders of a new colony, whatever Utopia of human virtue and happiness they might originally project, have invariably recognized it among their earliest practical necessities to allot a portion of the virgin soil as a cemetery, and another portion as the site of a prison.” – Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*

The Dursleys had set aside their plans for disposing of their "nephew" for months when he showed up on their doorstep again after school ended. They ushered him in before any of the neighbors could see him standing there, and Vernon slammed the door loudly behind him.

"What's the meaning of this?" he demanded. "Aren't just going to stay with your freaky friends?"

Harry glared up at him as they released his hold on him. "I wouldn't be back if I didn't have to be."

"Why?"

"I don't know! I've just been told by the school that I have to stay here over break!"

Vernon scowled at him and pointed up the stairs. "If you come out of your room before we call for you, I'll make sure you never get back to that freaky school. Might just do it anyway."

Harry sneered at him. "Right, because that worked so well last time."

"You could walk last time."

Harry paled slightly and grabbed his stuff before heading up the stairs. Only when they heard the door close loudly behind him did they turn to each other and move into the living room. "I don't want him here for any period of time," Petunia hissed to her husband.

"I'm not getting involved in any nastiness," Vernon said with a dark expression. "What day do they have to take him back?"

"Probably sometime in August."

Vernon was silent. Then, in a whisper, "We could do it tonight. They won't know. It's-It's self defense, is what it is. We have a right to our protection."

"...How are you thinking about doing it? Poison didn't work..." Petunia asked, just as quietly.

"Well, I prefer the Killing Curse myself," a voice drawled. Both froze. There was no one in the room with them. "But for a muggle your size... I would recommend a knife, or the boy might be able to fight you off. You shouldn't worry too much about it, though. You should worry more about yourselves."
Harry was unsure if the Dursleys or the insane maniac in front of him was going to kill him first. With a sigh, he deflated a bit, resigning himself to his last hours of suffering. To his left, Dudley was crying pathetically next to an infuriated Vernon and a shrieking Petunia. To his right, their kidnapper looked remarkably sympathetic to his plight, although he wasn’t making any move to end Harry’s pain quite yet. All of the Dursleys and Harry were tied to chairs with rope that Harry suspected was magical. He had spent the first hour trying to work himself free, but the ropes tightened every time he thought he was getting close.

“Did you work with Voldemort?” he asked, despite his (limited) self-preservation screaming at him.

The man shook his head. “Nope,” he said, walking closer until he stood just a few meters away. Thankfully, the Dursleys quieted with his presence and leaned away, although Dudley was still sniffling loudly. He smirked at their reaction and raised his wand, making them flinch, but he just summoned a chair from the kitchen and sat down on it backwards, uncomfortably close to Harry. “Do you know who I am?”

Harry shook his head, not taking his eyes off him. "Why should I?"

"Because I'm here to finish the job I started years ago. If you help me, I'll make your end faster."

"No," Harry said immediately.

The man snorted. "I haven't even told you what it is."

"I'm not doing it."

The man gave him a mocking sympathetic look like he was a five year old who had just stubbed his toe and didn't know what had happened. "I just need you to kill a child, is all."

Instead of the reaction the man was obviously looking for, Harry frowned. "Why... Why would you need me to kill a child instead of doing it yourself?"

Some of the easy malice that had settled on the man's features transformed into anger. "That," he snarled, "is none of your concern."

"Actually it is... Why do you need to kill a child?"

"Not just any child," the man said. "Your brother."

"I don't have a brother."

"You do. You've just never met him."

A thought struck Harry. "Wait... Finish the job..."

The man leered. "That's right. Your mother's already dead."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Harry said. "My mother was-

"Not Lily Potter, so not killed by Voldemort," the man finished for him. He leaned forward and put both hands on the arms of the chair Harry had been tied to. Harry forced himself not to move away. "Don't play games with me. I just need you to kill a boy, and then I'll kill you in an instant instead of days. You should take the deal."

"I told you," Petunia seethed, and both Harry and the man turned to look at her. She was glaring at
Harry. “I told you, this was all your fault! If you’d only stopped, if you’d only listened to us and hadn’t acted like such a freak, this wouldn’t be happening!”

“I didn’t ask him to kidnap us!”

“You own parents didn’t want you and you got my sister killed!” Petunia screamed at him. “I’m surprised no one struck you down sooner, but why did you have to drag us into this?!”

“I never meant to!” Harry shouted.

A stinging slap hit him in the side of his face and he quieted. “Both of you, shut up,” the man snapped. Petunia bit her lip, and the man turned back to Harry. “See, the thing is, when I tried to kill your brother too, I realized something weird was up. There were blood wards around the house, activated by the separation of another child from the family. And I knew someone wasn’t living at home like they were supposed to…or like they had been forced away. It didn’t take me long to find out that you were on a list.”

Harry frowned up at him. “Why am I on a list?”

The man snorted and raised himself to his full height. “Why wouldn’t you be, Boy Who Lived? You’re special.” With a smirk, he added, “Just not special enough to be worth keeping, apparently. People around you don’t stick around long, do they?” His grin widened. “I heard you thought Riddle was on your side a couple weeks ago. How stupid did you feel after he told you the truth, while the girl was dying?”

“Shut up!” Harry shouted at him.

"So that's a no to killing your brother?"

"You're a coward," he snarled, "and I won't do your dirty work for you."

Before he could even try to move out of the way, a wand appeared in the man’s hand and a stinging hex hit him in the neck. Harry jerked back, quieting. “You don’t have long, boy,” he sneered. “I just need your father to show up now. And knowing him, that shouldn't give you much more time.”

The man stowed his wand away and walked out of the room, looking around himself curiously. They could hear him moving about the Dursley house, opening the refrigerator and closing it after a couple of seconds, then pacing some more. Unfortunately, as soon as he left, Dudley went back to crying and Vernon and Petunia turned their attention to blaming Harry for the entire situation. He tuned them out.

Two years before Harry had been born, Lily Potter had been hit with two curses and taken to the hospital when the field healers had been unable to treat her. The healers had regretfully admitted that they were uncertain as to what had happened, since no one had heard either curse uttered, and as such had no way to cure it. The result, however, was unmistakable – she would never have children. No one knew, of course. The Dursleys had been the only one over to mention it, and he was pretty sure that the only magical people outside of himself who knew were Hermione and Ron, who he had told.

As for his real biological parents, no one had a clue who they were. According to the Dursleys, his alcoholic and abusive father had gotten divorced from his whoring mother not long after Harry was born – because he was born, as the Dursleys said – and during the divorce proceedings both declared they wanted nothing to do with him. Somehow, the Potters had picked him up and taken him in, only to die less than a year later.
“Harry,” Dudley suddenly asked, and he jumped slightly. “Who’s Riddle?”

“Someone who tried to kill a bunch of students last year,” Harry said. “He almost succeeded in killing one.”

Dudley became quiet, and thankfully stopped crying. Harry gnawed the inside of his lip, trying to think of a way out of this. He had no clue where his wand was, having been knocked out before he’d known someone was in the house who had no place there, although he doubted his kidnapper had been considerate enough to leave it on him. He did, however, have the invisibility cloak upstairs, just inside his trunk. It didn’t do him a lot of good in his current position, since he couldn’t even get it out.

He yanked harder at the bonds, hoping that if he twisted his wrist a certain way he might be able to slip out before it tightened again. He moved it in an uncomfortable manner, grimacing, and then tried to sharply pull it down and out of the bindings. A flash of fire ran through him and Harry jolted up with a muffled shout of pain. Everything below his left wrist felt like agony, but he had managed to yank it free.

After a moment, he tried flexing his fingers of his left hand and winced immediately. It felt like he had pulled something in his wrist from a sudden movement. His wrist might have been broken, but he couldn’t tell without better examination and he raised it to try and get a better look. It took him a surprising amount of time to realize it didn’t matter whether or not his wrist was broken or not.

“Er, Harry?” Dudley asked tentatively.

“Don’t talk to him! He’s probably having a psychotic break!” Vernon hissed.

“Appreciated,” he dryly responded, then sucked in his breath as he accidentally jostled his wrist. Ignoring the pain, he bent over and ran his fingers along one ankle, then breathed a quiet sigh of relief when he felt his wand still strapped to his leg. His paranoia about being unable to get out of the house had paid off. It took a few minutes, but he was able to unwrap the makeshift strap he had created and point the wand at his other wrist. It wasn’t suggested to use one’s non-dominant hand, but he didn’t see another option. “Deletrius.”

To his relief, the rope crumbled away immediately. He wasted no time in transferring his wand to his right hand and releasing the bonds on his ankles. A moment later, he was standing, knocking the bonds off himself. “Okay, stay quiet,” he said, and the Dursleys followed his advice for once. “I’m going to get you free, but we can’t make a sound.”

“Expelliarmus!” the kidnapper snapped behind him, and Harry’s wand went flying. “Everte-“

Harry lunged for his wand, grabbing it just in time to throw up a shield spell to block his kidnapper’s spell, then shouted, “Mucus ad nauseam!” The rest of the spell his kidnapper had been about to cast came out as a garbled mess as his nose filled with mucus, producing a small blue light at the end of his wand that spluttered out almost immediately. “Stupefy!” The kidnapper sneezed explosively, the effort of which doubled him over in time to inadvertently duck the spell.

Harry pointed his wand up at the ceiling over his opponent’s head and cried, “Bombarda Maximum!” He quickly cast a shield spell to protect himself and the Dursleys as the ceiling caved in, effectively creating a barrier between them and their kidnapper. When there was no immediate effort against the fallen ceiling and everything else that had tumbled in from the floor above, Harry turned back to the Dursleys and hurriedly finished undoing their bindings.

“If this weren’t for you-“ Vernon snarled.
“We’d all live much happier lives if I didn’t live with you,” Harry agreed. “I think we can leave it at that and focus on getting out.”

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Hotch put down the phone, walked out of his office, and called out, “BAU team, conference room now.” He cast a quick glance down the hallway and saw Gideon turn in his office, hearing the sudden command. They locked eyes, and Gideon tilted his head slightly, analyzing him, before marking his place in whatever book he was reading and putting it down. As he started getting up, Hotch turned to look towards JJ’s dark office. “Does anyone know if JJ went home or not?”

“I think she’s with Garcia,” Reid replied as Morgan came out of the small kitchenette with a fresh mug of coffee. “I can give her a call and tell her to join us.”

“Ask Garcia to come too.”

“We have a case?” Elle asked, bewildered. She glanced at a clock and did a double take. “It’s eleven thirty at night!” After a pause, she muttered, “Never mind that we’re all still here anyway…”

They gathered in the conference room, murmuring amongst each other in a combination of caffeine and curiosity. It wasn't likely that they had managed to get another case so soon after their last one, which had taken them out of state. Once JJ and Garcia had arrived, Hotch moved to the front of the room. "The Woodsmarked Killer has been sighted again," Hotch announced, and the conference room went dead silent.

"He killed someone else?" Garcia whispered, horrified.

"Miraculously, no, though it's not quite clear what happened. He showed up in Britain, of all places, but the family he attacked was able to protect themselves. It sounds like he'd managed to take out half the family, planning to kill them later, when something distracted him and they all got away. The explanation the police gave us was...not illuminating as to how exactly that happened." He flipped to a picture of three people, a couple and their son.

"I think we can safely say they didn't outrun him," Elle muttered.

The Woodsmarked Killer. One of the BAU’s failures. The Unsub had initially made his name in Wisconsin years ago, killing the family members of several prominent government officials in the state before branching out into the federal government. The name had been coined after a particularly dramatic news article had stated that the victims were “marked only by the woods” while discussing the inability of the investigators to locate a cause of death. His murders only took family members of the government employees, but each attack usually resulted in multiple deaths as he had a tendency to kill more than one individual, though who he would kill varied widely.

The BAU’s introduction to the case had occurred when he killed Haley Hotchner.

"What happened to the family?" Gideon asked.

"They're on their way here," Hotch said.

"Why aren't they staying where they're at?" Reid frowned, puzzled.

Hotch grimaced. "That is also unclear. It seems they thought they were safer getting away from England entirely for some reason...even though he's an American serial killer..." He turned back to the whiteboard. "In any case, we need to figure out what drove him to England. Unlike the rest of his victims, this family had nothing to do with American politics or government. But something about
them got his attention, and we need to figure out what before he comes back."

---

The Dursleys, when they showed up, were about as vague and uninformative as humanly possible. They appeared unable to give any remotely plausible explanation for how they had managed to escape, even contradicting each other after hearing the description another one of them had just told five minutes ago. When they weren't talking about what had happened, they were complaining about what had happened, and Hotch was genuinely starting to wonder if the killer hadn't gone after them solely because they were so damn annoying.

The door to the conference room opened and Morgan walked in with a sour expression. Hotch rose and went outside with him, closing the door behind him. He had been talking to the Dursleys for hours, and was anxious for any intelligent conversation. "Any news?"

"Garcia was looking into whether or not we needed to pay for their plane fare--" more like ensuring the Dursleys had to pay double what they were supposed to for being such dicks about it "--and she discovered they bought four plane tickets to America." Hotch's eyebrows shot up. "Not only that, but she already checked with the flight and a boy came here with them. She talked with local authorities in England, and they said that there is someone who lives with them, Petunia Dursley's nephew through her sister."

"They haven't mentioned a nephew once," Hotch said, glancing back into the conference room. They were looking nervous about the agents' conversation. "Tell Garcia to get an address for their hotel room and send someone to see if there's anyone there." He paused, debating whether he really wanted to go back in to a useless conversation or not. "Actually, I'll come with you."

---

Harry was not, relatively speaking, actually that far away from Quantico. However, he was somewhere that was starting to become very familiar, which was smack dab in the middle of danger.

Shortly after the plane had landed, the Dursleys had informed him in no uncertain terms that they were not going to be explaining to American authorities that their nephew had magically managed to defeat a killer in their home, nor were they going to risk something bizarre happening at the FBI, so Harry was just going to have to wing it until they could get back. They then added on that they also refused to let him stay in the hotel room on his own, which meant he was staying in the lobby until further notice.

A group of four official-looking people walked past, spoke to the concierge at the front desk, and then left in the direction of the elevator. Harry watched them go curiously, then turned his attention back to his own problems, of which he had many. First and foremost, there was a potential murderer after him, and honestly, he didn't even really know why because he'd given little explanation in his dramatics. He wasn't sure if he should be concerned about the man coming after him, but he'd made sure to tuck the cloak into a bag with his wand, and he had the strap of the bag lying over his shoulder just in case.

Second, though perhaps it should be first, he was certain the Dursleys weren't planning on taking him back to England, and he wasn't sure if that was because they were going to kill him before they left or because they were planning on ditching him here. In any case, there were only three plane tickets to return to Britain, and he knew none of them wanted to vacation here.

The couch cushions sank as someone sat next to him, and he glanced over to see-
"Surprise," the serial killer said calmly, shifting to rest one ankle on his knee. "I sent a rather threatening message to your guardians, and I was expecting at least a little argument or thought when I asked them to hand you over. I think I got the response back about as soon as it was physically possible."

"You told them to bring us to America," Harry said quietly.

"Ah, perceptive, aren't you? Yeah. Your father's here. Saved me the trouble of bringing you to him myself." He looped an arm across Harry's shoulders. "So, we're going to walk out of here, and you're not going to make a fuss."

"You think so?"

"I suppose that depends on you. I wasn't really intending on using the Cruciatius on you for too long, but I can drag it out. And then I can do it to your brother, when I get to him."

Harry nodded tightly and gripped the lip of his bag in one fist as he stood with the man. The killer kept his arm where it was and led him out of the lobby, while Harry slowly, carefully reached his hand into his bag until he got a hold of his wand and slipped it out.

"Put it back," the man said calmly, just as voices broke through the silent lobby.

"Excuse me, can we have the key?" Harry glanced behind them reflexively and saw one of the people from before standing at the front desk.

Beside him, the killer also turned, but he frowned slightly. Harry slashed his wand at the potted plant they were passing and hissed, "Wingardium leviosa!"

The killer whipped around, yanking his arm off Harry's shoulders as the pot upended itself over him and then fell onto of his head. There was a surprised shout from behind them, and then Harry sprinted for the front doors. Before his fingers touched the handle, a force yanked at his back and threw him to the ground as the killer started to approach.

"Hey, FBI! Stop where you are!"

The killer turned and Harry scrambled to his feet to duck behind a couch. A spell hit the spot where he'd been moments before, and then the killer was forced to pay more attention to the agents as one of them fired a gun. Harry thought he saw someone gesturing to him out of the corner of his eye, but he ignored it and glanced around the corner of the couch. The man who'd murdered his mother was still suitably distracted, and though three of the four agents were focused on him, he was easily holding them off with magical shields. It wasn't long before he managed to take one of them out.

The fourth agent was calling in back up, and Harry realized in horror that the killer wasn't going to have a problem taking out the entire group. He got up and sprinted towards one of the side hallways, off to the side of the killer, and shouted, "Expelliarmus!"

The killer narrowly avoided it, then held a shield spell as two more bullets went whizzing towards him and glared at Harry. "You," he snarled, "are so dead."

Harry held out his arms. "Come and get me, then!"

"Wait!" one of the agents shouted as Harry considered how bad of an idea this was, but then the young wizard turned and ran for it.

He hit the door at the end of the hallway and burst into fresh air, just as the window beside the door
exploded from one of the killer's spells. The parking lot in front of him was too exposed, and he quickly moved around the corner to head towards the back of the hotel. There was a small park there, and while it didn't have much cover, it would take them away from the busy roads where there were innocent bystanders. By the time he had reached the park, he'd managed to get the invisibility cloak out from his bag.

He turned back just in time to see the killer fling open the door and step out, and their eyes locked. Then Harry saw someone behind the man, near the front entrance, and Harry felt a strange pang in his chest as his gaze turned curiously towards the new figure. He hadn't been in the hotel with the others, probably responding to the call for help from the other agents now, and his gun was drawn by his side. At Harry's shift in attention, the killer whipped around, groaned in frustration when he saw the agent, and then vanished.

Harry's hopes that it was as easy as that went the same way when he heard a crack behind him, and he dropped just as a spell shot over his head. In the same motion, he flung the cloak over himself, then hurried to the side as the killer started guessing where he'd gone, shooting spells in random directions. A few gunshots echoed past them, and Harry stayed low rather than risk getting shot. The killer turned his attention back to the man, holding up his wand to shield himself from bullets, and Harry ran to the side - right into a trashcan.

He and the trashcan went down, him with a loud swear as the cloak slipped off him, and a spell almost hit his arm. "Expelliarmus!" he shouted again, accidentally overcharging it, and the killer went flying backwards.

Then he turned and ran, snatching up the cloak as he went.

A green spell flew past his head, nearly missing him, and he jerked away and threw a curse over his shoulder in response without thinking. He followed it with a small explosion towards a bush he was passing, covering his exit for a moment with a swirling burst of twigs and leaves. The next spell went wide, and he turned sharply to dart behind a fence, leaving the park and entering a more urban area.

He ran for a solid minute before he had to dodge another spell, and he threw himself behind the nearest car as another curse went flying past. A quick glance around the corner of the car showed his kidnapper was closer than expected, and he barely had enough time to throw the cloak back on to hide himself again. He shot out a hex, which landed straight on the kidnapper’s chest and forced him to stumble back with a few choice swear words as his legs began moving out of his control.

Two street corners later, and Harry was grateful for the evening light that he was fleeing through. It made it harder for his pursuer to see him, true, but fewer people were on the road that he had to look out for and no one was trying to get involved. He could only imagine what the man behind him would do if a muggle ran across his path. There were police sirens coming from his right, but they quieted soon enough, and he hoped they weren’t somehow following him.

Before he could cross another street, a car skidded towards him and toppled onto its side. Harry threw himself out of the way as best as he could, but the fender clipped his leg as it soared past. He fell with a shout of pain, collapsing onto the ground out of sight of his kidnapper thanks to where the car had finally stopped. The man scanned the area and snarled when he realized Harry was nowhere to be seen, nor was any blood splatter from the car he had sent at his target. He cast the lumos charm futilely, directing the light every which way but still unable to spot his target.

Harry slowly got to his feet, both to avoid making too much noise and to test his weight on his injured leg. It gave some protest, but it didn’t feel broken. Keeping a careful eye on the man and acknowledging that he was out of his league in this fight, he backed away down the street behind
him. His kidnapper swore loudly and cast one last glance around.

“Boy!” he snarled, and although Harry knew he couldn’t be seen, he froze. “Get back here this instant! I will not chase you any longer!”

Harry remained silent, but something rooted him to the spot.

A wicked grin broke across the man’s face. “Come on, Harry, haven’t you hurt enough people? How many lives have you ruined? How many times have you put the people around you in danger? Come with me. It’ll end if you do. And if you don’t, the next two lives are on you.” He smirked. “You might not have much family left, but you do still have a brother and a father, and I’ll bet there are more I can find.”

His heart was beating so loudly that he was sure the deranged man could hear it. Even as he watched, it seemed like the man’s aimless drifting was bringing him closer. “Harry,” he sang. “Why don’t you come with me? I’ll give you a nicer, faster end than any other you could find. It’s not like anyone really wants you around, so who’s going to mind? Who’s going to notice?”

Harry took a step backward into a car and jumped as the car alarm blared. The man’s next words were made incomprehensible by the loud honking, but a green spell shot out of his wand and flew past a few feet away. Harry sent a hex in reprisal and turned sharply on his heel to bolt—

Only to slam right into something taller and stronger than him. Blood racing and adrenaline pumping, he threw himself back, almost toppling over as he stepped on his injured leg. A partner! How had he known where Harry was?!

The man held onto him tightly, but instead of pulling out a wand and threatening him, he yanked Harry down to the sidewalk with him and threw a hand over his mouth. The other arm remained tightly secured around his shoulders. Harry stayed silent and looked up at the new figure, surprised to recognize him as the man from outside the hotel. He was looking away from Harry and down the street, where Harry’s kidnapper was stalking towards them.

“Stay where you are and put your hands above your head!” someone shouted, and several figures began appearing from behind cars and the sides of houses. With a wave of the wizard’s wand, the ones to his right were slammed onto their backs, and another spell tossed away the weapons on his left. The agent nearest to him, who had called out the order, was still standing and reaching for something from his belt.

The wizard pointed his wand at him and began to cry out another spell, but the man by Harry’s side released him, pulled out his gun, and fired twice before the incantation could be completed. Harry jerked back, startled, and stopped himself from hitting the ground with both hands. His wrist, the one he had yanked on at the Dursleys’, screamed angrily at him in pain. He ignored it and looked at the wizard, who had dropped to the ground and was holding his side. The man next to Harry fired twice more, but the bullets ricocheted off of a shield and he immediately stopped lest he injure someone unintentionally.

Harry’s kidnapper looked up furiously, picking out his attacker and glaring at him. The man didn’t back down, instead taking the brief pause to replace his clip with a full one. “You,” the wizard snarled. With a gesture of his wand, the shield came down. “Transmorgify!”

“Protego!” Harry shouted, pointing his wand over the man’s shoulder, and the yellow-colored spell hit his shield. At the same time, the man fired two more rounds, one hitting the wizard’s leg and the other his hip. Harry rose slightly for better aim, using the car as a crutch. “Stupefy!”
“Bombarda!”

“Protego! Expelliarmus!”

“Petrificus Totalus!”

The wizard dove out of the way after sending the curse to avoid a trio of bullets flying his way. Having only expected two like before, the third caught him off guard and he hit the ground roughly, wand skittering down the road. He scrambled for a moment to grab his wand, and Harry shouted, “Locomotor Mortis!” The spell hit home and the man’s legs locked together, preventing him from using them to move closer to his wand.

The wizard was too close, and he lunged forward to grab the wood. “Incarcerous!” Harry shouted, but the spell hit cement. He was gone.

“Goddamn,” someone said behind him, and Harry whipped around with his wand out. Belatedly, he realized his cloak had slid off his shoulders. The woman held her hands up, a small smile creeping across her face. “How old are you?”

“Twelve. Why?”

“That was some pretty impressive dueling for someone your age.” He blinked in surprise at the compliment, and she turned and looked to the man getting to his feet behind him. “He won’t come back,” she said regretfully, “not with this many people here.”

"Who are you?" the man demanded, moving to stand in front of Harry, not appearing to be completely aware he was doing it. One arm was out slightly, widening the barrier he put between Harry and the woman.

"Ah, this is awkward. I arrived at Quantico not long after you and your team left. I'm in charge of the Woodsmarked Killer's case from our side, which is... Well, we'll get to that later. In any case, we've already contacted your tech analyst, so you can call her if you don't believe me." She glanced at Harry. "You're Harry Potter, right?" After a moment, he nodded firmly. He was holding his wrist in the cradle of his arm. "You need to come with us."

"He's under our protection," the man snapped, and Harry eased back, hand on the cloak. One more step, and then the man's hand closed on his elbow, stopping him from leaving. Damn, he'd been more observant than Harry had hoped. "And you still haven't explained who you are."

"Let's get back to Quantico, then. We can talk there." And then the woman vanished.

The man just stood there for a very long moment, and Harry finally said, sympathetically, "You're not used to magic, are you?"

"Magic."

"We're not supposed to say anything - Statute of Secrecy and all - but I think this is a bit past that now," Harry said. He was starting to shake with the adrenaline crash, and he kind of wanted to sit down.

The man sighed slightly. "Don't take it the wrong way when I say I don't really believe you."

"That's hardly offensive. It took me a bit of time too, and I saw a man put a pig's tail on my cousin."

The man paused, and Harry realized he was staring at the car that was lying on its side halfway
down the road. "What happened?"

"Ah, do you want me to say the magical version or not?" When there was no response, he said, "The car, um, well, the parking brake came loose and it, uh, started rolling and, er, hit a bump and-"

"Okay, okay," the man said, resigned, holding up a hand. Harry smiled weakly. Closer to the car, the agents and officers had all recovered themselves and were giving each other instructions and talking to people on their phones or radios. One of them was looking in their direction, and the man beside him waved them off. "Your family's at Quantico. We'll be taking you there now."

Harry nodded, then promptly started easing backward as a woman, the one who had gestured to Harry in the lobby, approached. The man beside him must have known her because he said, "Stay and canvas the area with local law enforcement. Keep Reid and Morgan with you, and I'll take Elle back with us."

Harry took another step back, ever so slowly, more cautious this time. There was no way he could go back to the Dursleys, not after what they'd done. "Actually, Hotch, uh... Someone just showed up with orders from the director of the FBI."

Harry paused, and Hotch stared at her. "What?"

"We're supposed to hand the scene over to the group that showed up," she said, pointing, and Harry saw a cluster of wizards and witches starting to move around discretely. "And there's more. They want everyone who was here, police included, to head straight to Quantico for some sort of briefing."

"I think I know what about..."

Harry took another step, sensing that the conversation was coming to a close and he didn't have much longer. A bit more and he could put the cloak over himself and slip away. How he was going to get back to England, he hadn't the faintest idea, but he just knew he couldn't go back with the Dursleys. He didn't have a snowball's chance in hell of convincing anyone they were trying to kill him, or that they had turned him over to the killer.

JJ tilted her head slightly, staring at Hotch, and Harry realized belatedly that she was gesturing to him. He staggered backward, tripping over his own feet in his haste to get away, just as Hotch's hand wrapped around his arm, just above his elbow, and stopped him from going anywhere. Harry stopped, flushing in embarrassment at being caught.

Hotch glanced back at JJ, and she nodded and left the two of them alone, hurrying back to where she'd come from. "What's wrong?" Hotch asked. Harry didn't respond, leaning away from the agent's hold. Hotch turned so he was facing Harry, and he put his other hand on Harry's shoulder, crouching slightly to get closer to his eye level. "Harry," he said, more gently, "do you know who we are?" Harry shook his head. "I'm Agent Aaron Hotchner, and the people who came with me today are my team. We work with the FBI, and we've been going after the man who attacked you. Our job is to keep you safe from him, but we can't do that if we don't know where you are."

The serial killer, funnily enough, wasn't the one Harry was all that worried about.

"I promise you, that if you come back with us, we'll keep you protected. He won't hurt you again."

Harry had a feeling he was going to lose this argument, so he just nodded. "Okay..."

Hotch lowered his hand from Harry's shoulder, though he kept a light but firm grip on Harry's elbow. Harry couldn't feel annoyed at the sign of distrust in Harry's word even when he knew he
would have run for it if possible.

---

Quantico turned out to be the FBI headquarters, which was much larger than Harry had thought it would be. Hotch took him up to the floor the BAU was located on, and Harry quickly looked around, searching for the Dursleys. The bullpen space was large, and there was a section of offices raised half a level above it, including a conference room. It was bustling with people, some looking like official muggle agents and others looking considerably more out of place.

One of them was the woman who had approached them earlier, and she smiled and approached. "I'm Agent Travis. Sorry about the rush, but we didn't want to have to obliviate everyone if things started to leak." She glanced at Harry politely. "How are you doing?"

"Regular Tuesday for me, but I'll admit the time of day is regrettable. You?"

Hotch smiled slightly, and the other two agents were startled into small laughs. "Obliviate?" he asked.

Harry said, "It's a spell that makes someone forget a certain time span."

The witch Travis blinked at him. "How do you know that?"

"Had a professor last year who tried to Obliviate my friend with a broken wand. It backfired on him and wiped all of his memories."

"Yikes," she muttered, then turned back to Hotch. "He's right, though. It's been mostly taken care of, but all the law enforcement present needs to either agree to keep quiet about what they saw or be obliterated, which is why we had everyone come here. The rest of your team already arrived and has gone through it."

"What did they decide?" Hotch asked.

"I can't tell you that until you make your own decision."

Hotch looked decidedly irritated by that but didn't say anything. "Fine. Give me one moment." He pulled Harry along with him, leaving JJ and Travis behind, and went further into the bullpen. Harry recognized the three people they were approaching as the others who had been in the lobby. They glanced up from their quiet conversation, and Hotch said briskly, "Harry, these are Agents Morgan, Greenaway, and Reid. I'll be right back."

Once he was gone, the woman, Greenaway, reached out with her leg and pulled a swivel chair closer for Harry. "Elle," she said, extending her hand, and he shook it. He hesitantly took a seat, wincing slightly and feeling increasingly small and awkward with the situation.

Morgan frowned. "Are you injured?"

"Not really," he said immediately, though upon reflection he realized he had no idea how true that was. He opened his mouth to change the subject, but none of the agents seemed interested in leaving the matter alone.

"You probably should go see a paramedic," Reid told him once. "Most injuries are exacerbated by further use and become much worse than they originally were because of inadequate treatment."

"I'm not hurt," he said. "Really, I'm fine," he added, but all three began scanning him for injuries.
"Surprised Hotch didn't notice," Elle muttered as she gently took his forearm and looked at his injured wrist. "This definitely needs treatment." Glancing up at him, she added, "Because of your age, we'll need your guardian's consent before anything can be done, but we should be able to get that once Travis's people are done talking to them."

That wasn’t likely. Harry couldn’t imagine trying to get his aunt or uncle to sign anything for him. "What’s the FBI?" he asked.

"Federal Bureau of Investigation," Reid supplied, face lighting up as words began to spill out. “It operates under the Department of Justice as a security service and intelligence agency to work as a sort of national police force. The closest equivalent in Britain is MI5, although the roots are considerably different since MI5 actually split from MI6 shortly after they were formed, while the FBI came from-“

“National police force,” Morgan interrupted with a grin, holding out a hand to stop his associate. Elle was smiling slightly. “We’ll leave it there.” He paused. "So, ah, you're a wizard, then?"

Harry nodded nervously. "Er, yeah. You all went with the Statute, then?"

"I'm not getting my memory wiped," Reid grumbled while the other two exchanged knowing grins over his head.

Elle asked, “Where’d Hotch run off to, by the way? Figured he’d still be here.”

“Probably hasn't been given the choice yet,” Morgan guessed and Harry nodded in confirmation. "Have you seen Gideon?"

Elle gave Morgan a look. “Does anyone ever really know where Gideon’s at?” The other agent conceded the point with a tilt of his head. “Hey, do your parents know where you're are?” she asked Harry.

He shook his head quickly. “No, um. They’re dead. The people I was with were my uncle and aunt.”

Morgan frowned. “Are you living with them?”

Harry paused, examining the agent’s expression. “Yes,” he said carefully. “Why?” The three agents exchanged knowing looks, and he feared for a moment that he had given himself away. “What’s wrong?”

“Harry,” Reid began slowly. “When your…aunt and uncle learned we were picking you up, they started saying some…disturbing things.” Harry could all too clearly imagine what they had said. He wondered if they had tried to sell the St. Brutus’s School for Criminal Boys line or if they had just told everyone how freakish he was. “Things people don’t say about the children they take care of. Things people don’t say about anyone, really.”

When Harry didn’t react, a sort of understanding seemed to simultaneously pass over the agents, and he leaned back. “What?” he asked.

“Harry, how do your relatives usually treat you?” Elle asked quietly.

“Fine, I suppose.” Shit, shit. If he could just keep low, maybe he could slip away and hide the rest of the summer. That wouldn't happen if they were suspicious of him, which they definitely would be if he tried to tell them what was going on. Besides, it wasn’t so dangerous anymore now that he was usually at school and away from the Dursleys. “I mean, they’ve been pretty good about having to
“Take me in and all.”

“Do you think they would blame you for something like this?” Elle asked.

Damn. “Yeah,” he sighed. “But they’ve had a rough time with magic. They weren’t too happy when we found out I was a wizard.”

“Have they ever called you a freak, and told you that you deserved anything bad that happened to you?”

Harry avoided her gaze and focused instead on the moving agents and aurors behind her and Morgan. A long moment passed, but he was saved from answering when he saw Hotch walking in their direction. He sat up a bit straighter, almost unconsciously, and his rapt attention caused the other three to focus on the agent’s approach.

"He went with the Statute, too," Greenaway whispered to Morgan, who nodded in agreement.

“They will be taking over the scene from now,” he said, coming to a stop. “Harry, the rest of your family’s in one of the rooms down the hall—”

“He can just stay with us, though,” Morgan quickly added in. Hotch shot him a look, and Morgan stared impassively at him. "Might be more helpful here."

“Right,” Hotch finally said. “Or that. If your relatives say it’s okay, and you don’t mind, we do have a few questions we would like to ask you.”

Harry quickly nodded. “Yeah, I’m sure they won’t care and it’s fine with me.”

Hotch glanced at his team members, and Harry once more got the feeling that there was a lot he was missing. “All right, then,” he said. “Travis and a few of her officers need a quick briefing on analyzing the scene. If the two of you can stay with Harry, Reid and I will handle that.”

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“Elle and Morgan already did this,” Reid said once they were out of earshot.

“They did,” Hotch replied, “but we’re going to go stand by a group of people and pretend.” They both remained silent until they had reached a spot the unit chief deemed satisfactory by the action of Travis, who glanced at them briefly and then looked away to continue talking to someone else.

“What happened?”

“The Dursleys are abusive,” Reid immediately said. “He doesn’t easily make eye contact, he keeps flinching—”

“He was just almost killed,” Hotch gently reminded him.

“—and the agents who were watching over the Dursleys got worried when the parents started loudly claiming their nephew should be sent to prison for the rest of his life and it wasn’t their fault he was such – and I quote – ‘a freak and a waste of space’.”

Hotch stared at him. “This is the same kid who saved their lives?”

“Yeah, same one. They were also talking about pressing charges against him, but they talked it over and decided against it because it would cause too much of a scene. Hotch, he’s too thin and he’s too short for his age. He had a sprained wrist and a multitude of other defensive injuries, and there’s
something wrong with his leg, but he hasn’t complained once and tried to brush off help. Let alone the emotional trauma, I don’t think he’s physically safe with them.”

As Hotch chewed the information over in his mind, Reid quietly asked, “Do they know what happened to the Woodsmarked Killer?”

“I was hoping he might have to check into a hospital, considering what Harry and I did to him, but it doesn’t seem like it will be necessary for him. They’re keeping an eye on admissions to magical hospitals anyway, in the hopes that he will.”

Morgan came up to them and said, "Harry hasn't eaten in at least a day and a half."

---

Hotch sent the three agents and Harry to get food. There wasn't anything for them to do until the magical division sorted everything out, but Hotch had to remain behind while they fielded nonmagical issues through him. Elle stole the keys from Morgan and slipped into the driver’s seat while the grumbling agent took the passenger’s, and the rest climbed into the back.

“Where are we off to?” she asked when everyone had seat belts on and she was pulling out of Quantico.

Morgan pulled out his phone and began searching on the internet. “I’d say just start driving for now. I mean, theoretically we could have just grabbed food back at Quantico, but…”

“I’m not sure that stuff’s edible,” Reid muttered from the back with Harry.


“Definitely not edible,” Reid said.

“IHOP.”

“It’s four pm!”

“Never too late for breakfast.”

“Chinese buffet.”

“That place looks like its run by the Triad.”

“Dairy Queen.”

“Not real food. Are you purposefully picking the worst choices?” When he caught sight of Morgan’s grin, he exclaimed, “Morgan!”

“Sorry,” he said, not contrite at all. “Burger King.”

“Real food!” Reid and Elle both patronized at the same time.

“Harry, where do you want to go?” Elle asked.

Where did he want to? “What?” Mind catching up with the question, he said, “I don’t know. Most of the places here are different than in Britain.” Not that he’d ever gone out with the Dursleys…

In front of him, he caught a glance Morgan sent Elle’s way, and realized he hadn’t been so subtle
about what he was really trying to hide. “Olive Garden,” Elle said.

Morgan snorted. “You’re paying.”

“Noodles and Co.!” Reid exclaimed leaning forward to point between the two.

Elle flicked on her turn signal. “Well, if I’m paying…” Morgan nudged her lightly in the ribs. “Seriously, though, we’ll cut at least an hour off the wait time. Any protest?”

That was how they found themselves walking into the restaurant five minutes later. The cashier glanced up immediately as they moved towards the front and did a double take. Elle and Morgan ignored the look, but Reid scanned their group in confusion. At about the same time, he and Harry both realized that between the stereotypically nondescript vehicle they had pulled up outside, Reid’s nerdy student appearance, Morgan’s federal agent aura, Elle’s passive-aggressive glaring at the customer who was openly gaping, and Harry’s dust-covered and blood-splattered clothes, they made quite a statement.

“What,” Elle deadpanned upon reaching the cashier.

“Um,” he replied blankly.

---

They actually met Gideon and Hotch in the elevator when they returned, as the pair was coming from a meeting with Strauss. Neither looked exceptionally delighted about what had occurred, and no explanation was given as to where exactly Gideon had gone off to before, though that surprised no one. The elevator doors slid open to present one bubbly individual waiting for them.

Almost the instant they had all managed to get out the elevator, she gasped and ignored the rest of them to dive towards Harry, who blinked and stumbled back into Hotch. The latter grabbed his shoulders to steady him and held on to act as a support while Harry was introduced to the whirlwind that was their tech analyst.

“So you’re our brilliant little duelist!” she cried, reaching out to drag him into a hug. Hotch let him go, almost sad to see the boy be snatched away but content with the knowledge that he would be in a better place, surrounded by Garcia’s unceasing flow of love and rainbows. And blatantly illegal manipulation when times called for it, but still. Love and rainbows. “Aw, I’ve heard so much about you already!”

“I- You have?” Harry asked, nonplussed.

“Well, of course! Not often our fearless unit chief gets saved by a twelve-year-old.” She beamed at Hotch, who raised an eyebrow at her and ignored the stifled grins of his teammates.

“Harry, this is Penelope Garcia, our tech analyst,” Hotch introduced. “She’s as close to magical as we usually get around here.”

“Well, don’t put me out of a job before I even get to the work force,” Harry said and Garcia cooed.

“Not to worry, my dear. With those looks, you could beat me any day in getting a job.”

“Man, I feel like I’m being pushed aside,” Morgan muttered to Reid, who grinned back. “Is this what rejection feels like?”

“Well, you are getting older,” Reid replied. “Maybe Garcia’s moving on to younger men.”
Morgan jerked back. “Excuse you!”

Elle patted him on the shoulder. “It’s okay, Morgan. It happens to everyone eventually.”

“Not to worry, my chocolate god,” Garcia said with a smirk. “You’ll always be in my top five, but I guess you’ll have to settle for second now.”

“Yikes, competition,” JJ muttered. “Hey, guys, maybe we should stop blocking the elevators?”

“Nah, I’m pretty sure anyone walking past has nothing better to do than marvel at the glorious hotness that is my BAU team.” Garcia caught Gideon’s raised eyebrow. “Oh, uh, good morning, sir.”

“Briefing room,” Gideon said, and the group moved in the appointed direction.

“Why are you British?” Garcia whispered to Harry in annoyance as they climbed the stairs.

“Looked like a good place to be born,” he remarked. “Why?”

“’Cause you have to go back,” she complained as JJ held the door open and herded them in.

The whole talk took considerably less time than he had expected. Travis, who came in and was introduced halfway through, explained a lot about the magical world to the team, and Harry was surprised multiple times throughout the description. For one thing, American students were apparently allowed to use magic outside of school before they turned seventeen so long as they were enrolled in a government-recognized school, which thankfully included Hogwarts so Harry would be getting no letters about being expelled for using magic.

It also turned out that the statement that technology and magic didn’t work together was not entirely true. Travis admitted that they didn’t quite know how it worked, but Garcia was welcome to figure it out. The tech analyst looked almost too happy for her body to contain all the exuberance, and Harry wondered just what had been unleashed on the world. “Can I hack the wizarding system’s network once I’m done?”

At least she was on their side.

The topic turned back to the Woodsmarked Killer once the general explanation was over with, and they turned to Harry with the promised questions. Unfortunately, he felt that most of his answers were too unspecific, and he didn’t think he was giving them everything they needed. Still, no one looked upset with him, and the group marked down what he said without complaint. In fact, they looked relieved to have any information, and Harry realized the Dursleys probably hadn't been all that helpful.

Finally, Hotch turned to Harry when they'd gone through everything that had happened to him as the conversation started to drift away from what they needed him for. “Harry, you’re probably exhausted, and it’s going to be a while before we get everything sorted out. I’ve got an open couch in my office, if you want.”

Harry almost collapsed in relief. He hadn’t slept since yesterday, and that combined with a lack of food was beginning to wear him down. “That would be fantastic, thank you.”

“I’ll show you the way.”

---
When Harry woke up a few hours later, the first thing he wondered was how someone had found a pink and yellow blanket with bunnies in the headquarters of the FBI. Sleep still blurring the logical functions of his brain, he stared at it for a few minutes in befuddlement until the answer came to him. It must have been Garcia. He hadn’t had nearly enough sleep, but something was telling him to get up. Even still, he remained lying down and closed his eyes again, hoping sleep would come back to him so he could get some more rest.

A few minutes later, he heard the door open and shut. “He’s still asleep?” Reid quietly asked, moving closer to Hotch’s desk.

Something kept Harry quiet as Hotch responded in the affirmative. “Completely out. Garcia came in to see how he was doing and he didn’t even move.”

“He looked like he needed the sleep.”

“Did you find out anything?”

“Not really. He's not on many records. It's still not clear why the Woodsmarked Killer was talking to him about his father and brother when the Potters are dead and he was an only child.” They must have been close enough to hear the Woodsmarked Killer then, though Harry hadn't considered that. “Um, Hotch... I know this isn't...really a... Well, it's not the most important thing right now, in a way, but, uh-”

"I'm looking into it. I'll talk to him later."

Relieved, Reid said, "Okay. Okay, that's good."

"If it turns out that his father is alive, he’ll have somewhere to go."

"At least he won't be with the Dursleys... What's going to happen to him?"

"We won't know until we track his father down."

"Think we can do it?"

"We'll see."

They wanted to find his father, and they wanted to hand Harry over to him. He couldn't have imagined a worse alternative to staying with the Dursleys for longer, but it had just been handed to him. The Dursleys had done a lot of lying about the Potters over the years, sure - that didn't mean they weren't right about this. Besides, there wasn't any other explanations for how he'd ended up with the Potters that made any sense.

Maybe the Dursleys were all for killing him, but at least he knew that. Once he got back to England, he could run away and hide at the Burrow. If the Weasleys heard about what was going on, they'd surely take him in. All he had to do was hold out for a little while longer and make sure he didn't encourage the team's efforts.
There are going to be a couple romantic pairings, some canon and some not, but I won't say anything now to avoid spoilers. I left out as many OCs as I could, so almost everyone who shows up is someone you've met either in HP or CM, if only briefly. Travis is the only recurring OC who's not canon.
Reviews are love!
"And, as I am an honest Puck, if we have unearned Luck, now to 'scape the serpent’s tongue, we will make amends ere long, else the Puck a liar call, so good night unto you all. Give me your hands if we be friends, and shall restore amends.” – William Shakespeare, A Midsummer Night’s Dream

At about eleven that night, Hotch gently shook Harry awake, and he blearily opened his eyes. He’d gotten some restless sleep after overhearing the conversation between Hotch and Reid, guilt and nervousness gnawing at his thoughts.

"Hey, Harry?" he said quietly. "Usually we'd take you to stay with your relatives, but by the time we get you there and settled in, we're going to be coming right back." Harry nodded in understanding and started to sit up. Hotch leaned back to give him a bit more space. "But you can't stay here, so, instead... Why don't you come home with me?"

Harry looked at him, startled. "Really?"

Hotch nodded. "There won't be anything to do here until everyone comes back to work anyway. You'll have to get up early and come in with me, but I think that'd be preferable to any alternative."

The only other option was to go stay with the Dursleys, and he really didn't trust them enough to sleep around them right now. Hotch led him towards the elevators, and the pair was halfway down when Harry asked, "Isn't... Well, he's still out there. Isn't there a chance he's going to follow me?"

"Not likely. He's going to need to step back and reconsider his position. Besides, that's just another reason why it'd be better for you to stick with me than to go to the Dursleys. It doesn't seem like he's after them."

At Hotch's slight frown, Harry asked, "What?"

"It just... Never mind." He appeared to regret it the moment he looked at Harry's curious expression, and he almost caved. "It's nothing."

"You're wondering why the Dursleys didn't take me with them if it was so dangerous."

Hotch winced slightly.

"I already know they're not good people," Harry said quietly, and the elevator doors opened.

He dozed lightly during the ride home, and Hotch shook him awake when they pulled into the driveway a while later. It was hard to see where exactly they were at or what anything looked like in the dark, even with streetlights, and Harry wearily followed Hotch to the front door. Inside, a couple of lights were already on.

A woman looked up, considerably younger than Hotch, and Harry couldn't quite stop himself from experiencing a brief shock at the notion. Hotch just hadn't seemed like the type to go that way. The
woman smiled when she saw them, though she looked a bit bewildered by Harry. "He's fast asleep," she said and Harry, horrified, realized Hotch had not only endangered himself by bringing him home but also his family.

She stood up, but instead of any sort of embrace Harry might have expected, Hotch just thanked her for staying so late, paid her, made sure she got to her car outside without a problem, then closed and locked the door. A babysitter, then.

"Jack's usually a sound sleeper," Hotch murmured as he started to lead Harry toward the stairs, "but probably best not to be too loud." Harry nodded, but something must have shown on his face because Hotch frowned. "Is everything okay?"

"I'm sorry," he said quickly, backing up nervously and causing Hotch to frown in concern. "If I stay, he's going to come, and you've got a family, and-"

Hotch move and put his hand on the front door as Harry touched the handle, stopping it from opening. "Harry," Hotch said soothingly. "It's all right. If it were that bad, I wouldn't have invited you. But I assure you, he's not going to come here, and he's not going to hurt any of us."

"You can't know that for sure," Harry said. "This just happened today."

Hotch grimaced. "No, it's..." He sighed, and his hand slid off the door. "My family was targeted by him before. He took Jack's mother, my wife, a couple of years ago."

"Oh," Harry murmured, but before he could say anything else, Hotch was coaxing him back up the stairs.

At the top, Hotch led him down the hallway to a guest bedroom. It was mostly empty and blank, but it was larger than what Harry had ever had before. "Get some rest," Hotch said, then pointed down the hall. "If you need anything, I'll be there."

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The next morning, they were up before Jack, and Harry never saw him before they were leaving. It was barely light outside when they left after eating a quick breakfast. Instead of going back to Quantico, Hotch accompanied him to the Dursleys, saying that the rest of the team didn't need him to continue working on the case. Harry resigned himself to the visit once he saw Hotch’s determination, but decided he could at least try and help make it as quick as possible.

"There isn’t treatment I can get without their permission?" Harry asked as they got out of the car. The Dursleys were being kept at another hotel, since they weren't staying in America long enough to need a permanent safe house.

"No, not unless it’s a minor injury."

"I’m not badly injured."

Hotch eyed him. "Your wrist is sprained and you have bruises all over you, not to mention numerous welts."

"Which, on their own, are minor injuries."

They'd been pushing for treatment yesterday, but Harry had hidden most of his injuries and claimed he was too tired for a closer examination. That morning, when he'd tried lifting a plate with his bad hand, Hotch had realized just how much he was hiding.
“And combined are not minor injuries. Besides, we’re already here.”

“Yeah, but I don’t think they’re going to sign it,” Harry muttered.

Hotch frowned at the comment but opened the door to let them into the hotel. They walked further into the lobby, and Hotch led him up two flights to get to the correct floor. He knocked on a door, which opened after a couple of moments to reveal a police officer. The room behind him was mostly empty, occupied only by one other officer. Both had the faces of people who would rather be anywhere but there. As they entered, Harry could hear Dudley crying for something in the next room while Petunia and Vernon tried to soothe him. Hotch’s expression quickly darkened when he heard the unceasing whining, and locked gazes with the pitiable officers in the hotel room.

“So, ah,” one asked, “are they heading home for the holidays soon, sir? As in, the next few hours?”

Hotch shook his head and the officers slumped in despair.

“You should hear them during Dudley’s birthday,” Harry said and they winced.

“Are they actually going to buy him a new television?” the second officer asked, glancing at the wall. It was one of those rooms connected to its neighbor.

Harry nodded honestly, unaware of Hotch’s rather rapt gaze on him. “Probably, yeah. They haven’t really failed him yet.”

“You have infinitely more patience than me,” the first officer said.

“No, I’m just talented at running out of sight before they fully understand what I said. You’d be surprised how slow they can be sometimes.” He looked up at Hotch. “Should we get this over with?”

Hotch nodded and pulled the door open. Inside, Dudley and Petunia were on the two beds, and Vernon was resting on a chair near the window by Petunia’s bed. Dudley was still crying, but was startled into a temporary lull as the door opened. The Dursleys quieted for one blissful moment to scrutinize Hotch before blowing up at the sight of Harry.

“You!” Vernon shouted, pointing at Harry.

“I was afraid you would recognize me,” Harry said neutrally.

“How dare you do this to my family! Do you know what we’ve been through?!”

“If you can think back far enough, you might remember that I was there with you.”

Vernon rose to his feet as quickly as he could, which was rather anticlimactic due to his bad coordination. Harry held himself still, fighting his initial reaction to move away, but Hotch had no such qualms. Before Vernon could move, Hotch stepped forward until he was barely a few centimeters away from the large man. Whatever Vernon saw in Hotch’s expression was enough to make him reconsider what he had been about to say, and he edged backwards a step.

“Sit down, Mr. Dursley,” Hotch said, and Harry’s uncle complied immediately. A stack of papers dropped onto the bedside table next to Vernon. “Sign.”

Vernon eyed him nervously before picking up the papers and scanning them. He turned an
interesting shade of purple halfway down the first page. “This-! This is-!”

“Yes. Sign.”

Vernon slammed the papers down. “I don’t have to sign this rubbish!” One meaty hand flailed in Harry’s direction. “Don’t tell me I have to waste money getting the boy treated when this is all his fault! You can’t force us to make someone patch up the ungrateful brat.”

Hotch folded his arms, tone impassive. With his back still to Harry, it was impossible to read his face. “No,” he agreed, “but I can charge you for child neglect, and I will happily do so.”

Vernon opened and closed his mouth a few times. “You can’t- That’s not-” He stood up again and gestured angrily at Harry. “That boy is not worth ruining my family over! I will not spend a dime on such a freak when he puts my family in danger every time he comes home! Can’t you see he’s-“

Hotch turned away from him and moved to walk out of the room. As he passed, he gently reached out and took Harry’s shoulder, coaxing him to go in front of Hotch. “Child neglect it is, then.”

“Wait!”

Both of them paused and looked back as Petunia grabbed a pen and hurriedly scribbled her signature down on the designated lines. She got out of bed and thrust the paper at him, looking away from Hotch only long enough to glare at Harry. Vernon was huffing furiously by the window but made no move to intercept her. Hotch was considerably unimpressed by the entire display and took the papers from Petunia.

“If there is not a serious attitude adjustment regarding your nephew,” Hotch warned, “you will be finding yourself facing charges. And don’t think going back to England means you won’t still be watched.” The Dursleys exchanged panicked looks and Hotch turned to go.

When they were out in the hallway and a good distance away from the connected rooms, Harry asked, “Why did you tell them they would be watched in England?”

“Garcia,” Hotch said, and left it there.

Harry grinned in understanding, then paused. “Wait, but why would she be keeping an eye on me?”

“Because what your relatives are doing isn’t right,” Hotch quietly responded, and Harry decided not to press the issue.

From there, they drove to the hospital and Harry was checked in at the receptionist’s desk. They were led to a room not five minutes later. Privately, Harry was pretty sure the quick response had something to with Hotch’s FBI status but he wasn’t going to complain.

Not long after, a nurse entered and began asking some routine questions. She came to the same conclusion Reid had, but added concerns about dehydration and malnutrition. Hotch didn’t seem all that surprised, but Harry blinked at the news. The nurse left, only to return not long after for treatment. There wasn’t much to be done about the bruising, but she took care of the leg – not fractured – and bandaged the welts the stinging hexes had left.

“I would recommend an IV drip to replenish everything you lost,” she said, “but it’s not necessary.”

Harry waved it off. “I might not be here much longer.”
She nodded and turned to Hotch. “Well, if that’s it, then there’s some paperwork at the front desk for you to sign since you were here. I’ll get Harry checked out and send him your way.”

Hotch left with a last glance at Harry, and the nurse waited a few moments after the door closed before she began. “Harry,” she said gently, “I need you to answer me honestly, okay?”

“All right,” he slowly replied. Wasn’t the examination over?

“Do you get enough food at home?”

He frowned slightly. “What?”

“Do you get enough to eat?”

“Well, I suppose.”

“How much do you usually eat at home?”

Harry paused, not quite sure what to say. He didn’t think his own food intake at the Dursleys’ was normal, but Dudley’s was on the other end so that wasn’t correct. And at Hogwarts, he could only assume that wasn’t quite the normal amount of food people usually ate, since it was often a feast. How much did people usually eat?

He realized his silence had stretched on for too long and slumped down slightly, deciding to just keep quiet. She looked at him sadly. He had a bad feeling about where this was going, but there wasn’t a whole lot he could say that would make it better.

“Can you tell me where you got these injuries from?”

“No…” Not when it was still an ongoing investigation, at least.

“Harry, are these from your father?”

He jerked back in surprise. “What? No!”

“Harry-“

“No, my father’s dead.” Dead to him, anyway.

It was her turn to startle. “Oh! I’m sorry.” He made a noncommittal noise, expecting her to move on. “Are these from your guardian, then?”

He shook his head, suppressing a sigh. “No, I’m not being abused.”

“Harry, I’m happy for you if that’s true.” He sensed a ‘but.’ “But-“ there it was “-if not, we can get you help. You don’t ever have to see him again.” She jerked her head out towards the hallway to gesture at someone, and Harry frowned in bewilderment. His guardians were at the safe house, not out in the-

“Oh!” he exclaimed. “No, that’s Agent Hotchner. We’re not related.”

Again, she started back in surprise. “Holy crap, really?”

“Yeah…?”

“I swear, I thought you two had to be father and son!”
“No, he’s just here because I’m involved in one of his cases.”

She turned that information over in her mind. “Wait, is that why you can’t tell me what happened?”

“Er, yeah.”

She put her face in her hands and groaned softly. Harry laughed and reached out to gently pat her arm. “Oh, I’m so sorry. I just accused a federal officer of child abuse.”

“I won’t tell him, if that makes you feel any better.”

“It does, actually.”

When she walked him out, however, she pulled Hotch aside to speak with him. She must have really felt bad enough to apologize even when Hotch hadn’t known. Harry gave them some space and watched out the windows until Hotch joined him.

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The ride back to Quantico had mostly been silent so far, and Harry glanced over at Hotch curiously a few times. The agent mostly watched the road, but once in a while Harry noticed he was being examined out of the corner of Hotch’s eye.

“What?” Harry finally asked.

Hotch let out a small, almost unnoticeable sigh, and flipped his turn signal on without responding. Harry watched as they pulled off the road into the parking lot of a restaurant, and noticed that Hotch looked unexpectedly grim. What had happened while he had still been in the examination room?

“Harry,” Hotch began. Something in Hotch’s tone warned him against relaxing. “Whatever you say will stay between the two of us, all right? I just need to know, and if you want, we can do something about it later. But it’s up to you when that time comes. This conversation is confidential.” Harry nodded hesitantly. “I know you’ve already been asked this a few times, but I need to ask you again. Is your family abusive?”

His immediate response was to shake his head and laugh off the question, but Hotch’s concern and dreadful certainty made him stop. He winced and turned away slightly, realizing a moment too late how telling the gesture was.

“Harry,” Hotch continued, and Harry shook his head.

“It’s…” He blew out his breath. “I know this sounds bad, but it’s really not a problem. I’m at school over half the year now, and I don’t go home for breaks so I don’t see them nearly as often anymore. And I’m not in any danger from them either.”

“Just because they aren’t threatening your life doesn’t mean it’s not abusive,” Hotch said, inadvertently striking the nail on the head.

He started to turn back to the agent. “Yeah, but…” At the sadness in Hotch’s face, his argument trailed off. What came out instead was, “I don’t have anywhere else to go, so there’s no real point in talking about it.”

“No other family, or…?”

Harry shook his head with a dry laugh. “No, and the Dursleys aren’t my real family anyway. I don’t
know where my actual parents are, but I heard they didn’t want me.”

“Well, then your actual parents are assholes and they’re missing out,” Hotch said firmly, and Harry was startled into a grin. “Look, we can take you away from them, and we can figure something out here. You won’t ever have to see them again.”

“But…would I still be going to school in England?”

“I don’t see why not.”

Harry stared out the window for a few seconds before looking back to Hotch. “Would you actually get me out of there?” he asked curiously. It was so weird to have an adult saying something like that. Sure, he was used to Hermione and Ron worrying over him, but he’d never quite gotten a protective reaction out of anyone else before. Even Mrs. Weasley hadn’t been so adamant.

Hotch nodded firmly. “All we need is proof and then we can let the courts do the rest.”

Harry sank down in his seat slightly. “But we don’t have any.”

“Actually, we do. The nurse who treated you told me your body is showing plenty of signs of malnutrition and abuse, which means there is physical proof within you, and I’ll bet a search of your house would yield even more. And don’t think people won’t believe you if you tell them the truth.”

He doubted that. “But wouldn’t it seem odd that I’m away at a boarding school for most of the year?”

“Your aunt and uncle made a mistake by saying you went to St. Brutus’s. You don’t have a criminal record, so it’s just another sign of psychological abuse.”

“I don’t know how the courts work.”

A hint of a smile appeared. “Before I became an FBI agent, I was a lawyer. British law is a bit different, but not by much, and I can definitely handle the American side.”

Harry let out a small laugh. “Really?”

“Yeah. I’ll help you through this. You don’t have to go home with the Dursleys if you don’t want to.”

Harry smiled, but the expression quickly faded. If they found out the truth, they were going to reintroduce him to his father. The one who had abandoned him. The one who hadn’t cared enough when he was a baby to take care of him, let alone now that he was older. The one who, according to the Dursleys, had been imprisoned for various crimes, including mistreatment of his own children.

Hotch looked at him in concern as his mood changed, and Harry shook his head glumly. “I don’t think I’m allowed to leave the Dursleys from the magical side, though. Petunia’s sister died to protect me when I was younger, so there’s some sort of blood protection on me. If I don’t stay with them, it doesn’t work.”

“Maybe we can work around that,” Hotch said, but Harry shook his head.

“I asked before if I could stay at Hogwarts over the summer, and that was the reason why I couldn’t. I don’t think they would let me leave their home entirely.”

“We don’t have to tell the magical side, then.”
“I get the feeling that they would find out and force me to go back whether I want to or not.”

“A blood protection doesn’t help you if you’re in danger from the people you’re staying with!”

“But I’m not really in any danger,” Harry tried. Hotch just shook his head, grimacing, and stared out the front windshield for a few moments. “And I don’t get hit often, so… I mean…”

“Often?” Hotch quietly asked. Harry cursed himself internally for the poor word choice but didn’t respond. When it became clear he was going to get no answer, Hotch reached into his wallet and pulled out a card, which he handed to Harry. “My contact information,” he said as Harry read it. “If you change your mind, call me. I promise I’ll come get you.”


Hotch met his gaze steadily and repeated, “I promise I’ll come get you.”

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“You don’t have to leave us,” Garcia whispered in his ear, arms wrapped tightly around him. Harry laughed as he reciprocated the hug. “You can just stay here. No one will notice if you just live in my office.”

“Well, they might notice that last bit,” Morgan admitted from Harry’s left. “They just need to not report it.”

“His flight’s going to leave without him,” Gideon said, and Garcia finally detached herself.

The entirety of the BAU had gathered to see Harry off, though he wasn’t quite sure why it was necessary. Still, he felt a warm glow in his chest at seeing all of them present to wish him well. Only Hotch was going with him to the airport, where they would meet up with the Dursleys. There wasn’t any point in them staying in America any longer, so Harry found himself leaving America almost exactly twenty-four hours after arriving. It hurt more than he thought it would have.

“Take care,” JJ said as Hotch pulled Harry gently towards the elevator. Harry waved back at them as he was ushered in, and the doors slid closed a moment later.

“They’re an enthusiastic lot,” he noted.

Hotch made an amused noise beside him. “I think it’s you, actually,” he said. “That’s Garcia all the time, but the rest of them aren’t usually like this during a case.”

Harry blinked in surprise but didn’t respond. All too soon, they were getting into one of the FBI vehicles and on their way to the airport. He had thought the ride over with Hotch might be uncomfortable after their last conversation, but it was surprisingly easy to start talking again. Once they were out of Quantico, Hotch began asking him more about the magical world, and Harry easily answered his questions. A few times, he realized he had absolutely no clue and resolved to find out.

“Well, you’ve got my number,” Hotch said, “so feel free to give me a call when you’ve got an answer.”

Harry nodded enthusiastically. “I mean, I just kind of assumed they travelled with the Floo networks, but apparating can only be done over certain distances so maybe Flooing has a limit too. I’m positive they don’t just get on planes, mostly because the magical world wouldn’t be able to use muggle technology.”
It took a moment for him to realize that they had pulled into a parking lot, and he turned to Hotch in confusion as the agent undid his seatbelt and climbed out of the van. Harry quickly hurried out after him. “Wait, you’re coming with me?” he asked in confusion.

“I’m going to have a talk with your aunt and uncle.”

“…You don’t have to,” Harry cautiously said.

“I’m glad you’re not at home most of the year anymore,” Hotch told him, “but they’re not going to treat you like that when you are at home.”

Harry smiled.

They found the Dursleys far too quickly, standing impatiently at the food court that had been decided on for a meeting place. They all looked straight at Hotch, ignoring Harry for the moment. He wondered if it was because they realized Hotch was the bigger problem for them at the moment or if they just wanted to forget about Harry for as long as they could.

“Oh, what is it now?” Vernon demanded as Hotch came to a stop in front of him. Petunia crossed her arms at his side, lips pursed as she examined Hotch. “Come to-?”

“Once a week, you’re going to let him call me. You will not coerce him into saying anything that isn’t true, and you won’t try to stop him making the call. I know he has my number, and I won’t accept any excuses from you.”

“Or what?”

“Or I show up at your house for a weekly conversation. Take your pick.”

Harry had to smother a grin at the flabbergasted expression on Vernon’s face. “You can’t just-“

“I can, and I will. Do you, for some reason, think I won’t?”

Vernon scowled. “Do your bloody call, then,” he muttered, turning to stomp away. Petunia and Dudley hurried after him, the former throwing a few glares over her shoulder at Hotch.

“Wow,” Harry said when they were out of hearing range. “I think they hate you more than me, and I didn’t think that was possible.”

Hotch shrugged. “Sorry I didn’t mention the call to you sooner. To be honest, I just thought of it as we were walking up, and I wanted a way to make sure you were safe.”

“It’s fine,” Harry responded, laughing slightly. It was easier to do when someone had just confessed to caring about his well-being. It wasn’t often that something like that happened. “Thank you, really. For everything. You didn’t have to, and it means a lot.”

“Be sure to call. I want to know you’re doing all right,” Hotch said seriously, and Harry nodded. “You’ll be fine, so long as you use your head. You’re a good kid – don’t let anyone tell you differently.”

It was the first compliment he’d ever received from someone who wasn’t a teacher or friend. It felt like his grin might split his face in two.

“Call,” Hotch insisted.

“I will,” Harry said.
Hotch reluctantly nodded in the direction the Dursleys had gone. “You’re going to have to hurry if you want to catch up to them.”

“Wouldn’t it be a shame if I didn’t,” Harry dryly said, but started running through the crowd to find them. If he missed the flight, the Dursleys were sure to make the rest of break unbearable, and he wanted to keep the good start he’d had so far. In spite of the whole ruckus with the Woodsmarked Killer, he couldn’t say he really regretted his time in America.

He spared a glance behind him and distantly saw Hotch still standing where he had left him. The agent was scanning the crowd of moving people, having lost sight of Harry. With no one watching him, he had a distinctly morose expression. Harry couldn’t help but wonder how the man was with his own kid, and realized with discomfort that he felt envious of Jack. It wasn’t Jack’s fault he had a fantastic father and Harry's had abandoned him.

Still, he couldn’t help but remember the nurse apologizing when he told her they weren’t related, even as she kept looking over his features and futilely searching for some sign that proved they couldn’t have been father and son. What he wouldn’t give to have been able to say that the agent who had brought him in was his father.

He shoved his hand in his pocket and made sure the card was still there. Then he turned, firmly putting his back to the agent, and went in search of the Dursleys.

He found them at the gate stamped onto his ticket, and they stared at him with dark expressions as he sat down on the row of seats across from them. They still had another hour, but the weather outside was beginning to turn cloudy and the airport staff was keeping a close eye on the darkening sky. “Finally joining us, are you?” Vernon demanded, sounding rather like Harry had held off on doing so indefinitely.

Harry didn’t reply, focusing instead on the carpet pattern.

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Hotch was met with crestfallen looks when he returned to the BAU. After a moment, Elle and Reid went back to work, albeit slower than before. Morgan, on the other hand, waited until he was about to walk past and asked, “He didn’t take the offer?”

Hotch paused. “How did you know I asked?”

Morgan glanced over at Elle, who looked up and admitted, “One of us was going to talk to him if you hadn’t.”

“He’s protected by blood wards at the Dursleys,” Hotch said. The news did not cause anyone to relax. “But I told him he can change his mind.”

As he walked away, he heard Morgan mutter, “Kid saves the life of at least one of us, and his family treats him like that. If that’s not injustice, I don’t know what is.”

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One of the attendants at the desk came on over the speakers a few minutes after it started downpouring and announced that they were going to be delayed for twenty minutes. Not long after, the twenty minutes turned to a full hour. Dudley started whining and Vernon went to go complain at the desk. When he came back, he muttered something about lightning on the runway and a line of planes waiting to go.
Harry was counting tiles on the ceiling, keeping his mind off the number in his pocket. He knew if he lingered on it for too long, he was going to make the call. And then Hotch was going to have to drive back in the rain, and then they were going to have to pass Harry through all the legal loops to register him under his real father’s name once they found out who he really was. There wasn’t even the certainty that his father actually wanted him back, and he didn’t want to get yelled at in front of Hotch again. It had been embarrassing enough when the BAU were all strangers, but now that he actually knew them a bit more, it was awkward for them to hear what the people who knew him well thought of him.

He felt the ghost of a smile cross his face when he remembered Hotch chewing out Vernon each time his uncle had said something, and he glanced up discretely to look at the man. Vernon was muttering crossly to Petunia, who looked like she had swallowed lemons. He quickly turned his gaze away before they saw him watching them, and then frowned at his own actions. Maybe he was more uncomfortable with them than he had thought. Surely it wasn’t common for kids to expect a reprimand for watching their guardians for a moment.

There wasn’t really any point in them helping him, after all, not if his father didn’t want him. And he had a feeling that he wouldn’t have. It had been over twelve years, and there wasn’t a reason why his father would suddenly change his mind about someone he hadn’t even known. With that thought in mind, Harry got up, ignoring the suspicious glances from the Dursleys, and began walking down the terminal.

If his father didn’t want him, Harry realized, then maybe he would go live with someone else. An American father might mean that the American laws did apply to him, and in that case, Hotch might be able to do something for him. As he pointed out, he knew the law.

His hand was resting on one of the phones along the wall when he finally understood where he was standing. After a long moment, he let his hand slide off.

Hotch probably had better things to do than deal with some kid who kept getting into trouble.

Before he did something stupid like actually picking up the phone, he turned abruptly and hurried into the nearest bathroom.

At this time of night, it was almost entirely empty. He meant to splash water on his face, but as he made to bend over the sink, he caught sight of the bandage on the side of his neck from the stinging hex. Curiosity struck and he reached up to gently pull the bandage away to look at the damage the welt had done. It ran almost the entire width of his neck, just above the point where it met his shoulder, and had raised a rather significant portion of skin. As he exposed it to fresh air, it began to itch, but instead of reapplying the bandage he rested it on the sink.

His gaze drifted down to his mirror self’s left wrist, which had been bound and wrapped to prevent him from injuring it further. He could still feel twinges of pain whenever he moved it, and the swelling sometimes rubbed against the wrap. After removing the bandages over his right wrist, he could see an angry red where the skin had been rubbed off by the rope, and there were a few scratches where he had worn it down far enough that it had begun bleeding. He knew that underneath the wrap on his left he would find a similar marking.

He looked back up into the mirror and noticed the weariness he so keenly felt was evident in eyes and posture. Behind his glasses, the shadows under his eyes were slightly darkened, and there was little of the bright spark that came with youth. His pallor was lighter than normal, and while he had always been on the leaner side, he was beginning to look gaunt. There was a bruise on his right cheekbone, and he couldn’t even remember where he had gotten it from.
The door swung open, and a man walked in a few seconds later. He jolted backwards when he caught sight of Harry, who immediately made himself appear busy washing his hands. A flush spread over his cheeks at being caught looking in the mirror. When he grabbed a few paper towels, he caught sight of the man again, who hadn’t moved from his position. This time, the man was the one to start at being caught staring.

“Sorry,” he apologized, then gestured towards Harry’s face, “but I was wondering, uh… how you got that.”

Harry’s mind went blank for a moment at the unexpectedness of the question. “I- What? Oh, just… fell.”

The man’s eyes flickered down to his wrist. “Really?”

“Er, yeah.”

He frowned. “Here, show me your hands. I had first aid when I was in the military, and that bandage doesn’t look quite right.”

Harry extended both wrists cautiously, wincing when the man’s eyes narrowed as he gently took them. “I think I jostled the bandages out of place,” he admitted. “They were done correctly before.”

“Keep your right where it is,” the man said, and Harry let his left fall to his side as the man grabbed the bandages off the sink and began wrapping up his wrist again. With a nod at Harry’s neck, he asked, “That from ‘falling’ too?”

Harry sighed. “Sorry, I can’t… I can’t talk about what happened.” With a small smile, he added, “But you’re the third person today to get worried.”

“Probably because it kind of looks like the asshole out there who you’re sitting with beat you up,” the man flatly told him and Harry’s eyes widened. With a glance up at Harry, he snorted and added, “Don’t look so surprised. He’s clearly got anger issues and you don’t exactly look like an MMA fighter. Other wrist.”

Harry switched wrists and flinched as he touched the left. At the man’s inquiring glance, he said, “Sprained.”

“Do you have pain medication for this?” he asked as he secured the wrapping a bit tighter.

Harry debated on telling the man or not before deciding that the man clearly didn’t seem like the type to let things go. “No,” he admitted. “They gave me a prescription at the hospital but we didn’t fill it.”

“You went to the hospital?” was the doubtful reply.

“Procedure, I think. An FBI agent took me.”

The veteran looked at his wrists with a new gaze. “Ah,” he said. “When you get off your flight, you should get some meds. You won’t do this wrist a whole lot of damage if it stays bandaged up, and it’s pointless to just be in pain all the time. Besides, it should help with inflammation.” Harry nodded. “What’s your name?”

“Harry,” he said without thinking. After a moment of consideration, he supposed it wouldn’t do any harm when this conversation would stay in the bathroom.
“Julian. Who are you travelling with?”

“My aunt, uncle, and cousin,” Harry replied, entirely resigned to the treatment. He made a mental commitment to stop looking like such a pitiful creature that everyone around him kept asking if he had been abused.

“Whoo, good. I was worried for a moment that you lived with those assholes.” When Harry didn’t respond, Julian glanced up at him in exasperation. “Oh, you’ve got to be kidding me. You do?” He nodded. “Great. Do you have anywhere else to go?”

“Not really…”

“Well, you should find somewhere.” He tugged on the bandage one last time to make sure it was secure before letting Harry’s hand go. “Whatever happened, you’ve clearly had a rough time and I’m sorry if this bursts your naïve bubble but your relatives don’t give a shit. And I’m willing to place a bet that they’ve hit you, because your uncle seems like that kind of dick. How much longer do you have to stay with them, until you’re of age?”

“Five years.”

“You really want to be stuck in a house with them that long?”

Harry opened and closed his mouth before looking away.

“So I’m going to ask again. Do you have somewhere to go?”

Despite his earlier resolution, he found his hand drifting into his pocket to finger the card there. “Yeah,” he said slowly. Then, with more vigor, “Yeah, I think I do. I- Thank you. Thank you.”

He ran out the door, energy flowing through him and making his blood pump faster. Behind him, he heard the door open again and knew the man had stepped out to see where he had gone in such a rush, but Harry just skidded to a halt beside the Dursleys, who all looked up at him like he was insane.

“Here,” Harry said, dropping his ticket in Vernon’s lap. “In case they tell you that you’ve got too much luggage for three people, ’cause who knows what you bought yourselves while we were here.”

“What the bloody hell are you-“ Vernon started.

“Oh, and for what little you did, I suppose I should say thanks,” Harry said, then turned and started jogging away.

“Where are you going?!“ Vernon shouted after him.

“Away from you!” Harry called back, and was pleasantly surprised to hear a round of laughter from the nearby clusters of people. The Dursleys’ antics had made more than a few enemies that night. To his right, he could hear Julian’s laugh distinctly. He shot a grin in the veteran’s direction, then took off running towards the terminal exit.

Blood wards. Pft.

He had the FBI.
The next morning, almost as soon as Hotch sat down at his desk, his phone rang. That wasn’t altogether surprising, considering how many calls he usually got in a day, but getting one at seven was somewhat unusual unless it was a case. Since they were already in the middle of one, however cold all the leads had gone, he hoped it was someone with news.

“Ah, Agent Hotchner?”

“Harry!” Hotch checked the time. The teenager should have been three quarters of the way across the Atlantic by now. “Did your flight get cancelled because of the rain?”

A short laugh came through from the other end. “No, I, uh…” Another small laugh. “I didn’t get on it.”

“What?”

“You were right, and someone else was right, and… I don’t want to be stuck with the Dursleys for five more years. I think twelve was long enough.”

Hotch smiled. “I’m coming to get you. I won’t be long.”

Elle was walking out of the elevator as he walked in. “A lead?” she asked hopefully.

“A pick-up from the airport,” he responded, and her eyes widened in understanding as the doors closed.

---

Hotch realized belatedly that he and Harry hadn’t agreed on a location to meet at, but upon arriving at the airport quickly saw that his concern wasn’t necessary. Despite the still down-pouring rain, Harry was sitting outside on one of the benches, jacket wrapped tightly around himself and arms bundled in the fabric. The wind had made his cheeks red and his nose was a bit runny, and he had tightly pressed himself back against the bench.

He was talking to one of the airport’s security officers as Hotch approached, and he managed to catch the tail end of it.

“-better be here soon,” the officer was snapping.

“I know, sorry,” Harry apologized.

“When is he getting here?”

“I don’t know. Soon. I don’t have a phone to call him with and I spent the last of my change calling him the first time.”

“We can’t have people sitting here making trouble and getting into fights.” The officer’s eyes were raking over Harry’s bandages and injuries. “If he’s not here in the next five minutes, I’m calling the cops.”

Hotch held up his badge right next to the officer’s face and the man pulled back sharply. “We have a quick response time,” Hotch deadpanned when the officer gaped at him. “We appear ‘soon’.”

The officer all but bolted away and Harry grinned up at Hotch as he took a seat next to him. “You don’t look well,” Hotch said. “How long have you been out here?”

“A while,” Harry said.
“Your flight should have left hours before you called me.”

“Figured you would be asleep. I caught a nap in the airport, but then some of the staff in there kept
asking me if I was okay, so I moved out close to the entrance, and then someone else kept asking me
if I’d gotten into a fight, so I came out here.” He scowled. “In the last day, I’ve had nine people ask
me if I’ve been abused or strongly imply if I have been, and three others asked if I got into a fight.”
He turned to Hotch. “Do I really look that bad?”

“Do you want the honest answer?”

Harry groaned. Despite the vicious wind, he made no effort to get up and move towards the van.
And Hotch swore that he tensed up further as soon as he sat down.

After a few moments of quiet, Hotch asked, “What’s eating at you?”

“Is that also so obvious?”

“No,” Hotch said. “I’m just a profiler. So what is it?”

“You really want to do this?” Harry asked, looking up at him in a mixture of resignation and
desperation. “If I leave the Dursleys completely, I don’t have anywhere else to go.”

A justified concern, with Harry’s situation, even if it was a bit late when they had already left on the
plane. He didn’t want to think about what the Dursleys would do to Harry if he called them now and
they had to buy another plane ticket to get him back to England. “I’ve got space, so you can stay
with me until we get this sorted out,” Hotch said.

Harry frowned automatically. “Won’t I be in your way?”

Hotch didn’t say anything for a long moment, and he felt Harry shift slightly next to him. Finally,
with carefully chosen words, he said, “The house is a bit quieter than it used to be. You’d be a
welcome addition.”

“Are you sure? Really, I don’t want to impose-“

“Harry, if anything I’d ask if you could stay longer. You’re only here for a couple months until you
need to go back to school, right?” Harry nodded. “So you aren’t staying long enough to impose even
if you wanted to.” He stood up, and Harry got to his feet beside him. “If that’s decided, let’s head
back. You look like you’re half drenched.”

Harry let out a small laugh as he followed him to the van. “I would agree with that.”

---

They ended up going back to Quantico, for a variety of reasons. They were still waiting for a
response back from numerous inquiries in magical departments, and Travis told them they could
expect a long wait. The BAU was working on other cases in the lull, since Harry was no longer in
immediate danger but other people, who they could protect, were.

Hotch needed to be there in case something came up about the Woodsmarked Killer case, even
though it was unlikely, but he didn’t need to actually be clocked in for work. He sent Harry to his
office and then finished everything he had been in the middle of so he could focus on the legal
situation they were about to become wrapped up in. It somehow ended up involving him trying to do
the responsible thing and track down his paperwork after the rest of the team realized he was getting
Harry out of the Dursley home and stole his paperwork so he could get to it sooner.
An hour later, Hotch gave up on the paperwork search at Gideon’s insistence and returned to his office. Harry blinked his way out of a light doze when he heard the door shut, and Hotch gave him a somewhat sheepish shrug. “It would take another hour to get it all back, and it’s just not worth it at this point.”

“Did you find any of it?”

Hotch held up a single file. “From Reid, and only because he had been in the middle of working on it. Who knows what happened to the rest of it?” He turned the guest chair around to face the couch and took a seat. “I know this probably isn’t what you want to do right now, but it’s going to help in the long run if we can get some of it worked out as soon as possible. We need to talk about what we need to do legally, because some of this can take a long time to sort out.”

“How long?” Harry asked hesitantly.

Hotch sighed. “Sometimes, years.” Harry went pale. “I’m hoping that’s not going to be the case here if we can get enough solid proof quickly. The good thing is that I’d say you have some pretty solid witnesses here to back up your story,” he said with a nod of his head in the direction of the bullpen.

“So, what do I need to do?”

“This might be hard, but I’m going to need you to tell me everything they did to you,” Hotch said. “Go into more detail than you think is necessary. There might be things we can get them for that you wouldn’t have even considered.”

Harry nodded, eyes on the floor. He leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees without looking up. “What kinds of things?” he asked.

“Abuse comes in a lot of different forms. The four most commonly recognized types are physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect.” He gestured with one hand as he spoke, causing Harry to look up at him to see what he was doing. Hotch needed the eye contact for this. “Physical abuse is pretty self-explanatory, but is generally defined as intended harm in which the punishment is too extreme for the crime, if there was a crime at all.” As he explained each, he kept a careful eye on him, watching how he processed the description. Harry hardly reacted to the definition of physical abuse, and what little signal he did give that he had heard was the adoption of an accepting, resigned expression.

“Emotional abuse includes a much wider range. It can occur when the abuser intimidates, isolates, or threatens the victim, but also when they minimize or deny a problem. Holding status, such as money or privilege, over the victim also counts.” Harry’s eyes widened in small increments throughout the explanation. Hotch wasn’t surprised. Many kids, like Harry, in these situations who recognized they were on the painful end of a physically abusive relationship wouldn’t be able to notice they were in an emotionally abusive one as well. It wasn’t emphasized as strongly in the media and the definition tended to be vague since it encompassed so much. “Constant degradation, like insults or embarrassment, also qualify.” Eyes flicker to the side, away from Hotch. Fury rose in the BAU agent. Even in a different country, they still hurt him by their lingering remarks.

“Sexual abuse in minors is one of the simplest to describe. Because a minor is under eighteen, they’re not capable of giving consent to someone over eighteen. Any sexual activity with them is illegal.”
No reaction, thank God. He hadn’t been certain how he would have dealt with that if it had become necessary. In all honesty, he probably would have been forced to ask for Morgan’s help.

“Neglect occurs when the minor is not properly cared for. It includes the basic necessities – food, water, shelter – but it also includes emotional care, which provides some overlap in those two abuses. The guardian has to provide guidance and support, as well as love and care.” He could almost see Harry checking boxes in his head.

“Considering all of that, what first comes to mind?” Hotch concluded.

Harry let out a large sigh. “I don’t…” He dropped his head into his hands. “Sorry, it’s just that…” His head came up and his palms splayed helplessly towards Hotch. “I just never really thought of myself as a victim.”

Hotch nodded slowly. “I can understand that. How about I ask you some questions about your life with the Dursleys instead? We can sort it out that way.” Harry looked grateful for the idea and settled back against the couch. “What was the general atmosphere? How did they behave around you?”

“They just…hated me. Hated everything about me. I was a reminder of the magical world, and they didn’t want anything abnormal in their house. Whenever I was around, they tried to make it seem like I wasn’t there, by sending me out to do chores or locking me up.”

Hotch paused, but Harry hardly reacted to the last part. Had that been a metaphor? “Where would you usually go if they had company over?”

“After I started going to Hogwarts, I would stay in my room.”

“And before?”

Harry didn’t say anything, face twisted in a grimace as he regretted the words before he even spoke them. Just when Hotch was about to push, he gave in. “I stayed in a cupboard under the stairs. When my first Hogwarts letter arrived, it was addressed to the cupboard so the Dursleys panicked and moved me into Dudley’s second bedroom.”

“A cupboard? How big?”

Harry gestured with his hands. The size he was implying could hardly have fit an eleven-year-old. He discretely took in Harry’s appearance, particularly his smallness. “How much did you usually get to eat?” he finally asked.

Harry opened his mouth a few times, each time closing it before anything came out.

“Not enough?” Hotch wagered, taking pity on him instead of making him force it out.

Harry nodded. “I usually got less than Dudley, and then he’d steal some of my food,” he mumbled. "And..." Hotch nodded encouragingly. "Well, sometimes when they locked me in the cupboard, they wouldn't give me food."

"How long were you in there, normally?"

"A day or two." He hesitated. "A couple of times they'd put me in there for a week, but once I was in there long enough that I lost track of the days."

Hotch closed his eyes. This was worse than he’d thought. “After you got the room, did they ever hold it over your head? Threaten to move you back to the cupboard, maybe?”
“No, not that,” Harry said. Hotch waited. “But… One time they thought I’d done magic in the house—” He sat upright suddenly, urgent, and said, “I didn’t, I swear! It was—“ Hotch put out a calming hand, nodding in understanding and Harry slumped back with a muttered, “Sorry.” Then, “The Ministry sent me a letter about performing underage magic, but I’d never told the Dursleys that I couldn’t perform magic outside of Hogwarts until I turned seventeen. They locked me in my room and said they were going to make sure I never got to go back to Hogwarts.”

“What were you going to do?” Hotch asked curiously.

Harry shook his head. “Nothing. If I used magic to get out, they were going to take my wand away, but the door was bolted from the outside and the window had bars on it so I couldn’t get out.”

At this point, Hotch didn’t think he could legally allow Harry to return to the Dursleys without alerting the local authorities to what was going on. He remained silent about that, hoping Harry wouldn’t suddenly regret his decision not to get on the plane. “Was your room still like that when you left?”

He was startled to see Harry grin. “No. The Weasley twins took the bars off the window, so now there’s at least one route out until Vernon decides to replace them.” At Hotch’s confusion, he elaborated with, “My friend Ron got concerned when I wasn’t answering any mail, so he convinced two of his brothers to help him come visit me. They removed the bars so they could get me out.”

“You’ve got good friends.”

He nodded quickly in agreement. “I really do. I met him and Hermione at school.”

“Did you have any friends before?”

“No, Dudley drove them all off and the Dursleys told everyone I was mentally unstable. Kind of made parents wary to let their children play with me.”

"Did either of them ever lay a hand on you in a malevolent way? Hit you, or touch you in a way that made you feel uncomfortable?"

"They used to hit me often," he said, "but that stopped a few years ago. I...I think my magic might have been protecting me." He gnawed on his bottom lip for a moment before asking, “What’s going to happen to me now?”

Hotch leaned forward and Harry looked at him, concerned. “You’re going to be removed from their home. I’ll be entirely honest with you – I don’t know where you’re going to go yet. Obviously, for break or however long this takes, you can stay here, and I’m going to keep working on this while you’re at school and find a place for you to live.”

“How does this work?”

“We prove you can’t safely stay in that house anymore, and then we find a suitable home for you to go to. It might be with your parents, if we can find them.”

“You said the legal paperwork could take a while?” Harry asked nervously.

“Yes,” Hotch said, “which is why we need to start it as soon as possible.”

They spent the next few hours talking about Harry’s home life, which was steadily painted as more miserable the longer the conversation went on. A plan started hatching in Hotch’s head, one he knew he was going to regret just as he knew he was probably going to go through with it. At noon, he
decided they should probably break for lunch and check in on the rest of the team. Elle ended up taking Harry for food, which gave Hotch the opportunity he was looking for to do some quick research.

By the time Harry and Elle returned, he had already started pulling up the necessary paperwork and printing it off. Elle frowned when she saw him filling out forms, but he ignored her and gestured for Harry to come further in. “You’ve got your own stack,” he said when Harry looked at his in sympathy. It was mostly to keep Harry distracted enough that he wouldn’t see what Hotch was working on. “Some of this I can get sent over to the British authorities tonight to get the process started, provided we finish it tonight.”

Harry rushed forward to take the papers Hotch had gestured at. Elle turned to Hotch and asked, “Do you guys need any help?”

Yes. But there were other people who needed Elle’s profiling skills more than Hotch needed her paperwork assistance. “No, go back to work. We’ll be fine.” She left, door closing softly behind her.

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Harry felt like he was buzzing with excitement as he filled out the forms, which was not something he would have ever considered possible before now. Yet there he was, eagerly going through the paperwork for his own freedom from the Dursleys. Sometimes Hotch would ask him a question and both would stop what they were doing to talk for a little while, and sometimes they kept mindlessly chatting over their work. The questions usually focused around Harry’s life with the Dursleys, considering their task, but sometimes it dived off into the magical world and all its peculiarities.

It was effortless to hold a conversation with Hotch, and felt infinitely relaxing. He found himself talking about things he had never brought up to anyone before, and to a degree hadn’t admitted to himself. When he felt embarrassed, Hotch moved on rather than dwelling on the topic, and he asked important questions without making Harry feel like he was being pitied.

He had a feeling that the paperwork he was filling out wasn’t actually anything important, but he didn’t bring it up. Most of it was just him filling out the Dursleys’ address and contact information, as well as any other minute details that might have been important. He had to leave several large portions blank when it came to education, since he was unsure as to how he needed to fill that out when his last few years had been at Hogwarts.

He paused before turning to the next page and asked, “What’s the law side of it?”

“Well… The problem is that this wasn’t discovered in Britain. For instance, under the Children Act of 1989, a minor in an abusive household can be removed immediately if they’re endangered by staying in the home any longer and inquiries into the situation are being blocked.”

“That’s basically what you did, right?”

“Yes, but the problem is that I’m not an ‘authorized person’ because I don’t work with the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.”

“Do you think they have an abbreviation for that?” Harry asked.

Hotch smiled slightly. “I hope so or they’re going to get really tired of saying it very quickly.”

“What happens since you’re not authorized?”
“We need to get in contact with someone who is and ask for help, which is what that’s for,” he said, pointing at a file on the bottom of his stack that he had already filled out.

A thought occurred to Harry and he winced even as he thought it. “Wait, won’t you get in trouble for this, since I’m technically running away?”

“And the laws accompanying that, yes. It looks like that shouldn’t be a problem, though, if we can maneuver this correctly. There’s a statement – again in the Children Act of 1989 – that an emergency protection order can be issued to force someone to reveal an endangered child’s whereabouts. If I’m asked to disclose information under this, anything I say in accordance can’t be used against me in court for any other offence, except perjury.”

“So if you ever just really wanted to graffiti the White House, now’s the time.” Hotch smiled at him, and Harry beamed back. “You seem to really like the law part of this.”

“I do,” Hotch admitted. “I worked it for years before I came to the FBI.”

“Why did you become an agent?”

Chapter End Notes

I still have a second note on here. Does anyone know how to fix that?
"A lesson without pain is meaningless, for you cannot gain something without sacrificing something else in return." - Hiromu Arakawa, *Fullmetal Alchemist*

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It took a while to get the rest of the paperwork done when they kept stopping to talk, but Hotch got the process started with what they managed to send out by the end of the day. Before Harry had time to realize it and panic, the official end of Harry's stay with the Dursleys had been set in motion beyond his ability to stop it. Instead of dwelling over all the ways he could get in trouble if someone from the magical world realized what he had done, he forced himself to pay more attention to his environment in America.

There was no advancement in the case, no matter how hard they pushed it and despite the new knowledge they had from Travis about the nature of the killings. To make it worse, they were further stalled with the paperwork transfer from magical departments. Travis had informed them that this was the first time a nonmagical group had been fully brought into a magical case like this, and it was causing some serious problems with sending information over.

Said agent appeared in Hotch's office, the normal way through the door. Thankfully, she had stopped apparating straight in after the first two days. Hotch nodded for her to take a seat, and she sank into the spot opposite him eagerly.

"So, ah, I realized a bit belatedly..." she began. "You don't really know a whole lot about Harry, do you? I mean, his status in the magical world."

"Status?"

So she explained, and he slowly leaned back in his chair, aghast. "He's twelve. He's twelve and they put him through that kind of thing?"

"It's common in the magical society, unfortunately. We have so few idols that we tend to make them up when we need some more. My point is that you're going to want to keep him off the record as much as possible, which is going to be a major problem considering your current situation."

He frowned. "What do you mean? And shouldn't you be telling this to whatever family he's going to stay with?"

She stared at him for a long moment. "Hotch, just how many families do you think you're going to find who are going to be willing to take in a magical boy who's not related to them and has a serial killer after him? Not to mention any of the dark wizards eager to kill him because of Voldemort? Anyone who would take him in won't do it to be a good Samaritan."

He tilted his head, eyes narrowing slightly. "You're not saying..."

She nodded reluctantly. "I thought you knew that when you offered to take him in."

"I can't just adopt a boy I met a couple of days ago! We barely know each other, and he seems like a good kid, but I have a hard enough time taking care of one!"
"He doesn't have anywhere else to go! I'm sorry, but I really thought you'd understood this before! Besides, what are you going to do? Turn him out?"

He sat there awkwardly for a moment, and Travis waited for him to collect his thoughts. "It wouldn't be fair to him. He needs a family, not... Not whatever I'm offering. Someone's got to be there for him consistently, and I can't do that. And if everything fell apart, it'd be just as bad as foster homes, and he'd get bounced around. He's got to have stability." Travis sighed without opening her mouth, disappointed. "It sounds like a great idea on paper, but there's too much that could go wrong in practice."

"Right," Travis said, slowly getting to her feet. "Well... I'll stop in when I've got more news for you."

He nodded, and she vanished. But she didn't take her comments with him, and no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't get Harry's situation out of his head. And so, during his lunch break, he pulled out the prosecution paperwork again.

---

Hotch came home to find it completely empty. It was late afternoon, but almost all of the lights were off, even though Jack should have been back from school by now. Harry had stayed home this time, since there was no reason for him to come with Hotch to work anymore. The two boys hadn't met yet, and he'd hoped to be there to introduce them but he hadn't been able to get back from Quantico quickly enough.

"Jack?" he called. "Harry?"

Nothing. He set his briefcase down, the first stirrings of panic beginning to rise. Just as his hand started to move to his holster, he heard a sound he hadn't heard since Haley had died.

Jack's shriek.

He started forward, but aborted the motion immediately as it was followed by a burst of laughter.

After a couple of seconds, it started up again, followed by Harry's exuberant shouting. Hotch slowly started towards the backyard, listening as the pair's excitement grew. The back door was slightly open, as if it had been closed almost as an afterthought, and the noise filtered in through the gap. He pushed the door open a bit more so he could see out, and his eyebrows went up at the sight.

Harry and Jack were both running around the yard, moving in all directions, backwards and to the side when needed, and always keeping their eyes on the sky. Above them, circling, was a snowy owl with flecked wings, hooting at them cheerfully. As he watched, it dived on Jack, who only flinched away slightly as it landed partially on his shoulder and back, wings flapping around him. Jack giggled, turning his head to look at the owl, who ruffled his hair with its feathers and nuzzled its head against his before taking off again, aimed at Harry. Instead of landing, it curved in a tight turn around him, then shot up into the air again to circle.

A moment later, it was darting back down, swooping around Jack and then Harry again before flying so low over Harry's head that he had to duck his head to the side to avoid being hit. Harry grinned, and Hotch found himself moving out onto the back porch to get a better look. Neither boy noticed him, too engrossed in the antics of the owl. Before any of them were ready for it, the owl moved higher into the air and dove farther, arcing away from the pair and aimed instead at Hotch, slowing down with a couple of wing beats to land on his shoulder.
Hotch watched it, startled, and it just tilted its head at him curiously as its wings shuffled. A small chirp escaped it, and then it fell forward, spread its wings, and took off again. Hotch followed it with his eyes as it moved back to the boys, who were now both looking at him in surprise. Jack darted forward, running to hug his legs, and looked up with a grin before Hotch could even hug him back.

"Dad! Harry's got an owl!"

"Oh?" he asked, glancing up at the owl. It had come to rest on Harry, who was rather nervously petting it. He smiled slightly in reassurance and the boy relaxed slightly.

"Her name's Hedwig! She's a snowy owl!" Quietly, conspiratorially, Jack whispered, "I think she's magical."

Hotch wasn't quite sure how to respond to that, so he just glanced back to Harry. Hedwig nipped gently at his ear and buffed his head with her wing, and he jerked to the side with a light scowl, then reluctantly moved closer to the Hotchners. He took as much time as he could without being obvious about it.

When he was closer, he said, "Travis stopped by in the morning. She somehow got everything from the Dursleys, and she brought Hedwig with her. Sorry, but I didn't know how to get a hold of you..."

Hotch waved it aside. "It's fine." Harry wasn't completely appeased. With a small head gesture to Jack, he asked, "So, is she magical?" Jack smiled sheepishly, expecting to get a joke about his comment, but Harry just nodded quickly.

"She can locate anyone on the planet, and if they're close enough, she can deliver mail to them. That's what we usually use owls for," Harry explained, and Jack's eyes widened in surprise.

"That's so cool!" the youngest of them blurted. "Can she understand what I'm saying?" Hedwig hooted and Hotch thought his son might just keel over in delight. After a moment, she flew towards him, landing briefly on his shoulder before taking flight again, and Jack chased after her.

Beside him, Harry was the very opposite. His shoulders were hunched, curling in to protect himself unconsciously. Hotch raised a hand to gesture at the owl and Harry flinched automatically, clearly expecting a blow, but instead of turning away from it he glanced up at Hotch. He paused, hand still in the air. You're going to have to look at me if you're going to hit me, his posture screamed. Look me in the eyes and do it.

Even as half of him went cold at the idea of Harry staring down his past abusive guardians like that, the rest of him instantly warmed to the courage the simple act took.

"If she's a problem," Harry started quickly and quietly, but Hotch shook his head, lowering his hand.

"She's not. How does she usually get food?"

"She hunts for herself."

Hotch nodded, filing that away. "Isn't she tired?"

"I think magical owls sleep differently than regular owls, but either way it's later in England. She's probably still on British time."

An hour or so later, when it became obvious Hedwig was definitely starting to tire, Hotch herded the
group back inside. Harry took Hedwig up to his room, presumably so she could sleep, and then returned while Hotch got dinner prepared. He seemed a bit unsure about what he was supposed to be doing, so Hotch sent him off under the guise of keeping an eye on Jack. Until dinner was ready, he could hear the muffled snickering and laughing of the two boys from the other room.

---

Harry went to work with Hotch the next morning, largely because of the complications that had arisen from dealing with the paperwork of two different societies. Hotch did not admit to himself that he also didn't want to leave Harry home alone, not because he didn't trust the boy but because he thought the wizard would probably enjoy company.

"Any luck?" Hotch asked as they neared the bullpen.

Elle grimaced. "Nothing. Their information transfer is still lagging - driving Garcia up a wall, let me tell you - so what little we have been able to look into has already gone cold."

Hotch nodded and led Harry up to his office, where Travis was already waiting for them. She'd already put a file on his desk, which he recognized from the stamp of the magical government, but he didn't comment on it while Harry was listening. It must have been about his status in the country and they were trying to keep quiet about that around him so he didn't worry about it.

"I've gotten permission for something that might work for Harry, but it's going to be weird," she said.

"In what way?"

"We're going to break a lot of laws. But my department head's cool with it, actually suggested a couple of them, so we're fine." At Hotch's and Harry's expressions, she added, "Going through this legally would almost certainly result in Harry being illegally taken back to the Dursleys. Magical tradition favors blood with blood, no matter how bad the situation is. The British Ministry would just take him back. And with my head backing us, we won't get prosecuted for it, especially since it regards safety."

Hotch frowned, but decided not to argue. "What do we need to do?"

"Well, if he has any remaining blood relatives, he really should go stay with them."

"I don't, though," Harry said quickly.

"Actually," Hotch said, "we think you might. The Woodsmarked Killer goes after family members of magical people in the American government. You must be closely related to someone, even if you don't know it." Harry went curiously quiet. "However... That doesn't explain why you were in England."

"I think I've got an explanation for that," Travis piped up. "It's a shi- a bad explanation, but it's common enough that it's highly probable, especially since you said that the Woodsmarked Killer found you because of a list. It took me a while to work it out, because you're on a crap ton of lists, but I finally realized that the list must have been one relating to your parentage so I started looking back farther than I had before and I think I found what he was talking about. It looks like you were taken under what's called the Blood Relocation Program, which is the nice way of saying the black market child slavery."

Harry started, then quickly shook his head. "I've never heard of it."
"You wouldn't have. It's an underground movement and people don't like to admit that it exists. The program was established centuries ago and has gone under a lot of different names, and it's been used for a large variety of reasons. Pureblood families who were sticklers for having only magical blood in their lines would sometimes kill their child if it was a squib and replace it with a stolen muggleborn magical child so no one would know they'd had a nonmagical offspring. It was illegal, of course, but the practice endured for a long time. That was the main reason for the program. Sometimes, however, they just used it like an adoption agency, since they didn’t see muggles as being entirely equal and therefore not worthy of discussing whether or not they would mind having their child stolen from them. Parents might use it if they didn’t want to go through the pregnancy period and risk a squib, or if for some reason they couldn’t have children.”

“Like the Potters,” Harry said.

“That’s what I thought! But I did some more digging and I don’t think that’s why they did it. See, the program has multiple options. There’s a fast track method, which is loads more expensive because it requires more intensive and immediate searching for an adequate child, and there’s the slower route, which is a lot more affordable because there’s less pressure. They didn’t use the faster way, which means they weren’t too concerned about finding a child immediately. During war, that would be unthinkable. After all, any delay could reveal that they were looking for a child. Which also begs the question of why they would pick up a child in the middle of a dark lord’s reign.”

Talk about culture shock. Hotch was way out of his comfort zone with all the new information that was coming at them, especially when new bits came up that they hadn't even thought to ask about. They were far too reliant on Travis for his liking, but until they learned more, there just wasn't anything to be done about it. "Can we use that to find out who his real parents would be?" he asked.

She shook her head, wincing. "No, unfortunately not. They keep bad records on purpose in case any government suddenly cracks down on them. It gives their clients almost complete secrecy." With a small, regretful smile, she continued, "And before you ask, there isn't a way to use magic to find out who his real parents are."

"We might not need magic," Hotch slowly said. "Depending on what branch or position his government-employed parent works at, they might have their DNA in the federal database. It wouldn't completely match with Harry's, but it could narrow down options, and from there we could cross-reference with whoever had a child kidnapped."

"Or killed," Travis said. "Sometimes they'd pull that ruse over the parents so they wouldn't go looking for their child. Recently, it's become more likely that a kidnapped child will be sought after if the magical government gets wind that they'd been taken."

And made the situation even worse for the parents. One option at least gave them some hope they'd be able to see their child again. The operators of the program were right, though - if something like that had happened to Haley's and his first son, they definitely would have gone after him for however long it took. There was no reason for them to search when they were told he was dead.

He glanced to the side, hoping to see Harry's excitement. Instead, he saw that the boy had gone almost completely white, and he frowned.

Oblivious, Travis continued, "That doesn't explain how the Woodsmarked Killer found the Dursleys here, though. If he had tracked them all the way back to America, he wouldn't have waited until the Dursleys had come to Quantico."

Too late, Hotch shot her a warning look. There wasn't a reason right now to tell Harry he could still
be in danger. His eyes flickered to Harry, hoping he was taking it well, and was surprised to see Harry was now nervously shuffling as well.

"Oh, that, um... I'm not quite sure how to say this, and I'm not even sure if it's true..." Hotch nodded encouragingly, vowing to himself that he was going to get Travis out of the room before something she said put Harry even more ill at ease. "When he met me at the hotel, he said that he'd gotten hold of the Dursleys at some point." Hotch felt his pulse quickening in anger, already terribly aware of where this was going. "He told them that they should either turn me over or get killed, so they told him where I'd be while they came here."

Hotch and Travis stared at him slightly, respectively stiff with cold fury and lax with stupefied horror. "They sold you out?" Travis whispered, and Hotch cursed her again internally for her lack of tact.

"That's just what he said," Harry quickly pointed out. "I don't know if it's true or not. I never asked the Dursleys."

It certainly explained why they hadn't brought Harry to Quantico, and why the Dursleys had been so nervous and absent-minded. The worst part was that there wasn't any absolute proof, and without that, they couldn't do anything legally against the Dursleys.

Travis opened her mouth to say something, but Hotch looked sharply at her, not wanting her to say anything insensitive in front of Harry. She caught his look. "So, er, I'll go find out what we need to do about that DNA sample, yeah?"

"Go talk to Morgan. He'll know what to do."

She hurried off, and Hotch turned back to Harry, who wasn't looking even slightly better. A gnawing suspicion was hunkering out in the back of his thoughts, and he reluctantly admitted that it would be better to ask and get it over with before Harry had to stew over it any longer. "Harry?" he asked, and the boy looked at him nervously. He'd get to that suspicion in a minute. "How did he tell you that?"

"Taunting me, really. It was hard to tell if it was true," he said, shuffling anxiously. "Maybe he made it up."

Hotch brought his hand up, scratching the back of his neck thoughtfully, and didn't miss the sudden turn of Harry's head, as if he were preparing to absorb a blow. It took him a moment to process the gesture Harry had just made, surprised the boy didn't try to move out of the way or even truly flinch. Like he just expected it and didn't care.

Hotch lowered his hand back down, trying to ignore the way Harry slightly shifted in response without even taking his eyes off Hotch. So trusting, yet still instinctively believing he was going to get hit. The only thing to do now was to try to uncover what Hotch suspected. "Do you know who your parents are?" Harry shook his head quickly. "But do you know something about them that could help us find them?"

Harry shifted his weight. "Sort of..." Hotch waited. "The Dursleys knew who they were, I think," he continued quietly, not appeasing Hotch's concern in the slightest. "I don't know a whole lot, just what they said."

"What was that?"

"Well... They got divorced, shortly after I was born. And..." He grimaced, looking down.
"Harry," Hotch said gently, "anything could help us. You'd be surprised what shows up in records."

There was a long silence, and Harry kept his face turned away so Hotch couldn't see it. Finally, "What if I don't..."

Hotch tilted his head in surprise, understanding beginning to dawn. "What if you don't want to go stay with them?" Harry nodded quickly. "Then we'll work it out. But Harry, the Dursleys don't seem like the kind of person who would tell you anything you wanted to hear. There's a good chance they made everything up, just to hurt you."

Another nod, more relieved. He looked up anxiously. "What if it's true, though? There's no other reason I would have ended up with the Potters."

"Well, what did they say?"

"...My... My mum was a prostitute and my dad... Um, he touched his kids."

Fuck sending Harry back immediately. That couple was getting serious background checks before either they or Harry laid eyes on each other.

"Harry," Hotch said firmly. "You don't have to go with them if you don't want to. I promise, if we find them and you're still worried, you don't even have to meet them." He waited until Harry had relaxed a bit, then added, "And if it helps, I really don't think the Dursleys were telling the truth. There's no way they could have known who your real parents were, not if the Potters somehow got you through the Blood Relocation Program, and it doesn't sound like Lily Potter and Petunia Dursley got along enough for Potter to tell them about your real parents."

"You think?"

Hotch nodded. "I do. I'm sure it'll all work out fine."

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There was no advancement in the Woodsmarked Killer case. Too much time had passed for them to have a solid lead, but at least now they were able to start gathering more useful information that could help them get a better profile. He was quickly slipping away from them, and Hotch had the sinking feeling that they wouldn't catch up to him until he struck again. For now, the Woodsmarked Killer was free, just as he had been for years already. That didn't mean Hotch's situation wasn't changing.

At home, he couldn't help but notice that the house was steadily getting cleaner and cleaner without him doing anything. He also couldn't help but notice that Jack's babysitter was rather confused as to how that was happening. His efforts to talk to Harry about it had been met with calm understanding...and then a cleaner house the next day. He wasn't sure if he should just give up or not.

The Woodsmarked Killer case was put behind them for now as the BAU moved on to other cases, ones that they could help with. If Harry was upset about his attempted murderer still on the loose, he didn't show any signs, and it honestly seemed to have slipped his mind entirely. He spent an inordinate amount of time in Hotch's library - which, considering a good portion of it was filled with rather dark or dry topics like serial killers or law, was a little peculiar - and doing homework, until Jack got out of school. The babysitter had flatly admitted to him one day after he came home that she had little to do because the boys kept such good care of each other.

"What do you mean?" Hotch had asked, puzzled.
"Well, Harry keeps a really close eye on Jack," she'd said, a little hesitantly.

"Yes, I noticed..." he said, trying to entice her to continue.

She paused. "And Jack is...a good influence on Harry." Another beat. "I mean. Not that Harry's bad or anything, but..." Hotch looked at her strangely. "Well, he wasn't quite sure how to..." She sighed in frustration, moved forward a bit so she could look around the railing of the staircase and make sure both kids were nowhere near the top, then shuffled backwards. In an undertone, she asked, "Was he in an abusive home?"

"That bad?" Hotch asked, grimacing.

She nodded slowly. "He was so worried about how much food he was allowed to eat the first few days. Jack helped get it all sorted out. I barely had to do anything."

Hedwig came and went, and none of the neighbors seemed to notice in the slightest. She probably had some sort of sleep schedule, but if it existed, Hotch had no clue what it was. At any rate, he'd never seen her sleeping. It wasn't uncommon for him to come home and find that she was playing with the boys in the yard, to Jack's delight and Harry's amusement. She managed to pull Hotch in a couple of times, remarkably.

There was something else changing, also related to Harry, but taking place at Quantico instead. Since his DNA couldn't automatically match his parent's, the search was going to be a while as they whittled away all the potential candidates through a variety of factors, including age and history. Something had stirred Garcia even more than before, though she adamantly refused anything of the sort had happened, and she had thrown herself into a flurry trying to establish with certainty who the parents were. Morgan knew what was going on but was keeping his lips sealed, but Reid told Hotch that he'd overheard the pair talking about a name on the list. It sounded like they knew someone who was a potential parent.

"So Garcia has almost found his parents?"

Reid nodded happily. "Sounds like!"

It was a good thing, he told himself. Harry deserved a nice family. He should get the life the Dursleys took away from him. So Hotch was glad that Garcia was closing in on the parents, right?

He sat Harry down a couple of days later. Harry had grown at least a half inch since he'd arrived, and he looked incredibly healthier. Instead of awkwardly sitting on the couch, he perched comfortably on the edge of the couch, easily making eye contact with Hotch. A light grin lingered on his face.

"Did the visa thing get worked out?" he asked.

"Well, it's not going to be necessary if we can find your parents, since you're an American citizen then," Hotch said, and Harry's mood dimmed slightly at the reminder of his parents. "Which is what I need to talk to you about, actually. Garcia's getting close to narrowing down the list."

The rest of Harry's contentment faded away. "Oh."

"...I thought I was delivering good news."

Harry twitched, regretful at causing any disapproval. "I suppose you are. Sort of. I'm sure it'll be fine when I get there." Hotch tilted his head at him, encouraging him to go on and trying not to show that he knew Harry was getting more anxious the longer he was under the spotlight. "I just... I like where
I'm at now."

The answer caught him off guard, and he paused for a long moment. There wasn't anything reassuring he could say to that - after all, his real parents could be halfway across the country, and there was no guarantee that Harry would ever see Hotch or Jack again. He couldn't even say Harry would be there much longer.

Rather, the more Hotch thought about it, Harry needed to get out as soon as possible. He was developing a much stronger attachment to both the Hotchners than the agent had originally realized, and it was going to hurt him much more when he had to leave. Not only that, but it was going to get harder and harder for Jack to say goodbye the longer this dragged on. Hotch was constantly reminding himself of his promise to Harry that they would check the parents out first before Harry went to go stay with them.

But what if they decided it was a bad idea? What if the Dursleys were right, and Harry couldn't live with them? What then? Was he just going to be stuck at Hotch's house in limbo for even longer, until they eventually found someone else who might want to take Harry in and was aware of his situation?

An idea that had been planted not long after Hotch had met Harry sprouted just a bit more, and Hotch awkwardly wrapped up the conversation, then went upstairs to Jack's room. His son smiled, something he did more often now, and let the book in his hands fall to rest in his lap. Hotch smiled back at him, made sure the door was closed shut behind him, then moved to sit on the edge of the bed by Jack.

"Hey, buddy," he said. "Good book?" Jack nodded, but he tilted his head at Hotch in a way that suggested he knew it wasn't the important question Hotch had come in to ask. "Listen, I've got something I need to talk to you about. It's Harry." Jack immediately sat up a bit straighter. "You know we're still looking for Harry's parents, right? Well, we're getting close to finding them, and once we do, we're going to decide if Harry wants to go live with them or not."

Jack frowned in confusion, and Hotch stopped so he could formulate his thoughts. "But... He'd leave."

"Yes. He'd go to be with his family."

Jack's face fell. "I thought we were his family?"

It might have been less painful to get stabbed. A few moments passed while he tried to come up with an answer to that. "Well, we're... Right now, we're just taking care of him for a little bit, until he can move on."

"Like Mom?"

"No, no, no, Jack. He's not leaving like that."

"But we won't see him again."

His son was, perhaps, far too perceptive for his own good. "Well, we might. It depends on the kinds of people he goes to stay with, and where they live."

Jack wiped his nose on his arm and hiccuped slightly. He wasn't quite looking at Hotch anymore, trying to hide blurry eyes. "Why can't he just stay here?" Jack whined. "He likes it here! And he could live with us, and I could have an older brother, and..."
Hotch wrapped an arm around Jack's shoulders, and his son leaned his head against him, curling up and sniffing. "Jack, there's a chance this might not go well," he said cautiously. "His real family might not be able to take them in. If that happens, he wouldn't leave here, at least, not immediately." Jack turned his head to look up at him, hopefully. "So, if his parents can't take him, would you be okay with Harry staying here permanently?"

"Forever?" Jack clarified, face lighting up. Hotch nodded. "Can he?"

"He would legally be your brother and my son," Hotch explained. "He'd be a part of the family. You'd have to share some things with him, like the bathroom, the television, me..."

"But we'd split the chores and he has Hedwig," Jack countered quickly, and Hotch didn't have a good rebuttal for that. "And he doesn't really like to watch television anyway. And he keeps doing the chores even when Diane catches him and tells him the house is already clean." Yes, that was all true too, but Hotch got the feeling that Jack was kind of missing the significance of what was being asked of him. At the same time, he wasn't exactly going to be able to understand the full impact at his age.

"If you're okay with it..."

"I don't want Harry to go," Jack said, pleading, and Hotch nodded in understanding as he rubbed Jack's arm. "I want him to stay."

"It's his decision," Hotch warned him. "It may be best for him to go stay with his parents. If that doesn't work out, I'll ask him if he wants to stay here. But Jack, you can't tell him about this, all right? I'll tell him when I know more about what's going to happen, but we can't push him to stay here if he really wants to go to his parents."

Hotch seriously doubted it would come to that, but Jack needed to be aware that this just might not work out for them. Later that night, once both boys were asleep, he went into his office and started pulling out the files he hadn't dared to look at before.

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The next morning, Harry was up early, something that hadn't faded since his time with the Dursleys and at Hogwarts. A cursory look around the house found Diane downstairs, so Hotch must have already left for work. His odd hours must really suck, Harry noted as he went back towards his room to wait for Jack to get up so they could eat breakfast together. A pang went through him at the thought of it in connection to what Hotch had told him last night. He couldn't imagine not doing meals with the Hotchners anymore.

There was still some homework for next term, but he quickly found that he couldn't focus on it so he set it aside. He tried not to do it while Diane was over anyway, since it would be awkward if she walked in on moving pictures or parchment and quill. Instead, he shifted his attention over to other problems, since he knew there were other troubles that he'd have to deal with as soon as he could. The primary one was something he'd celebrated last year - Hermione and Ron weren't getting his letters, and they were going to realize something was up.

He'd already been in America a month now, with no communication to either of them. If this went on for much longer, whether Travis liked it or not, they were going to have an issue with the British Ministry finding out from the Weasleys that Harry was not only not at the Dursley home but also not in Britain. He was definitely going to have to get a message out to at least one of them, but Hedwig couldn't make the flight. Maybe he could ask Hotch about talking to Travis about ways he could get send letters across the ocean.
In preparation, he went ahead and wrote out a quick explanation about what had happened, including an urging not to say anything to anyone until they knew for sure what was going on and where he was going to be after everything settled down. By the time he was done, Jack was starting to move in the bedroom across the hall from Harry's, so he went out into the hallway to start getting breakfast ready. As he moved past Hotch's office, though, he saw a low light filtering in from under the door.

After a moment, he gently pushed the door open, wincing at a slight creak. A lamp had been left on by the desk, and he quietly slipped in to turn it off. He'd broken into much worse places in the last two years, yet this felt worse. The office was the working place of someone who'd taken him in, not the location of a scheme by someone trying to kill him. That thought weighing heavily on him, he was just about to turn and go when the papers spread out over the desk caught his eye.

Children Act 1989 was at the top of the first page, and he remembered hearing Hotch mention it before. Harry wondered if he was still working through it because the document was so long or if he was using it for reference. Before he could stop himself, he shifted closer to read the papers more easily. There were a few that Hotch seemed to be looking at from this position, all from the same act, but they were layered in such a way to help him identify what needed to be done. None of them were forms to fill out, and it appeared that Hotch was analyzing the act from a legal perspective. One of the papers on bottom was mostly hidden, but a label at the top, partly cut off, said “-option Act of 2000.”

The topmost paper was still being annotated, and Harry quickly skimmed it. The heading read “22 General duty of local authority in relation to children looked after by them,” and the parts beneath described exactly what the heading said. Hotch had marked some sections related to local and national authorities involved, as well as the wishes of the child. The paper by its side had been heavily marked, and Harry recognized part of it as describing what allowed a child to be removed from the home. Hotch was focusing particularly on a certain part reading “(ii) the prevention of the child’s removal from any hospital, or other place, in which he was being accommodated immediately before the making of the order; and (c ) gives the applicant parental responsibility for the child.” He quickly looked up at the top of the paper. The ‘applicant’ was whoever applied to the court to get the child removed from the home.

Harry paused, leaning back for a second. If Hotch were the ‘applicant,’ that would mean…

The next page was an amendment to the Children Act, describing the acts of the local authority in the adoption of the child. There wasn’t a whole lot to it, and Harry moved to the fourth and final page that was on the desk.

His eye caught a paragraph detailing the specifications of a child being adopted and someone who was adopting. “Under the age of sixteen” and “unmarried United States citizen of at least 25 years of age” were both underlined for the respective parts. Underneath were five requirements for the adoption: Attorney General approval (left alone by Hotch’s pen), anyone with legal custody of the child signing away that custody (“tbd” written beside it), living parents being unable to provide for the child (“?”), confirmation that the adoption is to form a parent-child relationship and that the relationship with the natural parents has been severed (“?”), and that the proper paperwork was filled out for adoption and emmigration to the states (“tbd”). Below it was an addition stating that no one with parental rights to the child prior to the adoption would retain them after.

Harry stood, stock-still for a moment. Finally, he turned, walked out of the room, closed the door behind him, and went downstairs to start dinner.

His rational side was telling him not to get his hopes up, not to jump for joy. He didn’t know why
Hotch was looking at those papers. Maybe it was something to do with the legal process and not just… (Your parents didn't want you, so why would a stranger? a part of him whispered.) The other side wanted him to get Diane to call Hotch so he could demand an answer immediately, and then wildly celebrate when he got a confirmation that Hotch was trying to get someone to adopt him.

Even if someone did want Harry, he’d have to get his parents and the Dursleys to sign the paperwork. Harry didn’t doubt that Hotch could convince them to, but if he wanted to take Harry in, he’d also have to learn about everything else that had happened to Harry over the last couple of years, all the accidental magic and danger. No sane person would want to take in someone like that, and Harry didn't know if he could handle being kicked out when Hotch became reasonably concerned over what Harry's presence might mean for his home.

And yet, maybe those papers weren't what he thought they were. It could be that he was just looking at them in case Harry couldn't go to stay with his parents and they had to find someone else to take him in. After all, Hotch hadn't even briefly mentioned that Harry could stay permanently. His stay hadn't been given an expiration date, though every time the duration came up it sounded temporary. There were numerous reasons why those papers could have been on his desk and he was just blinding himself to all of them in his desperate hope to stay. Oh, he wished he hadn't seen those blasted papers!

_You made the choice, you live with the consequences_, a part of his mind whispered to him. If only he had decided to do the right thing hours ago and face up to it, _before_ Hotch had gone to all these lengths. The kinds of things those documents required weren’t going to be easily obtained and if the agent tried to sort it out he was quickly going to find a mess of custody rights in Harry’s history.

Diane came into the kitchen to help him make breakfast, sensed he really wanted to be alone, and promptly left again. Jack hurried in a little while later and tried to cajole Harry into a game with Hedwig, but Harry had to beg out of it, saying he had more homework to do. In reality, for the rest of the day he barely got anything of the sort done. Instead, he camped out in his room, drafting letter after letter to Hermione, seeking logical advice about how to handle the situation, and Ron, wondering if the Weasleys would take him in when this went sour.

Hotch came home a little later than usual, just as they were about to start dinner, though not late enough for Harry to realize he was going to need to hide his distress. Of course, the look Hotch gave him as soon as he saw him said he hadn't covered it up nearly well enough. Nothing was said while Jack and Diane were in the room, and Harry knew he wouldn't bring it up until both were either gone or asleep, so he ate dinner quickly, helped with the dishes, and then tried to slip away upstairs as hurriedly as he could.

It didn't work. Hotch went with him to get changed out of his work clothes, and he paused at the top of the stairs like he was about to say something. As if he hadn't noticed, though there was no way Hotch would buy that, he scampered towards his own room away from Hotch. When there was no sound behind him, he glanced back despite every intelligent part of him screaming to just keep going.

Hotch was staring at the office, which was slightly open. Harry's stomach sank, realizing he hadn't closed it, and before he could stop himself, he asked, "What?"

"You did." _Just shut up!_ a voice in his head hissed as he made it worse. Hotch looked at him curiously. "I turned it off." To keep himself from saying anything worse, anything that could possibly be more incriminating, he hurried into his room to the sound of an internal swearing montage and sat down heavily on his bed.
A minute or two passed, even if it felt like an eternity, and then Hotch knocked softly on his door before entering. Harry looked up glumly, immediately recognizing the cautious and regretful expression on Hotch's face. He'd figured it out.

Hotch walked over to him carefully, as if he were treading over a delicate matter instead of the carpeted floor, and sat down next to him. "By any chance," he started, "did you see the papers on the desk?"

Oh, he totally knew. "Sorry, I- I just was curious and-"

Hotch held up a hand to stop him before he got any further, mercifully cinching off the pain of the admittance of guilt. "I would rather you wouldn't have seen that," he admitted rather obviously. "I felt like I needed more time to think about it before making a sudden decision, but I was going to talk to you about it once I knew if it was possible or not, and if things fell through with your parents. I didn't want to get your hopes up, and I didn't want to bias you about what you should do. I know the idea of going to stay with people you don't know is frightening."

Harry breathed out slightly. It didn't seem like Hotch was all that angry at him. "If- If the Dursleys were right, is it possible... Well, is it possible that wouldn't show up on records? That I'd only find out after I'd gone to stay with them?"

Hotch was quiet for a long moment, and Harry turned away, expecting the reassuring lie. "Yes," Hotch finally said, surprising him. "It's possible. But Harry, if you go with them, I'll make sure it's as safe as it could be. We'll tell them the same thing we told the Dursleys, that you have to contact me at least once a week, and you can tell me if something goes wrong. I'll come get you. And even before you leave, we'll investigate them, and if anything seems off, you won't have to go with them until we figure it out."

It was the same bargain he'd gotten when he'd been about to go back to England, but it just didn't feel the same. After a month here, the idea of leaving to go stay with his parents just didn't hold the appeal it would have before. "But what happens if I can't go with them? We just keep looking for someone to adopt me?"

From Hotch's expression, that was the very question he really hadn't wanted Harry to ask. "No," he said slowly, "no, there's somewhere you can go." Harry looked at him curiously. "But I really think you should look at staying with your parents before we consider that option."

"But if I'm just going to be bounced around whenever I'm home from Hogwarts, shouldn't I just stay with my parents, no matter how bad they are? That'd be a lot simpler than-" He stopped at Hotch's stricken expression.

"Harry, if it's a bad home, you need to get out. It's no different than if you were staying with the Dursleys."

"I don't want to end up just drifting around, though!"

"No, you need a place you belong," Hotch said, resigned. Harry kept quiet while he gathered his thoughts. "Harry, I-" He breathed out a sigh. "Promise me you'll try not to let this impact what you decide about your parents. You really should try giving them a chance. As a parent, I can honestly say being separated from my child would be the worst thing that could happen to me." His eyes closed for a moment, and he said, "I have lost a child, and it was a kind of pain you can't imagine. Even if you don't know your parents at first, they'll probably be very eager to get to know you. Give them a shot."
"Okay,” Harry said slowly.

"If all of that goes badly, if it turns out your parents just aren't good people... You can stay here."

"I thought that was the plan already?"

"I mean, you could stay here however long you'd like. Harry, I'd adopt you."

Everything stopped. "Really?" Hotch nodded, and Harry sank in relief.

It was extremely relieving to know he had this as a fallback plan, though if he really thought about it, this wasn't the fallback plan. This was the place he really wanted to stay, where he had... Well, where he had a younger sibling, and a father who'd gone out of his way to keep him safe already. Why would he want to go stay with some people he'd never met before when he had this?

"Remember," Hotch started to warn him.

"Parents," Harry agreed. He did understand where Hotch was coming from when he said he needed to consider their point of view, but that didn't make it any easier. "Right."

“What are you so worried about?”

"Just...what the Dursleys said. I mean, it could be they lied, like you think, but..." He sighed. "It's just... I want to stop flinching," he finally whispered, embarrassed.

"Harry," Hotch said in a calm murmur. "I swear, when we find them, I'll personally check them out, and if I think you won't be happy there, you don't have to stay with them. You won't ever have to see them. I won't let them take you if you don't want to go."

Harry nodded, miserable. He wished Hotch had been allowed that extra time to think about the adoption so he would see how bad of an idea it was. With the Woodsmarked Killer after Harry, not to mention Voldemort if he was still around, it was becoming much more dangerous to be anywhere around him. And it seemed like ‘coincidence’ didn’t cover it when two of the three couples who had taken care of him had wanted nothing to do with him, and the third had died trying to protect him. Harry wondered which category Hotch would fall into if he went through with taking Harry in.

“Hey,” Hotch said quietly, reaching out to touch Harry’s forearm. “We’ll work it out. I promise. It's going to be all right.”

“Okay,” Harry muttered.

“Harry, stop panicking.”

He took a deep breath, steadying himself somewhat. “I don’t know if I want to know who they are,” Harry quietly said. Hotch frowned in confusion at the statement. “I mean, there’s got to be some reason no one wants me around, right?”

Hotch wrapped an arm around his shoulders and pulled him in. After a moment, Harry relaxed against him. “It just means you’ve gotten stuck with bad people,” Hotch said. “Don’t use their ignorant decisions to define yourself.”

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The first thing Hotch did the next day was go to Gideon's office, where the lights were already on as the agent filled out paperwork. Gideon waved him the rest of the way in and Hotch dropped into one
of the chairs scattered around the room. A distant part of his brain briefly wondered why he didn’t have more comfortable chairs like this in his office, but he quickly hushed it.

"This is about Harry," Gideon said.

"Yes, I-" He paused, then looked at Gideon curiously.

"What else would you be worried about?" Gideon explained.

"Right... He was still panicking about going to stay with his parents, so I realized we needed an alternative. The more I talked to Travis about it, the more she said that it would be almost impossible to find someone to take him in without ulterior motives. So... I think the best option is that I adopt him."

"Does he know?"

"He found out. I was going to wait until later, when I'd had more time to think about it, but... Jack's okay with it." He paused and admitted, "Honestly, if it turns out Harry's parents are good people, I'm not sure how we're going to separate the two of them. Jack freaked thinking about it - he hadn't even considered Harry going away."

"I imagine Harry was excited to hear you would be the alternative."

Hotch sighed, frustrated. "Yes, but he likes where he's at."

"That's not a bad thing."

"It is if that could push him away from staying with his parents, and if it means he doesn't enjoy it as much because he's constantly comparing that life to what it was like here. He might not even consider them as an option when he knows there's no risk in staying in his current situation."

"Again, that's not necessarily bad. He's not going to be blinded to any faults of his parents."

Hotch started to point out that he might be inventing faults too, but the nonchalance in Gideon's voice caught his attention. "You don't think he's going to stay with them."

"That's not what I'm saying."

"That's almost exactly what you're saying."

"It's not." He was smiling slightly. "Did you know that Garcia's almost completely narrowed down the list?"

Hotch stopped. "I knew she was getting close."

"She's got four names left, and she's banking pretty hard on one of them. Travis is coming in later to confirm it, but I'll let her explain that." He paused as Hotch's gaze drifted away. "What is it?"

"I'm not sure I'm ready for Harry to leave," he admitted quietly. "He's sort of become part of the household. I thought we were going to have another week, at least."

And then, curiously, Gideon smirked. "Well, the name Garcia thinks is the match lives rather close by, so I think you'll be seeing a lot of him if he decides to go stay with his biological family." Hotch tilted his head towards Gideon again, some pressure gone with that news. At the same time, it did mean that Harry might rely heavily on him instead of his parents if he could still see Hotch often, which...wasn't something that Hotch would mind, quite honestly. "You don't need to worry unless..."
Harry decides he wants to go stay with someone else."

"I'm not worried."

Gideon's smile widened. "You shouldn't be, since I expect he's going to stay with you."

"Which is a problem, Jason! He needs stability and parents who are home often enough to provide him that! I'm already struggling with Jack!" He paused and added as an afterthought, "Not to mention that his parents are probably going to want him back!"

"Stability, yes. A good home, also yes. But he also needs a good deal of independence. He's not used to a normal home, and to suddenly shove him into one would be rather shocking. You've already helped ease him into a better situation, one that I think he could remain in quite happily and without detriment. I'd be hard pressed to find a better match."

"This doesn't matter if Harry leaves," Hotch said.

"What do you want him to do?" Gideon asked curiously.

"Well, according to you, he's going to stay with me."

"He is. But I still want to know your opinion."

"...I think he should go with his parents. I really doubt the Dursleys were right about them, and he should at least give them a chance."

"That's not what I asked. What do you want him to do?"

There really wasn't anything else he could say to that. "I'd like him to stay," he admitted. "He's a great kid, and despite everything that's happened to him, he's been incredible to be around. I think I'm really going to miss him when he's gone, and it's going to be really hard on Jack."

"'When'?"

"I've been trying to stress to him that he needs to give his parents a chance. I'm hoping he'll understand when it comes time for him to meet them. Though if the Dursleys were right, that's not going to happen." He was honestly trying not to be excited by that prospect. It would be very good for Harry to be reunited with his real family, and he needed to be happy for the kid if his parents were wonderful.

"I don't think it will either."

Hotch got the impression he was being laughed at, and scowled. Gideon stared at him innocently.

"Well, he'll still have to stay with you for awhile, no matter what happens, so we can investigate them. Harry won't mind - I'm sure being around someone who understands the problems he has from the Dursleys has been enormously helpful."

"It's like they went through a checklist on horrible parenting," Hotch snapped angrily, gesturing sharply towards the British couple in a direction completely opposite to England. "A serious lack of self-preservation is the only reason why he appears to be doing as well as he is in communicating with people and reacting."

Gideon frowned, the first negative expression he'd made since Hotch had entered. "What do you mean?"
"There have clearly been times where he did something that he thought was going to get him hit, and he just didn't care."

"Have you tried talking to him about it?"

"A little, but he doesn't seem to understand how he's actually reacting. I swear he thinks it's normal."

"How's the paperwork to prosecute them going?"

"Horribly, since Travis isn't sure yet if we can do that without tipping off the British Ministry that Harry's no longer staying with them. She's positive that even with everything we've got against them the Ministry will still force Harry to stay with them, and they'll just send someone to threaten the Dursleys into not trying to kill Harry anymore. It's what they usually do, apparently. So long as he doesn't actually die, they just don't care."

They both turned to the door as they heard a frantic scrambling towards them, and they stood as the door swung open. Morgan held onto the handle, grinning, as Garcia pushed her way into the room with Travis. Behind them, the rest of the team had gotten swept up in the excitement and had followed, but they appeared just as confused as Hotch. The door closed as Morgan let it go, and Travis and Garcia exchanged a series of gestures to motion for the other one to go first.

"I take it someone knows who Harry's parents are?" Gideon asked and Hotch's heart started sinking in dismay.

"We do, we most definitely do, and it's brilliant," Garcia blurted.

"Good couple?" Hotch asked, hoping for a negative. Garcia blinded him with a grin instead.

"How'd you figure it out?" Reid asked curiously.

"Well, we knocked out the names through a variety of factors. Age, race, that kind of thing - and they had to fit the Woodsmarked Killer's standards - and then Travis started going to the remaining homes one by one. What the Dursleys said hadn't correlated with any of the pairs, so we didn't have to worry about that."

Damn. Maybe they were just discretely abusive.

No. No. No. Wait. This was good. This was very good. Harry could go to a fantastic home.

"So at each house," Travis took over, "I was checking for broken blood wards, which occurs when the child is removed from the house, particularly at a young age. It's incredibly rare, but the wards become overactive so it's usually pretty easy to tell when they're present. This morning I checked one of our last names, and this is definitely the family."

"You're sure?" Elle asked, impressed.

"The blood wards are nuts. I can't get near the house without wanting to go somewhere else. No one will notice unless they're magical, thankfully - especially since the wards are so out of control they're not even strongest at the house. They're absolutely bonkers here."

Hotch started. "Here?"

"Yeah, at Quantico. Because this is the first place Harry would have really met the person the blood wards are tied to in a place they felt was similar to home."
That would make sense, he supposed. They could have crossed paths while Harry had come to the BAU right after escaping the Woodsmarked Killer, or one of the later days that he had visited. Gideon had said the most likely candidate lived nearby anyway. "Right," he said carefully. And then, because he really didn't want to hear family names and have it confirmed that Harry was leaving, he asked, "What happens to the blood wards when Harry shows up there?"

"They protect him, like they're already doing."

"The wards protect him even when he's not at home?" Elle asked. "I thought you said they were designated to places."

"They are, but since he's behind the ones at the house already, the wards aren't letting anyone get close to him if they've got magic in either location," she said, grinning. Garcia was practically vibrating beside her, and Gideon's face lit up in satisfaction.

"What do you mean, he's behind them? Then the wards would be at my house."

Garcia looked like she was about to start squeaking in excitement as Morgan slowly nodded and said, "Yeah, that would be the case, wouldn't it?"

"What- Oh!"

A warm glow spread from his chest to the rest of his body, pushing back the cold feeling that had started to seep in once he had heard they knew who Harry's parents were. His frown, for the first time since he had seriously considered how soon Harry would probably be going to his home, transformed into a grin.

"Why don't you take the rest of the day off to destroy those adoption papers?" Gideon asked, amused.

"You knew!" Hotch exclaimed, fully aware most of the team was trying to hide snickers at his belated reaction.

"Most of us did," Elle admitted.

"But it wasn't like we could say anything until it had been confirmed, now could we?" Reid added.

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Harry still hadn't decided on what he was going to do about his parents. It sounded like he didn't have much more time to work it out, not if they were closing in on the identities. He knew it could be a great life awaiting him with his real family, but that just wasn't making his situation even easier. Especially when Hedwig was sitting on Jack's knees while Jack ran his fingers through her feathers carefully.

If he left, he was going to miss this so much. But if he stayed, he wasn't giving his parents a chance, and he knew that would disappoint Hotch, and seeing that would hurt almost as badly as leaving.

He heard a car pull up, and he turned to look out the window. It was Hotch's. He frowned in confusion as he saw Hotch hurry out, and the door opened a moment later. Jack turned away from Hedwig, though he kept his lower body carefully still to avoid knocking her off, while Hotch shut the door almost as an afterthought before he hurried towards them.

"Did something happen?" Harry asked, confused.
"Garcia and Travis figured it out." He sat down on the living room floor beside Jack and Harry. Hedwig fluttered onto the table, letting Jack turn around to completely face him. "We know who your family is."

Harry tried not to let his face fall. He hadn't thought this was going to happen so soon, and... Well, he'd kind of thought that Hotch hadn't really wanted to see him go. It almost- No, it did hurt to see him looking so happy about the news.

"Oh," Harry said, trying not to sound too crestfallen. "So, it's good news, then?" It couldn't possibly be good news, not for Harry. He just wanted to stay. Hotch nodded quickly, excited. "You met them already?"

He got a small laugh in return. "It would have been hard of me not to meet them. Harry-"

"But doesn't this mean...Harry has to leave?" Jack asked, and his voice cracked. And then he burst into tears.

Hotch sat there for a moment, grin turning into an awkward, helpless look as he sat there with one hand held out to Harry, mid-gesture, and the other reaching towards Jack to try to calm him down. The part of Harry's heart that had detached tore further at the sound of Jack's crying. Hedwig fluttered off Jack to land on the back of the couch.

Hotch wrapped an arm around his son and Jack burrowed into Hotch's shoulder, shaking with sobs. "I kn-know y-y-you s-said t-t-to let him-m m-make his own-n d-decision, b-b-but-

"Jack-

"I don't want him to go!" Jack wailed.

Harry and Hotch exchanged an uneasy look. Harry hadn't been expecting this reaction from Jack, and Hotch didn't seem quite sure how to handle the complete breakdown.

"Jack," Hotch said carefully, "Jack, calm down, buddy, okay? Just listen to me for a moment."

Jack keened.

The back door closed and Diane walked in. "I heard voices," she said slowly, eyes flickering around the room.

"I'll be home the rest of the day," Hotch said. "If you have somewhere else you'd rather be..."

Diane glanced over the scene. "...Right." A couple moments later, the door closed behind her as she hurried out of the family drama.

Harry stood up, wanting to get away as quickly as possible. Hotch looked at him. "Where are you going?"

"I'll go pack," Harry said quietly.

He took a step towards the stairs, but Hotch grabbed his hand and pulled him back. "No, wait," he said. "Jack, Harry- Jack, deep breaths, it's okay, I promise it's okay. Harry, I- Jack, breathe." He paused while Jack sucked in a huge breath and pushed it back out. He hiccuped loudly. Hotch rubbed his back with one hand, simultaneously pulling Harry back down to sit with them. "Okay, just listen to me."
"Are we going to hide Harry from his parents?" Jack whispered.

This clearly wasn't the way Hotch had been intending to deliver the news. In any other situation, Harry probably would have laughed at the expression on the agent's face.

"No," Hotch said and Jack's shoulders shuddered as a fresh wave of tears started up. "Jack!" His eyes caught a glimpse of Harry's crestfallen look and he demanded, "Both of you, stop what you're doing and listen!"

There was a brief pause. Jack's eyes were welling up with tears again, signaling a limited timeframe in which Hotch could speak.

"Harry, when Travis was identifying which home you were pulled out of, she looked for ones that matched certain criteria regarding your background. Garcia narrowed things down for her there, and then she started looking for broken blood wards. No one told me until today, but I've been on the list of government employees with a child who went missing or died in the time frame we think you arrived at the Potters' house."

Both Jack and Harry were staring at him with wide eyes and gaping mouths now.

"The only reason it took so long for them to decide if I could be the father or not was because they had to check all the other possible homes in case any also matched. Travis stopped by the house earlier and confirmed that I've got broken blood wards with a severity that matches the damage she thinks would have been caused by you leaving. No other location she checked had that kind of blood ward. This is your home, Harry. You're not leaving."

Harry's brain rerouted a couple of times. Hotch waited.

Jack, however, made the connection immediately. "So Harry's my brother?" Hotch nodded, still rubbing his back. "Oh. That's good, then." He gave one last hiccup and then smiled happily.

"I... So... Wait, hang on..."

"Yes."

Jack jumped out of Hotch's grip and threw himself at Harry with an excited yelp. It broke the standstill and Harry laughed, wrapping both arms around Jack and starting to laugh with him. He looked up at Hotch, grinning.

Hotch reached over and ruffled his hair. "I hope you liked it here," he joked. Harry couldn't say anything past his grin. "You're not going anywhere anytime soon."

He shifted closer to Harry and wrapped an arm around him. Jack leaned on both of them even though he was still clutching Harry.

"Hedwig stays too, right?" Jack whispered.

Hotch laughed. "Yes, Hedwig stays too."

Jack popped up. "Wait, then Harry can make lunch forever!"

Harry laughed harder while Hotch raised a bemused eyebrow. "He could, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't help him out..."

"He doesn't need my help."
Harry and Hotch exchanged a grin. "This sounds like a conversation for another time," Hotch said. He tightened his hold on Harry and Jack nestled in closer as he murmured, "Welcome back."
"There are bad things in the world. There’s no getting away from that. But that doesn’t mean nothing can be done about them. You can’t abandon life just because it’s scary, and just because sometimes you get hurt." – Jim Butcher, *Turn Coat*

Harry went with Hotch the next day to Quantico to work out some of the paperwork that their newest revelation would entail. Hotch led Harry up to the briefing room while Reid hurriedly finished typing something into his computer and Morgan and Elle ran off in two different directions to gather the rest of the team. Inside the conference room, Travis looked up from her pile of papers. She smiled as soon as she saw the pair and leaned back slightly in relief at the visible evidence that she had been right. "Oh, I'm so glad we were actually right."

“What happened?” Hotch asked, picking up on something unnoticeable to Harry.

“The superior of my superior sent me a message emphasizing how much we didn’t want to talk to England’s authorities, if we were wrong about everything.” At Hotch’s look, she said, “The Americans are kinda isolationists and the British run around like chickens with their heads cut off at small catastrophes and pretend the real volcanoes aren’t going off.”

“Don’t we still need to contact them about this?”

She frowned slightly. “Legally, no, we don’t, although we usually would. However, I’m under strict orders to make no communications. You’re going to be talking to someone else about that. The one I actually just got off a floo call with. He says he knows you. John Blackwolf?”

Hotch visibly started. “Blackwolf’s involved in the wizarding government?”

“Ah, so you have met.”

“Who’s Blackwolf?” Harry asked.

“A member of the Apache tribe. We met him during one of our cases, but I would never have pegged him for being part of any form of government.”

“I’m sure he’ll love to explain it to you so I won’t cut him out of his moment of glory,” Travis said, amused. “But essentially, the magical government is run by Native American tribes and is largely based on self-rule policy with the magical communities here.”

Gideon and Elle entered, and Gideon smiled warmly at Harry. “A pleasure to have you back permanently.”

Harry grinned in reply. “Thanks.”

Reid entered a minute later while the rest were taking seats around the table, and Garcia and Morgan came in shortly after. Garcia immediately made her way over to him and enthusiastically embraced
him. The others chuckled at her reaction and she withdrew long enough to say with a completely serious expression, “I have blackmail on your dad when you need it.”

“Ah,” Hotch started from behind Harry while Elle snorted.

“But what’s the main rule about blackmailing?” Garcia asked the wizard as if seriously making sure he was well versed in proper blackmailing etiquette.

“Parental supervision?” Harry guessed and the rest of the team laughed.

“Well, I was going to say 'Don’t get caught' but that too.”

Everyone eventually settled at the table, and Travis looked to her left. “Hey, Harry? I’m sorry, but you’re not going to be able to tell anyone you’re here yet. Not until we know who the Woodsmarked Killer is. Information like this is a lot easier to access in the wizarding world than the nonmagical world and it’s not a risk we’re going to want to take.”

“Er, I’ve got one friend I might need to tell,” he said cautiously. “Last year I didn’t reply for a while and he knew I had problems at home so he and two of his brothers showed up in a flying car in the middle of the night.”

She pointed at him, professionalism out the window. “You’re the ones with the flying car! That was awesome! How’d you manage it? We’ve been trying to do that with a DeLorean ever since Back to the Future came out but we can’t get it to work!”

“Their father did it. Arthur Weasley.”

To his amusement, she wrote the name down. “Right. Do you know if they still have it?”

“Last I saw, it drove itself into the Forbidden Forest after it saved Ron and me from a pack of Acromantulas.”

“Acro-what?” Morgan asked.

“Giant spiders,” Travis said. “As in, over fifteen feet long. With fangs. And venom. Why were you getting chased by Acromantulas?”

“We had to go ask one a question.”

Travis stared blankly at him. “You needed to ask one a question.”

“It was a good idea at the time. And you haven’t really lived until you’ve seen a giant spider get taken out by a flying car.”

Travis slowly turned to the rest of the group, entirely doubtful in her own ability to tell when someone was joking or not now. “So, magic. Hey, has anyone explained the blood wards to you two yet?” she asked the two Hotchners.

“They work mostly if someone’s sacrificed themselves for a relative, right?” Harry asked.

“Sort of,” Travis said. “In some cases they do, but not in this one. There’s a current theory about latent magic in muggles, that it only comes out in extreme situations or with particular coercion, such as when they have a magical child. In that case, all of the magic is devoted towards protecting the child in the home, or in the place that is viewed as the home. So you do still have a blood ward protecting you, since your parents were nonmagical.”
“What will the blood ward do to the house?” Hotch asked. “Block out anyone with malevolent intentions?”

Travis let out a small *heh*. “Well, usually,” she said, a bit too casually to be entirely genuine. “But, ah, it seems yours might have gone overboard.” The entire table looked at her in confusion. “The blood wards kicked in as soon as you went to go get Harry from the Woodsmarked Killer. Even if you didn’t know, the blood wards did, and they settled into place the moment you left their location.”

“You said they’re here and at my house,” Hotch said.

Travis smiled slightly. “Exactly. I’m not entirely sure, but my working theory is that it’s because you were here at three o’clock the morning that you heard about all of this. That’s the most powerful part of the day.”

“The witching hour,” Reid interrupted. “It was said to be the most powerful time for magical creatures and was when magic was performed by witches, particularly black magic. It was to the day what Halloween – or All Hallow’s Eve, or Samhain – was to the year. Similarly, Halloween was when souls and creatures could enter the world when they otherwise couldn’t and magic was at its strongest.”

“Some do believe dark magic is at its strongest on Halloween, but it’s never been confirmed for sure,” Travis added in. She caught Harry’s look. “What?”

“Do you know if Voldemort believed that?” he asked.

“No clue. Why?”

“That’s when he murdered the Potters, had Quirrell set the troll loose, and first let the basilisk out.”

“Who’s Quirrell?” Morgan asked.

“My first Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher.”

“We can get to that later,” Gideon said. “Blood wards.”

“If Hotch was here at three, any latent magic would have registered *this* place as his current residence.” She paused, and then added, “I’d say that will make the individual wards weaker, but that doesn’t seem to be the case. I suppose you’ve got some pretty powerful latent magic in you.”

“What will they do?” JJ asked. “How strong are they?”

“In this case, they’re overpowered, but I don’t know how long that will last.” She gestured between Hotch and Harry. “The problem is that they were separated for too long and the blood wards are… panicked, in a sense, and they’re compensating for lost time.” Her gaze went to Hotch. “You’re actually going to be able to tell where he is and, to a degree, what situation he’s in, until he turns seventeen. That naturally comes with parental warding, but most families usually tie it into an object since they don’t have enough power on their own devoted towards their children.”

“Wait, like a clock?” Harry asked suddenly.

“Yeah. You’ve seen one?”

“It had everyone in the family and most of the places they would go to.”
Travis nodded. “In some cases, they add in the parents with some extra spells just so they can keep track of everyone, not just the kids. It was a particular concern during the war. Now, we’re actually going to have to find a way to tone your warding down a bit,” she said, addressing the last part to Hotch. “Because I think it’s causing problems with people getting to work on this floor.”

Morgan suddenly jumped. “That’s why the bullpen’s been emptier than normal!”

“Exactly,” Travis said. “They can’t get to the floor. They suddenly feel sick, remember they need to go pick up their dry cleaning right now… That sort of thing. It’s primarily causing problems with those who have any sort of magical blood. The ones who have little to no magical blood are able to come in just fine, but over centuries of bloodlines crossing, there’s a good percentage of magic in almost everyone. The main issue with this is that since you don’t have magic, there isn’t a way to calm your wards down without letting them fade naturally. You shouldn’t have this problem at home, since it's weaker there for some reason. I think it's because you came here first.”

“So…what do we do?” Elle asked. “It’s going to be hard to explain why a group of us can get to work but not the rest.” The group collectively paused, and she added, “Wait, why can we get in?”

“It’s common for parents to allow people into the blood wards without even thinking about it. Usually it occurs with close friends, family, that kind of thing. Obviously, that won’t work for the rest of the floor, so what we’re going to have to do is manually allow everyone who works here to get in.” She paused. “On the bright side, no evil wizards are going to be able to get through no matter how hard they try. It’s kind of ironic, but muggles can put up a stronger magical ward than any magical folk possibly could.”

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Diane, who had been staying in the area until her fiance's job settled down in Montana, was leaving, so Hotch now found himself in an interesting dilemma. Harry was more than qualified to be on his own, and it wasn't like Hotch was leaving him without company. Having supervision over him would probably just be weird. Still, he wanted to make sure there was at least some sort of transition, so he called Sean and was relieved to hear that his brother had been thinking about coming down for some time now for a week or so. Hotch refrained from giving him the news over the phone since he was going to be coming down soon and it was a pretty outrageous explanation to take in face-to-face.

Hotch took a day off work to deal with all the intricacies of this changing situation, which involved filling out new paperwork for what seemed like every government agency in existence besides the EPA. His taxes were going to change, Harry's status as living needed to be updated, magical waivers would claim Harry was getting an education privately...

He looked up from where he was working in the kitchen. The two kids were whispering in the living room, which was a little peculiar but maybe not nearly as worrisome as it should have been. "Harry, I'm not sure you're going to have dual citizenship by the time this is over."

Harry paused and turned to him. "I won't?"

"I'm not sure you were ever anything but an American citizen. You were registered as a Potter, not a Hotchner."

Jack frowned in confusion. "Why wouldn't he be an American citizen?"

“Oh, I’m British.”
This was apparently life-shattering for Jack, who gawked at him. “How can I have a British brother! I thought I was American!”

In the kitchen, Hotch clapped a hand over his mouth as his shoulders shook with suppressed laughter. Harry looked like he envied his place out of Jack’s sight and bit back his own snickers. “Ah, you are.”

“Then you have to be American too!” He turned on his father. “Are you British too?” he accused.

“No, I’m American,” he replied, but Jack had gone back to Harry before anything else could be added.

“Then you have to be American too!” he firmly stated, and Harry just didn’t have the heart to argue with him.

“Okay,” he said, holding both hands up in surrender. “We’re all American.”

Jack perked up again. “Like cheese!”

Harry had the expression of one who had the feeling he was missing something.

Later that evening, once Hotch had knocked out most of the paperwork and Jack had been wrestled into a bed for a nap, he went upstairs to go check on Harry. Since he was staying permanently, he was now completely unpacking everything and getting it all sorted out. He had to do it in increments or after Jack had gone to sleep, since the boy had become quite attached to Harry and hardly left him alone. Hotch was just thankful that Harry adored him just as much.

He knocked on the door and was welcomed in to see the room in a half-prepared state. If there was order to the chaos, Hotch didn’t see it, but it wasn’t completed yet so he didn’t expect to see anything like that. "Got a moment?"

Harry nodded, setting down a stack of books on the bedside table next to him.

"So, now that this is...official, I think we should probably sit down and really talk about this. It can be now or later, but..." But he rather hoped Harry would get it over with instead of taking more time to stress out over what they needed to talk about.

Harry hesitated, but relented and took a spot on the bed. Hotch moved to sit beside him, closer than a professional distance but still giving Harry enough space not to crowd him. He knew there were going to be lasting effects from his time with the Dursleys, and he’d rather not stumble on them accidentally and in a way that was painful for Harry.

"The first thing I think you need to know is that I'm still looking at prosecuting the Dursleys," Hotch said and Harry perked up. "I don't know quite what I might need from you yet, though."

"Anything," Harry said in relief.

"If we assume you're not going to be here for the trial, since you would be at school, we might need to get your testimony on video," he warned. "You can share as much as you're comfortable with, but they might need a lot for evidence."

"Just tell me what I need to do."

"Later, once I know," Hotch said, and Harry smiled faintly. "On another note, all I've told Jack, in the vaguest terms, is that you showed up somehow and are now here. He doesn't know you've got
magic or anything, and he doesn't know about the Dursleys. Can we even tell him that you're a wizard?"

"Yeah. Siblings are allowed to know." He paused. "We can probably elaborate about everything when he gets older."

"He's going to be clingy when he finds out that you're going to be gone for a few months," Hotch warned.

"I feel like I'm clingy," Harry said.

Hotch shook his head. "Not at all."

"Yet," Harry quipped, and Hotch smiled at him.

His smile dimmed. "Just...be ready to work with him," he continued. "After your mother died, he started holding onto what family he had left. Sean started coming over more often, and Jack doesn't like it when I leave for long periods of time. He might get very upset when he hears you're going to be go back to England for a while. That's all right," he said when Harry frowned slightly, "but be prepared, and remember it's not your fault."

Harry nodded slowly.

"Okay, then... House rules. We don't really have any official ones, so they're more like guidelines." Honestly, he'd had to cast his mind back to what he and Haley had decided on years ago while he'd been thinking over what he needed to talk to Harry about. "Things get broken, and I get that. Just let me know and don't try to hide it." A flash of confusion crossed Harry's face when Hotch emphasized the last bit. He sighed. "Sean and I might have hidden a small trove of broken family heirlooms and pictures when we were younger," he said, and Harry bit back a snicker. "Ah... You can bring friends over, just let me know in advance."

He paused and, in a spur-of-the-moment decision, scrapped the rest of his planned list. "Look, you've been on your own for so long that it doesn't seem right to give you the same rules as Jack, and you're very responsible for your age. I trust your intuition about doing the right thing. If you're uncertain or you need help, come get me. It's better to be safe than sorry. Really, the only bit I'm going to add is that you're free to do magic in the house, so long as it's safe. If you think it could hurt you or someone else, do it outside or- Wait, I've got neighbors." Harry grinned at his dilemma. "Just...talk to me and we'll work it out, okay?"

"Okay." Uncertainty flickered over his features. "So, um, what happens if I do something I shouldn't?"

Hotch was a bit impressed that Harry actually asked that question. He'd been expecting that he was going to have to somehow slip it into the conversation without making it seem awkward or like he walking on eggshells around Harry. But then, he'd only paused for a moment before lunging into the fight against the Woodsmarked Killer. Maybe Hotch shouldn't have been so surprised after all. "I get that mistakes just happen sometimes, so if it's small, probably nothing so long as you understand that what you did was wrong. If it's bad enough, you'll be grounded."

Pause. "Which means...?"

Hotch stopped. With Jack, he could take away television, and if it had been another teenager, he could take away a phone. (Shit, he needed to get Harry one of those.) Anything he did was going to seem tame in comparison to the Dursleys, so it might not even have an effect on him. "...Don't get
grounded," Hotch finally said lamely, startling Harry into a laugh. "You're too hard to think up punishments for," he added.

"Glad to be a challenge."

"I'll admit, I haven't even thought of splitting chores between you and Jack yet." Which was made more complicated by Harry not being home for a good portion of the year. ...But when he was home, could Harry use magic to clean up the house in a few minutes? Hotch kind of felt bad for even thinking that. "We'll have to work that out another time."

What else...

The important details had already been covered, but he knew he needed to go into intricacies he usually wouldn't have considered since he needed to repair the damage the Dursleys had done. What was Harry going to be worried about? "Everything from before is basically the same. You can eat from the fridge anytime you're hungry, though I'd recommend waiting if there's a meal soon." Harry visibly relaxed. Hotch kept his dark thoughts about his perspective on the Dursleys to himself - telling Harry that he had access to food shouldn't have caused such a change. "Hedwig can come and go, but tell her to be careful so she doesn't knock anything over."

Harry had a strange look on his face and Hotch waited. "I'm not quite sure how to ask this," he said slowly. "But, uh... Are there any times she needs to stay in her cage?"

Were there? He wracked his brains for any, but settled for slowly shaking his head in confusion. "Not that I can think of... Is there something you were thinking of?"

Harry's silence set off warning bells and he prepared to curse the Dursleys again for the nth time that day. "Harry?"

"Well, won't the neighbors think it's strange?" Harry asked tentatively. "I mean, when we only thought I was going to be here for a little while, it wasn't such a big deal if they saw her once or twice, but now she's going to be more obvious."

"The neighbors will probably just think there is an owl that lives nearby," Hotch said. "I doubt anyone will be paying close enough attention to see she keeps flying from and to this particular house. Besides, it doesn't matter if they do figure it out. No one's going to realize that you're a wizard just because you have an owl." Harry nodded, but his expression hadn't really changed throughout the explanation. Hotch hadn't touched on what had him concerned. "Is that why the Dursleys locked her up?" he asked, deciding to take the obvious route.

Harry blinked, surprised he'd made the logical jump so confidently, and nodded. 

"She's your pet. It's your job to take care of her, and part of that includes making sure she's healthy. She won't stay well if she can't go out and stretch her wings, so I wouldn't expect you to keep her cooped up for any reason. Furthermore, if she gets ill, let me know so we can get her checked out by a vet."

Harry nodded in relief. 

"Speaking of which... Have you ever gone to see the doctor?"

"No, but we don't tend to get sick the same way that nonmagicals do," Harry said. "Hermione pointed it out one time. I don't know if our magic fights it off for us or if we just can't get the same illnesses, but we just tend to have different problems."
"Can we get magical sicknesses?" Hotch asked curiously.

"Not the faintest clue."

"Huh. At any rate, I think I'm going to have to take you in to see a doctor if we're prosecuting the Dursleys. Hopefully, a doctor could find some information that could help us, and for the purpose of medical records it could be important later." There was no objection from Harry. "Questions?"

After a moment, Harry asked, "Can I leave the house?"

Ooh, good one. Hotch pondered it for a moment, then slowly said, "Not until the Woodsmarked Killer is caught. I don't think he knows where you are right now, but I don't want to find out I'm wrong the hard way." Harry nodded without argument, but there was an odd smile on his face. "What?"

"The differences in you and the Dursleys. You're literally the exact opposite."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

The test for Harry's independence came sooner than expected. Hotch fully expected Harry to be self-sufficient and, if he was honest with himself, had been rather hopeful that he would get to find out the extent. He had a feeling his son was much more impressive than he was letting on, particularly since Travis had confirmed in an aside to him that Harry's dueling skills were definitely far above his average year level.

The next day, a call came through right after breakfast about a case. It wasn’t a drop-everything-and-fly-to-Alaska situation, but the Salt Lake PD were desperate for some quick advice on a hostage situation. Hotch was on the phone with JJ and both were coming up with ideas to explain his absence when Harry overheard part of it and practically sent him out the door. The agent tried to say that they didn’t need him, but stopped once Harry said, “Oh my, I didn’t realize FBI agents only settle down after the second child.”

Despite his trust of Harry, he was a bit reluctant to leave without saying anything. Still, he knew that giving him a lecture on the dos and don'ts of being home alone would drive Harry crazy, and he tried to make a joke out of it. "Don't let strangers in the house. Don't let strangers out of the house. Keep track of your brother, and if I’m not back for lunch, please don't eat pure sugar." He stopped. "Do you want me to help get lunch prepared before I-"

"Go," Harry said, laughing. The mini-lecture had earned him a smile, and Hotch returned it as he left.

If they hadn't been related, Hotch would have driven to the office right now just to sign the adoption papers.

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So far, so good. The house had not burned down, and Harry was confident he could make spaghetti without disaster. Honestly, he was sure he could make a wide variety of things without disaster after cooking for the Dursleys for so long, but he didn't want to test that on his second full day 'home.'

He was home. He was grinning like an idiot just thinking about it.

Jack alternated between standing treacherously close to the stove and on a chair so he could see what Harry was doing. Harry wasn't sure where he preferred him. He was more likely to get set on fire in one place but more likely to fall in the other. Finally, Harry flagged down Hedwig from where she
was roosting in a tree in the backyard for help, and made Jack agree to sit in a chair while he pet her so he didn't "startle her." Harry knew that Hedwig wouldn't have cared where Jack was, but his brother wasn't as used to Hedwig's behaviors.

He heard a car pull up and frowned to himself. Hotch (Dad? Father?) could only be pulling in if he had turned around halfway there and come back. "Jack, is someone supposed to be stopping by?" he asked casually. It was so weird to be the most responsible one in the room.

"Nope," Jack said, eyes focused on Hedwig and oblivious to the reasonable fear that shot through Harry.

The wizard reminded himself that the Woodsmarked Killer wasn't going to show up in a car. Still, he stayed right where he was, aware that someone at the front door couldn't see into the kitchen. A car door slammed outside, and then someone was knocking at the front. Of all the scenarios he and Hotch had covered the day before, this hadn't been one of them.

Harry stayed where he was at, even when the knock came a second time. After a pause and a thumping sound from outside, followed by a muffled curse, he heard a strange scratching sound and placed it as a key in a lock. The door opened and Harry could hear a rough wind outside for a moment before the door shut roughly. "Shit, it's vicious out there," he heard muttered. By now, Harry had completely left the spaghetti on its own and was focused on the voice making its way from the foyer to the living room. "Chances Aaron's home? None. It's the middle of the day. Shoulda called ahead..."

Maybe this person was supposed to be here, but it didn't seem like Hotch to forget to mention a thing like this.

"Holy fuck, the house is so clean." Harry was surprised someone had noticed. Usually no one else came by, and it wasn't like the house had been particularly dirty before. Harry had just cleaned up when he had a few spare moments, out of habit. "Damn." A sniff, followed by a groan. "Of course Aaron left something cooking..."

He must have smelled the spaghetti, Harry realized in alarm. His gaze flickered between Jack and the sliding back door that led from the kitchen outside. He didn't think he could get Jack out silently, not with that wind as noisy as it was.

The stranger entered at the same time Harry turned back around, and both jumped simultaneously. They stared at each other, and then Jack ran across the room and slammed into the man's knees with a cheer. The stranger spared another confused look to Harry, then bent to rub Jack's head. "Hey, buddy, you miss me?"

"Yep!"

The man caught sight of the owl and blinked in surprise. "Um." Harry was still watching him carefully. "Hey, so, uh... Who are you?"

"Ah, if you don't mind... You're kind of the one who just broke in. Mind telling me who you are first?"

The man held up a key. "Didn't break in. And I'm the brother of the guy who owns this place. I take it you're supposed to be here, since most burglars don't usually cook for the people they're robbing?"

"Yeah," Harry said, then stopped himself. "It's a long story."
"Well, can I get a name, Mr. Not-Burglar?"

"Harry."

"Sean."

Harry started. "Oh! You're Sean!"

"Yes?"

Harry let out a small laugh. "Okay, I know who you are. Sorta. I thought you were coming later."

"That was the original plan." He nodded towards the stove. "Want help? I'm a chef by trade."

"Feel free to take over. I won't be insulted in the slightest."

"Don't mind if I do." Sean managed to detach himself from the little one by prodding him back towards Hedwig, who fluffed her feathers and clicked her beak as Jack returned to his original post. He frowned at the contents of the pot. "There's not enough in here for two."

Harry paused. "I didn't think that far ahead," he admitted. "I was just going to clean up and then go back to homework." He still needed to finish up some more - stupid potions essays - and he was hoping to get Jack to sleep with the carb crash so he could have an hour or so to knock out a couple things out.

"What happened to Aaron?"

"Had to go to the office. Shouldn't take long." Sean frowned for a moment but kept his silence. Harry wondered what he'd said wrong. "Er, do you need me to grab anything for you?"

"Sure. Got any meat?"

Harry checked the fridge while Sean dumped some more spaghetti into the pot. "Chicken."

"We'll make it work. Grab that. What vegetables?"

Within a half hour, the chef seemed to have a good idea of what he was going to make based off of what was in the house, and Harry had mostly convinced himself that it probably wasn't necessary to send Hedwig to Quantico to ask Hotch if it was likely his brother had come in early. Really, as Sean had pointed out, most people who weren't supposed to be in a house didn't cook for its inhabitants. Since Sean was making the meal more elaborate, he set the spaghetti aside to cook later while he prepared a fantastic sauce. "Harry, was it?"

"Yeah?"

"Can you cut those up?" he asked, gesturing to a couple of the vegetables. Harry nodded, grabbing a cutting board and knife. "So, how long are you here for?"

More than anything, he wanted to say forever. But things happen. He modified the truth, honestly saying, "Another month or two." After all, he was heading back to England after that. Until then, he was just going to let Hotch explain their relationship. They had a blood tie, obviously, but was that really all that made them father and son?

A loud clanging sound behind him made him jump, the onion falling from one hand and the knife from the other. His brain caught up with his racing heart, and he knew Sean had just dropped the pan onto the stove when the handle slipped from his hand. He silently took a deep breath, closing his
eyes as he slowly lowered his hands, and then almost immediately jumped again as Sean touched his shoulder. He glanced sharply behind him, but Sean didn't remove his hand, preferring to wait until he had calmed down on his own.

Sean frowned in concern. "Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you," he said as Harry finally relaxed. "You good?"

"Yeah...fine."

Sean nodded and moved away, letting Harry go back to the cutting board. He didn't press the subject, which Harry found himself extremely grateful for. "House looks clean. Wasn't Aaron and wasn't Jack so...you?"

"Had nothing else to do," he lied.

"Nicely done. How long did that take you?"

"A couple of hours here and there."

"Woah, you're fast!" Harry smiled to himself. Speed had been necessary at the Dursleys. "Come home with me? It's a bachelor's pad, much easier than this."

Harry let out a laugh. "Don't think that's up to me. So, you said you're a chef? Where at?"

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The BAU team was not impressed when he tried to explain that he wasn’t able to defend himself against his oldest’s sass, so he found himself making the forty-five minute drive back home ten minutes after he arrived at Quantico. He wondered when he had lost control over his own life.

The rental car in the driveway was a surprise. Shouldn't the blood wards have, maybe, done something about that?

A blast of spices hit his face like a wave when he opened the front door. Murmuring voices came from the kitchen and he heard Harry’s laughter as he took his shoes and jacket off.

“Hey, Aaron!”

“Sean?” Sure enough, his younger brother was cooking a feast up on the stove. Harry was practically salivating a few feet away with Jack balanced on his hip, one arm wrapped around his younger brother while the other hand mixed a salad. "I thought you weren’t coming until tomorrow." Though in the flurry of the last few days, he had almost forgotten that Sean was coming at all.

“Caught an earlier flight. Thought you might have to book it out of here at some point over the break so I might as well get here as soon as possible so I actually get to see you.” Sean nodded towards Harry while he stirred whatever was in the pan he was holding. “Looks like I’ll be seeing more of your guest than you,” he added, the question there but not asked. Evidently he was uncertain of where they stood and was unwilling to push it.

“He’s here to stay,” Hotch said and saw Harry relax slightly out of the corner of his eye. Sean tilted his head ever so slightly in surprise, and then his gaze flickered to Harry for a moment. Someone hadn't been entirely truthful, it would seem. “I meant to call you yesterday but didn’t get around to it.”

Sean looked even more confused. “Did you kidnap a child or something?”
Movement caught his attention and he turned to see Harry slipping out of the room with Jack. “No, wait, you don’t have to go.”

“It’s fine!” Harry called without stopping. Instead of waiting for a reply, he started talking to Jack, effectively stopping Hotch from easily bringing him back into the kitchen.

Hotch sighed, running a hand through his hair. His brother caught the gesture and raised his eyebrows. “Woah, you only do that when you’re really out of your league,” he said, setting the pan down and turning off the stove. “What happened?” Hotch looked away. “Shit, Aaron, what’s going on? Who’s the kid?”

Hotch pulled out a chair from the table and took a seat. Sean’s eyebrows went higher, if possible, recognizing the gesture as a concession of power to him. The younger Hotchner would have made a great profiler. As it was, he made a fantastic cook. “Reserve judgment until the end, please,” Hotch started. Sean nodded, although he probably would have agreed to anything at that point. “Do you remember when Harry died at the hospital?”

“Yeah-“ Sean broke off. “Oh my God.”

“It’s him. We still don’t know the details of how, but it’s him.”

“How do you know?” He turned to lean back against the counter, nudging the contents of the pan around to prevent them from sticking.

“It’s complicated, but we’re positive.”

"Where was he before?"

Hotch stared at a point over Sean’s shoulder to avoid looking him in the eye. “It was worse than Dad,” Hotch said quietly but Sean’s stiffening told him that he’d heard. “The way they treated him, like he was the scum of the earth. A mix between that and a slave.” He snarled the end out and then closed his eyes, bringing his hand up to rub his forehead. Getting angry now wouldn’t do anything to help. ”I was thinking about adopting him even before I learned who he really was."

Sean was quiet again. “Is he okay?” he finally asked in a low murmur.

Hotch grimaced. “I don’t know. We met a month ago, but he's good at pretending to be fine.”

Sean frowned at him. “Wait, you only met him a month ago and you went to work?!” he hissed. Both hands went up in defense. “He forced me out the door when he realized what I had gotten a call for!” he hissed back. Sean’s aggression immediately faded to be replaced by confusion. Another moment and his shoulders were shaking and he covered his mouth with one hand in a bad attempt to hide his laughter. "What?"

“Your twelve-year-old forced you to go to work?” Sean snickered.

Hotch rolled his eyes.

“I can’t get you to get that stick out of your ass for longer than five minutes and he makes you go to work because you’d rather stay home.”

Hotch went back to rubbing his forehead. “Yeah, laugh it up.”

His brother complied for a solid three minutes, taking the chair besides Hotch as he did so in case his
legs gave out.

“If you don’t want him,” Sean finally said in between gasps, “I’ll take him.”

“You can’t have him.”

“It’ll be a kidnapping. You’ll never see it coming.”

“I think you’d have to take Jack with you, then. They’ve gotten rather attached.”

“The more the merrier. And then you’ll have to come visit me if you ever want to see your kids. I’m liking this idea more and more.”

“I work for the FBI and I know where you live,” Hotch deadpanned.

Sean sniggered again. “He’s a good kid,” he said, a little more serious.

“He is,” Hotch said, without pride. He’d had no involvement in getting his son to where he was now, something he knew he’d regret for the rest of his life. Harry’s success was all of his own making.

"Why did he vanish?" Sean asked, the serious undercurrent returning to the conversation.

"He was taken for some reason. The couple who took him were killed, and as far as we can tell so far no one knows why they did that for sure. The organization who did it..." Hotch grimaced.

Sean smirked lightly. "Planning on waiting for your kid to settle in before you burn it to the ground?" Hotch didn't say anything, but when he looked up, mouth tensing slightly, Sean saw a worrying amount of determination. "Remember that murder is illegal."

"They've done this to other kids, and they're still going to do it."

"Wait for a little bit, gather more information, and then go after them," Sean coaxed. Hotch twiched, but there was something in the gesture that was an acquiesce. The people who had Harry had been bought a couple of weeks, at least, before Hotch went after them. “What happened to...? Who was taking care of him?”

“He was given to the woman’s sister. She and her husband…” He couldn’t say ‘raised.’ “…well, he was under their roof until now.” He dropped the murderous tone that had entered his voice in the last sentence. “Our tech analyst is working on sending the local authorities the information necessary to arrest them.”

Sean nodded his approval. “Good.” He paused, mulling something over in his head for a moment. “You said they used him like a slave?” Hotch’s face darkened in reply. Sean chose his words carefully before continuing. “When I came, he was making lunch for Jack. Not himself.” A look of resigned horror crept onto Hotch’s face. “This has happened before,” Sean said, correctly interpreting the expression. "What the hell did they do to him?” Sean whispered angrily.

Hotch rested his elbows on the table in front of him, clenched his hands together, and pressed both fists into his forehead as he tried to control his breathing. “It happens sometimes, when he forgets... Between this and the cleaning...” He looked up at Sean for a moment. “Do you think there’s a chance he was just doing it to be nice?”

Sean shrugged helplessly. “I don’t know, but if Dad had been using me as a slave, I don’t think I would have felt comfortable without trying to play housekeeper for the next place I lived.”
Hotch put his forehead back against his fists again. After a moment, he felt Sean’s hand reach up to clasp his shoulder. “I should’ve looked harder. There must have been something wrong with the medical records. Why didn’t I check?!”

“Aaron,” Sean snapped immediately, “stop. You were mourning. No one’s invincible against grief, not even you. Your son had just died. Of course you weren’t looking at the details. It would’ve been too painful. No one would have looked. But it doesn’t matter because you’ve got him now. It might not feel like enough, considering what happened, but you have a chance to make the rest of his life bright. Just remember that.”

Hotch stared at him from the corner of his eye. “Did you start studying psychiatry without telling me?”

Sean snorted. “No, but did you hear I’ve got a brother who’s a profiler?”

He faintly smiled at that.

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Hotch coaxed Harry down to lunch, which was spent talking over differences between the British and American governments. The adults did their best to pretend the earlier conversation had never happened, though they were sure Harry had his suspicions. Jack was, of course, oblivious, and entirely set on reminding Harry and telling Sean that they were all American and Harry was most definitely not British. No one tried explaining to him that nationality wasn’t genetic.

While the two adults and Harry started to put dishes away, Jack wandered upstairs for the nap that Harry had engineered. The three in the kitchen were talking in low enough voices to clearly hear him ask, "Oh, who are you?" followed by two overlapping, "Shhh!"’s. The Hotchner trio came to a dead halt, freezing where they were at.

"Is someone else here?" Sean whispered very quietly and Hotch looked to Harry, who shook his head quickly, eyes widening.

Something shrieked, startling Sean, but the other two recognized the sound, having heard it often enough. To the same degree, Harry also recognized the next sound he heard - "Not now, Hedwig!" someone hissed, trying to calm the bird.

His jaw dropped. "Hermione?" he demanded, running out of the room before Hotch could stop him. His father and uncle hurried after him quickly.

Instead of a terrifying display of a hostage situation with the Woodmarked Killer on the stairs with Jack, they were met with the rather anticlimactic picture of a redhead and a brunette huddled at the top, facing off against Jack like he was the next dark lord.

"Hiya, Harry," Ron said, cheer muted by the embarrassment of being caught like this.

"Um, not that I'm not glad to see you," Harry began, stunned into place, "but how did you even know where I was?"

"Well, see, Ron thought something was up, so I convinced my parents to take us to the Dursleys, only they said you’d been taken somewhere in America, but they rather made it sound like you’d been killed and none of our parents believed that," Hermione said in a rush.

"But...wait..."
"So then I convinced my parents that I was going to stay with Hermione," Ron continued, "and she told her parents the same thing, and then we used my parents' floo channel to hop over here."

"They're international?" Harry asked.

"Well, not usually, no, but you know how Dad likes to fiddle with things, so ours is now. Anyway, we got over here, and then we rented brooms and an owl to take mail to you, only we followed it, see, and then we got here."

"I didn't follow half of that," Sean admitted, "but you guys are seriously dedicated and brilliant."

Hermione huffed, blushing slightly at the compliment. "Well, something like this happens every year, so we have to be prepared."

"Every year?"

Hermione quickly shut her mouth, glancing at Harry. "Ah," he said. "Er, there's something we should probably tell you..."

"Hold on, your parents don't know where you're at?" Hotch asked the intruders, who both shook their heads.

"Didn't Travis say we can't tell anyone, though?" Harry pointed out and Hotch grimaced.

"She did," he said reluctantly and gestured at the pair. "Come on down from there." They carefully descended, and Jack hurried ahead of them to come stand by his father. The two stood rather awkwardly beside the staircase, facing the Hotchner clan and entirely unsure what to make of their situation. "How did you get into the house?"

"Well, we got turned around quite a bit for some reason," Ron admitted, "but we went in through the second floor, since that's where the owl was trying to go."

"The wards must have let them in for the same reason the rest of the BAU could get onto their floor without a problem," Harry surmised. "Or something like that."

"Still lost," Sean reminded everyone.

Harry glanced at Hotch, who nodded slightly, and then took his wand out of his pocket and muttered, "Wingardium Leviosa," pointing it at a book on the table. It rose next to Sean, who leaned away in surprise. After a moment, he reached out and took it, and Harry let the book go. He stared a moment longer, and then Harry added, "Transmogrify," and the book turned into a rather papery clock. "Oh, that's not what I meant to do."

"Isn't that going to...?" Hermione started.

"Oh, we can use underage magic here," Harry said. "The Americans really don't care." Ron's face brightened instantly. Sean was still staring at the object in his hands. "Uh, Finite incantatem." The clock turned mostly back into a book, though now the cover was slightly reflective. "Finite incantatem," he tried again, and this time it appeared to be completely returned to normal.

Sean was quiet. "So. Um. I wasn't expecting that."

"Magic exists. Congratulations - now you can't tell anyone," Harry said.

"Wonderful." He glanced at Hotch to make sure his leg wasn't being pulled. "Well. Okay then.
Okay..."

"You all right there?" Hotch asked.

"Excuse me while I reconsider reality. You guys continue on without me."

They took his word for it. "So, uh, what did happen?" Ron asked Harry. "Clearly you weren't viciously murdered."

"Not for lack of trying. First, though - everyone, this is Ron and Hermione. They're my friends from school. Guys, this is Jack, Uncle Sean, and my dad."

Ron gaped and Hermione tilted her head slightly, taking in the resemblance. "Well," she finally said. "I think this is going to be rather an interesting explanation."

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Hotch filled Sean in more about everything that had been going on, somehow managing to convince Jack to stay down with him to 'help' so the kids could go upstairs to Harry's room and talk. Ron was marveling at everything, astonished at being inside a nonmagical house for the first time, and Hermione practically had to drag him along to get him to Harry's room.

"Everything," Hermione said once they were sitting on his bed, and he obliged, detailing what all had happened since he'd gotten back from Hogwarts. The two listened, enraptured, as he told the tale from beginning to end.

"Blimey, mate," Ron whispered. "So he's... He's really..."

Harry nodded quickly.

"Well, to be honest, he's a bit..." He searched for a non-offensive word. "Well, he's rather...um, tougher than I thought he would be."

"Well, it makes sense, doesn't it?" Hermione huffed. "If his job is to track down serial killers and the like, he'd hardly look very friendly at first look. It'd rather be like having an auror for a father, or an Unspeakable." Ron looked considerably less daunted at the prospect of Hotch, hero-worship beginning to creep into his eyes at the thought of having an elite father. Hermione rolled her own eyes at the transition and turned back to Harry, who was watching in amusement. "What's it been like?"

"It's been incredible, Hermione," he said. "I can't even... I love it." A smile crept over his face. "When I thought maybe the Dursleys were right about my parents, he told me I didn't have to go with them if I didn't want to, and I was still pretty nervous about it, so... Well, he started trying to figure out how to adopt me."

Hermione shared his smile. "Sounds like he cares a lot, then. And you've got a brother now! How's that?"

"Jack's amazing. I'm not sure how we're going to tell him that I have to leave for Hogwarts, though."

"I'm sure you'll figure it out."

His smile turned shyer. "Thanks for coming out, by the way. I'm really glad you came, even if nothing bad was happening."
“Yeah, what gives?” Ron asked, nudging him with his foot. He was sitting in the middle of the bed while Harry was leaning back against the wall, and Harry playfully nudged him back. “Honestly, couldn't even send us a letter of I'm not dead?”

“Couldn't send Hedwig over the ocean, and Travis was still trying to figure out how to get mail to you without letting your parents know.”

Ron frowned. “Right, we can't tell them. Well, I reckon it should be all right to let them know at some point?”

Harry shrugged. “I've no idea. Just not right now, at the least.”

“I'm just so happy for you,” Hermione murmured. “After everything the Dursleys did... This is wonderful. And you seem very excited.”

“It's awesome. The only problem is that if I'm ever nervous I can't get a lie past my dad,” he admitted. “And I really don't think I'm that bad of a liar - he's just really good at reading people.”

“His job sounds fascinating.”

“I can't really get him to talk about it, since it's kind of dark, but I've been reading books in the library downstairs sometimes. I think he knows, but he hasn't made me stop yet, probably because he doesn't know specifically what I'm reading.”

Hermione had perked up, back ramrod straight, at the mention of the library and now Ron groaned. “Oh, now you've done it.”

“Library?” she chirped.

Before either one could stop her, she was flying out the door, and the two rushed behind her, down the stairs to the first floor. She peeked around the living room corner, saw the Hotchners looking at her in mild confusion in the dead end of the kitchen, and then went the other way, passing through the dining room and finally into the library. Ron and Harry came in behind her, slower, while she quietly keened at the sight of all the books.

“Oh, Hermione, you should respect libraries a lot more,” Ron chided. “Honestly, you just don't spend enough time in them to appreciate them.”

“Oh, hush, Ronald.”

“You know,” Sean said behind them, and the group turned to see the two adults standing in the doorway. “I just downsized to a smaller apartment, since I live in New York, and I've got some books that don't fit.”

Hermione's eyes lit up.

“I didn't even say what they were about,” Sean added, amused.

“Hermione's obsession with books goes to the point where we broke into the restricted section at our school's library just to grab more books,” Ron said cheerfully.

She elbowed him. “Actually, it was Harry who broke in, and that was just because we couldn't find information anywhere else!”

“I'd like to point out that we found out what we needed in the area where the books weren't chained
Ron's family was planning a trip to Egypt soon, and their parents were going to start wondering when they were coming back from their friend's house, so Harry's friends reluctantly admitted that they needed to leave at some point in the near future. Hotch compromised and had them spend the night, then, armed with Travis's instructions the next day, drove them close to the magical community they had arrived in. Harry came with them and helped them return the brooms and owl, while Hotch came along and quietly observed the strangeness of the magical world.

"I thought muggles couldn't see any of this," Ron muttered under his breath when Hotch was standing far enough away not to hear, curiously watching a group of witches haggling over a dead bat. Or something that looked like a dead bat, Harry amended in his head as it started twitching.

"Parents can," Hermione explained. "They've got something in their blood that popular magical communities make sure their wards connect to, so parents of muggleborns can get in to help with school shopping. That's how my parents can get into Diagon Alley."

As they moved on, Harry quietly explained the process of floo-ing to Hotch, having already experienced the startling image of seeing his friend lit on fire and not wishing his father to have to repeat the same scare. Ron and Hermione led them to the shop they had arrived in, and they each hugged Harry goodbye before vanishing in flames, zooming back to the Burrow in ashes. When both of them were gone, Harry slowly turned away from the fireplace and walked with his father back to the entrance to the community and, through it, the car.

"Ron's the one who showed up with the flying car, then?" Hotch asked.

Harry nodded. "He and two of his brothers, the twins."

"They're good kids. I'm impressed they managed to get all the way over here, and then to our house, without anyone catching them."

"Well, Hermione's brilliant, and Ron's just really determined."

"They seemed worried about you."

"Considering how Ron found me last time, I'm not surprised. And Hermione knew enough to be
very upset when she heard I had to go back to stay with the Dursleys each year." He paused, then added, "Sorry if they startled you, appearing like that."

"Actually, I'm rather glad they came by. It's good to know you've got people looking out for you, and if everything had been like it appeared to them, they very well could have saved your life. Overall, it was nice to meet your friends, too, though a little warning next time would be a bit preferable."

Harry nodded, grinning. "I don't think they'll be able to get away again this summer, but I'll let them know."

Chapter End Notes

This is for my wonderful beta, Rowen Morningstar, who read through everything to help me make sure this story actually progressed in a logical fashion, Because sensible plot is always nice.

Also, thanks to DrbWrite, who probably thinks I'm dead by now since it's been six days since I posted. (Kidding. I'm travelling right now and the internet has been spotty at best, so there might be some pauses until I get home.) Also also thanks to BakenandEggs for helping to fix my story note dilemma!

By the way, I forgot to mention this before, but the idea for this story stemmed from ROSSELLA1's Resurrected?, which had the concept of Hotch looking like James Potter. I took it a bit farther than that.
"Do not fear the ghosts in this house; they are the least of your worries." - Neil Gaiman, "The Hidden Chamber"

After Sean's initial shock had worn off, he had adjusted to the magic news rather quickly and immediately began bombarding Harry with questions after his friends had gone.

"So, do you have sports? Do you play the same ones as us, or...?"

"No, we've got Quidditch. I think that's all we've got, actually. Or all we've got in England, at least. It's sort of like...well...flying...football? But...not really?"

"...American football or British football?"

Harry snorted. It was rather difficult when he was salivating from whatever was cooking in the oven. Hotch was just a bit worried that Harry might follow Sean home when his nose was no longer subject to the delicious fumes in the Hotchner home. "British football. You Americans use your hands in your so-called 'football.'"

"Hey, we use our feet to. That's why it's called the kick-off."

"Fine. You use your feet, like, once."

"Do you use your feet in Quidditch?"

He scowled. "Well, no. We use our hands." Sean smirked. "But it's like football in that you're trying to move the ball to score...points... Oh God, it's more like American football." He moaned into his hands as Sean and Hotch laughed at him over his head. "What have I taken part in?"

"You play Quidditch?"

"Yeah. Seeker. We look for the Snitch."

There was a loud thump from upstairs and they all paused. Sean and Harry looked a bit apprehensive, but Hotch shook his head and counted down from five quietly. When he hit two, the patterning footsteps resumed, a door closed, and then it was quiet. "He's fine," Hotch confirmed. "Oh, Sean, are you coming for Christmas?"

"Is the Pope Catholic?"

"The rest of my team has already informed me that they are planning to hijack my house on the twenty-first for an early Christmas. JJ and Garcia have laid out some food plans, so you might want to get in touch with them."

"I could just let them handle it."
"...Or you could admit you're going to get involved, and you could just offer your help."

Sean smirked. "I could do that. Why are we bringing this up so early?"

"The ones with out-of-town family are going to go home for the holidays and a few might not be back until after New Year's. Since we're taking a longer break, we have to tell the Bureau we'll all be out months ahead of time."

Harry paused. "Do we have out-of-town family?"

Hotch straightened suddenly. "Jessica doesn't know," he said by way of explanation when both Sean and Harry looked at him curiously. "Haley's sister." He groaned, rubbing his forehead. "That completely slipped my mind. I need to call her father, too."

"Well, it's been a bit busy around here," Sean pointed out.

Harry frowned slightly, realizing the conversation had been redirected. "I only have other family on Mum's side?"

Hotch and Sean locked eyes, and for a solid fifteen seconds, a slight conversation waged by means of slight expression changes. Finally, they both turned away from each other, and Sean said, "Yep," at the same time Hotch said, "Well."

"I thought that look meant..." Sean muttered.

"Well," Hotch repeated.

"Not really," Sean said as Hotch firmly stated, "None on ours."

They exchanged looks again, hoping for better communication.

"No one important," Sean said.

"...Right," Hotch added.

Harry stared at them in bewilderment.

"Well," Sean said reluctantly and Hotch glared meaningfully at him. "I mean... You've got a great-aunt... Wait, is that right? Mom's sister?"

"Yeah, great-aunt. And a second cousin, through her," Hotch added, a bit too quickly and stiffly.

Harry glanced between the two of them. "Um."

"And...sort of...a grandmother..." Sean muttered, so indistinctly Harry could hardly make it out. His uncle didn't say anything else when Hotch gave him a warning look.

"Um," Harry repeated.

There was a thump from upstairs. Hotch repeated the counting, but there was no patter, so he sighed and got to his feet. "He's probably fine..." he said and left the room.

Sean stayed quiet until they heard Hotch go up the stairs. Then in a hushed whisper, he said, "We're not really on good relations with the rest of the family. Haven't seen them in a decade, at least."

Harry's eyebrows went up. "Maybe a little longer for your father. Dad had cancer and we thought he wasn't going to make it, but things went sour between him and Aaron and then Mom blamed Aaron..."
for Dad's condition when it got worse so... I don't think they've seen each other since then."

Harry nodded, then glanced upstairs as if it would tell him if Hotch as coming back soon. "Okay, Christmas. What do people usually do for it?" Sean blinked at him in surprise before understanding dawned. 'I'm pretty sure overloading children with gifts isn't normal, but the only other Christmases I had were at Hogwarts, and I'm not sure magical Christmas is the same as not-magical Christmas."

"Harry," Sean said firmly, "every Christmas is magical." They both cracked a grin. "I see your problem... Ah..." He rubbed a hand over his mouth. "Usually, at your age, it's not expected for kids to get their parents gifts, especially since you just met him. Um... I don't know if it would be normal for you to get something for Jack... Harry, stop freaking out."

"I'm not freaking out," Harry said, scowling when his voice cracked slightly.

"And stop squeaking. It'll be fine."

"Ugh."

The doorbell rang. "I've got it," Sean said, and Harry remained in the kitchen. "Hey, I actually know you!" Sean said cheerfully at the door.

"Sean, right?" Morgan's voice trailed in. There was more than one pair of footsteps that entered the house. "Here for the summer?"

"Yeah. Aaron's upstairs. Do you need him?"

"Not immediately, if he's busy."

"I think he's debating on bandaging battle wounds or wrapping Jack in bubblewrap to stop him from running into stuff. Here, you two can join me in the kitchen. I'm in the middle of planning a kidnapping," Sean said, his voice most definitely carrying up the stairs.

That was confirmed when Hotch called down, "You do not get to kidnap either of my children!"

"Go back to your bubble wrap!" Sean shouted back. "Nothing criminal is happening down here! Harry, get the acetylene torch."

Harry snickered as he entered the kitchen, bringing in Morgan and Garcia with him. They all sat at the kitchen table, and Garcia said that JJ would be showing up at some point with Gideon for working out some of the paperwork dealing with the Woodsmarked Killer. They had finally gotten the last of it, but they weren't allowed to fill it out at Quantico where other prying eyes could see it.

When Sean was sure Hotch still wasn't coming down anytime soon, he put both hands on the table to get everyone's attention. "Okay, serious talk," he said. "Does anyone know what Christmas is usually like?"

"Is this a trick question?" Garcia asked suspiciously.

"Help," Harry said by way of explanation.

"Ah."

"I'm trying," Morgan said slowly, "but I just can't picture it here. Sorry."

"Wait, what are birthdays usually like, while we're at it?" Harry asked, mortified.
"Still can't picture it," Morgan admitted.

"Shit..." Sean drew out, then remembered his audience. "Oh, fuck-" He clapped his hand over his mouth while Garcia laughed uproariously at his dilemma. Harry and Morgan exchanged a grin. "Don't tell your father," Sean pleaded and Harry held up his hands in forgiveness. "I'll ask him what's going to happen for you." Sean said in relief.


The other three stopped, speculatively thinking. Sean left the room and a moment later, they heard him shout up the stairs, "Is Harry's birthday July 31st?" There was a somewhat muffled response as Hotch moved from Jack's room to the stairs. Sean came back into the room. "July 15th. That's a weird change to make. You guys need to hurry up and figure out what the hell happened with-" He broke off mid-sentence with a groan, realizing he had sworn again, and the others laughed. "Don't tell Aaron," he begged again.

"Don't tell me what?"

The others laughed harder as Sean grinned sheepishly at his brother, who was just entering the room.

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Something woke him in the middle of the night. He wasn’t quite sure what it was, but upon leaving his room immediately saw that neither of his sons’ doors were closed. After a moment he heard a faint giggle from Jack downstairs, and his Harry Senses were pointing him in the same direction. He crept quietly towards the stairs to evaluate the situation, but paused when he heard Harry cover up a snicker. A few more steps toward the stairway and he began to hear another sound. Hissing.

He silently moved down the stairs, but found neither one in the living room. A cold draft curled around his socked feet, only getting stronger as he moved towards the back. As he passed it, he noticed that the sofa had been stripped of the blanket and two pillows that had been on it before.

The back door was open, and the exit was blocked by both of his sons. Harry had one pillow against the door jam and was leaned back against it. In his lap, Jack had curled up and rested his head back against Harry’s shoulder. The blanket was tucked around Jack, while Harry sufficed with his jacket in the mild weather, colder than normal with the front a storm was following. He shuffled slightly as Hotch watched, giving up a little more of the blanket that was partially draped over him to wrap it more firmly around Jack.

The hissing was coming from Jack at the moment, but as soon as he stopped, something else responded. Harry answered. The…conversation continued for a solid minute, during which Hotch became aware of something sliding across the floor. At this point a couple of weeks ago, he would have started panicking. But he trusted Harry.

Instead, he quietly left and came back a minute later. This time, he let the floorboards creak underneath him to avoid surprising either one. Harry’s back stiffened as he got closer, and Hotch crouched down to tuck the blanket he had just retrieved around Harry’s shoulders, and Harry cautiously turned his head over his shoulder to meet Hotch’s gaze. Hotch smiled comfortingly at him and raised his hand, ignoring Harry’s immediate flinch and subsequent wince at his own action, then finished the motion to rub Harry’s head.

Jack leaned back to beam at Hotch. “Dad, Dad!”
“Jack?” Hotch responded, amused. Harry had gone almost entirely still beside them both.

“Harry can do it too! He speaks it!”

Hotch glanced at Harry with a small smile, but paused when he realized Harry was carefully focusing on anything away from him. “Speak what, Jack?”

“Um, er…” Jack frowned, one knee jiggling while he thought. “Snake-talk.”

Hotch blinked. “What?”

“Parseltongue,” Harry reluctantly said.

A small hiss came from outside, and Hotch peered over the two brothers to see three snakes curled up on the back porch, watching him. One was pulling away, retreating as far back as it could without leaving entirely. Jack replied to the hiss cheerfully, and got a response from the nearest snake. Hotch and Harry observed the conversation, the former dumbfounded and the latter with trepidation, until some sort of question was posed towards Harry and he was forced to respond.

“I’m beginning to think the term “trouble magnet” can only be strongly used in your case, but this isn’t quite what I was expecting to find this early in the morning,” Hotch finally said before Harry could become any tenser. After a pause, he asked, “Was St. Patrick a wizard, then?”

A laugh, half-surprise and half-relief, escaped Harry. “Not that I know of, but maybe. He would have had to be a specific kind, though, a Parseltongue. We can speak to snakes, but it’s extremely uncommon.” In a rush, he added, “And associated with dark magic.”

Hotch leaned over and ruffled both boys’ hair, earning a squawk from Jack, who was interrupted mid-sentence in whatever he was saying. “Well, I guess we’re going to be up for a while. Do the dark wizards want hot chocolate?”

“Yes!” Jack happily exclaimed, earlier frustration forgotten. Hotch looked at Harry, who nodded, evidently not trusting himself to speak.

“So does this mean Jack’s a wizard, too?” he asked, calling out behind him as he walked into the kitchen.

“I’m pretty sure. Never heard of it outside of magical folk,” he heard Harry respond. There was some shuffling, and then Harry appeared at the doorway. Some hesitancy permeated from him, so Hotch continued preparing the hot chocolate while he waited for Harry to form his statement. “You’re not mad,” he finally stated.

“A little confused about the hour, but no, not mad.” Glancing over, he pointed out, “Can you imagine how often I’d have to throw a fit if I got mad every time Reid showed a new talent?” Harry made a conceding facial gesture. “You should’ve seen Morgan’s face when he told us he did magic tricks.” He handed a cup to Harry and took the other two to the back door, passing one to Jack and keeping a steady mantra going in his head about how this was to make sure Harry never felt threatened and that any sugar high in his youngest son was a much simpler problem to fix. Jack had to struggle to get his arms out from under all of the blankets he was bundled in so he could take it.

“So, what’s with the snakes?”

“Apparently Jack’s been talking to them for a while. There was a small nest in the washroom that hatched last spring and one of them liked Jack so she stuck around, and two of her friends joined her.” The cup froze halfway to Hotch’s mouth as he began planning home repairs to block out any other animals that might be trying to get in, and wondered how long it would take to clean out
It took a great deal of self-restraint to not ask about what mice problem that might be.

His phone rang, and Harry’s eyebrow rose. “You really are on call at all hours,” he commented. Hotch sighed, giving him an apologetic look before checking the number and frowning. “What is it?”

“I don’t recognize the number.” He set the cup down and walked into the kitchen so half his hearing wasn’t devoted to hissing. “Hotchner.”

“What’re you doing awake at this time?” the voice on the other end asked.

“If you didn’t think I’d be awake, why are you calling?”

“Honestly, forgot the time difference. But since you’re awake, we might as well talk.” The voice was familiar, on the verge of recognition but not enough for him to put it to a name. “Heard through the grape vine that you’re looking into a better security system. It just so happens I’m flying out to DC for a lecture on Apache studies, and I’m sure I could stop by on my way back.”

“Blackwolf,” he said aloud. Running a quick calculation in his head about what time it must be in New Mexico, he weighed his choices and decided it wasn’t worth it to ask why the other man was awake at this hour.

“Yes. Do you have time around the eighth?”

“Yeah, I should be here.” He spared a glance towards Harry, who was looking in from his place on the couch not-too-discretely. “And if not, there’s someone here who you can talk to.”

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Despite their knowledge of Harry’s magic, the team refused to treat him any differently, even if he tested their tolerance once in a while by performing magic around them. Hotch and Gideon caught on to what he was doing immediately, and his father made no effort to stop him. He relaxed once he was confident that the team truly had no trouble with it. Sean and Jack kept asking to see more magical demonstrations, which made Harry smile, and Hotch gladly gave his brother a blank check for how long he could stay at the house.

Travis had worked political magic and gotten Harry unrestricted access to the BAU’s portion of Quantico, though she said Strauss requested that he disillusion himself so no one wondered where Harry came from or why he kept walking in. The team decided not to comment on how Strauss knew what magic was, and Harry just threw on his invisibility cloak whenever they went to Quantico, which was almost daily because of the strength of the wards there.

There was no immediate case they needed to work on, so the team instead devoted its time to the Woodsmarked Killer. Harry spent most of the days watching them work, which led to team members taking breaks to explain what they were doing so he could follow along. While the information was usually free, sometimes they asked for information about the wizarding world. Reid asked for his books at one point, then gave them all back, read and memorized, by lunch.

Travis stopped by to deliver information about the Woodsmarked Killer. Hotch asked for information about the wizarding world, particularly relating to Harry, and the team set aside time at the end of the day for an impromptu meeting.
The magical agent covered as much information as she knew about Voldemort, and while Harry sat in to supplement anything she didn't know, there wasn't a lot of them to tell. Within a short time frame, Travis was coming to an awkward halt. "We really didn't get involved in the last wizarding war," she said honestly. "America, I mean. Europe and Western Asia has more wizarding wars than anywhere else. For some reason, they have a lot more dark wizards. Just in the last century, Europe's had two."

"Do they know who this guy really is?" Morgan asked, frowning. "And Voldemort, what kind of name is that?"

"Flight from death," Garcia said and everyone looked at her. "Voldemort. It's French."

"He's become so dehumanized by the wizarding society that I wouldn't be surprised if he'd managed to completely wipe away his previous identity," Travis stated. "It was said that he had been so changed by the dark magic he was using that he didn't even look human anymore."

"His real name was Tom Marvolo Riddle," Harry said suddenly. Travis blinked in surprise. "He went to school at Hogwarts fifty-one years ago, when he opened the Chamber of Secrets and framed Hagrid for it. Hagrid's the gamekeeper at the school now." At Travis's gape, he continued, "Er, that's about all I know. That, and I think his father had the same name, because he said he started going by Voldemort since he didn't want the name of his muggle father."

There was some more blinking from Travis. "How on earth do you know that?" she finally asked.

"He told me, last year."

"Wait, you've met him?!"

"Twice now. Well, three times, counting when I was one."

Travis rubbed her forehead. "How did you survive?"

"Sheer luck, really. The first – or second - time he was too weak to really fight, and the last time he was channeled through an item that I destroyed."

"I am Lord Voldemort," Reid suddenly said.

Harry perked up. "Exactly!"

"What," Travis deadpanned, and if the team hadn't been used to Reid's oddities by now they surely would have been making similar sounds and expressions.

"It's an anagram. Tom Marvolo Riddle can be rearranged to spell 'I am Lord Voldemort,' " Reid explained.

"Harry, is there anything else he told you?" Travis asked. "You might know more about him than our whole government does, if he talked to you."

Harry shook his head quickly. "No, that was it."

"It's a start, and it's more than we had before," Elle pointed out. "You can look up information based off that, can't you?"

"I can give it a go," Travis agreed. "Might take me some time, though. I'll try and get it to you by Thursday."
When the group finally broke up so the profilers could work on some independent research, Harry hesitated to leave, unsure if he should remain in the briefing room or head to Garcia’s office, where the tech lay in wait with her innumerable questions about magic. Morgan muttered something to Hotch, got a quick response, then walked over to Harry, grabbing Reid along the way and causing him to lightly stumble and curse.

Harry raised an eyebrow slightly as Reid straightened himself out and Morgan ignored his grumblings. “If you’re not busy, do you want to come with us? There’s something we’d like to show you.”

“Don’t include me in this,” Reid snapped.

“It’s not like it’s porn,” Morgan shot back. Harry nodded in amusement and followed the two out after sparing a quick glance at his father, who shot him a brief, small smile.

They took the elevator down a few flights and weaved through hallways before Morgan opened a door and waved them both into a large room filled with padded mats. A few pairs of agents were scattered around, sparring, while a observers called pointers out to them. A couple more were using the punching bags. The room was humid and had an overwhelming stench of sweat, but everyone else appeared to not notice it as Morgan led them to a back corner.

He asked Reid to grab a few water bottles from a cooler, then turned to Harry with a light grin. “So since you get into trouble annually, I asked Hotch if we could show you a few things that might help you in a fight. Travis said wizards don’t really know what hand-to-hand combat is.”

Reid walked back up at that point and set the bottles to the side on a chair. “So I guess I’m here as a punching bag?” he asked ruefully.

“Other way around.” Reid arched an eyebrow. “Your size to mine is closer to Harry’s to an adult’s. You’ll demonstrate and then Harry’s going to do it.”

Reid turned his pleasantly surprised expression to Harry. “I already like this more than I thought I was going to.” Harry snickered quietly.

“All right, your best advantage is going to be surprise, obviously, but you also need to make sure you can hit fast and get away. I’m opposed to Reid socking me in the face and I think we’re going to have to build up your arm strength before we do any of that so we’re just going to show you basics right now.”

Morgan began a process of talking Reid through movements, such as basic strikes and blocks. After a minute, Reid would take Morgan’s place and Harry would take Reid’s while Morgan would watch for anything he was doing wrong. After some corrections, they’d move on.

The agents focused entirely on the lesson, making sure to point out small mistakes without deprecating him. The pair joked around a lot to relieve tension, and if Harry wasn’t mistaken, he was sure the lesson was just as much for Reid as it was for him since Morgan kept making jokes about both their trouble-finding abilities. There were no standards they were fulfilling besides general defense, and Harry realized Morgan truly had come up with and implemented the idea on his own to make sure Harry could protect himself. He found himself smiling at odd moments and was grateful neither agent mentioned it, although it probably had something to do with how much amusement they found in teaching him.
At the hour point, as they took a ten minute break, one of the pairs who had been grappling nearby walked over to them and started up a conversation with the agents. Harry took the moment to relax as much as he could while they discussed a case, but was pulled back out of his zone as the agents began asking questions.

“Are you part of a case, or…?” the woman asked.

“Er…” He glanced at Reid. The doctor fumbled and looked at Morgan.

“Classified,” the dark-skinned agent deadpanned.

She snorted. “Sure. Trying to build up muscle?”

“Not really, just some basic defense.”

The man she had been with blinked in surprise. “With *his* body weight? Why aren’t you trying more judo or locks?”

While Morgan hesitated, Reid snorted and said, “Because ex-football players have a one-track mind for taking people down.”

The woman reached out a hand to Harry, which he hesitantly took. It was sweaty and warm, but tightened gently around his as she pulled him to his feet. “Too much offense, not enough defense,” she lightly scolded.

“The best defense is a good offense,” Morgan muttered, following her as she led Harry back to the mat.

“For linebackers.” She released Harry and moved away to face him. “Jenna Harris.”

“Harry Potter,” he replied, relieved for once that the last name that naturally came to mind didn’t match his father’s.

“So the distance you’re at, most adults have enough of an arm span to outreach you. You’re going to want to get closer, like, *uncomfortably* close, and then beat the crap out of them with your elbows and knees. You won’t need a lot of force to do a lot of damage. Aim for weak points. Unlike Morgan over there, who breaks everything he touches, you don’t have the strength to just dive into a fight and start slugging people.”

There was some muttering from Morgan behind Harry. Reid was snickering.

“Be aware of anatomy. Diaphragm’s here,” she said, pointing it out on herself. “Blow there with your elbow will wind them faster than anything else. Higher, though, and the rib cage isn’t as easy to damage. Lower and to the side, you can hit the kidneys, which is a real bitch.” She glanced at Morgan. “What kind of fighting are we looking at?”

“I don’t know, Harris. Looks like you’re calling the shots now.” Amusement flavored his tone.

She rolled her eyes. “I mean general fights or more specific, like against an armed individual, abductions, whatever.”

“Someone trying to kill him.” There was just a subtle taste of stiffness, enough that Harris got the message that it wasn’t a regular training regimen.

“That makes this easier.” She turned back to Harry. “How long have you got in Quantico?”
“I’m not sure… A few more days?”

“Okay. We’ll simplify years of teaching. Punch the neck, dislocate the shoulder and knee.”

“Damn, that’s not nice at all,” Morgan said.

Harris grabbed her partner and pointed at him. “Carl Samuels.” Harry waved. Harris turned Samuels to the side so Harry got a better angle, then aimed a fake punch at her partner’s neck. “It’ll cut off air supply and usually drop them on its own, but just to be sure…” She motioned for Samuels to mimic a reaction to getting punched, and he bent over, clutching his throat. Harris moved closer and wrapped her left arm around his neck to hold his head down while grabbing his elbow with her right hand and shoving it up. “This’ll dislocate the shoulder. Also handy if he tries to come after you later because it’s always easier to dislocate something a second time.” She released his neck and grabbed his arm with her right hand before sticking her right out for balance as she raised her leg and aimed it as his knee. “Dislocate the knee.”

“He can’t call for help for anyone trying to kill Harry with him, can’t fight with the shoulder, and can’t chase him with the leg,” Reid summarized, impressed.

“And you’ll probably have a lifelong enemy,” Samuels added in as he was released.

Harry snorted. “We’ll add them to the list.”

“What about breaking the arm,” someone asked from behind Morgan and Reid. The group turned to see who it was. A new agent, fresh from the punching bag, was leaning against the chair Reid had pulled over.

“Which way?” Samuels asked with a snort.

“Well, here,” the agent said, stepping onto the mat. “The best way if you’re focused on close combat is…”

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Hotch left his office to find Morgan and Reid after neither answered their phones for half an hour. He felt nothing from Harry’s end besides a general elation, so it was likely there was no danger, but they had to leave at some point to go make dinner. Elle slipped into the elevator just before it closed, saying she wanted to give any last minutes tips the guys may not have covered.

They found most of the training room’s occupants gathered in a back corner and, upon close inspection, the BAU couple and their younger addition specifically. An agent Hotch had never met before was sparring lightly with Harry, both moving slowly to let him get a feel for it. “See, Harris, there’s a way for him to defend himself without annihilating his opponent,” someone called out, creating a ripple of laughter.

Harris, standing next to Morgan and Reid, waved it off flippantly. Hotch nudged his way through the small crowd as she leaned toward Morgan and asked, “ Seriously, what’s he here for?”

“Classified,” Morgan responded as if this was the response he’d given for an hour or longer.

She rolled her eyes. “Yeah, right. Look, I’m not saying he looks like your boss’s offspring, but he sure as hell looks like your boss’s kid.”

“You’re the only one thinking that,” Morgan laughed.
“Everyone is thinking that,” Harris’s partner, whose name Hotch had forgotten, muttered from behind Reid. “Why do you think there are, what,” he said, turning slowly to count, “fifteen agents skipping workouts for-“ He stopped in his counting as he turned and came face-to-face with Hotch, letting out a yelp.

Harris raised an eyebrow and turned to look at him, but glanced Hotch out of the corner of her eye and “Shit” slipped out. The rest of the group became aware of the new presences like small waves spreading through a pond, and Hotch’s hopes for keeping Harry’s parentage quiet dropped as he saw the shiftiness in the group. Harris read his expression and offered quietly, “Well, maybe not everyone is thinking it.” Without turning around, she heard an agent give a startled gasp, looking between Harry and Hotch. “Now they are,” she added in the tone of someone who is preparing to jump into the grave they just dug.

“Sorry, Hotch,” Morgan said quietly, and Hotch waved him off. Harry and the agent had stopped sparring in the ring, and Hotch was pretty sure the agent was trying to hide behind Harry to avoid elimination. From Harry’s expression, he had caught onto the problem.

Hotch raised a hand to get complete attention, which he already had but now led to everyone’s silence. “It’s fine, but keep it to yourselves. I’m sure you can guess from this activity why that’s so important.”

There was a lot of eager nodding and fleeing until the BAU team and their plus one were the only remaining people in the corner.

Hotch raised an eyebrow at Harry, who responded with a grin that was half sheepish and half nervous. “I guess you’ll have to return tomorrow or there’s going to be a full scale riot.” He was rewarded with a wider, more confident smile.

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The agents at Quantico continued their eager training of Harry, much to Hotch’s unspoken amusement. By the eighth, he was well able to at least get away from most opponents without difficulty. One of the BAU members was always with him, and Hotch stayed aware of Harry’s progress through whoever came back with him that day.

Blackwolf showed up on the eighth, a Tuesday, and immediately began assessing the wards. He confirmed Travis’s earlier statements about their formidability, and moved onto the dilemma of getting Harry to the “Dursleys” after school ended.

“Don’t bother going through the regular muggle system,” he said. "If anyone magically involved is the plaintiff or defendant, it's sorted out in magical courts. When the plaintiff is magical and the defendant muggle, paperwork is forged and the defendant goes to muggle prison. I'll send you what you need to know later." Hotch nodded his understanding and Blackwolf moved on. "Now, the schools sometimes check to make sure the proper wards activate. Obviously, with Harry they weren’t, which means it’s more likely that someone is on the street watching him. You’re trying to keep this quiet, right?” At their nods, he said, “Get in contact with Travis and give her all the names of people you know in your previous neighborhood. Whoever it is, they’re probably directly under Dumbledore and loyal to him, which is going to make this a mess to sort out.”

“Why would this getting back to Dumbledore be a problem?” Harry asked.

“Because it’s hard to foil a scheme, create a scheme, and try and guess someone else’s all at once. As it is, you’re probably going to have to guess at what Dumbledore’s already planning, and we don’t want you to also have to work out what he’ll do if he hears about this. The guy’s a great wizard and
is one of the major reasons his side won the war last time, but he does tend to sacrifice individuals for the greater good.”

Harry frowned, uneasy and taken off guard by the matter-of-fact manner in which this was stated. Riddle had said similar things, but then, he’d been gloating.

“Besides, he has a spy who’s working as a double agent against Voldemort – *supposedly* – so there’s a higher chance from that alone that anything you say to Dumbledore could get back to Voldemort’s side so they can keep his cover.”

“Wait, what? Who?”

“I think the name was Snape.”

“Snape? Like, *Severus Snape*, professor at Hogwarts?”

Blackwolf raised an eyebrow. “I’m sensing some animosity.”

“You’ve got to be kidding. Dumbledore trusts him as a *spy*?”

“There was apparently a good reason for it, at least in the last war, but since I have no idea what it is I can’t tell you if that applies to any future wars.”

Harry rubbed his forehead, leaning back against the chair he was in to process the information. Hotch took the opportunity to ask what should be done about the informant on Privet Drive.

Blackwolf shrugged. “Buying him or her off isn’t a sure way to go about it since they’re probably not doing this for pay. You are likely going to find that you have to directly talk to the man or woman and explain the situation. Your best option is to get them to see that keeping your secret is the moral thing to do.” After a pause, he grudgingly added, “And you can tell them that the American wizarding government will arrest and prosecute them for espionage or something equally ridiculous. The American muggle government doesn’t have a good record and I’m sure that will carry over.”

“Why are you so involved in the wizarding government?” Hotch asked.

Blackwolf glanced at him, amused. “The Apache *are* the wizarding government. Didn’t Travis tell you that?” He let out a short laugh when Hotch just stared at him. “We mixed up the wizards and witches who were born into our tribes as the Gahe. We eventually learned that wasn’t true. By the time of the European settlers, many Native American tribes were actually using their magical members as spokespeople and go-betweens for other tribes, since most believed they at least had some spiritual power. When the settlers began pushing out into our lands, we kept their identities quiet to protect them, but we still learned that the Europeans were bringing their own wizards and witches with them. There were many occasions in which tribes, especially those who would join the Iroquois Confederacy and the so-called Five Civilized Tribes, sheltered persecuted wizards and witches, although the need for their protection began to die out with religious fundamentalism.

“Through that protection, however, many in the magical community became aware of our consideration towards them and tried to get us under Britain’s wizarding laws. Britain refused to acknowledge us, and this angered the Americans enough that after the Revolutionary War, most were in agreement to turn a great deal of their local wizarding government over to us. By the Civil War, almost all of the power had been given to tribes, and by the world wars, the entire government was being run by Native Americans. We’ve controlled it ever since.”

“I’m a bit surprised the tribes could work together for that, since they had difficulty doing so to protect their lands,” Hotch said, a bit cautious to phrase it in a non-offensive manner.
Blackwolf shook his head. “Actually, it was easier, since the wizarding communications had already been established through the tribes. That was one of the major reasons we were the first choice for the government. Another reason that we were chosen, and a reason that we accepted, was that we were organized enough magically to provide some structure while the U.S. government was still being built, and it made it easier to integrate with the government once it was established. We waited until there was a successful turnover of party power, which was the first in history, before we revealed the presence of the magical community to the president.”

Hotch ran through the first few presidents in his head to look for the mentioned event. “Thomas Jefferson?” he asked.

“Yeah. All the presidents since have known, for better or for worse. He in particular was amiable towards us, but asked that we also inform the speaker of the house, vice president and the chief justice to maintain balance of power. We’re rather grateful he did so, since Marshall was almost aggressively pro-wizardry when Jackson began his political persecution of it.”

Harry looked completely lost at the names of the Americans, and Hotch made a mental note to later explain. “So, was the Trail of Tears about the Native Americans or the magical community?”

“Both, although that had more directly to do with the Native Americans from public opinion. It just had the added bonus of hurting the wizarding society as well. He wanted to actually reveal the wizards and witches, but we warned most of the magical public, and several prominent government officials threatened him into submission after revealing their own magical history.”

“They threatened Jackson?”

“Politely encouraged with superior numbers. He would have most likely done something if not for his focus on the pet banks, and Van Buren was too busy with the financial crisis after him. By the time a president with time had taken office, the wizarding community had already earned several favorable points and it wasn’t such a good idea to try to oust them.”

“Have wizards ever gotten directly involved in the government?”

“The acquisition of Alaska was actually directly because of wizards. Russia wasn’t too fond of them and many pushed Steward to accept Russia’s offer for the land so they could protect many there before any persecution began. After the Civil War, we gained more power in the government and more people in high ranking positions became aware of magic. There was so much concern with Reconstruction that they simply didn’t have time to deal with the wizarding community. Since then, many quiet movements were made to protect Native American lands and, through them, the wizards and witches. The code talkers helped during World War II in thanks to those who had protected their cultures.”

“But the tribes and the wizarding government aren’t synonyms.”

“No. Certain tribes run the government by geographical region, with a centralized but weak center in Philadelphia. The Oneida used to run it, but interest fell in the late 1880s and the Apache offered to take control in an attempt to protect their culture, since U.S. government encroachment was becoming a threat. Most of the departments are solely under one region’s jurisdiction, with a few exceptions that are spread out over all of them, such as the Defense Department. But the tribes are not solely devoted to running the government.”


Blackwolf began to answer but Hotch beat him to it. “Philadelphia was the original capital of the
U.S. It was later moved to D.C. instead due to politics.”

“It’s always politics,” Blackwolf muttered.

Harry had a feeling he was seeing history repeat itself as the two grown men quickly devolved from intelligent conversation into bantering.

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An hour had passed after Blackwolf left when Harry broached the question tentatively. It was remarkable how keen he was to ask, despite his concern over the consequences. Hotch hadn’t yet decided whether he should classify it as a lack of self-preservation, courage, or a mixture. "Is there anything...like, a video or pictures...oh, of course there are..."

"Harry."

"...of Mom?"

Hotch paused. In the backyard, they could distantly hear Sean running around with Jack, who was chasing Hedwig from the ground while she flew overhead. "I've got a video with her and Jack, shortly after he was born," he said. "Let me go get it."

He was back a few minutes later. Harry, who had taken to snagging books from the library and reading through them in between spurts of homework, set a book...was that one of Hotch's old law textbooks?...aside, eagerly sitting up while Hotch put the CD in.

It had been a long time since he'd gone through any of these videos. Now that he thought about it, he wondered just how many there were of Haley. There was a multitude of Jack, but... On that note, he wasn't sure if *he* was in any of them, since he was was usually behind the camera. He didn't think that was a problem, except there wouldn't be a record of him left for the boys if something happened to him. What if something *did* happen to him at work? Damn it, he needed to add Harry to the will. Or should he wait until he knew Harry better? Ah, might want to wait just a little longer. He wasn't going to die in the next few weeks, with any luck.

Jack was falling down on screen again as he started paying attention again. Haley's legs occasionally came into view as she tried to encourage him forward, but there hadn't really been a good glimpse of her face yet. Jack almost walked into a table corner, saved only by a quick grab from Haley. Hotch's own laughter filtered in through the audio, as well as Haley's snickering. "Oh, this one's going to be a handful," she said.

"That's okay. We're going to be helicopter parents, remember?" Hotch joked on screen.

Next to Harry, the Hotch realized the statement had little meaning, since the two had continued to agree that they were probably going to be hypervigilant after Harry's supposed death. "It was something we used to say after- Harry?" he asked, stopping abruptly as he turned to him. His son had gone entirely pale, and Hotch glanced back to the screen Harry's eyes were fixed on. Haley had finally come into view, grinning at Jack as the boy stood in between her legs and patted her head in a confused manner. "Harry, what's wrong?"

"I knew I recognized her voice," he whispered.

Hotch quickly paused the video. "What?"

"Her voice." He ran both hands down in his voice. "I- I've heard it before." There was a sharp gasp. "Oh, Merlin, and I thought I'd recognized yours too..."
Hotch reached out to touch Harry's shoulders and turn him to face Hotch. He shifted forward and leaned in slightly when Harry didn't look up. "Harry, what are you talking about?"

Harry moved his eyes up reluctantly. "I used to hear voices, when I was younger. They stopped when I was about eight, for the most part. When I got really upset, I'd hear... Well, I'd hear this woman talking to me, sometimes. She'd read to me, or help me with my homework when I got older, or just sit and talk... She'd sing if she couldn't stay long. It happened about twenty, maybe thirty times. The older I got, the less it happened, until it totally stopped. Something...bad happened when I was eight, and I thought that was the last time I'd ever hear from her. I heard a man's voice twice, then never again. At the end of my first year, though, when I was fighting Quirrell... I heard her. She helped me hold him off, and when it was over, she told me she had to go. It was the only time I ever saw her. I haven't heard from her since."

He turned sharply away from Hotch. "I- I'm sorry, it's just..." His head dropped into his hands. "She looks and sounds so much like her," he finished, muffled.

Hotch stared at the back of his head for a long moment. "Did... Did she ever tell you to go to the police?"

His son's head snapped up so quickly that time that Hotch was almost worried he'd hurt himself. "How did you know that?" Harry whispered.

"Haley woke up screaming one time," Hotch replied shakily. "She said she'd seen you, and that she thought someone was going to kill you because she'd made you try to go to the police. They caught you before you made it."

Emotion welled up in Harry's eyes as he nodded. Hotch felt nauseous the more he thought about it, as one main thought stood out above all the rest.

Haley had told him Harry was alive, had told him that he was in danger. And Hotch hadn't listened.

No, it was worse. "Harry, about a week later... Did...?"

"You were there," Harry whispered, eyes widening slowly. "I hadn't had food or water in days, and then they gave me some and I threw it up. You told me not to take what they were giving me. You said it was poisoned."

Hotch pressed a hand to his mouth. He was vaguely aware that the hand was shaking.

"You sang to me, too. You stayed until I went to sleep, the first time, and...you sang until I fell asleep..." Harry's gaze drifted away, struggling to recall. Hotch let his head slide down until it was completely covered by his hands. "Are you going to Scarborough Fair? Parsley, sage, rosemary, and..."

"Thyme. Remember me to one who lives there. She once was a true love of mine." He lowered his hands and raised his head to see Harry staring at him. "Simon and Garfunkel. "Scarborough Fair,"" he murmured. "You were throwing up blood, but you... You had a fever, and I kept thinking, This is how we lost Harry. A fever. I thought it had to be a nightmare."

"You taught me how to throw an elbow and block a basic punch. You..." His shoulders shook, and Hotch reached for him in alarm, pulling him in close. "You were the reason I could fight back." Harry buried his face into his neck, but his tone was relieved and exuberant. "You were there...!"
But you weren't there soon enough, his mind whispered to him and he closed his eyes tightly. You never saved him. He saved himself for you.

His gut wrenched. He hadn't been there like he should have been.

Chapter End Notes

I this chapter answers the last of the plot issues. The reason why Hotch and Harry had never recognized each other before, despite meeting in the cupboard, was that it had been years since their last interaction and they had never actually seen each other.

This chapter also includes the first of my epic nerd-outs. These will be common in the story. You're welcome for my American magic explanation. (Which, oddly enough, was written before Rowling came up with her canon version of American schools. That's why Ilvermorny is not mentioned.) Bet my AP US history teacher didn't think I'd be applying his class like this.
“How can I hold that all men are created equal, when here before me stands, stinking, the moral carcass of the gentleman from Ohio, proof that some men are inferior, endowed by their Maker with dim wits, impermeable to reason, with cold, pallid slime in their veins instead of hot red blood! You are more reptile than man, George! So low and flat, that the foot of man is incapable of crushing you!"

“How dare you!”

“Yet even you, Pendleton, who should have been gibbeted for treason long before today, even worthless you ought to be treated equally before the law! And so again, sir, and again and again and again I say: I do not hold with equality in all things - only with equality before the law.” - Lincoln

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The doctor's office found them a time shortly after New Year's, and Hotch took a day off to get Harry in. In retrospect, there was a lot that Harry should have probably been expecting to happen.

After the nurse practitioner left, the doctor entered without looking up, frowning at his chart. "Harry?" he asked, finally sparing him a glance. He nodded. "And you're the father, I'm guessing?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Well, first off, I'd like to know why you don't have medical records."

This had been something they'd talked over on the ride to the office, and they had decided it wasn't a good idea to lie to the doctor now in case something came up. "I haven't been living at home," Harry said. "It's a really long story, but I was in England for most of my life, and the people I was staying with didn't really care about my health."

The doctor frowned grew. "Were they your legal guardians?" He nodded, and the doctor's frown intensified further. "Okay, that's child neglect."

"We're getting the paperwork together to prosecute," Hotch assured him, and the doctor moved on. "All right, that explains some of this, then. You're a bit underweight and on the short side, but you've probably guessed that for yourself. Otherwise, you're in good health. The nurse who was in here thought she saw something when she was checking your breathing, though, so if you don't mind, I'm going to have another look at it."

When Harry didn't protest, he walked around to the side of the examination table and slipped his hand under and up the back of Harry's shirt. His fingers probed gently at his back, causing no pain, but the doctor didn't look pleased all the same.

"Hm," he grunted, and lifted the shirt so he could see. "Ah. What happened here?"

Harry tried to crane his neck back. Hotch moved to a better position, then froze in shock. "I can't see
it,” Harry said, trying to ignore the expressions on both of their faces. "Usually not looking there."

"Circular scar, a few years old..." He gestured with his hands. "That big. Sort of feels like two of the ribs broke and rehealed back here."

Harry frowned thoughtfully. "I think that was when Aunt Petunia hit me with a frying pan."

They both stared at him. "She hit you hard enough for it to scar that badly?" the doctor demanded.

"Well, I remember it was bleeding. I never saw it, though."

The doctor's fingers ghosted over the spot again. "You're lucky those were your ribs and not your vertebrae," he muttered. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Hotch close his eyes and run a hand over his face. "Any pain back here?"

"None."

"Did they take you to get this looked at?"

"No."

"Didn't think so. This is remarkable - it looks like your ribs healed perfectly well on their own. Obviously, I'd need an x-ray to check, but frankly, if this was a long time ago and you haven't had problems since, I don't think there's a reason to. You were really lucky. Well, medically. Your situation sounds like shit."

Was it possible for his magic to have set the bones in place so they would heal correctly? "I'm out of it now," Harry said.

"Okay," the doctor said, letting the shirt fall back down. "Let's talk about food."

"Oh joy."

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When the Harry opened the door in response to the ring, he smiled in surprise at the old man on the front step. "Good afternoon," he said promptly, earning a small, polite nod. It was two days after the doctor's appointment, midday while his father was at work. After Sean's abrupt appearance, Hotch had confirmed he could and probably should answer the door, which Harry had ascertained in his sheepish state after he told Hotch what had happened when Sean arrived. "Can I help you?"

"Ah, yes. May I come in?"

Harry paused for the briefest of seconds. Sean was upstairs but he must have surely heard the bell ring, and if this somehow went badly, he did have his wand in his pocket. "Of course," he said, opening the door wider and holding open the door. "Who do you need to speak to?"

"You, I think. You could only be Harry."

He smiled slightly. "I am." Something about the man demanded respect, and although Harry was hesitant to give it, he unwittingly found himself speaking in more proper tones. "But, ah, I don't know you."

"No, I didn't think you would," the man said, a touch bitter towards the end of his statement.

From upstairs, Sean's voice drifted down. "Hey, Harry, who is it?"
"Er..." He glanced at the man for clarification.

Instead of giving him an answer, the man tilted his head towards the stairs. "Hello, Sean," he calmly said, loudly enough for it to carry.

Sean swore loudly, and then there were loud footsteps down the upper hallway and he appeared at the top of the stairs. "What the fuck are you doing here?" he demanded, pausing only for a moment before flying down the stairs. Harry stumbled back, startled, as Sean grabbed his arm and tugged him away from the visitor. "You don't have any right-

"Sean, this is not your house," the old man interrupted, eyes narrowing crossly. "You do not dictate the rules here."

"No, but I know Aaron told you never to come here," Sean snapped. "Get out or I'm calling the police."

"And tell them what, exactly? Aaron never filed legal papers to keep me off the property."

"Hey," Harry said firmly, causing both heads to turn towards him. "Who are you?"

"Someone you would have been introduced to long ago if your father knew what was good for you," the man said stiffly, still glaring at Sean, who reddened at the jab at Hotch. "None of this would ever have happened if I had been involved in raising him, you know," he told Sean.

"No, it probably would have turned out a lot worse," Sean snarled.

"Aaron couldn't keep his son from getting sick, couldn't stop him from getting taken - he hardly found the boy on purpose. It was sheer luck they managed to cross paths, and only because he couldn't protect his wife."

"Don't you dare - " Sean hissed.

"Tell me, does he really not care about his children or is he just an inept father?"

"Hey!" Harry exclaimed.

The old man glanced at him out of the corner of his eye. "There is a lot you do not know about your father, boy. You might see him as a hero, but he covers a lot of deficiencies remarkably."

"What do you want?" Sean demanded.

"I want to meet my grandchildren."

"Tough shit. That's not happening - and you need to leave before Aaron gets home."

The old man let out a small laugh. "I'm not afraid of my son - either of them." Harry froze. "Sean, I know the legal system better than you, so when I say I have every right to be here, I think you should know well enough to believe me. I certainly know more than a second rate cook."

The hand on Harry's arm tightened but Sean didn't otherwise outwardly react to the insult. His grandfather turned towards him. "Go get your brother," he ordered. Harry didn't move. "Boy, I won't ask you again. I want to talk to both of you."

Harry glared at him. The old man's hand struck out until it was tightened around Harry's shoulder. He jerked back instinctively but the grip stayed firm, and his grandfather bent until he was at Harry's height. "I don't think you quite understand the situation you're in, so let me explain."
"Let go of him," Sean ordered.

The old man ignored him. Harry could make out some of the features evident in his father and Sean, but they were twisted into a cold visage on the man in front of him. "Your father, for all his intelligence, has had a series of oversights regarding you," he said. "You're not registered as being alive. You are in no government systems. By all accounts, you're here under a false identity. It's fraud, and all three of you," a glance included Sean into this, "could end up in prison if someone uncovered this."

"Nice to meet you, too, Gramps," Harry said dryly and the old man twitched at the name. "Why don't we all sit down and you can continue threatening us over some tea?"

"This isn't a game," his grandfather snapped. "I am not asking for much. I just want to see you and your brother."

"Congratulations. You've seen me. Jack looks like me, but shorter and more adorable. You can go now."

"You don't have a right to get involved with either of them," Sean snapped, glaring at his father.

"You are incapable of raising a rabbit and the only child Aaron cares about is his work. Either I will take them, or I will hand them over to the authorities, who would be hard pressed to care less than Aaron about his offspring."

Harry tried to yank his shoulder away but his grandfather roughly shook him. Despite his age, there was still an iron strength in the muscles he retained. "Stop fighting me, or I will ensure that you regret it."

"You don't know anything about your sons, do you?" Harry spat out. "Do you even care?"

"Harry."

Harry threw his arm up and slammed it against his grandfather's elbow, forcing him to either let go or risk a dislocation. "Stay the hell away from me," he snarled, moving to the side and nudging Sean in the same direction to block the stairs. "And stay away from my brother."

"Harry?" a cautious voice whispered from behind him and Harry turned to see Jack half-hidden behind a wall.

"Jack, go to your room and lock the door!" Harry shouted up at him and Jack scampered out of view.

There was movement in front of him and then Sean was pulling him out of the way. The blow, instead of hitting Harry, caught Sean squarely in the side of the head, and Harry managed to catch his uncle as he stumbled back into him. He twisted, depositing Sean on the stairs and out of the way, then moved in front of his grandfather as the old man tried to slip past.

His hands locked around Harry's upper arms and he dragged Harry up three of the steps with him. Harry shot a glance back towards Sean, who was shaking his head, dazed, on the bottom step. A trickle of blood was coming down from one temple. Harry lashed out with his leg, catching his grandfather's as he made to climb another stair, and the man stumbled half on top of him. The young wizard used the sudden imbalance to grab him around the torso and haul him back down the stairs. They were back to the bottom by the time his grandfather had gotten his feet securely under him again and pushed him off. The door to Jack's room audibly slammed shut.
A hand clenched his shirt, holding him in place, and a solid fist collided with his jaw. Harry moved with it to avoid taking more damage than necessary, and then waited for the second hit. As the next fist flew, he used the moment of weak balance in his grandfather's stance to slam his palm into the old man's chest. On its own, the movement was forceful, but he took no chances and poured a thrust of magic into shove. His grandfather released him, a flash of surprise crossing his face before he collided with the wall a few feet behind him.

Sean was still on the stair, and Harry feared a bad concussion. At any rate, the blood stream coming from his temple didn't look good. His grandfather was unexpectedly strong, and even after taking a hit was getting back up again easily. Harry threw both his hands up, palms splayed in front of him. "Protego!" he cried as his grandfather tried to approach. The man hit the barrier and stumbled back.

"Harry?" Sean asked beside him.

"I can hold this as long as I need to," Harry said firmly, not tearing his gaze away from his grandfather. That was a lie. He wasn't sure how strong the barrier would remain after a while of this. "Are you okay?"

"Just a little banged up. Mostly my pride."

Harry smiled slightly. His grandfather was frowning curiously at him. "Might want to call Dad."

It went to voicemail.

The old man nodded, unsurprised. He hadn't yet said anything about the magic. "I expected as much. Cares more about his work than his children. Harry, reconsider this."

"Live with my dad, who doesn't answer his phone this one time... Live with you, who punched me within five minutes of meeting me... Hmm..."

"Sending him a text," Sean said quietly. "He'll get it at some point."

A long silence passed. Harry resisted the urge to shift his weight every once in a while, and remained focused on keeping up the barrier. So long as it gave the appearance of being sturdy, his grandfather was unlikely to repeatedly test it. Upstairs, he hoped Jack listened to what they said and stayed there instead of venturing down at any point to see what was going on.

"Harry, be reasonable," his grandfather scolded. At least ten minutes had passed. "Your father doesn't know a thing about magic, does he?" Harry stiffened at the mention of the power he was using as a barrier between them. "I've had my encounters with magic before. I know about it, and more importantly, I know how to live with it." Harry's eyes narrowed – the chances of his grandfather having heard about magic and not being oblviated were incredibly slim, and yet...

Before he could think on it further, his grandfather nodded upstairs. "Does your brother have it too?"

"Shut up."

"Two wizards under the house of one muggle. Did you know there's a rather high rate for muggles killing their magical children?"

"You don't know anything," Harry snapped, hands shaking with anger.

"Harry," Sean said, a note of warning in his voice. Harry ignored him.
"Your father's job is to act. To pretend to sympathize with criminals, with serial killers, with psychopaths. Do you really think you'd notice if he didn't care? He didn't answer his phone now. I'll bet there are a lot of missed calls on his phone record. So. Do you really think that you'd notice if he didn't love you at all? If he was just pretending, to fill a role everyone expects of him? And people expect a lot of things from your dad, Harry. He can't properly care about all of them without letting a few become neglected."

Harry stayed quiet. There was a sharp streak of light as the barrier temporarily flickered at the upper edge.

"Harry."

"Drop the shield, Harry," his grandfather coaxed. "I'll take care of you and your brother. I hit you, yes. Because you're out of line and someone needs to show you how to behave. But I think you know that that's not going to be your father or his brother. There's a lot you don't know about them. And I'm sure they mean well, to some degree, but... Well, your father can have anger management issues sometimes."

Sean wavered next to Harry, as if he'd tried to stand up, but the blow to his head caused him to slump back to his original position almost immediately. Harry shifted closer to steady him with his leg, but kept his arms up.

"You know, the only reason I found out about you was because Sean happened to mention you to my ex-wife. She told me. Oh, Harry, I wish I'd seen you grow over the years," his grandfather murmured, so full of emotion that Harry hesitated to discard the sincerity as fake. "But I want to see you grow over the next few years too, and your father isn't going to allow that, now is he? He wants to keep you hidden. You're enrolled in magical school, I assume, but that means that outside of that limited community the only person you see is him. Maybe a few others, like your uncle here. Does that seem normal to you? Don't you want to be normal?"

Sean leaned on Harry's leg, using the stability to twist backwards and make sure Jack was no longer there. Harry began to grow concerned about just how badly he had been hit. He wished he could cast a *silencio* at his grandfather, but to do so would have required his wand or the cessation of the wandless magic, and any break could allow his grandfather to barge through.

"I still have contacts in the legal system, you know," his grandfather continued softly. "I had them look you up. You're still not in there. If something happens to you... Well, it'd be all too easy for him to make you vanish when you already don't exist. The only hint I could find that you really were alive was the action he took against the Dursleys. You were staying with them, weren't you? The boy who lived with them until recently sure looked a lot like you." Harry grimaced at the mention of his previous 'family,' and his grandfather jumped on it. "I thought I might go see them, find out more about you. I knew Aaron wouldn't tell me anything. You know what they told me? Horrible things. Very terrible, but I knew they couldn't be true. At least, not at first.

"And then I come here, and all I want to do is see the two of you. And I see that you've been turned against me. By Aaron, and by Sean. All I want is my grandchildren. I want to see you provided for, and cared for, and loved. I don't see that. You're still angry, still upset from how the Dursleys treated you. Still haven't recovered. I'll bet Aaron just told you that you didn't deserve it. I'll bet he didn't tell you why it happened, because he just wants you indebted to him. Harry, they didn't treat you like that because you were innocent. Your magic hurt them. You don't remember it, but it happened.

"That's the real reason why they were scared of you. They wanted to protect themselves, and each other. They loved you at first, and then your magic got out of hand one day. Someone could have been injured. By treating you the way they did, they kept your magic under control. They were
trying to protect you from yourself, and every time they thought you were starting to rebel they had
to keep you from hurting anyone. That's the real reason they acted like they did."

Harry could see his hands shaking in front of him, and he turned his head away from his grandfather.
That didn't stop the old man from speaking.

"They tried to tell you when you were little, but you wouldn't listen. They had to be strict or you
might have killed someone. It wasn't their fault - it was yours. The punishment was meant to fit the
crime. They treated you harshly for trying to hurt others. It was only natural. But that kind of
behavior... Well, your dad sees a lot of violence at his job, doesn't he? I'm sure he'll only see your
actions the way the Dursleys did, as signs of greater violence later. He'll kill you, surely. And it's
only going to be self-defense."

"Stop," slipped out before Harry could hold the word back.

"I asked them a little more," his grandfather continued, softly. "They told me about who they thought
your parents were."

"Don't..."

"And Harry? They were right about your father."

"Shut up!" he shouted.

"Why did you think he was so eager to take you in, when he barely knew you? I'm just trying to
warn you-" his grandfather said, and then his eyes left Harry as another light streak down the center
of the barrier showed Harry's distraction. He pushed forward, breaking through, and Harry fell
backwards in surprise. He landed awkwardly on the stairs, but before his grandfather could step
closer, the door was flung open and it bounced off the old man, making him jump to the side
reflexively. Harry took the moment to fling out the barrier again, shielding him and Sean once
more.

His father stepped into view, kicking the door shut so nothing was between him and the eldest
Hotchner. He was wearing a heavy scowl, which only intensified once he saw Harry's sprawled
position and the blood on his brother's head.

"Aaron," Harry's grandfather greeted. "We were just talking about you."

"Harry?" Hotch's eyes didn't leave his father.

"I'm fine," Harry replied tersely. "But I think Uncle Sean's got a concussion at least. Jack's
upstairs."

"Aaron," the eldest said, calmly as if his son weren't potentially suffering brain damage from a blow
he himself had delivered. "I hope you'll be more reasonable than your son is being." His tone was
disproving, strict. "You don't have time to raise two kids, certainly not ones who are going to be a
handful due to their magic."

"How much do you know about that?" Hotch asked sharply.

The oldest Hotchner smirked slightly. "You don't remember, do you? Typical."

"Harry," Hotch said, still not moving. "Go upstairs and stay with your brother."

"I'll have to drop the shield," Harry admitted. He didn't think his nerves would let him move and
hold the barrier at the same time. Not to mention that it would leave Sean exposed, and he definitely
wasn't going to be able to get both of them up the stairs. He wasn't too comfortable letting his
grandfather out of his sight, either.

"Let them come with me, Aaron," his father said. It sounded more like he was conducting a business
meeting than family matters. "You've had your chance - they're not thriving here. I can take better
care of them."

"I told you never to come here for a very good reason," Hotch snapped. "You don't get to go
anywhere near my sons. Not again. After this, don't think for a moment that I won't get a restraining
order against you."

"Aaron, Aaron. These boys need more than you can give them. And do you really think you're a
good parent? How often does work take you away? How much do you know about raising magical
children? How are you going to manage to balance the needs of your children with the demands of
your job? I can give them everything they need. You know that. They'll grow up better than they
ever would here. Just tell them to come with me."

"Harry, go upstairs. Even if the barrier drops, he won't get to you," Hotch insisted.

Harry's grandfather smirked. "I'm not surprised you're refusing me. I told you that would happen,
didn't I, Harry?" This time, Hotch's gaze left his father to glance sharply at Harry, but his son was
glaring at the uninvited visitor. "I told you they were right. You should've listened to the Dursleys."

"Dad-" Hotch said waringly.

"And that's only what they knew about," his grandfather pushed. "How much else do you think
there is, buried in classified files or legalities? I'll give your father this - he knows the system. If there
were things he didn't want people to know... Well, people just wouldn't know it. You should've
heeded the Dursleys' warning. Before it's too late, Harry, come on. If not for yourself...for your
brother, because you're not alone in this."

"Harry, what's he talking about?" Hotch demanded.

"Nothing," Harry said forcefully. He pushed more energy into maintaining the barrier, wary about
his pent-up anger when he was acting wandlessly. "Your father's just a arse."

The oldest Hotchner snapped his head up to look at him. "Perhaps I was wrong about you," he said.
"Perhaps they didn't treat you like they did because you were a danger - perhaps it was just because
your behavior was so inexcusable they had to find some way to instill discipline and find some
meager touch of usefulness in you. It seems they didn't hit you hard enough, you worthless-"

Hotch's fist cracked across his father's jaw.

His father stumbled back and Hotch hit him again before he could recover. "Don't you ever treat my
son like that again," Hotch snarled. "Not if you want to leave my house in one piece."

His grandfather steadied himself against the wall behind him. Both elder Hotchners had the same
muscular build, the same form that had allowed the oldest to easily toss Sean aside and haul Harry
along. Whether Hotch would or not, it wouldn't be hard for him to do Harry serious harm. And
looking at the fury on his face now, Harry had no doubt that his father had the emotional capability
to become enraged enough to do so. He'd never seen his father lose control before, but he had a
feeling he was close to witnessing it now. He knew why Hotch hadn't wanted him to see this - and
why his grandfather had.
"What are you going to do?" his grandfather asked. "Hit me over and over again, until I'm black and blue? That would hardly go over well in court."

"It's *always* been about the courts to you, hasn't it?" Hotch snapped, hands still fisted at his sides. "Not about what was morally right - about what the *courts* said was right."

"I get what they give me."

"Yeah? Then get out of my house, because *you don't get my children.*"

"No," the old man said calmly. "You do." He glanced away from his oldest son to Harry. "I'm sure you'll find out about that soon enough."

Hotch frowned, angered by the reference to a conversation he had not been a part of. Harry, however, was all too aware of what his grandfather was inferring. The same thing the Dursleys had spoken of, when they told him that his father was more interested in his kids for their bodies than anything else. It was an illusion that had quickly been dispersed, and having it brought up again was the straw that broke the camel's back.

"Get out," he said, dangerously quiet.

His grandfather tilted his head at him. "For what, warning you?"

Harry shot to his feet. The barrier collapsed, but he spread both arms to plant one hand on the wall and the other on the railing, preventing his grandfather from moving past him. He could still feel the magic channeling through him, itching for a release after spending so long providing a barrier. "*Get out!*" he shouted.

With a loud series of crashes, every glass fixture of the house shattered inward in a spray that was temporarily blinding.

There was a startled scream from upstairs, and Harry felt horror seep into his heart as he remembered that Jack's room had a window. In front of him, Hotch had instinctively thrown himself away from the front door. A few shards had embedded themselves in his coat, and there was a thin cut across one cheek. His movement had brought him in front of Sean, potentially shielding his brother, but Harry couldn't tell from his angle if his uncle had completely escaped harm. His grandfather, turned towards the front door in awe of the glass that had been blown out of the side panels, seemed uninjured but Harry couldn't even pretend to care.

He forced himself to hold his ground, even though old instincts were screaming at him to run upstairs and away from his father. Damn his grandfather for bringing up the Dursleys. He stayed where he was, hands still secure, and removed any traces of uncertainty from his face to fix his harshest glare on his grandfather when he finally turned back around.

Hotch didn't fall for it. "Harry, go check on Jack," he said quietly. Harry didn't glance at his expression to see if it was a calm or dangerous quiet, and he whipped around to hurry up the stairs.

The moment he was out of sight, Hotch and his father began raising their voices, and Harry pulled out his wand like he had wanted to for the last half hour. He reached Jack's door and found it locked. He jiggled the handle frantically for a moment before forcing himself to take a steadying breath. "*Alohomora.*" It clicked open and he slipped in, closing and locking the door behind him again.

The room was covered in glass, but he couldn't see any sign of Jack. There wasn't any blood either, though. The window had been entirely blown out. "*Reparo,*" he muttered, hand shaking. The glass from around the room flew back up into the air and reassembled itself in the empty frame. "Jack?
Jack, are you in here?"

The closet opened and Jack sprinted out. Harry crouched in time to catch him in a hug.

"Why is Dad angry?" Jack muttered into his shoulder as they listened to the shouting.

"Someone stupid showed up," Harry replied, rubbing his back. "Are you all right?" Jack nodded against him. The closet door must have protected him. "We're going to stay here for now, okay?"

Another nod.

A minute later, the front door slammed shut, and there was a long pause before they heard the start of an engine. There were tires on the pavement, and then the car was driving away. Another long pause. Steps up the stairs, a knock at the door.

"Jack? Harry?"

"Dad!" Jack sprinted out of Harry's hands and to the door. He unlocked it, letting in their father, but Harry remained where he was as he stood up. Hotch hugged his younger son for a moment, then leaned back to look him over.

"You're both okay?"

"We're fine," Harry quietly said. Hotch's gaze sharpened on him, and Harry knew he was going to get called out on the lie when Jack wasn't around. "Is Uncle Sean...?"

"No," Hotch honestly replied. "It looks pretty bad. I'm going to take him to the hospital. Do you want to come with us?"

Harry shook his head. He didn't think he could be surrounded by everyone right now. "I need to clean up the house before anyone thinks it's strange that we got rid of all our windows," Harry pointed out. "I'd rather we not obliviate our neighbors."

Hotch nodded, though he didn't look like he completely bought Harry's reasoning. Still, he didn't argue, but Harry realized he was being treated as a wounded animal. He couldn't fault his father for that when he rather felt like one.

"Can you take Jack with you? In case he comes back...and it might help Uncle Sean..." Hotch's gaze flickered between Harry and Jack. "And then he won't be liable to step on any glass until everything's cleaned up."

Hotch released Jack and moved to Harry until he could put both hands on his son's shoulders and look him in the eye. Harry forced himself not to instinctively back up. Even keeping his eyes averted, he could still see glass sticking out of Hotch's coat. "Are you sure you're okay?" he asked quietly and Harry nodded again. "And you're still going to be here when we get back?"

Damn, he knew that thought had crossed Harry's mind.

"I just need the quiet for a little bit," he admitted. Whatever happened, he needed to stay and face it.

Hotch reluctantly released him. "We'll be back as soon as possible," he promised, and a few minutes later, after Jack and Sean had been herded into the car, Harry was left alone in the house hoping that would be true.

He pulled out his wand and issued a silent thanks to whoever had decreed that underage wizards and witches could use magic outside of school in America. It didn't take any effort to find damage, and
he quickly went through the rooms with windows at the front of the house to repair the most obvious glassless gaps. Within a few minutes, he had the most problematic holes filled, and he worked his way around the sides of the house to fix anything someone else might spot.

One of the cabinets in the living room had glass panels to display the books inside, and Harry had to repair not only the panels but also any damage to the interior of the cabinet that had been done. The television screen had blown out, and halfway through the first floor he realized some other pieces of the house had also been damaged. Pieces of alabaster had cracked, as well as a few door handles. He only finished the front half of the house, figuring no one would enter the back but were more likely to enter the second floor once they got back. He finished cleaning the foyer, wincing when he saw drops of blood on the wood floor. From where the drops landed, they could only have been Hotch's.

He climbed the stairs, jolting halfway up when he saw the large crack in the wall. On his way down, he had been more distracted by the wreckage of the living room to his right to notice. After a moment's hesitation, he repaired the angry, jagged mark. It was right where he had placed his hand.

He had done so much damage to this house in a matter of moments. Nevermind the house, his father had been bleeding because of what he'd done.

The hallway upstairs was fine, but he had to go room by room to repair everything. His own was largely untouched, since he still hadn't really settled in yet, and Jack's hadn't had anything like glass or alabaster in it besides the window. Hotch's room, on the other hand, had contained several framed pictures as well as a window facing the backyard, and Harry did his best to clean it up quickly. The upstairs bathrooms all had large cracks in the sinks and tubs, and, as he had noticed in the other rooms, most of the light bulbs had been blown out.

The door opened as he finished up the last room upstairs, and he trudged down to meet everyone. Sean was half asleep, and Jack was holding his hand and trying to make sure he didn't walk into anything. The result was Jack walking into a wall because he wasn't paying attention and, despite the situation, Harry had to smile slightly. Hotch came in behind them.

"Concussion," he confirmed, coming to stand by Harry as Jack and Sean took the couch. His expression didn't look like the one someone wore when bringing good news. "He'll be okay. Head wounds bleed a lot." Both hands were fisted in his crossed arms, and his body was too tense.

"Are you okay?" Harry asked, barely pushing his voice out of his throat. "The glass..."

There was a small sigh from beside him. "My coat caught most of it. The rest are just scratches." When Harry eyed him dubiously, he insisted with a voice that wasn't quite kind, "I'm fine. Really."

Fine after his son had almost violently killed him on accident when he got angry.

"Did you get everything already?" Hotch asked, looking around the restored living room.

"Everything from the living room to the front door, and the second floor. I haven't gone into the kitchen yet, so the back door's- No, that's probably been open this whole time," Harry groaned. He thought it had been getting drafty.

"It's probably not that bad..." Hotch said, walking ahead into the kitchen. He came to a dead halt. "Oh."
"What!" Harry scampered to join him, and then similarly stopped and gaped.

It was almost completely ripped apart. The dishes, glassware, and silverware had all either shattered or distorted, and the blasts had shredded the cabinets or drawers they were housed in. The glass sliding back door, as predicted, was entirely gone with shards strewn around the floor, whose tiles were mostly cracked or damaged in some way. The light was gone, having burst like most of the others in the house.

"Wow," Hotch said after a long moment. The humor was too forced.

"Reparo," Harry muttered, giving his wand a generic wave over the room, and the tiles straightened themselves out. "This is probably the worst room."

"Can you clear a path so I can get there?" Hotch asked, pointing to a door opposite the space where the back door had been. "That holds a lot of the utilities stuff."

"Sure." He cleaned it out, then left Hotch to open the door while he tried to put the rest of the room back together. A few minutes later, he sighed as the last of the silverware went into the drawer, back to its normal shape. "Done."

"Not quite," Hotch said from the bottom of the stairs he had gone down. Harry walked over to the doorway and realized it opened into the basement. "A few of these pipes are... Well."

Harry walked down and came to stand by him. Some of the overhead pipes had been horribly bent, and Harry sighed, shoulders slumping as he stared up at them. There was just no end to the damage he'd caused the house. This room, at least, had been one of the few to not have a blown light bulb, as evident by the light shining from it that softly illuminated the space.

"Reparo."

"What was he talking about, at the end?" Hotch asked when Harry finished.

"You heard him," Harry said, keeping his eyes fixed away from his father.

"He was rather vague out of context, but he brought up the Dursleys."

Harry sighed. "There were a...variety of things they used to say about worse situations I could be in. And they mentioned my parents a lot, or who they thought my parents were. It was mostly what I told you before, when I said I was afraid to go stay with my parents."

What was he supposed to say? Sorry, my previous guardians accused you of being a pedophile? There was a sharp intake of breath. "Harry..."

He turned, starting up the stairs. "I'm going to make sure I got everything," he muttered.

"Harry, wait..."

"It won't take me long." He was going to make sure it took an eternity so he could avoid being in the same room with his father. His nerves couldn't stand rejection right now.

A hand wrapped around his wrist, stopping him. "I'm proud of you."

His mind came to a complete halt moments after his body had. "W-What?" He hesitantly turned, looking down the stairs at Hotch.
"You did something incredible today. I just want you to remember that."

"I wrecked the house," Harry said slowly, bewildered. Hotch seemed sincere, but he was definitely still angry. "And you're bleeding."

"It was an accident," Hotch pointed out. "Look, we'll talk about this later. I'd rather be calmer, not..." He grimaced, and despite the reassurance Harry felt a pang of trepidation.

"Not when you're still mad," he finished for him.

Hotch's eyes quickly moved to meet his, surprised by the sudden evaluation. "Yes," he said carefully. Then, "I'm not mad at you, Harry. You know that, right?"

The pause was too long. "Yeah."

Fingers stroked the inside of Harry's wrist in a soothing gesture. "It's my father I'm not happy with," Hotch said firmly. "And myself. I shouldn't have let this happen."

Harry frowned. "But you didn't know he was coming. How could you have stopped it?"

The hand left Harry's wrist and he missed its warmth and comfort immediately. "We never had a good relationship," Hotch said, turning away from him slightly. "I didn't think he'd held a grudge long enough to come back after so long, but...apparently the temptation to get at me through the two of you was too strong. He must have heard about you somehow and decided to do something."

"My grandmother told him." Hotch nodded in understanding, and Harry asked, "Do I need to be expecting a visit from Grandma too?"

"I'd be surprised. She's in a wheelchair after a stroke." He tried to give him a reassuring smile but it was strained, revealing his leftover tension from his father's visit. "Set aside the house cleaning for now, all right? The rest, if there's anything left, can wait. Go check on your uncle and brother."

Harry nodded.

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Hotch spent the better part of the day making calls, and by the time Jack had been put to bed, Harry was pretty sure that his grandfather would be coming nowhere near the house again without getting tackled by every agency in the state from the local police to the EPA. Leaving him to it, Harry discretely spent the time finishing putting the house back into its proper shape when he wasn't keeping an eye on Sean and Jack.

He knew Hotch was worried about his tendency to play housekeeper, thinking it was a leftover effect from the Dursleys, but Harry didn't know how to tell him the truth. This was his home now, damn it, and he wasn't going to let the place get even a little out of sorts just because an unpleasant visitor had stopped by.

Sean was still dead to the world by dinnertime so Harry ended up cooking. Hotch tried to take over, only for Harry to pointedly ask him where the garlic was, so he retreated back to the living room with Jack ("Honestly, who was making dinner here before you had Sean and me?"). A half hour after dinner was tucked away into their stomachs, Jack went scampering back up to his room, claiming there was some calculated scheme he was concocting to overwhelm the Martians, leaving Harry and Hotch behind. Harry's father left the room for a moment to wake Sean and ask the routine questions to make sure the concussion wasn't causing any problems, then walked back into the kitchen just as Harry as trying to slip out.
"Sit," Hotch said.

"But-"

"Sit."

Harry flopped back down into a chair. "I'm not traumatized or anything," he muttered.

"I don't think you are," Hotch replied, taking the spot opposite him, "but you're not going to bed with disillusions about what's happening." Despite the hours that had passed, Hotch seemed more tense than before, if that was even possible. "Sean's still out of the loop. The closest thing I got to an answer out of him was a string of swear words. Can you tell me what happened?"

"Not much, really," Harry said, focusing on a spot on the floor. "He rang the door and I answered it. He seemed nice enough and had his marbles together so I figured, at the very least, he wasn't magical. Sean asked who it was and he answered; I guess Sean recognized his voice because he all but fell down the stairs trying to get to us. They yelled at each other a lot. He said he wanted to take Jack and I 'cause..." He really, really didn't want to say it, not if it meant hearing anyone mention such an idea out loud again. Hotch wasn't like that or anything else his father had suggested.

He continued on and Hotch stayed quiet, letting him finish instead of pressing. "Sean and I blocked the stairs so he couldn't get to Jack, but Jack was trying to figure out what was going on so he was at the top. I turned to tell him to go into his room and lock the door, but..." He paused, unsure what to call the man. It sounded odd to name him as his grandfather. "With my head turned, he tried to hit me, but Sean saw it coming and he got in the way. That's how he... Then I put up a barricade and Sean got a hold of you, and that's about it until you showed up."

Hotch frowned slightly. "That's all that happened for twenty minutes?"

"I thought it was a forty-five minute drive to Quantico?" Harry asked in confusion.

"It is when you don't get a wizard you're in a meeting with to put various charms on your vehicle so you can more than double the speed limit without getting pulled over or causing an accident. Thank Blackwolf." Harry smiled faintly. He could practically see the wheels turning in Hotch's head as he mulled over what had Harry said, even while he was talking. "Is there anything else that I should know?"

Harry felt his foot jiggling nervously under the table and he forced himself to stop the motion. "The magic that I was using, it... I didn't use it on purpose. All of that was unintentional."

Hotch nodded. "I never thought you meant to hurt me."

Harry flushed, both at the reminder and having to correct him. "No, I mean that all of that didn't... I wasn't in control. I don't know if something like that is going to happen again."

"We'll deal with it if it does," Hotch said. Something must have shown on Harry's face, because he continued, "You're not a bad person, just because you lost your handle on it for a minute." He caught Harry's eyes flickering to the cut on his cheek, and he gestured at it. "Yes, you lost control today. So did I, and you don't hate me for it even though the person I hurt is definitely much worse off."

Guilt continued rolling inside, and while he knew arguing was just going to make Hotch feel worse for not being there, he couldn't stop himself from speaking. This all was obvious information that his father must have known and was just conveniently ignoring, and Harry had to know if he was just trying to make light of it to make Harry feel better.
"You don't have magic, though," he said. "If you lose it, you've got a couple of seconds to react, or, if you need to, try to get that control back. I don't have that time. What if this had been worse? What if it hadn't been my grandfather, but someone I didn't know, and he'd scared me enough that I killed him?"

Hotch smiled slightly, surprising him. "You broke half the house not when you were physically attacked or made to feel inferior but when he insulted me to a point you couldn't handle. So when I say I don't feel threatened or upset because of today...I'm not just saying it to make you feel better."

"What if one day I react and..." He trailed off as a flash of irritation crossed Hotch's face at the continuation of the same argument. The instinctive Sorry rose in his throat, but he had the feeling that it would just make Hotch more frustrated and he cinched it off.

"If you hadn't done anything today, my father could have taken Jack away. If you hadn't stood in the way and stayed there until I showed up, Sean might not be recovering. And if you hadn't reacted and forced your attacker to stop, he could have hurt you today. I don't care what's going to happen 'one day.' I'm more relieved about what just happened."

Harry nodded tightly, biting back any further response and letting himself just agree with the assessment.

There was a long pause as Hotch's gaze left him, moving to the table. Reluctantly, as if the words were being dragged from him, Hotch said, "However... We do need to consider my own actions."

"You hit someone who'd just attacked us," Harry said. "There's not much to consider."

"Not that." He sighed, and he looked tired and resigned. "I understand if you still haven't fully settled in here. After what you've been through, I'd be shocked if you adapted immediately. And I'm sure there are going to be times when I do something that maybe makes you a bit uncomfortable because I'm just not thinking."

"What are you talking about?" Harry asked tentatively.

Hotch kept his gaze away from Harry, preventing himself from seeing the inevitable reaction to his next statement. "...You looked scared when I hit him."

That wasn't something Harry could argue against, and he flinched. Hotch twitched in sympathetic response. "Because you looked like him for a moment," Harry said. "But I wasn't scared you'd hit me."

"You weren't?" Hotch asked doubtfully.

Harry gave him a cautious look, unsure how to say it. "I might have been a bit concerned you were going to seriously hurt him. But I knew you weren't going to hurt me."

"Please don't just tell me what I want to hear."

He shook his head. "You've caught me on every lie so far, so that'd be kind of stupid." He startled Hotch into a slight smile. "No, I've never thought anything like that."

"Then why didn't you come with us to the hospital? And don't tell me it was because you wanted to clean up the house - you could have just quickly gotten all the outside windows and then left the rest for later."

Harry hesitated, licked his lips nervously, then slowly, carefully, said, "Well, I didn't want to be there
"When... When you changed your mind."

"About what?"

"About me, and letting me staying here, because the Dursleys were right. I didn't want to see that."

"Harry," Hotch whispered, horrified. "I'm never going to think that. Not ever, okay? I'm never going to believe for an instant that they were even remotely accurate."

"But-

"You're my son, Jack's brother, and Sean's nephew," Hotch said firmly. "And you belong in this house, and I will never force you from it. This is your home, and you have the right to be comfortable here, no matter who you're around. I don't care that you have magic." Harry opened his mouth to protest, gesturing generally around the kitchen at everything he'd had to fix, but Hotch shook his head quickly and held his hand up.

"No, Harry, I genuinely don't care. I accepted you from the moment I met you, and your magic is a part of you, so it's just as welcome as the rest of you. Look, you were my introduction to the magical world. You and the Woodsmarked Killer. And you two proved that magic isn't good or evil, that it's determined by who uses it. He murders people with his power. You save people. Why would I ever hate you for that?"

Harry nodded slowly in acceptance. "Thank you," he said, hoping Hotch got his meaning for everything that monologue had meant.

"My point was..." Hotch's current resolution at pushing his perspective at Harry faded as he moved back to what he'd originally been discussing. "I get that sometimes I'm going to startle you. So...if that happens, and you're worried... Well, I'd prefer you talk to me about it first, but if you think you need to, if something like this happens again, you can stay somewhere you think is safer for a little bit. I'll get you some of the addresses of people you know and trust here, and the location of the community Hermione and Ron came through, so you can stay at one of their houses if it's bad enough."

Harry stared at him, mortified, and before he could stop himself he asked, "Are you expecting you'll beat me senseless in the near future or something?"

Hotch jerked back. "What? No! No, of course not! Just, if you ever feel uncomfortable."

Harry blinked a couple of times. "Shouldn't it be the other way around?" he pointed out, and Hotch's eyes narrowed in confusion. "I mean, I'm the one who almost..."

"Yeah, but that wasn't on purpose."

"Well, I don't expect you're going to be making me uncomfortable 'on purpose' either."

"I can't tell if you're trying to tell me not to give you the addresses or if you're telling me to get my own list together."

A ghost of a smile passed over his face. "Both, maybe."

"I'm really okay," Hotch assured him, in the tone of someone completely not used to being on this end of reassurance. "Just a little scratched. Nothing too bad. And I know you didn't mean to do it."

"Yeah, but... Isn't it kind of scary that all of this happened on accident?"
"No," Hotch said honestly. "Surprising, but not scary. You didn't mean to hurt anyone, and this was an unusual situation. This won't be happening weekly or anything." He leaned back a bit, moving to stand up. "I'll get you that list. If something happens, just leave me something to say you left on purpose and that you weren't taken-"

Harry reached across the table and grabbed onto his arm, stopping him from rising completely, and emphatically shook his head. "No, no, I- I really don't want it," he said quickly.

"Harry, I can't leave you without options."

"Please," Harry begged and Hotch went quiet. "I trust you. I do, and I don't want you to tell me there's a reason I shouldn't."

"I know you're still nervous," Hotch said in a low voice, calmly. "You still jump if I move quickly or do something you don't expect. And you'll get over your nerves, I know you will, but I don't want to back you into a corner and force you to face everything. That's not fair to you." When Harry was unmoved, he sat back down next to him. "This isn't a bad thing. It's just a precaution. I don't think you'll ever have to use it."

"And I'm not going to, so there's no point in giving it to me. You've never scared me - you just startle me sometimes, is all." His confusion over Hotch's insistence on the matter suddenly cleared and horror crept into his expression. "You're worried about...?" Hotch glanced away. This wasn't about Hotch hitting his father. It was about the accusations. "How can you even-? I know they were lying!" Harry snapped.

"You know that now, but you were told something different for years and-"

"There's no way in hell I'm ever believing anything like that! If anything, I'm even less likely to believe it because both the Dursleys and my grandfather said it was true! No, I- No. I don't think you're- No." He glared at him heatedly, furious that this had even come into their discussion.

"The list isn't me saying it's true," Hotch tried, "it's just-"

"No," Harry hissed. "I'm not entertaining any ridiculous hint of a notion that you're anything like what the Dursleys claimed. If you write that list, you better burn it and I don't ever want to see it."

Hotch finally held up his hands in defeat. "Okay," he conceded. "No list."

Harry nodded firmly, still angry. "Good." He breathed out heavily. "You're a lot more concerned about this than you were about everything else."

"I'm okay with you thinking less of me if it means you're trying to keep yourself safe," Hotch corrected. "I'm not okay with you thinking less of yourself because someone hurt you."

"He didn't really hurt me," Harry muttered.

"I took a lot from my father, Harry," Hotch said quietly. "Believe me when I say I know that he was good at blaming the victim and playing mind games. He's always been fantastic at finding weaknesses and exploiting them. Don't feel bad if he upset you - there's a reason he's divorced and both of his kids are now about to get restraining orders against him."

"I just didn't want to hear him trying to make it sound like he had some sort of moral reason for being here." His voice was low, shaking slightly as he pushed past the last of his fury. "I didn't want that reminder of living with the Dursleys."
"I'm sorry he showed up," Hotch said regretfully.

"Worth it." When Hotch pulled back slightly to look at him in surprise, Harry smiled. "You didn't see his face when you hit him."

Hotch let out his breath in a quiet, content huff and ruffled Harry's hair. "Why don't we see if Sean's slightly more coherent? I can't wait to see his reaction when he remembers you destroying half the house."

In the other room, Sean was not coherent, but he was at least up to talking. As soon as they walked in, he turned his head towards them and said, "By the way, I think I'm staying here for another two weeks."

"Isn't your flight leaving Wednesday?" Hotch asked, grabbing a blanket off a chair.

"The doctor said I can't fly."

"No, he didn't-" He turned towards the couch to drape the blanket over his brother and caught Sean's frantic drunken hand gestures. "Oh. Yeah, you can't fly. Forgotten. Guess you're conveniently here until Harry leaves."

The teenager laughed and settled on one of the chairs, content to spend the rest of the night in the company of his relieved father and his satisfied uncle.

Chapter End Notes

So I was flipping through chapters, and I was like, 'Oh, which one's next?' And then I saw it was this one and started grinning maniacally.

By the way, yes, I know Hotch's dad was supposed to be dead. But he's not. ...Peculiar, isn't it? On a similar vein of thought, people keep bringing up pedophilia and Harry. I don't want to spoil anything, but I do just want to assure you that I'm not throwing that in offhandedly. There are two very specific reasons about why I needed to make those mentions, for later things that are going to be important. (Reading that, it actually sounds kind of misleading, but I don't know how else to assure you without spoiling so...we'll leave it there. Just have a little faith.)

Thanks to everyone who reviews! It means a lot, even if it's just a quick note. I'm really glad everyone seems to like Harry's and Hotch's relationship, because I fell in love with writing that, especially later on when it develops more.
"The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest fear is fear of the unknown." - H.P. Lovecraft

Harry came downstairs one Saturday to find Sean cheerfully talking about the most recent of the Bond movies to an unfamiliar woman. Sean glanced up and smiled at him, causing the woman to turn. For a moment, Harry froze, staring at his lost mother.

And then time started again, and he realized it wasn't quite her.

"Hi?"

She glanced back at Sean, who nodded, and then to Harry again. Without further ado, she got to her feet and pulled him into a hug, then leaned back to better examine him. "You do look the spitting image of him," she muttered. "This family needs more estrogen."

Sean slapped a hand on the table. "That's what I was saying, but they didn't listen to me and Jack popped out male. No one ever listens to me."

The woman sighed. "That's our curse as the fun ones in the family..."

Harry glanced at Sean for help.

"This is Jessica," Sean said, confirming Harry's suspicion. "Maybe one day you will meet one of us in the normal way."

"Oh? How'd you meet him?" Jessica asked curiously.

"Both of us thought the other one was breaking in. Kinda awkward." He leaned back while Jessica pulled Harry down into a seat. "Harry, your dad's getting groceries. I had to promise not to kidnap either of you while he was gone, so you should be safe." His thumb pointed to Jessica. "However, she did not, so careful what you say or you might get snatched up."

"We've only got half a full nest," Jessica agreed. "We could fit two more."

"I have cousins?" Harry asked.

"Yeah, but they're, like, tiny, so we didn't mention them," Sean said casually. Jessica raised an eyebrow. "And I kinda forgot they existed, but y'know, toe-may-toe toe-ma-toe."

"Nice cover up," Harry said dryly.

"Woah, you're British!"

Harry and Sean exchanged a grin, and then Harry said, "Not you too. We're still working on Jack." At her bewilderment, he added, "Being British is not genetic or contagious."
She laughed. "Jack thinks it is?"

"It's been interesting to describe. I think he's growing to like my accent, but maybe it's just wishful
thinking." He smiled at her, and she returned it, but he couldn't help notice that it didn't quite reach
her eyes.

"Britain, huh?" she said casually. "So, friends and family back there?"

"A few friends, yes, but all my family's here," he replied, puzzled. Shouldn't she know that? Beside
him, Sean looked similarly confused.

"Oh, sorry. I meant whoever you were staying with."

Without looking, Harry felt Sean stiffen slightly. "Ah, no. Not really, no," Harry said, hoping she'd
drop it.

She didn't. "What do you mean?"

"Well... Let's just say that someone's law degree is about to become really useful in court."

Her eyebrows shot him. "Aaron's prosecuting them?" she asked sharply. "For what?"

"What's not on the list?" Sean muttered, tone harsh.

"Murder," Harry pointed out. "Uh, theft?"

"Attempted murder is, though. Theft too. Aaron's pretty sure that they took a few of your belongings,
since not everything made it back here."

"Arson?"

"Nope, don't think so."

"Perjury?"

"Maybe. There was a host of complications with how they said you were living with them, since the
Potters hadn't put you in the system."

"Potters?" Jessica asked.

"It's a long story," Harry sighed.

They heard the van pull up outside, and Sean jerked his head towards the sound. "Best go help him,
Harry." When Harry raised an eyebrow at him, he said, "Hey, best part of being over eighteen?
Delegation rights." Harry rolled his eyes and walked out, but the first gesture caused some spluttering
behind him. "Did you just-" he demanded while Jessica laughed.

His hand had just touched the front door when he heard Jessica ask in a low murmur, "Is child abuse
on that list?"

Sean wearily replied, "What do you think?"

"What kind?"

"Most of them."
He was aware of a rising tension while bringing the bags in and attributed it to Jessica's new understanding of his previous living situation. For the next few minutes, he moved in and out of the house, but was almost never in the kitchen for more than a couple of seconds. Sean took Hotch's job and started to help put the groceries away, and it was only when Harry saw Jessica and Hotch slip out of the room that he realized the tension wasn't really due to him. He caught Sean's eye, but his uncle just made an "eek" face at him before hurriedly returning to putting vegetables away.

"Uncle Sean," Harry started when they were done. Hands flailed immediately, making cutting gestures across the throat and putting a finger to lips. The teenage wizard blinked but quieted.

Sean listened for a moment, then pulled him closer. "If your aunt kills him, you can come live with me, okay?"

"Do we really have to whisper this quietly?"

"They can both smell fear from a mile away, so it stands to reason that they can also hear talk of it within close distances." The front door opened and Sean stepped back to make it look like they were just finishing up. Harry leaned back against the counter as Jessica and Hotch entered, both calm and collected without the slightest trace of what might have happened.

The rest of the day was spent sharing stories and meals, but no matter how personal it became, Harry was certain there was still some underlying, ugly conflict he wasn't seeing.

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In the middle of the night, Harry woke up abruptly to an angry shout. His heart thudded loudly for a moment even as the shout was quickly hushed, and he sat up in bed and hurriedly but silently scrambled into some clothes. Thankfully, the door opened without squeaking, and Harry crept down the hallway, avoiding the spots he already knew had a tendency to groan.

He got to the top of the stairs without a problem. Instead of risking the climb down, he sat quietly on the landing, pulling his legs close in case anyone walked past the stairs or was in the living room. He knew Jessica had shaken off Sean's suggestion that he move to the living room so she could take the guest bedroom, and she had gone to sleep on the couch earlier that evening. Or, at least, he thought she had. Now he could hear her voice furiously whispering somewhere downstairs, probably the kitchen or dining room.

"...while she was here! How are you going to manage it when she's gone?!"

"Jessica, it's not going to be like that," Hotch said, frustration leaking into his voice. "As much as I don't like it, Harry won't be here for a good portion of the year. It will still just be Jack and I, until he's home."

"Yeah, okay, that makes for three things I don't like. One, Harry's gone for so long, which I still don't get. Two, you haven't mentioned what you're going to do when he is here, like now. And three, you're not really managing with just Jack!"

Hotch gave a irritable sigh. "None of us like that he's going to be gone, but he needs to do it. I swear that I can't tell you about it right now, or I would. And yes, I've been having trouble with just Jack, but it's actually been easier with Harry around." There was a disdainful snort. "No, I'm serious. He's smart and he's responsible, and he really loves Jack. He takes care of him just as much as I do, without being asked, and if you want the truth, it barely feels like I'm taking care of him."

"...Because you're incompetent or he's just that good?"
Harry turned in fury, prepared to send an indignant shout down the stairwell regardless of the lecture he was sure to get for eavesdropping. Before he could, a hand clapped over his mouth and he jumped.

"Shh!" Sean hissed in his ear, then took a spot beside him. Harry scowled but stayed quiet, just in time to hear Hotch's response.

"Harry is quite easily the most remarkable young man I've ever met."

A warm pit fluttered into existence in his stomach, and he couldn't stop the smile that crept over his face.

"It doesn't feel like I'm taking care of him because he almost never needs my help. He knows what to do and how to do it, he thinks quickly, and he's got good instincts. Jessica, having him here is definitely easier than not."

Harry was still grinning when Jessica huffed. "Fine. But what about him? Is this what's best?"

"I don't know," Hotch murmured, unexpectedly tired. Harry's exuberance faded at the tone, and for the first time, he wondered why Jessica was so keen on arguing about this that they had to do it in the middle of the night. "And this might be selfish, but I think it is what's best for me and for Jack. He's leaving in a week, and I'm already not sure what I'm going to do."

"How's he going to cope when you're gone for weeks at a time?" Jessica asked, a bit quieter. Harry and Sean strained to hear her. "He needs a steady presence in his life. Can you give that?"

"...No."

Harry's eyes slid shut and he leaned his head back against the wall behind him. It didn't so much hurt to hear that Hotch couldn't always be there as it hurt to hear any signs of submission to whatever Jessica was pushing. He might have missed the beginning of this argument, but he had a painful feeling that he knew where it was going.

"Do you see my point?" Jessica asked.

"Yes. I did even before you found out about him. But that doesn't change my position."

"Aaron, be realistic. You just admitted that you don't know if this is the best place for him or not, and I do sympathize with your situation. But after what he's been through? He needs someone there for him all the time, not someone who can't promise to be home for birthdays and holidays."

"So overwhelming him is the way to go about it, is that right?"

"That's not what I meant."

Harry gave Sean a pleading look, but his uncle could only grimace in return and continue listening to what was going on down below. When Harry nudged him, Sean leaned in and whispered, "Your dad has to fight this one on his own."

"This is the safest place he can be right now. I'm prepared to take off time to ensure that. You want to adopt him? Great. But I don't think you're ready to take him in - along with the two mass murderers coming after him. No one's making it in here again. I won't let that happen."

Jessica sighed. "It's not just me. My parents could take him in, or even Sean. Just- Someone. It doesn't matter if he's safe if he doesn't get the love he needs."
"Jessica, I'll quit my job if I have to. But he's staying here for as long as he wants to. You know what? Before he leaves, feel free to explain the situation to him. All of it. And if he wants to go with you, or with Sean, he can. I trust you both."

Sean suddenly grabbed Harry's arm and pulled him up, and the two silently made their way down the hall to Harry's room. "They're almost done," Sean muttered. "I recognize Aaron's tone."

"Sean," Harry whispered, panicked. "Is she serious?"

"You heard your father. It's your choice. You can stay here if you want, or you can go." He hesitated before reluctantly stating, "She is right, though. Aaron's job sometimes takes him pretty far away for long periods of time. But he does care about you, more than anything else. When he said he'll quit the Bureau if he needs to...he wasn't lying."

Sean gave him a quick hug, bade him good night, and was gone before Harry could ask anything else. Harry half-heartedly tried to get back to sleep, but it refused to overtake him and he was still wide awake when, a few minutes later, he heard footsteps on the stairs. They moved carefully down the hall to avoid waking anyone, slowed to a stop outside Harry's room, then went on after a moment's reflection.

The next morning, Jessica pulled him aside to talk to him. Harry attempted to back out of it, but she was insistent, and he decided to submit to the awkwardness. After she'd had her say, he gave a short reply and found Hotch in the library, aimlessly moving some books around.

"Morning," Harry said, yawning, and then dropped into a chair and promptly went to sleep.

Someone was shaking him awake immediately, and he blearily opened his eyes. Hotch was crouched in front of him, frowning. "Harry, Jessica's about to leave."

"I said-" He yawned. "I said goodbye to her this morning. Thought she and Sean were going to fight all day until she left."

"Did she talk to you?"

"Yes. I'm staying. But don't quit your job."

A hand ruffled his hair, but Harry was surprised to find he didn't mind the gesture normally intended for younger kids. "That was a last-resort scenario," Hotch told him, relief coloring his tone. They could hear Jessica's car pulling out of the driveway. "Don't worry about it."

Harry raised an eyebrow at him. "Now, really, after everything, did you think a simple conversation from your sister-in-law was going to be the deciding factor?"

A smile caused Hotch's lips to quirk upward. "I doubted it."

Sean walked in and fell into a chair with a groan. "So she's pissed." He caught Hotch's look. "So she's very irritated," he corrected, and Harry grinned. "I hope she gets over it by the next time I see her. She makes a fantastic strawberry cheesecake and I'd rather not be cheated of it."

"What's she upset with you about?" Hotch asked curiously.

"She thinks he encouraged me to stay here," Harry explained. "I didn't think she knew we were up there," he said to Sean.

"She didn't." Sean narrowed his eyes suspiciously at Hotch. "But you did, didn't you?"
"I wanted Harry to have the night to sleep on it," Hotch admitted, then reached out and rubbed Harry's shoulder. "I wouldn't have if I realized you would spend all night thinking it over."

The wizard tried to suppress another yawn. "I didn't," he replied, and it would have sounded more irritated if he hadn't been fighting another yawn. "I was too busy sending disapproval your way through brain waves because you thought it was a good idea to entertain the idea that I might leave."

"Atticus Finch," Sean grumbled. At Harry's confused look, he elaborated, "A character from To Kill a Mockingbird. There's a part where his daughter overhears him talking to someone, but he only sends her back to bed when she's heard everything he wants her to hear. And he was a lawyer too."

Hotch got to his feet. "All right, it's past time for breakfast. Anyone know if Jack's up?"

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"There's no way Hotch isn't drowning in paperwork," Reid muttered, nodding ever so slightly towards the unit chief's office.

"That's not abnormal," Elle responded.

"True, but he's still got to take Harry home and somehow finish all that up. From his normal pace—" neither were even remotely surprised that he had calculated Hotch's speed "—he won't be done until mid-afternoon tomorrow."

Morgan checked the time. "It's late for us anyway. How close are you guys to being done?"

"Another hour," Reid groaned.

"One more file," Elle said. "Why?"

"Anyone got plans tomorrow?"

"Do you really think we have plans?" Elle scoffed. "C'mon, spill."

"Let's grab Harry – and I'll bet Hotch might suggest we take Jack as well – and go do something. Even if it's something simple, he's just been cooped up here for his whole break. He hasn't had anything to do to relieve stress besides learning defensive tactics and he has at least one person trying to kill him."

"I don't think Voldemort counts as a person in active pursuit if he doesn't have a body," Reid argued.

Morgan paused. "I was talking about the Woodsmarked Killer, actually," he admitted.

"I get your point," Elle said before they could enter a full discussion on everyone trying to kill their boss's son, which would have been a depressingly long conversation. "Reid, go ask Hotch. You look the cutest and he's most likely to agree."

"What?" he squawked, earning snickers from his teammates.

The next day found the three agents and the Hotchner kids in downtown Washington, D.C. Reid had managed to convince everyone that it was necessary to set out earlier in the morning than anyone wanted to even be awake, but by the time they hit traffic, Morgan had grudgingly agreed that he had forgotten how bad the interstates around the capitol were. They finally found parking at around eight, despite having left the house at six, and ended up under the cherry blossoms not long after. Jack only
seemed marginally awake, and Harry had taken to carrying him on his back in case his brother dozed off.

To everyone’s amusement, Reid immediately began reciting nearby locations within walking distance, and Elle and Morgan began suggesting the best sites they could think of. Harry fielded all decisions to them, even when they tried to ask his opinion, and pointed out that he really knew next to nothing about the city.

“We’ve got to hit at least one Smithsonian!” Reid protested as they continued along the river.

“That’s just going to turn into one museum after another!” Elle argued. “We’ll spend the entire day paying for tickets!”

“Actually, the Smithsonian museums are all free.”

“We’re really not that far away,” Morgan pointed out before they could continue. “We’ll probably even come back soon, so we don’t have to hit everything today. Reid, you get one and only one Smithsonian today. Got it?” When he’d received a nod, he said, “Elle, pick a place.”

“Walk past the White House. Always fun to try and spot the protective detail. Your turn.”

“I’d say Arlington but it doesn’t really mean anything unless you’re really into U.S. history,” Morgan said. “And it’s kind of depressing.”

“Did you know Arlington used to belong to the Lee family during the Civil War?” Reid asked. He caught Harry’s blank expression and quickly added, “Robert E. Lee was the commander of the south’s forces during the war. Actually, he was offered to lead the north’s by Lincoln, but at the time most citizens still largely cared more about states than the country as a whole, so he went with the south when Virginia seceded because he didn’t want it to become a battleground. Ironically, less damage would likely have been done to Virginia if he hadn’t but-“

“Reid. Arlington,” Morgan interrupted, and exchanged a grin with Elle when Reid wasn’t looking.

“Oh, right. Anyway, embalming was starting to become popular during the war so bodies could be shipped back home, but the transportation necessary to get everyone back wasn’t available so most were still buried near or at the battle site. So many northern soldiers were buried on Lee’s grounds that after the war he was unable to return because the home had basically become a cemetery and there was no way they could find and remove all of the bodies of the enemy troops. After that, the U.S. claimed the lands and continued burying soldiers there. The Lee family has tried reclaiming the land, but at this point, that’s obviously extremely unlikely.”

“Huh.” Elle smiled at Harry’s expression. “You get used to it after a while. At least you’re going to get caught up on American history pretty quickly with him around.”

Harry grinned back at her. “Morgan, you never picked a place.”

“Right. Ah, let’s do… Hey, let’s do the area around the national mall. That’s really the place that most people hear about, and we can knock out a bunch of prime locations all at once since they’re grouped close together. Okay, Reid, how much time does all of that leave us?”

After the briefest of pauses, the young genius said, “Probably the afternoon. Most of that is right next to each other and a walk-through. We could take a late lunch after all of that at around one.”

In the end, the lunch was closer to two-thirty because of the time they spent at the national mall. Most of it was because Reid was overflowing with information about the area and Harry had a tendency to
ask questions right before one of the other agents would have usually subtly encouraged him to shorten his explanation. Elle joked at one point that Reid had combined a full year of high school American history into one morning, though by the end, the statement did hold a degree of accuracy.

Jack woke up fully and walked beside Harry most of the time, not because he was afraid of the agents but rather because it put him closer to his brother so he could tug on his sleeve and point out something to him. Hotch had sent a camera with them and Harry had passed it off to Jack, who eagerly spent the day clicking away. He had a tendency to take a picture, show Harry what he had caught his attention, and then take another picture, which, while initially adorable, quickly turned into a problem as they tried to get him to stop taking so many pictures and actually walk.

“Had a kid who followed me around last year taking pictures all the time like that,” Harry said, amused, while Jack took a fourth picture of the Emancipation Proclamation on the wall inside the Lincoln Memorial.

“Really?” Elle asked. “Why?”

He rubbed the back of his head and laughed slightly. “Well, see… Er, I was the only one to survive the Killing Curse, right?” he asked after a quick glance around to make sure no one was close enough to hear. “I suppose you could say I was kind of made into a celebrity for it, especially since most people thought I had defeated Voldemort.”

“As an infant.”

“I never claimed most people were smart.”

“Why do I get the feeling you’re understating the celebrity bit?” Morgan asked.

“Because you wouldn’t believe how bad it is. I don’t believe how bad it is. Honestly, I don’t even remember the event and from the way most people tell it, I beat the bane of wizarding society with full knowledge of what I was doing. Ridiculous, really.”

Lunch found them at a Hard Rock Café, as Elle was insistent that Harry be introduced to as many chain restaurants as possible. “Culture,” she said whenever someone brought it up. Hotch called at about the same time to make sure neither of his kids had drowned in the Potomac River, and Harry handed the phone over to let Jack fill him in. After lunch, they set out again with a new set of places to go.

“The problem,” Morgan pointed out as they left the restaurant, “is that almost everything to see in D.C. is either a memorial or a museum.”

Elle opened her mouth to disagree but could think of no arguments. “Yeah,” she admitted. “Scenery, I suppose.”

“Already did the cherry blossoms. Enough scenery for the day.”

“They weren’t blooming! That hardly counts as scenery.”

“Well, it’s not like they’re going to bloom in the middle of summer just because the Hotchner kids are around!”

Reid checked a text as it arrived. “Garcia wants to know if we can plant a bug in the Pentagon.”

“Tell her the D.C. security is suspicious of us after Elle’s scrutiny of the White House.”
“She’ll be so disappointed.” He sent a text back and then turned to Harry as they walked. “So I was wondering… You said the DADA position is cursed, right?” Harry nodded. “What usually happens to the teachers?”

“Various things. Had a few deaths, a lot of retirements, that kind of thing. Someone went mad a few years back. They’ve had some go missing, but that’s not as common. Last year, Ron and I were trying to get Lockhart to help save Ron’s sister but he refused because he was a fraud and had been stealing credit from other people. He got Ron’s wand, which had broken earlier in the year and had been malfunctioning ever since, and tried to obliviate both of us so we wouldn’t tell anyone but the spell went wrong and backfired on him. Woke up without a clue who he was.” He paused. “Not sure what happened to him after that, now that I think about it. We didn’t have a DADA teacher for the rest of the year. I still haven’t had a final exam in that class.”

“You said your first teacher had Voldemort in the back of his head?”

“Yeah. Apparently he didn’t die thirteen years ago and his soul is still sort of out and about. It attached to Quirrell to stay alive, but when he died, it… Well, I suppose it went somewhere.”

“Quirrell died?”

“Yeah…” Harry winced at the memory. "He was attacking, and the blood wards were fighting him off but they were killing him while they did, and I couldn't stop him any other way so..."

Reid tried to steer away from the topic and asked, “So, earlier you said that Ron’s wand broke. Is it possible to fix that? Does it happen often? What happens when it breaks?”

“I don’t think it’s really that common. The first wands are usually the best, and they’re pretty expensive in general so people don’t want to have to go to buy a new one. That’s part of the reason Ron had a bad wand the entire year – that and he couldn’t get down to Diagon Alley to test them out. Once they’re broken, I think they’re almost entirely irreparable, otherwise Ron would have gotten his fixed. He tried all sorts of things over the year, and none of them quite worked.”

“How’d he break it?”

Harry paused, trying to think of the best summary. “Well… See, a house elf named Dobby had shown up over the summer and had been trying to convince me to stay away from Hogwarts that year because something dangerous was going to happen, and he blocked the entrance to get onto the train platform for Hogwarts so we couldn’t get through. We both kind of panicked and took the flying car, but when we landed it was pretty dark so we kind of crashed it into the Whomping Willow, and the tree sort of… Well, as Ron put it, the tree did more damage to us than we did to it. His wand was broken and the car seemed upset at us so it drove off into the Forbidden Forest.”

Elle puzzled over the car sentience while Morgan asked, “Why did Dobby think something bad was going to happen?”

“Well, he’d overheard the head of the family he served – the Malfoys – talking and found out that there was a plot to try to bring Voldemort back. A bunch of students were petrified, including Hermione, and Ron’s sister was almost killed. It was bad enough that they thought they were going to have to close the school.” He frowned, squinting at something up ahead. “Reid, what’s that?”

“What, the Washington Monument?”

“I…suppose?”

“Washington Monument it is,” Elle said, guiding the group in the new direction.
“I guess I should thank you for letting us kidnap your kids today,” Morgan said as he walked into Hotch’s office that evening.

Hotch glanced at the clock and groaned, putting his face in his hands for a moment before looking at Morgan. “I was supposed to meet you an hour ago at my house.”

Morgan smiled slightly. “I sent you a message two hours ago saying the kids both crashed at Elle’s.” He waited while Hotch checked his phone and relaxed slightly. “Harry was planning on staying up later and waiting for you to get back but Jack fell asleep on him and then it was lights out for both of them.” He snagged the chair across from Hotch’s desk and sank into it.

“Good,” Hotch said with a relieved nod. “Sounds like you packed a lot into one day.”

“Went the whole nine yards. If you don’t mind, we might grab them another time.”

“No, I think it was good for them. It’s not fair that Jack really only sees his new brother on the weekends, and Harry shouldn’t just be stuck here for his whole break. I’m glad the three of you took them out. How did it go?”

“They both had fun. You’re going to have a lot of pictures to sort through if Jack ever lets go of that camera.”

Hotch waited for more, but when Morgan said nothing, he said, “And yet you came back to the office even though you’re going to see me on Monday at the latest and I’m just a phone call away.”

Morgan nodded slowly. “Right. Nothing bad happened, but we ended up talking a bit about Hogwarts and some of what he said was a bit… I suppose disturbing would be the best adjective. Did he tell you that he killed the DADA teacher in his first year?”

Hotch started. “No, he didn’t. What happened?”

“Voldemort was telling the professor to get the Philosopher’s Stone away from him and Harry was pretty sure the guy was going to kill him in the process so he killed the professor instead. Voldemort couldn’t touch him without being injured because of the blood wards and Harry used that to…well.” In a lighter tone, he added, “At any rate, sounds like neither Quirrell nor Voldemort was a very nice man.”

Morgan gave him a minute to let it sink in, and then Hotch asked, “What else? You don’t start with the bad news.”

“It’s all kind of equal this time,” Morgan admitted. “The three of us talked later and we’re pretty sure that he’s got serious trust issues, mostly because the adults around him have been about as useless as can be in protecting him.”

“And that’s as bad as the trauma of killing someone?”

“It is when he’s almost entirely self-dependent and doesn’t understand that it’s perfectly normal to ask adults about anything they need. It didn’t sound like adults had ever really been there for him. The kid seemed genuinely worried about us when he asked what we would do if attacked by someone with magic. I’m seriously concerned that he won’t even think to ask for help if something’s gone horribly wrong, and I highly suspect something will go wrong because your son’s got shitty luck.”
“Trust issues. That’s just what we need,” Hotch sighed.

Morgan got to his feet. “Something to think about. I’m heading back to Elle’s. Reid was contemplating staying the night, which means he’s probably asleep. If we take them out to breakfast we’ll let you know, but otherwise we’ll just be at the house.”

He nodded in understanding. “All right. And thanks, for everything. I can’t express how grateful I am.”

Morgan snorted. “I don’t know how anyone could hope to manage this situation alone. No matter what happened to him before, I’m just glad we’ve got him now.”

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The next time Blackwolf appeared in Hotch’s office, it wasn’t to deliver good news.

“How are the blood wards?”

“How would I know?” Hotch pointed out and Blackwolf tilted his head slightly to concede the point. “Do you think something’s wrong with them?”

“The opposite.” Without being prompted, he took a seat across the desk from Hotch. He rested his forearms against his knees, leaning forward with a frown. “I think their overreaction might start causing problems if they become much more obvious.”

“Is there something we can do about that?” The protection wasn’t an issue, obviously. Someone detecting that there was protection might be.

“No. Just be aware. The last time I checked, they had solidified even more.” He shook his head slowly in grim incredulity. "I've never seen such powerful wards before in my life. I had never even heard of something this extreme happening." After a pause, he said, "I think your wards are what caused Voldemort’s Killing Curse to backfire on him that day twelve years ago." "Call him Riddle," Hotch said and Blackwolf blinked in surprise. "I know the magical community likes using titles to differentiate people, but you give him more power by treating him like he's something more than a regular human."

"In a way, he was, is, and will be," Blackwolf said reluctantly. "Grindelwald caused similar damage during his reign, but his followers were not nearly as numerous or powerful as Vol- Riddle's were. Even now, many people still refuse to speak his name and simply call him You-Know-Who. And if he manages to completely come back... Death is not a wholly impermeable barrier in the magical world. But crossing through is still rare enough that even more people will follow him if he returns out of fear."

"Then let's stop him from returning," Hotch said firmly. "You said the wards protected Harry. Will they do the same thing again?"

Blackwolf shrugged. "Probably not. I think that was a very extreme situation, and blood wards tend to be at their peak when the child is very young. Your wards are still powerful, but I don't think you could unknowingly protect him again like that, especially since the wards will understand that he should be able to keep himself safe now."

"Hm." His eyes flickered over Blackwolf’s expression for a moment. "What else?"

"This isn't about the blood wards," Blackwolf said. His tone was clipped, furious, but his glare at one
of the corners of the room behind Hotch told him that anger wasn't directed him. "There was a break out from Azkaban, the major British prison. No one has done that before, and quite frankly, the person who managed it had been in there for so long that I don't know how he got out with enough sanity intact to keep himself coherent enough to escape."

"Was it one of Riddle's followers?"

"Sirius Black. He was the Secret Keeper for the Potter's house and he betrayed them. That's why Riddle was able to go after them." He paused, fingers tapping along his knee for a moment. The motion stopped and he slowly added, "Most people think he's going to go after Harry now."

Of course he'd be a target, if most of the wizarding world held him responsible for the downfall of Black's old master. He frowned. "How dangerous is he?"

"Right before they caught him, he killed a street full of muggles and a friend of his. When they took him away, he was laughing. To be honest, that's all I know about him. I can try to get more information together, but it will take a while since the British government will be suspicious of anyone looking into it. If we were to find something in his files that showed ineptitude on their part, it would be a mark against their credibility and prestige, and they need to tread carefully."

"Are they going to try to increase his protection at the Dursley home?" Hotch suddenly asked, internally swearing. There was no way they could have predicted this, but it could pose a serious problem to their current plan. At least Harry's current position effectively hid him from Black, who would search the entire Great Britain island multiple times before even thinking that Harry wasn't even in Europe anymore.

"I doubt it, but I can find out," Blackwolf replied. "Are you going to tell him?"

"That there's a murderer after him who knew the Potters?" He grimaced. "I have to. If I don't, he won't have any way to protect himself."

Blackwolf nodded slowly. "All right. I heard there will be some more protection put on Hogwarts this year. Some of the dementors from Azkaban will be moved there, which...could do more harm than good, but should at least deter Black."

"Dementors?"

"They feed on happiness and can suck out souls when asked to by the Ministry, which is called the Dementor's Kiss. They're the guards at Azkaban because they can't be fooled by disguises, and, for better or worse, they can't be reasoned with." He glanced out the window at the bullpen, where the team was working on various paperwork. "Are you going to tell him now?"

"If you have nothing else to tell me. Would you mind staying and answering any questions he has, since you know more about the situation than I do?"

Blackwolf nodded and remained in his seat while Hotch left the room and walked to Garcia's office. If Hogwarts was so safe, he wondered harshly to himself, how had two dangerous events already occurred there in the last two years? Could it be trusted to keep Harry safe this time around?

And yet, he didn't have another option, not unless he wanted to risk someone coming to try and take Harry away. Keeping his current home secret was even more essential now that they knew that someone was coming after him. As reluctant as Hotch was to admit it, he didn't know enough about the wizarding world to be able to efficiently protect Harry right now from a witch or wizard.

The sight in Garcia's office made him pause, brain rerouting from the dark turn it had taken as he was
faced with a bundle of blankets under her desk. JJ was in the spare chair, reading through some files, while Garcia was working on something on her computer. In the pile of blankets, Harry had been wrapped up and hidden out of sight, though Hotch knew he must be in there because it was the only place he could be.

"Can I borrow Harry?" He decided to just ignore his son's situation for the time being.

"Oh, sure. We were just hiding him from anyone who happened to walk by," Garcia said cheerfully and JJ rolled her eyes.

"You mean you were keeping him to yourself," JJ said as Harry emerged from his cocoon and tried to disentangle himself from the blankets.

"How could you say that!"

The pair continued lightly bickering as a grinning Harry finally came to stand beside Hotch, and the two left to head back to the main area. Hotch thought about apologizing for Garcia, decided Harry looked too happy to care, and kept his thoughts to himself.

"Did something happen?" Harry asked when they were halfway back to the bullpen, looking at him worriedly.

"Yes," Hotch admitted. "Someone who could be a threat to you broke out of prison."

Harry frowned. "But they won't know where I am."

Hotch smiled slightly, nodding. "Exactly."

Blackwolf hadn't moved, and Harry took the spot beside him while the Apache filled him in on what he had just told Hotch. Harry's expression grew solemn, brows furrowing in thought as Blackwolf described the curtain situation they found themselves in.

When he was done, Hotch said, "You mentioned that Black was the Secret Keeper. What does that mean?"

"Critical secrets can be protected with the use of a Fidelius Charm," Blackwolf explained. "Usually they are used to hide locations or something similar which cannot be deduced. Besides the people involved in the secret, such as the people living in that house or something similar, one other person knows. They're the Secret Keeper, and are the only ones who can reveal the secret to another. If Black hadn't told Riddle where the house was, Riddle would never have been able to find the Potters."

"So I just need to stay inside the castle this whole year, and I should be fine, right?"

Blackwolf nodded. "We think that should work, yes. I highly doubt he could get onto the grounds, much less somewhere deep in the castle." A flicker of amusement crossed his face. "I heard that several agents who work nearby have started taking an interest in your defensive abilities?" Harry grinned, partly in amusement and partly in sheepishness. "I would consider advising them to step it up a bit."

Hotch frowned slightly – he didn't want Harry to get the impression that they thought he was going to need to be able to protect himself from Black because no one was going to be there for him or because they wouldn't be able to stop Black. Harry just took the suggestion with a nod, however, without looking concerned, so Hotch decided to remark on it later if he was going to at all.
"The school lists should be sent out sometime soon," Harry said thoughtfully. "I'll need to go to Diagon Alley for books and supplies."

Blackwolf paused and Hotch's frown increased. "Couldn't he get what he needs from here?" Hotch asked.

Blackwolf shook his head. "I don't think it would be a good idea. However strange, there are people who keep an eye out for Harry every time he goes to Diagon Alley." Harry blanched at the thought. "Shopkeepers who would have to see him each year would find it suspicious if he doesn't show up."

"I could meet up with Hermione and Ron," Harry suggested. "Their families usually come along, so I'd be with a large group."

Hotch didn't like the idea in the slightest.

But he didn't have a better one.

"I could probably arrange to be in the area at the same time," Blackwolf said slowly. "I doubt he would try anything in a place as busy as Diagon Alley, but precautions never hurt."

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Harry went to Diagon Alley two weekends later to meet the Grangers and Weasleys. Hotch got up ridiculously early with him and was a bit amazed to see how much caffeine Harry was able to down to seem awake, like his internal clock wasn't telling him it was three in the morning instead of seven. Hotch drove him to the nearby magical community, still frustrated that this place couldn't substitute for Diagon Alley but not verbalizing that, and waited for a couple of minutes until Blackwolf showed up. The Apache went through first, and then Harry followed a little while after, setting himself on fire with green flame after calling out, "Diagon Alley!"

On the other side, he knew that Blackwolf was going to wait at the Leaky Cauldron inn with Harry, nearby but not close enough to make his guard obvious, until one of his friend's families arrived. That knowledge was a small comfort when he would have much rather been there himself, scanning the crowd for anyone exhibiting suspicious behavior. Instead, despite it being Saturday, he drove to Quantico to get some more work done so he'd have less to do on Monday and could get him sooner then.

When he got back, the house was dead quiet. A year ago, that had been cause for alarm. Usually he could hear Jack at least shuffling around. Now, it was suspicious. There had only been a handful of ties when he had come home to absolutely no noise, and none of those times had he gotten a complete explanation for what had happened. Especially while Sean had been here.

Sean, who was most definitely recovered from his concussion and was milking the stay at his brother's house for all it was worth. At least he was helping to pay the grocery bills.

Just as he closed the door behind him, he heard a strange shuffling noise coming from the side of the house to his right containing the library. He frowned – it sounded like there was an animal loose. Before he could go investigate it, however, he heard Harry's voice from the kitchen. "Dad?"

"Yes?"

As if he were able to see through walls, Harry said just as he started to duck down, "Don't take your shoes off."

Hotch paused, eyes narrowing. "Why?" he asked, straightening.
"Uh. Heh. No reason."

Something was definitely up. He followed Harry's voice to the kitchen, and came to a halt. Jack, Sean, and Harry were all sitting on the kitchen counter, sharing a bowl of popcorn between them. No, not just popcorn. A couple of bowls beside them suggested that more than just popcorn had been made while the three of them had sat there.

"So," Sean said calmly, taking another handful of popped corn. "Did you see anything unusual when you came home today?"

Hotch raised an eyebrow. "No..."


"I'm fine where I'm at," he said. His eyes flickered around the room, looking for any incriminating signs. "What's that?"

Sean glanced where Hotch pointed. "Oh, that's a trap."

"For a small animal." A small animal the size of Hedwig at least, but the owl was sitting on the back of one of the kitchen chairs, surveying the small grouping of humans like they were complete morons. He had a feeling he was going to feel incredibly sympathetic for her in a couple of minutes. "Harry," he said cautiously, really wishing someone had at least asked him for permission first but not sure how to broach that. He just knew he'd cave if Harry asked and then they'd be keeping the damn thing – the stupid creature that had most of his family hiding above ground with a trap on the kitchen floor. "Did you bring something back?"

Sean immediately started laughing. Harry nodded. "Yeah, but they didn't say how to take care of it."

"Which is kind of ironic, really," Sean added.

"You brought back an anim-"

A sudden chomping noise made him turn sharply. Honed instincts from being a field agent failed him completely and he gaped for a long moment as he was charged by a vicious, man-eating, fanged... Book.

"Get on the table!" Sean told him.

Between the embarrassment of having to be taken to the hospital for being bitten by a book or having to take cover from said book by climbing onto kitchen furniture, he took the latter, though he stood on the chair beside the one acting as Hedwig's perch instead of the table.

"What the hell is that thing?" Hotch demanded.

"Care of Magical Creatures textbook," Harry said while the book growled at him, the two eyes poking out of the top glaring.

"We've been hiding from it for the better part of the last two hours," Sean said shamelessly. "It can't jump – yet – so we should be fine where we're at."

Hotch glanced at him, exasperated. "We can't stay up here forever!"

"Theoretically it's got to get tired, right?" Sean asked, looking at Harry with a pleading expression.
"Er."

"Well, at least we're in the kitchen, surrounded by food," Sean said cheerfully.

"What about when someone has to go to the bathroom?" Harry pointed out.

"...Shit."

"Okay," Hotch said. "Sean, grab the bucket next to you. The one on the floor, for Hedwig's pellets."
Yes, his kitchen now included owl food. This was his life now, standing on chairs while directing his
brother to upend the bucket as the owl glared at him so they could trap the rampaging textbook his
son had brought home. "Pass it over here." Sean stretched his arm out and handed it to him.

Just as Hotch took it, he felt an irritable scrape against his arm, and he turned to see Hedwig furiously
watching him. He sighed, just as frustrated as she was. "Would you rather share the house with that
thing on the loose?" He pointed at the book.

And now he was arguing with his son's owl, the one that could find anyone in the world to deliver
mail.

Hedwig clicked her beak unhappily but she shuffled her wings and settled down.

Hotch turned back to the book, which was moving back and forth between the floor underneath
Hotch's chair and beside the counter, eyeing all of the tasty humans inaccessible above it. He pointed
at the door that led down to the basement. "There's a box at the bottom of the stairs to the left. If you
rifle around a bit, there should be bungee cords in there, or rope, or something like that. When it's
distracted, Sean, go grab something and bring it back up here."

"But...what if it takes my foot?" Sean asked, aghast in mock horror.

"You've got two feet for a reason," Hotch replied.

The chair suddenly skidded several inches forward as the textbook rammed itself hard against one of
the legs. Hotch waved his arms for a moment to keep his balance – trying to ignore the feeling that
he was surfing in his kitchen on a chair because of a damn bloodthirsty book, how was this his day –
and kept a critical eye on the floor until the green monstrosity finally left his chair alone and started
towards the kitchen counter again. Hotch turned the bucket upside down, and quickly stepped off the
chair and dropped the bucket on top of the book.

Sean jumped from the counter and hurried to get something to tie the book up with. Harry, doing the
exact thing Hotch would have rather he'd not done, came down after him and hurried to Hotch,
putting his hands on the bucket with his father's and trying to help him hold the plastic over the book
even as it bucked underneath them. He was just going to have to hope that the book didn't get loose
or, at least, got loose on Hotch's side.

"How are you supposed to read it?" he asked, amazed for a moment that that was his concern.

"No idea," Harry said, grunting as the book gave a particular jerk on the bucket.

"Sean, is that bungee cord coming?" Hotch called.

"One second!"

"Maybe I can stupefy it," Harry mused.
"Where's your wand?"

"...Upstairs."

Hotch was willing to admit that he didn't think he could hold the bucket in place long enough for Harry to go all the way up the stairs and back to the kitchen. Besides, there was still more to do besides just holding it under the bucket.

Finally, Sean came back into view, holding rope in his hands. "Less likely to stretch and let the bastard out," he said. "Jerk. Let the jerk out."

If Hotch thought it would do any good, he would have planned a day to sit his brother down and try to clean out his mouth with soap, at least while he was around the kids. As it was, experience told him that would only work for about a half hour.

"Okay," Hotch said, looking at Harry, who was just a couple of inches away from him as they both struggled over the bucket. "We're going to lift the edge of the bucket on my side so it goes towards me."

"It was nice knowing you," Sean interrupted.

Hotch ignored his brother's morbidity. "Once it does, lift the bucket entirely and try to grab it on the sides. You'll just need to hold it for a second before I can help you." Harry nodded, determined. "Ready?"

"Ready."

He tilted the bucket up. The book came at him, jaws snapping furiously enough that he didn't have a hope of getting his hand over it to hold it down. Less than a moment later, Harry tossed the bucket aside and grabbed the book from behind, trying to clamp it closed by wrapping his hands around the sides close to the binding. It worked until the book threw itself backwards so hard that Harry toppled over before Hotch could move to help him.

"No, Harry!" Sean cried out mournfully and melodramatically.

Still ignoring his brother, Hotch lunged forward and helped Harry wrestle with the book until they'd gotten it back to the floor face down. Harry squirmed forward and got both forearms over the back, leaning as much of his weight on it as he could to hold it down. Hotch got a good grip on the edges to ensure it couldn't move. If it had been alive, they probably would have suffocated the blasted thing by now.

Sean worked around them, getting the rope under the wriggling book and over until he'd wrapped it enough times that it seemed like it would hold. "Well," he finally said when the book groaned weakly at them. "That was interesting. Harry, did you bring anything else back that we should know about?"

"Don't think so," Harry replied, panting. "Hermione got a cat that tried to kill Ron's rat, though, so I imagine she's having even more trouble than we are right now."

Hotch glared at the book when it tried to shuffle towards Harry. The book quelled under his gaze and shuffled right back to where it had been before.
I forgot how slow the plot develops at the beginning. Short term plot develops, yeah, but the long term plot...daaaang. But to be fair, when I started this thing the long term plot was not even close to being thought up yet. A lot of stuff was added later, like the book scene at the end, either to add a critical plot detail or to create a scene that I wanted to ensure happened somehow. (The original plan was for Hermione to throw the Monster Book at Foyet to distract him, and then they'd all be on various pieces of kitchen furniture arguing when he showed up, but Foyet ends up with other issues so that didn't happen.)

So Jessica's a bit...yeah...but I needed someone to bring realism to Hotch's situation and it wasn't going to be Sean. Honestly, if Haley hadn't died, I don't think Hotch would have been nearly so involved in Jack's life even if he really wanted to be, simply because he was so busy with work all the time. And now I REALLY need to get to sleep so I'm posting this. Enjoy!
“Did you ever notice how in the Bible, whenever God needed to punish someone, or make an example, he sent an angel? Did you ever wonder what a creature like that must be like? A whole existence spent praising your God, but always with one wing dipped in blood. Would you ever really want to see an angel?” – The Prophecy

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Elle waited until the Hotchner pair had left before she said anything, unable to keep it in any longer. "That kid is so screwed up."

"Elle!" Morgan exclaimed, taken aback.

She scowled. "He is. Not that it's his fault – I'm just saying not all the marbles in his head are where they should be." Reid openly gaped at him. "Is it socially acceptable to firebomb the Dursleys' house?"

"No," Morgan said firmly. Then he paused. "No," he repeated, less strictly. "All we can do is help him now."

The dark look on Elle's face made Reid lean away slightly. "They hurt him that badly and they just walk away from it."

"Hotch is going to put them away for a long time," Reid said quietly, continuing even when Elle's ferocious look turned his way. "You know he will. He won't accept anything else."

"I know, but that doesn't feel like enough."

Morgan sighed, folding his arms across his chest and leaning back in his chair. "It's not up to us," he said. "And it's not up to Hotch either. It's about how much Harry still holds against them, and how much he's willing to tell his father."

"They really believed that what they did to him was right, didn't they?" Reid said. "All of it."

"Their loss," Elle spat out, "our gain. He's ours now."

"The 'messed up' one?" Morgan said, trying to keep the sharpness out of his voice and utterly failing.

"He was abused so horrifically that he doesn't even flinch," Elle snapped. "He just prepares to take a hit if he thinks someone's angry with him. You know the real reason why all of those agents are always coming down to help you guys train with him? They think he was taken by an Unsub and he's still recovering. Yeah, he's messed up. He's not normal."

"And that's why everyone here cares about him so much," Reid said. Both looked at him, surprised at the sudden statement. "It's not just us. I think a lot of people have noticed the relationship between Harry and Hotch. It's unlike most father-son partnerships in how close they are, and no one would
want to even interfere except they've noticed that all of us are worried about him. You don't need to be a profiler to see that something went badly wrong in Harry's past."

"So they're all looking out for Harry because they want to protect him?" Morgan said. "There's got to be more to it than that."

Reid shrugged. "People naturally gravitate towards Harry. Even Gideon, and it took him... Actually, I'm not sure he knows Garcia's name even after a couple of months. There are really only two agents who always come help us, but the rest from the first day haven't been shy about keeping up with his progress."

"Could it be the blood wards?" Morgan wondered out loud. "They're protecting this area. Maybe the people inside are affected by it and are more likely to want to watch out for Harry."

"Could be," Reid said thoughtfully.

"Whatever the case is," Elle grumbled, "those idiots who let Harry get into so much trouble at Hogwarts these last two years damn well better do a fantastic job at keeping him safe this year, or I'm going to be pissed. He's not getting hurt by anything else."

"Because he's 'messed up'?" Morgan said again, pointedly.

She scowled at him as she got to her feet. "Yeah. Because they failed him before." She grabbed her bag, slinging it over her shoulder. "So we're not letting that happen again, and we're going to give him what he needs to get him through all the crap he's been through, aren't we? Even if the magical world doesn't, we've got his back."

Morgan smiled slightly. "I wouldn't disagree with that at all."

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For once, the end of break came far too soon.

Blackwolf got them through the paperwork shenanigans of getting Harry into the American wizarding society. No one would know he was there, and any magic performed by him while he was underage would be routed directly to an Apache office to prevent anyone else from seeing it. Some other efforts were made to secure his protection, but Harry was never quite aware of what they were. Honestly, he was a little afraid to ask. He did get the impression that Blackwolf was going to be borrowing him for more training when school ended, though, which he was uncertain about liking or not.

Morgan and Reid, without fail, stole him for parts of every day. The activity kept changing, moving away from defense now that most of his time at Quantico was devoted to that anyway. Sometimes they took him before or after he and Hotch were at the FBI headquarters and would show him some sights around DC, or they might lead him away from the bullpen and teach him a card game. He soon learned the basics of poker, and just as quickly realized he had no hope of winning while playing Reid. In their off moments, which happened more frequently than he would have expected, JJ and Elle would do their best to join them. Gideon remained aloof, but he treated everyone else the same way so Harry guessed he had been accepted from that alone.

Before and after Reid’s and Morgan’s kidnappings, they’d usually take him to Garcia, who had begun working with some CIA and Cherokee technicians on getting technology to work around magic. She was determined to get him into contact with the team when he left for Hogwarts, and by the time he left, they appeared to have made pretty good headway. There were still times when the
technology would fizzle out and die, which came from something they couldn’t understand yet, so
Harry had to go back to Hogwarts without a communication device but Garcia and the other
technicians, talking to him through computer screens, were adamant to tell him that they would
certainly have a device delivered to Hogwarts within a month of him returning to school.

Sean stubbornly insisted on coming to visit as soon as school got out even after Harry tried to assure
him it wasn’t necessary. He made sure he’d be able to keep in contact once Harry went back to
school, though he decided to avoid the letters and just wait until he could use muggle technology to
communicate again. His regular correspondence meant that he knew at least one person would
definitely continue sending him messages once he got back to school, and he suspected his uncle
would probably make good on his promise to come down to D.C. more than just once or twice.

Hotch glanced at him out of the corner of his eye before flicking on his turn signal. “Glad to be going
back to Hogwarts?” he asked, somehow making it obvious that he wasn’t just filling the time with
words.

Of all of them, Hotch had been the best, and Harry couldn’t even say why in particular that was.

“Yeah,” he admitted. “I like it there. But I think I’d be just as glad staying here.”

“You’ll be back in a few months,” Hotch pointed out. “And if you get into any trouble, all of
Quantico just might relocate into Hogwarts to be with you.” He paused. “Our floor, at least.”

“That’d be a bit excessive. Garcia can just blackmail people from her laptop.”

Maybe it was Hotch’s lack of reaction to anything. He just didn’t mind Harry’s oddities or
peculiarities, and his attitude toward magic couldn’t have been more ambivalent. If his thoughts
towards Harry had been the opposite of Dursley’s, his behavior was more so. He almost predicted
the problems that Harry faced in settling in – which, admittedly, likely had something to do with the
whole behavioral analysis part of his job – and made efforts to block them before they could get too
serious.

Somehow, he’d picked up on more of Harry’s problems than Harry had. After he’d hugged him,
Hotch had gone out of his way to make small amounts of physical contact, reaching out to touch his
elbow or nudge him in the ribs to get his attention. He gave him brief but sincere hugs, and Harry
stopped trying to remember if he’d ever been hugged by an adult before. His insecurities about his
place at the unknown house had faded before he’d even realized they were there, with Hotch easily
slipping him into the household’s normal routine. Somehow, Hotch managed to make him feel
critical to the functioning of daily life without allowing him to do chores. At some point, they had
edged their way into an agreement that Harry wouldn’t do dinner if Hotch was home to make it and
that he wouldn’t clean the whole house unless it somehow got to the point that the CDC needed to
be called.

Most importantly, he encouraged the interactions between his sons instead of building animosity
between the two of them like the Dursleys had, which was not only a welcome gesture in itself but
also provided a way for Harry to relax. Talking with someone who was not and had never been
emotionally screwed up due to attempts on his life or other incidents was something he didn’t get to
partake in often. He wasn’t sure how long it would take for him to adjust to actually being able to
speak Parseltongue without getting looked at oddly, either, although Hotch did tend to raise an
eyebrow when they did it at four in the morning. Harry was a bit surprised he hadn’t made the two of
them go to bed yet, but he realized that Hotch was just as relieved as he was that the Hotchner sons
were getting along so well.

"What happened to Dumbledore’s spy on my street?” Harry asked.
Hotch frowned slightly. "We don't know," he replied. "When we tried to get in touch with her, she wasn't at the house."

That didn't seem like a good sign, but that didn't mean it was a bad one either.

Hotch had to leave Harry outside the local magical community, with palpable reluctance. Harry smiled slightly, relieved in a way by his father's obvious discomfort at being separated from his son for months after just meeting him. The two waited for Travis to show up, both leaning against the side of the car with Harry's trunk off to one side and Hedwig's cage resting on top of it.

"If for some reason you can't get letters through to me," Hotch said, "you might still be able to contact Blackwolf. Let him know there's some problem."

Harry nodded. He wasn't just going to let his father worry over him for weeks. "Okay."

"And Garcia is probably going to get the technology thing worked out soon. I've never seen her so dedicated, and the others who are working with her are excited that they think they might be near a breakthrough."

"Right."

"And if you see anything strange, just make sure you contact someone. Let us know, obviously, but also talk to the staff at your school." Hotch's voice gave away how little he trusted said staff, but at least he didn't flat out say it. "They're in the best position to help."

"I'll be fine," Harry said, laughing slightly. "Nothing's going to happen."

Hotch nodded reassuringly, but Harry thought the comfort might have been for both of them. "Yeah." His eyes flickered, annoyed, as he saw Travis approaching from down the street. "You sure you've got everything?" Harry raised an eyebrow. "Okay. Just..." He sighed, smiling slightly, almost in self-deprecation. "You know what you're doing."

"Yeah," Harry said, laughing. "But thanks for trying."

Hotch pulled him close in a hug, which was quickly reciprocated. "Be careful."

"I promise not to do something overly dangerous," Harry said. "And I won't get in trouble on the first day."

Right, Hotch told himself. There was no way that Black was going to show up in the Great Hall or something like that.

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"So," Hermione said when the three of them were getting back to their dorms after leaving the infirmary, "how are you planning on explaining this to your father?"

Harry groaned. He'd been right. He hadn't gotten in trouble on the first day. His luck had, of course, interpreted that to mean it was free to get him into a mess before he even arrived. "He doesn't need to hear about this." That would do nothing to ease his father's concerns about his son being so far away with a mass murderer after him.

Hermione frowned at him but Ron nodded in agreement. "Besides, it's not like he's going to know if you're not saying something, right?"
Within two days, Harry was sure he just needed to start slapping people mid-sentence whenever they started to say something ridiculous along the lines of "This won't possibly go wrong in any way." He'd sent a letter to his father saying everything had gone well, but the post he got in reply had included a very blunt question asking what had not gone well.

"He doesn't know what dementors are," Ron pointed out while the three of them were sitting in an alcove of the Gryffindor common room. Everyone else was still down at breakfast, allowing them to speak in low voices.

"Ron!" Hermione scolded. "That doesn't mean he should use that to pull something over his father!"

"He knows about dementors," Harry said, wisely taking neither side. "Blackwolf told him when he was talking about Azkaban."

"See?" Hermione said.

Harry frowned. "Ron, what's wrong with Scabbers?" The poor rat looked practically dead in his friend's lap. "Is he still sick?"

Ron nodded mournfully. "Nothing's helped him."

"Well," he said awkwardly, "the shopkeeper in Diagon Alley did say that they usually only live for three years, and you got him twelve years ago..."

"I know, but it'd still be awful if he survived all my other brothers and then died with me," Ron said. "I'm sure his situation hasn't been helped by that orange murderous beast Hermione's got."

"Crookshanks is a cat!" Hermione exclaimed. "What were you expecting?"

"Can't you just keep him away from Scabbers?" Ron snapped. "He's got enough problems without that wretched thing making it worse!"

"He's probably just trying to put him out of his misery!"

"Speaking of animals," Harry interrupted, frantically trying to get them off that topic. "Did either of you figure out how to tame your book of monsters?"

"Well, Dumbledore that Hagrid's taken over for Care of Magical Creatures, so he must have assigned it," Hermione pointed out. "But even with that, I haven't managed to figure it out. I've had to keep it tied up all summer since I got it."

Ron shook his head. "None of my brothers had it, so they don't know either. No one's used this textbook before and no one thought to ask the shopkeeper why there were sedative charms on the books."

Hermione frowned. "We can't just be expected to cast those on the books every time we need to use them. Those are really advanced spells!"

Not that that was going to stop Hermione from learning them anyway. "I was surprised they didn't at least warn us," Harry said. "Especially the muggleborn families."

Hermione checked the time. "We'd better get to Divinations," she said. "It's in a tower, and we don't want to be late for our first class."

Once they had somehow managed to locate the room with the help of a painting of a knight that was
a little too eager to help them in their 'quest,' they stared up at the trap door above them quietly.

"How do we get in?" Ron finally asked, exasperated, and was treated to a rope dropping onto his head from the door. He scowled at it while Hermione pulled the door down with the rope and climbed up. Ron followed, grumbling behind her.

Once inside, the three of them took a spot in the room, claiming poufs and setting their bags beside them. No one else had gotten in yet, and they quietly chatted until the small, almost stuffy room filled up with the rest of their class.

Their professor finally appeared, coming out of the shadows in a mystic manner that Harry was sure was planned. After a moment, he realized, stunned, that most of the room hadn't seen it coming. The BAU must have rubbed off on him more than he'd thought. A glance at Hermione, however, suggested a different answer. She appeared similarly unimpressed. Perhaps it was just that those who were raised by muggles were more skeptical about the eccentricities of magic.

Neville needed to check on his grandmother. They were doing tea leaves this semester and palmistry the next. Parvati needed to avoid a redhead. There was going to be a flu that hit the school. Someone was going to ominously disappear around Easter. Lavender's fear was going to come true in October.

This was starting to get ridiculous. There was no way she could be predicting any of that without even checking the usual fortune-telling signs, let alone by simply walking into the room and picking out random students to talk about. He tried to hide his discomfort, but he knew it was starting to show and he settled for leaning back and trying to pretend this wasn't happening.

Finally, she turned them loose to analyze their tea cups. Ron and Harry bent over Hermione's at the same time. "A...fox, I think?" Ron said.

"That looks like an acorn to me."

"It could be a fox with an acorn."

Hermione didn't look all that impressed by their Inner Eyes. It didn't take much encouragement from her for them to set her cup aside for the moment and look at Ron's instead.

"What's that?" Harry muttered to Hermione, pointing. "Looks like a cross..."

"Could be a box, though," she replied. "Look at the edges. Maybe that bottom part isn't supposed to be connected."

"That's got to be a sun," Harry said, skimming through his copy of Unfogging the Future. "So you're going to be happy about it... Oh, and this says that a cross is for trials and a box is for being trapped, so either way I guess you're going to be happy about your problems?"

Ron snorted. "Let's see yours, then." Hermione looked decidedly unenthused about looking at anything else's tea leaves but at least tried to appear like she was participating. "What's that? A hat?" Hermione just frowned skeptically. Harry bit his lip to keep from laughing. At least this class was going to be enjoyable, even if it wasn't educational. Ron turned the cup. "And...a leaf?"

A long, spindly hand reached between Hermione and Harry and plucked up the tea cup. The room went quiet startlingly quickly, and Harry looked up as he realized everyone was eager to see what Trelawney was going to say when she had something to focus on to give her a firmer grasp on her predictions.
"Oh dear," she murmured. "A club. My boy, there will be an attack coming from you, and-" Her eyes widened as she turned the cup again. "The Grim."

"The what?" Harry asked, trying and failing to lessen the deadpan in his voice. Just about everyone else around them looked horrified.

"The giant, spectral dog that haunts graveyards! It is an omen of death!" She shook her head. "I am sorry to tell you this on your first day..."

"Well, at least I know," he said dryly.

She gave him a look. "It is unwise that you should be so dismissive of your fate! Even those who heed the call of the future are not always prepared!" She dipped her head again, hands shaking as she examined the cup. "But perhaps...perhaps there will be some light in your-"

She let out a piercing scream and thrust the cup back at him. He barely managed to take it from her, struggling not to drop it like Neville had. Interrupting herself twice – definitely planned.

"The leopard," she whispered, stepping back from him.

There was a sharp gasp from behind him.

At least he sort of knew what that meant this time. By which he meant that he knew what a leopard was. "What does that mean?" he asked, frowning.

"The leopard is the cruelest sign of the fates," she hoarsely replied. "It is the archetype of the cunning and calculated feline, and the return of an unwanted threat. But be warned – the one who kills the leopard shall be marked by a fatal curse, as will be any who touch its' bones."

This was past ridiculous now. "So if I kill someone, I shouldn't touch their bones," he said slowly. "Got it."

"You foolish-!" She broke off with a huff. "This is the art of divination, not potions! A bone is not a bone! A bone is what is left behind by the slain leopard."

"Let me get this straight. I'm going to be faced with a problem that I can't get rid of unless I want to get killed?" Harry asked doubtfully.

"I do not know," she whispered. "The leopard is merely in your future. It does not mean that you will be the one to kill it. But whoever crosses it will find themselves against a frightful enemy to contend with."

She reached out, hand shaking violently now, and hesitantly took the tea cup back from him. She turned it the final quarter turn and her shoulders sank. Harry was ready to just get up and leave. "The red dragon," she murmured.

Tea leaves didn't have color, he bit back.

"Characterized by blood." She lowered the tea cup and, to his astonishment, he saw two red drops in the leaves.

"I bit my tongue this morning during breakfast is all," he said.

"Mr. Potter," Trelawney said softly, "red dragons are the beginning of a new age and the overthrow of the old, white dragons."
To take a phrase from Garcia, he was three hundred percent done with this class.

She set the tea cup back down. "Beware the Grim and stay clear of the leopard's path," she warned. "And recall that any who see a cat walk before them and do not turn back will surely live to regret it." She looked up at everyone. "Class dismissed."

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"Absolute garbage," Hermione scoffed under her breath. She hadn't stopped insulting Trelawney once and Harry was happy to let her keep going while they walked to Transfigurations. "What a complete waste of time. Did you see how she kept it up just to try to startle you?"

"Yeah," Harry said, laughing. "A dragon, really?"

"I don't know," Ron said slowly, shaking his head. "That seemed pretty real to me. Dragons are powerful omens."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "No, they're not. They symbolize rain and the change of power in England from the Saxons to the Britons, as Merlin predicted when he saw the red and white dragons fighting in the sky. No one really uses dragons as omens anymore."

"They do for significant change," Ron said. "Like she told you."

"But a leopard, Ron! We don't even have those in Britain!"

The rest of the class was thinking much more along Ron's thought process then Hermione's. They settled in to their seats quickly, not wanting to be reprimanded by McGonagall, but it was clear that no one was really focusing. Her fascinating lecture on Animagi was only appreciated by Hermione and Harry, who were eagerly listening and stared in amazement when she turned form and became a cat.

She shifted back to her usual self and folded her arms. "What is the matter with you? Not that it's important, but this is the first time my transformation hasn't gotten applause."

Most of the class looked at Harry. Hermione sighed. "We just got back from Divination-"

McGonagall nodded knowingly. "Right. Who has she prophesized to die this year, then?"

"Me," Harry said.

"Ah. Mr. Potter, she has predicted the death of a student annually and all of them are still breathing. As you appear to be in good health, I would expect you will be just fine, so you will excuse me if I don't let you off homework today. You will not have to turn it in if you die in an unfortunate accident between now and the next class period."

"But Professor," Lavender said from the front of the class, eyes huge, "she saw the leopard and a dragon in his tea leaves, after she saw the Grim."

McGonagall frowned slightly at the mention of the wild cat but quickly hid it. "All three in one tea cup? The chances of me winning the lottery are lower than that occurring. If that were true, then Mr. Potter would be the harbinger of an change in our society rivalling that of Merlin's time followed by his untimely death." She seemed to fight with herself to stay politically correct, and instead of saying the obvious – a thirteen-year-old is not going to be responsible for an upheaval of the world as we know it – she said, "Tea leaves are usually predictors for the near future, not events within a couple of decades."
"But it is possible, isn't it?" Lavender pressed.

McGonagall's lips pinched together so tightly that they became a thin line. "...It is," she ground out. Her gaze flickered to Harry. "Do warn us if you feel like becoming the Minister of Magic to restructure society's workings."

He grinned at her effort to make light of the situation. "I don't think that's going to be a problem."

"Since leopards have entered our discussion," she said, "I will briefly touch on predatory forms. They are not wholly unusual, but such aggressive forms are rare. Dogs and cats, for instance, are relatively common, while a form such as a leopard would be unheard of for centuries."

"Why is that?" Hermione asked, barely remembering to put her hands up.

"It is widely considered that your patronus form is the same as your Animagi form," she explained. "The only people who can conjure a patronus are those who have good hearts. There has never been an instance where a dark wizard has managed to produce one. Patronuses represent the person who casts them, and as such, it would highly peculiar for a well-meaning person to produce a creature known for violence."

After class had ended, Harry stayed behind, motioning for the other to go on to lunch without him. McGonagall raised an eyebrow at him curiously as he waited for the door to shut behind the last person. "I was just curious... What's so strange about seeing the leopard?" She sighed in exasperation, and he quickly said, "I'm not worried. You just seemed surprised."

"I've never heard her see that before," she admitted. "The leopard is extremely rare, because it is so specific and not native to British tradition."

"Specific?"

"I assume she gave you the full lecture on all its horrible meanings," she said dryly and Harry nodded. "Did she mention that the leopard is representative of a person?"

He frowned. "No."

"Most predictions come true simply because they are so vague. The leopard, on the other hand, is not ambiguous, so no one bothers to say they saw it because the chances of them being proved wrong are so high." Harry smiled at the derision in her voice and she coughed. "Don't worry yourself about it. I doubt you will be coming across any leopard-animagi individuals soon."

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**Dad,**

There were dementors searching the train when we went to Hogwarts. One came into our compartment, and I'm not really sure what happened but I passed out. No one else did, though. Luckily, the new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher was in the compartment with us and he sent the dementor away.

Classes are fine. Third years get electives, so a couple of the courses are completely new. Our Divinations professor seems a little odd and I doubt she can actually read the future, so I'm not sure what we're supposed to get out of it. She made a large portion of the class panic by predicting my death with the Grim, and then when Hermione and I weren't suitably panicking she added dragons and a leopard. Professor McGonagall sorted the class out when we got to her next period. She doesn't hold any faith in fortune-telling, apparently. I think you'd like Professor McGonagall. She's
the Transfigurations professor and the deputy headmistress, but a bunch of us think she'd be the best DADA professor we'd ever had if she took the post. She's apparently an animagus too, so she can turn into a cat.

Care of Magical Creatures is now being taught by the groundskeeper, Hagrid, so now we know why those bizarre textbooks were assigned. He's got a tendency to underestimate how dangerous creatures are because he's so large they aren't really a threat to him. (He named a cerberus Fluffy and told us that the giant spiders in the forest that tried to eat us were misunderstood.) Apparently we were supposed to stroke the spine to calm the book down. One of the other students (Malfoy, we've had problems with him since we started school) antagonized one of the hippogriffs Hagrid brought out so now Malfoy's complaining in the infirmary about how he's going to die from a small scratch on his arm. It wouldn't be a concern except his father's one of the school governors and we think he might try to get Hagrid removed from his position.

By the way, we went down to go visit Hagrid later to make sure he was doing all right, and he wasn't happy that I'd gone outside the castle walls after dark since Black's on the loose. He seemed to think that even being on the grounds was dangerous. I don't mean to say that he's stupid, but he doesn't usually get ideas like that on his own, and the last couple of times he was saying something like that it was because he'd heard it from Dumbledore. I don't know if that means Dumbledore's worried or not, but at the least it sounds like he might have told Hagrid to keep an eye out.

Harry

The letter was simultaneously a blessing and a curse. Hotch set it on the low table beside him on the couch, mulling his thoughts over in his head. On one hand, he had been concerned that Harry's attachment back home would start to weaken the longer he was away. Obviously, there was still time for that, but if he'd started to become uneasy as soon as he was back among magical folk there could have been a big problem.

On the other hand, he had no idea what half the letter was about.

He checked the time. Blackwolf was probably asleep, so a phone call wouldn't be appreciated. Instead, he went upstairs, pulled out his laptop, and sent him a long email, hoping the Apache checked nonmagical messaging once in a while.

A couple of minutes later, his phone rang. "I thought you'd be asleep," he said curiously.

"I wasn't." His voice was uncharacteristically urgent. "Are you sure that Harry said his Divinations professor saw a leopard in his tea leaves?"

Hotch frowned even though Blackwolf couldn't see him. "Yes. Do predictions like that really come true?"

There was a long silence on the other end. Slowly, carefully, Blackwolf said, "Not always. More often than not, they are just like nonmagical predictions. However, there are some members of magical society who do in fact have the ability to discern future events. The Trelawney family has a history of accurately giving prophecies, though they are rare and do not necessarily mean that their average predictions are also just as true."

The leopard fled from Hotch's thoughts. "He said that Trelawney also saw the Grim in his cup."

Silence.

"What does that mean?" Hotch demanded.
"It could be nothing," Blackwolf finally told him. "Like I said, predictions not given in a true trance are tentative at best."

"But you seem awfully concerned about that leopard," Hotch pointed out.

"The Grim's a common omen to use for death. It could be she was just trying to scare the class into paying attention. The leopard, however, is far too detailed to be a general sign." A sigh. "Hotch, I doubt the authenticity of the presence of a Grim, and a dragon is one of the hardest signs to detect because it looks like a couple of other omens. The leopard may not be something we should dismiss, though."

"Harry said one of his professors was skeptical even of that symbol."

"It could still be completely wrong. I'm just saying that it's not something we should forget about. Besides, there's nothing we can do. I assure you that if we meet the leopard, though, we'll probably know immediately. They come with significant-" He broke off sharply.

"What?"

"Change," Blackwolf finished quietly. And then, even quieter, "The kind that the appearance of a dragon predicts."

"Then she could have just been staging the whole thing to make them connect," Hotch said. That had to be the case. There was no way all of that could possibly be coming true, and the chances of Harry learning all of that in the first day of his class made his chances even lower.

"I think it peculiar that she would put a good sign – the dragons – with a dark sign – the Grim – together with an extremely potent omen – the leopard," Blackwolf said. "It's strange. But when Harry comes back, I want to look into it."

His son wasn't going to die. That was absurd. He scolded himself for even thinking about it. "Fine." There were other, more reasonable concerns he needed to deal with. "He said the dementor made him pass out. Why didn't anyone else?"

"Dementors have stronger effects on people who have tragedy in their pasts," Blackwolf explained, reluctantly leaving the omen topic behind. "Your son's past was probably more than enough to get their attention. You and the rest of your team would have similar issues, because of your job."

"Is there protection against them?" he asked.

"A patronus charm, but honestly, I'm not sure he could manage that at his age. It's very advanced magic. Some adults have trouble accomplishing it."

"There were some other creatures that Harry mentioned. A cerberus, some giant spiders, a hippogriff."

"A hippogriff?" Blackwolf interrupted in a tone that was on the verge of excitement. For Blackwolf, that was like a complete flip out. "What about it?"

"He said his Care of Magical Creatures professor was showing the class one and it hurt one of the students."

"Oh, I'm not surprised. They're very temperamental to anyone who's not respectful enough. But he's got one?"
"...Yes?"

"Fascinating. They're very rare on the American continents so I've never seen one."

---

By Thursday, Harry had gotten another letter from his father. He'd been a bit concerned that whatever he told him would be hard to follow, since he had even less of a magical background than Harry did, but the reply sounded like Hotch knew what he'd been talking about. Harry wasn't sure how that was possible, but he'd somehow managed to make up the knowledge gap.

Before Harry had long to puzzle over that, he read a line close to the bottom of the page that went, "Blackwolf would like more information about the hippogriff. He apparently has a fascination with them." It was no longer a question of how he'd gotten the information.

He didn't have time to write a reply that morning, and by the time he'd gotten to potions class he still hadn't gotten around to it. Half the Slytherin class was practically falling over itself to coddle Malfoy about his ridiculous injury, and Snape sneered as soon as he saw the Gryffindor trio.

This was something he definitely hadn't missed while he'd been away from the magical world.

"Worried that Black's getting closer, eh, Potter?" Malfoy muttered under his breath while Harry was being made to shred some of his roots by Snape because Malfoy was incapable of doing it himself. (Yeah, right.) "Or hoping to get revenge?"

Harry froze in his shredding and he saw Malfoy smirk, thinking he'd hit a nerve. "How did you know about that?" Harry demanded instead.

Malfoy looked taken aback for a moment, but before either could say anything, Snape took five points off of Gryffindor for Harry's dallying in his task and Harry turned away from Malfoy again.

His attention was briefly diverted from the matter at the end of class, when Snape tried to poison Neville's toad, but it was still on his mind when he was climbing the stairs out of the dungeons.

"You should've just lied and said Neville had done it all by himself!" Ron exclaimed to Hermione, then turned to Harry for support. "Right?"

"What?"

Ron stared at him for a long moment. "Snape took off points from Gryffindor because Neville's potion was perfect so he knew Hermione must have helped him," Ron said slowly, like Harry was particularly dim-witted.

"Oh. Yeah." He glanced back at Hermione, then blinked. "Um."

"What are you two still doing down there?"

He turned and saw her waiting for them at the top of the stairs. Hadn't she been right behind them, though?

Ron seemed to have a similar thought but he shook his head to clear it and hurried up the last couple of steps. "Really, why couldn't you lie to a teacher once to just save us some points?"

Hermione scowled at him. "Oh, honestly, like Snape wouldn't have known anyway." She glanced at Harry. "Why did Snape deduct points from you, though?"
"Malfoy said something strange," Harry said slowly, ushering the other two along until they were definitely out of anyone else's hearing. He repeated what had happened, and both had similar, concerned expressions. "How could he have known that Black was the Secret Keeper?"

"Malfoy's father was a Death Eater," Hermione pointed out. "He must have heard that way." Ron nodded in agreement. "I can't believe he'd try and taunt you with that, though."

"Must be glad to hear Black's out," Ron muttered under his breath. "Pompous brat. Thinks he won't be in trouble just like the rest of us if Black gets into the school..."

It wasn't so odd to settle back into magical life again, not after he'd had access to his magic over the summer. The transition was a lot easier than it had been last year, but at the same time, it felt so much harder. Last time he'd been all too happy to get away from the Dursleys. This year he wished he could see his family sooner than the Christmas break.

The post situation got increasingly stranger. Before long, Harry was getting letters not just from Hotch but also the rest of the BAU, which were delivered in packages instead of on their own to make it seem less suspicious. Sometimes, if the topics of the letters were all similar, Hotch would write the first draft and the rest of the team would annotate, which never failed to provide an amusing contrast between Hotch's rather dry tone and the rest of the group. Blackwolf sometimes sent a message as well.

His misgivings about Hotch not understanding the magical world were solidly grounded, he knew, but still his father managed to surprise him. Blackwolf and Travis must have been really active trying to get him as caught up as they could about magical theory. Sean gave up on waiting for the technological breakthrough and finally started sending his own letters, which were considerably less colorful than his usual language since he could actually reread what he'd written and censor it before it was sent. Jack did his best to keep up a regular correspondence, but it was a lot easier to interact with his brother when he was there in front of him and not through ink.

There was one thing he'd gotten completely wrong, though. Not everything could go totally according to plan, after all.

"Stay after, Potter," Snape said as he swept past his workstation and Harry bit back a groan. He knew he hadn't done anything wrong this time.

It wasn't until the class had completely emptied that Snape approached Harry by his station. The teenager resisted the urge to lean away from the potions master's severe expression, which seemed oddly more formidable than it usually did.

"Do you think yourself well-informed, Mr. Potter?" Snape demanded.

He blinked. "I...suppose, sir."

"Do you read the paper?" He nodded. "Keep up to the date on the news, any news?" Another nod. "Then, you blasted boy, how can you explain how you were completely unaware about Sirius Black's escape?" His tone rose steadily throughout the sentence until he was shouting at him.

"I did hear about that!" Harry exclaimed, still bewildered.

"If so, then why on earth did you think it wise to leave your home and go meandering elsewhere?" Snape demanded.

"Sir, what are you talking about?" Damn, damn, damn, damn!
Snape sneered at him. "Don't try to get anything past me. I know you weren't at Privet Drive this summer, as I was given the luxurious task of tracking down your ungrateful, endangered corpse after Black had mutilated it!"

"I was there!" Harry protested.

"I know for certain that you weren't. Now tell me, are you completely inane and find it amusing to entertain yourself at the expense of your safety, or were you arrogant enough to assume that the world's dangers don't apply to you?"

He had to know how Snape knew he hadn't been there. He had to. But he wasn't going to be able to get Snape to slip up in conversation and tell him, though he was sure his father could have managed it within a couple of minutes. At the same time, he didn't have a hope of pressuring Snape into telling him.

Or...maybe he did. Reid had pointed out offhandedly at Quantico that he'd been the target of bullying back at school, considering his IQ and youth. Even though he'd never really applied it, he'd said, there was something that was true with every bully who had a victim they knew they could pick on.

So Harry took a deep breath, straightened his back, and looked up at Snape. "Professor, this line of questioning is ridiculous if you don't have proof I wasn't at home."

Snape narrowed his eyes at him, incensed by the sudden defense. "There is proof, you fool. As I said, I was given the absurd task of locating you when it became clear that you weren't where you belonged!"

"But you had to find me once it became clear that I was missing," Harry pointed out, even as Snape glared harder at him. He just had to keep this up for a little longer. "How did you know I wasn't there?"

"Is it really so hard to believe that there are protections on the house of the precious Boy Who Lived that you don't know about?" Snape sneered.

"Yes," Harry said, surprising himself. "My aunt and uncle hate magic, sir. They wouldn't have agreed to that." Snape's look of distaste towards him increased further, if possible, as he kept up this line of attack. "Sir, this is about my privacy and my safety. I've got a right to know how you found out I wasn't at home, don't I?"

Snape scoffed at him. "You do not when you will surely use the information to circumvent us in the future."

"And if Black or someone like him tries a similar trick to figure out where I'm at? I think I'd better use the information then, too." He took another breath. He absolutely could not be antagonistic about this. "Look, professor. You're telling me I'm an idiot for leaving, but I would have been a bigger idiot for staying. The Dursleys knew about Black and they were talking about handing me over to him if they could."

"Impossible," Snape hissed.

"They hate me."

"I wonder why."

"-and they'd rather I not be in their lives anymore. The feeling's mutual, so I left. I figured I had a better chance of staying alive on my own instead of risking getting sold out." He met Snape's eyes as
best as he could, trying to radiate sincerity. In a way, he was telling the truth. The Dursleys had just tried to give him to the Woodsmarked Killer, not Black. "Does it really seem ridiculous that I want to know how you knew I was out of the house, but not where I’d gone? Because I know you don’t have protections over the house for me, or someone would have come before the Weasleys to get me out of there when the Dursleys tried to stop me from returning to Hogwarts."

There. He’d said it. And while he hated admitting any sort of weakness, revealing to Snape just how much the Dursleys had despised him when Snape could easily use that against him in class, this was worth something more important.

"There is a squib living on your street. Ms. Figg." Harry blinked, stunned, as he realized Snape was actually answering him, even if the words were ground out. "She made us aware that you were absent. Now. Where were you?"

Harry looked away, hoping the gesture came across as ashamed and not a telltale sign of a lie. "On the streets," he muttered.

He didn't have to look up to hear the sneer return to Snape's voice, but it was worse this time, furious that Harry wasn't telling him what he wanted even after Snape had been forced to give something up. "Instead of going to stay with your precious Weasley friend? Potter, I searched the country for you. You were not here."

His heart was pounding in his chest, but he forced himself to say, "Well, when were you looking?"

"Does that matter?" Snape demanded.

"I was in America for a little while," Harry said. "A serial killer from there came after the Dursleys. We got away, but some officials over there wanted to talk to us about what had happened. If you searched then, we wouldn't have been in the country."

He looked up when Snape didn't respond for a couple of moments. Finally, the professor demanded, "What?"

"The...Woodsmarked Killer," Harry said, genuinely puzzled. That sounded like something he should have heard of. "You didn't hear about that?"

"I was not made aware of the details of the situation," Snape said through gritted teeth. "We believed you were still in the country, since the Dursleys were there."

"Er, I used magic against him, so the American wizarding officials had to keep me longer to clean things up to keep the Statute of Secrecy," Harry quickly fibbed.

Snape's jaw clenched. "You will not run away from your family again," he snapped. "Things will be different next summer. Now get out."

Harry hurriedly obliged, grabbing his bag and trying not to flat out run up the stairs. When he reached the top, he let a grin slide over his face, elated at his success. He couldn't believe that had actually worked!

As Reid had said, face a bully without flinching and you'll surprise them with your strength as much as you'll surprise yourself.

---

_Dad,_
Quidditch season is starting back up again. The Gryffindor team captain's a seventh year and he's never won the cup, so he's really eager for us to manage it this year. I thought he was going to cry when he was giving us a rallying speech earlier. Provided we have no ridiculous accidents this year, he thinks we've got a good shot of winning.

I have a lot of time to write because Hermione and Ron are fighting since her pet is trying to kill his. That, and Hermione is spending most of her time doing homework, because she's taking every elective possible, which I didn't think was possible because quite a few of them overlap in time slots. She's definitely doing it, though, so I suppose she's managed it somehow.

Harry set the quill down after a pause, sighing to himself. It felt like he'd been telling his father everything recently, but there were some things he just couldn't bring himself to mention. He was sitting up in the dorm room on his own because everyone else was at Honeydukes, but it wasn't like he could just come out and say that the reason why he wasn't going was because he hadn't gotten his permission slip signed by an adult. He'd gotten the slip with everything else over the summer, but he'd known that he couldn't get it signed by the Dursleys, who would have just laughed if he'd asked, or Hotch, who no one could know about.

It had been a lot easier to shove it aside then. It was a lot harder now that he had to hear about everyone anticipating the Hogsmeade weekend and eagerly leaving to go see the village and its shops.

It just wasn't something Hotch needed to worry about. Harry knew he was already trying to figure out how to get Ms. Figg not to mention Harry's absence next summer, and that was much more important.

He made himself scribble down some other information about the upcoming Halloween feast, then spelled the ink dry and rolled up the parchment. He left the tower, planning on heading up to Hedwig to ask her to deliver the letter, but before he could get there, he saw Professor Lupin crossing his path.

"What are you doing up here?" Lupin asked curiously.

It took a moment for him to get his meaning. "I didn't get my slip signed for Hogsmeade," he said.

Lupin made a small sound of understanding. "Well, I just got some grindylows for class. How about you come see them?"

Harry nodded, stuffing the letter in his pocket, and followed Lupin into the classroom. Lupin glanced at the parchment briefly but didn't say anything about it. "What's a grindylow?"

"It's a water demon. We'll be dealing with them next in class," Lupin said, gesturing to a tank on a desk with a green creature in it. "Tea? I was thinking of making some."

"Sure."

"I've only got tea bags, but I think you've had enough of tea leaves."

Harry grinned slightly. "Has everyone heard that story now?"

"Professor McGonagall told me in the staff room," Lupin said lightly. In a tone that was carefully blank, he said, "A leopard... Strange."

While Lupin went about making the up the cups, he continued, "Ah, professor, I was wondering... Why didn't you let me face the boggart in the staffroom on the first day of class?"
Lupin glanced at him. "I thought you knew. I didn't want Voldemort to appear in front of the rest of
the students."

Harry blinked a couple of times. "Oh. I don’t think you needed to worry about that. The dementors
were scarier than a dark spirit who only tries to kill me once a year."

Lupin was startled into a smile. "I suppose so. You think the boggart would have become a dementor
instead?"

"Yeah. What happened to it anyway?"

Lupin grimaced. "Right after class, another professor entered the staffroom to get some papers they
had left, and they inadvertently released the boggart. Since we haven't seen it since, we think the
boggart found a quiet portion of the castle to hide in for now. If it shows up again, we'll deal with it
then. They're relatively harmless, even if they do tend to give people a fright."

The door opened, and both of them glanced up as Snape entered with a steaming cauldron. The
potions master immediately gave Harry the harsh glare he'd been sending his way ever since the day
Harry had managed to force the identity of the spy on Privet Drive out of him. He turned away, gave
a slightly less distasteful look to Lupin, and deposited the goblet on the desk in front of him.

"There's more if you need it," Snape said without much concern in his voice for Lupin's wellbeing,
and left the room almost as quickly as he was able.

"What's the potion for?" Harry asked curiously.

"I've been a bit ill recently. It helps me along."

Harry tilted his head but didn't press. "Professor, about the dementors... How did you send the one
away in the train compartment?"

Lupin raised his eyebrows, surprised by the question. "I used the patronus charm."

Soon after, he left for the owlery, and after spending some time with Hedwig he sent her off with the
letter. He still wasn't quite sure how she was delivering it across the ocean, but he sure wasn't going
to complain about it.

By the time he got back downstairs, the Hogsmeade crowd had returned and it was time for the
Halloween feast so he headed straight towards the Great Hall.

"How was it?" he asked.

"Oh, it was fantastic!" Ron gushed at the same time Hermione said, "Fine," clearly trying to temper
the experience since Harry hadn't been able to go along.

"What do you mean, 'fine'?" Ron demanded. "Just because you're more interested in things like
books and your cat gorging itself on Scabbers doesn't mean that-"

Harry tuned the pair out as they went at it again, instead focusing on his dinner. The pair had brought
back a pile of sweets for him, and he was thinking about sending some back home.

The feast ended without disaster, and Harry was thinking that maybe the first two years had been
coincidentally dosed with bad luck right up until he tried to get into the common room with the rest
of Gryffindor house, only to find it impossible.
“Nasty temper, that Sirius Black,” Peeves snidely remarked about the slash marks on the painting.

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note: Finally, the plot begins to show up. And Harry finally goes to Hogwarts. So now’s probably the time to mention that this story is going to get a bit AU in plot line. Voldemort’s still obviously a thing and most of it will be the same, but there’s going to be something major and not-canon that gets thrown in that’s going to make a huge change. It’ll be a lot of fun and I think you’ll enjoy it. Stuff gets interesting.

By the way, I'm surprised no one's asked already, but Prentiss and Rossi do come in.

I'm posting early since I should have posted another chapter or two during the trip but was travelling. And besides, why not.
"There's a time for daring and there's a time for caution, and a wise man understands which is called for." - *Dead Poets Society*

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Harry pushed the book back into the slot on the shelves that he'd taken it from, then made his way back to the table he'd been reading at with Hermione and Ron. Unsurprisingly, the two were arguing. Hermione huffed, turning away from Ron as he approached. "Sorry, Harry, what?" she asked.

"I didn't say anything."

"Oh. Well, what were you looking for?"

"Information on patronuses," he said. "Professor Lupin said they're the way to drive off dementors."

Hermione nodded, then glanced around. No one was near them, but she still lowered her voice. "You got a letter from-" She broke her words off. "Let's go visit Hagrid and see if there's an update on the situation with Buckbeak." Her words were a bit too loud.

Once they were past the walls and walking towards the hut, she picked back up where she'd left off. "Your dad sent a letter this morning, didn't he? What'd he say?"

"He's furious that Black managed to get in and they don't even know how." He bit his lip. "I think, if he didn't know how badly I wanted to be here, he'd try to bring me back to America."

"Anything else?" Ron asked.

"I mentioned to him that Snape told Dumbledore that night that he thinks there's some traitor in the castle. They're looking into it, but I doubt there's a lot they can do. They can't access the right information to properly check that out." He paused. "I also told him that I'm being stalked by Wood and all our professors, so he doesn't need to be worried about that."

Hermione grimaced, glancing around. "Best not mention that we're outside like this," she said. "He probably wouldn't be happy to hear that."

Ron knocked on the door when they got there, but no one answered. The three exchanged frowns.

"I don't hear anything inside," Ron said. "I don't think he's here."

Hermione suddenly perked up. "Wait, I hear him around back."

Now that she mentioned it, there were definitely voices that were coming their way. They left the front door and walked along the side of the garden until they'd rounded one of the stone corners and saw a pair coming towards them, Hagrid easily recognizable by his sheer size and another man who appeared as a dwarf in comparison. Harry fought back a grin, eyes lighting up as the man's features
came into view.

Hagrid waved at them enthusiastically, picking up the pace to reach them quicker. "What are you three doing out-" He started, then suddenly stopped. His expression darkened like thunder clouds had swept across it. "What are you doing out here with Sirius Black on the loose?!"

"Er," Ron explain to him intelligently and coherently.

Hagrid huffed in frustration. "Well, now that you're out here, I reckon you better stay close until I walk you back up." The other man, who had calmly continued walking closer, now came to a halt beside him. "Sorry, Mr. Blackwolf. These three are some students o' mine."

"We came to check on you, see if there was an update on Buckbeak," Hermione said. "Malfoy was bragging about getting his father involved in the whole matter and, well...we know how much influence he has..."

Unexpectedly, Hagrid's face brightened. "Matter's all sorted now! Yer just in time!" He reached out and patted Blackwolf on the shoulder. Someone smaller would probably have been knocked flat on their face. "Mr. Blackwolf 'ere's taking 'im!"

Harry grinned. That didn’t come as a surprise, not after everything he'd been hearing about Blackwolf's interest in hippogriffs. "Really?"

"Sorry, getting ahead o' meself. This is Ron Weasley, Hermione Granger, and Harry Potter. This is John Blackwolf, from America."

"A pleasure to meet you," Hermione said. Ron nodded.

"We just grabbed some dead ferrets an' were about to head to the paddock. Since yer here already, do you want to come with us?" The trio nodded, and Hagrid waved for them to follow them.

Hagrid spent most of the walk talking about the hippogriffs, but once they reached the paddock, he went into the area to feed them and left the other four on their own. Blackwolf turned his head away from Hagrid, back towards the other three.

"You've been to the Three Broomsticks, haven't you?" Blackwolf asked.

Harry blinked, surprised. "No."

Blackwolf frowned. "I thought most students went there during Hogsmeade weekends."

He shuffled awkwardly. "We need a guardian's signature on a permission slip for that."

Blackwolf nodded in understanding, and he glanced towards the other two. "What about you?" Both of them nodded, still bewildered. "Think you could get there on a day that's not a Hogsmeade weekend?"

Harry's mind flashed to the invisibility cloak. "Yes." Hermione winced at the blatant scheme to break school rules but didn't say anything.

"He wants to come talk to you about Black," Blackwolf said. He didn't have to specify who the 'he' was. "November twentieth."

"That's not going to work," Ron said immediately, before Harry could. "We've got a Quidditch match."
Blackwolf had a look on his face that was well-practiced in dealing with students. Harry remembered his father mentioning that the Apache sometimes taught at the local school. As well as worked as the police chief. And ran a part of the wizarding government. And helped the Hotchners get settled into magical society. Talk about time management. "Then no one will notice him missing," Blackwolf said diplomatically.

"I should think they would," Ron replied. "He's the Gryffindor Seeker."

Blackwolf paused. "The thirteenth, then. I would rather do this sooner than later."

"The dementors won't stop us, will they?" Hermione asked. "I know the school told the dementors to overlook us during Hogsmeade weekends, but I don't think they'll be too eager to make an exception this time."

"We'll use a patronus charm," Blackwolf said.

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The next letter Harry got detailed what to do. It was simple enough, and if everything went well and they had some luck, they didn't think they'd run into any trouble.

"Harry won't," Hermione corrected on the day before the meeting, eyeing Ron meaningfully. "It's less likely that one person will get caught than three."

"Fine," Ron grumbled.

"Aw, are the wee ones up to some mischief?"

Ron groaned and buried his face in his hands at the voice. On either side of him, the twins circled the couch and sat down, looping their arms over his neck. "We're so proud of you," George said.

"Completely."

"Utterly."

Fred glanced at Harry, grinning. "Sneaking around, it sounds like?"

Hermione looked exasperated, but Harry sighed, resigned. "Please don't mention it to anyone."

George put a plaintive hand to his chest. "Us? Rat someone out to a teacher? Harry, you should know better. Where you off to?"

"Why should we tell you?" Ron snapped.

"Because, Ronnie dearest, do you really think the best pranksters in the school don't know some ways around the castle you don't? Ways that might keep a teacher or two from seeing him, if we know where you're going?"

Harry paused. There were some others in the common room with them, but no one close enough to hear over the sounds of their own conversation. Even Hermione looked speculative at the twins' idea. "I can't go to Honeydukes because I didn't get my slip signed by the Dursleys," he said, and for a flicker of a moment he thought he saw the twins' expressions darken at the mention of the people they had stolen him away from in a borrowed car. "I was going to see if I could slip out on a day like this, when the professors won't think to be looking for me."

The twins looked at each other. "No one's in our dorm right now," George said.
A minute later found all of them in the boys' dorm, which Hermione bravely faced despite her repulsion. Fred rooted around in his trunk for a moment before hurrying back over to them with blank parchment.

"Now, we don't give this to you lightly-" he began.

"-and if you lose it or get it taken by a teacher, you'll shame everything we stand for," George said. "But you need this."

"I've got some parchment," Harry said, puzzled.

"I solemnly swear that I am up to no good," Fred said pompously.

"Oh, well, we all know that," Hermione said, and then gasped as words started to appear on the page. Fred grinned at her reaction.

"A map of the school, showing where everyone is," George said. "As up to date as it can be, showing all the nifty little secret passages to enjoy, whether it's for hiding from teachers or ex-girlfriends or hurrying to class you're twenty minutes late for."

"Though if you're that late, you really should just skip," Fred commented, ignoring Hermione's glare.

"Now, there are a lot of passages you can take," George said as he opened up the map, "but to get to Honeydukes, you should probably use this one, by the statue of the one-eyed witch. The map's nice enough to give you passwords to secret passages you might find, by the way, so look out for those."

"This is brilliant," Harry whispered, looking over it. "Wait, you said the passage goes straight to Honeydukes?"

"Yeah. What, were you planning on just walking across the grounds?" Fred scoffed and Harry nodded. "Rubbish. This is much better."

"I doubt you'll get caught this way," Ron pointed out.

"You're forgetting something. What about on the other side?" Hermione interrupted.

Fred waved it off. "They know us. We've been sneaking over there for years, buying products and bringing it back into the school to sell for them." Hermione gave them a disparaging look.

"Now come on, Hermione," Ron said, "you can't tell on them without getting Harry into trouble too."

She huffed.

Between this and the cloak, getting to Hogsmeade had just become easier than getting a passing score on Trelawney's homework when all he had to do was foresee his own death.

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The passage was cool when he slipped through it, from the chill of the air outside, but he definitely needed the cloak he'd brought along when he got out of Honeyduke's and into the street. The invisibility cloak, over his normal cloak, provided little against the frosty air, and he pulled the second one tighter around him before hurrying down the street to get to the edge of the village closest
to Hogwarts.

Waiting for him there was Blackwolf, facing the grounds and clearly waiting to see a figure coming his way. Instead, Harry slipped up beside him, intending to move quietly. Before he had gotten within a couple of meters, though, Blackwolf turned and frowned in his direction. "Yes?"

Harry blinked, startled, then pulled the hood down of the invisibility cloak. "How'd you know I was here?"

Blackwolf smirked in reply, then waved at the cloak. "Where did you get that from?"

"James Potter left it to me."

"Interesting. Hotch said you had something like that. Put the hood up and follow me."

Blackwolf led him back the way he had just come until they reached the Three Broomsticks inn. It was open, but Harry suspected it was much quieter than it would have been on a normal Hogsmeade weekend because no other students were there. Blackwolf made sure to push the door open a little harder than necessary so Harry could slip in behind him, and he walked towards the back and up a flight of stairs to a room he must have booked to give them some privacy.

Harry took off the cloak once he entered, tossed it and the regular cloak over the back of a chair, then stepped forward a few steps to meet his father halfway. The hug he was swept up in sent a wave of nostalgia over him, and he closed his eyes as he leaned into it. A soft exhale ruffled his hair and he tightened his hold.

After a moment, both stepped back, and Hotch glanced him over. "You grew an inch," he said, surprised. "At least."

Harry shrugged, grinning. "Probably all the sugar from the feasts."

"I don't think that's the direction sugar makes you grow," Blackwolf pointed out.

"How've you been?" Hotch asked.

"Less concerned than I should be," Harry admitted. "At least I know what's going on this year, unlike last time and the time before that."

Blackwolf frowned at the reminder. "I still want to know how he got onto the school grounds, let alone into the school. I looked at the wards while I was there, and I don't understand how he could have managed to get in."

"Do the wards only reach to a certain height? Could he have flown in with a broom or something similar?" Hotch asked.

Blackwolf shook his head. "I checked. The wards completely cover the air. Furthermore, there are anti-Apparation wards installed. He couldn't have come in that way, and he could only have used a portkey if he had gotten a hold of one issued by the headmaster. That takes out five of the six directions he could have come from and directly appearing in the castle."

"What would be the sixth?" Harry asked.

"Underground, but there aren't tunnels under Hogwarts. I asked Hagrid about that when I asked if the hippogriffs were eating any moles."
Harry paused. "Well, there's one tunnel network under the school itself, but I don't think it connects outside, although..." He stopped again. "Maybe it does. I suppose it would have to empty somewhere." He frowned to himself. "But Riddle would have had to have told him about it, and he'd have to be a parslemouth to enter."

"Why is there a tunnel network under the school?" Hotch asked both of them.

"Sewage, I think," Harry replied. "At least, that's what it seemed to connect to when I was down there. He built part of it as the Chamber of Secrets. If it emptied anywhere, it'd be into the lake, though, and it would make much more sense to use a tunnel-" He groaned. "To use a tunnel a lot like the one I just used." Without the two saying anything, he quickly explained the map he'd just been given and the paths that the Weasley twins had described.

"So we've got seven possible routes he could have taken," Hotch murmured. "Assuming he knows about all of them."

"One caved in, so that knocks it down to six," Harry said. "Filch knows about another four, so they probably checked those when they were looking to see how he got in."

"The route you took would have required him to walk into the middle of Hogsmeade," Blackwolf pointed out. "The final route, on the other hand, starts at the Shrieking Shack."

"Can we go investigate?" Hotch asked, and Harry could have sworn the look Blackwolf gave his father was one of amused exasperation at a stereotypical response.

"We could, except the Shack is one of the most haunted locations in Britain. Most of the people who enter there have died. Usually I would discredit such dramatic rumors, but numerous credible sources reported tragic accidents. Considering many spiritual elements can't be seen by someone without magic, I think we'd stand a rather high chance of getting you killed if you went in. Going in alone would probably be suicide."

"Then why would Black do it?" Hotch asked.

"He's probably not staying there for longer than a couple of minutes to get to the tunnel," Blackwolf said. "We'll keep an eye on the place, in case he uses this route again to get into the school."

"At least we know how he got in, then. Or highly suspect, at the least," Harry said, relieved.

"Who else knows about these passages?" Hotch asked.

"Just the Weasley twins, Ron, Hermione, and whoever these four people are," he said, pointing at the names at the top of the parchment. "But there have been thousands of people at Hogwarts, and some of them must have also found a couple of these passages."

They talked for a little longer, and then Blackwolf left when it was obvious that there was nothing more they could learn that day. Harry sat on the edge of the bed, tucking away the map, and Hotch grabbed a chair.

"Are you really feeling okay?" Hotch asked. "This can't be easy on you."

Harry shrugged. "It's fine. It's better than last year because you're actually telling me what you know instead of leaving me in the dark."

"The use of the letters is throwing me off," Hotch admitted. "I'm used to faster response times."
"I'm not used to getting responses from home," Harry added with a small laugh, belatedly realizing the dark humor probably wouldn't be so funny to Hotch. There wasn't a verbal response, but Hotch reached up with one hand and rubbed the back of his shoulder and neck.

"Blackwolf mentioned you've got a game next week," Hotch said, completely changing the topic.

Harry nodded. "Oliver really wants a win this year. He thinks we're the best team Gryffindor's had in years but the last two tournaments have been cancelled. He might kill us during practices this year, but at least we'll win the cup."

An hour later, Blackwolf came back into the room and said that Harry needed to return to the school. It was harder than he expected it would be to leave at the end, but he had to head back before dinner or someone would miss him. Hotch gave him another hug and reluctantly let him leave with Blackwolf.

The older wizard walked beside Harry to Honeyduke's as a precaution, even though he was under the cloak. "Hey, what's the incantation to the patronus charm?" Harry asked while they were walking.

Blackwolf glanced at him, then redirected their path until they were on the outskirts of the village. "Expecto patronum," he told him. "Are you planning another encounter with them?"

"Well, I didn't plan the first one."

"Fair enough." He glanced back in the direction they had come and, seeing no one, turned to Harry. "We have a couple of minutes. Try it now, and then you can practice on your own."


"Strong, good memory."

Harry opened his mouth, then paused. "Does the memory have to be good, or the feeling's we associate with it?"

"Just the feeling."

He closed his eyes for a moment, thinking back to the feeling of the stairs digging into his back and hip after he'd fallen trying to protect Sean and Jack from his grandfather, and the shock of seeing his father standing there, so aggressively furious. You dared touch him, his expression had said, in a defensive gesture Harry had never expected to see applied on his behalf. He brought back that warm glow in his chest that had bloomed when he'd understood just why Hotch had been so angry at his father – because he'd gone after not only Jack, but Harry, and made him upset.

"Expecto patronum!"

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A stag burst out of the end of Harry's wand, coming to stand in front of him and Blackwolf. It tilted its head up at the sky, antlers shifting to point backwards at the pair as it did so, and its small tail flicked aside some imaginary fly.

Beside Blackwolf, Harry grinned, then turned to look at him. He knew he was openly staring, but he could hardly contain his surprise. He'd never seen someone take to the spell as easily as that, let alone a thirteen-year-old.
"What?" Harry asked, smile fading along with his patronus.

"That was...quick," he managed.

"I usually get spells fast," Harry said.

Blackwolf eyed him oddly. "Try it again." Harry nodded. It appeared easier the second time, but Blackwolf told him to concentrate and hold it while he looked at the herbivore. The form was going to change. The mist wasn't solidifying around the edges, though the stag was completely corporeal. This was probably the shape it had taken when Harry had been raised in the Potter's image, but the new form would reflect his Hotchner identity.

Harry looked at the stag with him for a moment. "Why were you so surprised I got it so fast?"

"I've known talented adults who took weeks to get it down," Blackwolf said bluntly. "Not only that, but I hadn't expected your core to be developed enough to produce a patronus like this, or sustain it like you're doing now."

"So... What does this mean?"

Telling Harry this was the mark of incredible power later in his life would probably not be the best way to make him feel like a normal teenager who didn't have to shoulder every burden he could. The kid already had enough to worry about, and besides, he didn't know that for sure. Despite that, it wouldn't be a bad idea to tell Harry what he did know.

"Sometimes, people born to magical parents have stronger magic. It could be something else, but I don't know enough to say what. Let's head back to the castle."

"Wait," Harry said abruptly, and then, looking like he was surprising himself, "You're the only person in the wizarding world who's always given me straight answers, if you could. I wouldn't bring this up, except two other teachers now have commented on it, and they weren't dismissive like I expected. On my first day of class in Divinations-"

"I heard about Trelawney's predictions," Blackwolf interrupted. "You want to know what I think."

Harry nodded. "I know my father doesn't think it's real, but..."

"Your father would rather hope fate doesn't exist." Rather foolishly, Blackwolf thought, but there was little reason why Hotchner would believe in that sort of thing. "It would mean we are all locked in a certain path, and if Trelawney's prediction of yours was accurate, that would strongly hint at your approaching death."

"McGonagall and Lupin weren't worried about the Grim," Harry pointed out. "They both thought the leopard was strange."

Ah, the leopard. The puzzle that had been on Blackwolf's mind since it had first shown up. He shook his head. "I would want to see the leopard in your tea leaves myself before I decide anything. But I will say this – the leopard as a sign does not necessarily mean that you will be killed from it. The tribes in the western central part of Africa who first used it said that a leopard-spirit was powerful enough to appear in the tea leaves whether the human container of that spirit would harm or help the tea drinker. You may only meet a leopard-spirit."

"You think it's real."

"As I said, I would prefer to read your tea leaves myself. I don't trust someone else's word on a
matter like this. But, assuming there really was a leopard, you should keep that in mind."

"What about the Grim, then, or the dragon?"

If she saw the Grim, Harry didn't have long. A year at most.

"I would definitely want to see that tea cup," Blackwolf said. "The Grim can appear in leaves long before it appears in life, and the dragon is easily mistakenly read. The combination of the two is unlikely, as it would mean you would achieve enormous change in your world and then die within a couple of years. I don't think she saw both of them. Of the two, I think the Grim is less likely."

Especially considering the power he just saw.

Harry nodded, and this time he let Blackwolf walk him back to Honeyduke's. Blackwolf returned to the Three Broomsticks, made up his mind to solve this once and for all, and ordered a tray of tea from the counter. He carried it up the stairs and into the room he'd rented, then set it on a table.

Unsurprisingly, Hotchner immediately picked up on his intentions. "You are not honestly planning on reading my tea leaves, are you?" he asked skeptically.

The tea leaves were practically a personal insult. Hotch and the rest of his team had spent years of training to predict the behavior and future actions of the criminals they hunted, while a group of witches and wizards claimed they could do the same thing by looking at scraps at the bottom of a cup after someone had drained the liquid from it. One option was methodical and soundly based in logic and science – the other was vague and often lacked any illustrious information, allowing personal interpretation to make the predicted event come true almost every time.

Still. "Tea leaves are useless for discerning the exact circumstances of your future." He passed a cup to Hotch. "But enormous events, like those predicted by your son's cup, are not to be ignored."

"Then read his," Hotch said irritably.

Blackwolf picked up his own cup and met the agent's gaze firmly. "Within a couple of months, you and your son have grown remarkably close. Furthermore, you have ingratiated yourself in the magical events of his life. If the Grim, leopard, and dragon all truly appeared in his cup, the latter two should theoretically appear in yours, along with a sign of tragedy and grief."

The lie slipped right past Hotch. Blackwolf knew better than to think he would ever manage it again.

Hotch drank the tea.

Blackwolf stared at the contents, setting his own cup aside slowly. An upcoming enemy, from the falcon. That wasn't a surprise, considering his profession. Trouble, from the poison ivy. Again, not shocking news. A curious discovery, from the monkey. Hopefully that would solve some of the mysteries surrounding his son's situation. A journey, from the star. That was one of the vaguest signs, since the journey didn't necessarily have to be a physical one.

"Your future's going to be rough, but no one close to you is going to die and there are no leopards or dragons."

"Are you really sure those things work?" Hotch asked doubtfully.

"They work reasonably well, with the proper analysis, but like I said, they're too vague to be of any real use. You won't be out of a job anytime soon."
"Harry, switch with me," Katie whispered beside him before they were about to go out onto the Quidditch pitch.

Harry blinked at her. "What, right here?"

"No, I'll play Seeker and you be a Chaser. I can't ogle Diggory while I'm occupied with the Quaffle." Angeline sniggered behind her, but Oliver gave them all a look and she stifled the sound as best as she could.

"We'll knock him out for you, and then you can go to the infirmary wing and visit him, where he can't get away from you," Fred said, and Harry thought that Oliver might just turn around and strangle him.

"If Hufflepuff wins because you're all too busy checking out their Seeker..." Oliver threatened through gritted teeth. Harry was a bit surprised that he'd actually managed to hear them over the sound of the thunderstorm outside.

"If they're all standing around in midair in front of the goals, at least Hufflepuff won't be able to score," Harry pointed out, and then Madame Hooch called for them to walk onto the pitch.

When she asked for a fair fight, no one argued. Harry didn't think the Hufflepuffs could cheat if they tried, and Oliver would have murdered any of them who thought they had to do anything underhanded to beat Hufflepuff. Besides, with this weather, it was going to be a task just to stay on their brooms. As soon as they took off into the air, Harry lost sight of everyone. Vague shadows moved below him, but he couldn't tell if they were bursts of rain or students, and he quickly gave up trying to see what was going on.

He did a lap around the pitch, trying to find weather patterns to see if there were any spots that were keeping back the wind and rain, but it was all just as terrible. The wind threw itself at him suddenly, and he veered off path, careening out of the pitch and over the stands. Thankfully, no one was sitting on the top levels, probably worried they could be pushed off by the wind.

There was, however, a large, mangy, startled dog that Harry nearly knocked over with his broom. He got control of his broom and forced it back towards the pitch, giving up his search for the snitch for a moment and scanning frantically for the dog. He knew he'd seen it, but now he couldn't tell where it had gone off to. With a grimace, he moved away from the stands and back into the center of the pitch.

An hour had passed when a lightning bolt streaked out of the sky, briefly illuminating the pitch in a blinding flash of light. Before the black spots obscured Harry's vision, he saw it strike the tail end of a broom. He blinked rapidly, and when the spots started to clear he saw a small fire below him as the student plummeted towards the ground. He leaned over his broom, sending it in that direction, but by the time he was close enough to help two of the Hufflepuff student's teammates had already arrived.

When he looked back up, he saw a flash of yellow sprinting overhead, and he swore and pushed his own broom up after Diggory's. By the time he got there, though, the other Seeker had definitely lost sight of the snitch, and Harry came to rest beside him.

"What's the score?" Diggory shouted at him, practically right in his ear, and Harry was just able to make him out.

"I don't know! I couldn't make out who went down, but it looked like one of your beaters."
"What?"

Diggory couldn't hear him in this weather. "Nevermind!" A yellow ball darted off in the corner of his vision and he whipped his broom around, hunching low over the wood both to pick up speed and to avoid being swept off. Diggory moved after him immediately, but frankly, Harry was more than willing to risk a race if it meant they could get out of this weather faster.

The snitch took them further up into the air, past the point when Harry thought it usually stopped. The wind was beating all three of them back, but the snitch was able to keep just enough of an edge to stay out of reach. His fingers, bitterly cold, were latched tightly on the broom to hold on, but he prepared for the laborious task of peeling one of them off to grab the snitch.

"Just catch the damn thing!" Diggory bellowed, head at the level of Harry's waist. Then he shouted in shock, and Harry looked up.

A swarm of dementors circled overhead, descending towards them just as they were following the snitch up.

The hand Harry had just unlocked from his broom shot to his pocket instead of towards the golden ball, snatching his wand from his pocket. Hotch's simple words after he'd told Harry that he belonged there, that he was a Hotchner too - "Welcome home" -

"Expecto patronum!"

The stag charged upward, faster than either broom or snitch, and the nearest dementors immediately recoiled. In a fit of desperation, Harry lunged out with his other hand, practically falling off the broom, and felt his fingers catch on a frantically beating wing. Above him, as he lost concentration, the patronus faded.

Harry pulled his broom up sharply, doing a complete one-eighty. Below him, Diggory had done the same thing and ground to a halt when he'd seen the dementors, but now he was just staring up. Harry put on speed, shooting down, and he grabbed onto Diggory's broom as he passed and dragged the other student along with him. It shocked Diggory out of his reverie and he hurriedly flew beside him, both pelting towards the ground with everything they had.

"Do that again!" Diggory shouted at him, jerking at the dementors with his head. "They're right behind us!"

Harry grimaced but pointed his wand behind him. "Expecto patronum!" The stag appeared again, but within a couple of moments, he felt so drained that black spots were coming in at the corner of his vision and the patronus faded. The dementors were only repelled long enough to give them a slight lead.

The two pushed headlong to the ground, aided by the roaring wind and gravity, as the hoard followed them. Harry was working mostly on autopilot as he felt consciousness starting to slip from him, and the chill that was creeping into his bones wasn't just from the horrid weather. The snitch fluttered weakly in his hand, which was pressing it to the wood of his broom in a grip that was made less of strong muscle and more of cramped muscle. One of the towers of the Quidditch pitch flashed beside him, and Diggory started to slow slightly. There was a light, but Harry couldn't see where it was coming from, and then everything went black.

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"Wood! This is neither the time nor the place!"
"I just want to know how he's doing!"

"He's going to live, and you'll probably have the best Seeker your team's ever had back by the next game!" McGonagall snapped irately. "Leaning over him like you're planning on suffocating him or startling his wits from him when he wakes is hardly the best way to ensure a win for your rematch!"

Harry couldn't help the brief smile that flickered over his face at the sound of their voices. He forced his eyes open, blinking a couple of times. The infirmary swam into view after a moment.

"Harry!"

Hermione rushed to his side, leaning over him. Her hair fell in wet tangles around her face, and she hurriedly brushed some of them out of the way so she could actually see them. Oliver, on his right, had shifted back at McGonagall's urging but now immediately returned to peering intently at him.

"Are you all right?" Oliver demanded.

"I think you'd be better off asking the trained mediwitch than the boy who was unconscious half a minute ago," McGonagall dryly pointed out, somewhere behind Oliver.

"I don't feel dead," Harry said encouragingly.

"There's a start." He had to raise his head to see the twins at the foot of his bed. "If he can joke, he can fly."

"Professor," Harry said, trying to look around Oliver, "what did you say about a rematch?"

"After you knocked yourself out on the ground, we called the game off due to the weather, the dementors, and a downed Seeker," McGonagall told him.

Harry frowned. "But I caught the snitch."

There was a long moment of silence. Hermione looked down at his clenched hand and unpeeled his still freezing fingers from around the ball. "Oh, so he did."

"Blimey," Ron said, leaning past Hermione to look. "Nicely done, mate."

Harry didn't think he was imagining the smugness in McGonagall's voice when she said, "In that case, I will inform the headmaster that a change of plans is in order." She finally stepped close enough for him to see her past Oliver, who was in fact still leaning over him like he was either going to strangle or kiss him. After the snitch revelation, Harry thought the latter was looking uncomfortably likely. "Mr. Potter, am I correct in believing that you cast a patronus charm this afternoon against the dementors?"

Harry nodded and McGonagall looked, if possible, even prouder. "Stupendous spellwork. Twenty points to Gryffindor." He grinned at her.

"I didn't know you could do a patronus," Fred said, staring at him in awe.

"That's our Seeker for you," Oliver said.

"It's a recent thing," Harry said, "since I didn't want to deal with the dementors again. What happened, by the way? I just remember falling."

"Well, you and Diggory went after the snitch-" Oliver said, worry coloring his tone.
"No, I remember everything up until we reached the pitch," Harry told him.

Oliver sank in relief. McGonagall took over. "The patronus charm exhausted you, and between that and the dementors you fell unconscious."

"Sorry, mate," George said sheepishly. "We would have caught you sooner, but we thought you were just fleeing from the dementors some more. It wasn't until Diggory had completely stopped and you were about to punch the ground with your head that we realized there was probably something wrong with you."

He sat up, a bit shaky, and frowned. "How long was I out?"

"A half hour," Ron told him. "Not long."

On the other side of the bed, Madame Pomphrey passed a bar of chocolate to McGonagall, who started to hand it to Harry only for it to be hurriedly snatched by Oliver who thrusted it into Harry's hands, as if the half second difference in speed would somehow determine the fate of the upcoming match against Ravenclaw. Harry grinned at the gesture and broke off a couple of pieces for himself, then divided the rest and absently started handing pieces to everyone else gathered around his bed. After a moment, McGonagall acquiesced and took the proffered piece.

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He was kept in the hospital wing for the next few days, just to keep an eye on him, and Ron and Hermione spent most of the time with him, knocking homework out of the way since there was little else to do. Harry wrote a couple letters back to America, which they took to Hedwig for him.

Unsurprisingly, no one was happy to hear about the Quidditch incident, and though he knew he'd toned it down considerably, Blackwolf would probably have told them in an instant what a dementor attack would have been like, making any of his lies of omission redundant. His father also told him to stay away from Hogsmeade for now, in case Black was there, but if Harry didn't go after the twins had given him the map then the pair might become suspicious.

That was how, a couple weeks later, he found himself in the Three Broomsticks, ducking under the table to hide as some of the school's staff and the Minister of Magic sat down at a table near them, soon to be joined by Rosmerta, the barmaid.

When they got back to the school, the three of them grabbed a corner of Gryffindor common room and Harry quickly wrote down everything he could remember about the conversation. The other two quietly added in bits that he forgot to add, and when he was done, he drafted a letter to his father explaining what had happened. Not long after that, the two pieces of parchment were on their way to America, and Harry just hoped that he could make it home for Christmas without any more excitement.

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"I heard from Gideon that we got Harry mail," Morgan said, sitting down in the visitor chair in front of Hotch's desk.

"He got some news about Black." The tone was somewhat dismissive, not out of apathy but rather assuming Morgan wouldn't need the details. That, and Morgan could clearly see the browning parchment and ink on top of his desk, out of place beside the printed white sheets.

"News?" Morgan frowned. If something had happened, Hotch would be a lot more excitable than this.
"Information," Hotch clarified. "He overheard a conversation." He glanced up from the paperwork he had been looking over. "Which, by the way, took place between a group of people who included the Minister of Magic and deputy headmistress of Hogwarts. Three thirteen-year-olds were able to listen in."

It was unnecessary to state Hotch's view of their incompetency in the handling of the Black case. If this had been in America, he and JJ would surely have managed to wrest control of it by now.

Hotch grimaced, a probable sign of his irritation with himself for letting that slip out even though Morgan was hardly going to begrudge him for it. "Anyway, that's what it was about."

Morgan threw one arm over the back of his chair, and Hotch raised an eyebrow slightly at his knowing look. "C'mon, Hotch," he said. "You know we've already unofficially started profiling Black anyway, even if we haven't done it as a group. We might as well have all the information."

Hotch grimaced. "We have cases to work, ones we can actually get involved in. This isn't something we can control."

Oh, and didn't Morgan know how much Hotch hated that. "Well, not officially, no," Morgan agreed. "But we can help Harry with a profile, and if something really goes wrong, we know that we can get into Hogsmeade if Blackwolf gives us a hand. If Black shows up and we're in a position to do something, we'd rather have the profile already made than scrambled together last minute."

Hotch still didn't look convinced. Morgan knew he was worried about dragging their attention away from the cases on their desks that it was their job to do. "I won't say we care about him as much as you do," Morgan continued, "because I don't think that's possible, but we don't want anything to happen to him. He might as well be our nephew. We're going to look more into this anyway, so it makes more sense to just save time and collaborate on it."

Hotch grimaced again, glancing at the clock. Without giving a go-ahead, he said obliquely, "I'm going to be here later than normal to look over old Unsub profiles who have a similar history and behavioral pattern to Black."

"If we all stayed after and it got back to Strauss, we could be in for some trouble," Morgan said. "We could work on it at someone's house. Maybe we should see if Travis or Blackwolf could come down, in case they know something that could help."

"They're both busy and they've spent a lot of time helping us. Let's get the profile together first and then contact them."

That acceptance that there would be a collaborative effort was enough of an approval for Morgan. He grinned swiftly and got to his feet. "I'll tell everyone."

Saturday found all of them at Elle's house, which was the largest one that didn't have dogs who might react to the Reid Effect or Jack who Hotch didn't want overhearing anything.

"Okay, before anything else, let's go over what we know just to make sure we're all on the same page," Elle said, rubbing her temples with her fingers. "Sometimes we got individual letters, and I know Harry probably told Hotch everything that he thought was relevant to Black, but things just aren't adding up for me."

Gideon nodded, making a humming noise. "There's something else going on that we don't know about. It could be that Harry simply hasn't mentioned it, figuring we either already knew or that it was inconsequential, but more likely than not there's much more to this situation. Hotch, you know
"Black and Potter were best friends since day one at Hogwarts. Both were troublemakers, but it seems like that's not necessarily a bad thing in wizarding society – the barmaid, Hagrid and McGonagall all praised their past partnership. After school, Black was Potter's best man at his wedding, became Harry's godfather, and was made the Secret Keeper." There were a couple of blank looks, and he quickly explained the Fidelius Charm.

"Then he betrayed the Potters' location and Riddle killed both adults, though his curse on Harry backfired. Hagrid was sent to the Potter house when news of the attack got out, and he got Harry out of the rubble. Black was also there, and tried to convince Hagrid to give Harry to him because he'd been named godfather. Hagrid said no, since Dumbledore had told him to deliver Harry to the Dursley house. Black gave him use of his flying motorbike, saying he wouldn't need it anymore.

"A day later, Peter Pettigrew – who was rather untalented and unpopular in school but followed the pair around – found and confronted Black, shouting at him about betraying his friends. Black killed him as he went for his wand, and blew up the street they were on, killing thirteen nonmagical bystanders. The only thing found left of Pettigrew was his finger and bloodied clothing. When the Magical Law Enforcement Squad caught up to him, he was laughing and he went willingly with them.

"The Minister visited Azkaban shortly before the breakout. Most prisoners there are severely unhinged because of the presence of the dementors, but he said that Black was entirely calm and reasonable, even asking him for his newspaper once he was done with it because he missed doing the crossword. The group Harry overheard believed Black to be Riddle's most loyal follower, his heir in a way, and they think he might be trying to find a way to bring him back.

"He somehow got into the school on Halloween and tried to enter Gryffindor tower, cutting up the portrait guardian when she wouldn't let him in. There are suspicions that he made a mistake, since any other night Harry would have been in the dorm but was instead down at the holiday feast with everyone else. That night, Harry overheard Snape and Dumbledore talking, and Snape seemed to think that someone Dumbledore had brought into the school was a traitor who had let Black in. That's all we know about what's directly connected to the case."

Reid frowned. "Someone Dumbledore brought into the school – that'd be someone Snape doesn't like. Hagrid was just brought on as Care of Magical Creatures, but Lupin's this year's DADA professor and it sounded like there was quite the animosity between him and Snape."

"Harry said he almost wondered if Snape was planning on poisoning him with a draught he'd made," Morgan added.

JJ made a note on a pad of paper in front of her. "We need to find out how old he is. He could have gone to school with Black and Potter. Is there anything else someone thinks could be important?"

"There are the passages under the school," Elle pointed out. "Those and the Shrieking Shack. Hey, weren't the dementors given permission to suck out Black's soul as soon as they saw him?"

"According to a newspaper Harry read, yes," Gideon said. "Why?"

"Well, doesn't it seem odd that the dementors charged the pitch but didn't go anywhere near the students? And in that storm..." She paused, but there was no mincing words. "Quidditch is quite the dangerous game without the kind of weather Harry described. It would have been the perfect opportunity for him to try to kill Harry."
"The dementors would have gone there to get Black, but they couldn't have gotten closer because they couldn't go near the students, so they would have just hovered over the pitch like Harry described," Morgan summarized. "Only, once the two Seekers got close, they were so hungry it didn't matter anymore and they chased them down to the pitch." Elle nodded.

"There's something that's really bothering me," Reid said. "All of this – getting onto the pitch, sneaking around the castle – this doesn't make sense. Someone should have seen him. None of the portraits saw him, and Harry says they're all over the castle, in just about every hall. Invisibility cloaks are so rare that that's practically an impossibility. And then at the pitch, even in that weather, someone should have noticed an adult in the crowd, especially one who wouldn't have been near the staff. So how's he getting around without anyone noticing? And how often is he doing it?"

That rather unsettling notion hung over the room, the noise broken only by JJ writing it down.

"I want to know who else goes to Azkaban," Morgan said. "Something's different between Black and the rest of them, if he kept his sanity. That, or he's also got a talent that kept him from going crazy."

"We need more information on his family life," Reid added.

"We just need more information," Elle said with a sigh. "This is barely anything to work with. It's a lot of scattered bits and pieces of heresay."

Hotch caught a contemplative look on Gideon's face. "What?"

"I have an illegal idea," Gideon calmly said, tone slow as the idea continued to build. "Let's fake a Black sighting in America."

"No one would believe it," JJ said, frowning in confusion.

"Of course not, but it would give Blackwolf or someone else a reason to access Black's files. I wouldn't suggest something like this, but the security at Hogwarts has been rather appalling in the face of Black's repeated entry onto the grounds."

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The BAU was aggressively lovable towards Harry when he arrived for Christmas break. Elle grabbed him in a hug and swung him around, making Reid dart out of the way or risk getting hit, and Harry staggered back, grinning, when she finally put him down.

"I'll go tell Garcia the little one's back," Morgan said, sending a wave towards Harry before he headed off. Hotch was standing back as he watched the proceedings, smiling faintly.

"Conference room," Gideon said, as they were still standing in the middle of the bullpen where other agents worked as well.

Travis was waiting for them there, and she grinned as Harry walked in. "Hey! How was your semester?"

"Only almost died twice," Harry said. "New record."

"We all need life goals."

"Sorry, but I didn't think you'd be here just to see me come back."
The lighthearted expression on her face flickered. "Sorry. I'm here for the Black case. This was my only open slot this month to come give information, and Blackwolf's booked even worse than I am."

He shrugged. "I get it."

"How did you come back?" JJ asked as they all started to settle down around the table. Garcia and Morgan came in, and the tech analyst hugged Harry from behind, a bit awkwardly since he was sitting down. "I'm surprised they let you leave the school with Black on the loose."

"Snape at least knows the Dursleys hate me, so I used that and told them that I needed to go back over break to work things out with them so I could at least get a truce out of them for when I returned in the summer," he explained. "They weren't happy about it, but they let me go. Besides, Black's broken into Hogwarts more often than he's showed up at Privet Drive."

Travis glanced at her clock. "Sorry to push this along – I know Harry just got back – but we've really got to get started." Hotch gestured for her to go ahead. "Black grew up in pureblood house composed almost predominantly of Slytherins, and didn't get along with almost any of his family members. Upon going to Hogwarts, he was immediately sorted into Gryffindor."

"The Sorting Hat wanted to put me there but I'd just had a bad experience with Draco Malfoy," Harry admitted.

"The Sorting Hat?" Reid asked.

"It sings a song each year."

Travis snorted. "Anyway, back to Black, but remember the House thing because it's important. So Black joins Gryffindor and meets three others in his year: James Potter, Peter Pettigrew, and Remus Lupin. It seems like the four were good friends, from what little testimony about the case there is. Black ran away from home and was subsequently disowned, and then stayed with the Potters for the rest of his school years. That kind of thing."

"Is there information about his trial?" Gideon asked.

"There wasn't one. That sort of thing got glossed over at the end of the war. People just wanted it all over."

"How did Pettigrew find out where Black was?" JJ was frowning slightly. "He found Black before the Ministry officials did, but Black was essentially in the middle of nowhere."

"We need to talk to Lupin," Hotch said.
"I don't see how that's going to happen before school ends," Travis said. "Provided, of course, that he doesn't die because of the curse on the DADA position before then."

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"What's got you so worn out?" Hotch asked almost as soon as they arrived home. The last couple of hours, Harry had been dozing off whenever he sat in one place for longer than a few minutes without anyone engaging him in conversation.

By that point, Harry was just too exhausted to bother coming up with an excuse. "I was up-" yawn ",late trying to-" yawn ",get homework done. Before break. So...free for break."

"...How late?"

"'Till two. At least. Since Wednesday. And at least midnight since Monday."

Hotch paused, blinking at him in surprise for a moment. Harry was blinking too, but mostly just to try and wake himself up. "Well..." Hotch finally said. "It's early, but you should probably get some sleep if you want to be at all alive for break."

Harry nodded sleepily, but didn't seem to have processed the words entering his ears until Hotch coaxed Harry up the stairs towards his bedroom.

Hotch managed to explain the situation to Jack quickly enough to keep him quiet so his older brother could sleep, and then somehow wrested the excited boy into bed without letting him see Harry - he knew even opening the door so Jack could peek in would result in Jack trying to wake the teenager. Jack sullenly went to sleep, and Hotch spent an hour glancing over the house in last-minute preparations. He'd cleaned up, well aware that Harry's almost neurotic cleaning tendencies probably hadn't completely dissipated, but he also needed to make sure everything was ready for another guest to stay in the house.

Right on time the next morning, Sean showed up on the doorstep and Hotch quickly ushered him in before he could ring the doorbell again. "They're both still asleep," Hotch said quietly as Sean shut the door.

"Still?" Sean muttered. "It's, like, ten."

"I couldn't get Jack to go to bed last night and Harry needs the rest," Hotch said as they began to move towards the kitchen. It was furthest from the staircase, and anything they said would not carry up the stairs to either boy.

"What, was he up late partying?"

Both paused as floorboards overhead creaked.

"That's Harry's room, isn't it?" Hotch nodded. "Sorry. It was probably the doorbell."

"He's a very light sleeper and you didn't know. He'll probably just go back to sleep." Making sure to keep his voice quiet, he asked, "He was up late getting homework done."

"Oh God. He's got the Hotchner workaholic gene. You've warned him it's chronic and incurable, right?"

"We have a treatment plan here. It requires regular doses of JET. Seems to work."
"What's JET?"
"Jack Exposure Therapy."

Sean put a hand over his heart. "What's this? You cracked a joke?"

"I'm in a good mood."

Sean was with them for most of break, and he and Jack had a tendency to gang up on Harry and ask him questions rapid fire about the wizarding world. He quickly admitted to Sean that his friend Hermione was really the one he should be asking, and Sean told him to ask Hermione if she wouldn’t be willing to answer some of his questions. Hotch came home as often as he could, but Harry quickly realized how accurate his warning from the airport had been. There were times work kept him so busy that he didn’t get home until the early morning and had to leave just a few hours later to get back to the office, but he was clearly making an effort to get home more often than he normally would.

There was a regular D.C. trip with Elle, Reid, and Morgan, which Harry discovered that he had missed more than he thought he had. They visited more of the Smithsonian, to Reid’s utter delight and the amusement of everyone else, as well as some of the monuments scattered around the area.

Harry was intensely grateful that he had managed to get most of his schoolwork done before break, because it was only in the last two days that he remembered his remaining essays and quickly hurried to complete them. Reid had made some vague excuse about helping and then promptly read through the books Harry had brought home with him and spouting out random facts he saw instead of actually helping Harry look for information. It was amusing enough that Harry didn’t call him out on it and tried his best to just focus on what he was doing.

Agent Travis showed up to take him back to Hogwarts, and everyone reluctantly admitted it would probably be for the best that they just remained in America instead of accompanying him back to the station, although it was now much easier to get to England. Harry said goodbye to everyone at the end of break, and then he was back at King’s Cross.

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The letters from Harry between Christmas and Easter were not in the slightest bit reassuring.

First, Harry got back to discover that he'd been sent a Firebolt, since all of his mail had been delivered to Hogwarts over break. Hermione thought that highly suspicious, turned it into McGonagall for checking, and was promptly rewarded for her efforts by harassment from most of the Gryffindors. Harry agreed with her, though – there was no point for someone to send him a broom when he already had a good one, especially not one that expensive and sent without a message. It had almost certainly been Black who had sent it.

The second thing that happened was much worse and effectively annihilated Hotch's hopes in Hogwarts security. Black not only got into the school again – he got into Harry's dorm with a knife and was only noticed when he was leaning over Ron's bed.

Ron's screaming had woken most of the dorm immediately, which posed the question once more that was bothering Hotch the most. How had Black gotten passed all the swarms of students who had gotten out of bed and come to see what was going on? Even if he'd been invisible, someone would have surely bumped into him, and he couldn't have run out of there quickly enough to avoid everyone.
All of that put together, Hotch decided he was going back to Hogsmeade. Sometimes, Harry told him, the professors came down to Hogsmeade for a drink or something of the sort. Maybe he could figure out a way to get Lupin to see him there.

The same day he came to that conclusion, Garcia bounced into his room with a wide grin on her face.

"We solved it!"

He stared at her. "Solved what?"

"We got a computer to work around magic!"

Chapter End Notes

By the way, shout out to all my recurring reviewers. You guys are fantastic.

So jayswing96 asked about the Hotchner family patronuses, and coincidentally enough that question got partially answered in this chapter. Hotch’s, Jack’s (sort of), and Harry’s are going to get revealed later so I won’t say anything now, but I can share the other one. I think Sean would be a ferret – you know, snuggly and a little shit, and kinda scary if angry but still basically harmless.

Yep, patronuses can shift forms. Tonks’s did when she fell in love with Remus, becoming a wolf.
Lycanthropy

Chapter by AlexTheReaper (daviesroyal), daviesroyal

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Every great magic trick consists of three parts, or acts. The first part is called “The Pledge.” The magician shows you something ordinary: a deck of cards, a bird, or a man. He shows you this object. Perhaps he asks you to inspect it to see if it is indeed real, unaltered, normal. But of course…it probably isn’t.” - The Prestige

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Hotch glanced around the inn’s eating area. There was almost no one there. A large gathering in the back was going to make an impression on anyone who walked in. “Someone’s going to notice this,” he said under his breath.

“I bribed the innkeeper,” Blackwolf said bluntly. “They’re not usually open this early, so no one’s going to come in. By the way, if the kids get caught sneaking out, we wanted to talk to them about Sirius Black without adults telling them what to say because we realized the British were holding something back in their reports to us.”

The rest of the team had come, for a variety of reasons. Hotch thought it would be a good idea to give all of them a taste of magical culture, since they knew so little about it. Garcia had to be there to troubleshoot any minor problems that came up, just in case. Phones weren’t really working yet, since Garcia knew more about how to code a computer than manipulate a phone’s chip, so the bag she had brought contained two laptops. The rest of the group claimed to be there for moral support.

With nothing to do but wait, they pulled out case files and began quietly discussing a few profiles they were looking at. The information regarding Black, Pettigrew, and anyone else the team had started profiles on – against Hotch’s better judgment because, seriously, they did have a job to do that involved better information and immediate danger – was left back at the BAU to prevent it from falling into the wrong hands.

About fifteen minutes later, they had divided themselves into two main groups to sort out profiles. Morgan, Gideon, and JJ had wrapped up one they had started on the flight over and were started on another, while Hotch, Reid, and Elle were plowing through one that had been giving them trouble for a few days now. Part of the dilemma came from their lack of undivided attention to it, given the huge mess with the wizarding world, but the local authorities asking for help were getting desperate and the profile needed to be sent to them in the next twenty-four hours.

Reid tapped his fingers against the table for a moment, flipping through a file uselessly for a few seconds before closing it and saying, “What if it’s not about the MO?”

“They were all shot twice in the groin,” Elle said dryly. “Are you suggesting the UnSub is just a really bad shot?”

“It’s in the Georgian countryside, so everyone’s got a gun. Double-tapping is a common tactic to ensure at least one bullet hit the target. And killing someone by shooting them in the groin could be a sexual act, but it doesn’t make any sense then that he missed so badly and never hit the same spot from victim to victim.”
“What are you saying?” Hotch asked, setting aside what he’d been looking at.

“What if he wasn’t shooting them there because he wanted to…” What if he did it because that’s the only area he could hit? What if he was below them when he fired?”

Elle and Hotch stared at him for a moment, and then Hotch was flipping back to the medical reports and Elle was climbing out of her seat and onto the floor. “Gideon,” she asked, interrupting the other table’s conversation, “can we borrow your table?”

Morgan and Hotch moved the table over while Elle got into position beneath the short gap between the two tables. Meanwhile, Reid climbed onto the tables and waited until everyone else had stopped moving before he put one foot on each. At some point, Blackwolf had moved to the bar and was watching the scene play out with the innkeeper. It was a little unclear as to whether the Apache was encouraging the other man’s unease or soothing him.

“Does it match?” Morgan asked.

Elle formed her hands into a fake gun and pointed it up. “Could be. If I were a little farther away, I’d definitely have trouble directly hitting his groin.”

“And you’d be timing it to his walking pace,” JJ added in, “and he'd probably be crossing a gap when you shoot if it never hits anything below his knees.”

Hotch gestured for Reid to back up, but the table wobbled ominously. Gideon and Hotch reached out to stabilize him while Garcia and JJ held the tables still, and then Reid walked across the table and over the gap.

“Verdict?” Morgan asked.

“Dunno. Hard to tell when I don’t have anything to actually shoot at him.”

“You are not shooting anything there,” Reid said firmly.

“Scoot over.” Morgan got down on the opposite side of the tables from Elle and put his head next to hers so both of them were looking up through the gap and had space to raise their arms. “All right, try it again up there.” He muttered something to her and she nodded seriously.

Reid walked over the gap again at a regular pace, and the two agents beneath him made helpful and mature pew-pew-pewing noises to mark when they fired.

“Thanks, guys,” Reid said dryly.

“I think I hit him with about the same accuracy our UnSub did,” Elle stated, ignoring him.

“Only as accurate as him? I think I was pretty damn good,” Morgan replied smoothly.

She raised her arm above her head to awkwardly whack him in the chest.

“Do you have a good assessment or can we stop shooting me?”

“I think we’re going to need real pellets to tell,” Elle deadpanned.

Garcia snickered. “I think they just want to shoot you in the ass.”

“You’re in England. It’s ‘arse’ here.”
The group turned to look at the three teenagers standing behind Hotch. Elle and Morgan sat up sharply at the same time and accidentally smacked each other in the arms and back of the heads. Hotch shot a look at Blackwolf, who had remained helpfully quiet during the kids’ entrance, and noticed that the innkeeper had vanished at some point.

Harry nodded at the set up. “Working even when you guys aren’t at Quantico?”

“This is work?” Ron whispered a little too loudly to Hermione.

“We’re trying to figure out how someone got shot,” Elle explained as she crawled out from underneath the tables, editing “twenty some people” to “someone.” “So, you guys are sneaking out of school to visit us?”

“I get the feeling that it’s safer here with you guys than in the castle while dealing with an escaped convict,” Harry pointed out, pulling up one of the chairs. “Not that I’m not happy to see you, but why did all of you come out here?”

“We’re looking into some leads, Garcia wanted to bring her gizmos herself in case anything’s wrong with them.”

“There’s nothing wrong with them, they’re my beautiful babies!”

“And Hotch was already out here anyway,” JJ summarized. “If everyone sits down,” she said, eyes moving from a standing Gideon to Reid on the table to the students, “let’s get introduced.”

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Morgan and Reid had teamed up in an attempt to convince Ron about the benefits of profiling, and while Hotch didn’t know how far they would be able to get with that, he left them to it. Garcia was drilling information into Hermione’s head about the laptops she was handing over to them, ensuring that they could fix some easy problems she predicted might arise.

“Harris misses you,” Hotch remarked to his son. “She’s laying out a schedule for when you get back with some of the other agents who were helping.”

Harry laughed. “Really?”

“I think it’s their way of showing they care. Or they’re all obsessive but, being a psychoanalyst, I hope for the former option. Harris would like me to ask you for the general defense maneuver they claim to have drilled into you.”

“Neck, arm, leg. Some disagreements about how to grievously injure each one.”

“Heads up,” Blackwolf called. “Three incoming. I recognize Dumbledore and Snape. Third is a woman with greying hair, looks ready to kill someone.”

“McGonagall,” Harry and Ron chorused.

“You’ve got about a minute before they walk in the door.”

“It doesn’t make sense for eight people to have come out to talk to three kids,” Hotch said, standing to get a better angle to look for a place to hide some of the agents. Elle and Garcia started grabbing files and laptops and throwing them into bags without a care as to who it belonged to. Someone could sort it all out later.
Morgan hurried over to a scruffy couch against a wall in the opposite corner, and Reid joined him in adjusting its back and the two walls behind it created an empty triangle that was hidden from the rest of the room. “Hotch, who do you want out?”

“Everyone but Blackwolf, Gideon, and I.” Hotch started rearranging the workspace around him to take the appearance of an interview, and Gideon did the same while moving everything to the same table as Hotch. Garcia slung her backpack and go-bag over her shoulders and grabbed two backpacks in each hand before running behind the bar and ducking down. She tucked herself into a side panel that jutted out, just barely vanishing from sight with the bags she had brought. One more might be able to fit.

“Why aren’t we behind the couch?” Ron asked as he moved to stay out of everyone’s way.

“No use. They already know you’re here,” Blackwolf explained. He adjusted some of the chairs to make it look less like there had been a large gathering that had recently vacated the seats and taken refuge behind the couch and bar.

Morgan vaulted over the back of the couch, disappearing a moment later, and Reid gingerly joined him, as if concerned the couch might eat him. Elle threw the rest of the bags behind the couch, ignored Reid’s indignant noise as something hit him, and then jumped after them. JJ pushed the three teens into seats opposite Hotch and Gideon before joining Garcia under the bar. Hotch could just see a trace of her knee, but it could easily be overlooked as coloring of the wood.

“I can’t imagine what any of them will say if they happen to look behind there,” Ron muttered.

“Hotch, sit back a few inches from the rest of us and in the middle,” Gideon said, adjusting the chairs accordingly as Blackwolf took the spot the far left. “They won’t be thinking to compare you to Harry—”

“—But let’s not give them the opportunity to consider the similarities,” he finished, grabbing the last spot and pulling his files closer to him. He glanced up at the teens. “You’ve never met us before, you’re worried about skipping school and about talking to us, and you’re not sure how to react to American federal agents since you don’t know a whole lot about us.”

“And remember, don’t jump to our defense about anything,” Gideon stressed. “You’re at least indifferent to us, if not aggravated that we’re asking you all these questions and not giving you answers to anything you want to know.”

Hotch saw movement out of the corner of his eye but refused to react to it, instead directing the first question at Hermione, who looked the most prepared and who he was sure could act the part. “Was there anything important that happened right before the breakout? It could’ve been anything— even if you think it might have been minor.”

“I don’t really keep up with wizarding news as much as everyone else,” Hermione said, shaking her head. The gesture made her eyes sweep towards the front of the room and she ‘caught sight’ of the approaching professors. She was on her feet in an instant. “Professor!” she squeaked, face flushing. Beside her, Harry and Ron both jumped up, panic just as evident on their faces. Hotch wondered how much of it was an act and how much they trusted the judgment of the agents.

He could pick out each professor from their descriptions alone, and although traditional interrogation instinct encouraged him to stand and calmly address each by name immediately, several factors prevented him from doing so. The most prevalent was that the professors needed to feel in control of the situation, but the second was that he could draw no attention to himself before Blackwolf or Gideon for the same reason that he couldn’t sit close to Harry.
Blackwolf smoothly rose, nodding towards Dumbledore. “Headmaster. It’s been a while.”

“Blackwolf,” Dumbledore responded, a smile lighting up his face. The man’s eyes twinkled, for heaven’s sake. “I confess that I did not even imagine I might be seeing you here.”

Blackwolf sighed as if displeased at having been found out. “My apologies for the intrusion, but we had good reason for sneaking around. I hope you will agree.”

Snape glanced between the two, a frustrated frown crossing his features. Evidently he had been expecting a quick but brutal reprimand to the children before a fast march back to the castle. Hotch avoided meeting his gaze, aware that, given Snape’s grudge with James Potter, the man was the most likely to draw the connection that Hotch looked a great deal like James and Harry Potter.

Dumbledore nodded and waved towards the Apache as he turned to his accompanying professors. “This is John Blackwolf, the head of the southwest branch of the American wizarding government. Blackwolf, there are Professors Minerva McGonagall and Severus Snape.”

“With me is SSA Jason Gideon and SSA Aaron Hotchner with the FBI. I would have brought members of the wizarding defense department but we don’t yet have a team that specializes in what they do. We’re actually trying to build such a team now, but the current BAU needs more information about the wizarding world before they can train anyone else, so we were hoping this might provide some insight into our world.”

“BAU?” McGonagall asked.

“Behavioral Analysis Unit,” Gideon explained. “In short, we analyze behavior to determine someone’s most likely course of action in the future.”

In a quieter voice, Blackwolf told Dumbledore, “Most of the people they face are like the average Death Eater. Considering Voldemort’s recent actions and the stirring in his ranks, we thought it might be best to try to take preventative measures.”

Hotch later found out that both hidden groups had stirred up some dust and were frantically trying to stop themselves from sneezing around this point. JJ and Garcia were pinching their noses and filling their cheeks with air while Morgan and Elle had both sets of hands on Reid’s nose and mouth as soon as it looked like he was going to sneeze. The three behind the couch all used their shirt collars as air filters after that to prevent any more dust from getting into their noses. Hotch was just amazed at how quiet all five had been, especially since he was sure that whichever agent had gotten their hand sneezed on by Reid had undoubtedly wiped it off on one of the other two behind the couch.

“So you snuck three children out of one of the most secure places in the world to hold an interview about an escaped convict, no matter that said convict is running around nearby and attempting to kill one of the children,” Snape sneered. Dumbledore raised a hand slightly to calm him, to no effect.

“We accompanied them from the border of the school to Hogsmeade and planned to do the same to return them back to the castle,” Blackwolf said. “And since we planned the meeting in broad daylight on a day that did not fall on a Hogsmeade weekend, Black isn’t going to be on the lookout for Mr. Potter. Why would he be out here?”

“And if he did learn that Mr. Potter was out of the castle, do you think you could have held off Black?” McGonagall demanded.

“Yes,” Blackwolf replied simply. “We outnumber him by too many and the rest of the town would investigate if they heard a ruckus.”
“While I do not disagree with the idea, why not simply hold the interview in the castle?” Dumbledore asked, although he appeared to have already reasoned that the three Americans were going to have a response to everything. That he hadn’t pushed for deeper answers already suggested that he would be asking Blackwolf more difficult questions later or that he knew there was something else they weren’t saying. Considering the FBI’s reputation, though, Hotch doubted he would make the leap from ‘They’re hiding something’ to ‘One of the agents is visiting his son, who was hidden from him for over twelve years.’

Blackwolf glanced uneasily at Gideon and Hotch for a moment. “One of the major reasons I wanted to bring the BAU into this was that the team regularly deals with mass murderers. They won’t be fazed easily by anything Voldemort’s side may show them. However, because of their frequent interactions with psychotic killers and gruesome death in general, I thought it might be ill-advised to bring them anywhere near the dementors that are flying around the school, even if you gave approval for them to come in.” After a pause, he continued, “I heard some broke through earlier.”

Dumbledore nodded sadly, taking one of the seats. McGonagall looked incredulous that he wasn’t pressing further, and Snape appeared to be contemplating whether it was worth it or not to just hex the Gryffindor students since that’s what he had come out here to do anyway. Good reason apparently outweighed the urge since he made no move towards his wand. He did not, however, join the headmaster in taking a seat, although McGonagall resigned herself to it.

“An unpleasant event. It appears to have been taken care of.” Dumbledore tilted his head slightly. “However, I cannot understand why you would not inform me that you wished to talk to one of my students. I would hope that you would trust that I would allow you to do so.”

Blackwolf sighed. “I don’t know how to put this lightly, but… A lot of information that has come out of Britain has been…warped. I am aware that the government and press has a lot to do with that, but all the same, we needed to unabridged and unedited truth from Mr. Potter and his friends. Their account could not be distorted by what any adult had told them, and although I trust your judgment, we had to ensure that no one, even someone meaning well, had not inadvertently pushed them to say something or leave anything out. Psychoanalysis is a tricky and very detail-oriented science, and it is even more difficult for the agents to apply it through secondhand knowledge.”

Finally, they were past the worst of it. The aggressive tension against the agents had fled from the professors, although Snape still looked like he’d rather be hexing everyone.

McGonagall moved the conversation past subtle accusations to actual conversation. “What are you analyzing now?”

It was time for the final risk. Gideon and Blackwolf had already spoken, and this wasn’t related specifically to the children. Once he had spoken and they didn’t make the immediate connection of the similarities between him and Harry, the chances of them realizing it later were severely diminished. “Honestly, there are a few crucial gaps in Black’s story that aren’t lining up,” he said. “We want to fill those in.”

Snape looked at Dumbledore in frustrated disbelief about the apparent waste of time.

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The agents and Blackwolf walked the professors and students back the edge of the castle grounds. At the boundary, the Gryffindor trio did their best impression of hurrying away to avoid punishment by the professors. Hotch was glad none of them looked back to try and make eye contact. Instead of following the rest of the British group back to the castle, Dumbledore pulled Blackwolf aside, and both motioned for the rest of their group to go on without them.
The rest of the BAU was still hidden when they returned to the inn. The owner was behind the bar, ignoring the fully grown women hiding underneath it with a pile of bags. He nodded at them as they walked in before focusing his attention on the glasses he was cleaning. Gideon and Hotch took their seats at the table again and reviewed general information that they had just learned, as if it was all entirely new and they had never before spoken to anyone about the Black case.

Blackwolf walked in a few minutes later and announced it was clear for them all to come out. The BAU members climbed out of their unorthodox hiding places and began sorting out whose files had ended up in which backpack while they regrouped around the tables.

“By the way,” Blackwolf added in a low voice, “the innkeeper thinks Dumbledore is in on all of this.” The loyalty thing to the headmaster was becoming a theme at this point. In a regular voice, he continued, “We’re going to have to wait a few more hours before we can leave.”

“We need to deliver the laptops for one thing,” Garcia muttered, peeved that the students had been forced to leave without the objects she had slaved over.

“I don’t know how we’re going to do that just yet,” Blackwolf admitted, sparing a glance towards the innkeeper as he left the room again.

The damage from the quick clean-up had been reversed, and the only thing left to do about the Black case in Hogsmeade was to wait. “You said there were other leads here in England,” Hotch noted.

“We wanted to look into Lupin’s family life to make sure we can rule him out as a suspect,” Elle jumped in. “He has no living relatives, but maybe some old associates might know something. Why didn’t we just ask Dumbledore about the four of them?”

“He’s secretive,” Gideon said. “He wouldn’t tell us anything he judged to be a breach of confidence. Besides, why should he trust us with secrets? He only knows Blackwolf, who won’t even be working the case for long.”

“Anything else?” Hotch asked.

“Pettigrew’s history, while we’re at it,” Reid answered. “Also unlikely to yield anything but worth a shot. Finally, Blackwolf thinks he can get one, maybe two, of us in to the Ministry of Magic to search public records in case we can spot what might have been Black’s stressor to escape.”

“Elle and Morgan, look into Lupin. Gideon, can you go with JJ to check out Pettigrew?” He got a nod in return. “Blackwolf, can you drop Reid off at the Ministry?”

“I’ll have to stay with him, but I don’t think you need me here any longer.” He glanced at the rest of them. “I suppose I’ll also be transporting all of you around today, or you’re going to spend the remaining daylight hours driving instead of asking questions.”

“Are we staying here?” Garcia asked.

Hotch nodded. “I need to brief them on any changes to the profile, and you need to give them the laptops. We’re just going to have to trust that they can get back here somehow.”

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The Gryffindor trio did not, in fact, make it back, due to the extra vigilance on them.

They sent twins.
“Fred-“ One said, pointing at the other.

“And George-“ He mimicked the gesture.

“Here for pick-up!”

“We’re keeping them,” Garcia whispered to Hotch. He didn’t comment. One of the many backpacks came out and was handed reverently over to the boys. “Do not toss or throw, or I will find you and hurt you,” she threatened.

The two bowed. “Absolutely we will-“

“Not.”

She perked up. “Good!”

Hotch decided not to voice his concerns as the twins left. Trust and all that. At least the trio had only told them that the American team was trying to help but they needed to keep everything quiet.

He was just finishing up the Worthington profile, the one that had involved tabletop demonstration, when his phone rang. “Hotchner.”

Panicked panting met him on the other end. “Get Blackwolf over here. We’re running outside of the-“ A horrific snarling interrupted him and Morgan shouted in a mixture of anger and frustration. The phone thumped to the ground with a crunch of leaves and someone rolled over it in the midst of a scuffle. It sounded like Morgan was fighting a large dog…or a wolf.

“Trace the call,” Hotch told Garcia. “Send the address to Blackwolf and tell him to send backup to Morgan and Elle. Sounds like they’re fighting a werewolf.”

The wolf let out a sharp yelp as something heavy slammed into it, and Hotch heard Elle shout, “Bitch, fight me!” More growling filled the phone, and there was another thump of something getting hit. The wolf abruptly moved farther away, but something dragging behind it slowed the progress.

From there, Hotch lost sense of what was going on at the other end. The sounds of the fight never let up, and he listened intently for signs of life from both of his teammates over the growling. Garcia alerted him that Blackwolf and others were on their way.

Then Elle screamed and Morgan roared in anger.

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The BAU team wasn’t online for the video chatting for a solid week. Hermione suspected it had something to do with the way that the technology interacted with the school’s magic, but that seemed odd since everything else about the laptops were working. While they waited for word from the team, Hermione and Harry passed the time introducing Ron to the marvels of the internet. They had to keep reminding him that using a keyboard would take practice and time before he could use it as fast as they could, but he still got frustrated.

The twins, unsurprisingly, kept the secret with glee. There were a few secretive nods and winks now and then, but the professors attributed it to some sort of prank. Except Snape, who gave them all detentions for who knew what. Harry was positive it was because he hadn’t been able to punish anyone when they snuck out. Still, the twin’s asked for only one thing in return, which was to be in on some of the video calls.
Finally, they got an invite to a video chat. Harry sent a reply asking for ten minutes, and he grabbed Ron and Hermione and went to hide in the boys’ dormitory. At this time of day, nobody would be up there. The twins could come in on the second call.

With the three huddled around the bed, they grinned at Garcia, who appeared on the other line. She gave them a smile, but it didn’t quite reach her eyes.

“We were beginning to wonder if something had happened,” Hermione said in the middle of pleasantries, and Garcia’s façade fell.

Elle had been bitten two days before the full moon. Before she was completely recovered from the wound, she had transformed and howled for the first time.

And then she had tried to tear herself apart when there was no one for her to bite.

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In February, Elle left the BAU.

She showed up leaning against the walls of Hogwarts the next day with a smirk.

“What the-“ Ron blurted.

“Yes!” Harry exclaimed.

Hermione, reasonable as ever, ushered Elle inside the castle walls before anyone spotted them. Morgan had sent them a message saying to bring the invisibility cloak to the Care of Magical Creatures class, and they threw it over the ex-agent before walking her any closer to the school. The three tried suppressing grins and, when they failed, started talking in murmurs so it appeared that they were at least laughing over something.

It took them a record low of five minutes to get back to the Gryffindor common room, and Harry hurried up to the dormitory to see if anyone was there, and upon spotting Dean and Seamus working on homework, muttered an excuse before heading back downstairs. Hermione led them to Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom instead, which was, as always, empty. A precursory glance around showed that not even the ghost was there.

“Okay,” Harry said, and Elle pulled off the cloak.

“You guys look a bit surprised,” she said smugly.

From the light filtering in through the windows, Harry examined her as discretely as he could. She looked considerably gaunter than she had the last time they met, and the pale undertone had not been present before now. And yet, her muscular physique was stronger than before, and her tan covered up most traces of the illness. Her eyes had bags under them, but her movements weren’t lethargic and a strong sense of energy surrounded her. Instead of examining the damage that Harry had expected, he realized he was seeing the recovery.

“You’re looking good,” he honestly surmised.

She shrugged and found a place to lean against one of the sinks. Harry absently noted she was one off from the opening to the Chamber. “I’m still adjusting. I left the team officially mainly because I wouldn’t be able to take enough days off without anyone being suspicious.”

“Officially?”
She smirked. “I’m still working with them on the side. Sounds like Blackwolf strong-armed Strauss into it. His hatred for government policies is absolutely fantastic.”

“That’s awesome,” Ron said.

“What are you doing here?” Hermione demanded. “The dementors—“

“—are looking for Black, not me. Besides, I came in while there were students outside for class, so they weren’t even really allowed to come near. As for what I’m doing here, I’m checking in with you as a part of my new job.” She spread her arms to encompass herself. “Meet the new liaison between the FBI and the wizarding Defense Department.”

“Is that even a job?” Hermione asked.

“They were already planning on creating it so the implementation just went through a little faster than normal. It sounds like the BAU’s still looking for a replacement for me, but I don’t know if or when they’ll be telling that person about you. They might have to since the wizarding government is looking for their help on the dark wizard cases. Meanwhile, I’ll be helping train a team in the wizarding world that will act a lot like the BAU, but before I can do that, I have to learn more about how the dark wizards act so it sounds like I’ll be in England most of the time. You guys just have dark wizards coming out of the woodworks all over the place here.”

She went on to explain some more of the finicky details of the job, specifically relating to her place near Hogwarts. Before she could profile the dark wizards, she had to profile the average magical individual. To help her with this, muggleborns working in the American government were being interviewed for a potential position in gathering information about the wizarding world. Due to the sheer number of people, it was taking a while, and Elle was on her own for a while. Since England had denser magical communities, Elle was starting her search there – conveniently placing her near Hogwarts in an entirely coincidental manner.

“I’ll be profiling Snape directly while I’m here,” she added. “Hotch started to when he met him, but he wanted a better analysis.”

Harry grinned. “I thought he didn’t want to profile all of the professors.”

“He was outvoted, and besides, I’m already here and it’ll be a good place to start.” She checked her watch. “When does your next class start?”

“An hour.”

“I need a better way to get into the castle. Is there another route?”

The teens exchanged glances.

“I’ll grab the map,” said Harry.

“And I’ll get the twins,” added Ron.

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They started emailing now that that was an option. For the next emails from Harry, each had good news mixed with the bad.

He got the Firebolt back, since the professors said there had been no tampering with the broom. Hotch didn’t trust that assessment in the slightest, having heard of too many failings on the British
side of things already, but Blackwolf told him over a phone call that the professors there were at the top of their class for spellwork, and whatever faults they might have in other areas, they were certainly right about this. Hotch told Harry not to fly the broom anyway. He had the sneaking suspicion that Harry was doing so anyway out of fear that Oliver would kill him if he didn't.

In the same email, though, he told Hotch that Hermione's cat had killed Ron's rat. To make it worse, the relationship between the two had already been strained by the cat's previous attacks and Hermione's mysterious schedule that she refused to explain to them, so the two weren't on speaking terms anymore. Harry was trying to balance his friendship with both, but he was clearly unsure what to do.

In the next email, his suspicion about the Firebolt was confirmed – Harry was using it. Harry bluntly owned up to going against what he'd said, then tried to lighten up the situation by describing an amusing commentary by Lee Jordan during the Ravenclaw-Gryffindor Quidditch match in which McGonagall had practically tried to wrestle the microphone away from him because the dialogue was becoming an ad for Firebolts. Hotch really wasn't happy to hear that he'd gotten on the broom, but Harry's attempts to soothe his fears through humorous anecdotes didn't fail to make him smile.

There were plenty of emails in between, as well as video calls, that made it easier to handle Harry's separation from him. They started making plans to get him home for Easter, and then a new email came in.

*Lots happened today. Ron and Hermione made up, mostly because I think Ron's too terrified not too. Malfoy was making fun of Hermione and she punched him in the face so hard his nose was bleeding, and then she snapped at Professor Trelawney for claiming she saw the Grim in my crystal ball again and we've never seen her so much as properly disagree with a professor in class before.*

*Professor McGonagall pulled me aside later. She said that with Black's most recent appearance they're even more concerned about my safety, so they're sending someone to accompany me to make sure I arrive at the Dursleys without being killed. Once I'm there, they think it's safe enough for them to leave me, but they want to come pick me up at the end of break too. Can we make that work?*

They damn well could make it work, if Hotch had anything to say about it.

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His official escort turned out to be Professor Lupin, who he greeted happily. Harry sent a parting wave to his friends, then followed the man across the platform. He smiled slightly at his *unofficial* escort, who inclined his head briefly at Harry and watched him exit with Lupin.

“So, you’re getting along with the Dursleys?” Lupin asked as they entered the muggle platform.

He nodded, trying to keep the regret off his face. Lupin and McGonagall both trusted him to tell the truth about his safety, and they really only did mean the best. “Yeah, it’s gotten better.” He quickly turned the topic to something else before Lupin could ask any more questions about it. “Thanks for coming to make sure nothing happened.”

Lupin patted his shoulder. “You’re not alone, Harry. Don’t forget that.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Vernon Dursley approaching, and decided he wasn’t eager to test the man’s acting skills in front of Lupin. “Well, there’s my uncle. Thanks again, professor!”

Lupin nodded in reply but didn’t move, and Harry had the sinking feeling that he was probably
going to be following them back to the Dursley house at least part of the way to make sure he was fine. While it was comforting to know someone cared about his safety, this was one instance in which he almost hoped no one else did.

Vernon glared at him slightly as he approached, but from a distance the look could have been easily interpreted as an unfortunate natural expression. He turned quickly from Harry when the teen reached him, and Harry followed after confidently, as if the brusque behavior was entirely normal and not in any way a sign of hatred. Neither of them said anything until they got into the car.

“Waste of breath, you are,” Vernon immediately muttered as Harry calmly strapped himself in. “Thought you were going to be gone for good and here you are, strutting back into our lives.”

“It’s for half a day, and trust me, I wouldn’t be back here if I didn’t have to.”

Vernon shifted in his seat to face him and Harry turned in automatic response to at least hear what he was going to say. Vernon’s hand moved and a moment later pain erupted across the side of his face. After the months under his father’s almost obsessive nurturing, no matter whether it was long distance or not, the sudden violence from the man who had been his parental figure for thirteen years stunned him. He went quiet, blinking back the responsive tears for a moment, while he waited for his thoughts to catch up to him. It felt like he was forgetting something important.

“You’re not burdening me anymore,” Vernon hissed, and Harry raised his eyes to his red face. “This is the last thing I ever do for your ungrateful hide, and you will remain absolutely silent until you leave. Understood?”

He actually spent a half second weighing his options. To nod or snark back. Well, it was probably his last chance for real snark against the man.

“Absolute silence, right,” he said neutrally. “I can do that. Had a lot of practice at it at your house, remember?”

Vernon’s hand started to lift.

“I didn’t expect you would; it’s been so long since I left for a federal agent’s house.”

The mention of his father’s position made Vernon freeze and Harry resisted the urge to smirk. Finally, Vernon’s hand went back to the steering wheel and he furiously threw the car into gear, refusing to acknowledge Harry.

For his part, Harry leaned back against the seat, silently and slowly letting out the breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding in. As they began to pull out, he suddenly realized what Vernon had done, the whole thing might be blown wide up. There were plenty of people milling around and Harry was sure he had probably missed him, but just as he was about to give up and just hope Lupin hadn’t been close enough to see it, his eyes alighted on his other escort.

Morgan was watching the car pull away through narrowed eyes, both hands clenched at his sides. If looks could kill, Harry would have been trying to take control of the steering wheel once Vernon collapsed. The agent’s intense focus on Vernon at least meant that he didn’t see Harry catch sight of him, though Harry knew that it was a given at this point that Morgan was going to tell Hotch what had happened. He stifled a groan, not looking forward to the results of that conversation. It had been a lot easier to explain to the professors at his school that he really wanted to go home to see his family when they could just assume it was the Dursleys – he wasn’t sure how to manage that again
when the Dursleys had been vivisected.

The ride to the Dursleys’ was quiet. After his realization, Harry was just too tired to bicker with his “uncle,” and Vernon was probably worried about the ramifications of what he’d already done. Harry couldn’t quite blame him for that. Vernon aside, what was he even supposed to do? Not mention it and hope that Morgan didn’t either? Or should he tell his father immediately? So long as neither Morgan nor Harry told him, there was no way he was going to find out, unless Vernon did something really stupid and let it slip.

He didn’t want to be the victim anymore. When the team had first met him, they’d spent the first twenty-four hours practically acting entirely as a human barrier against the Dursleys and anyone else they deemed threatening, and they and everyone else had been frantically trying to keep him safe from Black for months. Even before then, whenever he ended up in the infirmary for something ridiculous, everyone always flopped to him and asked if he was all right. For once, could he just not be the one everyone was worrying over?

By the time they arrived at the Dursleys, Harry had resigned himself to whatever happened. He wasn’t going to mention anything to Hotch – after all, it wasn’t like Vernon had beaten him black and blue, so what was he even going to do about it? Morgan probably wasn’t going to have time to tell Hotch before they all met back up, which meant Harry might be able to ask him to just keep it to himself. It wasn’t something big enough to freak out over anyway. And if Hotch did find out… Harry wasn’t sure why he was so nervous about it, honestly. He knew he wasn’t going to be the one in trouble. But he didn’t really want to make a bigger problem for Hotch, because he just knew his father was going to do something about it, and hadn’t he already done enough?

He got out of the car, somewhat reluctantly, and followed Vernon inside without looking around for any out-of-place vehicles on Privet Drive. He knew there was little chance of him spotting them. There was a distant, muffled crack, and he sighed quietly when he realized Lupin had indeed followed them home to make sure he had arrived safely. Hopefully the agents had heard it and knew he was being watched, in case Lupin stayed longer than expected to make sure the wards had truly settled in.

He closed the door behind him and looked around the house. Nothing really had changed. Petunia had reframed one of the pictures in the hall, probably after Dudley broke the original, and the flooring seemed a bit shinier, like it had been waxed, but otherwise he couldn’t tell a difference. His absence had changed nothing about the house, though it wasn’t like he had expected it to. If anything, things were slightly dirtier, like the banister and a few places where soil had spilled from pots. Had he still been here, he would have been quickly put to work cleaning. Petunia must have been struggling to get back into the swing of taking care of the house without Harry’s help, since there was no way she would get the other two to be useful at all.

One more hour, he thought to himself when he saw Dudley at the top of the stairs, gaping at him. “Petunia!” Vernon called out, moving into the kitchen. “The boy’s here!”

Harry winced slightly at his tone, hoping that couldn’t be heard outside, then glanced back at Dudley, who still hadn’t moved. He frowned in confusion. Dudley was still staring at him, but he didn’t look upset like Harry expected. Instead, he was holding himself as if unsure as to what to do. Finally, Dudley moved carefully down the stairs until he had reached the bottom and was standing not far from Harry.

The wizard watched him apprehensively, not certain if he should be backing away before he was maliciously pranked or if he should be checking Dudley for signs of a severe illness. Before he could make up his mind, Dudley glanced in the direction of the kitchen to make sure neither of his parents
were watching, and then held out his hand.

Harry blinked at it for a moment, then back at Dudley, who was biting his lip nervously. Finally, Harry reached out slowly and took it.

Vernon’s footsteps from the kitchen made them both yank their hands away an instant later, and by the time the man appeared they seemed entirely innocent. Vernon glared at Harry and demanded, “Are you just going to stand there all day?”

“For the next hour, maybe,” Harry replied before thinking.

Vernon stomped forward and Harry steeled his spine before he could instinctively lean back. “Help your mother,” he snapped at Dudley, who scurried off immediately with a single backwards glance. Harry stared after him for a moment, still a bit confused about what had just unfolded, but was jerked out of his thoughts as Vernon roughly grabbed him and dragged him away from the door and into the living room.

“I don’t know what you did to my son,” Vernon hissed, “but undo it. Now, or I’ll make sure you never go home again.” In the kitchen, a phone rang. Harry glared and opened his mouth to respond, but Vernon continued, “I’ll tell the school everything that’s going on here. And from the way all of you are acting, I don’t think that’s going to go well for you.”

“I didn’t do anything to your son,” Harry said through gritted teeth. In the kitchen, Petunia was arguing with whoever was on the other end. “I haven’t been here, remember?”

Vernon sneered at him. “Right, because you couldn’t figure out a way to curse him.”

Harry threw his hands up. “Just what do you think I’ve done!” he demanded.

“Vernon!” Petunia called irritably. “They want to talk to you!”

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It was a miracle that Blackwolf had been able to drop him off on the magical side of King’s Cross, Morgan had to say. They had all been apprehensive about what would happen, particularly if he would be able to get back out again on his own, but the whole thing had gone surprisingly well. He had kept his distance from Lupin once he had located him, just in case, but the professor had never so much as glanced in his direction. Harry had disembarked from the train and left with Lupin, and Morgan briefly met his gaze before following them out a few minutes later.

Lupin made sure Harry and Dursley got to the car, but as soon as they got in, he went back into King’s Cross, presumably to reach a point he could apparate out of. Morgan turned from watching Lupin leave to the car, which had yet to start. He had looked over just in time to see Harry’s head whip to the side, Dursley’s hand still in the air. The audacity of the man, to do something like that when he knew someone else was taking care of Harry now, almost brought Morgan to a complete halt. He was moments away from striding to the door and pulling Harry out when he saw the teenager lift his head and respond to Dursley. Whatever he said made the man turn back to the steering wheel and start the car, pulling the car out of the parking space before Morgan could hurry after them. He settled for glaring at the back of the man’s head.

Once they were gone, he began making his own way to Privet Drive with one of the cars they had rented once they had arrived in England. After all, they couldn’t just rely on Blackwolf to transport them everywhere, even if Morgan’s jump to the platform had been necessary unless the Apache had wanted to wait there for an hour. He caught up to Dursley’s car and drove a safe distance behind
them, breaking off and taking a different route once they were only a few miles away from the house. He parked at the very end of the drive, next to the car Hotch and Reid were waiting in. On the other end of Privet Drive, Gideon and JJ were also keeping an eye on the Dursley home.

He rolled down his window, and Hotch did the same. “Anything happen?” the unit chief asked.

Morgan stumbled mentally to a halt. What was he supposed to tell Hotch? ‘Sorry, your son got hit again. By the way, you still need to wait an hour to pick him up’? Logically, he needed to wait to tell Hotch. “The bastard in there smacked Harry.”

Hotch’s eyes narrowed.

“Guys,” Reid said, eyes still fixed on the house. “Dursley just pulled Harry away from the door.”

“What?” Hotch demanded, whipping around to look at the place his son had been standing. Without hesitation, he reached for the door.

Reid reached out, although he made no effort to try and physically stop his unit chief. “Wait, Hotch! If you just run out there, Lupin’s going to see you!” Hotch glared at him, but he paused.

“Let’s call the house,” Morgan suggested quickly. “If we tell them we’re watching, Dursley’s not going to do anything.” Hotch turned his glare on him, but Reid was already dialing.

When Petunia answered, Reid handed him the phone.

“Put your husband on the phone,” Hotch ordered. Morgan could hear her snap at him in reply, and Hotch said, “Yes, I know he’s quite busy abusing my son. Get him on the phone now or you’re about to find out how hard it is to rebuild a reputation after the neighborhood sees a team of agents storm your house.”

There was a pause, and then Morgan could hear a man’s voice over the phone. Before he could get very far, Hotch interrupted him and said, “I really don’t care if he set fire to your house, and I care even less about your problems. You have fifty minutes in which you are to stay as far away from my son as humanly possible. You do anything to hurt him in that time, and I will ensure you regret it for the rest of your life.”

Dursley said something, and a look crossed Hotch’s face that made Morgan and Reid exchange nervous glances.

“Dursley, I quite obviously know where you live. I know how to get access to your bank accounts. I know what you care about. I know what you hate. I know how to find out everything about you. Why don’t you take a guess as to how many ways I will make your existence miserable if you cross me again? Give my son the phone before I enact any one of them.”

There was another pause before Harry answered. “Hey,” Hotch said, his tone losing all of its edge. Morgan redirected his attention to the door, no longer concerned about Hotch running for the house. Reid looked similarly appeased on the other side of Hotch. “How are you?” After a short answer, Hotch smiled slightly. “Yeah, I suppose. Sorry about the delay, but we just heard someone apparate in so we at least have to wait until they leave. Do you mind?”

Harry must have responded with the negative because Hotch’s face fell slightly. Of course Harry was going to hold out, even when Hotch wanted to go get him. “All right then. We’ll come in when we can. Hey, there’s a window in the living room. Know where I’m talking about?” After the response, he added, “Go sit in front of it until we come get you. Then we know where you’re at.” And, Morgan knew, they would see if Dursley came anywhere near him. “Okay. Harry, I’ll see you
very soon. I love you.” Harry replied, and then Hotch hung up and handed the phone back to Reid. “So if we shoot Dursley…” Morgan muttered. “Manslaughter charges,” Reid pointed out. “We have to find a good way to dispose of the body,” Hotch said at the same time. “Well, we have a little less than an hour to think of a place,” Morgan dryly responded, hoping that Hotch was actually just playing along and not planning. Harry moved into view of the window and took a spot on the sofa. Within minutes, he leaned his head against the couch and was asleep. Morgan frowned slightly. Kid gets hit and then crashes not long after? “Must be exhausted,” he noted.

A few minutes later, Reid read a text from the pair down the street and said, “Lupin apparated out, so we can start counting down.”

Harry slept away the next hour, after which Hotch got out of the car, quickly followed by Morgan and Gideon. The other two remained in the cars in case something happened, though Morgan was sure it was more likely that Hotch was going to start something than Black or anyone else. In retrospect, he thought as they walked to the front door, he probably should have sent a message to Gideon telling him what had happened, but from Gideon’s expression when he took in Hotch’s posture, the other agent could make a pretty good guess.

They took the time to knock on the door, and Petunia Dursley answered not a moment after with a scowl. Hotch pushed his way in and she stepped back quickly while the other two entered slightly slower. He went straight to Harry while Gideon and Morgan remained in the foyer. Morgan glanced into the living room as Harry stirred, and he had to hide a small smile when the teenager’s expression lit up at the sight of his father. Harry quickly got to his feet, and then Hotch’s gaze caught sight of something on the side of Harry’s face. The agent reached out and gently tilted Harry’s chin to one side, the other hand examining the site while his eyes sharpened in anger.

Morgan had a feeling Hotch would have actually beaten Dursley unconscious if it hadn’t meant his son watching or Hotch leaving Harry alone for longer than a minute.

Instead, Hotch let his face go with a sad expression and put one hand on his back to gently guide him towards the door. As they came closer, Morgan could see what Hotch had already noticed. An abrasion on his cheek had already swelled a bit, but it would have really been nothing if not for the way he had received it. Morgan stopped himself from clenching his hands together in fury, in case Harry took it the wrong way, and instead smiled slightly in recognition. But the moment he heard Dursley’s approach from the kitchen, he turned his head to glare in the general direction. Gideon, for his part, gave Harry one cursory glance to take in the changes, and then looked towards the kitchen with a blank stare that immediately made Morgan’s concern move from Hotch to Gideon.

Behind them, the door opened and Hotch ushered Harry out. Morgan glanced after them and made to follow, but Gideon didn’t move. “Gideon?” he asked.

The senior agent didn’t look his way. “I’ll follow you later,” he said neutrally. Morgan turned to Hotch, who shrugged slightly.

If no one else stayed, no one could regulate what Gideon did. But really, Morgan didn’t care enough. “Okay,” he responded, and closed the door after he followed the Hotchner pair out.

“Why isn’t he coming with us?” Harry asked as they walked towards the sidewalk.
“We’ll ask him when he comes out,” Morgan said. “He kind of just does his own thing.”

They got into the two cars they had left not long before and Harry quickly greeted Reid as Morgan took Hotch’s spot and Hotch took Morgan’s car. The young genius enthusiastically responded, and the group chatted for another hour while they waited. The tension slowly slunk out of Hotch, although it never quite left while they were still on Privet Drive.

By the end of the hour, there had been no gunshots and no sign that Gideon would be leaving anytime soon. No one said anything, and they continued to wait him out. It was another half hour before Gideon finally emerged and calmly walked towards the car he had arrived in with JJ, with absolutely no sign of what had happened. Harry looked ready to ask about what Gideon might have done, but the evident confusion of the other three agents made him reconsider.

When Morgan did eventually ask, all he got was a blank look in response. According to Garcia’s records, they were still alive. Morgan almost worried about what exactly Gideon had done to the Dursley parents, but decided he didn’t really want to find out.

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The Easter break workload was even more serious than that of the winter, and Harry had once again crammed it in the nights before he left Hogwarts, which explained his exhaustion. Despite his efforts, though, he hadn't been able to get it all done, and he was still knocking pieces of it out over break. Sean didn’t make it down this time, not since he'd had to take off so much work already to visit last year and would probably do the same this summer.

Reluctantly, Hotch gave Harry the full profile, including bits that they’d kept out before. It was becoming imperative that he know more about Black, especially since he was now at risk of confronting the man in his own dorm room. He didn't know if Harry would actually be able to make proper use of it, but something was better than nothing.

They were in the last week of break when the BAU got a call. Kansas, multiple homicides, mutilated corpses, mysterious disappearances. Local police needed immediate help. Hotch contemplated begging off for once. Harry took one look at his face when he came home that day, asked what the problem was, and promptly told him to get to Kansas.

Hotch argued that he’d already spent enough time away from his son. Harry replied that three days was really not a big deal. Finally, Hotch caved in to the blatant manipulation Harry pulled when he strongly hinted that Hotch staying home would make him feel like a liability who was keeping an FBI agent away from a case where he could be helping save lives.

Elle flat-out cackled over the phone when she heard about that from Morgan.

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Harry returned to Hogwarts, a bit more relaxed than everyone else. The last couple of days, sadly including the ones Hotch had been in Kansas, had actually been like a vacation since his homework had finally been done and he had no more studying to do. No one else had had that luxury, but then, no one else had done as much work before break as he had. Of course, as soon as he got back, there was more work, so it didn't matter so much within a couple of days.

The twins had all but fell in love with Garcia. Within days after learning about the wonders of phones, they managed to transfer enough money to muggle currency, and then convinced Garcia to help them buy two. They were now pulling pranks and slipping out of detentions like they had never been able to do before, and the trio knew that Garcia felt no remorse when she heard of what they
were using the technology for.

It did become useful for when Elle snuck into the school, since the twins and the trio alternated who would get her in. At one point, the five had a quick meeting and decided to give her the Marauder’s Map so she could more easily get inside. After a slightly longer meeting, they also decided she was in much more need for the invisibility cloak than they were. When presented with both gifts, she stared at them open-mouthed for a solid five minutes while they explained. She got over herself long enough to give them a group hug.

Harry expected the next message from the BAU to include a light reprimand from Hotch about giving away such gifts for someone who would soon not be coming in as often, but he received no such mention. He would have believed there was no qualm with the exchange from Hotch’s perspective, but something about the letter told him that his father’s mind was far from the wizarding world at the moment.

He frowned, reading over the words a third, and then a fourth time. Ron found him like that and sat down on the bed next to him. “You skipped dinner.”

“Something’s wrong,” he muttered. Looking up, he asked, “Elle comes in three days, right?”

“The twins found a note from her in one of their books.” Harry didn’t bother asking how she had managed that. She’d been sneaky before, but the cloak made it almost impossible for a place to keep her out now, and with the map, she was nigh invincible in Hogwarts. “She can’t make it.”

“Something’s really wrong.”

Ron tugged at the laptop. “What happened?”

“I only got a message from Hotch,” he said. Even though they were reasonably certain no one would ever overhear them talking about Hotch as ‘Harry’s dad,’ they had all decided the possible outcome of being discovered far outweighed the risk. “No one else. And it was three days late. And short.”

He pushed the screen toward his friend. “Here, look.”

Ron skimmed it. “There’s nothing…serious in here.”

“But there’s nothing important either,” Harry argued. “It’s almost like it wasn’t written by him.”

“Do you think it wasn’t?” Ron asked, alarmed.

Harry chewed his lip for a moment. “I think it was,” he said slowly, “but I think there’s something he doesn’t want us to know.” After another pause, he added, “I think he would have told us if it had something to do with our world. It’s got to have to do with something going on there. And Elle must be involved with it if she’s going to miss the check in.” He rubbed his face with his hands. “I’m just glad he sent me a message. At least he’s not…” He sucked in a shuddering breath. “Someone warned me that his job was more dangerous than his relationship to me and I didn’t really think about what that meant…not until now.”

They sat in silence for a minute. “I hate saying this, but I think we need to let the twins in on everything,” Ron carefully said. “We can ask Hotch first if it’s okay, but keeping it just between the three of us… If something went really wrong with Black, no one would know, and the twins wouldn’t think to tell them.”

Harry frowned. “But you or Hermione could tell them.”

Ron laughed, nudging him lightly in the ribs with his elbow. “Mate, we were with you both times in
the last two years. If there’s a showdown with Black, you’re not going to be alone then either, and if he tries to kill you, he’s going to have to go through us first.”

“Maybe we’ll just do the smart thing and run this time,” Harry guessed. They stared at each other. “Okay, let’s tell the twins.”

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They talked it over with Hotch on a video chat. The BAU unit chief had made the call himself instead of sending an email, which kind of surprised Harry, but he quickly accepted the call once he had hidden inside Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom, not bothering to grab the other two first.

“It’s just that, with my luck…” Harry fumbled.

Hotch nodded slowly, rubbing his forehead. “I see your point. And the twins are closely connected to Ron, not you. If we send them packages instead of you, people would just think they’re up to their usual pranks and wouldn’t consider that you might be involved.”

A pause entered the conversation, and the question hovered on the tip of Harry’s tongue. But looking at his father, whose face had aged a year or two since he’d last seen him, he couldn’t bring himself to make the man think of it again, whatever it was. The silence had dragged on too long, and Harry knew that his father could guess that his next question was going to be awkward. Instead of his more pressing concern, he asked, “How’s Elle?”

An eyebrow raised. “You see her more often than I do.”

“I’m not a profiler.”

A hint of a smile crossed Hotch’s face. “It could have been a lot worse. Has anyone told you how it happened?”

He shook his head. “We thought it was classified so we didn’t ask.”

“It’s not from a non-magical perspective. We’re trying to keep it quiet, so only mention it to Hermione and Ron.” Harry nodded. “Morgan and Elle went to go investigate Lupin’s history. When they started looking into how he got bitten, they learned it had been by a man named Fenrir Greyback, so they went to go see if they could talk to him. Greyback was in hiding but they managed to track him down by asking werewolf attack victims at St. Mungo’s about where they were at the time of their attack. By matching the descriptions they gave of who their attacker was to Greyback, they found a general area he was likely in. He got behind them before they realized it and attacked Morgan, but Elle distracted him and was bitten.” He smiled faintly. “They took a chunk out of him, too. They think it’s unlikely he survived but we’re checking to make sure.

“When we got her back, she was still injured. The medical staff at St. Mungo’s wanted to-“ he grimaced “-‘put her down,’ they said, since they thought it was unlikely she could survive the transformation in her state. We got her back to America before they could and let her loose in a confined area.”

He hesitated again. “There was no one for her to bite, and we underestimated the urge to maim. She started trying to rip herself to shreds, and while she was already injured… We worried she was going to succeed where Greyback had failed. Before anyone could stop him, Morgan climbed into the area and got her attention. The rest of us helped in shifts, and we kept three people in there at all times, alternating distractions.”

A trace of pride flickered across his features. “Morgan was right. While she was chasing someone,
she wasn’t attacking herself, and she was too injured to keep up properly. Three people was just a precaution, in all honesty. Morgan handled it pretty well on his own, and by the fourth hour, she was too tired to run anymore and spent the rest of the night lying down.”

Harry let out an incredulous laugh. “That’s amazing.”

Hotch nodded slightly. “I could hardly believe it myself. She’ll be coming back here every month and we’re going to keep trying it.” His earlier smile widened slightly. “We think she recognized Morgan by the end of the third night. We don’t know if that’s good or bad.”

“She looks a lot better than I thought she was going to,” Harry admitted. “I was expecting much worse.”

“Blackwolf said the same. He thinks it’s because she’s not injuring herself during the transformations and she isn’t blaming herself for what happened and is instead getting on with her life.”

“I almost wonder if she likes her new job a little too much.”

Hotch had a full blown smile on by that point, and the lines from before were gone. Harry tried not to let his relief show and hoped his father wasn’t profiling at the moment. “It suited her even before she was turned. Now, with her protective werewolf streak, she’s aggressively passionate about doing something that will directly help people.”

“The twins love her because she keeps sneaking in. They’re going to rub off on each other.”

“I don’t know if it’s possible for either to get more mischievous,” Hotch honestly replied. “How are classes going?”

“Same as usual. I think if Snape were looking over my shoulder anymore he might fall into whatever potion I’m brewing.”

The door opened and Harry slapped the laptop shut and threw it under his books without explanation to his father. The other four teens in on the secret hurried in with a weird spacing between the twins. After the door closed, the cloak came off Elle. Harry thumped his head back against the sink behind him and took the laptop out again to get back onto the video chat.

“You guys scared the crap out of me,” he muttered, clicking his way through what he had up to send an invitation to a call through to his father. The incoming group, seeing what he was doing, hurried around him. By the time the call had come back up, Harry’s face on the screen was surrounded by five others. “Sorry, I thought it was someone else.”

Before Hotch could say anything, Elle jumped in. “I missed the plane back, sorry.”

“Okay-“

She pulled out the map and opened it. Unfortunately, since she wasn’t a witch, they had to leave it activated, so she usually left it wrapped up in the invisibility cloak. She flipped through the pages, scanning through the hundreds of names and passages for something in particular. “I was about half an hour away from getting on when I checked this again.” After a brief pause but without any guilt, she said, “I’ve been watching where Dumbledore, Lupin, and Snape.. Nothing so far to report. But I did see something else on here.” Her eyes alighted on something and she turned the map to show the screen, pointing. “Peter Pettigrew.”
Kind of surprised no one wondered how Prentiss would be coming onto the team when Elle looked like she was staying permanently. But anyway, now you know how I kept Elle on without actually keeping her on. I feel like Yzma from Emperor's New Groove. "Bet you weren't expecting that!"

A lot of you have been wondering about Sirius's and Snape's reactions to the news, and I now have this bastardized song lyric stuck in my head: "Sad boys, mad boys, whatcha gonna do, whatcha gonna do when Hotch comes for you."

If I don't update on time, it's probably because I forgot what day it was. I hate it when school's out of session. I never know what the day is.
"Are we living a life that is safe from harm? Of course not. We never are. But that's not the right question. Are we living a life that is worth the harm?" - Welcome to Nightvale

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“We can’t just let him run around the school,” Harry argued.

“How did he get in?” Ron demanded.

Elle held up both hands for silence without looking away from the screen. “Hotch?”

“Elle, get him out of the school immediately,” Hotch ordered. “The rest of you, split up and go away from Pettigrew but start looking for teachers and Dumbledore. Tell them that you saw Agent Greenaway from the BAU in here and that she had information Pettigrew was here and possibly a threat. Our apologies for entering without telling them but it was an emergency and we couldn’t contact them.” He looked at Harry specifically. “Do not go with Greenaway once we’re off this call.”

“If he’s got a wand-“

“He won’t be able to see her.”

“Hotch,” Elle interrupted with a touch of hesitancy, “we don’t know how he got in. And I really don’t know that much about magic.”

“Then grab a professor first.”

“That could take too long,” Harry said.

Elle was looking between the two like she was seeing a resemblance for the first time.

“Harry-“

“He already killed the Potters, and he’s at our school.”

The twins mouthed at each other, “Potters?”

“No.”

“But-“

“Harry, I’m not losing you too.” He emphasized the last word just enough and saw Harry’s resistance shake. “And Jack can’t either.”

Harry knew exactly why he brought up Jack, but that didn’t make it any easier. He gritted his teeth and muttered, “Fine.”
After an awkward moment, Hermione hesitantly said, “We can’t go to Professor Lupin. We don’t know how he’s involved.”

“Involved with what?” Fred asked.

“This wasn’t exactly how we meant to tell you,” Ron said hesitantly, “but…” The rest of them exchanged looks. “Um, Harry was kind of kidnapped from birth and raised by the Potters so Hotch is actually Harry’s dad. So the BAU and the top of the American wizarding government is trying to keep all of this quiet because we’re trying to use the FBI as a safe house in case anything goes wrong. But the BAU realized that Lupin and Black and Potter and Pettigrew were all really good friends so the other three might have possibly been involved in the Potters’ death.” He took a deep breath. “We’re not sure, though.”

“What,” George deadpanned. Fred was sneaking not-so-subtle glances between Harry and Hotchner, and the light dinged on in his head as he made the connection.

“Nice to meet you, Harry not-Potter Senior!” Fred and George chirped simultaneously.

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“Go the opposite way,” Elle hissed from underneath the cloak as they hurried through the corridors.

“We will,” Harry said, “but you’re going to need the professor to go with you. They won’t see you if you’re under the cloak, remember? And they it’ll take longer to convince them to believe you if we don’t go with you. It won’t take long.”

Elle growled. That wasn’t a new development from lycanthropy. “Fine. But we’re not looking anywhere near Pettigrew.”

“You’re keeping an eye on him?”

Elle’s silence glared at Ron.

“Right.”

“Let’s get Professor McGonagall-“ Hermione started, then broke off. “We can’t.”

“What? Why not?” Harry asked as they hit the stairs and started down them. Elle was muttering about how they were technically getting closer to Pettigrew on the second floor. “She can’t be working with Black, or with Voldemort at any rate – she’s been helping me. Why would she do that if she were trying to kill me?”

“Too closely connected to the people who’ve been involved,” Elle said under the cloak. “Even if she’s against Black, she might have conflicted interests. It’s just going to be faster if we can find someone who is as disconnected from this as possible.”

They reached the bottom of the stairs and Hermione hissed for them to be quieter as their voices were starting to echo. “Okay, so McGonagall’s out. So we need to grab someone who wasn’t involved at all and who we don’t have a connection to?”

“I can’t think of anyone not involved who we still know,” Ron said. “I mean, then they could still be involved and we just wouldn’t have a clue.”

“Yeah, but-“ Fred started.
“-could you really see-“

“-Professor Sprout-“

“-or Professor Flitwick-“

“-or Hagrid helping?”

“Hagrid’s too far away,” Elle ruled out.

“Same with Sprout,” Fred added.

“We need to go back upstairs for Flitwick,” Ron muttered irritably.

Hermione groaned as she threw out her arms and caused the group to skid to a stop. “Then let’s go back up for him!”

“And what would you be needing Professor Flitwick for?” a voice drawled behind them. The group whipped around. Snape had one eyebrow cocked and an attitude of confidence wrapped around him. This time, the trio wouldn’t be able to talk their way out of it easily. “And what would students such as yourselves be running around the school for? Surely not academics.”

“Just…asking…Professor Flitwick some…” Hermione broke off, staring at Snape oddly. The professor narrowed his eyes at her in response, although he hardly reacted otherwise to the sudden scrutinizing. “Wait.”

“Oh no,” Ron groaned, burying his face in his hands. “No, no, no…”

“At least we don’t have to go back up the stairs?” Harry weakly pointed out. Snape’s gaze snapped to him, and his tone was more suspicious when he spoke next.

“No duplicity. Explain now before I take you all to the headmaster.”

Harry felt a tug on the back of his shirt and heard the quietest murmur from Elle. “Him?” she breathed.

Harry nodded in response, sighing as his shoulders slumped. “We don’t have time and anyone else we could go to was probably teaching him when they were all students, so…”

“Don’t say it,” Ron pleaded, still behind his hands.

“-he’s our best bet,” Hermione finished, avoiding Snape’s gaze.

“Why did you say it?”

Elle pulled the cloak off before anyone else could speak and stuck out her hand to greet Snape, who started in surprise. “I’m Agent Elle Greenaway with the American wizarding government.” When he made no move to shake her hand, whether or not it was out of shock or distrust, she calmly retracted it and added, “I’m afraid we don’t have a lot of time, as you’ve probably gathered, but you have a suspect of ours running around the school and I’ve been ordered to bring him in for questioning.”

Bless Snape, he only took a moment to collect his thoughts. “We need to see the headmaster before any action can be taken. How did you get in?” From the way he glanced at the cloak, it seemed like the question was just asked for formality’s sake. Interestingly, he then eyed Harry, as if he knew the cloak’s owner.
“I’ll explain later, but the suspect’s Peter Pettigrew. If he and Black are working together, he could be bringing Black in any minute now.”

“Proof,” Snape stated.

“Here,” Elle replied, pulling out the map and showing him. After a moment of looking, she hissed, “Oh, you’ve got to be kidding me.” She pointed at Harry. “If he kills me, I am coming after you, so help me God.”

“Pettigrew?” Harry asked, bewildered.

“Hotchner.”

“Of course Hotchner’s involved,” Snape muttered.

No matter what, it seemed like the Potions Master was doomed to be at ends with Harry’s father.

“There were some oddities that didn’t line up with Black’s story and he realized that either someone else was involved or Black hadn’t done it. Looks like Pettigrew’s got some explaining to do,” Elle explained. “This is the floor below us, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

Elle gestured to the other five. “Just because he’s coming closer does not give you an excuse to go anywhere near him. If I see any of you, I’m shooting you. Maybe it’ll be nonfatal and you can explain to Hotch why I shot you and then he’ll glare at you and you’ll wish you were dead. Got it?”

Harry raised his hands and leaned back. “We’ll stay right here.”

“No, go back to your dormitory,” Snape ordered. “This close to him, you’re bound to find trouble.”

“Finally, someone else agrees with Hotch and I,” Elle muttered.

Snape looked like he might be returning to his ambivalent position on Hotchner, and despite the seriousness of the situation, all Harry could consider was that maybe miracles do happen.

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They went back to the dormitories mainly because anyone looking to update them would go there first. That didn’t mean anyone was happy about it.

“We could’ve helped,” Ron muttered.

“I’m still stuck on Snape’s face when he realized we were actually asking him for help,” Fred began.

“And that we had brought an FBI agent into the school without anyone knowing,” George finished. Both of their pockets vibrated. “Elle wants to know if Ron has a rat, and if so, if it’s missing a toe.”

Harry started and demanded before anyone could answer, “Ron, how long have you had that rat?”

“Twelve years-“

Everyone else stopped.
Fred and George began frantically typing a reply.

“They knew the finger thing was weird!” Harry hissed. “Why didn’t we see it?”

“I don’t know, let’s see if that demon of Hermione’s is secretly Sirius Black in disguise! Or maybe it’s your owl, Harry!” Ron muttered, scrubbing his hands over his face. “We didn’t think of it. Why would we?”

Hermione grabbed Harry’s and Ron’s arms. “Common room, now. I want to hear any news immediately.” In a lower voice, she added, “And we shouldn’t be talking like this out in the open.”

Five minutes later had them in the common room, which was empty but for a few first years who the twins scared off without a problem. Hermione glowered at them for that, but her heart wasn’t really in it. They crowded around the couch, someone keeping an eye on each entrance to the common room in case someone entered. The twins, the only ones with phones since Garcia was trying to upgrade laptops and phones from the original designs for the twins and trio respectively, sent texts to Hotchner about the situation.

“So,” they said when that was all taken care of. Fred continued, “Harry, dear-“

“-our little friend-“

“-our surrogate brother-“

And then in tandem, “What’s this about your father?”

Harry sighed and whispered the full story. Both twins listened intently without interrupting, exchanging startled glances every once in a while. It was obvious that odd details about the situation before were now sliding into place in their minds.

“Good on you,” Fred said when he was done as George patted his shoulder.

“And better on you for staying quiet,” George added.

“Wouldn’t have thought you had it in you.”

“Not at all.”

“Little one’s surprising us now.”

“Growing up and becoming less adorable.”

“Anyway,” Ron interrupted. “Any message back from Hotchner?”

They checked their phones. “He wants us to tell him as soon as anything happens since Elle is probably going to be bogged down with politics,” Hermione said, peeking over their shoulders.

The door to the common room opened and McGonagall swept in, scanning for who started the fire. She spotted the group scrunched together on the couch and strode towards them. “All of you need to come with me to the headmaster’s office immediately,” she said unnecessarily as the group was getting to their feet before she had even finished.

“They’ve got him?” Harry asked as she turned on her heel and started out.

McGonagall let out a huff of breath. “I can answer none of your questions since I have been not made privy to the entire explanation yet. The headmaster knows only slightly more than I do, and it
seems that – who knows why – Professor Snape has all the answers.”

She hadn’t mentioned Elle. Who knew about her presence in the school? “We ran into him while we were looking for a teacher,” Hermione said. “So we explained what was happening to him and he went to go find…” she trailed off as they passed a group of students.

“You can tell the story when we get there,” McGonagall said, unconsciously picking up her pace.

As it was, Elle, Snape, and the rat in Snape’s hand met up with McGonagall’s party before they reached the office. The teens subtly moved the twins to the middle of the group and one of them sent a text to Hotchner about Pettigrew. They ascended the stairwell silently and entered the office, whose door was already open. A befuddled Lupin was standing inside, and he went rigid when he saw the rat.

“Peter,” he breathed.

Snape held the struggling rodent out in front of him and pointed his wand at it, hissing a spell under his breath. A moment later, he was holding a struggling, full-grown man. With a wave of Dumbledore’s wand, a chair shot out to scoop Pettigrew’s feet out from underneath him, and another gesture bound him to the chair with ropes.

“You switched with him,” Lupin said, beginning to breathe heavily. “You switched with Sirius and you let him take the fall for it!” He lunged forward and only McGonagall’s arm stopped him.

“Remus, please,” she said, although she sounded like she wanted nothing more than to let him tear Pettigrew apart.

The rat animagus turned towards Harry. “Your father wouldn’t have done this, your father would have let me go,” he whimpered. “We were the best of friends, Harry!”

“I’m not James Potter,” Harry said coldly. “And frankly, I’m getting a bit tired of having to remind people of that. Just because he would have let you go doesn’t mean there’s a snowball’s chance in July that I’m going to.”

He kept his eyes on Pettigrew, ignoring the rest of the adults around him. Still, he was pretty sure he saw Lupin wince out of the corner of his eye and Snape tilt his head ever so slightly. The other two, however, stayed focused on the more important matter.

Pettigrew recoiled as if struck. Seeing no hope of an ally in his friend’s ‘son,’ he turned instead to the Weasleys. “Did I ever do you wrong? Any of you, all the years I was with you…?”

“Other than orphaning my best friend, not really,” Ron muttered.

“You said they switched?” Elle asked. “Switched what?”

“Sirius was the secret-keeper for the Potters’s house,” Remus said, gently moving McGonagall’s arm away. “But…they must have switched… Why…?”

Peter didn’t answer, crying quietly and avoiding everyone’s gazes.

“Agent Greenaway,” Dumbledore said, speaking up for the first time. “Not that we’re not grateful for your intervention, but can you explain your presence?”

Elle nodded and summed up the basics of what had happened, adjusting the truth to fit what she had already told Snape. She added that there were details she was not willing to discuss with present
company, which the students didn’t argue with since they knew they would be told about what cover
she was keeping later. Pettigrew sniffled through the whole thing.

“What do we do about Sirius?” Lupin asked. “He’s innocent.”

Snape snorted quietly.

“He is.”

“Remus, we can only wait until he comes in,” Dumbledore calmly said. “Once the newspapers
announce that Pettigrew has been charged—” said man began wailing “—Sirius may very well give
himself up. Of course, we’ll have to get the Minister to clear all charges first, but I’m sure we can get
him to see reason in face of all the evidence.”

“Has he been contacted?” McGonagall asked.

“He should be sending Aurors as we speak.” Pettigrew’s wailing grew louder and Dumbledore shot
a silencio at him. With lighter humor, he added, “Perhaps we can finally get the dementors taken off
the grounds, hm?”

“I don’t know, professor,” Harry said dryly, “that plummet during the Quidditch game was awfully
fun.”

The five were shuffled out a few minutes later to head back to class. Elle didn’t even watch them
leave, appearing totally uninterested in the students. The adults began to look more seriously at
Pettigrew, and the real questions were bound to start up once the kids were gone. Again, they didn’t
protest at their obvious dismissal. The twins parted from the trio at the stairs after extracting a promise
for more details about the situation later. They went to their separate classrooms, tensely took tests for
the end of the year, then walked out as soon as they were done.

“Think Black’s still going to be out there for a while?” Harry muttered in the hall.

“Depends on how often wanted fugitives read the newspaper, I suppose,” Ron responded as they
went towards the Great Hall for lunch. They found seats by the twins, who immediately moved over
to make room. “Any news?” he breathed quietly.

Fred shook his head subtly. “Not much. She sent off a text about half an hour ago demanding we
stay out of trouble. Apparently the Aurors arrived and they’re interrogating him in Dumbledore’s
office.”

“She’s somehow under the impression that we – well, Harry, really – can still get in trouble while
Pettigrew’s up there,” George added.

As more people began filling up the table, the two groups turned away from each other and moved
onto safer topics of conversation. Not long after, they split up to go to class.

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"What happened to you?” Ron asked as Harry hurried down the ladder to the Divinations classroom.
He shook his head quickly, grabbed Ron, and pulled him away from the room. Behind them, a few
students were still waiting to take their tests.

They caught up with Hermione in the courtyard, where they’d agreed to meet previously. She raised
an eyebrow at them. "How on earth did you manage to do badly on your test? Didn't you just need
to predict your death?"
"I did excellent on it," Harry corrected breathlessly, "only then she gave me a real prophecy."

They stared at him.

"What?" Hermione asked. "That's impossible. Harry, why would you pay attention a word she says?"

"I don't mean like her usual rubbish, I mean like a real prophecy. I was looking at her like you're looking at me now, and then instead of trying to give me some cryptic warning she just asked me why I was standing there. Didn't remember a thing she'd said."

"Well, what did she say?" Ron asked.

"Innocent blood being spilled tonight, and Voldemort and one of his servants reuniting soon after the servant broke loose. And then...she said he'd come back, worse than he was before."

"That can't be possible," Hermione said. "No one knows what happened to him! And what servant?"

"She didn't say."

"Can't be Black, even if it made any sense," Ron pointed out. "He's already broken out."

"Maybe they're metaphorical bonds," Harry said.

Hermione was frowning, and now she shook her head urgently at them. "I still don't believe that dreadful woman is capable of a real prophecy," she said. "I wouldn't worry about it, Harry. She was probably just trying to get a reaction out of you, since her regular doom and gloom prophecies aren't so impressive anymore now that they never come true."

Harry nodded, hesitant to immediately discard it but acknowledging that there was a good chance she was right. "I'll text my dad about it, just in case, and they can keep an eye out for anyone else breaking out of Azkaban or something."

"Let's go see Hagrid," Hermione suggested. "It's been a while."

"Think we can find trouble from here to there?" Ron muttered. Hermione smacked him on the arm slightly and told him not to joke about that.

They didn't find trouble on the way to Hagrid’s and had a nice break from the school. With Pettigrew caught, they doubted any of the professors would really get upset about them being outside. Hagrid was delighted to see them, as expected, and they spent a long hour discussing Buckbeak's situation in America. As the sun began to set, Hagrid finally stood up and grabbed a large pot from a shelf.

"Ron, think ya could ya give me a ‘and wi’ some’ing?" he asked.

Ron nodded and walked closer. Hagrid pulled a rat out of the pot and handed it to him.

"I was gonna give ‘im back tomorrow, but I think Holly Weatherspool might be wantin’ ‘im back sooner rather ‘an later." He gave the rat one last pat on the head. "Didja ever find yers?"

Ron shuffled his feet awkwardly. "Er, yeah. Thanks for asking."

Hagrid beamed. “At least Hermione’s cat didn’t eat ‘im, right?”
The three waved their goodbyes and left, hurrying up the hill to the castle when they realized how late it was getting. The sun was halfway down already and the anyone who ran across them wasn’t likely to know that the threat against Harry had been dealt with…supposedly. Harry frowned as they reached the top of the hill. If Black hadn’t been the one to betray the Potters, why was he at Hogwarts?

His thoughts were interrupted by a loud growl.

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Every once in a while, Hotch felt a subtle surge of emotion coming from Harry’s end. In the beginning he had started immediately planning a trip over to England. Now he realized that the surges were normal and not true predictors of danger.

When he knew what was going on at Hogwarts, it made keeping track of events a bit easier. He felt a sudden burst of dread as…something happened, and he pulled out his phone and started debating if he should call Elle or one of the twins. The feeling passed and he assumed it was just a side effect of realizing the magnitude of what Pettigrew’s presence meant. Later, a text informed him that Snape had shown up, and he adjusted his assumption to Harry being startled by the sudden appearance.

This time, Hotch was on the phone before he realized he had dialed Elle’s number. He stood and began grabbing anything that might be necessary when he arrived in England. Movement outside caught his eye, and he spared a moment to notice that someone on the team had seen his sudden flurry of action and the rest were beginning to throw things together as well.

“Hotch?” Elle finally answered.

“Where is he?” he demanded.

There was a contemplative silence. “Should be in the castle somewhere. Why?”

“Go find him immediately.”

She took the phone off her ear and he heard distant voices. Elle bullshitted her way through an explanation, then left the room if the sound of the closing door was anything to go by. “Okay, I’m out of the office. What’s going on?”

“I don’t know. He’s in danger.” He closed his eyes and concentrated on the feeling. Panic, fear, horror. Concern. “I think someone’s injured.”

“Do you want me to tell the staff?”

Hotch grimaced before admitting, “At this point, you know more about wizard and witch mentality than me. It’s your decision.”

He heard her begin running even while she kept up the conversation. “I don’t want to herd them and look for Harry at the same time,” she decided. “I’ll call you back when I’ve got news.”

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The building creaked ominously as they entered it, but neither paid any attention to the sounds as they crept in. Upstairs, they could hear Ron saying something, voice muddled by pain. Hermione shot a muttered Muffliato at their feet and then the two began silently making their way up the stairs. Footsteps of a dog preceded them in the dust, along with the drag marks of their friend. A piece of the railing had broken off in Ron’s struggle and they sidestepped it to avoid making a noise.
“Stay back,” Ron shouted as they reached the door.

“Hand over-“ another voice started.

Harry threw the door open and, using the voice to locate the source, said, “Expelliarmus!”

The wand flew into Harry’s hand and he aimed both it and his own at the man as he and Hermione moved into the room. Hermione immediately went to Ron to see if he was all right, and Harry put his back to them to entirely focus on the man in front of him.

“Where’s the dog?” Harry asked.

Ron pointed and Harry saw the tips of his fingers out of the corner of his eye. “It’s him! He’s an animagus!”

A dog animagus. He had been seeing dogs everywhere, but that confirmed the suspicion that Black hadn’t really been after Harry this whole time. He would have easily killed him before if that had been the case.

“…think it’s broken…” he heard Ron say quietly to Hermione behind him and his grip on the wands tightened. Trying to kill Harry or not, the man had still hurt his friend.

“Harry Potter,” the man in front of him stated, a crazed chuckle escaping him. “I didn’t expect to meet you quite like this.”

“Sirius Black?”

He got a wild grin in response.

There was a hiss of pain behind him as Ron shifted to stand and he very nearly knocked Black out, but stopped himself at the last minute. He ground his teeth together and forced himself to take a deep breath.

“Act calm,” Reid had said. “He’s been on the run for months and in prison for years, and the last thing he’s gotten is a touch of peace.”

“It’ll unsettle him if you’re not aggressive, and it might even soothe him a bit,” Elle had added. “You might not feel like it if you cross paths, but empathize. That’s the most important thing you can do. No one’s listened to him, no one’s believed him this entire time. If you’re the first one in over a decade, he’s not going to hurt you.”

“Let’s talk, okay?” He tucked Black’s wand away. Honestly, he wasn’t even sure what would happen if he tried to use it. He kept his own out but lowered it slightly and held up his free hand in a gesture of neutrality. “What’s going on?” He was grateful his back was to his friends so he didn’t see their looks of bewilderment.

Black panted, hands clenching and unclenching. “I’m here to finish what I started thirteen years ago,” he snarled. “What do you think I’m here for?”

His instincts forced him to bring the wand back up as Black leaped forward, and panic began to fill him again, unsettling his forced state of calm. The mental indecision slowed him by a second, and Black had almost reached him when a hand grabbed Harry and pulled him back. Ron used the movement to lunge out and shove Black away with his other hand.

“Don’t you touch him!” he screamed, pulling Harry behind him. The younger teen was surprised
enough not to fight it. The rat Ron had shoved into his pocket was flailing, distressed by the situation and almost crushed in between the two of them. Hermione stepped up to his other side, holding out her wand. “And if you want to try, you’re going to have to go through me!”

He only had a few moments before the situation completely devolved. What had he done wrong?

“The profile isn’t going to steer you wrong,” Gideon had said. “We’re as accurate as our information is. If for some reason Black isn’t responding the way he should be, we missed something, and you’re going to have to figure out what that is. Remember that this profile is fluid. You can add to it and change it if you need to.”

Black rolled his eyes. “I’m not after him, you fool!”

Ah.

“Hey, Black,” Harry said, purposefully keeping his voice at a normal tone and forcing everyone else to stay quiet to hear him. Now he could see his friends looking at him weirdly and he did his best to ignore them.

“We’re positive that he didn’t turn against the Potters,” his father had told him. “I highly doubt he would try to harm you purposefully. Remind him of that. If you feel like you’re in danger, tell him and, as crazy as it sounds, he’ll probably back off a little.”

“We don’t know what’s going on, and I’m going to have to stun you if you don’t calm down. You’re endangering us right now.”

Black shuffled irritably, lips pressing together in frustration. But he stepped back.

“Tell us what’s going on.” He gestured with one arm, careful not to make the movement too fast. Black’s eyes followed the appendage. “We can’t leave here until we know.”

“Make him feel like you’re on his side. Tell him that you’re not going to hurt him,” JJ had said.

Well, that wasn’t quite going to work after they’d threatened to stun Black, and certainly not with Hermione and Ron aggressively glaring at him. Scratch that idea.

Black stood there for a few moments, panting and trembling. Harry began to think he wasn’t going to respond when he finally pointed at Ron’s pocket and snarled, “Give me the rat.”

Ding.

Harry grabbed his friend’s wrists in warning for them to stay quiet. Hermione relaxed slightly and turned her face as if to look at Harry. Her hair moved between Black’s line of sight to her lips and she muttered ever so quietly to Ron, “Profiling.” Immediately, Ron’s stance became considerably less aggressive.

As Hermione looked back, Harry shook his head slowly. “Tell me why first.”

“It’s not a rat – it’s an animagus!” He snarled, “It’s Peter Pettigrew.”

“Even if you know what’s going on, ask him to talk to you about it anyway,” Morgan had stated. “We’ve never met this guy before and we’re just going off of some basic information. If we’re wrong, you’ll be the first one to know. By asking him to tell you his side, it’s going to allow you to check and
see if his view of the situation is the same as everyone else’s.”

“How do you know?” He kept any accusation out of his voice, trying to stay level, if a bit curious.

Black took a deep breath. It was the first sign he’d made that he was trying to control himself, but better yet, that he was also trying to match Harry’s state of low anxiety to talk to him from the same level. “Your father, Pettigrew, and I were all animagi,” he said finally. “I knew he could turn himself into a rat. And then when I met him outside the house, after he’d betrayed them… I was supposed to be the secret keeper, but I thought I was too obvious, I thought we could trust him after all these years…!”

Harry subtly slipped his wand into Ron’s empty hand and help up his empty palms in an appeasing gesture.

“And once you get him calm, keep him calm. By the point you get him there, help’s going to be on the way,” his father had said.

“It’s okay,” Harry said soothingly. “How did you know Pettigrew was here?”

Hands shaking, Black removed a picture from a newspaper article from his pocket. It was of the Weasley family in Egypt, and Pettigrew was on Ron’s shoulder in rat form. “The finger was missing,” he whispered.

Harry blinked in surprise. In genuine bewilderment, he asked, “Where did you get that from?”

“Fudge stopped by in Azkaban and I saw the article,” he said. He shoved the picture back to where it came from and pointed at the rat in Ron’s pocket. “Hand him over. I’ll take care of the lying traitor.”

Harry made eye contact with him and slowly let his breath out. Black relaxed the slightest bit, unconsciously mimicking him. “Black… We found out earlier today that Pettigrew was an animagus. He was arrested just a few hours ago. The rat Ron’s got right now belongs to someone else.” Before Black could protest, Harry muttered to Ron, taking his wand back as he did so to free a hand, “Show him.”

The redhead pulled out the rat, who was still rather sensibly freaking out, and showed him the front paws. No missing digits.

“It’s over, then,” Black breathed out.

Footsteps thudded up the stairs and the trio of students whipped their wands towards the doorway. Lupin came into view a moment later, out of breath from the sprint. He swung his head around to take in the entire room, and blinked when he realized the situation was mostly under control.

“He knows,” Harry said before Lupin could start shooting spells.

“Someone broke into the castle,” Lupin managed to get out in between heavy breaths. “They got to the Auror team while they were leading out Pettigrew, and both of them are gone. All of you, come to the castle with me immediately. We can work everything else out there.”

“He escaped?!” Black roared.

“We don’t know who freed him yet, but between him and Pettigrew, they killed all the Aurors.”

“You might not find yourself in a situation where it’s just you and him,” JJ had pointed out. “If so, your job’s going to be a lot more difficult, and you’re going to have to try to keep everyone calm.”
Harry had a feeling that this was one of those pieces of advice that didn’t quite fit with the situation. Two murderers running around was a definite cause for panic.

“When did this happen?” Harry asked immediately.

“Not long ago. A half hour.”

Hermione started, catching onto Harry’s train of thought. “They could still be on the grounds. If we try to head back, they might be between us and the castle once we come out the other side.”

Lupin grimaced. “You’re right, but Peter knows about this place. He might come through the tunnel to get off the Hogwarts grounds quickly. That’s why I thought to come here. I think we’re going to have to risk it, since we at least have coverage if we go back this way and we’ll be able to tell if they’re coming towards us.”

Ron shoved the rat back in his pocket and the teenagers moved on either side of him to help him walk. As fast as they could, the group made their way down the stairs and back into the tunnel. Black transformed into a dog to better smell anyone coming their way from the opposite end and Lupin brought up the rear on the slight chance that someone came in from behind. In the middle, the students did their best not to slow down the party too much. Hermione’s wand pointed ahead to give enough light for them not to trip.

Black snarled ahead of them and began running forward, quickly disappearing into the darkness. Lupin shouted at him to wait, and several loud bangs filled the tunnel.

“Elle! Black!” Harry screamed. “Stop, both of you!”

Silence. Harry swore he could hear his heart thudding.

“Black?” Elle’s voice drifted through the tunnel, echoing oddly. “My name is Elle Greenaway. I know Harry and his friends, and I’m not here to hurt any of you.”

“She’s right,” Hermione quickly confirmed.

There was a pause, and then Black padded back into the light.

“I’m approaching,” Elle warned, and came into view a few minutes later. Her gun was still drawn by her side. “Lupin,” she said once she saw him at the back. “You heard?” He grimly nodded in reply. “They still haven’t found them. In between the time we caught Pettigrew and when he escaped, did you have time to take the wolfsbane potion?”

Ron stiffened, realizing the significance immediately. Harry, having become more conscious of the lunar cycles since Elle’s accident, immediately realized they were trapped in a tunnel between two werewolves on a full moon. But at least Elle had –

“I know I didn’t,” she shakily replied. Shit.

“It slipped my mind entirely,” Lupin whispered.

“Okay, let’s get out of the tunnel,” Harry quickly jumped in. “Or you two head back to the Shrieking Shack.”

Elle shook her head and gestured for them to start moving. She kept pace with Black at the front as she explained, “Greyback’s the one who released Pettigrew. I recognized his scent.”
Lupin sharply sucked in a breath. “Were you bitten by him?”

She nodded. “Not long ago.” After a second, she asked curiously, “You too?”

“Yeah.” In a dry tone, he added, “Funny coincidence.”

She snorted in reply.

They came out the other end a few minutes later. The tree was still moving wildly, and Black touched his nose to a particular knoll on the tree. It calmed immediately. Harry suppressed the urge to scowl at it. He knew he had cuts and bruises all over him from trying to get in earlier, and he was pretty sure Hermione was no better off.

The group moved out into the open and Elle and Lupin immediately distanced themselves. “You up for this?” she asked him and got a jerky nod in reply. To the others, she said, “We’re going to find Greyback and distract him. Pettigrew doesn’t have a wand and he can’t get too far without Greyback. Once you get inside, tell someone what’s going on. We’ll get the two of them separated and the Aurors can take Pettigrew. Again.”

“Who all knows what happened?” Harry asked. “Are people going to start shooting spells at Black as soon as we get in there?”

She paused. “Probably.” She shoved her hand into her pocket and pulled out the invisibility cloak. “Black-“

“We know what that is,” Lupin said, eyeing it in surprise. “I wondered where it went.”

“Dumbledore gave it to me,” Harry quickly explained, taking the cloak. “No offense, but you guys need to hurry.”

Elle pointed. “Go straight there and for the love of shit, stop getting into trouble.”

“I know it’s hard to believe, but I’m really trying.”

She rolled her eyes and then turned away, breaking into a sprint. Lupin followed close behind and the two disappeared a minute later into the trees. Harry looked up at the sky to check the moon. They didn’t have long until the transformation and the two werewolves wouldn’t be able to get far enough away to not smell them. Friend or not as a human, they wouldn’t recognize them as wolves.

Harry resettled Ron’s arm along his shoulders and started toward the castle. Hermione kept pace with him, and they practically carried Ron now that they were able to fully stand. Black turned into a human and took the cloak from Harry so he could quickly throw it on in a minute. He strode ahead of them, senses sharp to search out anyone nearby. They were almost to the castle when Harry felt a chill running up his spine. He dismissed it as the cold weather and situation until he felt Ron shudder at his side. The grass crunched sharply underneath his feet and he smelled the frost.

“Hermione, switch with me, quick,” Harry said, removing Ron’s arm. Hermione obeyed, but she and Ron voiced their confusion at the same time. “Go straight to the castle and don’t look back. Sirius!”

The man turned around. “They’re after you. Let’s move away until they get inside.”

“Who is?” Ron demanded.

“Dementors,” Hermione whispered, and Ron followed her gaze up into the night sky. Against his better judgment, Harry looked too. At least thirty were flying overhead, drifting for the moment. A moment of absolute stillness passed.
Then it was over and one was diving towards them.

Harry shoved at his friends. “Go!”

They began awkwardly running towards the castle as Black began retreating in the direction they had just come with Harry. The dementors hesitated between the two pairs for a moment before following Black and Harry, choosing the greater feast. Hermione and Ron were still moving towards the castle but Harry felt a touch of relief when he realized they were going to make it.

He and Black might not.

They started running, and a distant portion of Harry’s mind realized they were heading in the same direction the werewolves had just gone. He tried to squash it but he heard a howl in the distance barely a moment later. It was quickly joined in a duet by a second one. He grimaced and kept running. No one had mentioned if dementors had any effect on transformed werewolves but he figured they were about to find out.

“Harry,” Black panted, “go back. They should just follow me now.”

He shook his head. “You don’t have a wand and you can’t pull off the Patronus without one. And even if I give you mine, I’ll bet a few are still going to follow me back and then I’ll be in trouble.” Not to say that he wasn’t already. “If we both go back, they’ll follow you into the castle.”

Black let out a growl of frustration. Harry sympathized.

They had just come across a lake when a dementor suddenly dropped down in front of them. They both skidded to a stop and Harry whipped his wand forward. “Expecto patronum!” A gust of silvery-white smoke came out the end, not fully solidifying, and the dementor retreated. Harry dropped the spell before it drained him too badly.

A cloaked face with a gaping mouth dropped down in front of him before he could react. He heard Lily Potter scream and scream, and then a very small portion of his brain recognized his knees hitting the ground. His vision faded with a last image of Black collapsing beside him. His father was shouting at him now, competing with Lily’s screams.

Then the screams were fading, and it was just his father shouting.

Some warmth returned to Harry’s limbs and he could smell the damp earth he had collapsed on. But his father was still shouting just as clearly as he had been a moment ago. And then, all of a sudden, he wasn’t.

Harry blearily raised his head, trying to focus his eyes. The first thing he saw was a wave of shadowy dementor cloaks passing overhead. Hundreds were flying by, but that instilled in him more confusion than terror. They were just…leaving. One dropped down for the briefest of moments to suck at Black’s soul for a half second, but it quickly left before it could fully drain him. None of them even bothered to pause to consider Harry as a meal, finding something else much more enjoyable.

He started to hear shouting again, but this time he knew it wasn’t in his head. He scrambled to his feet and followed the path of the dementors to where they were moving across the lake. The moon’s light and reflection off the surface of the lake was enough for him to see figures on the other side. As the effects of the dementors gradually left him, his senses began to sharpen, and he realized he recognized the voices.

“You piece of shit, follow me!” he heard Morgan roar. The dementors didn’t seem overly insulted but they took him up on the offer. “You suck!”
“That’s terrible word choice!” Reid called back.

Morgan started to reply but his legs gave out as the wave of dementors hit him. Reid, a few yards off, was quick to follow. The rest of the figures were running and trying to distract the creatures feeding on their friends, but there were just too many. Any that left Reid and Morgan to get a fresh victim were quickly replaced, and there were only two of them still standing. JJ and Gideon, he realized after a moment. But hadn’t he heard?-?

There was a body lying close to the lake. One lone dementor hovered over it, and a small light was moving from the mouth of the body to the mouth of the dark creature.

Jack quietly hissing to him in the middle of the night, eyes lighting up at the secret they shared. Sean calling him up, yelling from the other end that Harry was his new favorite person because his brother was actually trying to cook now. Morgan ribbing Reid for Harry’s benefit so he didn’t linger on the mistake he’d made, and Reid giving him snark in return. Elle teaching him how to throw a punch, claiming it was only so they could boast that Hotch’s “not-son” was a better fighter than the other FBI units. Gideon saying nothing but starting to bring extra portions from home and leaving them by Harry’s bag when he wasn’t looking. Garcia shoving him under her desk and throwing blankets over him when she thought he was getting overwhelmed by too many people, and JJ’s subsequent efforts to try to free him before she submitted to the tech analyst’s will and just brought him tea.

His father talking to him from the other end of a video call that was only made possible by a team’s dedicated efforts, demanding that he stay safe because he didn’t know what he’d do if Harry got hurt.

“EXPECTO PATRONUM!”

A wave of white burst out of the end of his wand, and the dementors directly overhead fled immediately. The stag leaped into existence, hind legs pulled up and front legs extended as it braced for a landing on the surface of the lake. It darted forward, sprinting across the water and driving away any dementors in its path. The creatures at the edge looked up as it approached, and a few immediately darted off. The rest were too slow, and the stag lowered its head and used its horns to throw them out of its way. It collided with the one over Hotch, and the dementor screamed in fury at being denied its prey before fleeing. The stag made a hairpin turn and thundered towards Morgan and Reid, leaping over them and driving back the creatures above. The ones by Gideon and JJ were already shooting towards the sky.

Harry directed the silver animal around the group a few more times, pushing away any stragglers, and he did a 360 turn to make sure there were none sneaking up behind him and Black. Finally, he let the stag rest, and both of them looked up towards the moon to make sure the dementors were truly gone. After the last vanished behind the clouds, he ended the spell and the stag faded away.

He dropped to his knees immediately and checked Black’s pulse. Finding it present and steady, he left the man behind and sprinted around the lake to go to the BAU team. Gideon was over Hotch, blocking his view, and JJ had already left Reid to make sure Morgan was all right. Harry skidded a halt and practically collapsed beside Gideon, limbs shaking from the exertion of the run and the after effects of the dementors and subsequent patronus.

“Is he okay?” he panted out.

Gideon nodded. “The…white ball went back down,” he confirmed. Neither of them mentioned that it had likely been his soul. “He’s just unconscious now, but we don’t know anything about this. I think he needs to go up to the castle.”
And because the night could still get worse, a howl broke over the clearing.

Harry resisted the urge to just jump in the lake and be done with it.

“We need to move fast.”

“We can distract them,” Morgan said and Harry snapped his head up to look at the dark-skinned man. Reid was staggering to his feet beside him. “The Aurors don’t know the situation but we can get the werewolves to the pack.”

“What pack?” Harry asked.

The group stared at him. He leaned back slightly at their scrutiny, reflecting their own confusion back at them.

Another howl interrupted.

“You’ve got it?” Gideon asked.

JJ gave a solid nod of confirmation. “Don’t worry about us.”

Gideon turned to Harry. “Can you grab Black?”

“I think so.”

“Go get him and start back to the school. I’ll carry your dad.”

Chapter End Notes

Just started a tumblr blog so I can talk about things without making these author notes super long. It'll be about this story (updates, behind-the-scenes, more in-depth info about any of the nerd stuff mentioned), and I'll probably post some HP and CM stuff too. If there's an update delay, I'll mention it, and I can take questions about the story there too. So...yeah. Look up writing sarcomeres or use the link writingsarcomeres.tumblr.com, without the spacing.
"A definition not found in the dictionary - not leaving: an act of trust and love, often deciphered by children.” - Markus Zusak, The Book Thief

They went straight to the infirmary, meeting no one on their way in. It sounded like the school had been put on lockdown, for which Harry was extremely grateful as he was in no mood for questions. Unfortunately, that meant they were on their own for carrying their incapacitated up the stairs.

Black began to come to by the second floor and was at least able to stagger a bit. With some of the pressure relieved, Harry came up on his father’s unoccupied side and helped share some of the weight before Gideon could tell him not to. The elder man was clearly beginning to have difficulties, and Harry was a bit surprised he had made it as far as he had. Black hadn’t had enough nutrition for a long time and was practically skin and bones, but Hotch was an FBI agent and mostly muscle, not to mention his height.

Harry awkwardly kicked the infirmary door to force it open, and their strange group fumbled their way in. Ron was on a bed with Madame Pomphrey treating his leg, and Hermione was sitting in a chair beside him. She immediately got up when she saw them. On the other side of the bed, Dumbledore, McGonagall, Snape, and Fudge were already standing, and they turned at Hermione’s expression.

Harry helped Gideon get Hotch onto the nearest bed, and Black shook his help off to stumble his way over to and practically collapse on the neighboring one. Pomphrey had hurried over by that time, leaving Ron for the moment, along with the rest of the group. “What happened?” she demanded.

“Dementors,” Harry panted, resisting the urge to roll his shoulder. His entire back felt like it was on fire. He couldn’t imagine how Gideon must feel, but a glance at the older man’s face gave him a good idea.

Pomphrey waved her wand and two full chocolate bars flew into her hand. She gave one to Black, who was surprisingly coherent enough to recognize the object and nod his thanks, and set the other down on the table beside Hotch’s bed. Her wand waved over the FBI agent first to diagnose any other problems, but, finding none, quickly moved onto Black. To Gideon she said, “He should be up in about an hour. If I’m not here, make sure he eats the chocolate immediately. It’ll help.” After a pause, she added, “And sit down before you collapse and I have a fourth patient.”

He didn’t protest and pulled up the chair closest to Hotch’s bed.

“Is that Black?” Fudge demanded. “What’s going-“

“Were both of you attacked too?” she asked, having no time for the minister’s panicking. She eyed their disheveled and haggard appearances. “How many were there?”

“I don’t know… Over a hundred?” Harry guessed. “And yeah, we were both there.”
“I think it was closer to two or three hundred,” Gideon supplied.

Pomphrey paled. A moment later, two more chocolate bars were summoned into her hand and delivered to them. “Eat.” She pointed at Harry. “And sit.”

While the two complied, Fudge exclaimed from his place far away from Black, “What is he doing here?”

“I already explained to you that he is no threat to anyone in this school now that Pettigrew is outside it,” Dumbledore said patiently. “He truly is not a concern.”

Fudge shifted uncomfortably. “He went on trial!”

“There wasn’t a trial,” Harry said from the chair he’d gratefully sunk into. At everyone’s surprised looks, he added, “We checked because we were curious about what had happened.”

“Well…er…”

“When he’s well enough, try veritaserum this time,” Dumbledore calmly suggested to the minister. “Perhaps you’ll get a more reasonable story.”

“He already told us what happened,” Hermione spoke up. “It’s the same as what Pettigrew said. Pettigrew cut off his finger to fake his death and turned into a rat to flee, framing Black.”

Pomphrey paused in her fussing over her two new patients. “Is he a muggle?” she asked, astonished.

“We both are;” Gideon supplied.

She looked at them with a new, approving eye. “If you weren’t here as proof, I would hardly believe you had pulled this off.” Gideon tilted his head, encouraging an explanation. “You got onto the grounds without setting any alarm off, and then you managed to get away from a group of dementors that large. And you still made it here mostly intact.”

Gideon skimmed right over the trespassing part and said, “We wouldn’t have if not for Potter’s…”

He looked to Harry.

“Patronus.”

Fudge started. “You summoned a patronus large enough to drive away over two hundred dementors?” Harry nodded. Fudge’s eyebrows went up. “Where did you learn to do that?”

“Professor Lupin. I asked if I could learn the patronus charm since I kept running into dementors.”

He hoped the minister never asked Lupin.

“I’m surprised you were able to pull one off with so many dementors around you.”

“I didn’t, not really. They all went after them once they appeared,” Harry said, leaving ‘them’ and ‘they’ ambiguous as he glanced at Hotch and Gideon to express who he wanted to include. “The dementors didn’t care about us after that.”

Dumbledore nodded slowly. “Blackwolf was worried that might happen.”

“Blackwolf? From America?” Fudge asked. It was just a day of bewilderment for him, apparently.
“He stopped by a few months ago with Agents Hotchner and Gideon,” Dumbledore explained, waving slightly towards the two. “They had to stay outside the grounds because Blackwolf said it was likely the dementors would disobey any orders to attack immediately since their job involves extremely gruesome murders. It would seem that he was right, although I admit that I’m surprised the dementors even bypassed Sirius Black to go after them.”

Pomphrey held up both arms to block off her patients and wave the group away. “That’s enough of this,” she scolded. “All of them need to rest, and I can’t properly tend five people while you’re asking all of them questions. You can return after Agent Hotchner has regained consciousness but not before.” She ushered them out the door and closed it behind them, though Fudge was considerably reluctant to leave. She turned back to her patients. “Sleep, sleep,” she said, point at both Gideon and Harry. “You need to rest.” She lightly touched Black’s shoulder to get his attention, and he moved his head sluggishly to look at her. “Go to sleep,” she said, articulating carefully. The man nodded slowly and she helped him lie back. “This can all wait until later.”

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Collectively, the group wasn’t recharged to half strength until the morning of the next day. Miraculously, Fudge had been kept out the entire time, and everyone slowly muddled their way back to consciousness by nine o’clock. Hermione had refused to leave the infirmary, and she and Gideon had been set up on their own beds.

Ron was up early enough that the other two students had time to talk to him before any of the professors returned, but Black was also awake and they weren’t able to sneak a conversation with the BAU agents. They stayed away from sensitive topics, instead asking if Ron felt okay or not. He grumbled a bit about his leg but said he was fine overall. Black took the moment to apologize. Gideon, who had reclaimed his seat earlier by Hotch’s bed, and Harry’s father, who was up by that point and conversing with his teammate, both looked incredibly unimpressed behind Black’s back about the apology.

The teens had been talking for a few more minutes when they heard Black ask, “What’s that?”

They turned to look. Both agents were confused by the sudden question, and Gideon was pulling a phone away from his ear as it went to voicemail again. He’d been trying to call someone every half hour, but none of them wanted to ask in case they were keeping it quiet.

“What?” Hotch glanced at the teens for help, hoping they would identify the object in question quickly.


“Yeah,” Black said, though he didn’t sound entirely sure.

“It’s a muggle device for communication. You can call someone anywhere around the world from it, if you know their number.”

From Black’s expression, the explanation had flown right over his head.

“It’s their version of floo powder, but they don’t have to carry a fireplace around with them wherever they go,” Hermione tried again.

Still blank.

“Never mind.”
If they were attempting the call in the infirmary, it wasn’t too discrete of a matter. At the very least, they could just lie if the answer wouldn’t work. “Who are you trying to call?” Harry asked as if he were just making conversation.

“One of the team members you saw at the lake,” Gideon replied. “They haven’t checked in.”

“Is that unusual?” Hermione asked.

“Very. We were expecting a call around dawn.”

The infirmary doors opened and Dumbledore entered with Snape and McGonagall on his heels once more. Fudge was not with them this time. Both agents immediately stood. “Is everyone doing well, then?” the headmaster asked pleasantly. Black relaxed slightly but the agents’ impassive facades remained in place. “Lovely.” Then Hotch’s eye twitched. The expression was mirrored on Snape’s face, although his had a single-minded fury aimed at Black whenever he glanced the convict’s way.

“What happened?” Black asked, ignoring the Potions Master for the time being.

“I hoped you would tell me your version first.”

Black frowned. “I thought Pettigrew already told you.”

“He told us what happened before yesterday, but no one has described the events of last night.”

Black explained his version up until they arrived at the Shrieking Shack, where Hermione quickly took over and summed up the events rather than going into detail. It was too likely that Dumbledore would realize the BAU team had done more than just ask the trio some questions one time if Harry had talked down a criminal in pure profiler style. He spared a glance towards the two profilers, hoping they would catch the message. Hermione finished her side of the story with her and Ron arriving at the infirmary. Harry was hesitant to pick the tale up, but Black had been knocked out only a few minutes after they had split up so he continued with his side. It felt uncomfortably like bragging when talking about the patronus and he tried to describe it as blandly as possible and move past it quickly.

Dumbledore appraised Hotch for a moment. “You knew the dementors would go after you once you got close enough,” he said. “That was very brave.”

“Or very stupid,” Snape muttered.

Before either McGonagall or Dumbledore could reprimand him, Hotch replied bluntly, “We’ve done stupider.” Snape didn’t look able to reply to that.

“It would seem you showed up at just the right time,” Dumbledore continued. “I would be interested to hear your side.”

“Blackwolf asked us for a profile and we gave him one. We immediately found inconsistencies in Black’s background and decided that someone else had to have been involved, whether Black had done anything or not. Agent Greenaway, who’s recently taken the post of a liaison between the defensive agencies of the wizarding and muggle governments in America, came to Hogwarts to ask a few more questions of Potter and his friends. The topic of the map came up and she was curious about how it worked.”

“Wait, what map?” Black asked.

Snape snarled at him, “Which map do you think?”
Hotch plowed ahead before either moved forward. “While she was examining the map, she spotted and recognized Pettigrew’s name. She called in to us at that time and, as part of standard procedure, we arrived as back up in case something went wrong. Due to conflicts in your office, she was unable to alert us that the situation was under control and we entered the grounds, coming across Potter and Black at the lake. What information have you received since last night?”

Dumbledore sighed deeply. “The aurors were unable to catch Pettigrew and his accomplice.”

“Greyback,” Ron spoke up and most of the room turned to stare at him. “Greenaway recognized him.”

“However, it seems that two more werewolves were loose on the grounds last night,” he added in a neutral tone, which betrayed his insight to the situation as much as a blatant admission would have, “and both were arrested by the aurors in connection to the case. They were on the west side of the forest, near Hogsmeade.”

“Have you spoken to Fudge about this yet?” Gideon asked urgently.

“He is unyielding on the matter. However, the werewolves were set loose by an unknown party shortly before they would have transformed back, and the aurors are looking for the rest of your team. I fear they suspect they were responsible, which leads me to ask if you have heard anything from them.”

“Not yet, but even if they had broken the werewolves out, they would have let us know,” Gideon replied.

Dumbledore frowned. “It would seem we have a dilemma then.”

Black got to his feet. “Headmaster, if they take them, we won’t ever get them back,” he said, frantic. “You saw what happened to me! Someone’s got to go after them, give them a warning!”

“Oh, and I suppose you should be entrusted with that,” Snape sneered. “Since you seem to be so exceedingly skilled at delivering warnings in time.”

Black whipped around and Snape reflexively pulled his wand out. McGonagall jumped and shouted at Snape in reprimand, but he paid her no heed. “And what, you should?” he snapped. “I seem to remember that you weren’t overly fond of werewolves, now were you?”

A growl broke out of Snape and his grip on his wand tightened. “If you weren’t used to them before, I’ll bet you’re definitely accustomed to them by now. There are quite a few in Azkaban, after all. Do you think you’ll be seeing them again soon?”

“Severus!” McGonagall hissed in warning.

Black stalked a few steps closer to Snape. “At least I did something!” he roared. “Better than sitting on my hands and letting everyone else take the fall around me!”

Snape drew his wand arm back sharply, a hex or curse already in the making on his lips, and Black’s hand darted forward to stop them.

Hotch grabbed both of their shoulders and forcibly moved them away from each other. Black tore himself loose but backed up further, angry at the contact, and Hotch released Snape as the professor made to do the same. “That’s enough,” Hotch snarled. “You have a friend running out there in danger, and you really think getting into a sophomoric fight with someone you haven’t seen in at least thirteen years is actually going to help him?” he demanded of Black before rounding on Snape.
“And trying to beat down a convict who’s got the moral support of almost everyone in the room for being the underdog is hardly a winning, intelligent battle.”

He glared both into silence as they simultaneously tried to speak up. “Quiet, I’m not done!” Snape glowered at him and Black made an animalistic sound. “You’re standing here and bickering over some feud from over a decade ago simply because neither of you have grown up enough to move on, while we have as many as five people trying to run for their freedom outside. They don’t have the luxury of time that you’re lavishing in, and I highly doubt any of them would be impressed by your ridiculous attempts to take control of the situation. Even if you don’t like most of them, you still owe them for the protection of at least three students, if not more. Neither of you have done a whole lot to help them,” he snapped, pointing sharply at the teenagers, “and they’ve still managed to accomplish more in the last few hours than either of you have. If anything, they’re fixing your mistakes while you focus on your own selfish problems instead of trying to deal with the more immediate crisis. And you two think you’re fit to be a teacher and a godfather. What kind of example are you setting?”

Black looked away at ‘godfather.’ Snape was sullen.

Hotch pressed on. “I’m not asking you to hold hands and go skipping across a meadow together. At the very least, ignore each other so we can stop wasting time. I don’t care what you two did to each other before, and I’m pretty damn sure my agents and Professor Lupin don’t give a shit right now either. You can tear each other to pieces later, but not when I potentially have people in danger. Do you understand or do you both need to remove yourselves from the situation?”

McGonagall’s eyebrows had reached new heights in her forehead as the two previously bickering men remained absolutely silent.

“Where’s Fudge?” Gideon calmly asked Dumbledore. “I would like to speak with him.”

“He believes you to be part of the werewolves’s escape,” Dumbledore said, “and he has requested that I keep you two in the infirmary.” He paused. “In response, I would like to tell you both that I would be unable to detain you here if you could find your way out of the school in the next half hour.”

“We can get Blackwolf to meet us at the edge of the apparation ward,” Gideon said. “However, we’d like to pick up our team as we go. Where was the group last spotted?”

“In the Forbidden Forest. I suspect they were heading deeper in, but your team is not aware of the dark creatures that lie inside. It may be safer for them to be arrested than to venture further.”

“Is the magic in there different than that over the school?” Hotch asked. Dumbledore nodded, and the BAU members glanced at each other. “That could explain why we can’t get a call through to them.”

“I would not advise going in there after them,” Dumbledore said. “It would be more likely that we would lose all of you than you would save your team and Professor Lupin.”

“You don’t have a lot of time left,” McGonagall said urgently. “If we’re to make a decision, it needs to be in the next few minutes.”

“Let’s contact Blackwolf and meet up with him,” Hotch told Gideon. “From there, he might be able to get a party over to help us look. Frankly, if anyone can search out a group in the Forest, he would know who.”
Dumbledore turned to his professors. “In the meantime, Minerva, please cover for Remus’s absence.” She gave her assent and began moving towards the door. “Severus, come with me to keep Fudge occupied. I do believe we can keep him company long enough for the agents to get out of England and the Ministry’s jurisdiction.” His eyes drifted to Black. “Would you accompany us? I’m sure your tale would provide ample distraction.” Snape and Black locked eyes for a moment before the latter turned back to Dumbledore and nodded. “Please meet me at my office. I need to speak with Poppy first.”

Harry watched the exchange between Snape and Black, but his focus wasn’t on it. Instead, he tried to watch his father out of the corner of his eye, curious as to how he was going to react. It was a very slight tell, and Harry only barely caught it because he was looking, but Hotch had the slightest bit of an uncertain air about him. He was stuck between his child and his team and there was no compromise option between the two.

“Do we just stay here until Fudge comes to talk to us, or are we heading back to class?” Harry asked.

“Stay put,” Snape immediately snapped. “Though I’m sure you’ll still manage to find trouble without even leaving the room.”

The infirmary emptied within the next minute, with just the teenagers and headmaster remaining. When they were finally alone, he turned to Hermione. “It would seem that we need more time,” he said bluntly, eyes sharpening to drive a point home. She inhaled quickly, stiffening. “Remember – you cannot be seen.” He put his hand on the door of the infirmary behind him and said. “I will be locking you in here. It is half past nine in the morning. I would suggest retracing the steps of others, assuming their account today has been accurate.”

“What?” Harry asked, bewildered, but Hermione was already pulling him towards her and yanking something out from underneath her shirt.

“Sorry,” she said to Ron, who was sitting up anxiously in reaction to her sudden movements. “But you’ll just hurt your leg worse if you come with us.” She threw half of the chain over Harry’s head, and it extended to fit instead of choking them together. A small hourglass sat in the middle of a circle on the chain, and Hermione reached up to turn a knob on the side. Harry was in the middle of exchanging concerned looks with Ron when everything began to blur past him.

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Hermione had given them an extra half hour with the time turner to get to Hogsmeade. Harry’s mind was still whirling from what he had just learned, although he saw how the pieces fit together now. He grabbed her arm and pulled her to a stop near the boundary. “Wait,” he said, “we can’t go find them yet!”

She stared at him in bewilderment. “What do you mean? Of course we have to!”

“No, no, no.” Thinking frantically, he said, “When I met them at the lake, they said that they were going to get the werewolves to a pack. We have to find out what that is! Dumbledore said the aurors had found them wandering, so the team hadn’t gotten them there yet. Once we get free Lupin and Elle, we’re going to have to help get them there.”

“Harry, the team is absolutely not allowed to see us,” she said. “Can you imagine what would happen if they realized you were in two places at once? Even with magical folk that would be bad, but with them? They’ll know something’s wrong immediately and think the worst.”
“Then we won’t be seen,” he quickly replied. “But we’ve got to hurry.”

As he took off ahead of her, she shouted, “We don’t know where the pack is!”

“I guess we’re going to have to start looking!” he called back.

“Wait, wait,” she said, hands on her head, and Harry looked at her. “I read something about a pack in the Forbidden Forest… There were rumors about a wild wolf pack.”

“No idea how to find them?” Harry eagerly asked. He deflated at her expression. “I guess we’re doing this the hard way, then.”

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It took a full hour of tramping through the forest before they came across the pack. To be honest, it was more like the pack found them. Seven wolves came out of the trees like ghosts, graceful and beautiful, and surrounding them almost immediately. Hermione gripped Harry’s wrist to avoid being separated and carefully reached for her wand. A wolf near her growled softly and she stopped the movement.

“Um, hello,” Harry tried. He wished any of the profilers were standing with him.

One padded forward, muscles relaxed and tail drifting after the rest of the body. The wolf sat a few feet in front of him, regal and tall. It was even larger than Harry had thought.

“I’m sorry to bother you,” he continued, “but something’s come up. There are going to be two werewolves loose on the grounds tonight, and they don’t have time to get wolfsbane potion and they’re concerned they might hurt someone.” The wolf nodded in what Harry swore was understanding. “Can you take care of them tonight? Tomorrow they should be able to get a hold of the potion.”

The wolf nodded again, effectively making this whole event one of the most surreal of Harry’s life. “All right. They should be coming this way once the moon sets.”

The pack collectively whipped their heads towards the right, ears pricked. The leader in front of Harry got to her feet, fur ruffling. Three of them moved out of the circle towards Harry and Hermione, guiding them in the opposite direction. The leader made eye contact with Harry and motioned sharply with her head for Harry to leave with the trio.

“Thank you,” Harry whispered, worried about alerting whatever made the pack nervous, and then they set off towards Hogsmeade with their entourage.

The other three made them hurry, and Hermione and Harry remained silent as they moved quickly through the trees. A half hour later, the wolves let them proceed on their own, nodding in the direction they needed to continue, and then took off in the direction they had come.

“Let’s get back to Hogsmeade now,” Hermione said, whirling around to start heading in the general direction they had been pointed in. She screamed.

Harry whipped his wand out and shouted, “Expelliarmus!”

“Woah!” In the light of the spell, he saw Morgan’s surprised expression and his gun flying out of its holster into Harry’s hand. “Hey, it’s just me!”

Harry blew out a relieved breath and walked over to hand the gun back. “Sorry.”
“I’m glad your reflexes are that quick. If we hadn’t been friendly that could have saved you.”

Behind Morgan, Harry could see the faint outlines of a few more figures. Hermione grabbed his wrist, her tight grip reminding him that the unexpected reunion wasn’t a cause for celebration. Suddenly, Harry remembered everyone’s expressions at the lake when he had asked them what pack they were talking about and before he thought it through he heard himself saying, “We heard a werewolf at the school used to use a pack of wolves to help him from hurting anyone during transformations. Lupin. Since Black was a friend, we thought he might be looking for them to see if they might help him.”

Thank the heavens for the almost complete blackout the trees caused, because he was positive the profilers would have seen through the act immediately. He was almost ashamed he couldn’t come up with a better lie on the spot. As it was, he was uncomfortable with them hearing his voice.

There was movement behind Morgan and Harry recognized the figure of his father approaching. He realized with a pang of dread that he hadn’t considered the ramifications of what he’d said in connection to his current location.

“So you thought you’d go looking for him?” Hotch demanded, exasperated.

“Not really,” Harry quickly said. “He got Ron.” Someone swore. “Well, he didn’t mean to, we don’t think. Hagrid had given him a lost rat to get it back to its owner, and Black mistook it as Ron’s rat but he couldn’t just grab it so he took both of them.”

“How long ago was this?” Gideon asked.

“Not long. We thought if we turned back to the castle we’d lose too much time finding someone to help and convincing them of what had happened, and Black seemed frantic so we weren’t sure if he was thinking straight enough to realize if he was hurting Ron or not…” Hermione stayed quiet beside him, hand still tight around his wrist.

“When did you lose sight of him?”

“About twenty minutes ago.”

Hotch sighed in frustration, mouth closed. “Okay. JJ, go with them, and make sure they get back into the castle.” She gave a sound of assent behind him.

“Wait, Hotch,” Gideon said. “They last saw him twenty minutes ago. That’s plenty of time for him to have killed the rat.” He didn’t say anything about Ron, and Harry was extremely grateful that he knew his friend was safe. Well, in comparison to the false situation he had just spun. “He might be heading back to the castle to look for his godson by now. They might be more likely to cross paths with him than us.”

“We can head back to Hogsmeade,” Hermione jumped in. “They won’t be looking for us there.”

Hotch paused. “Gideon, take Morgan and Reid. JJ, and you two, come with me.” To the team, he said, “Once we drop them off at Hogsmeade, we’ll meet back up at a midway point. I’ll get a hold of Blackwolf and see if he can come out here and take a look at the tracks. Maybe he can give us a direction.”

The team split up and the students followed their designated half. The first part of the journey was made in silence with the exception of any of the sounds they made by their passage through the forest. Hermione kept moving closer to Harry, as if considering trying to ask a question, but reconsidered each time and moved away after glancing at the agents ahead of them. Harry wasn’t
able to focus on any answers he could have given her. His thoughts were centered entirely at the back of the adult ahead of him.

The more they walked, the more uncertain he became. He had only stayed with the man for a couple of weeks, after all, and then had communicated back and forth for a few months. They didn’t really know each other that well, at least not in comparison to most father-son pairs. How could Hotch hope to trust anything he said? Their explanation was outrageous even for those in the magical world, let alone any who had just been thrown into it haphazardly. And no matter what, Harry was probably going to have to keep lying to him if what Hermione had said about the time turners was true. It put everyone in danger if he didn’t, but that didn’t make it any less likely that Hotch would see through any of his lies in a moment.

As if sensing his internal struggle – and maybe he really did – Hotch dropped back from his place up with JJ to walk beside Harry. Hermione picked up her pace to give them some room, although she and JJ didn’t stray too far ahead.

“Harry,” Hotch said quietly. “What’s really going on?”

There went his hope of deception. Before he could think of a better answer, his mouth put an inarticulate “Huh?” out into the world.

Hotch was quiet for a moment, and although Harry couldn’t see him, he felt the disappointment.

“I mean,” Harry quickly said, “what makes you say that?” Not any better. He muffled the groan that escaped him.

“Please just tell me the truth.” The faint tone of desperation in his father’s voice made him wince. “I can’t help you if you don’t tell me what’s going on.”

Realization dawned on Harry. No matter how much he was afraid of his father not trusting him, it must be so much worse for Hotch. Harry had believed for years that his parents were dead. He wasn’t in the middle of adjusting, like Hotch was with Haley’s death. And yet, here Harry was, showing up to fill a hole in the Hotchner family. But Harry hadn’t really shown any signs of trusting Hotch, despite every opportunity he’d had to do so. Sure, he’d kept him up to date with any new information, but there were plenty of obvious bits of information he had kept to himself instead, even when he could have made the effort to spend a few minutes contacting Hotch instead of taking it upon himself to resolve a problem. Such as the werewolf fiasco that had led to their current situation.

“I…” Harry scrubbed his hands over his face. “It’s not…” He let out a frustrated noise. “I want to. But I don’t know what will happen if I do. I don’t know the laws.”

“We’re in the middle of the woods. No one’s going to hear what you tell me.”

“Not like legislation, like… Law of gravitation or something.” Was that even a thing? “We did something, but I don’t know how much we changed already. We really aren’t supposed to be even seen by you guys. I might be screwing things up by telling you this much.”

There was a long silence from Hotch’s end. “I think I understand,” he said carefully and Harry sagged in relief.

“What gave me away?” Harry asked curiously.

“I felt that you were in trouble closer to seven. It’s ten now, so your timeline didn’t match up. Hermione wasn’t saying anything because she knew you had a better chance of pulling the hood
over our eyes. You’re both worried, but you didn’t react any more strongly when talking about Ron so you weren’t concerned about him.”

“So, basically everything,” Harry said dryly.

“And I can sense two of you.”

Harry paused. “Oh yeah,” he said, an awed note entering his voice. “I didn’t consider that! But yeah, you would, wouldn’t you?”

Hotch relaxed slightly. “This is related to that?”

“Yeah. I’ll ask Hermione later, but I think we might be able to give more details once we’re this is all over with. But for now, if you run across the other me… Well, it’s literally me, so please don’t shoot or anything. And remember that the other me hasn’t spoken to you yet.” Shit, Hotch had already been unconscious by the time they had started talking about the pack. “Actually, never mind.”

“What?”

“It won’t matter. You’ll see why later.” His instincts screamed at him to tell Hotch immediately that he shouldn’t go anywhere near the lake. In his mind’s eye, he could see his father, collapsed and limp, on the other side of the water as cloaked figures drained the life out of him. But his logic told him that if Hotch hadn’t distracted them, Harry wouldn’t have been able to summon the patronus and they all would have died. “Just…” He couldn’t resist. “Be careful.”

There was apprehensive quiet from Hotch. “Harry, is something wrong?”

“It’s not a problem,” Harry mumbled.

“Harry.”

“I just…” He remembered Black’s reaction to Hotch reminding him of his role as a godfather. And yet the man had been absolutely out of control at the Shrieking Shack. “Black had nothing to do with it. They might let him go immediately.” Hotch stayed quiet, letting him finish the thought. “And then someone’s going to find out the Dursleys were arrested. To them, the only place left for me to go is with Black.” He sighed. “I’m sure he’s a good guy, but he just… He was more focused on getting revenge for people who are dead than on making sure Ron wasn’t in danger of getting injured, and Ron didn’t even have anything to do with what happened when Sirius was arrested.”

“We’ll deal with it when we get there, okay?” His arm wrapped around Harry’s shoulders and he pulled him closer for a moment for an awkward hug. Harry couldn’t care less about how disjointed the movement probably looked, closing his eyes and leaning into it. “You don’t have to leave if you don’t want to.”

“I want to stay in Virginia.”

The arm released him and a hand ruffled his hair lightly for a moment. “We’ll work it out. Whatever it takes.”

“Okay,” Harry murmured. Hotch’s hand rested on his shoulder for a brief second before falling back to his side.

The BAU agents led them out of the forest and into Hogsmeade, slipping through back streets until they reached the inn they had gathered at last time. Harry wondered how much that innkeeper was getting bribed for each of these stunts. Hotch called Blackwolf and got an immediate response. The
Apache arrived just a few minutes later with a few others in tow, and the group quickly made their
departure. Hotch pulled Harry aside for one last encouraging remark before he left.

The innkeeper eyed the remaining teenagers suspiciously.

Hermione tugged Harry away from him and settled them both down in a corner spot. “What did you
tell Hotch?” she whispered hurriedly.

Whatever. When the team found Black and me at the lake, they said they were going to lead Lupin
and Elle to the pack. But they just heard about that from us. And when I had asked them what pack
they were talking about, all of them had looked at me like I was crazy. They’d met us by the pack
already!”

She gnawed on her bottom lip. “I suppose that could be possible,” she finally said. “But what about
Blackwolf? When Hotch and Gideon were leaving at the time we went back, they were going to call
Blackwolf then. Why would they do that if he was already at Hogwarts?”

“Because they weren’t going to,” Harry said slowly. “They weren’t telling everyone else the whole
story, and we don’t know everything that happened. Maybe they just used it as a cover.”

“Then what were they doing?”

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They left a few hours later, when they started to close in on the time that the werewolves were
captured. In the end, it wasn’t nearly as hard to catch up to the group as they thought it would be. The
howling led them straight there.

However, that meant the aurors also knew where to go.

By the time Hermione and Harry had arrived, the werewolves had already been bound and chained
to a tree away from the rest of the group. The aurors, hesitant to approach them, stayed away and
instead gathered in a small, muttering cluster closer to where the teens stood. Hermione grabbed
Harry’s arm to try to tug him back, but he held up a hand to make her wait. After a quick scan over
the scene, he obliged and moved back into the trees with her.

“They’re over there,” he whispered, pointing where he’d seen the BAU group. “A few aurors are
watching them but it didn’t look like they were really paying attention. If we get the werewolves
loose first, they could create a distraction. But we could also be attacked or someone else could get
injured.”

“I’ve got an idea,” Hermione said.

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Reid jumped when she touched his arm a few minutes later. He glanced back quickly to see her lying
on her stomach, hidden behind the BAU so none of the aurors would see her. “Just me.” He turned
around in case any of the aurors glanced their way. She whispered Relashio a few times, releasing
the bonds on him and the rest of the agents sitting away from the main cluster of wizards.

A furious whirl of movement from the directions of the werewolves caught their attention, but it was
just them thrashing with the chains once again. “Wait,” Hermione hissed as they were about to turn
away. The aurors had already stopped paying attention when the werewolves freed themselves from
the chains they had been tangled in. “Okay, we’re going to meet Harry at a midway point.” She
pushed back and scrambled to her feet, still crouched low to avoid drawing too much attention as she pulled at the agents.

As they began to follow her, Morgan said, “Wait, we can’t just leave the aurors to the werewolves,” at the same time JJ asked, “Where’s Harry?”

Hermione responded to both by pointing in the direction the werewolves were sprinting.

“Ah.”

The group began running in the same direction, not caring about attracting the attention of the aurors at that point. Behind them, some of the witches and wizards had begun to notice, but they were more interested in the running werewolves. Their shooting spells, aimed to incapacitate, were easily dodged by the werewolves, and they were quickly behind enough trees to make aim nigh impossible.

The BAU team upped their speed and Morgan snatched a branch off the ground as he ran. As soon as he was close enough, he hurled it at the nearest werewolf, who broke off its chase of Harry with a snarl. JJ grabbed Hermione and tugged her back and to the ground to avoid notice while Morgan pulled the werewolf’s attention towards himself. Reid kept running, making a suicidal dash across the path of the second werewolf, who immediately diverted course. He was jumping a moment later, making use of his height to snag a branch and pull himself into a tree. The werewolf growled in frustration and looked around. The first thing that caught its attention was its fellow werewolf chasing prey, and it darted after to take up the pursuit.

“Wait a few seconds,” JJ told Hermione before following. She nodded, even though the agent was already gone, and then got up to go find Harry.

Behind them, they could hear the sounds of the aurors moving towards them. Harry appeared from behind a tree and the two hurried towards each other. In the darkness and loud noise, neither noticed Reid until he was right beside them and both yelped.

“Shh!” he exclaimed, although he looked slightly smug that he had actually managed stealth. “Don’t follow us, okay?”

They both shook their heads quickly. “We’ll take care of the aurors,” Harry said. Before Reid could protest, he added, “It’ll take us less than a minute. Don’t worry.” There was another howl in the distance. Reid’s indecision gave way and he gestured for them to hurry before running in the direction of his team.

Hermione grabbed Harry’s arm and began running. After a half minute, she tilted her head back, cupped her hands around her mouth, and howled as best as she could. They didn’t stop running, but both tried to move a little quieter to hear for aurors behind them. There was nothing. Then a few spells shot overhead. Harry moved a few yards from her and mimicked what she had done. More spells came their way, and they changed course to move at a perpendicular route from the agents and werewolves.

“Do you have the cloak?” Hermione gasped out.

He groaned. “Sirius still has it.”

Hermione yelped a moment later, the sound pure for a quarter of a second before it was muffled by a collision. Harry whipped his wand out but couldn’t see well enough to aim.

“Follow me,” he heard Blackwolf say and let out a relieved breath. The trio once again began
running, though of course Harry could only hear Hermione. After a few moments, he jumped when he heard a wolf howl right next to him, and relaxed only after a solid minute had passed. Blackwolf repeated the sound a few more times, startling both teenagers after each repetition.

Spells continued to shoot near them whenever he howled, but they began to get sparser until they finally stopped altogether. Blackwolf tried once more and when there was still no response, he motioned for them both to stop. Harry and Hermione immediately bent over, chests heaving to try and catch their breaths. The Apache calmly and slowly breathed in and out, easily recovering. He checked his phone while the two gave up on social convention and collapsed on the forest floor, still wheezing.

“Reid says they made it to the pack without any aurors,” Blackwolf said. “Morgan got scraped by a pair of claws but they’re all otherwise okay.”

Harry held a thumbs up into the air for a moment to show he heard.

Blackwolf eyed them. “You really should start running if you get into trouble this often.”

They moaned in response.

“You have a half hour to get back to the infirmary,” Blackwolf continued. He gave them a skeptical look. “I doubt you could make it. Wait here for a minute.”

Both closed their eyes and focused on regaining their breaths. A few minutes passed in silence, and it struck Harry that they could probably be easily attacked and not notice until it was too late. With a moan, he sat up, making a half-hearted effort to at least be somewhat vigilant. As a result, he saw the two large horse-shaped figures and man approaching them, and was able to gape for the entirety of their approach.

Hermione heard his intake of breath and appeared over his shoulder to ask what was going on. Her eyes landed on the group. “Oh.”

Blackwolf made quick work of introductions when they were only a few feet away. “Firenze says he’s met you before. This is a friend of his.”

“Oh my God,” Hermione whispered.

“I am leaving you to their care. Do not get into any more trouble. Understood?”

They both quickly nodded.

“Good.” He made a formal, complex gesture to the centaurs, and then he was gone, silently disappearing into the trees.

Chapter End Notes

Oops, this should have been up days ago. Finished writing the whole thing and still can't keep a schedule.

Blackwolf’s back! And you better believe he'd be the only guy who could convince
centaurs to help humans.

For those of you disappointed at how anticlimatic the meeting between the BAU and wizarding world was – don't worry. The BAU hasn't really shown their colors yet. They're going to have more dramatic reveals than a Lady Gaga concert.
"The best laid plans of mice and men often go awry." - Robert Burns, "To a Mouse"

Snape whipped out his wand the moment he saw someone standing by his desk. Before he spat out a spell, however, he recognized Agent Hotchner’s form. “Shouldn’t you be gone before the aurors arrest you?” he drawled, putting emphasis on the mention of the Ministry squad. The agent hardly reacted except to turn slightly as Snape passed.

“I have more pressing concerns.”

Snape raised an eyebrow and slowly took his seat, mocking Hotchner’s severity as eloquently as he could. It was never something he would admit, but he found it to be something of a challenge to maintain complete control on the exterior around the agent. He felt like a bird whose feathers kept getting raised in response to the wind.

And now he was literally comparing himself to a chicken. Bloody American agents.

“Oh?”

“Harry Potter.” None of the flamboyant praise, no awed tone. But no disdain or disregard either. “Whether there be a reason for it or not, your society has placed a great deal of importance on his shoulders.”

Snape slowly raised one eyebrow. “I do hope this is not your pressing concern.”

“Are you aware that Black is his godfather?”

Despite himself, Snape sneered. “Unfortunately.”

“And the man seems rather taken with him.”

Snape’s fingertips became white as they pressed against the table. He forced the thought of Lily’s son being taken in by Black from his mind. “Also unfortunate.”

“And your headmaster doesn’t seem to care much that Black is hardly in proper shape to take care of himself, let alone someone else’s child.”

The statement was too close to his own thoughts and Snape snarled immediately, “What do you want me to do about it? The Dursleys were just arrested for who cares what – the boy has no other option.”

Hotchner went perfectly still for a moment, but it was gone so quickly Snape almost wondered if he had imagined it. “My entire education and career have been almost entirely focused around this kind of situation, Professor Snape,” he said, slowly and heavily. “This will go badly for Potter. Dumbledore is not going to listen to me, but he may listen to you. You must find an alternative. Perhaps he could stay with the family of a friend?”
“The blood wards won’t work—” Snape broke off midsentence and considered it. “Black is no blood of his anyway,” he said slowly. “If Potter had reason against going with Black, Dumbledore may rethink the matter to comply with a student’s wishes.”

Hotchner visibly relaxed. “Will you attempt it?”

The potions master tilted his head ever so slightly. “I might. But why should I?”

There was no response, verbal or not, from the agent, and in the low lighting of the dungeons, it was hard to make out his expression. The silence dragged for several uncomfortable moments, and Snape attempted a faint legilimency connection only for it to immediately fail. His brow twisted slightly in frustration when he realized Hotchner wasn’t actually making eye contact—instead, he must have been focusing on a point directly above or below to create the appearance that he was.

As Hotchner continued to keep his peace, Snape’s thoughts drifted unwillingly towards Potter again. Whatever symptoms he may display of his father’s apparent mental illness in his aptitude to run into danger without a thought, Snape could see too much of Lily in him to ever truly abandon the boy.

And now…after Potter and his friends had turned over their information on Pettigrew to him willingly…he was beginning to see that Harry Potter was his own person as well, more and less than his parents were combined. He had strengths and weaknesses from both, but he had also been molded by his own experiences and decisions. He was not solely the legacy of a famous couple and their tragic story. In his own way, he was just another student at the school.

Snape had his reasons for wanting to keep him safe. He was well versed in them, and had practically memorized the list this year when the boy’s inane attempts to get himself killed had nearly led to Snape strangling the boy in his sleep and saving them all the trouble of having to hunt him down to save his neck the next time he did something ridiculous.

He raised an eyebrow. “More importantly, what importance does this have to you? You’re American and muggle.”

“I’m a parent,” Hotchner reluctantly admitted. Not as if this was an embarrassment, but rather a prized, hidden treasure he chose to show Snape for a brief moment. “And I’m a psychoanalyst who specializes in disturbed minds. The combination does not produce appealing images for Potter’s future situation with Black.”

“So you wish to use my ‘petty feud’ with Black against him.”

To the agent’s credit, he didn’t flinch at having his words thrown back at him. “Something of the sort,” he freely confirmed. “I trust you can focus on much larger, current troubles now. I can hardly believe Black was a bigger problem then than he is now.”

Snape pressed his lips together. “That remains to be seen.” He wasn’t entirely sure if that was Hotchner’s attempt at an apology, but considering the man’s stance on Black, which seemed to be the only one in the school resembling his own, he would take the help. “I will speak with the headmaster.”

“Do you believe in the curse on the Defense Against the Dark Arts post?”

Snape tried not to show surprise at the sudden topic change. “Whether I do or not, Lupin will not be here next year. A werewolf on the grounds? The odds are against him even without the curse.”

“You might consider advising Dumbledore to see if Lupin would not be opposed to helping his old friend settle back into normal life. I don’t think Lupin would be able to keep this post and manage
that at the same time.”

Snape felt a small smirk begin to creep onto his face. “I will certainly take that into consideration.”

He trusted this man’s blunt honesty, and that alone set off warning bells immediately. Anyone who made such an effort to be open so early in the game was hiding something significant that could not be snooped around. Most importantly, it must be related to Potter, which was, as Hotchner had pointed out so cunningly, Snape’s business. The man was muggle and taking pains to ensure the boy’s safety, which made it extraordinarily unlikely for him to be on Voldemort’s side.

That didn’t mean his intentions were benign. “I will contact you at your office if Potter is successfully relocated.”

Hotchner nodded gratefully, if slightly taken off guard at the sudden information grant. “I would appreciate that.” He spared a glance at his watch. “If I stay any longer, Blackwolf will likely leave me to find my own way back to America.” He held out his hand and Snape shook it.

As the agent left, Snape began wondering how much information the Ministry archives would have on muggles.

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Outside the infirmary, loud shouts began to get closer and closer until the doors burst open and a troop of excessively pissed off aurors entered. Everyone looked up innocently.

“I recognized him!” one screamed, pointing at Harry. After a moment, the hand moved to Hermione. “You! You were with him!”

“The door was locked, Amadeus!” Fudge exclaimed. “And we just left five minutes ago!”

“Minister,” Hermione asked, bewildered. “What happened?”

Fudge looked at the auror like this was solid proof. The auror looked back in exasperation.

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Hermione and Harry were released from the infirmary not long after to go to DADA. Unsurprisingly, McGonagall had posted an announcement that the class was canceled that day due to Lupin’s absence while he helped the Ministry officials at the school. The teenagers suppressed snorts at that but gladly took the empty period.

“Pomphrey said Ron should be out soon, right?” Harry asked as they climbed the stairs. “It only took me a night to regrow the bones in my arm.”

“Knowing wizarding medicine, it shouldn’t be long at all. We can go check on him after lunch. If we head back now, Pomphrey will just kick us out.”

“Harry!”

He tried his best not to let his shoulders slump at the call. Hermione, not turning around yet, winced.

Sirius Black hurried up to them until he was only a few steps below. Thankfully, the stairway was entirely empty, otherwise someone surely would have screamed by now at the appearance of the ex-convict. The grin across his face stretched the tight skin and revealed his gauntness, though Harry
found he was surprisingly pleased that the man was able to smile after everything that had happened. Someone had gotten him a fresh set of clothes and he had bathed, revealing a skin tone several shades lighter than it had been last night. He now passed as someone who’d had a bad day instead of a bad decade.

“Harry,” he said again, “can I talk to you for a minute?”

Harry nodded and Hermione hurried off. Her footsteps dimmed as they hurried to the top of the staircase and through the doorway, but he didn’t hear them continue down the hall. From the way his expression didn’t change, Black wasn’t paying enough attention to notice.

Now that it was only the two of them, he shuffled his weight awkwardly. “So, ah…” He swallowed and one hand reached up to scratch the back of his head. “I know this might not be the…well, the best news you could be receiving,” he said, “but I thought you should know. Before your parents died,” and here Harry used all his will to keep his facial muscles still instead of allowing them a wince, “they named me…”


Some of the air left Black’s lungs. “Yeah. I just got out of a meeting with Dumbledore… I suppose you know that,” he added with a short laugh, though his tone quickly grew somber. “I’ve got some…other news, as well. I don’t know if you’re going to like this or not either.”

A flash of uncertainty raced through him. There was nothing else Black knew that he didn’t, right? He was beginning to see the value of planning ahead of everyone else, and without that lead, it felt like falling back to square one. “Okay,” he finally said.

Black shifted again. “You see… We don’t know the details yet, but Dumbledore found out that your aunt and uncle were arrested over break. They’re in prison and it…it doesn’t look like they’re going to be released anytime soon, let alone before the summer.”

Oh shit.

They couldn’t know. How did they…? Hadn’t Ms. Fig said she wouldn’t…? Who told them?

Oblivious to Harry’s internal panicking, Black continued, “So, I guess what I’m trying to get at is… It looks like you’re going to be going home with me, if—if that’s all right with you.”

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Hermione ambushed him at the top of the stairs, like he expected. “It is absolutely—“ He clamped a hand over her mouth, leaning back quickly to look through the archway and make sure Black hadn’t heard anything. The man was still walking back down the stairs. Harry let Hermione go but gestured for her to stay quiet and follow him.

She huffed and finished in a hushed but angry whisper. “It is absolutely not all right with you to be go stay at Black’s! Are you insane? Harry, why on earth would you say that?!” He opened his mouth, foolishly thinking she actually wanted an answer, but she cut him off immediately. “Look, I understand that he’s probably a good person, but honestly, what does he know about raising a child? …Well, I suppose you’re mostly grown up, but the point is that he doesn’t know how to take care of himself right now, let alone someone else!”

Harry kept glancing around to make sure no one would enter the hall and hear them. Hermione’s voice was steadily rising and beginning to carry. “And I know that you know how to take care of yourself, but if you go stay with him, you’ll be picking up after him as well! That’s not your job, and
you have other things you need to be focusing on!”

“Hermione-” Harry started.

She rode over him again. At least she had lowered her voice again. “All that aside, why would you want to? What did he do for you that I’m missing? Harry, your-” She grabbed both his shoulders and pulled him to a stop, facing her, as she dropped her voice even lower. “Your father really loves you. I know Black probably needs some compassion right now, but you don’t owe him anything and-and…between the two of them, I think your dad cares about you more.”

Harry looked around for a moment and spied a nearby, empty classroom. He took his friend’s arms and ushered her into the room, then shut the door behind them.

“Do you mind if I speak now?” he asked, somewhat dryly. “If I’d said no, he would have been suspicious and he probably would have told Dumbledore. To them, I don’t have anywhere else to go. I couldn’t have said I didn’t want to go with him.”

“But-“

“So what I need,” he pressed, “is a second option to appear.”

She frowned. “But I thought we didn’t want anyone to know.”

“We don’t.” He sighed. “You’re not going to like this, but I don’t want to have to go through this multiple times. Let’s get to Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom so I can call my dad.”

---

Calling Hotch was literally easier done than said. All it took was them walking into the bathroom, which was not empty for once.

“Dad!” he exclaimed once the door was shut.

The agent smiled in response. “What happened to staying out of trouble?”

Harry groaned. Hermione said, “I can honestly support him when he says he really did try.”

“Can you explain everything now?”

Harry looked at Hermione hesitantly. She nodded and pulled a gold chain with an hourglass attached to it out of her shirt. “It’s a time-turner,” she explained. “I was taking all the classes I could, so McGonagall asked the Ministry if I could borrow it this year. That way I could be in multiple places at the same time.”

Hotch paused. “You went back in time. Last night. That’s why it looked like Harry had gotten to the lake before us when he should have still been at Hogsmeade.” She nodded again. “So you found Black and stayed with him until the castle, and then after you heard someone had to get to the forest to mysteriously let the rest of the team and Lupin loose, you used the time-turner to tell us about the pack and then help everyone escape.” They both nodded this time. “Technically, that does qualify as looking for trouble.”

“Technically,” Harry admitted. “But it worked out, didn’t it?”

“Everyone is back at Quantico,” Hotch agreed reluctantly with a nod. “Even Gideon. Blackwolf is going to come back for me tonight. I got directions from Elle to come here, but I don’t think you
have long until someone notices you’re not in class.”

“We have an hour and a half,” Harry said.

Hotch nodded and his face darkened. “Unfortunately, we’re going to have to talk about the situation with Black.”

Harry blinked in surprised. “Wait, we just heard about it from him! How did you find out so fast?!”

Hotch mirrored his expression. “He already told you? He was supposed to wait until-“ He shook his head. “I’m not surprised.” Both teens looked at him expectantly. “I was talking to Snape. I didn’t know that they had found out about the Dursleys, but I suspected Black would try and take you anyway. Snape seemed like the best one to stop that from within the castle. He said Dumbledore found out not long ago when someone went to go check on Ms. Fig. Whoever went to see her then checked on the Dursleys and uncovered the rest of the story.”

“I’ve got an idea,” Harry said carefully, “but I don’t think either of you are going to like it. Actually, I know you’re not.” When no one immediately protested, though they both became wary, he finished, “We need to get the Dursleys released from prison.”

---

“I hate this,” Morgan said.

“I know.”

“No, I don’t think hate is a strong enough word,” Reid mused.

“How do you think I feel about this?” Hotch muttered.

“I will feel marginally – marginally – better if I can send them threats once a month. Or weekly. Or daily,” Garcia said.

“He isn’t going to be anywhere near them. Just hold onto that thought.”

“Those assholes should be in prison, not walking around,” Morgan snapped.

Hotch gave him a look and he pulled back, folding his arms. “Everyone, I know this doesn’t sit well,” he said. “But between them and Black, the wizards are going to think that Harry needs to stay with the Dursleys. The blood wards will keep him safe there.” Garcia snorted in dry amusement. “No one will know Harry’s staying with us.”

A few moments of silence passed in which everyone did their best not to sulk.

Finally, Gideon asked, “Are we in here for a case as well or is this it? Prentiss is noticing something is wrong.”

No one turned to look down at the bullpen where their newest agent was filling out paperwork and doing her best not to appear curious about the gathering upstairs.

“Quick vote,” Hotch said. “Harry said it would be okay, but I want to hear from all of you before I make a decision. Do you think we should tell Prentiss? I don’t have a problem with anyone saying no but I do want a reason.”

Elle raised her hand briefly before letting it fall on the table. “Honestly, it puts her in more danger. I got my ass bitten in, what, a month? And everyone nearly got wiped out running through a forest
filled with centaurs and giant spiders and who knows what I bit that left a bad taste for days. If she’s anything like the rest of us, which something tells me she is, she’s going to want in on us this little fun bundle of chaos, and it could get her killed or worse.” She sighed. “But at the same time, I’m glad you told me so I could make the decision for myself.”

“We don’t know her well enough,” Morgan added. “The rest of us had known each other for at least a year. She’s been here less than a month.”

JJ made a sound. “At the same time,” she said, “whoever fills this post is eventually going to need to know, and we’re just going to keep driving people away if we never tell any of them about the situation until they’ve been here for a few months. They’ll just leave because they won’t feel like a part of the team.”

“I would say she wouldn’t accept it but the rest of us managed to,” Reid put in.


Hotch stood up and walked around the table to open the door. He stuck his head out and called Prentiss’s name before heading back to his seat and dialing Blackwolf’s number. “Someone with more proof than I have is going to explain this,” he muttered.

---

Sirius began sending letters at least once a week, which Harry somewhat reluctantly replied to. Once on board with the plan, Hermione had reminded Harry that he would have to do everything possible to complete the guise, even if that included the regular correspondence. Harry found himself wondering when the Dursleys were going to get released, just on the off chance Sirius would lose some interest.

“It’s not that bad,” Ron muttered one day while the three were looking through any mail they had gotten. “He could still be a convict.”

“Has there been any news about…?” Hermione asked quietly.

He shook his head. “Not yet.”

A few hours later, though, Harry found himself held back as the rest of the class left Defense Against the Dark Arts. Hermione and Ron paused for a moment before he waved them on. Ron murmured to him that they’d be in the bathroom, and the pair left to go set up the call. Even when the rest of the team wasn’t available due to a case, Garcia insisted on a regular schedule. Sometimes the twins dropped in, but usually they were too busy causing chaos with whatever combination of technology and magic they had managed this time. When they did participate in a call, the conversation always managed to turn into them drilling Garcia for more information about technology. If Reid was present, they found his mental archives inexhaustible and valuable.

Lupin got up from behind his desk, drawing Harry away from his mind’s meanderings. He had gotten into the habit of focusing entirely on academics whenever he was in class after Blackwolf had warned him Snape was a Legilimens, but he found his thoughts always drifted when he was in Lupin’s class anyway. He figured it had to do with Lupin’s involvement in the Black and Pettigrew fiasco a month ago.

“Dumbledore thought it might be best if I were the one to tell you this,” he said carefully, eyes fixed
on the ground. “I’m afraid I’ve got some bad news.”

*Please tell me the Dursleys are out.*

“The muggle government evidently found there had been a…mix-up,” he continued, face twisting at
the word. “And…they decided to release the Dursleys.”

*Yes!*

“Oh,” Harry mumbled, turning his head away in case his expression didn’t entirely match his tone.

Lupin sighed. “I’m sorry. I know the living conditions weren’t…. Well.” He ran a hand through his
hair and blew out his breath. “To make matters worse, Sirius doesn’t have a blood connection to you.
As a result, you’re not as safe staying with him as you are staying with the Dursleys.”

Actually, Harry was pretty sure that wasn’t the case, because the Dursleys would have gladly handed
him over to anyone looking to kill him, but he didn’t say that out loud.

“Sirius and I tried to tell Dumbledore that even without the blood wards, Sirius’s place would be the
safer location for you, but it seems that…someone had a talk with Dumbledore and convinced him
that wasn’t the case.”

Someone… Snape? But why would he-

His father had spoken to the potions master shortly before he left the school. Harry never thought he
would feel gratitude towards the professor, but perhaps he could muster up a small amount for this
one occasion.

“It looks like you’re going to have to go stay with the Dursleys this summer, until we can get
something else worked out,” Lupin said reluctantly. “Harry, is this… Is this going to be okay? Will
you be all right?”

Harry sighed, nodding. “I understand.” He smiled slightly. “Don’t worry about it, professor. I’m sure
I’ll make it work. I’ve managed this long, haven’t I?”

A nostalgic look passed over his face. “Yes, I suppose you have. I’m proud of you for the effort
you’ve put in so far to making it work. And you can’t call me professor anymore.” Harry blinked at
him in confusion. “I’m leaving Hogwarts at the end of term.”

*What? You’re the best DADA teacher we’ve had in years! We learned so much! And no one
knows about…that, right?”*

“Not yet, but it’s only a matter of time now. When Agent Greenaway was also loose, it was just…
Someone could have gotten hurt very easily, and I don’t know what I would do if I hurt a student. So
I’m turning in my resignation.”

Harry’s shoulders slumped. “I think I get it,” he mumbled.

“I’m sorry to be leaving you like this,” Lupin said. “I do believe you’ll be seeing more of me,
however. When I leave, I plan to go stay at the Black house. And while Sirius may not be happy
with the decision, he thinks he can get you to stay at his house for brief periods of time to get you
away from your relatives. Nothing like a convict to get your relatives in place, hm?”

Harry started, but he faked a grin as quickly as he could despite the unease he felt. “Really?”
“I’m sure your aunt and uncle aren’t going to try saying no to him,” Lupin pointed out. “He thinks he can manage it at least once a week. Keep your chin up, Harry. It might not be as bad as it seems.”

Harry nodded his appreciation. “Thanks, professor,” he said.

---

Their connection shorted out that evening. The twins came to them immediately to demand to know what had happened, but they found the three already frantically running a plan together.

“Send an owl?” Fred said, like it was the obvious solution. “You did that before.”

“We can’t do it directly, because no owl is going to make it all the way over the Atlantic,” Hermione sighed. “We managed it before because we had a go-between, but no one knows where she went so I don’t know how we could send one now. A letter through regular channels would look odd since they did such a good job of disconnecting from us.”

“Even Elle?” George asked.

“Too dangerous for her right now. She’s temporarily undercover while she’s trying to learn more about Knockturn Alley.”

“Wait for Garcia to fix everything? Might just be a brief short out.”

“We think it’s on our side. They never revealed how they got into the castle and I heard Seamus say he saw Dumbledore walking around the grounds doing some sort of magic. I’ll bet they’re trying to reinforce the anti-muggle wards,” Harry said glumly.

“Well, what else do they really need to know between then and now? Someone’s picking you up from Platform 9 ¾, right?”

“Yeah, whoever they send and Sirius Black, because he’s decided that he’s going to keep an eye on me this summer.”

The twins winced. “Yowch,” Fred muttered.

“Maybe tell him you’re coming home with us for a little while? Or no, he and Mum or Dad would probably start talking and they’d realize something was wrong…”

“Wait, but he could say he’s going home with Hermione!” Ron exclaimed.

Hermione suddenly jumped and grabbed a piece of parchment and quill out of her backpack. “My parents! We can contact them!”

“What?” the rest of the group intoned.

“It’s like using Fred and George to get packages through. No one’s looking at them as a connection between Harry and the FBI. I can explain that we lost contact and need them to pass a message on.” She paused in her writing. “They probably shouldn’t know the details yet, though…” she added regretfully.

Harry began writing his own letter. “I’ll ask Dad about it,” he said. “I’ll bet we could let them know. Okay, so they need to know the connection’s down on our end… Hermione’s parents… Sirius Black…”

“They gather information, right?” George asked.
“That’s part of their job, yeah.”

“Might want to let them know that there’s werewolf movement in Romania. Bill said so. Considering Elle and what happened with Greyback… Could be of interest to them.”

“Maybe we should ask them to profile Malfoy,” Ron muttered. “He’s been insufferable since Buckbeak was sent to America without getting executed.”

“I think they have better things to do, Ronny-kins.”

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Within a few days, they had a letter back, including a message from Hotch asking if Hermione wanted to tell her parents or if he should. Garcia added a side note at the bottom about how she thought she knew what had changed with the wards and she was already working on a solution to fix it. The rest of the team added in their own notes throughout the rest of the letter, as per usual, while Hotch addressed the Black issue. He suggested, somewhat grudgingly, that Harry go home with him for a few days before heading back to the Dursleys and then claiming it might just be better to stay with his aunt and uncle for the rest of summer break. There were doubts from Hotch and the rest of the team that Black wouldn’t still keep an eye on the place, which showed some responsibility but was an annoyance in this particular incident.

Once they learned the full story, the Grangers were extremely enthusiastic about helping with Harry’s communications with the BAU and they eagerly accepted letters and sent them their respective ways. He got the impression the Grangers and Hotch had their own stream of conversation going as they compared notes on having magical children. Hermione said her parents were considering heading to America over the summer to meet with Hotchner and to learn more about the magical community beyond what Hermione could tell them. This left Ron in England on his own, and the twins were entirely not subtle about planning obscure escape efforts to travel to America and spend a few days with the gathering group.

The rest of term passed quickly. Lupin fulfilled his promise and turned in his resignation, to the general disappointment and confusion of the student body. There was a noticeable change in him, as if a weight had been lifted from his shoulders, and Harry heard a distinct lack of remarks about his supposed father, a curiosity that he lingered on but never found a reason for. Black continued sending letters, and Harry responded as earnestly as he could. It seemed to be working, although Black hadn’t realized Harry hadn’t really told him anything personal yet.

Throughout all of this, Harry managed to slip a letter to Morgan in one of the gaps between sending and receiving a reply, hoping to be as subtle as possible in how it was received. He was positive it had made it solely past Morgan’s eyes, if only because Morgan's response wasn’t marked up by the rest of the team. Ron and Hermione didn’t know he had sent the letter, and he kept its reply quiet as well. It didn’t seem right to share the information that he was sure was going to be personal.

*Harry -*

*I’d say nothing happened a few months ago but since you already know that’s not the case I won’t bother. I’d could also say it was nothing big, but I suppose you can guess that it must have been major for you to notice it when even the rest of the BAU has trouble reading your father.*

*Please do not tell anyone this if you think it could get back to Hotch. He knows where I live and he carries two guns.*

*With the time frame you’re talking about, I can only assume the cause was a particular case we*
worked where the Unsub directly approached and targeted us before we even knew he existed. The man was delusional and believed he had to put us on a quest to save someone and restore the damage done to him by a fire. At the time he contacted us, we had all been on a short break and should have been unreachable, but we all received messages anyway.

As the case went on, we continued to have breaches of privacy – I was arrested, Garcia’s network was temporarily shut down, Gideon had a head delivered to his door, a relative of Reid’s was involved. But for Hotch, a message was delivered directly to his home while Jack was there with a babysitter. We also became aware that the Unsub knew he had a second son, but we could never find out if that was just slipped in as a statement of fact or a threat, and it set Hotch on edge for the rest of the case. Obviously, by the end, nothing came of it, as you never came under threat from the Unsub.

(While I’m on the topic, I just want to make sure you know we weren’t purposefully trying to keep you out of the loop. We figured we either needed to pull you out of school immediately or make sure you stayed there, and we wanted to send the most updated letter through the channels so it would reach you during the normal owl delivery time. We were only a few minutes away from sending it when Reid cracked the case, and we were too focused on everything else to rewrite the message.)

When it was all over, we discussed telling you or not, but Black was still “loose” and we didn’t see any point in throwing another concern on you when there wasn’t anything to be done about it and the man responsible was dead. The case caused a lot of stress for all of us, but it hit your dad pretty hard because of how close Jack got to the Unsub. For a little while, both of you were near murderers and he couldn’t do much to protect either of you. He was acting differently for a while, and I suspect his research into Black’s case may have bordered on obsession, but it seems like he’s back to normal.

That being said (and this is the main part I’d rather you not share with him), I don’t think he’s ever going to fully adapt to Black’s “claim” over you through the Potters. Black was a threat to you then, and now you had to protect him from dementors and almost had your soul sucked out. I think your father is understandably peeved towards him. You’ve probably already noticed his extreme reluctance to allow Black anywhere near you, and I know he even reached out to Snape for aid. I’m almost certain he’s still in contact with Snape just to ensure the guy’s on his side and against Black getting custody. I say this because I know your opinions on staying with Black are the same as Hotch’s, but try to keep in mind that you also need to develop your own opinion of him. I’m sure you’ll see a different side than the rest of us will. Your father cannot claim to not be biased about him anymore.

I hope that answers your concerns about those two topics, but I can’t give you as many answers about the third. I don’t know all the details about this one, and I don’t want to share my guesses on the off chance that I’m wrong.

You’re right – Reid’s been different. You’re not imagining it, and he’s been acting oddly towards all of us. I’m a bit surprised he snapped at Hermione, though. I don’t know for sure what’s happening, but it started right after he was kidnapped by an Unsub. He didn’t fully recover. If the situation changes, I’ll let you know, but right now, it’s unclear if he’s going to be okay. I have faith in him to make it out all right.

Morgan

Harry folded the letter back up and slipped it into his pocket. A few students were still getting onto the train, but the trio had packed everything away into the overhead compartments and were just waiting to leave. The twins were trying to keep up the image that their relationship had not changed
with their youngest brother and his friends, and were sitting with their own classmates in another booth.

“So, you leave for America in five days, right?” Ron asked.

“Ron,” Hermione sighed, “your parents are not going to let you go to America, no matter what Fred and George are planning.” Harry quietly stood up while they talked and reached into the overhead compartment to put the letter into his luggage. He could do without that falling out of his pocket and ending up in the wrong hands, and his luck this year had been unpredictable at best.

“Maybe we could just sneak over and sneak back within a few hours?”

“You do remember how badly it went for you the last time you three tried to sneak out, don’t you?”

“I wish we could tell them,” Ron muttered. “It’d be so much easier. But I know Mum would tell Dumbledore and that would kind of defeat the whole purpose.” Before the mood came down further, he brightened and said, “Exploding Snap?”

The cards came out and everyone had soot on their faces and sting marks on their fingers within the first ten minutes. The conversation stayed in safe waters as the game continued, just on the off chance anyone happened to walk past and hear something. About an hour later, the twins slipped in, and it took serious analysis by all three to understand what hidden message they were trying to get across before Harry finally alighted on it and the pair left to return to their own compartment.

“I’m positive they were offering to fly me across the ocean on their brooms if I decided I really didn’t want to go stay with Sirius for the next few days,” Harry quietly explained and Ron snorted in amusement.

Three hours later, Hermione was in the middle of a nap when the train screeched to a stop. Unlike last time, there were no ominous, flickering lights, and it was perfectly bright outside. Hermione jolted awake at the unexpected change in momentum and asked, “We’re already there?” Neither answered her, and all three got to their feet.

The fields outside swayed in the breeze, entirely disconnected from the situation in the iron horse. Harry opened up the window and stuck his head outside despite Hermione’s hiss of warning. Along the rest of the train, he could see about ten other students doing the same, and none of them were seeing anything he wasn’t. Behind him, Ron had opened up the compartment door and was talking to the neighboring students.

“What’s going on up there?” Lee Jordan shouted, head out the window about twenty compartments away from Harry. The students in the direction he was inquiring to called back a response, but it was indiscernible to Harry.

Someone in the opposite direction shouted at Lee to send the message down, and he said, “They don’t know! It just stopped all of a sudden!”

“Is it dementors again?” someone else cried.

“No,” Harry automatically replied. “It’s downright warm, and besides, they were all sent away months ago.”

Screams pierced the air from the other side of the train, and everyone on Harry’s end pulled their heads back into the compartments. He shoved the window back up and locked it. As soon as he turned around, Hermione handed him his wand. Her own was gripped tightly in her hand, and he noticed she had pulled down their luggage to get out all three. She had evidently already passed...
Ron’s to him.

The two pressed closer to the door, but there were so many students packed in the aisle that it was nearly impossible to see anything. For a moment, the chaos seemed confused and uncoordinated, and the juvenile bewilderment hung in the air, a calm before the storm. Then the train’s occupants surged in Harry’s direction, and he found himself being pushed back against the window along with Hermione and Ron. Two second years and three fifth years were in his immediate line of sight, but at least ten or twelve were suddenly packed in. The ones closest to the door were shouting at each other and out of the compartment, screaming for people to get out of the aisle.

“What’s going on?” Ron shouted. He was standing on the seat cushions to avoid being crushed against the wall. One of his hands was tightly gripping Hermione’s shoulder, and Hermione reached out to take Harry’s wrist, even though there was no chance of them being separated in their current situation.

“Close the door! Close the door!” one of the students near the front was screaming. “They’re going to come in!”

Another student was shouting, “Wait! Wait! Do you have any first or second years?” Harry missed the beginning of the next sentence but heard “-sixth and seventh years apparating.”

The bodies in the compartment quickly began shuffling, and the second years and three more at the front of the compartment were shoved to the student in the aisle. A moment later, he heard a loud crack and two of them were gone. The student returned after a brief pause and took hold of the remaining first and second years. Someone near the front screamed, but the sound was quickly muffled.

“Oh, Merlin,” someone in the middle whispered.

“What happened?” Ron asked.

“She splinched. Her leg’s gone. …Or, the opposite, really,” the student continued weakly, holding a hand over their mouth. “I guess that’s the problem.”

“Splinched…?” Harry asked.

“Sometimes apparitions go wrong and the witch or wizard leaves something behind,” Hermione quickly explained. Harry stared at her, incredulous that she could actually pull the fact out in the middle of such a dangerous situation. “It’s why they only let sixth years and up do it.”

The lights went out and everyone was silent, listening for any signs of what was happening. The students at the front began moving as quietly as they could, reshuffling to pull everyone inside the compartment and shut the doors. They climbed onto the cushions alongside Ron, and wands went into everyone’s hands, up and at the ready. Harry was still stuck on the ground, but with most of the students out of the way, he had a clear view of the aisle and into the next compartment, which had been completely vacated.

“What’s going on?” Ron whispered one last time. “Who’s out there?”

A large body hit the window in the compartment opposite theirs. The pane cracked in response to the pressure, but the figure kept moving upward until it was gone. The compartment held its breath. Scratching above had half of them raising their wands to the ceiling, but the sound soon stopped. No sound filtered in from the rest of the train.

Two long minutes passed of complete silence. Hermione adjusted her grip on Harry, and he turned
his hand to wrap his fingers around her wrist.

Somewhere down the train, an explosion of glass precluded a wave of screams. Just as they had started, the screams vanished, some with a crack and others with a whisper, as if they had run out of breaths. A different portion of the train began shouting defensive spells, and the effectiveness was only proved by the continuation of the yelling. Several loud explosions rocked the train, and the screams of students once more rolled down the aisle as compartment after compartment found itself under attack. With so much going on, it was impossible to distinguish one sound from another to decipher what was happening. In their own compartment, each student stared with a fixed single-mindedness at the door, mouths already open to suck in a quick breath and fire a spell.

A piercing pain hit him in the back and he shouted, doubling over and falling to the floor. Glass rained down around him as a claw wrapped around his neck and pulled him towards the window. The remaining glass scraped against him as he dragged against it, feet slowly leaving the ground. One of his hands worked at futilely trying to break the grip around his neck while the other, his wand hand, tried to move into a better position for to get off a good shot. Beside him, he heard Hermione scream something, and a flash of light nearly blinded him as she sent a spell flying towards his attacker. The claw on him immediately released him as the creature dropped away, but before his toes could even touch the floor, a pair of arms grabbed him around the stomach and yanked him through the window.

Harry threw both arms over his head just in time as glass scraped past him. He felt more iron hands grasping at him even as he passed through and the spells flying past him were made evident by their streaks of light. Open air greeted his exposed skin, and before he could get his bearings, he was dropped ungracefully to the ground. He opened his eyes just in time to see Hermione and Ron, who he now realized had been grabbing his legs, landing on top of him.

By the time they had scrambled apart and gotten shakily to their feet, they were surrounded.

Chapter End Notes

Looks like the way to get reviews is to have Hotch yell at people. Can't say I can complain with that!

So this is where things start to go off from canon a bit. Most of the story will be the same, yes, but I wanted to throw some different stuff in because all of you know how the HP and CM stories go. You don't need me to tell them again with new characters added in. That being said, I will hit most of the major plot points for both verses, even if I've got my own plot going on at the same time too. The story's mostly about the relationship between Hotch and Harry, which means yes, Hotch yelling at people and Harry sassing everyone (EVERYONE). The plot divergences were to touch on that relationship more.
Chapter Notes

WARNING: This is the goriest that the story gets, but it's pretty gory. It's basically a chapter of pain. Message me if you want a summary of what happens because you don't want to go through the gore but still want to know what's going on.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"We all had to pay but not for the crimes we were accused of. There were other scores to settle." - Azar Nafisi, Reading Lolita in Tehran

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Hermione opened her eyes, startling awake when she realized she had actually managed to temporarily doze off. Her jerk rattled the chains on her left wrist, and she winced at how loud it sounded to her ears. No one reacted, but she was hardly able to relax. A quick assessment of the situation showed that very little had changed since she had closed her eyes.

On her left, Gregory Goyle was still alive. On her right, the fourth year who had shakily introduced herself as Mara Jenkins was not. Behind her, Draco Malfoy made a sound every once in a while. To the left of that boy, the student who had been sobbing when they had first arrived had gone completely quiet. There was empty space to the left of the quiet boy behind her and Goyle. Past Malfoy and the body of Mara Jenkins, another twenty-five students were still breathing. There had been thirty-three when they arrived.

Harry was kneeling ten meters in front of her, wrists locked together and held over his head by a coil of what looked like barbed wire. Enchantments had been placed on it, and it released blue sparks that stung him whenever he struggled. Above and below the wire, his skin was mottled with burns. His clothes were streaked with blood from the various open cuts and gashes he had received from being dragged through the glass on the train, and fresh wounds bled freely into the grooves in the floor beneath him. Exhaustion had seeped into his bones, and his head hung as he tried to get some rest before his attackers returned.

Hermione kept her head still and tried to look for any of the werewolves. None were within her line of sight, and she bowed her head further to breathe to Goyle, “Can you hear me?” He made a quiet noise. For the most part, the werewolves stood between Harry and the students and talked while someone bled out, then left the cavernous room via a stairway past the last student on Hermione’s right.

“Malfoy,” she hissed. There was a soft sound of surprised acknowledgement. “It’s likely they’re going to take one of the three of us next, after-after the twins. If I can get one of them on the ground, can you try to grab their wand between the two of you?”

“Why do you think the twins are next?” Malfoy whispered.

“They’re going from oldest to youngest.”
A werewolf meandered lazily in their direction, and her heart began to pound. Had she been heard? But he stopped in front of Malfoy, pointing and turning to one of his pack members. “This one?”

The other smirked and shook his head. “We’re saving him for the celebration at the end.”

The werewolf lashed out, and his foot connected with Malfoy’s stomach. The pureblood doubled over with a gasp, and the werewolf kicked him again in the same spot, over and over until Malfoy fell onto his side and curled up against the blows. Hermione turned to the other werewolf across the room, but he was watching, arms crossed and still smirking in satisfaction.

“You think you’re so much better than us,” the werewolf over Malfoy snarled under his breath. “Just because you’re completely human. Well, tell me, who’s completely human, and who’s in charge, huh?!” He reached down and grabbed a handful of Malfoy’s hair and threw him down away from the spot his chains connected to the floor, pulling his wrists and ankles from his body so he could no longer use his arms and legs to protect himself. The werewolf slammed his boot down Malfoy’s ribs, and the blond wheezed in his breath.

The werewolf drew back his foot again, and Hermione lunged forward, latching onto his leg and forcing him to stumble in her direction. Malfoy coughed weakly as the werewolf moved away from him, instead swearing at Hermione. He grabbed her by the throat and lifted her off the ground, amidst the shouts of several of her peers. She tried to suck in her breath, but nothing came. After what seemed like an impossibly long time, her vision finally began to darken with spots, and the voices got softer.

The pressure on her throat left and she pulled in a huge breath, arms coming out in front of her just in time to stop herself from hitting the floor. A rough kick hit her ribs, and a burst of pain spread across her abdomen. She coughed a few times, and looked up at the werewolf once she was able to see again. He had moved past her and was pointing at Goyle, having just said something to the other werewolf. He was entirely ignoring her now, aware she was unable to do anything until she could breathe again.

“Sure. And two more.” The werewolf pointed but Hermione wasn’t in a position to see who was indicated. “Take the keys and let’s go.”

Goyle was released from his manacles and hefted to his feet, and the werewolf held him tightly to prevent him from struggling too much. Further down the line, two more students were pulled up, neither of whom she recognized. All three fought as the werewolves began to drag them away, but none were able to break free or get a solid strike in at one of their attackers. One by one, they vanished up the stairway, shouts still drifting down until they were too far away to be heard. The rest of the werewolves drifted out, with the majority heading straight to the stairs. A few made their way through the student ranks, occasionally grabbing someone and scaring them with a howl or slashing open their arms or backs when they thought they had been passed by completely.

Hermione turned her head to look at Malfoy, who was still on his side and wheezing for breath. His manacles were digging painfully into him, but Hermione was in no good position to help him up. Finally, once she could breathe, she scooted backward, and Malfoy hesitantly used her legs and back as support to get himself up again. He didn’t make eye contact with her, and she felt a pang of annoyance before realizing it was because he was trying to actually pull in air.

“Malfoy, are you okay?” she whispered.

There was no response, just a steady heaving of his shoulders with each intake of oxygen. She frowned in concern.
The three sixth years who had been pulled along had been the first to go. The first student had been so unexpected it had taken several minutes for Hermione to realize it was real. Two werewolves had grabbed her and held her jaw open while a third reached in and clawed at the back of her mouth. They had all dropped her as she fell to the ground, still struggling and hands grasping at her throat as she slowly choked on her own blood. It had taken a surprisingly long time for her to die, while the werewolves calmly stood by and talked about who they wanted to eat for dinner.

Once she was dead, they gathered around her body and tore her apart with their fangs, claws, and knives, ripping at prominent arteries and veins and exposing the bones and organs in her rib cage until the blood flowed freely into the floor’s grooves. The students chained near her had edged away as best as they could, but many of them still had blood on their robes and hands. Ron, only two spots away, had looked at Hermione in horror, understanding of what they were there for beginning to dawn on him. Most of the students were screaming at that point if they hadn’t passed out.

Then a werewolf had approached Harry with a knife and a grin. Hermione was shouting before she realized she had opened her mouth, and she could vaguely make out the present Weasleys doing the same over other raised voices. Harry thrashed, kicking out and flinging his body away from the werewolf, ignoring the sparks that burned his wrists as he did so. The werewolf finally got close enough to grab a hold of his hair and pull his head back to expose his neck. The gesture, an attempt to instill submission, instead distracted the werewolf’s attention from his own lower body, and Harry’s leg went unnoticed until too late.

The werewolf was screaming in pain and backing away the next moment, dragging his own leg with him as he spat curses at Harry. The nearby werewolves paused in confusion, and the shouts from the Hogwarts students died away for a moment as they strained to see what had happened. The werewolf’s knee was at an unnatural angle, and the limpness of the lower half of his leg showed it to be entirely dislocated. Harry paused in his struggling to observe his victory, but immediately straightened again as a different werewolf approached him.

This time, the students goaded him on, jeering at the werewolf and encouraging their classmate. The new werewolf approached more cautiously, but Harry lashed out as soon as he was within reach, and there was a horrific crunching of bone as his heel connected solidly with the side of the werewolf’s ankle. This time, instead of retreating, the werewolf threw itself forward with a snarl, and Harry twisted his body in a futile attempt to get away. Then the werewolf was pulling back, smirking, and there was blood on one claw. The group’s shouts slowly quieted as they stared in bewilderment at the simple, albeit long, gash running across Harry’s arm. Blood dripped down from it to the lines on the ground below.

Hours later, the werewolves ripped apart Cedric Diggory. He had seen what happened to his classmate and fought them with everything he had. One of the werewolves’ eyes had been bleeding, but Diggory had collapsed when two of his lower vertebrae separated under a knife. Without waiting, the werewolves grabbed the last sixth year and tore her throat apart. Two werewolves approached Harry this time, one from the back and one from the front, and held him down while another two cuts were made.

The rocky floor made for an uncomfortable resting place, and Hermione shifted her weight again to try to ease the pressure. Mara’s blood had soaked into her robes and caked onto her legs, cracking painfully every once in a while. The manacle wrapped around her wrists were beginning to scrape away skin, and hunger gnawed at her stomach. No one was in a better position, but Hermione worried about Harry’s arms staying so long above his head. Her friend continued fighting after every murder but he was beginning to weaken without food and water and his injuries were clearly taking a toll. Even while he got no medical treatment, his attackers were continuously repairing themselves whenever they left, and any damage he caused them was gone by the time they returned.
With the sixth years gone, they had started working their way through the fifth years. Few sixth years and no seventh, first, or second years were present, as most of them had apparently apparated or been apparated off the train. Hermione wasn’t sure how far away they could have gotten, but they should have been able to get a message out to the Ministry by this point. At the very least, Hermione had no doubt that Hotch had felt something was dangerously wrong and was trying to get in contact with Harry.

“Stupid!” she hissed to herself. None of the werewolves had remained behind in the cavern, but she still whispered, “Malfoy, can you see any of them?”

“They’re- They’re all gone.” Hermione winced in sympathy. Crabbe had been killed randomly along with another student in the first two hours, and from the way Goyle had been dragged off…

“Can you reach my back pocket?”

“Under your robes?” He sounded appalled and she rolled her eyes, though at least his mind was off his friends for the moment.

“My pocket!” she snapped. “There’s going to be a rectangular-shaped object. Rather small, looks like it could break pretty easily. Can you get it?”

She heard the clinking of the chains as he slowly reached towards her and then partially fell against her. “Sorry,” he muttered.

“Are you okay?” she asked, concerned. There was a long pause, and she added, “Malfoy, you need to tell me now. If something happens to you and help comes but you’ve passed out, you’re going to be in trouble.”

“Feel…dizzy,” he admitted. “And my stomach’s tight.”

“Okay,” she said, filing the information away. “Can you breathe okay?” she asked, remembering his difficulty before.

“Fine,” he replied. “Not easily, but…” He trailed off, moving away from the topic, and shuffled forward a bit. She felt him awkwardly reaching up her robes, and his fingers began to search uncomfortably for the described object.

“Malfoy, really?” a girl hissed.

“You choose now to show your affections?” someone else snapped.

“Shut up! All of you!” They went quiet at Hermione’s admonishment. “Do you feel it?”

She felt the weight leave her back pocket and heard a soft thunk as it hit the ground. “Damn it,” he muttered.

“Is that…?” someone whispered.

“Call 999!”

“What’s going on?”

“How do you know we’re even still in England? Besides, muggle police aren’t going to be able to-“

“Everyone, stay quiet!” Ron hissed.
“Okay, see the circle on one side?” She paused to give him time to find it. “Push it. Did the screen light up?”

“Screen…? There’s more light from the box, if that’s what you mean.”

“Yeah. Touch the screen and move your finger from the left to the right.”

After a moment, someone nearby corrected, “No, Malfoy, hold your finger on the screen while you move it to the right. The screen senses your finger there and reacts to it, but you’ve got to be touching it.”

“Okay.”

“Are you looking at ten numbers?”

“Yeah.”

“Press eight-zero-one-five.”

“I’m looking at something else now. What the hell is this?”

“A phone. Muggle technology.”

There was a disdainful snort, but for once, it didn’t sound like his heart was really in it this time. “And how exactly is that going to help?”

“Just work with me, all right? It’s not like we’re getting out of here the magical way.”

“The screen went black.”

“Repeat what you did earlier.”

“…Okay.”

“Bottom left hand corner, there’s a small green box that says ‘Phone.’ Touch it.” He hummed. “What does it say at the top?”

“All contacts.”

“At the bottom, there should be something that says ‘Recents.’ Touch that.” After a moment, she said, “Look for the name Penelope Garcia.”

“…I don’t see it.”

Hermione groaned. “I never called any of them on this phone. We always used the laptop…”

“The what?”

“Malfoy!” Fred loudly whispered. Everyone went completely silent so the Slytherin could hear him. “Touch the thing that says ‘Keypad.’ The screen should have all the numbers again. See it?”

“Yeah.”

“Type in this number.” Fred slowly read off a ten-digit number, and then repeated it to make sure Malfoy had it in correctly. “Okay, touch the green circle.”

“The green circle turned red and it says it’s calling that string of numbers and there are a bunch of
circles on the screen.”

“That’s good,” Hermione said. “See the one that says ‘Speaker?’”

“Touch it?”

“Yeah.”

A buzzing sound filled the room, and several students let out relieved breaths. “What’s happening?” Malfoy asked, reading the thoughts of most of the minds in the room. “What is this?”

“Muggles use phones to talk to people across long distances,” Hermione explained. “The phone’s connecting to-“

“Garcia.” Someone was weeping in relief. Hermione smiled for the first time in what felt like years, and she heard Malfoy jump in surprise at the sudden voice. “Hermione? Sweetie, can you hear me?” In a quieter voice, as if she had moved away from the phone, she said, “JJ, I’ve got Hermione!”

“Garcia!” Hermione exclaimed as loudly as she dared. “Can you track us?”

“Oh, honey. I’m way ahead of you.”

“Why is she in the box?” Malfoy hissed.

“She’s in America,” Hermione replied. “The phone on her end is sending her voice to this phone so we can hear it.”

“Please tell me he didn’t just ask if I’m in the box.”

“Just remember how the twins reacted, all right?”

“I’m going to bundle all of you into modern technology and never let you go. Okay, tell me about what’s going on.”

“There are twenty-three of us left,” Hermione said. “A lot of injuries. Harry’s badly off.”

“I’m fine!”

“You’re bleeding all over the place!”

“Hey, stay with me for a sec. Do you know where you’re at?”

Hermione scanned the students, but all of them shook their heads. “No idea. I think we’re underground, though. There are some stairs leading up, and we’re in a big cavern with a high ceiling. We were taken by werewolves.”

“How many?”

“We’ve seen about twelve.”

“Can you describe your situation?”

“We’re all tied to the floor. Harry’s away from the rest of us. …Warn them to watch their footing. There’s… There’s a lot of blood.” She swallowed. “They’ve killed nine and… they just took two more away.”
“Did they say why they’re doing this?”

“No-“

“It’s a revival ceremony!” someone whispered loudly. Hermione stopped and leaned back to see who it was. Daphne Greengrass caught her eye and continued. “They’re trying to bring someone back to life. It’s usually done by shedding the blood of enemies, but it can also be the blood relations to their enemies. That’s why they took us. A lot of us have family who were enemies.”

“Who are they trying to…” Garcia trailed off. “Voldemort?”

She grimaced. “Probably. They have to kill twenty-one to complete the ritual, and one of the worst enemies needs to be bled after every sacrifice.” She glanced at Harry. “The rest of us are just food. They had to take Vincent and Tracey away or the blood would have interfered when they…”

“But most of the Slytherins were allies of Voldemort,” Hermione said. It was possible the two who had just been grabbed were safe.

“The werewolves never really got along with most of our families because the purebloods despised the werewolves,” Malfoy answered behind her, crushing the traces of hope Hermione had for the two students. His voice was shaking. “They’ll just say we got in the way or something to explain why they killed us.”

“Garcia, did you get all of that?”

“Yeah. I’ve got your location, too. They’re heading your way. Just hang on, all right?”

“How long do you think it’s going to take?” Hermione asked hesitantly.

There was a long pause. “It depends on if any wards were set up,” Garcia finally responded. “They’re still approaching and haven’t had any resistance yet. Keep this line up so I can send them more information, okay?”

Hermione nodded. “We will.”

“Hey,” Neville whispered. “Why do they have claws and fangs? I thought that was just muggle superstition.”

“There are some werewolves, especially the ones under Greyback, who think werewolves are superior,” Daphne said. “Some of them take certain potions throughout the month to ensure that they keep some of their werewolf traits, including heightened senses and claws. I assume they’re part of this group, but I’m not really sure since I’ve never personally seen the effects.”

Everyone became silent again, although they had trouble hiding their new energy. Many sat up with straighter backs and were running their eyes over the room as if looking for hidden trapdoors. Hermione started gesturing at them nonverbally to look more submissive again before the werewolves returned to find a revived group of students.

“Who are they taking next?” someone whispered.

“Us,” George said. “And whoever’s next oldest.”

“No,” Ginny whispered.

“Just hang on,” came faintly from the phone. Hermione spared a glance behind her. Malfoy was
clutching the phone like a lifeline, head bowed over it and eyes squeezed shut. “We’re coming, we’re coming…”

Less than five minutes later, the werewolves descended into the cavern once again. The two Slytherins weren’t with them and there was blood on their grinning maws. Movement behind Hermione suggested Malfoy was hiding the phone, and she just hoped he didn’t accidentally hit the end button. One of the werewolves walked straight to Harry and tilted his head. He’d been the first victim to Harry’s kicks, and had gone out of his way to make sure he was the one who added another wound to Harry’s growing collection. He lashed out with one foot and caught Harry in the ribs. Harry made a muffled sound but otherwise didn’t respond. The werewolf laughed and stepped closer to grab his hair again.

“What would you do if I bit you?” he wondered absently. After a moment, the idea took root, and he turned with a grin to his nearest companions. “Hey, he doesn’t have to be entirely human for it to work, right?” His fellow pack member exposed a line of yellowing teeth in agreement, and the werewolf turned back to Harry. “Haven’t you ever wanted to know what another human tasted like?”

Harry wrenched his body around, swinging his elbows until the wire wrapped once around the werewolf’s wrists. Strands of his hair came out in the claw that had been holding his head as the werewolf tried to yank himself away, but Harry pulled him closer by the wire and kept wrapping it around despite the burns it gave him. The werewolf began snarling at him and lunged forward, jaws snapping to bite him. Harry leaned into the gesture and punched him in the neck. When he doubled over, Harry pulled him down further, closer to his own height, and threw his body weight on the werewolf’s shoulder and neck while he grabbed the upper arm and elbow with his bound hands and threw the humerus upward and out of place. The werewolf howled in pain, too distracted to consider biting him again, and Harry quickly unwrapped him from the wire and kicked him away.

“Give it a rest,” one of the other pack members said, annoyed. “If you accidentally kill him, we’ll have to start all over.”

The cavern went mostly quiet with the exception of a group of the werewolves who were talking cheerfully in one of the corners. Every so often, someone’s stifled sob broke through the quiet before they hurriedly covered up anymore sounds. Hermione closed her eyes, wishing she could fade off into unconsciousness again. She had been awake for hours and her body was beginning to crash after the adrenaline rush.

Just as it seemed that she might get some rest, someone screamed, setting off a chain reaction around him. Her eyes flew open and she jolted into alertness. Down the row closer to Ron, a werewolf was laughing from where he was crouched over a student, claw sunk deep into the boy’s forearm. He shook his hand, tearing muscle and skin and eliciting another pained shriek. The students around him began shouting at the werewolf, demanding and begging for him to let go. The multitude of voices rose in volume until their echo in the cavern was all Hermione could hear, but still the werewolf held on, grinning all throughout.

“Marco, if you tear it open, the blood will ruin the ceremony,” another werewolf chided.

Marco leaned back and groaned in annoyance but, ever so slowly, uncurled his claw from the boy’s - Ernie’s, Ernie Macmillan’s - arm. As soon as he was free, Ernie yanked his arm back and curled his body around it, whimpering. The students closest to him moved in, trying to see if there was anything they could do to stem the blood flow. After a few minutes, someone managed to rip off a piece of their robes to wrap the wound, but it was quickly bleeding through. Two pairs of hands clasped the forearm while the girl behind him stroked his head and muttered soothing words.
Hermione glanced at Harry to see how he was doing, and closed her eyes and grimaced when she saw he was entirely slumped over.

Hermione felt Malfoy’s head drop onto her back and she almost fell over in surprise. His hand against her side steadied her, and she quickly regained her previous form. After a few moments, she barely heard him whisper, “He’s alive but his arm was just shredded. It’s bleeding pretty badly.” Hermione kept an eye on the werewolves as subtly as she could, ensuring none of them were looking their way and would be able to see Malfoy’s lips moving or his hands clutching the phone. Her back hid him pretty well, and she doubted they would think he was using her for anything but comfort.

His warmth left her, and Garcia’s reply was only heard by Malfoy. She wondered if Malfoy knew when the team was going to be arriving, or if Garcia had managed to finally give him an answer on the time at all. She wasn’t even sure how long it had been since the train was attacked, though it felt like it had been days at least. In their situation, she wasn’t sure how long their bodies would last before malnutrition became a serious issue.

Some of the students looked like they didn’t have the energy to go on, and she had no idea how any of them could attempt to escape when the opportunity presented itself. Harry was the only one making a visible effort to fight, as he could see when the next attack was coming, but it was obvious even from where Hermione was that he was beginning to shake from fatigue. To make matters worse, it was starting to get cold and most of them had ripped robes that felt like they were letting out more warmth than they kept in.

“It’s time,” the werewolf who had chided Marco said, smoothly rising. “We’ve got four this time.” He surveyed the group for a moment. “Grab the redheads.”

“Hey!” Fred shouted as one grabbed Ginny, unlocking her manacles to hoist her to her feet. “Leave her alone!”

The werewolf sneered at him. “What, did you think we were going to let any of you go? What made you believe she had a chance? Or maybe you just wanted to die as a martyr, pretend your death means something.” He wrapped a claw around Ginny’s neck and tilted it to the side to expose the jugular. “Maybe we should kill the rest of your family before you, just so you can see what will happen.” He grinned. “You’re a Gryffindor, aren’t you? Known for bravery.” His grin twisted. “Bravery doesn’t help you when you can’t do anything.”

Fred threw himself in the direction of the werewolf, held back by the chains. George and Ron were both up as far as they could go, shouting and screaming obscenities. Not to be outdone, Ginny thrashed, bringing both hands up to stop the claw from doing her any damage while she kicked and elbowed the creature holding her. The werewolves laughed, and the one holding Ginny began to drag her away from the rest of the students, sending a violent kick in Neville’s direction when he realized the boy had crawled a bit closer.

“Aw, acting like a brave savior, aren’t you?” another crooned nearby. “Maybe you’ll be lucky and you’ll end up with your parents after all this, hm? That’s technically surviving.” Neville paled but refused to look away. The werewolf laughed again.

Ginny was shoved to the ground and the werewolf knelt next to her, grabbing her arm and raising it to his mouth. She lashed out with one foot, successfully pushing him back a step and close enough to the students for her purposes. Neville, still on the watch, lunged forward and grabbed the werewolf around the knees before hauling both of them backwards. None of their other captors made a move to help, watching the actions of the students in amusement. One pointed something out to his neighbor and they both snickered.
The werewolf dropped with a surprised yelp on top of Neville, and the boy struggled out from underneath as quickly as he could. Yellow eyes met his a moment later, and he froze in place. The werewolf reached out and grabbed his shirt, yanking him closer, but Ginny was on him in a second, fists flying and feet stomping on whatever they could reach. Another member of the pack rolled his eyes and got to his feet. He casually strolled over and stuck his arm out, almost grazing Ginny’s back as she struggled to keep Neville from getting mauled.

Someone shouted a warning and Ginny jerked to the side before she was grabbed. The lapse in her concentration on the fight cost her a swipe to the leg, and she fell with a scream as the werewolf’s claw cut into her calf. Neville was thrashing, still chained and trying to fight off the initial werewolf, while Ginny began to crawl backwards, unable to stand as the newcomer slowly followed her retreat. The students around them rioted, grabbing at the werewolves and holding onto them long enough to throw off their balance and give Ginny and Neville a few more moments to fight. Past them, the rest were yelling at the top of their lungs, giving advice and encouragement alike.

Behind Hermione, she heard Malfoy raise his voice slightly and saw out of the corner of his eye that he had raised the phone directly to his mouth so Garcia could hear him over the shouts and screams. She went up as far as she could go, making it look like she was straining against her bonds solely to get at the werewolves but ensured her body entirely blocked off Malfoy from the view of the rest of the werewolves while he relayed information to the FBI tech. He shrank back a little, hiding behind her as best as he could and keeping an eye on the nearest werewolves in case they happened to turn and look his way. Some of the students near them saw what they were doing and did their best to mimic Hermione, rising up on their knees or crouching as high as they could with their bonds to cover Malfoy.

A loud snarl echoed through the chamber, and was quickly replied to in the same manner. The werewolves among the students snapped their heads around to find the source of the sound, and the students continued their efforts to push and shove the creatures away from them. They made no gains and the werewolves stood motionless, mouths beginning to twist aggressively at the new appearance. Out of the darkness of the stairwell, someone stalked out, posture curled defensively and gait offensive. She came into view spitting curses and insults so rapidly and with such vitriol that Hermione had trouble understanding her, but that didn’t stop her from recognizing the voice.

“-hairless, mangy dogs…filthy inbreeds…can smell you from here…pieces of maggot-infested shit…”

Before they could stop her, she was in the face of one of the werewolves, leaning towards him and forcing him back. The werewolf reached out before he realized what he was doing, putting an arm between them to keep the distance. She smacked his arm away immediately and growled.

“Who are you?” he demanded.

“You’re a waste of space, you know that?” she shot at him immediately. “Who the hell do you think I am?” When the werewolf paused, she pushed forward immediately. “Never mind that, who the hell do you think you are? Grabbing them? Half their parents are running around like chickens with their heads cut off, but the other half are grabbing the nearest weapon of violent murder and baying for your blood! If you’d been even a little bit more discrete, you’d have enough time to actually complete the ritual! We might be able to salvage this and take a few of the less prominent ones with us, but the rest are going to have to stay here.”

“Let’s just kill them,” Marcus said.

“Are you insane? You’ll never be able to stay still long enough to complete this with everyone after you. Between Bones and Malfoy alone, half of the Ministry is out looking for this place! No matter
how stupid they are, they’re bound to find you by sheer number alone. Now come on, let’s go!”

The werewolf she had initially approached crossed his arms and shrugged, but the movement was too jerky. “We’ll kill their parents as quickly as we’ll kill them. It’s of no concern.”

She sneered at him. “Oh, aren’t you cute. Just like a little Chihuahua.” She leaned closer again. “But I can smell your fear on you, and I don’t have time for your little tantrum. Do you want the Dark Lord back or not? Let’s move, let’s get out of here before they come! We can kill everyone later!”

One near the stairwell sniffed sharply, head whipping up towards the top of the stairs. A wild grin crossed his face. “Ooh, it seems you didn’t come alone.” She eyed him without turning. “Someone followed you.”

She paused for only a fraction of a second. “Little brat thought I was joking when I said I was a werewolf,” she gloated. “I thought I’d show him a good time.” Despite the mood of the situation, a low rumble of laughter swept through the group. “Come on down!” she shouted. “Everyone’s eager to meet you!”

After a few seconds, another figure appeared, this one almost the exact opposite of his predecessor in appearance and attitude. The nearest werewolf asked with a mocking grin, “Who’re you, kid?”

He remained silent. The werewolf reached out to grab hold of his shoulder, and the gesture inadvertently pulled him into the range of anyone on top of the stairwell.

A shot echoed through the chamber, and the werewolves recoiled immediately, sensitive hearing pushing them to slap their hands over their ears even as they whirled towards the sound. The nearest ones began lunging forward, and the furthest ones grabbed students to hold in front of themselves as more people began slipping down the stairway. Several more retorts followed up the first one, and the werewolves closest to the entrance began dropping. The woman who had entered before yanked out her own gun from her back, pistol-whipping the werewolf directly in front of her and firing at the next closest. The man who had followed her down dropped into a crouch to clear the area of fire for those behind him, and three werewolves who got too close to him were immediately shot, either by him or those backing him up.

The students moved out of the way as best as they could, falling to the ground and moving away, but Ginny and Neville were grabbed by the two near them and held up. One of the figures at the entrance fired a gun centimeters away from the ear of an approaching werewolf, making her howl in pain as it ruptured the ear drum, and the one holding Neville dropped him and fell back. Neville grabbed Ginny and the two of them managed to wrest her away from the final werewolf, exposing him long enough for one of the figures to get a clear shot.

And moments after it started, it was over.

“Clear,” a quiet voice said.

“That’s all of them,” Hermione confirmed.

The figures in and near the stairway hurried out of the shadows and moved towards the students. Gideon grabbed the keys and began unlocking the manacles as fast as he could while the others behind him started checking students over for injuries. Blackwolf moved ahead of him, opening the manacles with magic.

Hotch went straight to Harry and tried to get a response out of him as he crouched down. When he realized he was unconscious, he set about trying to get the wire dislodged from Harry’s wrists, but
quickly stopped when he saw his efforts were causing the wires to spark and hurt his son. He tore two strips of clothing off a nearby body and wrapped the longer one around Harry’s wrists, under the wire, and the other around his own hands, and then renewed his efforts to get the wire off. The sparks increased in intensity the harder he tried, and Hermione could see from his expression that they were getting through the fabric. Hotch pulled the wire on opposite sides, forcing it to stretch away from Harry’s wrists and protecting Harry from more pain.

Hotch gritted his teeth together, yanking even harder on the wire to get it over the ridges of Harry’s hands. Hermione was just about to call out for him to stop when the wire slipped off and Harry collapsed onto Hotch, who quickly dropped the wire and caught him. He did his best to shuffle his son into a better position, but his hands weren’t working properly.

Blackwolf stepped forward, inadvertently blocking her view, and tapped his wand against her manacles. Hermione sighed in relief as they finally clicked open, and she staggered shakily to her feet. The Apache immediately raised a hand to slow her ascent.

“Careful,” he said even as she wavered to the side. Around her, students were beginning to embrace each other and, after taking a moment to collect themselves, properly investigate wounds. “Sit back down if you need to.”

The Weasleys had all clustered together around Ginny, sheltering her with their bodies. One of the twins was shaking, but Hermione wasn’t sure if it was with relief, exhaustion or tears. She supposed it was likely a combination. Half the students were searching out friends and familiar faces. The rest just reached out to whoever was nearest, offering and taking support as they could. Distantly, a small part of her recognized with astonishment that two Slytherins were holding onto a Hufflepuff, who was crying so hard over a body that she was unable to stand on her own. Both green-and-silver clad students had their arms wrapped around her and were stroking her hair and back, trying to comfort her as best as they could while she stood in the blood of her friend.

Hermione turned away from them to face those closer to her side of the cavern, and saw Draco standing behind her, arms limp at his sides and staring across the room with a lost expression. He was favoring part of his body. When he saw her watching him, he quickly turned his gaze away.

“Malfoy,” she said quietly, and he glanced up at her. Her mouth opened and closed a few times, but no words of comfort were going to eradicate what had happened.

A gasp of pain from behind her made her turn sharply, and she spotted Hotchner sitting on the ground with Harry halfway on top of him. The teenager was starting to stir, grimacing for a moment as he shifted slightly. Hotch’s arms were holding him in place, but his hands were curled and useless, and Hermione’s suspicion about the damage to his hands was all but confirmed. She spared a moment to examine Malfoy, to see if he needed any help, but Malfoy just looked back at her uncertainly before hesitantly starting for Harry and Hotch.

The two hurried over to them as best as they could, and Hermione almost fell down instead of slowly lowering herself. Hotch automatically reached out to steady her, and both hissed in pain. He eyed her for where her injury was – her ribs – while she took a look at his hands. The wires had seared through the fabric and into his skin, and she could see a few blisters had already grown and popped. The skin was a dark red, and- no, that wasn’t skin. She turned away, pressing her lips together, and looked at Harry instead. She peeled back the robe material to take a peek in case it needed immediate attention.

His wrists were torn from the barbs, and what hadn’t been scraped off was worse than Hotch’s hands. Before she could get a better look, she was gently elbowed out of the way and a wand moved
over the wound. She recognized the stasis spell as Malfoy cast it and frowned in confusion.

“Can’t do anything about it here but it won’t get worse,” he muttered. “In case we don’t get help for a while.” He turned to Hotch and then gingerly held out his hand towards Hotch. After a moment, the agent responded by extending his own, fingers still curled. “Er, I’m going to need to see your palm,” Malfoy carefully said. “I don’t know how well this is going to work if I can’t specify the area well.”

Hotch paused before admitting, “I can’t open my hand.”

Malfoy stared at him intensely, frowning. Then his gaze flickered down to Harry, and Hermione realized he was wondering why Hotch had gone to such lengths to get the wires off. Something clicked in his mind, and understanding dawned over his face.

“Malfoy,” she said urgently.

“I’m not saying anything,” he quickly responded, making eye contact with both of them in turn. “I get it.” He turned back to Hotch’s hands. “But I don’t know how soon we’re going to be able to get out of here and get this seen to, but if it’s not within the next few minutes this needs a stasis charm. So we either need to leave now or I need to open your hand.”

Harry’s father nodded, with more strength than Hermione would have imagined possible with his hands in that condition. She wondered how much of it was a front for them, but didn’t linger on the thought too long. His confidence was reassuring. “Go ahead and cast it,” he said. “Even if we all get out in the next five minutes, I won’t be treated immediately.”

Malfoy reached out to take his hand but moved too quickly and gasped horribly in pain. His arms clutched at his upper ribs and he hunched over in a protective gesture. One hand went up to his mouth as he began coughing.

“Malfoy?” Hermione asked, scanning him for signs of an obvious problem.

He moved his hand away from his mouth and stared at it even as a few more shaky coughs escaped him. Hermione and Hotch both caught sight of the blood.

Hotch whipped around towards the rest of the cavern. “Can you apparate everyone directly out of here?” Hotch called out urgently to Blackwolf.

“No, that’s too dangerous. I’ll create a portkey to get us back to…” Blackwolf trailed off. “I doubt Quantico has the facilities for this.”

Harry groaned, and the three around him immediately redirected their attention. “Harry?” Hotch asked quietly. “Harry, can you hear me?” Harry’s eyes fluttered open and he had to blink a few times before he could properly focus. He gave a shaky nod. When Hotch realized his son’s son state wasn’t deteriorating, he glanced at Malfoy again to make sure the boy wasn’t just going to keel over. “Steady breaths,” he said. “Keep them shallow. I’m worried you punctured a lung.”

“It’s going to have to work. There’s nowhere safer, not until we know for sure how they managed to stop the train.” Gideon scanned the group as he finished unlocking the last student. “Who’s on the phone with Garcia?”

“Malfoy, that’s you,” Hermione said when she heard no response.

“I’m holding the phone, not on it,” the teen replied, genuinely puzzled. A few short coughs escaped him, aroused from the air movement.
“It’s an expression to mean you’re using the connection between the phones.”

“Oh,” he muttered as he pulled out the phone.

“*Honey, are you okay?”* she asked over the line.

“I’m fine,” Malfoy said in an odd tone, bewildered that someone he’d never met was asking after him.

“Ask the medical staff if they can accommodate twenty-five, some seriously injured,” Gideon asked.

“If not, the hospital isn’t that far away,” Reid pointed out. Both arms were wrapped around a Ravenclaw and two Hufflepuffs. One was quietly crying.

“They said they’re clearing a space right now and they’re ready to start treating everyone.”

“Get close,” Blackwolf called, and the agents began helping students to their feet and to stumble closer until they were all in a large group. He reached out and inquiringly touched a student’s golden and red scarf. They nodded and he unraveled it from their neck. “Hotch, can you move?”

Hotch eyed their group of four, all of whom bore severe injuries. “No.”

Blackwolf nodded and walked over to them, tapping the scarf with his wand and muttering something. “Everyone, grab hold,” he said, extending it so the four on the ground could easily grasp it. “It will activate in just a few seconds.” Reid, Elle, and the Slytherin boy the two were carrying between them were the last to touch it, and then the cavern was empty but for the bodies.

Chapter End Notes

All right, I'll fess up. I killed Goyle and Crabbe because I didn't want to deal with them. I suppose this chapter is for those of you wondering why nothing major had really happened yet and why things were going so slowly - I wanted to give them a break before things went down in this chapter.

By the way, shout out to my beta, who I'll message at random times of the day and always get a message back without fail. I sent a message at midnight or something once and still got a message back before I even had time to leave the screen.
"Everyone is down on pain, because they forget something important about it: Pain is for the living. Only the dead don’t feel it. Pain is a part of life. Sometimes it’s a big part, and sometimes it isn’t, but either way, it’s a part of the big puzzle, the deep music, the great game. Pain does two things: It teaches you, tells you that you're alive. Then it passes away and leaves you changed. It leaves you wiser, sometimes. Sometimes it leaves you stronger. Either way, pain leaves its mark, and everything important that will ever happen to you in life is going to involve it in one degree or another." – Jim Butcher, *White Night*

The magical-born students reacted as expected to the muggle technology, and it took considerable juggling by the BAU to explain to the FBI’s medical staff that the children were indeed serious and not mocking them. The muggleborns did their best to act as medians when a BAU agent wasn’t available, explaining to the confused student what the nurse or doctor was expecting them to do. To a degree, however, the muggleborns were just as confused and the BAU found themselves working almost nonstop in the infirmary.

Blackwolf vanished immediately to tell Strauss the team was going to have to hold off on any cases for at least a week, if not more, to deal with the calamity. His next stop was to bring in magical physicians, which required a complex maneuvering to keep enough non-magical medical aid working on the students while he cycled out a few at a time to indoctrinate them into the know about the wizarding community. Once every medical technician working on the students was informed and sworn into secrecy, the magical physicians were able to fully move in and begin helping with treatments. They began carting in massive amounts of dittany and silver to treat the wounds, and the magical-born students began to calm a bit more as they saw familiar treatments.

It took hours to fully treat everyone, and even then, some nurses remained on full alert for some severe cases. Ernie, whose arm muscles had nearly been completely ripped open, for instance, had required serious medical attention, and the physicians had quickly come to the conclusion that they were going to have to combine magical and nonmagical treatments if he was ever going to use his hand again. Even now, they were unclear if he would be able to move anything past the elbow. The rest of the students stayed awake long enough to be treated and follow any instructions asked of them, then crashed as soon as their heads hit their pillows. Almost eight hours after everyone had been brought in, someone dimmed the lights, signaling the end of the immediate crisis.

Hotch was seated next to Harry, who had shown no signs of waking yet. As soon as they had arrived, he had been knocked out with medication due to the severity of his wounds, since the nurses had been worried about him accidentally making them worse. Apart from all of the damage the werewolves had directly done to him, including a few broken bones and multiple lacerations, he had severe burns on his wrists, which had a host of complications. The burns had cut through to his veins, but by their very nature had also cauterized them closed, which prevented Harry from bleeding to death. However, he had the same problem as the student who was missing a chunk of their forearm, and the doctors were unsure if he would be able to use his hands again.

Someone was walking up behind him as quietly as they could, conscientious of the sleeping kids. By
this point, almost all of them had crashed from their adrenaline high, and some were in medicated
sleep. Hotch didn’t look at Garcia as she came to a stop by Harry’s bed and gasped aloud.

“Oh my God,” she whispered. “Oh my God…”

He gestured for her to take the chair that had been left by the bed behind him. Unfortunately, the arm
motion brought his hand into view, and both of her hands flew up to flutter around it, unsure if they
should touch or not. One hand held a laptop bag that swung and almost hit Hotch’s chair. “It’s fine,”
he sighed. “They’re not that bad.”

“They…?” Her gaze went to his other hand. “Not that bad in comparison or really not that bad?”

He didn’t respond.

“What happened?”

He quietly explained the wires that had bound Harry’s wrists, and her eyes flickered between his
hands and Harry’s wrists. She slowly took the proffered seat and held tightly onto her laptop bag to
try to stop her own hands from shaking as she heard the story. “How bad are they? Yours and his.”

“I’ve got second degree, and he has both second and third degree. He’s also lost a lot of blood from
lacerations, and they broke a few of his ribs and fractured his scapula and radius.” He watched her
carefully. “Garcia, I know… I know you want to be here, but maybe this isn’t…”

She shook her head firmly, biting her lip. “No, I… Well, I wanted to come for Harry, but I also…
Who was the boy I was talking to?”

He pointed to the bed across from Harry’s. “Draco Malfoy.”

“He didn’t sound okay at the end.”

“No. One of the werewolves had beaten him, and it caused severe internal bleeding and gave him
several broken ribs. While he was sitting down, he didn’t notice there was much of a problem
besides the swelling, but when he got up, his ribs moved and tore into his liver and stomach. The
portkey made it worse and he was practically unconscious as soon as we landed. They stabilized him
and he’s going to be fine.”

She nodded. “I’m going to go sit with him,” she said. “I mean, no one else really has someone,
and…”

Hotch waved her off. “No, I understand.”

She took her bag and moved across the aisle. Hotch watched her discretely out of the corner of his
eye as she gently took one of Draco’s hands and began murmuring softly to the unconscious boy.

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The first thing Draco saw was a plump woman tapping her fingers against some sort of muggle
invention in her lap. It was sort of like two sides of a metal box, except it had a screen like
Hermione’s phone on one of them and some sort of…thing on the other side. He stared in wonder,
watching her fingers move and somehow control the screen. Her expression was intent, and her
scowl promised great distress for something…or someone.

A small hitch in his breath as pain hit him caught her attention and she looked over. Her face cleared
immediately and she closed the not-box-thing, then stuffed it into a bag. “Do you feel okay?” she
asked. American, like the others. “Any pain?”

“A little,” he muttered.

She nodded and made to stand. “I’ll go get one of the nurses,” she said.

“No, it’s... It’s fine.”

She frowned. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah.” He felt too numb already, like the recent events hadn’t happened. “I’m okay.”

She settled back down and watched him for a moment before she brightened. “Oh! I’m Penelope Garcia. We spoke over the phone before.” She made to extend a hand, looked at his condition, and then retracted the gesture.

Her words took a moment to process, but he found himself perking up as soon as he realized what she meant. “Really?” he asked, surprised. “I, well… Oh, my manners. I’m Draco Malfoy.”

She laughed quietly at him. “I think we can excuse your manners for a little bit. Malfoy, huh? So you’re the one who was involved with Buckbeak.”

He blinked in surprise, the unexpected comment entirely breaking him out of his half-awake, distant state. “What? Yeah. I mean...yeah. But, how could you possibly know that?”

She smirked at him. “Between Reid and me, we know everything. You can hide nothing from me.” She paused. “Well, so long as I’ve got my computers.”

“What?”

A grin broke over her face. “I promised an introduction to technology, and a promise shall be kept. Watch me, padawan, and I shall teach you how to make all the information available to you do your bidding.”

She whipped out the strange contraption again and opened it. Draco looked around for a moment, and recognized that they were in an infirmary. The rest of the students were spread out, mostly asleep. Across from him, the agent from before was sitting next to Potter’s bed, hands bandaged. He was watching the interaction between Garcia and Draco, a little worried, but evidently decided that she would do more good than harm and turned back to Potter.

Seriously, he would never have pegged Potter for the subtle type. How the hell had he kept his lineage secret for so long?

Wait, not Potter in anything but name. After all, that man was definitely not James Potter.

He left that train of thought for another time and focused his attention on Garcia. “Okay, lesson one,” she began. Pointing to different parts of the contraption, she said, “Screen, keyboard, power button, mouse, left click, right click. And if you look at the screen, access to the FBI database and all the wonders that come with it. This, my dear little friend, is how technology and I make annoying people our bitches. Want to know how to blackmail someone in under five minutes?”

Her enthusiasm proved infectious, and Draco did his best to focus on what she was saying and try to understand it. Without any sort of background, it was incredibly difficult, but her enthusiasm made it surprisingly easy to learn, and he was quickly pulled in. He focused on her voice and pushed everything else out.
Perhaps, for a little while, he could just learn about a laptop and forget his broken bones and his shattered life.

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Harry woke up sometime later, but kept his eyes shut as he slowly made his way back to full awareness. A thumb was slowly stroking the back of his hand and fingers overlaid his. A palm rested warmly near his elbow. The faint whir of machines provided a constant, low background noise, and heavy breathing came from nearby beds. Every once in a while, someone would walk past his bed, either to check on someone else or leave the ward.

His eyes finally slid open, almost of their own accord. Directly across from him, he saw Malfoy’s blond hair splayed around his face. Even in sleep, he looked disturbed, and his face was twisted in a grimace. Harry couldn’t stop the memory of Crabbe’s gruesome murder arising in his mind, and he felt his own mouth turn in sympathy. He had almost faced the same when Ron and the rest of his siblings were grabbed, but Malfoy had lost both friends.

“Harry?” came a quiet murmur. He turned his head to the side, blinking sluggishly until his father came into view. “Hey…” he greeted, a small smile appearing. His eyes betrayed his worry.

“Really didn’t go looking for it this time…”

“I know.” The thumb never stopped its movements. A bit softer, he repeated, “I know.”

Harry took a deep breath and sat up a bit more. The infirmary looked much the same as it had when he went to sleep shortly after entering, and the lights were still turned down with most of its occupants out cold. A few other students were awake, and Harry saw that a BAU member was sitting with each of them, quietly talking. No one was hooked up to any machines, surprisingly.

Hotch read the thought on his face. “The magical doctors brought some pretty strong medicine,” he explained. “No one needed serious treatment past what the doctors could give them.” After a pause, he added, “Everyone’s going to be okay.”

“Physically,” Harry muttered.

Hotch shrugged slightly. “I think you’d be surprised to find how resilient your classmates are. I always find myself shocked by the people we rescue.”

“What happened?” When Hotch looked concerned, he quickly added, “After we left, I mean.”

“We don’t know how they stopped the train, and we’re worried others were involved. Until we know for sure, we’re going to try and keep you all hidden. However, we also wanted to assuage everyone’s parents. We asked members of the Australian, Chinese, Ethiopian, Russian, and Peruvian magical communities all to come forward with America and say that they knew the children had been taken back and were safe. If anyone else was involved, they won’t know where to look for you with so many countries announcing the information.” He smiled slightly. “Ron told me you dislocated someone’s knee and broke someone else’s leg.”

Despite himself, Harry felt the corners of his mouth tilt up.

“How are you feeling?”

“Tired. A little queasy. Everything hurts,” he admitted. “My head… It keeps aching. It did that whenever Voldemort was near before, but it feels…different this time.”
Hotch looked alarmed at the last bit. “You’re sure?” There was a nod in reply. “Do you think he’s nearby now?”

Harry quickly shook his head. “No, but…something’s wrong.”

The unease remained on his father’s face, but he said, “We’ll look into it.” Trying to change the topic to prevent him for lingering on it for too long, he said, “As for the rest, they said you might feel a bit sick from all the blood-replenishing potions they gave you. They were a bit worried about how much you lost, and your arms had damage from poor circulation. Can you move your fingers for me?”

It took him almost a full minute to open his hand. Hotch was unexpectedly satisfied to see the movement, and Harry wondered if the damage had been more severe than he had originally believed.

“Do you think you can stand?”

“Yeah. My legs feel fine.”

He regretted saying that the moment he tried to get up. Hotch quickly ushered him back into bed.

The student on the bed to his left started to stir. Quieter, he asked, “How are we explaining this?”

Hotch sighed and grimaced. “Once everyone who was previously involved is awake, I wanted to get you all together and ask. I think we might have to tell the students who are here and ask them to keep it quiet, though. Nothing else really makes sense. What do you think?”

For a moment, Harry just stared at him, mind rerouting. Hotch had asked him for his opinion before, but it still managed to throw him for a loop after the Dursleys. “I think we need to see how everyone reacts to the muggle world when they haven’t just been rescued,” he said. “If there’s still a lot of prejudice, I don’t think they would keep quiet about what we tell them.”

Hotch took the answer with a nod. “Makes sense.”

“They took our wands…”

“Before we went down the stairs, we found everyone’s wands in a room above the cavern, but we don’t know whose is which. We’re going to start passing them out once everyone’s awake enough to recognize theirs.”

Harry tried to suppress a yawn, but his father immediately caught it. “Get some more rest. You had a trying experience.”

“Wait—” Harry started, even though Hotch made no move to go anywhere. “How— How long were we gone?”

Hotch paused before saying, “The train should have arrived five days ago. You’ve been here for almost a full day.”

“And— And everyone who died… Are they…”

“We went back and collected their bodies to send them back home.” He reached out and gently laid a hand on the side of Harry’s head. “Go to sleep. Everything’s taken care of.” Harry nodded slightly and let his eyes slide shut.
Reid moved as quietly as he could around the infirmary, lightly touching shoulders and using a soft voice to awaken a quarter of them. Most woke instantly, having been unable to get proper sleep in the extremely unfamiliar setting, and listened as he politely asked for them to come with him. By the end, he had a small group of six students following him out of the infirmary and down the hall to a conference room he had gotten permission to use. One of the students, Blaise Zabini, came in a wheelchair. His legs' tendons had been torn and they didn't think he'd walk again.

“My name is Dr. Spencer Reid,” he said as he took a seat and gestured for them to do the same at the large table. They exchanged nervous glances before carefully settling at the end nearest to the door. Daphne Greengrass ended up next to him, but her chair was scooted as close to her fellow classmates as it could politely go. “I wanted to pull all of you aside before the others woke up for a few reasons. The major one is that you’re at a disadvantage right now, and I don’t think that’s fair.”

The group started at the statement and he quickly continued before they panicked. “Most of the other houses have a larger muggleborn population, or have close ties with someone who is. I get the impression you don’t have that.” Now the students shifted awkwardly or folded their arms across their chests. “Good or bad, it means you don’t know a lot about our society, which you’re right in the center of now. So I’d like to take this opportunity to let you ask anything. No question is stupid, and I promise that whatever you say does not leave this room.”

He gave them a few seconds to soak in his words and rested his forearms calmly on the table. The students looked between each other and him, wondering if any would make the first move.

“What does the FBI do?” Theodore Nott asked.

“Okay, so police officers are like aurors, right?” He got some scattered nods. “Police officers work in small regions like cities and towns, but they don’t have jurisdiction to cross state lines.” Catching a few confused expressions, he added, “The U.S. is broken up into fifty states. Each has its own government, and together, they form the national government. Does that make sense?” He waited until everyone seemed to understand before he moved on. “The police only act within the states. The FBI, however, works across state borders and on a national level.” Morgan had specifically told him to keep it to that if the question arose. Reid had agreed, chagrined, that more elaboration would just befuddle the students when they had such little knowledge of muggle society.

“So the BAU…”

“We’re a unit in the FBI that deals specifically with behavioral analysis. We evaluate current and past behavior to predict decisions people might make, and we work all sorts of cases, from homicide to robbery to terrorism.”

“Wait,” Malfoy said. “If the FBI works in America, why were you in England?”

Reid smiled at him, sitting up a bit straighter at the smart question. “Because we didn’t go to England as FBI agents.”

Two of the students in the back were whispering something. Nott turned around to tell them to keep quiet when Zabini flatly stated, “Agent Hotchner is Potter’s father, isn’t he?”

The entire group went dead silent and stared, wide-eyed at Reid. Most of them were physically holding their breaths, and a few had gone pale. The ones near Zabini edged away. Malfoy, remarkably, simply closed his eyes in resignation. Reid paused, unsure what the best response would be. Hotch had given him leeway to make his own judgment on it, since he was well aware that most of the students either suspected or knew by now.
Greengrass waved one hand erratically. "It doesn’t matter!" she quickly said. "We’re not going to tell anyone!"

The dam broke, and suddenly everyone was piling over each other to express their ability to keep the secret. Reid held out both hands to quiet them down, to little avail, and his soft voice was unable to make itself heard over them. The group finally began to burn itself out, and one student’s voice cut through the rest with a begged, “Please don’t send us home.”

Reid blinked and jerked backward. “Why would we do that?” The students did their group eye-conference thing again while he waited for their response, earnestly looking from student to student. “You’re safe here – you don’t have to go back if you feel like you would be in danger.”

A student near the back dropped their head into their hands, but he couldn’t see if it was from relief or stress. In front of him, Greengrass’s fingers were knotting tightly together, nails digging into her skin painfully. No one met his gaze, and a few were even looking towards the door. Reid didn’t know what he would do if one of them suddenly bolted and he sincerely hoped he wouldn’t have to find out.

Malfoy quietly said, “The werewolves went after a few of us specifically because of our families. During the last war, they had some…disagreements with our parents. If we go back and get taken again, they will definitely kill us or turn us.”

“But if they succeed in the ritual,” Nott continued, “the Dark Lord will probably punish us for not helping them sacrifice the other students and each other.”

Reid sucked in a deep breath and closed his eyes. He had hoped he wouldn’t be the one to tell them this. “Yes. Hotch is Harry’s father. We would appreciate it if you could keep this to yourselves, apart from the rest of your fellow classmates who are here with you. Honestly, I think everyone knows by now even if they aren’t saying it.” That relaxed most of the group. “But… We received some bad news yesterday and confirmed it this morning. We thought you should hear about it in private, since we’re aware that you aren’t on the best of terms with the other students.”

“They completed the ritual,” someone whispered.

The group stared at him with pleading eyes, but he quickly dashed their hopes. “Yes.” He swallowed. “I’m sorry to have to tell you this, but… Right now it seems that some of your family were used to finish it.”

A few exclamations started to arise but Malfoy held up his hands and took control of the situation once more with a firm, “Who?” His trembling fingers were the only sign that something was wrong. How could JJ do this so often?

He made eye contact with Cassius Warrington, who had remained almost entirely silent behind Greengrass. “The Warrington, Greengrass, and Zabini families. Attacks were made on the Malfoy Manor and the Nott Estate, but in both cases no one was home since they were at the Ministry.”

“My sister,” Greengrass whispered. “My sister was home. Is she- Is she-“

“I’m so sorry,” Reid replied, unable to stop his voice from cracking.

A scream burst through her lips and she buried her face in her hands. Tentatively, Reid reached out until his fingers brushed her shoulder. Behind her, Warrington had turned away to face the table, silent tears streaking down his cheeks, and Nott was embracing Zabini, whose shoulders shook as he clutched his friend in a desperate grip. When Greengrass made no move to pull away from Reid, he
scooted forward in his chair until he could wrap both arms around her. After a moment, she threw both arms around his neck, startling him, and hid her face in the crook of his neck.

“If- If we’d gone along with it,” Zabini began, voice breaking painfully. “Would- Would they still…?”

Reid quickly shook his head. “No. No, don’t ever think that this was your fault. None of this. And just because bad things happen to you doesn’t make you a bad person.”

Malfoy laughed mockingly. “You clearly haven’t listened to anyone talk about the Slytherin house before. The only thing we can do decently is make bad people.”

Reid ran a comforting hand up and down Daphne’s back as she shook in his arms. “I don’t think so,” he said, an odd note in his voice turning heads towards him. “You do whatever it takes to achieve your goals, right? But that doesn’t mean it has to be about personal ambition. The other houses, they’re upset at you because you don’t act like they expect you to. You hide yourselves away from them, but it’s not entirely because you hate them like they think you do.

"And if you actually hate them…it’s because they hurt you before you ever hurt them. Before you even arrived at the school, they already decided from your families that they could never be friends with you. So you protect each other, and you watch each other’s backs and you do anything for each other, and that’s where your ambition lies. In your family’s existence, in its pride and glory, because that’s all you have when no one else will take you in.

“And for some of you, when it seems like your parents don’t care about you past your ability to carry on the family name, you find family in each other. Is it so wrong for you to do anything to protect your alliances, when that’s all you’ve been left with? Does that really make you evil?” He met Malfoy’s eyes. “Does that make you a bad person, to want to have something to yourself when the people around you immediately take everything else simply because of the name you bear? Of course you hold your names to high esteem – it’s all you have.”

And then everyone was crying, and someone had gotten out of their chair and was clinging to Reid’s side and blocking his vision with a shoulder. Before he knew it, a mass of bodies had surrounded him, a wall of grieving, pain-stricken students with very little comfort left. The lack of space made him uncomfortable, but he reached out as best as he could to draw in more students.

When his right leg lost feeling from the weight of someone’s body half-resting on it, he heard Zabini demand, “What do we do?” His voice shook, but he continued, “We can’t… We can’t continue like we did before. Not with…” There was a wet swallow. “We lost friends,” he whispered. “And family. We literally cannot go back to the way things were.”

Reid rubbed what he thought was someone’s shoulder. “When you’re ready,” he said quietly, “let’s go pick up your wands. If it’s all right with you, I’ll ask one of my teammates to tell the rest of the students what’s happened, and then when we get back, I think we should all sit down for a long, overdue talk.”

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The next time Harry woke up, he was startled to find Ron sitting on Malfoy’s bed. He nearly fell out of his own bed when he realized the two were having a calm, civilized discussion.

“You’ll catch flies if your mouth stays open any longer,” a dry voice said beside him and Harry’s jaw clicked shut.
“I’m dead,” he whispered, earning a snort in reply. “I’m really, truly dead.”

“Your dad would be ballistic if that were the case.” Harry turned to face Morgan. “I think I’d be dead too, just from proximity to the fall out.” He winced in memory. “You should have seen him when he realized something was wrong. He was in the middle of an interrogation, and let’s just say I’ve never seen a guy crack so fast. The local police didn’t even have time to thank us before we were on the jet back to Quantico.”

Harry glanced around subtly, worried that someone might have heard the comment, but Morgan waved it off. “Don’t worry about it. At least half of them already know.”

“I thought we were waiting,” Harry asked, surprised.

“A bunch made the connection pretty quickly, especially since Hotch went straight to you when we arrived and stuck with you until just a few hours ago when the nurses forced him out to get some rest. They’re not saying anything as loudly as possible right now, and I think they’re just waiting for some kind of confirmation.”

The lights were all back on, and most of the students were up and awake. The majority were talking to each other, though a few were in their own worlds. Malfoy wasn’t the only case of inter-house relations – if a BAU member wasn’t with a student, a Hufflepuff was. Most of the students had coalesced into groups they had known from school but a few, who had no friends present, were pulled out of their isolation by someone else. Three Slytherins to Harry’s right were wrapped around a Ravenclaw, who was too exhausted to cry and simply lay limply in one of their arms.

“Did something happen?” Harry asked, seeing Nott tightly embracing Zabini on one of the corner beds. Something about their expressions… He turned to Morgan in time to see the grimace. “Is everyone okay?”

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Hotch wished he had been able to make the inter-house meeting, but Strauss had demanded a conference between the two of them, Blackwolf, and several others involved in the case. The conference went rather well, and an official transfer of power put more of the control over the BAU in Blackwolf’s hands than Strauss’s, which relieved the latter but gained no reaction from the former. The biggest impact was that the team had been given permission to work the case until they had ensured the protection of the students to their satisfaction.

Gideon filled him in as soon as he returned. The other three houses had taken the news about the Slytherin families with horror, and had been quick albeit cautious to make attempts to include the green-and-silver-clad students. When the meeting had officially started, they had begun, on JJ’s suggestion, by putting forth a general statement from each house about their immediate intentions once they returned to England and to go from there. The idea was brilliant, as it cemented a growing thought that the students had been beginning to come to terms with.

They all held the same core values. The difference was only in how they went about pursuing them.

Within the first five minutes, the houses had all firmly established that the involvement of the BAU was to be kept absolutely quiet, and that individuals outside of those present could only be informed by decision of the whole group and, in particular, the BAU. They then returned to the topic of what to do once they had gone back to England. Hufflepuff adamantly demanded that the Slytherins begin looking for others in their house who would suffer from the sudden student loss.

Slytherin was largely caught off guard by the stern order and honest concern, and quickly
acquiesced. Before anyone could relax, Hufflepuff pushed aside any other matter in favor of dealing with the orphaned state of several of the Slytherins. Warrington stepped forward and said he was old enough to take control of the empty house he was now left with, and that the newly orphaned could stay with him. He tacked on an amendment that any others who felt threatened, even from any of the other houses, would be able to stay with him.

With the most pressing matters taken care of, everyone then turned to Harry for a full explanation, which he provided as quickly as he could. No one could provide any semblance of reasoning for the actions of the Potters and they set the topic aside for reevaluation another time when they had gathered more information. The Ravenclaws looked particularly eager about that, and Hotch had the feeling that it wouldn’t be long at all before they had a better idea of what had happened.

“Why didn’t you say anything?” Anthony Goldstein asked.

“Keeping it quiet meant that Quantico could be used as a safe house,” Harry explained, and the Ravenclaws and Slytherins went nuts.

“That’s brilliant,” Draco said.

“Can we start practicing defense as a group once we get back? Or even before?” Daphne asked after everyone had settled down again. “No matter how good our teacher is next year, we’re going to need a lot more help to pass exams at the end of fifth year to get caught up. I think I speak for a lot of us when I say I don’t feel safe anymore.”

When the BAU tried to protest against unsupervised defensive work, Theodore sighed and said, “They’re just going to pick us off during the war if we don’t get involved now. At least this way we have a chance of survival and we can do something instead of just sitting around, waiting to be rescued like last time.”

Hotch had not been pleased to hear that the BAU had backed off after that, until Elle and Prentiss had asserted that the students were far from wrong. The Slytherins in particular had been able to give in-depth explanations about what had happened during the last wizarding war to confirm that students had been targeted largely for the emotional impact it had on those around them. Hogwarts was likely to become a battleground for that very reason, and the lack of a solid defense program at the school meant that most of the students would be unprepared for a fight. Blackwolf also stepped in, saying that children usually became involved in wizarding wars for one reason or another. At least now some of them had the support to stand their ground and resist being taken again.

Which brought them to the next point, involving defense. It was decided without anyone saying it that the entire group needed to begin focusing on actually learning how to protect themselves, and they turned to the older students in the group and Harry, who had been in more life-or-death situations than the rest of them. Harry had guided their attention to the FBI agents, who avidly volunteered to help them as much as they could while they were still staying at Quantico. Hotch was about eighty percent sure that some of his agents were pondering how to break into Hogwarts again to continue helping even after the term had started back up, and he wasn’t sure if he was even going to bother trying to stop them.

Hotch had walked in at the very end of the meeting, within the last fifteen minutes. They were discussing knowledge of the group at the moment, which had been a largely avoided and vague topic during the three-hour meeting.

“We’ve got to tell the Heads of Houses,” Terry was insisting. “Come on, it’s not like Professor Sprout is a Death Eater.”
“We can’t,” Blaise said.

“It might not be a bad idea to have teacher help,” Hermione pointed out.

“No, we can’t,” Daphne stressed. “Snape can’t know.”

“What?” about half the group asked at the same time.

“Snape’s a spy,” Hotch asked, taking a spot beside the bed. Reid, sitting on the edge, glanced up at him as he arrived before turning his gaze back to the group in front of them. The students had gathered into houses, with the Slytherins on Terry Boot’s bed, the Hufflepuffs on Draco’s, the Gryffindors on the floor between, and the Ravenclaws in the chairs they had grabbed from around the infirmary. The FBI agents were scattered among them. Hotch only spared a moment to take in the scene, which would have been impossible only a few days ago. The amount of resilience they were displaying in the face of adversary was astonishing, and their mobility to organize and make amends rivaled it. “Telling him would put him in a dangerous situation, and you need him as an emergency contact in case something goes terribly wrong.”

“Wait, you guys think we can trust Snape?” Roger asked, bewildered.

“He was the one who went with me to get Pettigrew,” Elle said. That quieted most of the complaints immediately. “Think of it this way. Because he acts aggressive towards everyone outside of the Slytherin house, you don’t associate with him. You don’t give him anything that he could possibly be forced to give to continue his role as a spy. It’s safer for you.”

Anthony perked up suddenly. “Hey, do you guys think you could ask him to teach us some healing potions next year?” he asked the Slytherins, who mulled it over.

“We can definitely ask,” Adrian Pucey said. “To my own astonishment, I think he might actually say yes, considering the situation.”

“ Heard you’re looking into defense,” Blackwolf said, walking up behind Hotchner. Several of the Slytherins sat up straighter, recognizing him for the first time now that they weren’t preoccupied with the horrid situation of the cavern. The rest merely appraised him with a quick glance-over. “Ready to start?”

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Since the entire group wasn’t entirely ready for physical exercise, Blackwolf shared the students with a BAU agent each day to instruct them on basic survival skills. They split the group in half each time, making sure to divide it differently from day to day so the kids got used to working with different people, and gave their wands back to them with the instruction that they were not to use them. Most groaned at the statement, pointing out that it would be their best asset. Blackwolf told them to stop whining, since their “best asset” had been next to useless so far, so they clearly needed new assets.

Almost immediately, he started something else in addition to the normal lessons.

"Let me make this clear: I expect you to hate me before we're done," Blackwolf said firmly. The four students who had been pulled aside eyed him nervously. "If you don't, one of us wasn't working hard enough. And it's not going to be me. Harry."

Harry jumped as he saw the tennis ball flying towards his face and barely managed to get his hands up in time. It bounced off one palm and onto the floor. He stared at Blackwolf in bewilderment. "What...?"
"You're going to catch the ball before you go back to school."

"I- What? I can't even open my hand before the Titanic has sunk in the movie!"

"So?"

Harry gaped at him.

"Same with you, Ernie."

"What?" Ernie exclaimed, just as intelligibly as Harry had not been. "But- Look, we were attacked by werewolves. Everyone knows you can't recover from that. Those scars are permanent, and so's the damage."

"Yeah, and everyone knows you can't break into Hogwarts, and everyone knows Voldemort's not back, and everyone knows muggles are hopelessly stupid. You will catch the ball. What, Blaise?"

"Ginny and I can catch balls. Can we go?" he asked.

"You're going to run before you head back to school."

Blaise's light-hearted smile, however strained it was, dropped entirely. "I'm not going back to school, then."

"You will." Blackwolf crossed his arms. He was standing at the epicenter of a half circle made of three chairs and a wheelchair, each one containing a student. "Half your problem is that you don't believe it's possible. Let me assure you that it is."

Ginny was sitting backwards on her chair, a baseball cap stolen from Morgan on her head. Her hand came up and knocked the brim back to lessen some of the shadow over her eyes. "What's that mean? If we just...think we can do it, we will?"

"Sorta," Reid said. He was seated behind Blackwolf on a foldable table, legs dangling beneath him. "Your first problem is that psychosomatic, or your brain's perception of a problem. If you don't think you can ever walk again, you won't, even though it's completely possible. There have been plenty of cases where people have recovered completely from worse injuries."

"And from what we've seen of you four?" Blackwolf continued. "There's no reason you can't too."

The quadruplet exchanged apprehensive and skeptical looks. Harry was the first to turn back to the adults. "Okay," he said slowly. "How does this work?"

"We're going to force your body to cooperate," Blackwolf replied. "You're going to be doing a lot of rock climbing. Your hands are going to have to work, but so are your legs. You won't have any choice but to use them, and your body will have to repair itself. You have an advantage with your magic - it will help you to a certain extent in allowing your body to actually move. Follow me and we'll get started."

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Hotch received a message from an owl a few days after the students were all released from the medical wing. After verifying it with Blackwolf, he sent out a confirmation in reply immediately before making preparations to head to the meeting. Thankfully, it was located near Quantico out of conscientiousness to his inability to transport long distances as easily.
The rest of the morning was spent, oddly enough, performing work that would normally have been regular for the BAU. As of late, they hadn’t been doing much of it as a team. He had decided to stay almost entirely out of the students’ training, however, due to his obvious bias to certain individuals who he already knew rather well. Besides, he was unsure as to how Harry’s fellow students would react to him, and he wasn’t eager to find out while they were still testing the ground with each other. Instead, he did his best to help cover the paperwork of the agent who was working with the students that day, as the rest of the team did.

Around midday, when the students had their lunch break in a designated lecture room before they switched to either Blackwolf or Gideon, Hotch stopped by and found Harry. His son had already finished eating and was chatting with Hermione and Ron, but he quickly caught Hotch’s eye once Hermione gestured towards him and grinned.

Out in the hallway, Hotch walked him away from the room to give some semblance of privacy. “How’s the head?” he asked.

Harry grimaced. “Still hurts. I don’t know what’s going on.”

“Is there anything else strange happening?”

“Like what?”

“Mood swings, strange behavior…?” When there wasn’t an immediate response, he smiled apologetically and added, “Sorry, it’s just how I think.”

“Well…actually, now that you mention it…” Harry said slowly. “I keep feeling…angry. Over the stupidest things, too. Ron and Hermione, and then Morgan and Elle, both pointed it out and then I started to try and do something about it, but it’s still…” He grimaced, losing his words.

“Does it coincide with your headaches?”

“Sometimes, yeah.”

“More often than not?”

“I wasn’t really paying attention to it before.”

Hotch nodded cautiously. “Let me know what happens with it, all right? It could just be nothing.”

Or it could be something went unsaid.

He left his son not long after, as Harry was being pulled away by Ron to go for the afternoon session with Gideon. Hotch smiled at their antics as the group swept them up and out of his sight, then headed in his own direction. It took him out of the building towards the city, and, after he had formulated a list of complaints against D.C. traffic, finally delivered him at a small café on the outskirts.

He was a few minutes early after he parked his car and walked the rest of the way, and he settled down in a corner booth to wait. A waitress came over and took his coffee order before leaving him, but he was only alone for another minute before a familiar figure took the seat across from him.

“How much do you know?” Snape asked immediately, disregarding any attempts at pleasantries. At least he had kept up the image of a muggle, having donned trousers and a dark shirt. The contrast to the robes was rather stark, and Hotch could only imagine the reactions any of his students would have upon seeing him like this.
His letter earlier had been vague and only a few lines long, composing mainly of a request for a meeting at an appointed date and time. The topic matter, obvious enough, had been left unstated, although the letter would have given Hotch little to no information if he had been unaware as to what had happened within the last two weeks. Blackwolf had confirmed his assumption that it was likely a search for information from the muggle side.

“He’s back,” Hotch said simply. “A group of students went missing but have been found. What specifics do you know?”

“The same,” Snape grudgingly admitted. “I can add few details. He returned six nights ago due to a blood ritual performed by a group of werewolves. Several students were sacrificed to activate it, but the survivors all vanished at some point in the middle of it. Someone, evidently whoever rescued them, didn’t properly counteract the ritual and left it open,” he sneered in general disdain, “and sent a message to the Ministry about it. The message was intercepted by a follower of the Dark Lord’s, and several families who had students taken went to the ritual site to argue for the release of their children in exchange for their servitude.”

“But the children were already released.”

“They thought the children were still being held by those who took them. It wasn’t uncommon for werewolves to take prey in this manner and hide them for later,” Snape said, tone twisting at the term ‘werewolves.’ “All of them were used to complete the ritual, including a few more who had stayed at home.” There must have been more parental deaths than they had initially realized, Hotch painfully realized. How many more children were they going to have to tell? “We lost eleven children in all,” Snape finished. “And we don’t know where another twenty-three are at, or if they’re even alive.”

And then Snape did the oddest thing.

In a totally out-of-character movement, one hand went up to run fingers through his hair. Once it had finished its path, he held the hand on the back of his forehead as he stared at the other end of the diner, frustration and anger still evident on his face. Hotch worried for whatever unfortunate patrons were sitting at the tables that the professor’s gaze was attempting to catch on fire, and then his eyes caught the trail of something on the exposed forearm. A tattoo, with two coils of a snake exposed at the bottom. The Dark Mark, according to Blackwolf.

Clearly and obviously flashed at him.

Snape knew Hotch was holding something back, and this was his warning to reveal none of it.

“Who’s investigating?” he asked casually, letting no sign of his understanding slip through.

Snape lowered his arm as he came out of his scowling reverie. “The aurors, through the little good that they do. I hardly think they will be able to find any of the students before the survivors reach their fiftieth birthdays.”

“Is it possible the students were actually rescued as claimed?”

Snape scoffed. “By who? Anyone who had pulled that off would surely be broadcasting it by now. Many are trying to convince the Ministry that the Dark Lord has returned, but Fudge refuses to acknowledge it despite obvious signs. If the children were found, they might be able to persuade him, but that hardly seems likely at the moment with the aurors on the case.” That was the second mention of the wizard police-equivalents in tandem with their apparent incompetence. A request for the BAU to look into the matter, if they didn’t already know what happened to the students? Did Snape even suspect BAU involvement in the students’ escape? “No, it’s far likelier that the
werewolves still have them.” His eyes slid to Hotch. “You heard the claims that they were rescued?”

“I did. They seemed legitimate to me, but obviously I know far less about the politics of your world.”

“Even with my advantage, I can hardly begin to explain the absurdity of the responses to this situation.”

Hotch grimaced and made a subtle gesture with his head. The professor grew quiet as the waitress approached behind him and delivered the coffee, then shook his head as she asked for his order. After she left, they both remained silent a few moments more to gather their thoughts.

“Why did you call the meeting?” Hotch asked. He already had his suspicions, but if Snape was pretending to spy for Voldemort, than the newly-risen Dark Lord was going to demand an explanation if he didn’t have one ready. “You know more than me, it seems.”

“The FBI gathers intelligence. I want to know if you heard anything.”

If Hotch could give him something he didn’t already know, it would give Snape an excuse to return and provide any information he could divulge. He could also play off what little most wizards knew about muggle technology. “We already got blood sample matches back from the ritual site,” he ‘admitted,’ which, to any in law enforcement, would be extremely questionable information since it would have required samples from all of the students pre-abduction. “I have the names of the students who are already dead.” Snape nodded wearily and he read them off, slowly enough for the professor to mentally make note.

At the end, Snape rubbed the bridge of his nose. “The Goyle and Crabbe families are already gone,” he murmured. “The rest are now orphaned. Greengrass lost a sister as well.” Hotch winced, hiding his previous knowledge of the fact as best as he could. The murders of the Goyles and Crabbes at least meant that it was less likely any of the others had lost their parents.

Snape looked up at him, as if to read his expression. Hotch automatically adjusted his gaze, focusing on the point directly above the gap between his eyebrows to prevent eye contact with the Legilimens. “What is your concern with the students?” he asked, despite having already done so.

“Someone asked for our involvement,” he truthfully admitted.

Snape’s eyebrows shot up. “Who?”

“I can’t give details, but it was someone interested in the wellbeing of one of the students.”

“Interested in Potter.”

Hotch tilted his head at him. “Why do you say that?”

Snape glared, but it wasn’t directed at Hotch. “It’s always Potter.”

“Speaking of which… I still don’t get your desire to protect Potter.”

Snape gave him a flat stare. “He’s a student and the headmaster has asked me to.”

“It doesn’t matter what he is; you still hate him, but you keep an eye out for him anyway. Why?”

“It’s my own business.”

Hotch shook his head. “I can’t give you more information unless you tell me, not if it’s going to put
anyone in danger. That’s too risky for Potter and anyone else around him, and I’m sure you can respect that.” With a dry look, he added, “It’s not like I’m on good terms with him and share everything with him.” …Half-true.

Snape’s fingers tapped against the table. While he waited, Hotch took a sip of the coffee. Across from him, Snape’s jaw muscles worked. Finally, he said, “You’re the profiler – why don’t you tell me?”

That was difficult territory. Too much and Voldemort would estimate them properly. Too little and Voldemort would view them as too stupid to bother wasting time on. Unfortunately for him, Reid had spent a great deal of time obsessing over this particular, troublesome detail and had asked all kinds of questions of Harry until he was satisfied with his conclusion. “It has something to do with Lily Potter, doesn’t it?” Hotch asked. Snape’s eyes widened in surprise at the immediate, evidently accurate response.

There was no immediate reply, though the professor’s mouth opened slightly. Hotch politely ignored the gaping. “How…?”

“We talked to the kids in Hogsmeade about general things before we started asking serious questions. It happened to come up that you were particularly against James Potter, but when we asked, they told us that you never mentioned his mother. You were all in the same year, so you must have known her, and if you were so against her husband, you would have, by association, been against her unless there was a specific reason not to be. I would hazard a guess at an early friendship at least.” And Reid would elaborate with a one-sided love.

From Snape's pained silence, Reid logic had won out.

Snape’s gaze returned to him from where it had drifted to the table, and he took in Hotch's expression. “You knew,” he said.

Hotch shrugged slightly. “We were sure that anything was possible,” he amended, trying to tone down their insight. Now the goal was to try not to push the topic further, before Snape accidentally incriminated himself unfavorably against Voldemort.

The conversation tapered off as both turned to their own thoughts. There was still more that Hotch needed to know about Snape’s relationship with Harry, but at the same time, he couldn’t pry too much. He also needed to make sure that, through Snape, either Voldemort – or Dumbledore, he realized – would see the team as valuable enough that it would be good to trade information with them. The question was how to manipulate the situation to appear intelligent enough to Dumbledore but not Voldemort, but he soon gave up on the attempt. They didn’t know enough about how the wizarding culture would affect Voldemort’s behavior yet, and there were just too many factors to consider for it to be worth the effort. He was going to have to trust Snape to accommodate for him. In his own way, the Potions Master seemed to enjoy his company, oddly enough.

“My wife died last year.” The words slipped out almost in spite of him. He focused on a point across the restaurant, aware that Snape was intensely staring at him. “Wizard serial killer, actually. But even before then…” He grimaced. “This job doesn’t exactly allow for…a stable family. Looking back on it, I’m kind of surprised she hadn’t left me yet, although I guess it was probably coming,” he admitted, and Snape’s eyes sharpened on him further. "What hurts is that they can't grow with us any longer, whether they're gone by choice or because they were taken.” He finally turned to look at him. “Trust me, I understand losing someone.”

Snape remained silent for a solid minute before he finally said, “I have yet to decide if I despise your occupation or not.”
A trace of a smile graced his face. “I have to agree.”

The small humor faded from his features. “Did you catch him?”

Hotch didn’t bother to ask who he was referring to. “Not yet. But we will.”

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Blackwolf had been expecting the call from his superior a week ago. The international mess the massacre had called must have given them so little spare time in the office that they hadn't been able to bring him in.

"I understand that what has happened is horrendous," his superior said across the desk from him. "But...there are other priorities that you have. You simply can't spend so much time with the BAU and the students."

"Leaving them now would be worse than shirking my other responsibilities," Blackwolf said. "Not only for the children, but also for us."

His superior frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Sybil Trelawney saw a red dragon in Agent Hotchner's son's tea leaves."

His superior paled and leaned back minutely. "Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"...Do your absolute best with these children." A shaky breath left him. "We cannot make enemies of them."

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It wasn't hard to find who Gideon was looking for. He was the only one in a wheelchair, after all. He tapped Blaise's shoulder, and the boy turned from where he was watching about fifteen others on a bouldering wall. There was a muffled thump as someone fell to the padded mats below. "Care to join me?" he asked.

"Not like I'm doing much else," Blaise muttered, turning so he could roll beside Gideon as they left the main rock climbing room.

Blackwolf, presumably, had had a talk with the buildings' owners and had convinced them to lend them the walls for two hours before and after the regular hours. That way the kids didn't have to worry about interacting with anybody else, and they could avoid a lot of awkward questions about the many injuries and limitations some of the kids were sporting. It also made it less likely that someone would notice a magical flare up, which had become common with the wild emotions.

"Where are we going?" Blaise asked, a hint of curiosity entering his tone as they left the building.

"A nearby school. There's something you should see, and it doesn't look like you're getting a whole lot done here."

Blaise scowled. "Not my fault I can't walk," he grumbled, and Gideon didn't reply to that. The next time he opened his mouth was to help Blaise into the van. Blaise had to hold onto Gideon while the agent maneuvered him into the passenger's seat, and then waited while Gideon folded up the chair and stored it in the back. The rest of the ride was silent, and then Gideon parked them at the
promised high school and assisted Blaise in getting out.

They walked and rolled across the parking lot until they hit a sidewalk leading them down to a football field. "Looks a bit like a Quidditch pitch," Blaise commented, breaking the quiet.

"Harry once described football as being a bit like Quidditch," Gideon agreed. "Football is much more likely to give you a concussion, and quidditch is more likely to give you a broken bone, though. Blaise, have you ever heard the name Glenn Cunningham?"

Blaise paused, mulling the name over in his mind. "No," he finally said.

"I didn't expect you to. Not many muggles have heard his name." Gideon put his hands in his pocket and glanced around them casually as they walked. From the look Blaise was giving him, the Slytherin doubted he'd ever been here before. He had, actually, when making sure this place would work, but he also needed to give the area some sort of security sweep just in case. He should have brought someone with them, but he knew an audience wasn't going to be anything but detrimental.

A wind kicked up, cooling the hot sun's oppressive heat by a few degrees and kicking up some mown grass. A lot of it had turned brown and yellow in the middle of summer, but there were still large portions kept green by sprinklers. Two soccer teams were practicing off season in one of the well-kept fields, but none of them seemed to spot the out-of-place pair. Part of the sidewalk was damp from the sprinkler's water, and Gideon surreptitiously kept an eye on Blaise's wheelchair out of the corner of his eye to make sure it had good traction.

"So? Cunningham?" Blaise eventually asked. "What about him?"

"There was an explosion at his schoolhouse when he was young. He ended up with severe burns across his body. They thought he would never be able to move his legs."

There was another pause. Gideon wasn't going to just give him the answers - Blaise was going to have to fight for every inch in the next few weeks, so he might as well start now.

It was a minute before Blaise sighed and relented. "Okay, what makes Cunningham important? What did he do?"

"For over a month, he tried to sit up. Finally managed it." They had come to the end of the sidewalk and were now facing the football field. The stands blocked them from view of the soccer teams, and the path had taken them right up to the edge of the black track with yellow and white stripes. "Blaise, have you seen this before?" Gideon asked, pointing at the track.

"No."

"It's a runner's track. One lap is four hundred meters. Four laps is about a mile. It would take me about three minutes to walk one lap comfortably. Morgan could probably run the complete mile in a little under six minutes."

"All right..."

"I brought you out here to give you a little perspective," Gideon continued. "Until 1954, many scientists had actually predicted that it would be impossible to run a mile in under four minutes. They thought the body was incapable of achieving and maintaining the necessary speed. Roger Bannister broke it in '54, and it's since been broken many times. Twenty years before that, Cunningham came just a little closer to reaching that record. He hit four minutes and six seconds, just about tying the world record. Four years later, he dropped his time by another two seconds and set the world record. He also set the record in the eight hundred meter at one minute and forty-nine seconds. All together,
he set seven records for the mile and for the fifteen hundred. He is considered among many the
greatest miler in the 1930s and among the greatest of all time."

Blaise stared at the track, eyes flickering across it as he gauged the distance.

"I have never run anything close to a five minute mile," Gideon said honestly and Blaise smiled
slightly. It was the first true emotion Gideon had gotten out of the teenager. "Nor, I suspect, has
Reid. We are quite content to allow the Morgans and Elles of the team do all the running. Hotch can
set a good pace, but he doesn't have a runner's body. You? You were made for this, Blaise. There's
not a thing in the world that could stop you from breaking a five minute mile, and I suspect you
could get pretty damn close to a four minute. You will not be rolling through the halls of Hogwarts
to get to class next semester. Understand?"

Blaise's eyes didn't turn away from the track for a long minute. Then he turned and rolled back up
towards the parking lot. Gideon quietly followed behind him. The rest of the way back to the van
was made in silence, and Gideon didn't try to push him any further. He'd done what he could for the
day.

Blaise leaned his head against the window while they drove back, and Gideon kept his gaze on the
road. It wasn't long before they were back where they had started that day. There was probably
another hour left before the left to go back to Quantico. The major downside to this was that there
wasn't a whole lot of time in the day to drive everywhere, so several of the agents had just taken to
sleeping at Quantico. Blackwolf's connections had enabled this, and Gideon knew for sure that
Hotch and Elle hadn't left the building in a month unless they were called away for something related
to the kids. Staying at Quantico definitely cut down on driving time, although it was far from
comfortable, which was something Gideon's aging body took considerable offense with.

He pulled into a parking spot outside the rock climbing center and turned the engine off. The
passenger's door opened as he went around the back, but instead of waiting like Gideon expected
him to, Blaise was already halfway out the van. One hand clung to the hand hold inside the van like
a lifeline while the other scrubbed for purchase on the door, and his legs hardly seemed to be
supporting him. Gideon stepped forward cautiously, unwilling to intercede until it became obvious
that Blaise couldn't move without his help or was endangering himself.

"This isn't working," Blaise hissed out in frustration.

"Yes, it is. You're using your legs."

"No, I'm not!" Blaise snapped. "I'm using my arms!"

"Blaise, look down. See how your legs are shaking?"

"Obviously!"

"They're shaking because they're weak. That happens when the muscles are having trouble
maintaining one position, when your muscle tone isn't strong enough. Your muscles are working. If
they weren't, they wouldn't be able to move at all."

Blaise grimaced, but he didn't protest. He was staring at his legs. "Are you sure?" he said after a
minute.

"Yes. I'm positive."

"Ahh...!" His eyes squeezed shut.
Gideon quickly moved closer, hands ready to catch Blaise before he fell. "What is it?"

"Pins and needles."

Gideon blinked in surprise. "You can feel your calves?" He tried not to sound shocked. The werewolves had cut completely through - all of the nerves had been severed, as well as the tendons, ligaments, and muscles. Blaise nodded painfully. "Give it a minute."

After a long silence, Blaise finally released his pent up breath. "Okay. It's better now."

The magic really did enable a faster healing. Reid and the medical doctors had predicted sensation after a week of intensive physical therapy. This was one of the first times anyone had managed to convince Blaise to get to his feet.

"You're doing much better than you think you are," Gideon said honestly.

"I'm going to let go."

"Wait-"

Blaise dropped like a stone instantly and Gideon lunged to catch him. The Slytherin collapsed against him, legs completely unable to support his weight after such atrophy. "You're not quite strong enough," Gideon grunted, and Blaise reached out to help him get both of them back to a standing position. "Let's take it one step at a time."

Chapter End Notes

A bunch of new people just started following this story at the same time a bunch of new characters became involved in this story, so I posted a list on my tumblr account (writing sarcomeres) for this story about it. Anything else like that is also going to get posted there for an easy reference.

Yep, they're learning about the horcrux a lot earlier than normal. Horcrux Harry snapped at everyone and everything that moved for no reason. If Harry's going to get pissy in this story, he's damn well going to have a reason for it, because you better believe Hotch wouldn't suffer him acting like an idiot by just blaming everyone around him.
The rest of the BAU had spent the entire early morning setting up who-knew-what in one of the training rooms, and while that meant Hotch had spent the time trying to knock out paperwork for all of them, it also meant he was responsible for getting all the kids up and shepherding them to the spot.

Despite the age range, it was much easier than he'd thought it would be. To wake them up, for starters, only involved him opening the door and saying, "Hey, it's-"

The kids did the rest. The ones nearest him startled awake, and they, in turn, shocked their neighbors into abrupt consciousness. A Hufflepuff a couple beds away sat up so abruptly that she pitched forward and fell off the bed. Hotch just stood there for a moment in alarm, blinking, while the entire room was roused within a couple of seconds.

He paused while everyone slowly got their bearings back and looked at him. "...It's time for breakfast," he finished.

"Food," one of the Weasleys groaned, and just like that, the somber and slightly panicked mood was broken.

Within a couple of minutes, he had the entire group moving into another area, the one that they had been using to get the kids fed. It was better than taking all twenty-some of them out to IHOP every day and breaking the bank each time, and it was faster. The food was provided from Blackwolf's side, but to be honest, Hotch had no clue how they got all the food made and brought to Quantico each time without anyone noticing.

While the group wandered around the food-room, as the kids had started calling it, Hotch did a quick headcount, just for precaution's sake.

He was two short.

He counted again.

Still two short.

And to his shock, one of them wasn't Harry.

He glanced to the side, wondering if one had gotten stuck in the hallway, just in time to see Luna
Lovegood and Anthony Goldstein walking towards him. Luna was padding across the hall, light-footed as ever, while Anthony was barely able to go in a straight line because he was laughing so hard.

"You have lovely agents here," she told Hotch, completely out of context, and then went into the food-room.

He turned to Anthony curiously.

"An agent stopped us in the hall," he wheezed out, "and started questioning us, because Luna had been looking for wrackspurts..." Hotch had no clue what those were. He wasn't sure he wanted to know either. "And she just smiled at him until he was so weirded out he just backed away..."

Anthony put a hand on the wall. "His face, oh Merlin."

Luna was their odd one. That was for sure.

As Anthony moved away, someone else replaced him. Neville Longbottom.

That was an unfortunate last name if Hotch had ever heard one.

"Er, I just had a question... How do you know for sure that, uh, You-Know-Who isn't still trying to send people after us?"

It had been said so quietly that Hotch had almost missed the first part, but by the time he said You-Know-Who, the entire room was dead silent.

Shit, who was You-Know-Who?

He glanced at Harry. "Most of the British wizarding world calls him that," Harry said, "so they don't have to say his name."

"Riddle?"

"Yeah."

"Riddle?" Padma Patil asked with a frown.

"His real name is Tom Riddle," Hotch said.

The room paused again.

"Riddle needs to consolidate his forces first," Hotch told Neville, hoping to push this along. "You're not a concern for him right now. He won't want to come after you, not now when he needs to make sure he has his old followers still."

"Why do you call him Riddle?" Roger asked.

Another awkward silence. Shit, this was why he had been avoiding the kids. He just didn't do this part well. "It's his name. He doesn't deserve a conqueror's title - he lost the first war, after all. Killing people doesn't give him special privileges of respect and honor."

"But... He's a monster," Susan Bones said, staring at him.

"He's still human and mortal, just like the rest of us. Besides, any special treatment gives him more power by distinguishing him from everyone else. He hasn't earned that through murder."
Someone dropped a roll on the counter and it sounded twenty times louder than it should have been.

"Tom Riddle," Fred Weasley said, testing the name. "Hm. I wonder if his mum named him."

"Kind of...shorter than I thought it would be," Daphne said. She sounded like she couldn't believe she was actually discussing this.

"I just... Tom," Theodore said.

"What's his middle name?" Padmas asked.

"Marvolo," Harry supplied.

"Well now, that's a bit better but not much."

The tension dropped palpably as the group turned to internal discussion about the new revelation. Hotch glanced at Harry, who smiled at him - and Hotch didn't think he was wrong to think there was pride in that smile.

"...not calling him by anything but Riddle again..." someone muttered.

"Hell, I'm calling him Tom-Tom," was the reply, and Hotch had a feeling he had no clue how big the ramifications of what he'd said were going to be.

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There was a two hour rigorous physical therapy period every day for the four kids unfortunate enough to need it. Each time, Harry found himself contemplating not only the legalities of what they were doing but also the ethics. Blackwolf's motto was quickly becoming "Don't tell Hotchner about this."

They agreed, if only because they were too morbidly curious to see what crazy shit he was going to pull next.

Yesterday and the day before, Blackwolf had taken them out on rides with four illegally stolen horses. For the ones who had trouble walking, it forced them to move their leg muscles in certain ways they weren't previously used to, while Ernie and Harry had to focus on using their hands in precise movements to control the reins. They were told it would work a lot better if they could do this every day instead of just a measly two-day session, but for one thing, he didn't want to fill out the paperwork for that, and for another, their magic was helping them heal faster so even the brief time they had was helpful.

"I'll admit, this day is mostly for those two," Blackwolf said, jerking a thumb at Harry and Ernie, "but you two had that day on the balance beams so it evens out." They had not entered that gymnastics gym legally either. "Above all else, remember this - if you care about my life in the slightest, you will never tell Hotch this ever happened."

The four exchanged grins while Blackwolf walked away into the trees of the park he had taken them to. "Above all else" days were the best days.

He returned with a bag, which he set on the picnic table they were using. "The second thing you need to remember is that these are sharp, which is exactly why I'm teaching you this. Harry, Ernie, you have to use your hands. You can't shortcut this like you can some other activities, or you might develop a technique that's dangerous to you or someone else."
"If I'm not mistaken about what's in that bag," Harry said, pointing, "I'm pretty sure the whole point is that they're dangerous to someone else."

"Well, someone you like, then." He revealed the contents, showing four rather large knives. "Apache-made."

Ginny clapped her hands together once. "Whelp, I'll add this to my list of things Mum is never going to know."

"Good girl. We're going to start working with these for a little bit each day, since this won't only help you regain muscle control but could also help you in a fight. Don't worry, Blaise, Ginny. We'll be doing balancing exercises every day for you too for now on."

"I'm going to die," Ginny mock-whispered. She hadn't gotten along well with the balance beam or, rather, had gotten along too well when she face-planted into it.

"Don't keep these on you while you're with the BAU. You won't get attacked here, and I just know one of them would figure it out. Once you get back to school, keep it in your trunks. You should have plenty of time to get to it in the case of an attack because of Hogwarts' defenses, and you don't want to accidentally hurt someone who doesn't know you're carrying."

The session passed eventfully, as always, and they returned to Quantico a few hours later. It had been decided that Blackwolf would keep a hold of the knives until they returned to school, which they hadn't argued with. Harry in particular was sure his father would figure it out immediately, if only because Harry wasn't the best at lying to him. Still, he was sure Gideon knew something was up with their lessons from the looks he gave them sometimes upon their return.

Harry dropped the tennis ball. It was the same one that Blackwolf had thrown at him the first day, but he wasn't doing significantly better at catching it. The only thing they noticed that improved his response was to increase the danger, usually done by throwing the ball at faster speeds, but that meant he was more likely to take damage and the BAU overseers had quickly shot down the idea. The twins had been greatly dismayed initially, but found that the other's reflexes had increased due to stress and were now having enormous fun trying to catch each other off-guard as they hurled rubber balls at their twin whenever possible. Bystanders had quickly learned to step back.

His father's hands seemed to be recovering quicker since the damage hadn't been as extensive. At any rate, he'd taken off his bandages far before he was supposed to so he could avoid questions about the injury, especially when talking to Snape or anyone who didn't know about his involvement in the rescue mission. He hadn't got any infections or made the injury worse, thanks to magical medicine, despite removing the bandages like everyone had told him not to.

The ball bounced up and Harry moved his hand under it, palm up. The ball landed in his hand soundly and his fingers tightened just enough to prevent it from falling off. He smiled slightly at the success. Maybe he'd be playing Quidditch this year after all.

The door opened and he jumped, dropping the ball and letting it roll away as he got to his feet. An older woman, at least fifteen years his father's senior, entered with a slight frown on her face. She glanced him over quickly. Harry glanced out at the bullpen, but no one else seemed concerned about her walking into Hotch's office.

"I was going to say you must be one of the students," she began, "but really, you must be Agent Hotchner's son."

"What makes you think that?"
She smiled humorlessly. "You both look the same when you're on the defense, which is really your offense. Do you know where he is?"

"With some of the other students. He'll be back soon."

"Why aren't you with everyone else?"

Harry hesitated, then figured there was no harm in it. He displayed one of his damaged wrists. The scars hadn't faded in the slightest, though he could feel the severed muscles mending and becoming stronger underneath even if he wasn't seeing much of a change in his movements. The woman winced inadvertently at the gruesome sight. "A few of us had...compromised body parts," he said. "I could barely open my hands, and another boy couldn't even do that with one of his. Two couldn't walk. The four of us have been working separately to try to regain some movement."

"Is it working?"

Harry smiled despite the stranger's presence. "Remarkably quickly, too. We really didn't think Blaise was going to be able to move his legs again and he was standing on his own yesterday. For about half a second, but still." He paused, then asked politely, "Who are you?"

"Section Chief Strauss."

Ah. This could get interesting.

"Nice to meet you."

His hopes that Strauss would just ignore him dwindled as she asked, "How are you holding up?"

"I... Fine, I think. Considering the circumstances." He grimaced. "I've got it the best, since I have family here who know what's going on. Some learned they don't have family anymore, and a few others discovered their parents were using their influence in the media to publicly denounce any sort of revival ritual."

Strauss winced, and Harry was reminded that, no matter how much Blackwolf and Hotch didn't like her, she was still human. "Is everyone getting better?"

"Well, we really couldn't get much worse. Actually, I'm...pretty surprised at how far we've come. No one's hysterically crying in the bathroom anymore, so that's got to be a plus, right?" Strauss didn't look like she quite knew how to reply to that. "We're getting better."

"I see..." Strauss said. "Can I ask... What exactly happened to your...?"

"My wrists?" He stared down at them for a moment.

"I'm sorry; I know this must be hard," Strauss said, struggling to maintain professional whilst simultaneously satiating her curiosity. "I just don't know as much as I would like about what's going on," she finished even as Harry nodded and tried to wave her off. The limited movement of his hand made the gesture look a bit strange.

"I understand, but I'm not quite sure how to explain it."

After another pause, she said, "You are aware I know about the magical side of this, right?"

Harry blew out his breath, relieved. "I thought so but I wasn't sure," he admitted. "I was the sacrifice the rest of the ritual relied on, so they had to restrain me and...bleed me at certain points. That's why
it wasn't properly completed at the end - I wasn't there. The restraints they used were designed to hurt if I resisted, but I was resisting most of the time to try to avoid getting cut open so... It looked sort of like barbed wire, if that helps?"

It seemed to aid in creating the image, if Strauss's vaguely ill expression was any indication.

"It tore into my wrists badly enough that it damaged most of the connective tissue there, which is why I've got to rebuild it all." He smiled wryly. "I've got it better than Ernie and Blaise. Ernie's got to repair practically his whole forearm, and I don't know how the hell Blaise managed to move at all when they cut almost all the way through his knees."

Strauss hesitantly stepped closer until she could extend a hand to him. "Can I...?"

He held out his wrist for examination, and her cool fingers lightly brushed over the skin. Her curiosity wasn't founded in some sick desire to look into their suffering - that was obvious from the repulsion on her features, if nothing else. There was surely no harm in letting her look closer, and, if he were honest, having others stare at the scars got him used to the attention he was sure to get once they returned to the magical world.

"These look like burns," she said, an odd note in her voice. He couldn't see her expression from the way her face was directed down.

"They are. Sort of like a combination of electrical and oil burns." The stiffness in her shoulders gave away the contemplative inner thoughts swirling in her head. "What is it?"

"Your father came back with similar burns on his hands. I didn't think to ask where he got them from."

"He pulled the restraints off. I was unconscious and didn't see it, but Hermione said they burned him pretty badly. I know he couldn't properly open his hands for a few days."

Strauss released him and he let his hand fall back down to his side. "Well, the two of you have made quite a pair, haven't you?"

"We do seem to find bad luck," Harry admitted. "Though I think his luck has been considerably better than mine."

She eyed him. "That rather frightens me. It really does."

"Maybe one day I'll just live in one of those padded rooms. That's realistic, right?"

The door opened before it could get any more awkward between the two of them. Now it could get plenty more awkward between the three of them, as Hotch glanced between his son and boss. "Section Chief Strauss," he greeted. "Harry."

"Agent Hotchner. I was here for an update, but... I think you have better things to be doing," Strauss said, nodded at both of them, and then left.

Hotch waited for a moment, staring after her, then turned to Harry. "What was that about?"

"I've...no idea. I was already in here when she showed up, and we started talking. Was that a good sign?"

"I think so," Hotch said slowly. "How is everything?"
"Slow-going," Harry admitted. "But at least I can move individual fingers now. Is everyone back?"

"Eating lunch. Do you want to go join them?"

Harry shrugged. "Not really. I was hoping I could get a nap in."

Hotch grimaced, an understanding look in his eye. "Nightmares?"

"Yeah. They started up a few nights ago."

"Try to get some rest," Hotch said and nodded towards the couch. "I'll wake you up later."

Harry gratefully dropped onto the cushions and curled up almost immediately. Hotch quietly moved around the office, scooping up the tennis ball from the corner it had rolled into and depositing it on the corner of his desk. He started on some paperwork, fully aware that he only had limited time before he needed to go oversee the students for the evening session. Gideon, damn and bless him, had pointed out that the kids needed to get used to building trust with adult strangers again before their ability to trust was seriously stunted by the events of the early summer. Just because they needed to be cautious didn't mean they should be in a permanent state of wariness. As a result, Hotch found himself roped into more sessions with the students despite his initial commitment to stay back and avoid accidental favoritism.

There was a sharp intake of breath from the couch and he looked up, expecting a nightmare. Instead, Harry's hands were clutched around his head, fingers tightening and digging into his skull. Hotch frowned and made his way over. The behavior didn't match with regular nightmare reactions, particularly when Harry's head had hardly featured in the torture that the nightmares were certainly about.

"Harry," Hotch said, shaking his shoulder. "Harry!"

His son startled awake, but instead of releasing his head, a low moan of pain escaped him.

"Okay, sit up," Hotch said, although he was sure Harry couldn't actually hear him. He used his hands to guide Harry into a sitting position, and then he pulled Harry's head down until it was almost level with his knees. His fingers worked around Harry's, rubbing into his scalp as he tried to soothe away whatever was afflicting him. As he waited for the pain to subside, he let his mind wander over possible causes. In the end, he decided that he'd contact someone who was an actual doctor to help instead of just hypothesizing.

Finally, Harry's breathing steadied.

"Better?" Hotch asked, not ceasing his fingers' movements.

"Yeah," Harry said softly. "What was that?"

"I don't know..."

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The next week found the students hiking through a remote, mountainous portion of Colorado. Above, the sky was filled with light clouds, and a breeze stirred the tops of the trees in the valley to their left as they plodded along. Blackwolf led the group in the front, and Elle brought up the back, while the students stretched out between the two of them. They had apparated in at the bottom of the mountain two hours ago, and the rest of the time had been spent in grueling misery. Some were clearly beginning to have trouble with muscle fatigue, while the menial nature of the activity was
grating on the nerves of others. A rare pack found themselves enjoying the weather and beautiful scenery. As for the adults, they concentrated on finding a path and making sure no one went over the side of the mountain.

The trees provided roots and branches to help students along as they trickled over the uneven terrain, staggering and strolling in even amounts. Any lingering hesitancy towards inter-house cooperation evaporated as they were forced to help each other over fallen trunks or awkward climbs. A recent rain made some portions of the forest floor deceptively slippery, but the students quickly began warning each other about dangers up ahead before anyone was able to take a bad step and injure themselves. After another hour and a half of climbing, made long mostly by the slow pace of the students, Blackwolf finally drew them to a halt not far from the top of the mountain.

The group panted in relief, though Elle and Blackwolf suffered few effects from the climb. The two worst off, Ginny and Blaise, were smugly satisfied with the hike up the mountain, and were among those who were happily surprised at their magic's assistance in mending their broken bodies. Ginny's self-imposed recovery with the climbing wall seemed to be doing her wonders, whereas Gideon's strict oversight of Blaise's recovery had led to leaps and bounds in healing. With their permission, the students sprawled out over the area, unexpectedly content now that they could clearly see the results of their labor. They were given a half hour to enjoy the view and their accomplishment before Blackwolf drew their attention.

“There is a camp site at the bottom of this mountain,” he said. “We will be spending the next week and a half there before returning to Quantico.” A bunch of grins broke out, and most of the students began to chatter excitedly about the scene they would be waking up to each day. “Sunup to sundown, you’re going to be moving through these mountains,” Blackwolf continued, and most grins stuttered to a halt as they realized what that meant. “We will be working a more hands-on approach here, and by the time you get back to Virginia, a ten-minute run is going to seem easy.”

From the expressions on the students’ faces, the mountains’ appeal had suddenly deteriorated into nothing.

Once they had reached the base, it didn’t take them long to settle in. No one had brought much, and most of what they needed had already been delivered into the cabins. They were sparse and obviously not used often, and the area had not been properly taken care of over the years. Everyone spent an hour cleaning up the camp site without even being asked, and even took to repairing some minor damage that nature had wrought on the cabins. Having put the site into a decent shape, some of the appeal of staying out in the woods for a week returned to a few of the children, though most of the more sheltered ones were still eyeing their surroundings in concealed horror.

Lunch started after everyone had finished, and most ate it on the porches of the cabins instead of trying to go through the hassle of conjuring or transfiguring benches in a condensed area. Since many of the students hadn’t arrived with people they knew well, the result was a rather scrambled conglomeration in each cabin. No one had any qualms rooming with members of different houses, and most cabins had representatives from at least three of the four. Five people could reasonably bunk in each, and although there were seven cabins available, they squashed everyone into four with Elle and Blackwolf sharing a fifth.

Most of the afternoon passed instructing the kids on basic survival in the wilderness. Blackwolf dominated the lecture while Elle took a seat by the students and listened as well, easily admitting his superiority in the subject. Instead of focusing on intense survival techniques, he stuck to smaller and easier tactics for short stints in the wilderness. In England, he pointed out, it was unlikely they would be on their own for long before they found some sort of civilization they could take refuge in.
“This is all assuming you are unable to use magic for some reason,” he said. “There are situations where using the muggle methods might be the better option, and having them at your disposal can only help you. However, if magic can be used, there are faster ways to accomplish some of this, but we will be going over that tomorrow. For the rest of today, I will show you how to get food. And if this doesn’t work, I suppose we won’t be eating dinner.”

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Harry was startled awake by a muffled thump.

He sat up quickly, throwing blankets back and reaching for his wand. His hand had trouble properly closing around it. Justin’s lumos lit up the cabin half a second after Terry’s, but Theodore sent a stunning spell across the cabin towards the source of the noise before knowledge of his surroundings caught up with his reflexes.

“It’s just us!” Draco snapped, but his heart wasn’t really in it.

Harry reached for his glasses, although he already knew Draco was by Ron’s bed instead of his own. “What’s happened?” he asked as the others lowered their wands so they could actually see. Harry managed to pick up his glasses and get them onto his face by scooping them up and settling them on, but at least he managed it.

In the light from the wands, the faces of Draco and Ron were illuminated, but not much else was made clear. Ron was half on the floor, legs still in bed with his shoulders on the wooden panels of the cabin. Draco was beside him, hands awkwardly placed to try and help but failing spectacularly. It wasn’t immediately obvious if Ron’s fall had caused the thump or if his position was a result of him dodging the spell.

“I thought you were past strangling Ron in his sleep, Draco,” Justin said, and the mood lightened considerably as a few snickered.

“Sorry,” Ron said as he took Draco’s proffered hand and the two got him back into his bed. He was shaking slightly. “I accidentally woke him up so he tried to get me up before I woke everyone. Guess it didn’t work.”

From his flushed face, he was clearly expecting some sort of ridicule for the nightmare, but the immediate reaction came from Theodore. “Oh, thank Merlin,” he breathed, “I hoped I wasn’t the only one.”

“I don’t think anyone’s sleeping easily. Once we were out of the infirmary, I know I didn’t sleep well for two weeks. Still not sure I’m back to normal,” Harry admitted. “And a bunch of us are looking pretty tired.”

“They said there were going to be problems,” Terry pointed out. “I mean, with what we saw? I’d like to say I’m fine now, but I’m not even remotely okay. I’m pretty sure I’m functioning now only because they gave us something to do.” There was a collective pause as the group exchanged looks. “Wait, do you think that’s why they agreed to this?”

“Among other reasons, I’m sure,” Harry said. “Seems like something they would do.” His hands were opening and closing as fast as he could manage, which was extremely slow. The recent habit had developed from his determination to get his hands working properly again through use, but process was slow going.

“I just keep seeing…” Draco started, but shook his head and broke off. When he looked up, he
happened to meet Terry’s gaze, and after an encouraging nod, he sighed and continued, “I keep seeing Chang. I don’t know why – I mean, I didn’t even really know her but it just… I suppose that’s when it really sank in.”

No one spoke, and then Justin quietly said, “Leanne’s mine. When they took her away, I swear…” He took a deep breath. “I swear she looked right at me,” he added, quieter.

“My sister and the twins,” Ron said.

“Ernie’s arm,” Theodore spoke up.

“Crabbe and Goyle,” Harry finished. Draco turned to him in surprise. “I mean, we were all at odds just a few hours before and then… And then they were gone. And I realized I was never going to know if it had really been worth it, to be fighting with them and you that whole time.”

“Are your wrists okay?” Theodore asked suddenly, and Harry glanced down at the bandages and his flexing fingers, which paused in their motions under scrutiny.

After a moment of consideration, he said, “They’re… fine. The wires were cursed so they think it’ll scar permanently, and I can’t really use them all that well but it’s getting better. The healing’s just taking longer than normal. I got off a lot better than Ernie did.”

Even with all of the efforts of the combined medical staff at Quantico, they had been unable to fully repair the damage to Ernie’s forearm after the werewolf had torn it apart. Still, it didn’t seem entirely irreparable, and they were instilling rigorous physical therapy to try and give him back full motion. Like Harry, he was probably going to have permanent scarring because of the nature of the wounds.

“Hey, Draco, Theodore?” Justin asked. “I know this is going to sound bad, but I really am just curious. What do you think about muggles now?”

“I got treated by muggles after being rescued by muggles because of a muggleborn,” Draco frankly stated. “It’s safer with muggles than purebloods. The muggles we’re with are smarter than most magical folk I’ve met. I think I’d be okay with marrying a muggle right now, if not for the whole underage thing.”

Ron made a noise from his bed.

“And while I’m trampling my pride, I should probably apologize to both of you,” he said to both Harry and Ron.

“More like half the school,” Terry casually pointed out, gaining a few smiles.

“It’s… fine, I suppose,” Ron said. “I mean, we’re all different after what happened. Things that applied before… don’t really matter now. But for what it’s worth, I’m sorry for trying to make you eat slugs last year.”

“I’ll admit that one was probably my fault,” Draco said. “And I’m sorry for trying to turn you in for the dragon thing…”

“Sorry about all the comments about your family,” Harry added in.

“… and for the underhanded Quidditch techniques…”

“… and for breaking into the Slytherin common room…”
“…and for everything I said about your families…”

“…and for hexing you…”

“…and—"

“Okay, I think general apologies are acceptable at this point,” Justin interrupted before the list could get any longer. “Although I’ll admit I’m dying to know how you snuck into the Slytherin common room.”

Ron and Harry exchanged a grin. “Well,” the former began, “we sort of thought that Draco was the heir of Slytherin.” Draco snorted. “Yeah. So we were trying to find out if was him, or if he at least knew who it was. Hermione brewed a batch of polyjuice potions, but hers malfunctioned so she didn’t come with us.”

An odd expression on Draco’s face stopped anyone from saying anything. “Wait,” he said slowly. “Did you get hair samples from Crabbe and Goyle?” They nodded, and Draco whipped around to look at Harry. “You said you were the worst thing to happen to Hogwarts!” he exclaimed and the two started laughing.

“It was the only thing I could think of to say!”


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To Hotch’s surprise, Snape sent a message for another meeting not long after the students had left with Elle and Blackwolf. As quickly as he could, he sent a reply explaining that he had been called away from Quantico on a case and was actually in the backwoods of Montana at the moment. The case had been dawdling on their desk for a day before the students had departed, and they had decided to take it while they were able. Hotch was just thankful there were no children involved so far in this case. He wasn’t sure if the team would have been able to stay objective.

The case had the added, if accidental, benefit of making the team seem more distanced from the missing student case. After all, if they were still heavily involved in the search and rescue effort, they would still be back at Quantico and not diverting some of their attention to an entirely different matter. With any luck, his response back to Snape would give off that impression to anyone he had to report the letters to. Unfortunately, Hotch wasn’t sure if it was safe for him to flat out ask how much of he said was going to be reported back, even though it would make it infinitely easier to hold a conversation with the man. Still, the potential for a heads-up on some approaching event or a leak in information was too good to pass up, and he could hardly refuse meeting with Snape altogether.

There was an acknowledgment in reply, along with a request to send back a message once the case was over with, which suggested that the meeting wasn’t of critical need. Curiosity piqued, Hotch made a mental note to contact Snape before they even flew out of Montana. Less than a week later, the BAU left the state with one dead Unsub, another imprisoned, and one living victim. Snape met him at the same café as before just a few hours after they landed.

Surprisingly, they started off with small talk. Then Snape made the mistake of asking about the case. By that point, after the press had gotten hold of it, Hotch was free to reveal the general details.

“Two brothers hunting people for sport.”

Snape blinked. No more small talk for him today.
“Any news on the missing students from your end?” he redirected.

“Nothing, and we don’t have enough information for a complete profile.” Technically, that was true. “We don’t even know enough about werewolves in general.”

“Shouldn’t Greenaway be looking into that, then?”

…Right. “She is. But she’s almost entirely working on her own and there’s a lot of information to sort through. We don’t just accept popular beliefs about groups as fact, and since we don’t have a background in magic anyway, she has to start from the very beginning.” He frowned. “Isn’t there a way to search for them magically?”

Snape grimaced and shook his head. “There is, but it hasn’t helped. The aurors tried several variations and got a series of different results. A few were complete failures and had no reaction, which they think means that the children are too far away for the spells to work, but at this point, no one is holding any faith in the aurors to complete the search.” Snape sneered. “And I don’t trust the werewolves to not send information to governments about a false rescue of the students.”

Hotch raised an eyebrow but stayed quiet. He could ask another time, when Snape would be more likely to tell him the whole story without amendments. "And if the werewolves don't have them?"

"Then those kids are still in danger. Hundreds of werewolves follow Greyback."

"We know for sure that he's the one responsible?"

"Positive. His pack has been far too active recently. With that many werewolves at his disposal, the children will have a hard time managing to avoid detection."

“But not all the werewolves follow him."

"No. Some take measures to avoid being a danger to society during their transformation and don’t try to make themselves more wolf-like when the moon isn't full."

"Hasn’t a better solution than the wolfsbane potion been found yet?"

Snape tilted his head slightly. “You know about it?”

He knew that it still forced an extremely painful change, and that it relied on the magic of the werewolf to keep the human mind while the body morphed. As a result, the potion worked the first day of the transformation for Elle and wore down her small amount of magic, but the other days the potion had no impact on Elle besides leaving a nasty taste in her mouth. “A little.”

“Not all werewolves agree to take it regularly and it is difficult to procure, not to mention expensive. The taste also leads many to try tweaking it with sugar or other additives to compensate for the taste, which almost always warps the effect of the potion and otherwise negates it entirely. There is no complete cure to lycanthropy, not unless the victim is treated within the first half hour.”

And few knew that it was an even shorter gap for muggles. If they had been able to get to Elle just ten minutes faster…

Snape grimaced. “It’s certainly too late for any of the students who have been bitten. The Minister is suggesting creating an entirely new school for werewolves just so they don’t have to be near the normal students, although he has not deigned to explain exactly how he is planning on making that work. In any case, if a lucky few of the students manage to escape death and lycanthropy, I hardly see how they could be forced into close encounters with another werewolf, student or not.”
Elle was nowhere to be seen on the last day of their stay in the mountains, to the dismay of many of the students. Ignoring her absence, Blackwolf gathered everyone back up at the top of the first mountain they had climbed. They had travelled all over the near region by that point, and could proudly state that they knew most of the easier ways up and down the rough slopes and treacherous points. All of the students displayed a lightly muscled physique, and the climb up had been no difficulty in comparison to the last few days. Most took the opportunity to stretch out various limbs in preparation for the last event, which they were sure was going to be worse than what they had previously done.

And sure enough… “Do you see the mountain with the waterfall at its base? To the left of the river, not the right.” When everyone nodded, he said, “You have twenty-four hours from when you leave to get there. Once you reach that point, I will be waiting to direct you to another destination, where Elle will meet you.”

The group gaped. “That’s at least twenty miles away!” Ron finally managed.

“Guess you should get started soon, then. And it’s closer to twenty-five.”

“We left our backpacks at camp,” Hannah threw in, beginning to panic.

“They will be waiting for you at the end.” When a few began to raise voices, he held up a hand to placate them. “No, stop and think. You’ve spent over a week out here. You know what to do, you just are not applying the knowledge. Do not treat this as a brief sprint. This exercise will take you the better part of the day. On your way, you are going to have to make sure you grab water, but look for food as well. Remember to get some rest when it starts to get dark. Watch out for each other, and yourself. If something happens, send up green sparks and someone will come get you. That being said, if you see someone out here who you do not recognize, that is not part of the training. Send up red sparks immediately and get away as fast as you can. Are there any questions?”

“Are we going as individuals or as a group?” Ginny asked.

“Threes. Do not try to meet up with other teams – you can do this on your own and that defeats the purpose. We trust you and we are applying an honor code against forming larger groups. There is no prize for coming in first. The accomplishment is reaching the end of this after everything you’ve overcome.”

The students had a feeling he wasn’t just talking about the toils of that week.

“How was Colorado?” Morgan asked once the group returned to Quantico. The grinning, lightly tanned faces and the stronger, more confident shoulders told him enough before anyone spoke.

“When are we heading back?” Terry Boot replied.

“Next week,” Blackwolf inserted, strolling past.

“Woohoo!” Fred shouted, punching the air while Neville laughed next to him.

Morgan raised an eyebrow at Blackwolf. “Setting the bar high, aren’t we?”

“Is this a competition now?”
“You won’t even recognize them when you get them back.”

Blackwolf gestured. “I suppose you can recognize them so well now?”

Morgan mockingly stroked his chin. “But the resemblance is still there.” He smirked. “Hey, who’s ready for Reid to blow your minds?”

The Ravenclaws were the loudest cheerers.

Harry would have been worried about how much time Blackwolf was spending with them instead of doing his actual job, but apparently there wasn't a whole lot to do in his job often because the American wizarding government held so little power. This, he assured them, was a much better use of his time, especially since he could get most of his work done in the breaks he did get while someone from the BAU was handling them instead.

Hotch pulled Harry aside while the students dispersed to resettle into Quantico. They’d been given two large rooms, usually set aside for briefings, with cots to sleep in, which the kids were happy with. He wasn’t sure if it was because they were just glad to not be sleeping while kneeling on a stone floor anymore or because they were near each other – maybe a mixture of the two. Either way, there were just too many students for all of them to stay with FBI agents, so the makeshift quarters were necessary.

“Good news or bad news first?” Hotch asked.

“Bad.”

“You probably noticed Blackwolf and Elle were keeping a closer eye on you.”

“Yeah.”

“Reid asked them to.” Harry’s eyebrow quirked up in surprise. “Although he’s not a medical doctor, he’s read enough that we generally trust him with diagnoses, and he’s been keeping track of the signs you’ve been showing. He thinks you should get an MRI, and the doctors he talked with agree. That doesn’t mean it’s anything bad. You might just be showing similar symptoms.”

“What do they think it is?”

A tumor.

He shrugged. “Can’t be sure yet. Do you want to get scanned later today?”

“Yeah, sure. I won’t interfere with the equipment, right?”

“Garcia will give them the adjustments to make. Don’t worry about it.” He steered him up the steps to his office. “Now for the good news…which isn’t waiting in my office like he was supposed to…”

“Harry!” A solid weight collided with his legs, and he stumbled back and leaned onto the railing to stop himself from falling over. “Missed you!”

“Jack!” He bent down to hug his brother. "It's been so long!!"
families. That was likely the reason why Hotch had pulled him aside for this.

His exclamation attracted a few glances, and he saw some of the students hurrying towards him out of the corner of his eye. “Hey, these are some friends of mine,” he said as they came to a stop by him. “Hermione, Ron, and Draco.” Jack reached out to pet Hermione’s curls in awe, and she giggled. Hotch stood off to the side, watching with a small smile.

Jack suddenly jumped, remembering something, and a string of hisses came out of his mouth as he whipped around to face Harry. The elder nodded, laughing every so often, while his peers watched the exchange in surprise.

“He’s a parslemouth too?” Draco asked. Harry nodded before responding to Jack in the same language. “Wow. I don’t think the wizarding world’s ever had three dark lords at the same time.”

“We live to be exceptional,” Harry deadpanned in between hisses.

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“The scan came back,” Reid said, shutting the door quietly behind him. Hotch looked up, focusing his attention on the younger agent as he brought up the test that had been run on Harry. The solemn expression was enough of a report. “It’s…” He swallowed, frowning, and Hotch’s immediate reaction to get ready for battle morphed into confusion. “Well. They’re not quite sure.”

“They’re not sure?”

“It’s not quite human brain tissue, but its close enough that they’re tentatively calling it a tumor. They ran some more tests and told Harry it was just routine so he wouldn’t get nervous, and they said it’s also emitting low radio waves.”

Hotch stared at him.

“Okay, that needs to go.”

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Hotch tried to convince himself that the surgery was nothing, but it was relatively difficult to do when they were cutting into his son’s brain and Reid was nervously babbling unhelpful facts beside him. At the moment, he had launched into a one-sided conversation about how the limbic system worked in the brain, since the ‘tumor’ had been leaning against it and causing the mood swings whenever it suddenly expanded.

Oh yeah, the thing moved too.

A doctor, thankfully, came out before Hotch could go stir-crazy and snap at Reid, which he truly would have regretted. From the doctor’s face, which was filled with utter confusion, he wasn’t sure how to react.

“Your son is fine and recovering,” the doctor began slowly. “With the magical medication, he should be back to normal before he leaves for England.” Hotch nodded for him to continue, and the doctor withdrew a small jar from his pocket. An odd, toxic-looking green lump, still covered in some blood, rested inside. The doctor motioned for them to be quiet and raised it up near their heads.

“Is that…screaming?” Reid asked finally. The doctor nodded carefully. Reid leaned back surreptitiously.
Hotch reached forward and took it, ignoring how Reid now leaned away from him. “Do you need this?” he asked.

“Please, just let me know when you destroy it so I can sleep at night.”

The doctor all but scampered away, and Hotch and Reid settled in to wait with their small screaming companion for Harry to wake from surgery. They spent the time making calls to see if anyone wanted to run tests on a semi-conscious mass that had just been removed from a brain.

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Morgan swayed, gaze fixed on the eyes in front of him. A low snarl emanated from the darkness, and he faintly heard paws stepping lightly on the ground, edging closer to him. He growled back, making a sound he had become rather accustomed to over the last few months. White teeth flashed as Elle snarled in reply.

They had held the position for a solid five minutes, but Morgan had at least another half hour before anyone switched off with him. If he wanted, he could make the effort to run the entire time, but he was bone-tired from the training session earlier that day with the students. Not to say anyone else was particularly awake in comparison.

He sensed more than heard Elle shift into a crouch, and he pushed off from his calves before she had the proper time to aim. Behind him, he heard her scramble for a moment as she twisted to follow him, and then everything blurred as he sprinted.

The first ten seconds were about outdistancing her. He spared a glance over his shoulder to check their spacing and saw he’d managed to put several yards between them. The next fifteen seconds were about confusion. His movements became erratic, pulling odd weaving motions as his upper and lower body appeared to be trying to go different ways, or suddenly dropping out of sight or jumping. Elle avoided pushing to her full velocity, unsure what he was doing. And then he had two to disappear. In one of the sudden, random jerks he implemented, he vanished entirely, swinging himself behind a tree and crouching until she sprinted past. He was up the tree in a flash until he was low enough for her to be able to spot him but too high for her to reach.

Her silvery back raced on until she skidded to a complete stop, ears twitching and eyes scanning the trees in front of her. Head tilting in confusion, she began pacing, nose pointed in the air and sniffing. Morgan grinned, recognizing the very human signs of frustration and exasperation. She stopped as she picked up his scent and whipped around to face him. He sent a smirk her way, and her growl drifted through the woods towards him.

Elle had given them complete ability to make decisions regarding her wellbeing during the monthly full moons, which had been expressly stated so as to include her human-minded psychological state. The document they had drawn up had been signed by every member of the team who took part in assisting with her transformation, though Elle had initially refused to acknowledge the document because she thought their involvement when she had no control was too dangerous them. It had taken weeks of pressure for her to finally wear down enough to just sign it and be done with it, particularly since the team showed no signs of leaving her alone during her transformation and a legal document at least gave them some guidelines.

Later, she had also asked if they wouldn’t mind running psychological tests while she transformed. The idea had initially been shot down on moral grounds, but the invitation had remained until Reid finally proposed a few basic tests, which were conducted during the next full moon. Morgan and Hotch had grudgingly consented to running a few of their own on Elle’s insistence, though theirs were more based around controlling the wolf form in comparison to Reid’s, which generally focused
on cognition and memory.

The tests had had the added benefit of providing them with better ideas on how to control Elle during her runs. They were aware that she had above-wolf intelligence, but that it was still subpar to human. Multistep problem solving was well within her limits, though she usually had difficulty judging danger levels. From a physical side, she had more immediate speed than endurance, which meant they could usually exhaust her before the night was over if they planned it well. Most of the time, they ran her down by one in the morning and spent the rest of the time until dawn running psychological tests from a distance. She had become surprisingly amiable towards this, which surprised everyone.

The branch cracked under Morgan, and his hands shot behind him to grip the trunk. His fingers slipped against the wet moss, and he groaned as he realized his angle was nowhere near good enough for him to be able to hold on. Ahead of him, he saw Elle’s ears perk up and she began padding closer.

He threw himself to the side, landing heavily and awkwardly on a neighboring branch. A glance to the one he had been resting on showed a large crack that was even now slowly enlarging. “Garcia,” he said, “patch me through to Hotch. Now.”

The lack of a wisecrack to start their conversation led to her silence, and he heard Hotch say a moment later, “Morgan?”

“The tree I’m on is rotten,” he said, shuffling his weight to try and distribute it across as many limbs as possible. All of them were sagging, and he suppressed the urge to groan. “Elle’s coming closer.”

“Get down and run.”

He glanced at the ground. Two yellow eyes looked back up. “Not quite an op- Shit!”

In a rain of bark, leaves, and rotten wood, Morgan fell to the soil, barely remembering to tuck and roll to absorb the shock. Without getting his bearings, he tried to stand the instant he had come to a stop and immediately toppled back to the ground as his sense of direction reoriented itself. In his ear, he could hear Hotch echo his swear.

Elle’s heavy weight slammed into his side, and he threw both hands up to cover his neck and head as he curled away from her. Two paws scratched at his side, trying to force him to expose his stomach, and a wet snout did its best to slide through his arms. Before she could get a good grip and get properly adjusted to gut him, Morgan launched himself off the ground and flung both arms around her, earning a startled sound in response. With a twist of his torso as he stood, he managed to throw her away from him, getting just enough distance to startle her so he could take off running again.

“Morgan, are you hurt?”

“Fine,” he wheezed, his side tightening in pain. “ Might have landed wrong but I’m good.”

“I’m at the gate and coming your way.”

He started to tell his boss to stay where he was at, but the panting was rapidly approaching behind him. The fall must have taken a bigger toll than he had initially realized. He leaned forward, arms waving to keep his balance, and focused on his footing. A misstep would be the end with her so close behind him.

The gate came into view almost before he expected it, and he barely had time to savor the moment when he heard a gunshot. Elle yelped behind him, but he kept running until he had touched the gate.
Hotch moved in front of him, gun out and aimed in Elle’s direction. Morgan did a double take when he realized the agent had not come alone – clutching his messenger bag as if were as useful as Kevlar, Reid could hardly have looked more out of place.

“Your shirt’s ripped!” he exclaimed.

Morgan glanced down at where Reid was fingering the parallel stripes. “She just clawed me.”

“She was close enough to do that but she didn’t bite you?”

Hotch spared him a quick onceover to make sure that he was unmauled before redirecting his attention to Elle. This time, it was him who had to look twice. “What the…”

Morgan and Reid followed his gaze to find Elle sprawled out on the ground, happily panting, tongue hanging out from exertion. Her eyes were on the messenger bag and as she noticed their attention, her tail began thumping the ground and she gave a soft chuffing sound.

“What did you do?” Hotch asked Reid without looking away from Elle. The wolf, thinking he was addressing her, stilled, eyes focused on him.

Reid gave a snort of laughter and Morgan began recalling nearby mental institutions. “I suppose all of this interaction with her wolf side had some good come out of it.”

“Reid?” Morgan pressed.

“She’s always seen Hotch giving orders, right? And she always sees you when she transforms, but you don’t act like prey and she never gets to bite you. And by the time she sees me, she’s already exhausted and doesn’t associate me with the usual hunt.”

“You think she doesn’t think we’re food anymore,” Morgan said slowly.

“We’re her pack,” Hotch muttered, mulling over the new information.

Reid nodded. He handed his bag to Morgan. “Here,” he said and, with no heed for caution, began walking straight towards the wolf. Both agents behind him immediately began trying to call him back. “Look, she doesn’t even care!” he exclaimed, turning away from Elle so he could gesture to her with one arm while facing the others.

Morgan and Hotch looked between the stubborn Reid and the content Elle, trying to make an argument against it and failing. Morgan rubbed his face with one hand and tried not to moan at the indignity of accidentally forming a supplementary wolf pack composed of FBI agents.

Elle’s panting cut off abruptly and they heard her shift into a more controlled position. Their gazes snapped towards her, but she was focused on something behind Hotch. Her lips pulled back in a snarl. All three agents swiftly turned to face the new threat…

Only to find Luna and Cassius waiting for them.

“No,” Reid said as firmly as he could, pointing at Elle. The wolf huffed but relaxed, laying her head back down on her paws. Morgan gave up at attempting to understand wolf mentality.

“Aren’t you cute?” Luna cooed at Elle, and he added teenage witches to the list of things he did not comprehend, which was rapidly growing in length that night.

Cassius opened and closed his mouth a few times before saying, “Blackwolf wanted us to find you.
He said you’ve got a case in Louisiana that the local wizarding department wants some help with. Is that a werewolf?”

Luna swatted him lightly on the arm. “That’s Elle! Be nice.” She turned back to Elle and started asking her about the ururdandles or something. When the wolf began nodding and making noises in reply, Morgan decided to risk his safety in exchange for what little remained of his sanity and turned his back towards the sight to face Cassius completely.

“He sent you down here?”

“Well, no, but JJ said she’d seen all of you run this way.” Distressed, he continued, “Was she bitten because of us?”

“No, this happened a few months before,” Hotch replied, holstering his gun. “It had nothing to do with you.”

Cassius nodded, comforted. “I thought the werewolves thought she was one of them because she was acting like such an alpha. But they really did recognize her as one of them.”

"She's usually like that around criminals, actually." Hotch glanced back at her. "I would say it's too dangerous for you to be out here, but I honestly don’t know how true that statement is.”

“And I would say I would keep quiet about the terrifying werewolf on the team, but I’m more worried about losing my socks than walking closer right now.”

“Oh, those wretched Nargles have just been causing all sorts of trouble for you, haven’t they?”

Elle woofed.

---

The next impromptu meeting with the Potions Master occurred in a park for a surprising change of scenery. The news, however, was less than pleasant.

“The Minister thinks it was just an isolated incident by stray supporters?”

Snape sneered in reply without responding. He cast a gaze over the pond beside them carelessly, though Hotch suspected he was also scanning for any eavesdroppers. The café had become too much of a habit, and even if they were both aware the conversation could be glanced over by Voldemort, that didn’t mean they entirely wanted to forgo cautionary measures. Not to mention a waiter had overheard an odd word or two in their conversation and had started eyeing them strangely.

“Did they actually do anything?”

“Besides scaring a lot of people and leaving the Mark, no.”

“Just a power play.”

Snape nodded. In contrast to their last meeting, his limbs were looser, his posture less tense. Though Hotch continued to avoid direct eye contact, Snape looked at him with less scrutiny and suspicion. Dare he say it, Hotch could practically say they had achieved a friendly status now. He wondered if it had something to do with what he had said about his wife’s death.

“The press is still reporting what he says. At this rate, Hogwarts will have its students back about the
same time the public is aware of the Dark Lord’s presence, which will be a few months after his forces have taken over the Ministry,” he snidely remarked. “Complete fools. Gaining a bit of political prestige now, only to lose it later. And to make it all better, the decision has been made to host the Triwizard Tournament this year. They hope it will appease the public.”


“A student is chosen from each of the three major European schools to compete in a series of three tasks. One school hosts the rest, and Hogwarts has been chosen this year.” His face twisted. “It was originally done away with because a student died each time, due to the extreme hazards of the challenges.” He glanced over at Hotch. “What are the Americans doing?”

“I have never seen such disunity in such a large group of people,” he admitted. “They value their independence and isolation, preferring to stick to small communities rather than large organizations. They acknowledge that they need to look into the Death Eaters, but they are moving too slowly for any real gain. It seems you can expect little help from America.”

Snape grimaced, but he seemed unsurprised. “Unfortunately, I need to attend to certain matters before the start of school. Excuse my departure.”

“I understand. The children are still missing, then?”

The dark look that crossed his face was enough of an answer and Hotch winced.

“Oh, before you leave...” Hotch began. Without further ado, he pulled out the jar. Snape stared and, after a moment, his ears picked up the faint screaming.

“What... is... that?”

Hotch sighed. “I was hoping you knew.”

Snape eyed him. “Where did you find it?”

“Someone started complaining of headaches and mood swings. We actually thought it was cancer or a benign tumor, but when they pulled it out...” Since then, they had run numerous tests, and still knew absolutely nothing about it. The medical team who had performed the surgery routinely called Hotch to check up on what was happening with the thing, and Hotch had only recently told them that they were now trying to destroy it after it had grown tiny claws and sharp teeth and had tried to eat the glass.

“Destroy it. Immediately.”

“We’re trying.”

“Try harder.”

A moment later, he found it difficult to focus on the figure by his side, and then there was a crack and he was gone entirely.

Hotch made his way back to his car, already thinking about what was taking place back at Quantico. The students were back with Blackwolf, doing... Actually, Hotch wasn’t even quite sure what they were doing this time. He thought someone had said something about sabotage techniques, but he had halfway convinced himself that he really didn’t want to know what that meant in relation to wizardry. Agent Travis, from the initial case when Hotch had first discovered he had a son, had joined Elle and Blackwolf in Colorado, and was having far too much fun thinking up outrageous
skills to train the students in. The scary part was how fast the students were learning, but, he grimly
noted, the very real danger hanging over their heads was an acute encouragement.

The students were going to be heading back in the next few days, and then they had planned on
having two weeks off before they started moving forward in the plans to get them all back to
Hogwarts. The current scheme was to drop them off at the school shortly before the term started to
ensure their safety. However, the attack on the Quidditch World Cup changed the nature of the
game. Voldemort’s forces were beginning to move, and Snape had not given him enough
information for the BAU to analyze what might be in the planning stage. Hotch was more inclined to
drop the students off much closer to the start of term, perhaps even the day that school started. There
was simply no way he was risking anyone’s lives by sending them back any earlier.

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When it was time for the students to head off, no one seemed to know quite what to do. While all of
the agents looked composed, most of the students appeared distressed at the least about having to
leave Quantico. They were fully aware of the media explosion regarding their disappearance, and
while almost all of them were eager for the chance to see their families again, none were looking
forward to explaining what had happened. They had settled for claiming amnesia, figuring everyone
would just eventually accept that they had been obliterated, when asked where they had been after
being rescued.

All too soon, they found themselves dropped off after lunch near Hogsmeade. The handpicked team
of Blackwolf’s who had apparated them over remained by the town with the BAU as the students
trudged towards the school. It was far from likely that they would be facing an attack, but it went
without saying that everyone felt much safer with the extra protection. No one spoke as they walked
towards the castle, mentally reviewing what they were going to say or considering what they were
going to have to do with their re-entry into the magical world again.

Filch opened the doors almost ten minutes after they initially knocked, and then stood with his mouth
hanging open at the group for another minute.

“Can we come in?” Anthony finally asked politely, and he stepped aside, still gaping, to let them in.

Filch muttered something about getting Dumbledore and ran off. The group shut the heavy, large
doors behind them and moved inside to the stairs. Most of the students took a seat, expecting another
long wait until the headmaster arrived. Instead, it was only a few minutes before he was striding into
view, moving much faster than any of them would have expected of someone his age.

His eyes flickered over the group, taking in any visible signs of injuries and noting who was present.
Without pause, he ushered all of them up and directed them towards the infirmary despite their
assurances that they weren’t injured. The heads of houses met them there, and from the looks of
surprise on their faces at seeing the students, they hadn’t been told the reason for their presence quite
yet.

It was only after Madame Pomphrey had checked over everyone that any questions were asked. A
few students dropped out of the question and answer sessions simply by going to sleep, and there
were enough students to replace them that no one bothered waking them. Dumbledore interviewed a
few of the students initially, but once he was certain he had an understanding of what had happened,
he announced the group as a whole and informed them that he would be alerting their parents as to
their presence at the school. After he left, the heads of houses descended on their students, talking to
them individually and trying to discern who needed help.

It didn’t take them long to realize that the help their students needed for what had happened was far
beyond their capabilities.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the delay. It reason for it is a long story.

By the way, remember that Riddle is back but not fully. He's like a stronger form of the baby thing that Pettigrew dumped in the cauldron because not enough was used. So he's back, but he's not nearly as strong as he was in canon sixth year.

Yeah, so Hotch calling Voldemort Riddle... I only realized that there's no way the BAU would treat him like he was something special and deserved his own name until I was almost done, so I had to go back and change his name in every chapter... That was fun.
Flood

Chapter by AlexTheReaper (daviesroyal), daviesroyal

“I looked through the Gideon Bible in my motel room for tales of great destruction. The sun was risen upon the Earth when Lot entered into Zo-ar, I read. Then the Lord rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of Heaven; and He overthrew those cities, and all the plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and that which grew upon the ground. So it goes. Those were vile people in both cities, as is well known. The world was better off without them. And Lot's wife, of course, was told not to look back where all those people and their homes had been. But she did look back, and I love her for that, because it was so human. So she was turned into a pillar of salt. So it goes. People aren't supposed to look back. I'm certainly not going to do it anymore. I've finished my war book now. The next I write is going to be fun. This one is a failure, and had to be, since it was written by a pillar of salt.” – Kurt Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse-Five

The newspapers roared when news of the students’ appearance at Hogwarts leaked.

Immediately, the parents of all of the missing students swarmed to the hospital, demanding to know if their own child had been brought in for treatment without their knowing, only to be told that all of the students were being treated at the school. When they were finally convinced that no transfer to St. Mungo’s had taken place, they then relocated to the Ministry, where they demanded answers. It was several tense, strenuous hours before Fudge himself finally gathered all of them in his office for one long meeting that was as full of uncertainty as it was lacking in fact. The only thing the parents were sure of when they left was that their children were better off in their own hands than in the Minister’s.

Fudge went straight from the meeting to Hogwarts. He had attempted to enter before, but the staff had forced him out to allow themselves to focus on evaluating the wellbeing of their students. By the time he returned, he found that the staff was grudgingly willing to let him and a few others in to speak with the children. Dumbledore, having not left the infirmary for a moment so as to hear any news about his students, was near the front of the medical wing while Fudge argued briefly with Madame Pomphrey about questioning the students, and Fudge decided to let him join the Ministry officials.

If he was truly honest with himself, however, it was more the other way around.

It was late at night by this point, and almost everyone was as asleep. Only three – Terry Boot, Anthony Goldstein, and Roger Davies – were still awake. The trio had gathered on the same bedding, and were sitting up without any required assistance even if they did lean on each other a bit for emotional support. Terry Boot appeared half-asleep and kept yawning as the adults took the provided seats by the bed.

“Minister Fudge,” Davies said, the eldest, as he took over for his fellow classmates and began shaking hands to get over the formalities.

“This is Kingsley Shacklebolt and Amelia Bones. And your headmaster, of course,” Fudge introduced. When Davies appeared to begin to introduce the rest of his classmates, he said, “Oh, we know who you three are.”

Goldstein met his gaze nervously. “They said we were gone for over two months?”
“I’m afraid so,” Dumbledore murmured. “Would you mind if we asked about what happened while you were gone?” They shook their heads.

“Can you tell us what happened?” Bones interrupted before anyone could stop her.

With Davies narrating most of it and Boot still falling asleep, they managed to deliver most of the tale. The attack on the train had already been surmised by the aurors who investigated the matter, though the story did clear up a few details about how exactly it happened. The ritual was embellished from what little they had already known, though Fudge’s uneasiness about the gore led to the students quickly skipping through it. Their breakout, however, was a rather surprising affair. All three confirmed that a werewolf had actually heard about what was happening and shown up to help.

“She got Padma Patil and Hannah Abbott free without them noticing,” Goldstein said, referring to their captors, “and then raised a ruckus to distract them while Padma and Hannah got the rest of us loose. We were free before they could stop us, and we… Well, we got out and we were running, but I don’t remember anything after that. No one else does, either.”

“You said a werewolf helped you?” Fudge asked, agape.

All three perked up immediately, even Boot. “Yeah!”

“She was brilliant!”

“And she had a few others working with her! That’s why it took so long for the other werewolves to find us,” Boot finished. He winced, and all three grew melancholy. “But…we don’t know what happened to them. We… We think they might’ve been…”

Davies squeezed his wrist reassuringly, and then looked at the adults imploringly. “If you hear anything about her, or anyone who was working with her, can you let us know? We owe them so much…”

While Fudge spluttered a bit, Bones nodded. “Of course. As soon as we know anything.”

They tried their best to describe who they had seen, but none of the descriptions matched anyone that the adults recognized. The students said that they were sure they were only being kept until they were able to ransom the students out, either to their parents and the Ministry or Voldemort.

“But did they really say You-Know-Who?” Fudge nervously, doubtfully asked. The students stared at him in bewilderment. “I mean, the werewolves must have known he’s not actually back.” More staring. Bones rubbed the bridge of her nose.

“---

“You lied,” Snape snarled.

“About what?” Hotch deadpanned, and the professor’s scowl deepened.

“You knew the children escaped. They showed up not four hours ago at Hogwarts.”

There was too much certainty in Snape’s eyes. If he denied it, the professor wouldn’t ever trust him again. “I did,” he admitted, and then began spewing bullshit like it was confetti. “From the analysis we ran of the situation, we narrowed the likely search area down to a specific region, and we found them at the ritual site. Elle’s a werewolf,” he said, and Snape’s eyes widened, “so we sent her in to try and talk down the students’ captors. It didn’t work and we took them back by force. Afterwards,
we got them to a medical facility, but they were in a bad shape, and even the magical doctors couldn’t wake them up. We kept quiet in case to keep them safe, and we decided we would just hold onto them until it was time for them to return to Hogwarts. However, we did let it slip that they had been rescued for the benefit of their parents.”

Snape looked like he was ready to snarl at Hotch, but something made him reconsider and he clenched his mouth closed before anything could escape. Of course, if Hotch had told Snape, the latter could have reported it to Dumbledore, who could have made efforts to protect the children from any further harm. But he would have also had to tell Voldemort.

“I’m sorry,” Hotch said truthfully. “We hoped we were doing what was best. If no one knew we had the children, no one would come after them. It was decided to obliviate them to protect the agents here, so none of the students remember this place or the people even if they do remember everything else after their rescue.”

Snape glared at the wall, arms folded over his chest. Somehow, the professor had gotten into the building and up to Hotch’s office to confront him. Considering the amount of warding on the building, Hotch was rather impressed. And was going to immediately send a message to Blackwolf about the break-in so more could be added.

“What happened to them was absolutely atrocious,” Snape bit out. “The mental torture alone would have absolutely destroyed lesser adults, yet they seem to be adapting well and seeking comfort from each other. Those who have heard the full story of what happened are already calling for blood.” His eyes shifted to Hotch. Some of the anger had diluted, but he still wasn’t off the hook entirely. “I want to know how you found them. We might be able to track down anyone else who was involved.”

“I’ll get you the information about our analysis, in case you want to search the area,” Hotch said, pulling out his phone and sending a message to Gideon about it. A moment later, he saw the man hurry out of his office to gather the team in the bull pen area and notify them that a falsified report needed to be whipped up in the next few minutes. “There’s something you should know,” he added, practically feeling the lightbulb going off. “Potter started showing signs of consciousness before the others after we rescued them, and his scar tore open and started bleeding. We thought it was odd, especially since he never actually woke up and the signs subsided.”

That had actually been true, although they avoided telling Harry. So soon after he had been rescued, it seemed cruel to tell him and it had never come up again later. Regretfully, he realized he probably should tell him as soon as possible just in case it became more important. “There was no physical explanation, so they ran some more thorough tests and discovered something was growing in his head. The doctors were worried about how large it was getting, since it was near some vital portions of the brain, so we gave them the go ahead to get it removed. Later, we matched up the dates and realized he started ‘waking up’ at the same time Voldemort came back. If the two were connected, we figured it was magical and we might want to run another test just to make sure we got everything. The test showed that the doctors had gotten everything, but something was growing back.”

Throughout his explanation, Snape had begun to steadily pale. Finally, Hotch paused and tilted his head slightly. “With the new information, do you know what this is?” He asked, tapping the jar on his desk. Snape glanced down, just now seeing the growth in the jar.

“Yes,” he breathed. “I’ll be back.” He vanished with a crack.

Hotch resisted the urge to roll his eyes at wizardry antics and shoved the jar in his pocket to keep it with him while he went out to check on the team. They had already made a solid start on the faked analysis, and he returned to his office to await the return of the professor. In the spare minutes, he finished up the paperwork he had been in the middle of and sent the message to Blackwolf about
upgrading the wards.

Snape appeared again, over half an hour after he had left. He waved his wand, and the sounds outside the office went silent. “This information cannot leave the room,” Snape said, and Hotch nodded, already planning on telling his team. “A while back, the headmaster realized the Dark Lord had managed to keep himself alive by splitting off portions of his soul. Each piece, called a Horcrux, bound part of his life in an object. It almost always requires effort, but Dumbledore began to get worried that an accidental piece may have ended up in Potter the night he tried to kill him. Over the last few years, Potter showed an odd connection to the Dark Lord whenever he appeared; he could speak parseltongue, he got headaches whenever he was near a piece of the Dark Lord’s soul, and he was singled out during the sacrifices.”

He doubted the parseltongue had anything to do with a piece of soul, since Jack spoke the language too. “If we just keep taking out pieces of the Horcrux from Potter’s head, should it eventually stop growing back?”

Snape hesitated. “I don’t know. I hope the surgeons who removed it simply missed something. Dumbledore was worried that Potter would have to die before it could properly be destroyed.”

Dumbledore was worried about the possibility. Hotch released the edge of the desk behind him when he felt his fingers shaking from the force he was applying. How could Snape so casually mention the possibility of his son’s death? When the possibility of it still hadn’t been ruled out? When Harry had almost been sacrificed just a few months ago? Before he could snap, his eyes, trained on Snape’s forehead as always, caught a pulsation on the professor’s temple. No matter the headmaster’s concern, Snape had been more than just ‘worried.’

“It would be best if only a few people knew about this. When do you think Potter should return to have more removed?”

“The doctors were thinking in a few months, about mid-October,” Hotch replied, turning his attention away from Harry’s potential death, using his required return as solace.

“I’ll discuss it with the headmaster, but I highly suspect he will also agree that Potter should be treated by the same physicians. Your doctors know more about the case than anyone else.” There. The flash of Snape’s eyes. He still knew something was up, and Hotch resigned himself to the suspicion. If his previous statements had done nothing to calm his fears that the BAU was more involved than they claimed, nothing would.

He let none of this show on his face. There wasn’t anything to be done about it now, and honestly, he admired the insight and wariness. “So this Horcrux…” Hotch said, tapping the jar. “It’s a soul piece. Why can’t we destroy it?”

“What have you tried?”

“Extreme pressure and temperature, blunt force, deflagration, acid, radiation…” He paused. “Have you ever heard the theory that a human voice can shatter glass?” Once he recovered from the topic change, Snape answered with the affirmative. “Obviously, it’s not true, but certain frequencies can do it. The trick is to get the frequency to resonate at the exact opposite frequency that the glass already resonates at. A similar trick can be performed with other objects as well. Two of our local geniuses tried it.”

“…And?”

“It turned yellow and its screaming turned into warbling.”
Snape closed his eyes for a moment and wisely decided to just move on. “A Horcrux has already been destroyed,” he said, and held out his hand. “I think you can understand why I am reluctant to tell you how.”

Hotch nodded. “Are there more out there?” he asked, reaching into his pocket to grab the jar.

“Yes.”

Hotch paused, the jar barely out of his pocket. He held it up for a moment. “I may actually hold onto this for a while longer,” he said. “Maybe we can locate the others with this.”

Snape gave him an impatient look. “Really.”

The jar went back into his pocket. “Well, it’s not like any of you thought to surgically remove this, right? Muggles think differently. Maybe we can find another solution to tracking down the rest of them, unless you know where the rest are.” No response. “I’ll keep you updated on any changes with this.” There was a flurry of movement in the bullpen, and Hotch resisted the urge to turn his head. Thankfully, it was out of Snape’s line of sight.

“Do you really believe you can find the rest of them with that?” Snape asked.

“We won’t know until we try. If it looks like there isn’t a chance, we’ll send it to you for destruction. How many are we looking for?”

“It’s likely that there are five others.”

“What was the last one?”

“Does it matter?”

“It could help us find a pattern to what the rest might be.”

Snape let out a small, frustrated breath. “A diary he used.”

Hotch leaned back against his desk. His team was still quickly throwing words out for evaluation in the bullpen below, and he paid them no attention. “If I may ask, what tipped you off? That we knew?”

“Everyone was too adjusted to what had happened. While I was talking to some of my Slytherins, I realized that it would have been extremely helpful to have someone present who had training like that which your team receives. And then I realized that it almost seemed someone fitting that description had already spoken to them. Perhaps some of what you said stuck with them despite the obliviation.” From Snape’s searching look, that suspicion had not been entirely appeased. Hopefully, the “memory charm” would soothe anyone else.

The BAU were masters at remaining calm and controlled under scrutiny, but Snape’s Legilimency might give him just enough of an advantage to realize how much of Hotch’s story was fabricated. “I’ve got two kids,” he said, looking away from Snape towards the window. “The oldest… I couldn’t quite get over how much Potter reminds me of him.” Snape started at the sudden admission. “Is he safe? At Hogwarts?”

“As safe as he can be,” Snape confirmed.

*Is he safer there than he is here?* Hotch wanted to ask. “And you’re going to keep an eye on him?”
Snape sighed. “To the best of my abilities. I have to admit that his determination to seek out trouble will make the job infinitely more difficult than it would normally be.”

Gideon stood from the spare chair he had acquired and threw a thumbs up in Hotch’s direction before heading up towards his office. “Good luck, then,” Hotch sighed, resigning himself both to his son’s presence away at Hogwarts and to turning over the rushed analysis. “I told one of my agents to pull up the information you need. If there’s nothing else…?”

Snape shook his head, and Hotch led him down to the bull pen, trying to ignore the gut feeling that told him to bring Harry back to Quantico immediately.

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The students were released from the infirmary the next day, although many remained there while family came to visit. The rest went to their houses, settling in just a bit earlier than the rest of the students would. Harry was left alone in the common room while the rest of his house was with family. The Weasleys had insisted he stay with them for a while, since Sirius had wanted to come but was unable to for obvious reasons, and Harry had complied until he was able to politely slip away. While he knew the Weasley parents had worried about him as well, he knew they were infinitely more concerned about their own and it seemed unfair to take even a bit of their attention away from their children.

With the quiet, he took the opportunity to pull out his laptop and call the BAU. Last year, they had taken to calling Garcia first, as she was the one who was almost always available even if the rest were on a case. He continued the habit, and she confirmed his suspicion that everyone was still at the bullpen. The two chatted for a few minutes before the rest of the team had gathered in her office, and then Harry gave them a brief explanation of what had happened since they arrived.

“Oh, and they’re reviving the Order of the Phoenix!” he finished with a grin. “It’s apparently the main group against Voldemort, and it dates back to the last war. Dumbledore came and asked Sirius if they could set up the base at his house. Sirius sent me a letter with the Weasleys since he couldn’t come, and he said that Dumbledore had already been talking to him about it for a while now.”

“Does anyone else find it ironic that we have more spies in the underground movement than they do in us?” Garcia asked.

Harry frowned in confusion. “Who else?”

“Professor Snape,” Hotch admitted without pause, then waited the necessary timespan for Harry’s brain to restart.

“Who is he not spying for?” Harry finally asked.

“Technically, he’s not spying for us. He just stops by and tries to get information out of me in return for me reading information off of what little he says,” Hotch explained.

“Snape is on good terms with your father. Never forget that,” Garcia said, still invisible.

“Okay, now that’s ironic.” He paused. “Actually, there’s something else you should probably know… We were all pretty tired last night, and Draco worded something badly and out of context it probably sounded awful, so I’m pretty sure everyone thinks we hate each other more than ever.”

While accurate, Draco’s muttered, “You don’t even deserve a title to a pureblood family like the Potters,” had come across as a particularly nasty remark to the adults who had overheard it. The whole thing could probably have been salvaged if either of them had been thinking about it, but
instead, Harry had simply responded, “Oh, like you do?” While both were fully aware that Draco was steadily growing more irritated at the elitist view of the purebloods, their comments had come across as having the exact opposite meanings to those who had been listening. Before either realized their mistake, the adults had already left and the damage had been done.

Another time, he might have been worried about how quickly the Slytherins started planning to use the misconception to their advantage. Now, he was just grateful that his friends adapted so quickly.

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“He’s just a boy!” Mrs. Weasley’s protested and Snape resisted the urge to clamp his hands over his ears. “And you want to tell him?!”

“Molly,” Sirius said.

“This is absurd! I would never put any of my children through that kind of pain, and I would hardly expect any sane parent to either! Do you think James or Lily would do that to him?”

Black began to respond in a raised voice, but Lupin’s soothing tones quickly overtook it. “Now wait,” he said calmly. “Let’s not bring them into this. It doesn’t matter what they would do, and we need to focus on what’s best for Harry without them now.”

“How sure are we that You-Know-Who’s really going to target him, though?” an eccentric woman named Nymphadora Tonks cut in. Snape had only met her a few times after she has graduated, and he was still unsure as to what to make of her. “Is it necessary to tell him?”

“With Potter’s luck alone, he most certainly is,” Snape drawled. “However, his inherited propensity to seek out trouble will most certainly land him in the middle of the Dark Lord’s warpath.”

“Then perhaps we should be focusing on keeping him out of harm’s way,” Molly snapped, entirely missing Snape’s point, “instead of encouraging him to get involved!”

“He already is involved!” Black replied, exasperated. “He needs to know,” Black continued, closer to a normal tone than before. “He’s in danger, and the more he knows, the more prepared he is.”

Molly turned to Snape, and he mentally groaned at her insistence on this matter. Didn’t she realize all efforts to protect Potter so far had contributed more to getting him into trouble than saving his hide? “Severus, you can hardly think to tell Harry about all of this,” she scolded.

“If he doesn’t already know, he will find out soon enough. There is little difference in telling him now rather than later,” he responded. Attempts to keep a secret from the boy had backfired in every instance before now, and he could hardly expect different results now.

Distantly, he wondered how Hotchner would have manipulated the situation. He was already well aware that there was much the man was keeping from him, but he was sure it was more out of protection for both of them than malice or distrust. His presentation of information through conversation and letters had been brilliant so far, giving Snape just what he needed to assuage Voldemort while also helping Dumbledore. Snape wondered if all profilers behaved similarly or if it was just Hotchner.

“At least give him some time to be a normal boy!” Normal. Potter. In what world?

“Honestly, Molly, I think it’s a little late for that,” Lupin quietly said.

“Well, it’s about what Dumbledore thinks,” Molly sniffed. “And I highly doubt he would approve of
everyone informing Harry about everything the Order has been doing.”

“I suppose my being his godfather has absolutely no bearing on my own decisions about his wellbeing. Why was I even made godfather?”

“Why, Black, I’ve wondered that for fourteen years,” Snape said smoothly, not even attempting to hold the insult back when Black had set him up so perfectly. “Do let me know if you ever come to a conclusion, besides the general reflection of Potter’s ill mind.”

“Severus,” Molly hissed.

“You-” There was a violent movement as Black stood, shoving his chair back as he did so. Snape moved to draw his wand defensively. Almost everyone in the room spoke up automatically, as if Black’s childish behavior warranted such attention and put Snape in danger. The overlap of voices made it almost impossible to decipher much cohesive meaning, though a few sentences broke through.

“Sirius, Sirius,” Lupin pleaded, “it’s not worth it.”

“Now, professor,” Arthur said, attempting amity and failing.

“Hey, wands down!” Tonks shouted. At least that was reasonable, compared to the rest of the suggestions making their ways around the room.

“You have no right to talk about him!” Sirius lunged forward, the table screeching to the side as he tried to shove his way past it. Lupin was still trying to calm his friend, now forcibly holding him back. Though he may not have liked the man, Snape had to admit it took considerable strength of will to attempt to make Black to do anything.

“I was unaware that my rights rescinded by war included talking about someone,” Snape snapped back, ignoring Lupin’s struggle as Black doubled his efforts to throw himself across the room.

“That’s just human decency,” Black snarled. “Is nothing sacred to you? You must have hated him so much – how else could you disregard their sacrifice like this? Doesn’t that matter at all to you, or don’t you even care? Why are you here, Snape? Because it sure as hell isn’t to help, no matter what you say! How can you care about helping any of us, when you don’t even care about Li-“

“How could I?” Snape exploded unexpectedly, images of the scene he had witnessed at Godric’s Hollow after Voldemort’s fall playing before his mind. “You want to know how I ‘disregard their sacrifice?’ It seems to have been so unremarkable to you that you entirely forget it happened!”

“What the hell are you-“

“What’s his name, Black?” The suddenly simple question was met by dead silence. “At Hogwarts. Is it Harry or James, because you seem incapable of distinguishing a difference?”

“Severus, that’s not fair-“ Molly tried to intervene.

“Do you ever remember that there was someone else who died that day too? Or is it perfectly acceptable to forget about that and just remember the one who really mattered,” he said, snarling the last words. “And then you implant your memory of your dead friend on someone who’s still quite alive, and who’s still quite a different person. Potter didn’t die to save himself, he died to save his son.”

But, Snape realized painfully, Potter wasn’t his mother either.
The Hogwarts Express had been repaired. Ron mentioned that it was a miracle they’d managed to get all the blood off the window the three of them had been dragged through, and Hermione elbowed him in the ribs.

Those who had arrived early at Hogwarts were already waiting in the Great Hall for their arrival, and were immediately surrounded by concerned friends. None of the professors tried to stem the flow as students left their seats to find friends in other houses or ran up and down the aisles to talk to various members of their own house. It took longer than normal for the first years to arrive, and Harry was sure that Hagrid and McGonagall were purposefully delaying their arrival to give the other students more time.

Eventually, though, the students regained their seats and the first years were shepherded in for the sorting. The students looked more nervous than Harry had ever seen them, and he supposed they’d probably been hearing horror stories on the train ride about what had happened at the end of last year. When they sat down, most kept a wide berth from the ones who had been taken. It wasn’t hard to see who that was, either – although everyone had mostly settled down, the house tables all had definite clumps around certain areas, shielding some of their members as best as they could.

“DADA position’s open,” Ron muttered, nodding towards the table. Sure enough, there was a chair open, just as it had been at the end of last year. Outside, lightning struck again, and the sudden illumination set the three on edge. Despite the months under the BAU’s eye, even with their help, all the students were still twitchy towards anything unexpected. The psychoanalysts had told them that it would probably be an unfortunate side effect of what happened for quite a while, and possibly for years if they didn’t try to do anything about it.

“Maybe they’re just going to have the other professors fill the spot?” Hermione hopefully suggested. “That would be the best consistency we could hope for.”

“Or every teacher who helped would be the victim of some mysterious accident and Dumbledore would have to replace the whole staff,” Ron pessimistically replied and Hermione rolled her eyes. Harry let his gaze drift down the line of teachers. Everyone else had taken their normal seats, and he didn’t think they would leave a seat open just because no teacher was filling the DADA post this year. Maybe they were still looking.

A loud bang! crashed through the hall, and Harry jumped out of his seat along with Ron and Hermione beside him and the twins across the table. As he was closest to the door, he ducked low and waited a half second while the other four sent a myriad of hexes and curses towards the sound, then raised and held a strong shield spell to protect all of them and anyone nearby. He distantly noticed furious attacks from the Hufflepuffs and Slytherins, but they were too far away for him to truly see what they were doing. Further down the table, he saw Neville was frantically firing spells, while two Ravenclaws had created a torrent of water to push out the intruder before anyone could properly see him. Neville grabbed the door closest to him with a spell and slammed it shut with the help of a Hufflepuff, while a few Slytherins grabbed the opposite door.

The hall went dead silent. Harry surreptitiously surveyed the area closest to the entrance to make sure no one had been hit by any spells in the crossfire, but everyone seemed all right.

“I believe that was our new defense teacher,” Dumbledore calmly stated, and all the students out of their seats quickly dropped back onto the benches in embarrassment, ducking as low as they could. “Even still, I believe I must commend all of your for spectacular reflexes and spell work. It is not often that I have seen Professor Moody completely taken off guard in that manner.”
“Oops,” Ron muttered, an embarrassed flush rushing onto his face.

“Who’s that?” Harry whispered.

“Mad-Eye Moody. Used to be a top auror but retired recently,” Ron whispered back. “Went against plenty of the darkest wizards in his time and put a lot of them away, but they started pushing him to leave recently because he was getting so paranoid and jumpy.”

Similar hushed conversations had broken out across the hall, and Dumbledore waited a moment for them to quiet. “Now,” he asked, eyes twinkling, “if I open the doors, would everyone mind remaining in their seats this time?”

“Can still hit him from my seat,” Justin said a little too loudly and a few people near him burst into surprised sniggers while Terry leaned over from his own table to smack him in a friendly manner on the back of the head in mock reprimand. Justin clamped both hands over his mouth and turned a bright red when he realized how many people had overheard him.

The doors opened with a wave of Dumbledore’s wand, and the new professor actually managed to enter this time. From the layered scars and eyepatch over his face to the prosthetic leg that thumped against the ground as he walked, the man had clearly seen more than just a bunch of overreactive students in his time, but Harry still felt a surge of guilt for instinctively participating in the attack. Instead of the scowl he expected, however, the man strode down the aisle with a smug expression.

“Seems this lot’s got a finer taste for defense than you told me, Albus,” he proclaimed, and the headmaster smiled. The ex-auror took the empty seat at the table, ignoring all the stares from the students.

He seemed unhurt from Harry’s vantage point, and Harry couldn’t help but feel relieved that he must have blocked or ducked most if not all of the spells that had been shot his way. A part of Harry took note that they had probably helped him by firing mostly at the same time, so he’d only had to send up one strong shield spell against a quick barrage instead of holding a slightly weaker barrier against a more extended assault. Next time they were going to have to work on volleying attacks instead of a single heavy strike.

“As I was saying,” Dumbledore continued, “we are to have the honor of hosting a very exciting event over the coming months, an event that has not been held for over a century. It is my very great pleasure to inform you that the Triwizard Tournament will be taking place at Hogwarts this year.”

“You’re joking!” Fred shouted, engendering a round of laughs. His sudden interruption did not get him stunned head over heels like Moody’s had. Harry wondered if it was because all the Quantico students were still trying to hold themselves back or if they were so used to the twin’s voice that they didn’t react as strongly.

“I am not, Mr. Weasley, though now that you mention it, I did hear an excellent one over the summer about a troll, a hag, and a leprechaun who all got into a bar-” McGonagall cleared her throat. “But maybe now is not the time, ah…”

Throughout his explanation of the tournament, Harry kept up a steady mantra in his head of all the ways he would not be getting involved in it. Over the summer, it had become a steady joke between him and Morgan that he never actively sought out danger but he never tried to avoid it either. While he knew the agent was just ribbing him for his bad luck, he had decided that this year, he would formally attempt to keep himself out of any trouble that looked like it was coming his way. He couldn’t quite ignore the niggling feeling that he was still going to fail this year, though.
“How’s your head?” Ron asked quietly, nodding. He was sprawled on his bed, head turned to look at Harry. Neville had walked into their dormitory a few minutes ago, but Dean and Seamus were still absent, giving them some time to talk.

Harry reached up and lightly ran his fingers over the incision site, hidden by his hair. It had been healed the day of the surgery, but they had left the mark in case they had to go back in through the same spot to remove more. “It’s okay. Muggle medicine’s pretty impressive, especially combined with magic. But…” He grimaced. “I started having a headache right before we left Quantico.”

“Did you tell your…” He glanced at the door. “Did you tell anyone?”

“Yeah. They ran the scans again. It… It looks like they didn’t get everything, and what’s left is starting to grow back. The doctors think I might need to head back before term is over to get more taken out.” He let out a laugh. “Hey, at least I’ve got an excuse to head back to America next summer, right?”

“Bets that Sirius is going to demand to join you and fuss over you the whole way?” Ron asked lightly. An expression of horror dawned over Harry’s face. “Maybe that’s too realistic…”

Steps and low voices on the stairs outside hushed them immediately, and they looked up to see Seamus Finnigan and Dean Thomas entering. The pair eyed all three nervously, entering a bit slower than they normally would have. Harry regretfully realized they were probably apprehensive about startling them after the display in the Great Hall when Moody had entered.

The two carefully took spots at the ends of their bed, and the change in the room’s mood caused Ron to sit up and focus on the pair along with Neville and Harry. Their eyes flickered between their three roommates, as if unsure quite what to make of them. Yet they weren’t afraid and they weren’t refusing to make eye contact, which Harry thought was a good sign.

“We just, ah…” Seamus started, glancing at Dean helplessly for support. “Well, we just wanted to make sure you were doing all right.”

A wave of relief hit Harry. They weren’t worried about getting stunned, just worried about upsetting their roommates. He hid a smile. The two weren’t Gryffindors for nothing – they had more concern for saying the wrong thing than getting hit.

“As good as can be expected,” Harry replied. While he hadn’t expected the pair to dismiss what had happened, he certainly hadn’t anticipated the express concern, especially not so soon. “I mean…” He swallowed, and the last look Goyle had thrown over his shoulder at Draco as he was led out flashed through his mind. ‘It could have been worse’ didn’t seem like the appropriate thing to say. “We’re here,” he settled on.

“Some people are saying…it was an attempt to bring back You-Know-Who,” Dean said hesitantly. When the other three exchanged glances, he hastily backtracked. “I mean, sorry, you probably don’t want to talk about this-“

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“Not really,” Neville cut in before Dean fell over himself trying to apologize or get out of the conversation. Dean blinked in surprise, and for the first time, he seemed to really notice the change that had occurred in the shyest member of their dorm room over the summer. Harry felt a surge of pride. The other teenager had always been brave – their first year had proven that when he stood up against the trio when they had tried to slip out of the common room – but the events over the last few months had forced him to really accept that and make something out of what he had. “But…it’s
important. And they killed ten students for it, so if we pretend like it never happened, or if we just
don’t talk about it... Then there wasn’t any purpose into us getting out alive.”

Harry found himself nodding before he realized it. Across from him, Ron was gripping his knees and
staring at the floor. Harry didn’t have to imagine what he was probably picturing. When he turned to
face Dean and Seamus again, he saw Dean was staring at his scarred wrists in horror. Seamus
elbowed him and he quickly looked away.

“Yeah,” Harry replied quietly. “He’s back. They used some others to complete the sacrifice. Did you
hear that some families were killed after we were taken?” Both nodded. “The Death Eaters who took
us... They did that because they felt those families hadn’t stayed loyal.” He grimaced. “Even the
Slytherins aren’t completely safe this time.”

Seamus gnawed on the inside of his lip for a moment. “So... You-Know-Who’s really back. Why
isn’t the Ministry doing anything about it?”

“Fudge doesn’t want to have an insane, murderous maniac on the loose, I suppose,” Harry said.
“And if he ignores it long enough, he thinks it’ll just go away. Maybe he’s got some people leaning
on him to stay quiet about it too. I don’t know; it’s just stupid.”

Dean shook his head and dropped it into his hands. “I don’t want him to be back, but that doesn’t
mean it’s a good excuse to bury my head in the sand,” he said, raising his head and gesturing with
open arms at them. “What if we got attacked again? For most of us, our only decent teacher was last
year, and he’s gone now! I mean, we all saw what happened last year on the train. Sure, the seventh
and sixth years were able to do something, but the only thing they could do was apparate. No one
was actually able to protect themselves. So what the hell are we doing in DADA then?”

After the conversation drifted apart and everyone began to go to sleep, Harry remained awake in his
bed, staring at the ceiling and thinking. What Dean had said at the end stuck with him. Even if
Moody proved to be just as good as Lupin, the Quantico students, as he had mentally dubbed them
in his head, were still too twitchy and had far too much pent-up energy. It had only been a few days
since they had left and Harry was already uncomfortable without practicing defensive tactics, and he
was sure he wasn’t the only one worried about losing the edge he had built up over the summer.

A few hours later, he gave up and quietly got his phone out of his robe pockets at the end of his bed.
Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Neville lift his head slightly to see who was moving before
laying back down when he saw it was just Harry. Dean and Seamus were dead asleep, but Harry still
retreated to the end of his bed furthest from them in case they happened to wake up.

His hands were slowly but definitely getting back to their former dexterity, and as a result, he could
send a group text out to the Quantico students, hoping for a reply in the morning. Is anyone else
freaking out about not training at all?

He laid back down, tucking his phone into his pajama pockets in favor of getting up again. Before he
could properly settle into sleep, a flood of replies hit his phone.

YES

I seriously thought we might have killed Moody today until he walked back in

All I was thinking during dinner was that my shield spell wasn’t strong enough to protect everyone
around me, and I’m already doing better that most of the sixth and seventh years in my house

I’m standing outside the bathroom listening to someone puking because they’re crying so hard over
what just happened to us. They weren’t with us but they’re worried we’re going to be taken again

Same – I am literally walking from dormitory to dormitory calming first and second years down

(I’ll join you Padma responded to Roger’s comment)

The Slytherins are panicking. A big group of them were crying in the common room and I had to
calm them down and remind them that we're still alive

Harry rubbed his hands over his face as the texts just kept coming in. He was aware that Ron and
Neville were both among those sending messages, and was grateful they had all had the foresight to
turn their phones on silent or the buzzing would surely have woken Dean and Seamus by now.

I’ll find us a spot, Hermione said. We’re not doing this again.

Hermione, you’re awesome, Anthony texted.

She knows, Ron responded.

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Classes for the next week were considerably more lenient than normal to allow the Quantico students
to adapt back to regular life. Although they had mostly accepted what happened and were mostly
adjusted, they were grateful for the time because it gave them a few days to acclimate to magical life
again after so long in the muggle world. The leniency extended to everyone even though only twenty
some students had been affected, and there was a particular emphasis on the house that had been hit
the hardest by mourning. Moody, the new DADA professor, had not gotten that staff memo, but at
least everyone else acknowledged that Slytherins had feelings for once.

Harry and Draco crossed paths on the first day in Herbology. Before Sprout entered, the two found
themselves standing face to face without any intentions of having ended up in that position.

“Potter.”

“Malfoy.”

“Seems James Potter wasn’t all he was cracked up to be, now was he?” Draco sneered. The
Slytherins behind him all grew quiet, and none made a move to intercede – however, no one
supported it either. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Hermione’s hand fly up to cover her
mouth, but he was positive she wasn’t hiding horror.

“Oh, how would you know?” Harry snapped back.

"You'd have been better growing up in the muggle world without bothering the rest of us."

"At least I would have been away from the idiots running the Ministry."

With Lucius Malfoy included in that category, a few people backed away in case a duel was about to
start. Harry futilely bit his lip, feeling the corners of his mouth raising. Draco’s lips were pressed a
little too thin to be doing anything but stopping his own mouth from doing the same.

“Everyone,” a voice from the door said, and they both quickly turned away and went back to their
own houses. Sprout walked in, sadly glancing between the two. Apparently, some had thought the
experience might have neutralized the tense relationship between them. It was hard not to send her a
reassuring smile. “Please step up to a pot, and let’s turn to page thirty-two. Now, see the red thorns
Harry scribbled a note and passed it to Hermione, who managed to get it to Daphne when Sprout turned to get something. After that, Harry lost track of it, but after class he, Ron, and Hermione went straight to Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom. The fourth year Slytherins met them there not long after.

“So we talked to one of the house elves at the castle,” Harry said as soon as they got in there. “We found a room that only appears when it’s needed. Everyone’s gathering there in about five minutes. I told them we were going to be late because we were going to get you. How fast can you grab Cassius and Adrian?”

“Less than ten minutes. Meet you back here?”

“Yeah, and then we’ll show you the way.”

Not long after found everyone gathered in the Room of Requirement. It took a half hour to get past greetings, and by that time, a few had classes they had to run off for. The rest gradually separated themselves into smaller groups as friends tried to catch up.

“How are the Slytherins doing?” Ron asked Draco as soon as they had taken their own corner. “You guys were hit the hardest of everyone.”

“Badly. We lost five, and most in Slytherin knew at least one of them. When we got back,” Cassius interrupted, plopping down into a cushion that appeared underneath him, “a lot of Slytherins were already open to the idea of making amends. Some of them are terrified, and they’re willing to switch alliances right now. This might be the best time to get them away from Voldemort’s side.” Draco winced at the name. “But a few seem even more radical before, and if we openly advocate the Light, anyone who graduates is going to be in danger.”

Harry nodded as he turned to the side to grab a tennis ball off the ground beside him. The room really did know what they wanted. “I was kind of worried about that. Do you think it’s safe for any of them to admit to switching sides?” He started tossing the ball back and forth, working at closing his fingers quickly enough to stop it from falling from his hands. In comparison to when he had first started, his fingers barely stuttered now.

“Bigger question,” Cassius said, leaning back and pointing at Draco and Harry. “Is it a good idea to keep you two hating each other in public? It might make it harder to bring the Slytherins and everyone else together.”

Draco paused then shook his head vigorously. “My family is in one of the best positions to get compromising information,” he admitted. “There’s a lot I might be able to learn if he still trusts me enough to tell me when something happens. And if I split off, it could put them in danger. And the Slytherins who still want to support the Dark Lord will keep talking to me, and I’ll know if they’re planning anything.”

“I don’t like it,” Cassius immediately said. “You shouldn’t be spying, not at fourteen.”

“I’m too young to spy on the Dark Lord but I’m old enough to get sacrificed to bring him back?” Draco demanded and Cassius hesitated. “I want to be safe. And I want everyone here to be safe too. If this is the only way I can help do that, then it’s what I’m going to do. Would you do any different?”

Cassius shook his head, slumping down in the cushion. “I s’pose not…”

“My dad’s going to flip,” Harry muttered. “He expressly told everyone to quit spying once he
realized the twins were trying to get information out of their parents and Sirius.”

“Then don’t tell him,” Draco flatly said.

“Sometimes it’s not a question of not telling him…”

Hermione suddenly jumped up from her seat and began throwing her books into her bag. “We’ve got class in five minutes with Snape!” She stood and shouted, “Fourth year Gryffindors and Slytherins! We’ve got to go!” There was a flurry of movement as panicked red-and-gold clad students bolted for the door while the others laughed.

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The students filed into their first DADA class of the year with a mix of apprehension and excitement. The students who hadn’t gone to Quantico were bubbling over, while those who were considerably less trusting of the new professor more reluctantly took their seats.

While the first day may have endeared them to him, it certainly had not worked the other way around. Nor did his actions later on.

Once Moody had told them to put the books up, he stared straight ahead at the group of students while his magical eye flittered about, taking stock of those in front of him. Harry did his best not to let too much of his discomfort show. Not long ago, he and Draco had gotten into one of their regular rows in the middle of the hallway, and Draco had started to cast a rather harmless hex on him while his back had been turned. In response, Moody had turned him into a ferret and bounced him around. Harry knew he hadn’t been able to suppress his look of horror quickly enough and Ron had had to kick Hermione when she put one hand over her mouth. It was already evident that Moody’s eye could see out of the back of his head, and they just had to hope he hadn’t been looking at them right at those moments.

“Longbottom,” he barked out, the sudden word making everyone jump. Moody grinned when he noticed several of the students had automatically reached for their wands. “Well done with your Bat-Bogey Hex during the opening feast.”

Neville flushed, but not as deeply as he would have last year. Harry suppressed a smile. “I- Thank you, sir,” he asked, a little confused but not flustered.

“Let’s get to it, then. Curses. Which are the most heavily punished by wizarding law?”

A few people raised their hands, and Moody looked at Ron.

“The Imperius Curse, or something?”

“Oh, your father would know about that one. Gave the Ministry a lot of trouble at one time, it did.” He pulled out a jaw of three spiders and removed one. Quite frankly, after the Acromantula, these didn’t even look remotely threatening. Still, Ron’s phobia had him subtly leaning away. “The Ministry had to keep a close eye on those around them. Required quite a degree of CONSTANT VIGILANCE!” Hermione whipped her wand back under the desk before Harry could properly realize that it had come out. Their professor sent an approving look her way but made no comment. Turning his gaze from her, he lifted the spider up so everyone could see, then pointed his wand at it.

“Imperio!”

The spider began tap-dancing, and Harry grimaced at the ease with which the professor controlled it. He couldn’t help but feel relief that none of the werewolves had been able to lead the students to their deaths with the curse, had at least given the students the chance to fight… Or would it have
been more peaceful if they had just been forced to go along with it? Were the victims aware?

“Does someone under the curse know what’s happening to them?”

The spider stopped moving and everyone turned to stare at him. With a feeling of trepidation, he realized that had come out of his mouth, and he clenched his jaw in case something else escaped him.

“Stand up, Potter, and you tell me,” Moody responded.

Harry shoved back from his desk and got to his feet before his senses could catch up with him. He avoided looking at his friends beside him. Hermione was shaking her head at him quickly and Ron had turned white. Across the room, he happened to see Neville plant his face in one hand, but he couldn’t tell if he was exasperated at Harry or didn’t want to watch.

“Granger and Weasley, move away from him,” Moody ordered.

“If it’s all the same to you, professor,” Ron replied, “I think I’ll stay right where I’m at.” On his other side, Hermione remained perfectly still.

Moody’s eye flickered over them for a few moments before he nodded. “Have it your way.” Both eyes went to Harry, and he did his best to ignore the electric blue, sentient orb that for once remained focused. “Potter, you’ll get the best answer to your question if you just go along with it,” he said. “However, if you so choose, it’s possible to fight off the Imperius Curse. It takes a certain strength and not everyone can do it, but you can give it a go if you want.”

Harry nodded stiffly and Moody raised his wand. “Imperio.”

A wave of calm swept over him, a calm he hadn’t felt in a long while. He felt completely at peace, entirely soothed. Not since… Not since before…

Jump onto the desk, he heard a part of his mind whisper. It sounded like Mad-Eye Moody.

Why, though? That wasn’t even a really good exercise, not after Blackwolf’s boot camp, and this wasn’t really the place for it.

Jump onto the desk, he heard again.

The peace came over him again, and he wondered why he was resisting. He hadn’t felt so calm since Quantico, not since last winter, really, when he’d been staying with his dad and Jack… Would they want him to jump?

Jump onto the desk.

No, no, resisting was much too painful. Wasn’t that how he got hurt over the summer? Wasn’t that how Cho Chang and Vincent Crabbe and all the others died, fighting?

JUMP ONTO THE-

He could hear the screaming again, see the blood as the werewolf sank its claw into Ernie’s arm again…

A ringing pain made him jerk awake and he stumbled back into the desk behind him. Someone’s hand steadied him, and he grabbed onto the desk and his chair to avoid tumbling to the floor. He blinked a few times and shook his head, too dazed to focus. The side of his head was aching. Had he
smacked it on something?

When he finally got his bearings back, he saw Hermione standing in front of him with both hands on his shoulders. “Are you okay?” she was asking.

“What happened?”

“You hit yourself pretty hard in the ear,” she said quietly.

“Trying to make the voice stop?” Moody asked from the front of the room. His wand had lowered, and he looked triumphant at Harry’s response to the curse.

Harry shakily nodded, taking the provided answer. He wasn’t about to admit which voices he had been hearing, but from the expressions of Ron and Hermione, they already had a solid guess. He moved to take his seat again, but Moody shook his head and gestured for him to keep standing.

“I was going to do another lesson and teach the rest of you to shake off the curse. Want to get yours over with?”

“ Didn’t I just do that?” he asked through gritted teeth.

“Causing yourself injury doesn’t particularly count, Potter. Do it again.”

Hermione hissed something at him, but he shook his head and got back to his feet.

When the curse hit him this time, it didn’t take nearly as long to throw it off. He barely moved as the curse’s influence left him, and it was a moment before he had regained his senses entirely. “Good enough?” he asked, trying not to sound antagonistic but sure he was failing.

Moody was grinning. “Well done, Mr. Potter. Not many can throw off an Imperius so aptly, and certainly not at your age!”

“ ‘Cause most kids his age aren’t getting imperioed in the middle of class,” Ron muttered under his breath.

“You’ll get your turn next week, Mr. Weasley,” Moody replied, his eye focused on Ron even though his head was directed towards the jar he was removing another spider from. “As I said, everyone willing is going to go under the curse.” He held up the next spider. “You got one of three. What’s another curse?”

“Avada Kedavra,” someone whispered.

A green light hit the spider with a burst of sound. A few students cried out, but all Harry could think was that it was remarkably anticlimactic. Before he had met his real father, he had wondered how his parents must have died, particularly after hearing Lily Evans screaming his third year. Now, after watching the deaths of the ten students during the ritual, he wondered if that wasn’t a better way to go.

Quickly.

“No countercurse and no blocking it,” Moody said. “Only one person’s survived it, and he’s sitting in this room.” Harry stared straight ahead as most of the class turned to look at him, but he ignored them. Hadn’t they stared enough over the years? “With no effective way to protect yourself against it, there is but a single way to make sure you don’t get struck down by it. CONSTANT VIGILANCE!”
The four Quantico students very nearly hit Moody with a variety of curses, catching themselves just in time. Ron, who had gone so far as to get out of his desk, flopped back into his chair with a growl of frustration.

Even Hermione, who was usually so polite towards the teachers, snapped, “Would you stop that?!”

“Miss Granger, I assure you, it’s unlikely that any of you will be able to hit me. Don’t lose those reflexes. They might save your life one day.” He looked around the rest of the class, who were eyeing their four twitchy members in concern. “The third curse, now.”

A few began to raise their hands, then quickly dropped them. Harry glanced around, frowning. What was so terrible about the last one that they didn’t want to talk about it? Neville was staring at his desk, hard, and the rest of the class was looking at him, Harry, Ron, and Hermione.

Finally, Neville raised his hand and looked at Moody, face set. Moody nodded towards him. “The Cruciatus Curse.”

“Engorgio,” Moody said, and the spider grew larger. Ron scooted back as far as he could go, abandoning any pretense. “Gotta be large for all of you to properly see. Crucio!”

The spider began thrashing uncontrollably, and though no sound escaped it, Harry could distantly hear screaming as the werewolves ripped apart one of his classmates. His hands gripped his knees as he trembled from the effort of resisting the urge to grab his wand. The spider looked all too similar to Cedric Diggory, unable to move after the werewolves had cut his spine and yet still fighting to stay alive.

Moody made no effort to relieve the pressure, and the spider’s shudders became more violent as no refuge from the pain came. It’s back began to bend at an unnatural angle and-

“Petrificus Totalus!”

“Stupefy!”

“Accio!”

“Expelliarmus!”

Moody flew back and the spider went the other direction, summoned by Ron’s wand. Ron screamed as the spider landed on his desk and stumbled into Harry, who steadied them before they both hit the ground. “I didn’t think that through!”

Lavender Brown scurried over to Moody and peered at him. “I thought he said you wouldn’t ever get the drop on him?” she asked.

Harry stared at the spider, still twitching on Ron’s desk from the after effects of the curse. Ron was also looking at it, but he seemed conflicted between giving it space after what it had gone through and beating it with a textbook. On the other side of the room, Neville shakily lowered his own wand and moaned, burying his face in both hands.

“Are we going to get in trouble for this?” Hermione asked.

“Someone call Madame Pomfrey down,” Seamus, who had run to stand over Moody’s unconscious body to make sure he was all right, said.
A scream tore through the image of Abigail Wrottan writhing in pain on the bloody ritual floor, and Harry jerked away from the bonds holding him in place even as they tore at his wrists. The wires gave way immediately, and he had a moment of lucid confusion as he felt suspended in midair for a brief moment before his back erupted in pain.

He opened his eyes and flailed, legs still bound by...something. The screaming continued, and it was too dark for Harry to see if any of the werewolves were approaching. He lashed out in case any were close enough, but he only succeeded in kicking a few inches because of his bindings. The floor, softer than Harry had remembered it being, provided enough leverage for him to kick off and try to wiggle his way out of whatever had tied his legs together.

It wasn’t until he saw the light from the window above Ron’s bed that he realized he was in Hogwarts, and that his sheets were still wrapped around him even after he had tumbled to the floor. He quickly disentangled himself, hands shaking, and got to his feet whilst hoping that no one had heard his embarrassing tumble. The screaming continued, and for a dumbfounded moment, he wondered why it was still so clear outside of his dream.

Two wands lit up the room, and Harry saw Ron thrashing in his own bed. A burst of light from Neville’s bed gave Harry just enough warning to duck out of the way of a spell, and he held up his hands in surrender. Neville got a good look at him and realized the only standing figure in the room was indeed someone he knew, then put his wand down. Harry scrambled around his bed to Ron’s and began shaking his friend awake. “Ron! Ron!”

The redhead jolted upright, hands grasping at Harry’s clothes. “Harry!” he exclaimed the moment he recognized him. “Ginny, they’re going to- They-”

“Ron, it’s just a dream,” he said soothingly. “She’s fine, she’s here at Hogwarts, remember? We all are.” Ron’s grip on his arms was strong enough to bruise but he made no effort to dislodge him. “We’re safe. We got out.”

Ron panted for a few more moments, eyes flickering over the room as recognition slowly settled in. He gaze met Seamus’ and Dean’s, and he groaned, head sinking forward to lean against his chest. “Sorry, everyone,” he mumbled. “Just a stupid dream.”

“I’m just glad you woke me out of mine,” Neville admitted.

“Same,” Harry added with a nod.

“Don’t worry about it,” Dean said. “I’m sure I’d be just as bad if I’d been taken instead. Do you want me to go get Madame Pomfrey?”

Ron waved him off. “No, but thanks. I- I think I’m fine now.”

“It was the Cruciatus yesterday, wasn’t it?” Seamus asked quietly. When none of them responded, he snarled, “What was Moody thinking, doing that in front of you guys? ‘Need to know,’ my arse, you four already knew!”

“Well, I think we had the last laugh, at any rate,” Ron said with a shaky smile. “Did you see his face before we knocked him out?”

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Author's Note: Fast update because of the weekend delay. If I finish my essay tonight, I'll post another chapter before I go to bed or in the morning.
I'm so happy with Crouch-Moody's introduction to the series. He shouldn't have startled the kids.

Hey, reminder – the tumblr blog (writingsarcomeres) I created has a bunch of tidbits about the story on it, including things like a list of everyone who was at the massacre. You might find it useful for resources like that.
"The past is gone and cannot harm you anymore. And while the future is fast coming for you, it always flinches first and settles as the gentle present." - *Welcome to Nightvale*

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Three weeks later, and Harry found himself suppressing a grin as he walked into the FBI headquarters. Morgan, face as impassive as Harry had ever seen it, greeted them at the doors and got them around security and into the elevators within a few minutes. The contraption was entirely empty, and the four spaced themselves out evenly. McGonagall didn’t look like she entirely trusted it.

They made it to the infirmary portion of the building in complete silence. The top secret aura Morgan was attempting to give his little group was somewhat negated for Harry since he already knew this area like the back of his hand, but he suspected it was having an impact on McGonagall and Snape.

At the infirmary, a group of physicians was already waiting for them. Harry recognized all of them, both from his time there when they had arrived over the summer and from the initial surgery, and resisted the urge to smirk. One of the youngest, a female nurse, didn’t quite manage to suppress her own and hid it by pretending to mutter to one of her coworkers.

“Mr. Potter,” Morgan said as they came to a stop by the group. The nurse kept her face hidden, which was made easier by her proximity to the back. “This is the medical staff who will be operating on you. Due to legal reasons, Professor McGonagall and I are going to be present. Is that okay?”

He nodded.

“Let’s take this into my office,” Dr. Anders suggested, and led the combined groups out of the large infirmary and down the hall.

Harry looked around at the rooms they were passing, trying his best to give off the impression of a wide-eyed teenager who had most definitely not spent several days in this exact area and months surrounded by similar walls and offices. While he turned his head to watch another room pass by, he caught sight of Snape dropping behind to mutter something to Morgan, who nodded and replied. The professor stopped walking with them and turned to go the opposite way, back to the elevators.

Harry blinked in confusion and turned to McGonagall, who was still beside him. “Why did he come with us just to leave?” he asked quietly.

McGonagall glanced at him and then in the direction he gestured with his head. She paused, choosing her words, before admitting, “I cannot claim to know specifics, but I am aware that he has a friend in the area who he visits.” She mistook his gape for basic astonishment. “Oh, honestly, even Professor Snape has friends.”

Harry slowed slightly to walk a pace behind her until he could turn and mouth to Morgan, “They’re on a friendship level now?!”
Morgan laughed silently at his mental anguish.

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In Dr. Anders’ office, they gave him a rundown of what they were going to do to remove the tumor. They had given him almost exactly the same explanation just a few months ago, and he had to force himself to pay attention. Morgan helped by kicking him in the back of the leg whenever he thought Harry’s mind was wandering, which was rather often. The snickering nurse was hiding behind McGonagall, by the door, so she could freely and silently laugh at the situation.

When he woke up from the surgery, his first thought was to wonder when they were going to knock him out. It took several reassurances from Dr. Anders, who had remained nearby until he woke up, and Morgan to explain that the surgery had already happened. McGonagall had temporarily left the room, and Morgan used the brief time to turn the conversation to more personal matters. Dr. Anders gave them some privacy and stood outside, pretending to look over a clipboard while he kept an eye out for the professor’s return.

“He’s looking better,” Harry said. He’d seen the youngest profiler on the way in.

“Reid’s looking better,” Harry said. He’d seen the youngest profiler on the way in. “He is. I didn’t want to say anything while everyone was here in case it changed, but he got his life turned around. His mood’s much better and his mind’s more focused. He’s back to his usual self. I think having you guys here gave him a reason to change.”

Harry shrugged. “I’m glad we’re here for something. How’s everyone else doing?” The easy smile slipped from Morgan’s face, and he looked away. Harry frowned. “Morgan?”

“There was a rough case a few weeks ago,” he admitted. “Gideon had gotten really involved in tracking down a killer almost a year ago, and the man showed up again. He killed an old friend of Gideon’s and someone we had rescued about half a year ago.”

“What? Why?”

“Because he knew how badly it would hurt Gideon,” Morgan quietly said. “And it worked. We caught him, but Gideon wasn’t doing well, and we had another bad case right after… Not long after, we couldn’t get a response from him when we were about to head out on a case, so Reid went to go see if he was okay.” He shook his head and sighed. “Place was empty when he got there. Nothing but a farewell letter. Just up and left.”

Harry leaned back against the headboard with a thump. “I… He’s gone?”

How could he just be…gone? After everything he’d done for them? All the hours he’d spent watching the students practice, training for their lives, watching for the ones who needed help. And then he’d pull them aside, and settle the whirling thoughts that were distracting them, and send them back to the group smiling. Tell a story to the group when he knew someone needed a laugh. Teach them the difference between telling when someone cared and when someone was pretending.

Find the one who had snuck off to cry over a lost friend in an empty room, and just hug them until their tears dried. Grab the children who needed a break and arrange for them to see a football game with Morgan or a baseball game with JJ. Never tell them it was going to be okay when he didn’t know, but tell what they could do instead of lingering on what they couldn’t. The considerate grandfather figure most of them had never had. Gone.

Morgan nodded solemnly. “I’m sorry,” he said, and after a moment, added, “I shouldn’t have told you this right now.”
“No, no… I… I needed to know,” he responded slowly. “It just… I never thought this fazed you guys.”

The agent grimaced. “It really does. More than you know.”

A thought struck Harry. “How are you guys doing? I mean, this can’t be easy for you.”

“It’s not. But…we’ll be okay.” He smirked slightly. “Strauss tried to get Hotch removed from the BAU. She suspended him and Blackwolf raised hell. For some unknown reason, she decided we just had to have supervision, so she went with us on a case. We put her in the worst situations until she just decided to leave Hotch to deal with us.”

Harry snorted in amusement, but he recognized the diversionary tactic for what it was and his mirth only lasted a few seconds. Morgan’s own smile slipped away. “We thought there was something going on,” he admitted. “Everyone stopped communicating for a few days, and then some people noticed Gideon had slowly stopped replying. But…we just thought…” He sighed. “I’ll tell them once I get back.”

“I heard the whole group gets together often.”

“Yeah. At first, it was just because we were the only ones who really knew what happened, you know? No one else really understood, and we just wanted to vent to someone who did.” He shrugged. “The room we’re using is always open for us, and it’s not uncommon to see at least ten of us there in the evenings.” A bit quieter, he added, “I think some go there when they’ve got nightmares in the middle of the night.”

“Hotch said you mentioned that in an email,” Morgan replied, nodding.

Harry smiled slightly. “And Draco said you and Reid have been counseling some of the Slytherins over the phone. He might not say it, but he’s really grateful.”

“It feels weird without all of you here for training,” he admitted.

“We’ve still been practicing. Some of the kids are sparring to work off steam, and everyone kept running.” He laughed, adding, “There were a few in our own house who didn’t recognize Neville when he showed up, by the way. It took a bunch of us to convince them that it was really him.”

Morgan opened his arms. “Hey, Hotch said to throw out an invitation – anyone who can make it back next summer is welcome.”

“I think a lot of us will be taking you up on that offer,” Harry admitted.

“You’re not optional,” Morgan said, pointing. “Hotch is already making a main plan, and Garcia is scheming a whole heap of kidnappings in case the rest don’t work out. You will be in Virginia this summer. That is a fact.”

Harry went back to Hogwarts with Snape and McGonagall the same day that he had arrived. In the end, he hadn’t even gotten to see the rest of the team since Snape had been in the bullpen until they had left.

For the next few weeks, the BAU focused on their cases with single-minded determination. While the students were important, that didn’t mean they could neglect all the other victims in the world, particularly the ones who they could help and the ones who they could protect ahead of time or save.
Without Gideon, their work load was a bit uncomfortable, especially since they were still catching up a bit from the hectic summer with the students, but no one complained. The result was a necessary sacrifice they were willing to deal with if it meant the students had felt safer returning to school.

Earlier that morning, David Rossi’s appearance had sparked some stirs in the group. They had already decided they were going to tell him by the third week if he was still around, since that was around the time that Prentiss had been told. For now, the rest of the team was preparing to watch him closely, to evaluate him to see if there was any reason why he shouldn’t know what was going on in the background. Hotch heard a few murmurs about how they were going to hide the extra workload in case Rossi wondered how they had gotten so far behind, but before it became a problem, they were already moving out for another case as they reached the time of year Hotch had been dreading for months. None of them had begun their discrete analyses, seeing as the man hadn’t actually come in yet.

Hotch put the matter out of his mind, instead focusing on his current project while he had a short gap in work. Thankfully, they had almost entirely caught up, giving him the necessary respite. The trio had been sending him information about Moody, who all of the students were rather frustrated about, and he had been in the middle of trying to create a profile while the three were working on homework. They left the line open in case Hotch had a quick question to help clear up the profile.

“You know, I think it’s back to the old Divination standby,” Ron said after several minutes of groaning over the star charts he was looking at. Since they were only on a call, Hotch couldn’t see his expression, but after months with him over the summer he could all too easily picture his face lighting up at the new plan.

“What – make it up?” Harry asked. Hermione, having opted not to take the class this year after their third year’s disaster, was largely just laughing at them whenever they talked about it, but was in class at the moment.

“Yeah. Next Monday, I am likely to develop a cough, owing to the unlucky conjunction of Mars and Jupiter.”

Hotch was so busy raising an eyebrow at the phone that he didn’t notice the door opening. “Is your teacher seriously likely to buy that?”

“Oh, yeah. Loads of misery and it’s spot on. You wouldn’t believe how many times she predicted Harry’s death last year. And didn’t she say something last lesson, something about…?”

“And I quote, ‘The position of Mars with relation to Saturn at that moment meant that people born in July are in great danger of sudden, violent deaths,’” Harry replied.

“Well,” Hotch said, not entirely sure what the proper response to that was.

“Monday, I’ll be in danger of, uh, burns. …Wait, that’s actually logical. We’re with the skrewts on Monday.”

“Does that even count as a prediction?”

“Shut up and sense your death on Tuesday.”

Ron snorted. “Nah, I’ll, uh…” There was the sound of pages flipping. “Loose a treasured possession. ‘Cause, er, Mercury.”

“Like your pride? Blaise is catching up to you on the stupefy.”
“Whatever. Why don’t you get stabbed in the back by someone you thought was a friend?”

“Yeah, right, because… Venus is in the twelfth house.”

“Wednesday, I’ll come off worst in a fight.”

“Man, you took mine. I’ll lose a bet instead.”

“Yeah, you’ll be betting I’ll win my fight.”

Hermione’s voice came over the phone. “Oh, is that your dad? Morning, Hotch!”

“Hermione,” he greeted, making a few more notes on his paper, entirely unaware of the other presence in the room. “Your friends are going to have a very bad upcoming month. You might want to stay away from them if their charts are even remotely accurate.”

There was motion, and then Hermione said, “You seem to be drowning twice, Ron,” as she looked over his chart.

“Oh, nice catch. I’ll change one of them to getting trampled by a rampaging hippogriff.”

“Don’t you think she’s going to notice you die an awful lot in these?” Hotch asked, amused.

“How dare you!” Ron exclaimed in fake indignation. “We’ve been working hard at this!”

“…decapitation on Friday…” Harry muttered in the background.

“You must be Agent Rossi,” a voice said loudly, and Hotch jumped and his head whipped up to find an entirely bewildered David Rossi standing just inside his doorway. Behind him, Morgan’s loud entrance was punctuated by an extended hand. The phone call went dead silent.

Rossi finally turned slowly from Hotch and took the proffered hand. “Yes,” he said slowly. “You are…?”

“Derek Morgan. Nice to meet you.”

“Right…” He raised an eyebrow at Hotch. “So, two drownings was it?”

“Hey!” Ron exclaimed on the other line. “I think I see my demise by fire coming true today after all. Watch as the heliopaths approach.”

“Those are your brothers, Ronald,” Hermione scolded.

“Same thing.”

“Oops, gotta go,” Harry muttered. “Explosive fire demons and technology don’t really go well together.”

“I’ll see you later, Harry,” Hotch agreed, and the phone call ended. He looked up at Rossi with an entirely blank expression, daring the other man to say something. Rossi opened and closed his mouth a few times as Hotch got up and moved to properly greet him. “Sorry,” he said with a smile, “I didn’t hear you come in.”

“Kids?” Rossi asked.

Hotch nodded, smiling. “Yeah. My oldest son and his friends. They’ve got some, ah, interesting
classes this term.”

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“So he tortures her? Out of anger?” Prentiss threw out.

Halloween.

A holiday that used to have absolutely no impact on Hotch, beside the brutal murders that showed up around it, until something went bad every single year for Harry. Five hours. Five hours left to break the cycle of bad luck.

As if.

“Masks often represent a state of mind,” Reid said, and Hotch refocused his attention on the case. Beside him, Rossi was taking notes, but from Hotch’s angle, he couldn’t see if it was about the team or the murder. “This one’s blank, expressionless. Doesn’t really coincide with anger.”

“It’s hard to imagine he did this out of anything less than rage,” Morgan replied, holding up a bloody picture of the crime scene.

The words had barely left his mouth when a wave of texts swept through the airplane. Rossi looked up from his pad of paper in surprise as the rest of the BAU began reaching for their phones. The open laptop in front of JJ showed a call from Garcia, which she accepted as she dug her phone out of the backpack next to her seat. The texts kept coming, and the phones vibrated every few seconds even as the agents tried to keep up.

Morgan planted his face in his hands. “Oh my God.”

“You have got to be kidding me,” Hotch muttered, scrolling through the texts.

“What’s happened? What’s going on?” Rossi asked. There was no way he had not noticed he was the only one not being contacted, which meant it was unlikely to be a message from the bureau.

“They’re all still down at the Great Hall,” Garcia said over the line. “I told everyone to have someone call me as soon as they can. Harry’s off with the rest of the…competitors, or I’m sure he’d be texting us too.”

“Who’s Harry?”

The rest of the group stopped flicking through texts long enough to exchange glances. Hotch sighed and got to his feet. “I’ll call Blackwolf for another demonstration.”

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They landed an hour later, and Rossi was still eyeing the rest of them from time to time, trying to decipher the oddities in the agents around him. Hotch didn’t envy him the confusion, and he could tell Prentiss fully sympathized with him, having been in the same place only a few months ago. Blackwolf was occupied for a while and was sending Travis instead, but she wasn’t going to make it until tomorrow. Hotch told the group to focus on the murder – they couldn’t do anything about what was happening in England now, but they could do something to help the people in Texas who were in danger.

Seven hours later, after they had left the police station to settle in at the hotel, Garcia called him with the news that she was on the line with a group of students at Hogwarts. Hotch asked her to wait a
moment while he got the rest of the team sans Rossi down to his room.

Finally, with two video feeds open to see Garcia and the students, while most of the BAU made themselves fit into the background behind him, Hotch waited for the students to explain.

“It wasn’t his-“

“-didn’t put it in-“

“-probably Karkaroff-“

“-sorry, but Mad-Eye’s way sketchier-“

“-hate Halloween-“

“-just came out after we already had one-“

“From the beginning,” Hotch interrupted. “One person, please.”

Harry jumped in before anyone else could. Hermione and Draco were beside him, with Ron leaning on their shoulders. Others were in view behind them, and Hotch was sure the rest of the group was in the room somewhere despite the hour their time. “A few days ago, they told us that anyone who wanted to participate in the tournament had to put their names in the Goblet of Fire-“

“The what?” Morgan interrupted.

“Basically a really, really big goblet that held fire,” Ron explained and Hermione elbowed him. “Somehow it decides who’s the most worthy to compete in the tournament out of all the names chosen.”

“-but they said that this time around they were imposing an age limit, and no one under seventeen could enter so I couldn’t have-“

“Harry, we believe you,” Hotch quickly assured him.

He blew out his breath and continued. “Anyone who wanted to enter wrote their names on a piece of paper and had to cross an age line to put the paper in. The twins tried it, just to see if they could get past the line-“ he said, glancing up over the computer screen to where the twins supposedly were, “-and even they weren’t successful.” A few snickers suggested the attempt had ended rather disastrously and even Harry faintly smiled. “Tonight, they gathered everyone and the Goblet tossed out the names of those it selected. It picked one from each school…and then it threw out my name.”

“But the thing is,” Hermione interjected, “even if he was sleepwalking, he couldn’t have gotten in. So someone else had to have put his name in.” She turned to Harry. “Did you ever see the paper?”

“It was my handwriting,” he said, nodding.

“So whoever it was is in the school,” Hotch said flatly.

“Yeah,” Harry responded. “Probably.”

Hotch rubbed his forehead.

Two months. Could his son stay out of trouble for two months?

“Okay,” he finally said. “How did everyone else react?”
“Ravenclaws started screaming,” Harry muttered.

“Did not!” Padma complained off screen.

“Nearly blew out my eardrums, mate,” Ron admitted. “You were pretty loud.”

“Well, the Hufflepuffs tried to hide you under their table!” Hannah responded from somewhere behind Harry. Some of the agents burst out into surprised laughter at the image and Harry let out a small groan as he remembered the scene.

“So ten minutes later, once I was able to get out from under the Hufflepuff table,” Harry began.

“It was more like five,” Justin muttered.

“I went to the room they had all the competitors gather in. None of them were happy about it, and all of them looked pretty surprised. Then the rest of the headmasters and headmistress and officials came in, and all of them ran around like chickens with their heads cut off for a while. Well, except Dumbledore, who was trying to do damage control, and Snape, who was there for some reason and bluntly told me he’d had a bet I wouldn’t make it to the end of the month without ending up in some disaster.” He paused and eyed Hotch.

“Yeah, I suppose I’ve lost that one,” Hotch admitted.

“It would appear you have too much faith in me,” Harry dryly replied.

“Who’s Karkaroff?” he asked, trying to redirect the conversation.

“Skipping right over that bet…” one of the twins muttered.

“I liked you better when you paid less attention,” Hotch told whichever it was, surprising the students into a round of snickers.

“Karkaroff’s head of Durmstrang,” Hermione said. “Madame Maxine’s headmistress for Beauxbatons. Barty Crouch and Ludo Bagman showed up as officials.”

An owl knocked on the window and Morgan got up to retrieve it. “Is there anyone who failed to react?” Reid asked. The group shook their heads slowly.

“There were some people who left quickly,” Blaise said. “Moody and Snape were gone in a few seconds, and McGonagall immediately tried to get an explanation from Dumbledore. Karkaroff and Maxine got their students out of there as quickly as possible so they could go to the champion’s room. Once the professors got the Hogwarts students to go back to their dorms, they all left together.”

“Who were the other students chosen?” Hotch asked, taking the letter as Morgan handed it from him. “Ah, thanks for the warning, Professor Snape,” he sighed.

“Fleur Delacor from Beauxbatons,” Ginny said, “Viktor Krum – who’s a Seeker for Bulgaria’s national Quidditch team, by the way –”

“Pause as half the room swoons to the floor,” Draco inserted. Ron nudged him playfully.

“Shane Fawcett from the Ravenclaw house, and Harry,” Hermione said.

“Is there any way to get you out of the competition?” Hotch asked Harry, although the expressions on the rest of the students’ faces were enough of an answer.
“I’m bound by magical contract,” Harry replied, shaking his head. “I have to compete.”

“What exactly is the tournament?” Reid asked.

“One of the three major European schools hosts the other two,” Hotch said. “Over the course of the school year, the champions compete in three tasks. At the end, whoever wins gets money and fame. It was discontinued because of how dangerous it was.”

“Can’t Harry do something to get disqualified?” JJ asked.

“There aren’t any rules I can break,” Harry replied grimly.

“Well, how dangerous is it? I mean, if students are competing, it can’t be too bad?” Morgan hesitantly suggested.

“They stopped holding it because people kept dying,” Harry said bluntly and Morgan’s eyebrows went up.

“Last time it was held, a cockatrice even got loose and injured some of the judges, which is why they ended it,” Hermione added. “It wasn’t uncommon for students to come away from it missing limbs, and one year a student won by default because the other two competitors were both killed before the third task.”

“Thanks for the encouragement,” Harry muttered.

She flushed. “Sorry, Harry.”

Reid perked up. “Oh! Just so you know, someone came in to replace Gideon, so we have a new team member. He doesn’t know about all of this yet, but he was in the plane with us when you were texting all of us so he’s aware that we’re keeping something from him.”

“Might as well go ahead and tell him if you think it’s a good idea,” Ron said. “We’re going to need all the help we can get.”

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Snape had taken to showing up on a weekly basis, whether he had news or not. The benefit was that both would be immediately aware if something happened to the other because they would miss the meeting, but no such disaster had yet to befall either of them. They regularly changed their meeting site, this time arriving in a park not far from the office.

“The Dark Lord is not as strong as he once was,” Snape said triumphantly, the first hint of a real smile appearing on his face. “He is alive, yes, but his strength was not resurrected with him. The ritual required all of Potter’s blood, and he never obtained that.”

“What can he do, then?”

“Mostly just give orders.” A sneer crossed his face. “Of course, that still has the brainless morons around him running scared. It makes it easier for me to fit in as a loyal subject, at least. I think he may just be grateful to have some intelligent servants around.” He turned to Hotch, his triumphant look spreading. “Still far too weak to perform any mind magic, however. He seems to have entirely forgotten I have a muggle contact, and he has posed no questions about what you know in months.”

Hotch raised his eyebrows. “Interesting. Although I would assume you’d be ordered to kill me off if he ever truly regains power.”
“In return, I would assume you to have vanished by that time.”

“Does this mean we only have good news today?”

Snape scowled. “No. It turns out that the first task involves some man-eating creature they are keeping in the Forbidden Forest. If it kills all the contestants in the first task, I suppose the tournament will be cancelled.”

Hotch quickly controlled his expression before it revealed too much interest. “Oh? What creature do you think it is?”

“I don’t know, and I’d rather not know until the task. I won’t spend any longer than necessary imagining how Potter will scare the wits out of all of us only to miraculously come out on top.”

Hotch didn’t press him. Too much interest would be rather suspicious. “How is the new DADA professor?” he asked instead.

A smirk crossed Snape’s face. “Dramatic as ever, to his own mistake. He attempted an entrance with flair on the first night, but all of the students who had been taken by werewolves this summer were… a little - high-strung, shall we say? – and moved rather fantastically at the sudden noise.”

Hotch’s eyebrows went up of their own accord. It would seem that said students had forgotten to mention a little detail. The students had still been rather jumpy when they had left, but he hadn’t expected they would actually… Well, do whatever they had done. “What happened?”

“Moody threw open the doors loudly enough to startle everyone and was promptly hexed about twenty-some ways. Thankfully for him, two rather ingenious Ravenclaws sent him back out the entrance with a flood of water and some others closed the doors so he had time to counteract all the hexes before anyone got a good look at him. I don’t believe any of the students were aware that they hit him, and Moody was actually rather pleased that their reflexes were so swift.”

After a few moments of allowing Hotch to ponder on that humorous image, he continued, “Still interested in what’s going on over in England?”

“With the rise of Voldemort’s forces?” Hotch clarified. “Of course. Can I do something to help?”

Snape nodded. “I talked to the headmaster about it and he approved the idea. If you’re able and willing, you can come to the first task. We believe that whoever put Potter’s name in the Goblet is still at the school, and they will likely be at the tournament. However, I am unsure if such a large number of people will make it harder for you to do your job.”

Hotch shook his head. “No, it should still work. Actually, sometimes more numbers help. Someone acting differently than everyone else tends to stand out, especially in large crowds. I might need to bring a few members of my team, though.”

“I’m sure Dumbledore won’t have a problem with that if he is allowing you in. You will have to be discrete. No one can know you have entered the grounds, and it is especially critical that no one learns you are muggle.”

“I understand. We can manage that.”

Hotch checked the time once he got back and mentally calculated the hour in England. It was often unnecessary, since someone was almost always in the Room of Requirement these days, but meal times usually cleared out the room entirely. The team had initially thought the students were just there in case someone called, but a few students had made comments about how they felt safer in the room
because no one else knew about it. None of them protested after that.

He went to Garcia’s office, repeated what Snape had told him, and then called the Room of Requirement. Garcia would automatically call a main laptop but added the others in if too many people were present to fit around one screen.

Today, that wasn’t the case, and only a few answered. Blaise, who was closest to the screen, looked a little confused when he saw that there were only two of them. “Hello?”

“So what’s this about your welcoming reception for Moody that we’re hearing about?” Garcia asked, grinning.

The students groaned in embarrassment.

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Surprisingly, all the help they needed came from Hagrid.

The Saturday before the task, Hagrid took him out to the Forbidden Forest at midnight. As soon as he got back, he went straight to the Room of Requirement, where he knew everyone had gathered once they heard he was going to be getting information on the task.

“They have bloody dragons.”

He noticed too late that a computer was open.

“What?” came his dad’s voice through the speakers and he winced. Of course someone had had the foresight to call him, but Harry would have preferred to put it a bit nicer.

“I’ll try and get a letter to Charlie,” Fred said immediately. “He works with dragons in Romania.”

Harry shook his head. “He’s one of the keepers they brought. If you ask, he’ll realize that I know.”

He turned to the Ravenclaws. “Any of you know Fawcett?”

“Are you seriously going to give up your lead?” Daphne asked incredulously as he walked towards them, letting the door shut behind him. As he got closer, he noticed that they actually had three laptops open so everyone could more conveniently fit around the screens without everyone sitting several feet away. Harry wasn’t quite sure when exactly everyone had gotten phones and laptops, but he was pretty sure that the twins had something to do with it, having been the first to get pieces of muggle tech with their own money.

“It’s not really a lead. Karkaroff and Maxime were both there so the other two champions are going to know.” He sat down by Hermione and Draco. The two had begun to get along surprisingly well, especially once Draco had realized how all of her knowledge could be put to use.

“You should probably tell him yourself,” Anthony pointed out. “Otherwise he’s going to be really suspicious about how one of us knew.”

Harry sighed. “Fine, I’ll figure it out tomorrow.”

“You’ve got until Tuesday to figure out what you’re going to do,” Neville said nervously. “How are you going to take down a dragon?”

“Figured I’d sing to it. That’s got to be awful enough that it’s just going to fly away and leave me alone, right?”
“Let’s get an idea tonight,” Hermione said, “and then tomorrow Harry can start working on it. I would say we should all just get a good night’s sleep and start then, but…”

“I’m not sleeping until we have a plan,” Harry agreed with a grimace. He took a better look at the computer screen. The team was gathered in the same hotel room as last time, and he noticed that no one else had joined the group. “Oh, you still haven’t told the new guy?”

“Travis hasn’t had time to come down yet,” Morgan said. “We decided to tell him once the case is over so at least someone is completely focused. Do you think you can shoot dragons?”

“You can probably shoot at them,” Justin said as a few people snickered, “but I don’t know how much good it’s going to do.”

“I’m just picturing Harry whipping out a Glock and firing at a dragon. Can you imagine how all the purebloods would react?” Susan said.

“Sounds like we’ve got a plan,” Ron joked. “Everyone can go to sleep now.”

“Oh, be serious,” Hermione scolded. “We’ll have plenty of time to mess around when Harry hasn’t been burnt to a crisp.”

“Technically you’ll have more time if I am burnt to a crisp,” Harry pointed out then held up his hands in defeat when she scowled at him. “Right, being serious.”

“What are you supposed to do about the dragon?”

“They didn’t say. I was just going to try and plan how to get around it,” he said.

“Well, who said you had to get around it?” Draco said slowly.


Draco smirked and gave a small laugh. “I think I’ve got your plan, so long as you can get down two transfiguration spells and two charms. Can you do the accio charm?”

“Yeah…”

“Well, maybe we’ll only be up until one the night before the task, then. Okay, so here’s the plan…”

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Hermione resisted the urge to grab Ron and go sit with Theodore and Draco, instead settling on staying by Neville and Luna Lovegood. They had spent all of Sunday and most of Monday getting the spells down, and Hermione had almost been concerned that Harry would accidentally cast them in his sleep because he had performed them so many times. At least he hadn’t looked too nervous this morning, and they’d seen him off to the tent with small waves. Shane Fawcett, who she had spotted this morning, had been considerably greener.

By the judges’ area, she saw the reporter Rita Skeeter already writing on her notepad about the arena. They had yet to disclose what was going to happen, but Hermione saw her eyes flickering over the crowd and making notes about the general atmosphere. Thankfully, Draco had already known about her and had warned Hermione, adding some tips for blackmail as well. The reporter had been foolish enough to ask Draco for his help in gaining some sensational news about the tournament, and when he had pointed out that it would be difficult for them to get information quickly, she had told him that he could meet up with her in her animagus form.
"Ah, an unregistered animagus?" Draco had politely asked to her beaming face. She had mistaken his glee for Slytherin appreciation of her cunning.

Hermione, claiming she had overheard them talking, had confronted the woman shortly after the Weighing of the Wands. To her frustration, she saw that the woman’s pad was already filled with ridiculous information. It hadn’t taken much time to convince the woman that she was teetering between the edge of a long future out in the real world or in Azkaban. And, as Hermione pointed out, they already knew a lot of what happened to people in Azkaban from the escaped convict Sirius Black. Oh, sure, he had been cleared of his crimes after so many had witnessed Pettigrew’s confession – but he wasn’t completely all right in the head these days, was he?

The article that came out a few days later was free of glaring errors and had equal representation of the competitors, Hermione was happy to observe.

Finally, they announced the purpose of the task, and Hermione faked a gasp. Oh, dragon! Shock and surprise! The egg part was new, at least, but Draco’s planned distraction was still going to work.

The other three competitors did well, although Hermione still winced when Delacor’s skirt caught fire, Fawcett’s back was hit, and Viktor’s dragon accidentally crushed its eggs. Harry was going last, against the Horntail. The Ravenclaws had dived on the library once it opened and had taken the entire day coming up with contingency plans for each sort of dragon, but they had gotten so distracted reading about all the different kinds of dragons that they had also come up with contingencies for every other kind of dragon. Unfortunately, very few gave Harry a way to stop the dragon from getting at him without hurting the dragon, and Draco’s initial plan remained the primary distraction.

Soon enough, Harry was walking out from the tent and onto the Quidditch plot. The crowd roared along with the dragon, then shouted in surprise as it sent a burst of flame at Harry before it even properly saw him. Harry dived behind one of the large boulders scattered around the field, out of sight of almost everyone else in the stadium but those directly behind him. Those students leaned out of their seats as he began doing something, and from their awed expressions, it hadn’t been what they were expecting. Only a few, including Draco and Theodore, didn’t look so impressed. The pair did look intensely focused on what was going on, and Hermione focused on them instead of the boulder to see if everything was going according to plan. There was no worry on their faces, and the dragon hadn’t moved from her clutch, so she felt herself relax minutely.

Harry didn’t appear for another few minutes, and a small bag flew into the arena, summoned by his accio charm. Not ten seconds later, Harry had gotten the bag open and flung the dung bombs it had brought. Each hit a few yards away from him, releasing an explosion of the nasty smell. The nearby students all jumped back, suddenly regretting their close proximity to the action, and Hermione heard Draco angrily shout, “Potter!”

She swore she heard Harry shout back, “Just for you, Malfoy!” and a few students broke into surprised laughs. Some of the Quantico students exchanged amused glances – after all, it had been Draco’s plan.

The dragon was among those who recoiled, her strong sense of smell giving her a disservice. She thrashed her head and blew out a few strong puffs of smoke to try and clear the air, but the odor was too strong. Harry appeared, riding a broom and flying far too close to the dragon. Many of the students screamed at the brashness of the action, but he pivoted out of the way just as the dragon moved to swipe at him. The dung bombs had angered her enough that she forwent protection of her eggs in favor of leaping at him. Her wings beat at the air and her legs threw her against her chains with so much force that the metal creaked ominously, and the stadium went quiet. Quite a few of the
spectators began pulling out their wands nervously, but none were properly prepared when the chain snapped off entirely and the dragon took to the air, unrestrained.

“Go, go, go,” Hermione whispered frantically, and the broom zoomed away with its rider leaning over the wood. The dragon roared furiously and took chase, ignoring all the possible bits of food she flew over as she left the stadium and followed the one who had so assaulted her nostrils. The pair disappeared, and those in the judges’ box began getting to their feet, clearly making plans to go after the dragon and recapture it.

“Wait!” someone shouted near the boulder Harry had initially taken refuge in, and a series of surprised cries and delighted whoops swept over the arena.

Sure enough, Harry walked into view from behind the boulder, waving his wand to scourgify the dung bombs away. He jogged unnecessarily across the arena to the clutch of eggs, glancing up at the sky to look for the dragon. He grabbed the golden egg and tucked it under his arm to carry it back to the tent, but a sudden roar of frustration made everyone hush. He cast another glance towards the sky before hurrying out of the arena, leaving the matter of the loose dragon to the keepers. His part, after all, was quite done.

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“No injuries?” Madame Pomfrey asked him in astonishment as she checked him over.

He shook his head. “The dragon, er, left the arena,” he admitted. The rest of the champions still present scowled at him for his comparably easier task.

The reason for the dragon’s departure became clear the moment McGonagall burst into the tent with the brightest smile Harry had ever seen on her face. “A transfigured double, Mr. Potter! And a charmed transfigured broom to match it! One of the most fantastic bits of spellwork I’ve seen on such short notice, truly!”

He grinned in reply.

“You transfigured a replica of yourself?” Fawcett asked in astonishment and Harry nodded.

“I think the dragon probably caught it, though,” Harry admitted. “She didn’t sound too happy.”

“The four of you will be staying in here until they’ve caught the loose dragon,” McGonagall said. “It shouldn’t take them long, but they want to make sure it does not come after any of you. After all, you seem to have had enough time with dragons today.”

An hour later, after the dragon had been secured, they finally brought all of the champions back into the arena to announce their scores. Harry was feeling a bit drowsy after the adrenaline crash, but Ron shook him awake for the scores.

Even while they returned to the castle, though, he found he didn’t really care that much what they had given him. “I mean, the important thing is that I survive this tournament, right? Not win it,” he said.

“But four tens!” Ron exclaimed. Of course, Karkaroff had given him a four, but no one had really been that surprised. On his other side, Hermione was beaming at him. “And if you do win, you get all that money!”

“I’ve already got money from the Po-my parents, remember?” he asked, quickly catching himself as he saw a few other students walking close by. “And it’s not like I really need any more fame.”
Aside from the normally dour faces, the mood at Grimmauld Place was overall rather chipper after the results of the first task were announced. Snape thought the whole thing rather ridiculous – it wasn’t even half over and they were already celebrating, but if they wanted to get drunk on their own fumes, then who was he to stop them? He just wished they would do it farther away from him or, better yet, hurry up with the Order meeting so he could get back to school.

Dumbledore seemed to have the same idea and gradually brought the group back to the focus. “We are quietly looking into the events surrounding Harry’s personal trial. It seems unlikely that it would only be his dragon’s chain that broke, but so far it appears that it truly was an accident.”

Black scowled, cheerful mood fading at the mention of the danger his godson had been put in. “But how can we be sure? It’s all been destroyed by now, hasn’t it?” Dumbledore nodded. “So shouldn’t we just assume it was an attempt on his life?”

“Black, there are far simpler ways to try to kill Potter than staging an elaborate ploy to get him into a tournament to sabotage one dragon’s chain when there was no way to know who would get what dragon,” Snape sneered and Black shot him a dark look.

Molly heaved a sigh at them.

“Didn’t your friend have an equally elaborate plan to find out who the man is that put my godson in the tournament to begin with?” Black sneered.

Snape glared at him. A few days before he had been planning on picking Hotchner up at Quantico to bring him to Hogwarts, he had received a message that the BAU had left on an urgent case and Hotch was likely to be unable to make it. “He had other obligations. Unlike some, he is able to prioritize instead of jumping headlong into trouble without ignoring other duties.”

Black threw up his hands. “Oh, fantastic. I’m glad to see Harry’s life is worth so little to him.”

Snape scoffed. “Like Potter was in any danger today from whoever put his name in. His biggest threat was being suffocated by all his adoring fans.”

“Now, Severus, you know most of the school is angry at Harry,” Molly said in a placating tone. “And Sirius, Severus’ friend does have other things he needs to be concerned about. I’m sure he would have come if he could have.”

“Well, why don’t we go see if he’s available for an explanation?” Black said, getting to his feet. With that expression on his face, he could only be planning something bad. Even Lupin looked a little apprehensive. “I’m just dying to know what was more important today. Besides, am I the only one finding it a little odd that Snivellus is the only one who sees this guy so often?”

“Is it weird that Lupin’s the only one who sees werewolves often?” Snape replied, folding his arms across his chest and refusing to get up to match Black’s alpha male stance.

“Ah, so he’s a vampire like you. Everything makes sense now.”

“Severus, you were planning on going to see him soon, weren’t you?” Dumbledore asked, and Snape’s stomach dropped. He nodded slightly. “Sirius, why don’t you accompany him to alleviate your own concerns – which I’m sure are unfounded,” he added to Snape when the potions master opened his mouth to protest, “and Severus can make sure that whatever happened is nothing to be concerned about.”
“I think I’d rather trust Hotch’s self-preservation skills and good senses,” Snape immediately replied, eyeing Black. “Furthermore, I cannot ask him to entertain my every whim by imposing on his time whenever I have a question. I was simply planning on sending a letter to inquire as to what prevented him from coming to Hogwarts.”

“If he has truly had a rough time the last few days, I’m sure that a friendly face would cheer him up.” Snape tried eradicate the idea of putting “cheer” and “Hotch” together in the same sentence. “And I’m sure Sirius will leave you two to talk once he has seen your friend is not among those plotting Harry’s demise.”

Black, the bastard, smirked at him. Snape glared back.

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“ ‘Rough time,’ my foot,” Black muttered when they finally arrived at the town the BAU had been sent to. “This is a rough time, not whatever he’s up to.”

Black’s smug attitude from Grimmauld Place had quickly deteriorated after he realized just how long it was going to take to get in contact with Hotchner. He had first been forced into side-along Apparation to get to Quantico, after which they had to pass through security that made him balk, and then had to go through the proper channels to get into the BAU bullpen. By that point, Black had already been grumbling about unnecessary measures, which Snape responded to by reminding him that Hotch provided a secure source of information that the Order could use to keep in contact with the American wizarding government.

Snape had expected an empty bullpen and was therefore the one smirking at Black’s expression when the latter realized their travelling wasn’t yet over. Snape was aware that their tech analyst could tell them where the team had been sent to, but he had no idea where her office was and settled for asking a nearby agent, who took their sweet time finding the location for them. At first, he was rather surprised by her slowness, until he realized she kept glancing at Black and was just trying to aggravate the other man. He tried to hide a smirk, especially once he realized they didn’t have a quick way to get to Florida.

So close to six hours after they had set out, they were finally entering the police station. If Snape hadn’t been so amused by Black’s frustration, he would have been in a similar state of irritation. As it was, he could settle with laughing silently at his old nemesis.

“I did say it would make more sense to simply send him a letter,” Snape said.

Black threw him a look. “I figured your friend was just purposefully making it inconvenient for you to find him. Must grate on his nerves to have to see you all the time.”

Before Snape could respond, they had pushed open the doors and a nearby detective was frowning at their entrance. For a moment, he was worried they hadn’t fully adopted the muggle style, before realizing the man’s frown seemed set in place.

“Are you here about the Lambert case?” he asked.

“We have information for an Agent Hotchner regarding another matter,” Snape said. Black seemed content to remain silent by him, which he could only be thankful for.

The detective grimaced. “You’re probably in for a bit of a wait. He’s in the middle of an interrogation and they’re still trying to find someone.”

“Is it bad?” Black asked before Snape could kick him into silence.
The detective stared at him. “You’re not from around here,” he said. “Watch the news while you’re waiting for Hotchner to finish up and maybe you can tell me later if it’s ‘bad’ enough to make you wait a little bit,” he snapped, aggressively pointing out a waiting area.

Snape gave Black a glare as he moved to the directed zone.

“What?” Black snapped.

“Because you have a disagreement with me doesn’t mean you have the right to take it out on anyone even remotely associated with me,” Snape acidly replied. “If they called in the BAU, they need every bit of help they can get, and they certainly do not need someone putting their time ahead of theirs.”

“What, so your friend’s some hotshot?”

“My friend and his team are good at what they do. Now shut up before you get us kicked out.”

A pair passed them by not long after, heading towards the back of the police station. Snape recognized Agent Morgan, but the garb of the other identified him as a preacher. Odd combination, but he left the BAU’s reasoning alone and settled for watching the officers work in the hopes of determining what had called Hotchner away from Virginia so suddenly.

A few civilians walked in, several with aprons on. They approached the officer who had snapped at Black and held up a pot. The officer smiled tiredly at them and nodded in response to whatever they had said, and he directed them towards the empty end of a plastic, foldable table. They talked quietly amongst themselves as they began scooping soup out of the pot and into small bowls. Some of the volunteers left to distribute the bowls among the officers.

“Aw, food,” Black whispered beside him. “Think they’ll let us have some of it?” He eyed Snape and moved a few chairs away. “Well, now they’re less likely to avoid me,” he explained with a smirk when Snape raised an eyebrow at him.

As the volunteers began to hit the bottom of the pot, one finally noticed Black’s appreciation of the bowls and walked over to him with a smile. “Hungry?” she asked.

“Starving. You wouldn’t believe my day,” he replied and Snape rolled his eyes. “What’s going on here, can I ask?”

She looked at him, startled. “British?” She shook her head. “Bad time for you to come to this particular town. Not a very good situation, I’m afraid. They haven’t released details, but they know at least one girl is missing and another was found, but…” She lowered her voice. “They haven’t said anything officially, but some of us overheard a few officers talking, and it sounds like they found quite a few bodies. They’re still looking for some more, though…” With a nod towards the soup, she said, “These are leftovers from the meals they were serving to the volunteers who went out to search for the missing girl.”

“They haven’t found her yet?” The volunteer frowned in dismay. “Oh. Well, I hope they do. It’s good of you to be helping.”

She smiled at Black and then left him with his soup, and Snape shook his head as she began to approach him, presumably to offer another bowl. She nodded at him in understanding and left the two alone.

“Hey, Snape,” Black said a few minutes later, just when Snape had been beginning to hope the soup would keep him quiet longer. From the way Black was holding the bowl, though, it was still too hot
to eat without scalding his mouth, and he couldn’t just whip out his wand to cool it in the middle of a
police station. “What exactly does your friend do? I never quite figured that out, not when he was at
Hogwarts or later.”

Snape heaved an exasperated sigh. If he answered, it would shut Black up. But if he did answer, he
would be giving Black something for free, and he would be lengthening the conversation on
purpose. What if Black thought he actually didn’t mind the bickering?

Unlikely. Right. Better to just answer the question and shut him up now.

Black blinked in surprise when he actually started to respond. “The unit he works in deals with
behavioral analysis. They predict someone’s movements based on how they act. Sometimes, they’re
trying to find out what someone is going to do before they do it, or understand what they already did.
It helps them find missing people, such as in this case, or incriminating evidence that can help them
arrest someone for a crime that has already been committed.” The main benefit of teaching, he had
discovered, was that he had long ago perfected the art of hearing a question and providing a logical,
formulated response within seconds, no longer how ridiculous the question.


“Ask him yourself. I’m not a behavioral analyst.”

The preacher from earlier burst into view with Morgan hot on his heels. The entire room turned to
look at them, but Morgan quickly shielded the preacher from view. It was still obvious that the man
was violently shaking and on the verge of a complete breakdown, whether from grief or rage Snape
couldn’t be sure. Not long after, Hotch appeared, casting a quick glance at Morgan before scanning
the room. His eyes landed on the pot with dread, and he quickly strode across the room to talk to the
volunteers gathered around the pot.

After a few words and gestures towards the soup, the volunteers’ eyes widened and they backed
away from the pot. One doubled over, and a nearby officer quickly moved him towards a trash can
before he emptied the contents of his stomach. Another officer appeared from the same hallway
Morgan, the preacher, and Hotchner had come out of, and he quickly held his hands up to get
attention. “Who’s in contact with the volunteer group?” he asked.

“Jordan,” Hotch called out, and the detective turned and spotted the pot by the agent. His expression
quickly grew horrified. Hotch turned to the volunteer nearest to him, who appeared to be in charge.
“Is this all of it?”

The woman, hands clasped over her mouth, shook her head.

“Where’s the rest of it?”

Her eyes flickered around the room to everyone who had bowls. Morgan rubbed one hand over his
face and Hotch grimaced. “Everyone, if you have a bowl of the soup that was offered at the search
earlier, bring it over here immediately. Do not take another bite.”

“Did you find my daughter?” a man asked, standing up in the middle of the room. He had been
sitting in a chair in front of an officer’s desk, a woman beside him. Hotch was staring straight at him,
but Snape got the impression it was less to focus on the man and more to avoid looking somewhere
else.

“Mr. and Mrs. Lambert,” Jordan said, walking towards them. “Please come with me,” he continued
as calmly as he could.
“What happened to my daughter? Is she okay?” the woman asked, moving quickly towards him, hands outstretched. “Is she- Is she-“

Jordan took her hands gently. “Mrs. Lambert…”

“Did you find her?” Mr. Lambert asked again.

Snape looked at the volunteers by Hotchner and then at the pot of soup. He took in the expressions of the four people who had come out of the hallway. “Black,” he said, “we may have had our differences in the past, and that may be biasing your judgment right now…but I think you should follow Hotch’s instructions just this once.”

He turned back to see Black staring at him, eyes widened in horror. “Don’t tell me they’re saying what I think they’re saying,” he asked.

“Go put the soup on the table.”

For once, Black did just as he said without further complaint.

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Snape suggested they return to Grimmauld Place to wait another day before trying to get in touch with Hotch. Sirius didn't jump at the idea.

Instead, he waited until it seemed like everything had calmed down, at least until they had gotten all the bowls collected, and then he quietly walked up to Hotch. Snape stayed where he was, grimacing and dreading whatever Black was going to do, but all the man did was quietly introduce himself, briefly shaking Hotch's hand and then start talking in a low voice. It was too long to be a question or an apology, and after a minute he tapped his nose meaningfully, expression grim.

Hotch tilted his head, frowning interestedly, and waved Morgan over to them as he and Black started over to where Snape was standing. They were far enough away from the rest of the department that no one heard them if they spoke quietly.

"The problem is that we have to prove in court how we found the rest of the bodies," Hotch explained to Black. "Even if you found them, we'd still need a reason."

"You can find them?" Morgan asked Black.

"I'm a dog animagus," Black pointed out. "I've got a better sense of smell in my other form."

"Depending on the location, we could say that we just happened upon the bodies," Snape said slowly, stunned that he was actually helping Black's idea along but seeing no other option.

With a tight expression that said how much he hated the idea, Black tentatively said, "We could say that..." He rubbed his face quickly. "Well, we could say that I'm your dog and I just took off suddenly, and when you caught up to me I was sniffing at the bodies."

It was unorthodox, but it would wrap up the case and give the families some peace of mind. Snape glanced at Hotch, who slightly nodded, and he let out a breath. "Someone saw us enter. We can say we came in because we found the bodies."

"If we take you into a private room, you can apparate out and find the bodies, then apparate back to the same room, can't you?" Hotch suggested. He glanced between them, noting the animosity that didn't quite fade even when they were in agreement. "You two won't be able to pass as friends.
Black, you might be recognized after so much publicity was put out trying to catch you last year. It wouldn't be likely, except we're in a police station."

"I'll stay in my dog form after this, and Snape can say I left to take care of our travel arrangements." He glanced at Snape, who grudgingly nodded.

In the end, they found three of the remaining bodies in one location and two more in another. Hotch had an idea about how to connect the two locations, so the 'dog' would have only found one and the BAU could make a claim about how they thought to find the other location. By the time it was all over, the sun was setting, and the two wizards were exhausted enough from running around the town that Hotch sent them back home firmly. Black didn't even comment on him giving them an order.

Most of the Order was still at Grimmauld Place, and they were greeted by a surprising amount of people. Despite the late hour, very few had left. Usually, Sirius would have been elated at the company. After so long in Azkaban, it was welcome to see everyone.

“We’re still celebrating, you see,” Molly explained, bustling about and shoving a plate of something into Sirius’s hands and then Snape’s. Both avoided looking at it. “It’s a bit ridiculous, but… Well, we’re just glad Harry’s all- Sirius, you look rather pale. Is everything okay?”

When he didn’t answer immediately, the room slowly began to get quiet as everyone turned to look at the two. He tried to come up with an excuse but nothing came out, and the result was him standing there and gaping. Remus carefully got to his feet and began nearing.

“Did everything go okay with your friend?” Arthur asked Snape, frowning.

“I- I-“ Black hurriedly put the plate down on the closest surface as the smell properly hit him. “I’m sorry,” he finally managed and fled out the door.

As he rushed up the stairs, hand over his mouth, he heard Snape stutter his own way through an explanation. “We were….inadvertently, ah….involved in the….resolution- rather, the conclusion of the case- I don’t quite know if everything was resolved…”

“Dear Merlin, Severus, what happened?” Molly asked as Sirius reached the bathroom. He put his hand on the doorway but didn’t push, morbid curiosity holding him in place to hear Snape’s answer.

There was a long pause. “You truly do not want to know,” Snape finally settled on. “Lupin, you may want to make sure Black doesn’t attempt to obliviate himself in the bathroom. I don’t trust his magical skill enough for that.” But even for one of Snape’s insults, it didn’t sound like he really meant it and would have rather given the idea a go himself.

Chapter End Notes

Forgot how much happens in this chapter! I realized a while back that Fawcett was apparently a girl, but I'm not going back to change everything in every chapter she/he appears in now.

So. Gideon. Thoughts? Sorry for everyone who really loved him (like me, he reminds
me of my #SWAG grandfather), but Rossi had to come in. But I'll just say...Elle left the team too...and you saw how long she stayed away for...

Meanwhile...Sirius and Snape. (Open letter to Sirius Black: SORRY, BRO.) I ended up doing a weird thing where Sirius kind of becomes...less than positive, simply because he wants Harry back and Hotch is aggressive at Finders Keepers and doesn't want Sirius near him. As a result, Hotch is more likely to lean on Snape for info but not Sirius, so Sirius comes across differently. Besides, Hotch has been working on Snape to make him get over his teenage years, whereas book!Sirius had a lot of trouble separating James and Harry (probably because of his time in Azkaban) and Hotch doesn't have a reason to bother doing anything about that.
“But say all we done is show the world that democracy isn’t chaos, that there isn’t a greater strength in a people’s union? Say we’ve shown that a people can endure awful sacrifice and yet cohere? Mightn’t that save at least the idea of democracy, to aspire to? Eventually to become worthy of? At all rates, whatever may be proven by blood and sacrifice must’ve been proven by now. Shall we stop this bleeding?” – Lincoln

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The celebration in Gryffindor tower that night was rather absurd, he personally thought, but his only regret was opening the egg to hear the clue. Not because he didn’t want to at least try to hear what was inside, but because he knew he was going to have to open it again.

But almost as soon as he reached the Room of Requirement, he wished more than anything that he could share the blaring message.

“What do you mean?” Harry asked, taking a seat by Ron. The redhead was frantically sending messages to Garcia, who was not responding. “What’s wrong?”

“Adrian came in to call them as soon as we got back. There hasn’t been a response,” Ron replied. “There hasn’t been a single reply.”

“But… Maybe they’re all returning from a flight,” Harry said, but he didn’t quite believe it. “Garcia isn’t…?”

“She’s the one we’ve been trying this whole time. They warned us earlier that the rest of the team would probably be out of touch.” Harry pulled out his phone and began dialing. “Harry, I’ve been trying her ever since-“

He shook his head. “I’m calling my dad. Maybe they’re back by now.”

“Anything?” Ron asked a few seconds later.

“No,” Harry said when it finally hit voicemail. “Let’s leave it alone for now. If they’re this busy, they don’t have time to tell us what’s going on. I’m going to leave a message asking for them to contact us when it’s over.”

Ron nodded sullenly. “Yeah, I suppose that’s a good idea.” He checked the time. “But I’m going to wait here tonight.”

“I think Seamus and Dean know we’ve been sneaking out, but after all the nightmares, I don’t think they’ll turn us in,” Harry said.

Ron gestured towards the egg. “Do you want to go ahead and send that screaming dragon yolk over? Can’t hurt.”

Harry shrugged. “Sure. Garcia showed you how to send sound bytes, right?”
Ron grinned. “Yeah. Man, I can’t wait to tell my dad about some of the stuff she told us,” he said as he began preparing the laptop for a recording. “I actually understand what all of this does. Here, open it up.”

“I’m going to let it scream for a minute. They always said more information was better than less,” he apologetically said. Ron hesitantly nodded. “But I’m doing it from the other side of the room so feel free to join me.”

Ron hit the record button. “Hey, Garcia. This is Ron and Harry here. Ah, you’ve probably noticed all the missed calls so you know we’ve been trying to get in touch with you guys, but… I don’t know what’s going on, or if anything’s going on, but just ignore this message if you have to and come back to it later. This isn’t important…well, not immediately important….so don’t worry if you’re busy. Anyway, Harry’s obviously not dead or I’d be panicking a lot more, but he’s got something weird for you to look at.”

“Yeah,” Harry said, leaning towards the computer. “The point of the task was to get this golden egg, but when we open it up it starts screaming bloody murder at us and we have no idea what it means. They said it was a clue for the next task, though. We have until after break to work it out but I’d rather not cram all the practicing into the last three days like we did before this task. So I’m going to open it up and Ron and I are going to move away, but you might want to watch your ears. Just…if it makes any sense to you as a clue, let us know, all right?”

He cast a silencing charm around himself and Ron, and then opened the egg. They let it scream for about a minute before Harry finally closed it and cancelled the charm.

“So now that we’ve blown out your speakers, I hope you’ll find it in yourself to forgive us,” Ron said. “We thought you might want the…clue thing, whatever it is, even if you can’t do anything about it right now.”

“I hope everyone’s okay, and if you can… Well, try to send us a message soon before anyone freaks out, please?”

“I’m not freaking out,” Ron grumbled.

“You said it, not me.”

“Whatever. All right, we’ll see you later, Garcia, okay?”

“Bye!”

Ron hit the end button and looked over his shoulder at Harry. “I don’t like this,” he said immediately.

“This is weird. If we don’t get a response soon, I get the feeling that someone’s going to fly all the way over to Quantico and demand confirmation that everyone’s okay.”

“And the rest of us will cover for them. Hey, I’ll bet we can get the room to whip us up some blankets. I don’t know if you want a more comfortable bed after today, but I think I’m going to stay down here, just to make sure someone will answer if we do get a call back.”

Harry shook his head. “I’ll stay with you. I mean, we don’t know what happened, and…”

Ron bit his lip. “Harry, I’m… I’m sure your dad’s okay. There are probably a lot of good reasons for why they’re not answering.”
“Yeah, but there are even more for why they aren’t, and they’re connected to me, so which do you think really happened?”

“Maybe it had nothing to do with you.”

“Maybe…”

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When Kevin Lynch was told to look at the computer system of the BAU’s tech analyst, he was expecting a quick scan before heading back to his regular job. After all, theBAUstuck to regulation. Anyone who was anyone – anyone who wasbreathing– in Quantico knew who Aaron Hotchner and David Rossi were, and they were not people to mess around with. Their tech analyst wasn’t going to be able to sneak anything under them, certainly.

So imagine Kevin’s surprise when he came across not one buttwoencrypted files. And not FBI-authorized encryptions either.

The first one he mentioned immediately, and Agent Hotchner was called to get the encryption key. The second, however, Kevin kept quiet about until his supervisor had left the room. The encryption had an odd catch to it, a fail-safe to be opened if necessary. It was directly downloaded onto Agent Hotchner’s computer, though Kevin was unsure the man knew it was there. But if he did, Kevin was not going to be the one who ousted some secret package of information that one of the BAU unit chiefs had. Kevin thought himself a somewhat courageous man, but there was bravery and there was stupidity, and pissing offAaron Hotchnermost definitely fell into the latter category.

“You left a hole in your coding, m’dear,” he murmured, fingers flying over the keyboard. And indeed there was, allowing for him to enter. “But why-Oh…Well, you need to get that fixed.” The computer had a permanent connection to some other device, which prevented the file from being closed. As a result, the encryption was present, but only partially able to block someone out. Honestly, if they were any worse than Kevin, it would have been covered up enough that the file would have been safe.

He leaned out of his chair to make sure no one was coming his way before hurriedly moving back to the laptop. Just because he didn’t want to accidentally bring up the file if it endangered the unit chief who could endanger hislife didn’t mean that his curiosity didn’t want an answer. What was so important that the file was shared with Agent Hotchner and encrypted?

Before he could properly access it, he saw his supervisor returning and he quickly hid the signs of the hole from the screen. “Gilman Street,” he said, and Kevin entered the key in. His eyes widened as he saw what he was looking at.

“Oh.”

“What is it?” His supervisor leaned hungrily over his shoulder.

“It’s just…the files of everything they’ve done.” He looked up. “It’s nothing dangerous. Just the routine files she’s required to keep.”

His supervisor ‘hmph’ed and leaned away. “Keep looking.”

He walked out again, and Kevin breathed out a sigh of relief. After a few minutes of performing menial scans, he went back to the hole he had been eyeing before and again tried entering. Without the interruption, he slipped in after a bit of maneuvering and opened the files.
“The Houdini file?” he muttered. “Harry Houdini? Thought you wouldn’t keep much stock in magic, Miss BAU Analyst…” His words trailed off as he opened the first video file that had been saved.

A group of teenagers were seated around one of the empty classrooms Kevin had passed on his way in. Many of them had bandages over injuries, and most looked like they hadn’t had a lot of sleep recently, but they were smiling and they were content. A few adults were scattered around the room, talking to someone or just listening.

Near the camera, a rather nerdy, wiry adult was excitedly gesturing at the largest subsection of the students, who were all listening in fascination. “-actually sent out a request for anyone to send in words with their own definitions. If approved, the definitions would be added to the dictionary – called the Oxford English dictionary.”

He was giving a lecture on…the history of the dictionary? He wasn’t sure if that or the interest of the teenagers was more shocking.

“How did they come up with definitions?” one asked.

“Variety of ways, but the most notable contributor, a Dr. W. C. Minor, actually sent in over ten thousand, and the overseer of the dictionary project, Professor James Murray, asked him if he wouldn’t join him in meeting the queen. Victoria had requested his presence, and the professor thought the largest contributor should join him. Dr. Minor replied that it would be impossible, and it turned out that he was actually in an asylum for the criminally insane. He had so much time on his hands that it was no wonder that he had been able to write so many definitions.”

A nearby agent was laughing. “Reid, if you keep going, they’re all just going to fall asleep where they’re at.”

The students rioted and the agent was forced to retreat and quickly defend his statement as a mere joke before he was in true fear for his life. The nearby students and other agents shook their heads and grinned.

Kevin stopped the video and began skimming through some of the others. The people in them changed, but overall it appeared to be about the same group of people. They ranged from extraordinarily light-hearted, such as the first one’s surprising history lesson in dictionaries, to heart-wrenchingly distressing, like the third’s bloody description of some sort of ritual. By the sixth file, he decided to leave the audio files behind, finding them too personal for him to be looking through on a whim.

But he still didn’t know what it meant. And if it was important to the case…

He was about to keep looking when he realized he was getting a video call through the open channel that had allowed him into the system in the first place. He bit his lip, but ignored it. If he didn’t know who was on the other end, he couldn’t answer the call. Not if it was personal. It was true that the analyst probably shouldn’t have been using FBI resources for private information storage, but really, who didn’t? And if it was this heavily encrypted, it was clearly important to her.

Whoever was calling was determined. They kept calling over the next few hours, and Kevin was tempted to respond just to tell them the analyst wasn’t available. He could only imagine why it was important enough for them to just keep trying like this. In the end, whoever it was sent a file titled IMPORTANT SORT OF.

He leaned out of his chair again. Still no one. Leaning back, he ran over his arguments again. The
caller was persistent, so maybe it was of critical importance that someone respond. But the file had said ‘sort of’ so maybe not. And yet they had kept calling, so maybe they were worried that something had happened to the analyst. She’d been shot – he doubted there had been time to tell whoever this was. If he opened the file and figured out why they were calling, he could decide from there what to do.

Five minutes later, he was even more confused, and he still had no idea what to do. He didn’t really want to be the one to break the news to two kids that their friend had been shot. Hadn’t they been in the videos from before, too?

He was waiting for more news, and he set about running his own scan on the screaming egg. An hour later, and he knew that the sound didn’t match anything in the system. He wasn’t listening to the blasted thing again, and even turning it way down didn’t tell him anything. Nor did turning it down and playing it backwards which, honestly, he hadn’t thought would do much anyway. After a while longer, he turned to the frequency, and rendered it to a human-vocal frequency.

To his surprise, it worked.

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“He changed the height,” Garcia hissed, trying to readjust her chair. “How dare he- I’ll get you Mr. Kevin Lynch…”

Morgan held out his hands in a placating manner. “Do you want some hel-“ He stopped at the glare. “Okay, okay!”

She pulled herself on her rolling chair towards her computers. “Let’s see what else he managed to muck up, shall we?” she snarled. “Oh, if you hurt any of my beauties on here, I’m going to…” She squinted at the screen. “You left me a present. This is not Christmas and it does not make up for my chair or the trash scattered around my office, I don’t care what it is…”

She opened it and a video appeared. Morgan moved behind her desk to watch as Kevin Lynch appeared in the same office they were sitting in now. He waved nervously at the screen and nodded slightly. “So, ah, don’t kill me,” he began. “I’m hoping you’re Penelope Garcia watching this. I found two encrypted files a while ago, and I told my supervisor about the first one. He doesn’t know about the second, or you would have heard about that.”

“Oh shit,” Garcia whispered.

“Garcia? There’s another file?” Morgan asked incredulously.

“Yeah, of course! You think I’d just leave a file about the kids lying around unprotected? Hush!”

“Er, I sorta… Okay, I looked at it a bit, but not all of it because it seems like it’s really important to you and I didn’t want to pry too much. Just wanted to make sure it wasn’t plans for mass terrorism or anything like that. Honestly, I’m not sure what I saw, so maybe it is and I just don’t know. Anyway, you might have noticed by now that there are a bunch of missed calls. I didn’t want to answer them, but they sent you a file. Again, I was kinda concerned about such a weird bunch of information on an FBI computer, so I…”

He rubbed the back of his head awkwardly. “Well… I guess- No, I opened it. Sorry.” He blew out his breath. “Um, your tech here is all pretty awesome, so I think you could kill me from your laptop and I’m going to beg you don’t. And as a peace offering, I’d like you to know that I went ahead and rendered what they were looking for and I sent it back to them as an audio file. They don’t know it
wasn’t you; the only thing on it was the rendered version. But they kept calling, and I know they said it wasn’t critical, but I was kind of worried about how determined they were so I thought getting a response would at least let them know you were alive. I think they were getting a bit nervous and…” He coughed. “Anyway. Maybe it helped them a bit and I hope I saved you a bit of time. Don’t kill me.”

Morgan whipped out his phone and dialed a number while Garcia began looking for the original file. She pulled it up at the same time Morgan’s call went through. “Yeah, Hotch? We might have a leak. Remember the guy who was helping us against Battle from within the office? Gave us the video feed? Yeah, well, apparently he looked through Garcia’s files a bit more than he was supposed to.”

“Brilliant!” Garcia whispered. “He put it through frequency deconstruction.” Morgan stared at her blankly. “Ugh, for one mass of chocolatey goodness, you are no Spencer Reid.” She spun around to face him properly. “Okay, so hang on through all this science with me. If you put two contrasting frequencies with each other, they negate each other. The lower one will become higher and the higher will become lower, and the result is an entirely different sound. In this case, an extremely low frequency.”

“So what happens?”

“It gives us an understandable audio feed.” She pointed at the phone. “Gathering the troops?”

Five minutes later had most of the team gathered in the room. She frowned. “Rossi and Hotch?”

“Rossi still doesn’t know and Hotch is going to kill Lynch. I mean, bodily threaten Lynch and then maybe drag him up here.”

As a matter of fact, that was not all Hotch had gone to do, but his impromptu search-and-rescue effort when Kevin saw him, realized why Hotch was there, and then panicked had not been anticipated. Hotch began to wonder what his life was coming to as he chased the plump tech through the halls of the FBI building.

“Rossi still doesn’t know?”

“Travis tried to explain and he yelled at her for wasting his time. We’re trying to find an alternate route in the meantime, so for now just…keep quiet about it.”

“Yikes,” Garcia muttered and pulled up the new file. “Okay, check this out.”

“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 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.”

The group alternated between staring at each other and the computer.
“Well, what did that mean?” Prentiss asked. “Something…underground?”

“Garcia, what frequency did he use?” Reid leaned over her shoulder as she began pulling up the frequencies of the rendered version.

“What does that matter?”

“The destructive frequency that he used must be the same frequency as a certain medium. If we listened to this audio file through that frequency, we would be able to understand it perfectly.” He pointed at a number on the screen. “That?” he asked, surprised.

She nodded. “Yeah, what about it?”

“It’s the frequency of water. Two point four five times ten to the ninth Hertz.”

“How do you know that?” Morgan asked.

“It’s a common medium used in college-level physics classes for example problems and the like. I saw it all the time,” Reid replied, barely sparing him a glance. “So the next task probably has something to do with water,” he continued and pulled out his phone, presumably to text that information to one of the students. “Did Lynch share this with anyone?”

“I guess we’ll find out when Hotch brings back his mutilated corpse,” Garcia muttered. “Oh! My poor babies!” She jumped into action while the others stared on in confusion. “He said they kept calling and weren’t getting a reply!”

“So?” Prentiss asked.

“So they’re probably freaking out,” JJ replied, expression mirroring Garcia’s. “The adults around them haven’t really had a good survival rate recently.”

The call only rang for a few moments before someone answered. Ron’s bedhead was atrocious, and the screen jostled as someone else jumped up. Ron swatted whoever it was whilst settling the laptop before turning back to the screen. “Hey!”

“Hey yourself!” Morgan replied. “It’s been a while, sorry.”

“Everything okay?” Draco asked, coming into view from the side. Harry crawled into view from the opposite side, and he was presumably the one who had accidentally hit the computer. “I mean, we weren’t panicking or anything, but-”

“There was some panicking,” Harry admitted. “I won’t say who, but there was panicking.”

“Nothing big,” Garcia said at the same time JJ said, “Garcia got shot.”

“What!”

“And we might have a security leak about magic,” Prentiss added.

They spent the next few minutes giving a short summary, during which more computers joined the video call so anyone else in the room could listen in. It was in the afternoon, but almost an entire week after the task, and most of the students were present in the Room of Requirement. None of them begrudged the agents for their hectic week, not since they had been returning from a case and then dealing with a home-ground crisis.

Hermione eyed Garcia through the call. “How is it that you got cleared for duty so quickly? I would
have thought you would have been out for longer.”

“Got my fingers in all the pies, my dear. And it just so happens that some of those pies include really good drug-makers. Or potion-makers, in this case.”

“Wait, are you saying that Snape brewed you potions to make you better?” Draco asked, gaping.

“Not sure. All I know is, Hotch left for a few hours and came back with the good stuff. He has remained silent on the matter.” She waved it off. “Don’t worry about me.”

She tried to continue, but Theodore cut her off. “What are you talking about? Of course we worry about you – where would we be without our best blackmailer?”

Garcia put a hand to her heart. “Aw, you say the sweetest things, you little Slytherin you.” Theodore beamed at her. “Who do you need dirt against?”

“Well-

Everyone else groaned while the Slytherins nodded approvingly.

Morgan suddenly leaned away and turned towards Prentiss, expression dropping to one of more professional interest. She caught on and straightened as well, nodding as she listened. “Which led to some difficulties with local authorities, but….”

“That always happens,” she agreed.

“Incoming,” Garcia muttered, ducking her head to the screen. “See you later.” The kids waved and Garcia shut off the call as Hotchner approached with a pale-faced Lynch.

“So, ah, how much trouble am I in?” he asked. He jumped when Hotch closed the door behind him.

“I suppose that really depends on how long it takes for someone to notice you’re missing,” JJ responded, an eyebrow going up. He gulped.

“How much do you know? And don’t cut out anything,” Hotch ordered, pushing Lynch firmly into an empty seat.

“Ah…”

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Right after the call ended, Ron turned to Harry. “Are we just going to cheat our whole way through this competition?” Ron asked, although he didn’t sound upset about the prospect. “Not quite sure you’re supposed to be asking anyone about this, let alone the FBI.”

“Shut up, Weasley; it’s called making use of resources,” Draco replied and Ron snorted in amusement. “Speaking of resources, I take it we can rely on Ravenclaws to hit up the library?” There was a chorus of acknowledgment. “Fantastic – I don’t have to do anything.”

“QDA’s winning this,” Terry said with a grin.

“The- what?”

Draco made a small noise of acknowledgment. “It works. I have no complaints.”

No one else did either.

Hermione frowned, looking around the room. “The Hufflepuffs don’t have class right now, do they?”

“No, why?” Cassius turned his head around. “Weird. I would have thought they would have been the ones who would have stuck around here the longest to wait for the call. Did they say where they were going? I doubt they just got sick of us.”

“No-“

As if on command, the doors burst open and Justin ran in, panting. “Harry, you get in trouble every year, right?” he asked. Harry blinked in surprise but nodded. “Who did you go to first?”

“I just kind of waited for someone to figure it out and yell at me. What did you do?”

Justin got his breath back as quickly as he could and explained the situation. The story of what had happened on the first DADA lesson of the year had reached the Hufflepuffs, who had reacted badly to say the least, especially when they learned that Harry had been forced to go under the Imperius Curse multiple times. They had been persuaded out of doing anything, but lessons with the Slytherins had gone even worse, and had continued to deteriorating over the last few months.

Finally, Moody had crossed the line when he’d taught the Slytherins the rope-binding curse and had practiced it on all of the students. Including those who had been bound and forced to watch the deaths of their friends.

As a result, the Hufflepuffs had come to the conclusion that the most logical course of action was to confront Moody. While it shouldn’t have come as a surprise, Moody had startled the entire group with a shout of “CONSTANT VIGILANCE” and had promptly been struck by three curses. Justin admitted that they might not have entirely lashed out simply from reflexes, but no one commented and just gestured for him to continue. (“Well, yeah, so we were just reacting at the beginning, but it’s his fault by now if he just keeps startling us when we’ve stunned him every other time he’s done so,” Neville later told Justin when they were walking to Dumbledore’s office.)

And then the oddest thing happened, Justin explained.

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“It was an accident, honest,” Justin said empathetically. The adults in the room were still too stunned to say anything. “And while we were standing around, talking about what to do, he just… That happened.”

The rest of the Hufflepuffs had remained in the DADA room to watch ‘Moody’ while Justin had gone to talk to Harry, who had not gone with them since his presence would probably be suspicious. Neville had walked with Justin instead as they went to get responsible advice from professors.

They all stared at the man on the floor, bound by the rope spell (the Hufflepuffs hid their smugness as best as they could), who was most definitely not Alastor Moody. Sprout opened and closed her mouth a few times before shaking her head in dismay. “He didn’t even last until final exams, did he?” she sadly asked. She turned to her Hufflepuffs. “Why were you looking in his office after you had stunned him?” The Hufflepuffs looked at her blankly. “Ah, we have more important issues to deal with.”
The real Moody was sitting on the trunk that had been his cage for the last few months. He smirked. “I wish I could have seen his face when he got hexed by a group of kids.”

“Go find a kid named Colin Creevey. He’s a third year,” Susan helpfully said. “He takes pictures all the time, and I’ll bet he snapped a few of it.”

“Alastor, I would understand entirely if you wanted to return to retirement instead of teaching the rest of the year,” Dumbledore told his old friend.

Moody shook his head. “Seems like the students have it well in hand, but I wouldn’t mind giving them a push in the right direction.” He nudge his imposter with his boot. “I might learn something too. His mistakes have certainly given me a new wariness for certain individuals in the school.” His eye, stolen back from his captor, swiveled to the Hufflepuffs. “What are your names?”

“Finch-Fletchley, Bones, Macmillan, Smith, Abbott,” Zacharias said. “Can I ask a small favor, sir, if you’re going to continue teaching?”

Moody snorted. “I think I owe you that one at least, Smith. What is it?”

“Please don’t try to scare the crap out of us.”

“Boy, are you crazy? Calling that a favor – I’m staring at firsthand evidence of why I should be doing that out of self-interest, even without your problems!”

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“They’re positive Crouch Jr. is the one who put my name in the fire,” Harry finished explaining. “Which doesn’t do me a whole lot of good now, but still. He’s refused to tell them anything yet, but it was just this morning.”

Hotch was in Garcia’s office, which was empty but for the two of them and Blackwolf. Group video calls had become less common with Rossi’s presence, as the man was still unaware of the magical world. Rossi was beginning to get suspicious, for a variety of reasons, but so far had made no move to confront Hotch about the oddities surrounding his son whenever the boy was mentioned. While he would gratefully take the reprieve from the initial scrutiny Rossi had put him under, they were going to have to tell Rossi soon before the man attempted any investigating of his own.

“Elle was actually sent over to look further into the matter,” Blackwolf said. He had shown up to tell Hotch the moment he had gotten word that Crouch had been apprehended, arriving moments before Snape had. “We should be getting some more news soon.”

Snape had also updated him on his situation with Black. Whether the ex-convict now trusted him or not was unclear, but any rate, the man had been understandably reluctant to join Snape on his next trip to America.

“Here’s the bad news,” Harry said. “The champions are required to participate in the Yule Ball over break, so I’m not going to be able to make it back.”

Hotch shrugged. “We can just say we need to scan your head again, then claim something went wrong so you need to stay the rest of break.”

Harry grinned at him. “Or we could just do that. Can I skip the ball entirely?”

“That would probably be too suspicious. Why?”
“Er… We have to have dates.”

Hotch smiled and laughed slightly. Blackwolf looked at him like his head had just popped off, and Garcia snickered at the Apache’s expression. “I think you can manage this, Harry.” He looked up as Reid walked into the office. “Don’t tell me we have another case,” he sighed.

Reid shook his head quickly. “No, but Morgan had an idea,” he said as he rounded the desk so he could see Harry. “Hey, this is probably going to be a really weird question, but did you ever hear about the diary of Voldemort?”

“Hear about it? It was slipped into Ginny’s school supplies her first year at Hogwarts and leeched off her life force so Voldemort could come back to life. He possessed her and opened the Chamber of Secrets to start purifying the school, but she realized something was wrong and tried to get rid of it. I ended up with the thing and it tried to tell me that Hagrid had opened the Chamber because he had been keeping a strange pet the first time the Chamber opened. A while after it forced her to take it back, she ended up down in the Chamber and I destroyed the diary. What about it?”

“Wait, the first time the Chamber opened?” Blackwolf asked.

Harry nodded, and a few people in the background began to noticeably take more interest in the conversation. Behind him, most of the other QDA students were crashing in the Room of Requirement instead of heading back to their normal dorms. Apparently the hype over the tournament and the fame of several of the students, whether from their involvement in the tasks or Crouch’s capture, had made their houses intolerable for the time being and they were all using the room to escape. Hotch privately thought that the group was still having trouble adjusting back to normal life at Hogwarts and was still clinging to each other for a feeling of security. But he wasn’t going to say anything – they had been through an extraordinarily traumatizing experience and he didn’t want to take away something that made them feel safe.

As Harry began to relate more of the story, the students who had been subtly listening in became more obvious about it. Ginny left her original place to come sit by Harry in case she needed to fill any gaps. The rest of the Weasleys shuffled a bit closer, the topic of the diary obviously a sore one for them because of its effects on one of their own and Harry.

“Yeah. Supposedly, the only one who could open it was the Heir of Slytherin. Not sure if that’s true or not, but Riddle thought it was him when he first went to school here because he was a Parselmouth.”

“A snake-talker?” Blackwolf asked. “Slytherin was too, wasn’t he?”

“Yeah, so he made sure the Chamber could only be opened by another Parselmouth since it was so rare. I suppose he figured that another Parselmouth would almost have to be a pureblood because it’s so uncommon, but ironically, neither Riddle nor I are purebloods.” Blackwolf blinked in surprise at the admission of Harry’s own skill.

Justin snorted in amusement at the memory. “Yeah, and then Harry showed he could talk with snakes at the absolute worst time and we all spent the year thinking he was the Heir of Slytherin. Looking back, it was pretty ridiculous.”

“Wait,” Blackwolf said before they got too far off track. “Why is the diary important?” he asked Hotch.

The agent surveyed the group, who were all eagerly watching him for a response by this point. Compared to them, the agents at Quantico had little hope of being able to track down the Horcruxes.
According to Harry, however, they had already located and destroyed one, and with the poor luck of the group, they would probably run into more. Not to mention that the group was one of the most trustworthy and secretive Hotch had ever seen; after the ritual, their animosity towards Voldemort was stronger than even Snape’s, and if anything he was more concerned about how far they would go to keep secrets than them letting something slip.

The students were really one of their best hopes of finding the rest of the Horcruxes, not only from their dedication but also because of their exposure to the magical world. They were more likely to notice something off than the muggles were, and they were more likely to run across something that could lead them to a Horcrux. Mind made up, Hotch sighed and reluctantly explained what Snape had told him about the Horcruxes. The group listened intently through the explanation, and Hotch wrapped it up by connecting it to the growths that had been removed from Harry’s head already. That last tidbit understandably sparked some fear from the group.

“So Harry’s got a piece of Voldemort in his head?” Ginny asked, panicking. “Is it going to kill him?”

“Not if we keep removing it,” Hotch responded, trying to calm her down. “But we need to find a way to permanently stop it. Harry, how did you destroy the diary?”

He and Ginny exchanged looks and a half-laugh. “I’m not sure that’s such a good idea, trying that on my brain,” Harry responded. “There’s no way that wouldn’t have worse side effects.”

“Wait,” Hermione said. “Are you creating more Horcruxes by continuously removing them separately from Harry’s brain?”

Oh shit.

Hotch paused and looked at Reid, who made a face at him. “Unsure,” Hotch finally responded. “From what Snape said, they have to be made on purpose. But if so, that makes it more important for us to have a way to destroy them. Can you send over whatever you used to destroy them so we can examine it?”

Ginny and Harry made the weird exchange again. “That might be a bit easier said than done,” Ginny finally said. “I don’t think an owl’s going to agree to carry that, and the muggle post won’t either.” Harry snorted in agreement. “Here,” she said, getting to her feet and turning to the rest of the group, “field trip, anyone?”

“We’ll be back in a minute,” Harry said, picking up the laptop as he too stood.

“Where are we going?” Susan asked.

“Chamber of Secrets,” Ginny replied. “Where else?”

Ten minutes later, they received a call from the group and Garcia quickly answered. Hermione was now carrying the laptop, and a damp, circular tunnel came into view behind her. Far in the distance, something was piled on the ground, and two students were standing by it and peering closer. From the sounds they were making, the rest were either passing Hermione by or already ahead of her as they moved further into the Chamber.

“That is…extremely creepy, actually,” Anthony said, out of sight. “Did you have to do that to its eyes?”

“That was Fawkes,” Harry admitted from somewhere ahead of the laptop. “Dumbledore’s phoenix. Otherwise I would have been killed as soon as I looked at it.”
Hermione turned the computer around, and the four at the FBI simultaneously jerked back in surprise at an enormous snake came into view. Easily as tall as a car, its limp body coiled and stretched across a good portion of the chamber before the rest vanished into a pool of water in front of a gigantic, sculpted face. Its eyes had been severely damaged, and blood ran out of its mouth from a hole that had pierced through the top of its skull. One fang was missing, and the jaws hung open listlessly. The corpse was beginning to show signs of decay, and the color was not as vibrant as it obviously had once been.

“Harry,” Reid breathed. “What is that?”

Harry, a few feet ahead of Hermione and talking to Ginny, turned around after someone prodded him to get his attention. “What?” Reid repeated his question, and Harry started slightly as he saw the expressions of the FBI agents. “Oh, it’s the basilisk Riddle set loose on the school.”

“There was a basilisk under Hogwarts?” Blackwolf demanded.

“Yeah. Fifty years ago, it petrified a few students and killed Moaning Myrtle, who you met in the girls’ bathroom,” Harry explained, saying the last part to his father. “Petrified a few here when it was set loose again. Anyway, we used basilisk venom to destroy the diary, but…”

“Is the venom still going to work?” Theodore asked, peering at the mouth from a safe distance. “I mean, it’s been a while, but it is a magical creature.”

“If so,” Padma added, “we can probably send one or two of the fangs back, right? It looks like one detached there, but…” She turned around, looking for where it might have fallen.

“Oh, it’s not here,” Harry said. “It went with us and the diary up to Dumbledore’s office.”

“Wait, so you took one of the fangs out and then used it? Can you do that again?” Cassius asked.

Ginny snorted out of view. “I think we better not, since he managed it by getting stabbed with the thing. I mean, unless someone else is volunteering?”

“How did you survive?” Blackwolf asked, and Hotch tore his gaze from the basilisk to look at the man’s paling face. “Basilisk venom is one of the most potent poisons known in the wizarding world.” Reid opened his mouth to say something, and Hotch shook his head. He really didn’t want to know any more about snake venom than he had to right now, and Reid thankfully took the hint.

“Fawkes again,” Harry said. “Phoenix tears have extraordinary healing powers. I was right as rain by the time I left.”

“You were bitten by a basilisk,” Garcia said slowly and a troubled expression crossed Harry’s face. From the way his eyes glanced across the screen, Hotch knew he was beginning to realize he might have made a mistake in showing them the creature that had almost killed him, and likely should have according to all odds. “And this wasn’t last year, since we would have heard about the Chamber,” Garcia continued, “so when did this happen?”

That was one point Hotch hadn’t been considering, and dread settled in his stomach. The rest of the students began edging away from Harry, sensing the oncoming story. “Er… My second year?” he replied tentatively. “Really, it wasn’t…but bad…”

“Oh my, that’s a big blood stain,” Draco muttered, a bit nauseous, off screen, and then yelped as someone smacked him and muttered something to him. “Sorry.”

Hotch resisted the urge to simply walk out of the room to clear his head. The danger to his son was
past from this creature, and there was nothing he could do about it now. The best he could do was help him face anymore threats that he was still in danger from, not give him the impression that Hotch was going to overreact at the slightest hint of a problem. Most importantly, he wasn’t sure how walking away would appear to Harry, and he was extremely conscientious of his son’s apparent attachment issues.

“Wait, Luna-“

There was a loud crunching sound as a fang popped out of the basilisk’s mouth. Luna, who had conjured a heavy towel and wrapped it around the fang, held up the long bone and looked blankly at Padma, who was gaping at her. “They’re like tungyroots,” she said. “Only dangerous if they bite you.”

After a long pause, Ron finally told the camera, “So I guess we can send some fangs to you.”

“Hey, can we get up there?” one of the twins asked, pointing to the top of the Slytherin bust.

“Gryffindors,” Blaise muttered, shaking his head.

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"I don't know how to do this," Harry whispered hurriedly to Ron, eyeing the girls walking past the Gryffindor table, giggling. "Why can't I just skip this blasted thing? It's for medical reasons!"

"Oh, honestly," Hermione muttered at his other side, not looking up from her book. "It can't be that bad."

"Well, how would you do it, if you were in our shoes?" Ron demanded.

She sighed, rolling her eyes at the ceiling. "First, I would find someone I enjoy spending time with, or the whole thing would be a very awkward night if it turns out you don't get along as much as you thought you did."

Ron, if possible, looked more horrified. "But what if they say no?"

"Make it clear you're asking them as friends," Hermione pointed out. "They'll understand."

"So then..." Harry prodded.

"Second, I would ask them politely if they've already been invited, since you both waited for so long to start asking." They had the decency to look sheepish. "And finally, I would ask if they wouldn't mind going with me."

There was a long pause.

And then, "So, Hermione," Ron started in a cordial tone.

"I've already been asked," she said blandly and Ron almost fell over in his seat with a groan.

"I thought so," Harry said immediately.

She blinked at him, surprised. "You knew?"

"Well, no, but I figured you'd get loads of offers."

She stared at him for a long moment. "Oh," she finally said, not sure how to reply. "Er. It's Viktor
"Krum."

"Bet Ron wished he'd been asked by Krum, too," Harry said, ignoring their friend who was heavily leaning against Harry as he almost fell out of his seat in his catatonic state.

"Probably," she replied, amused. "Ron, honestly."

"You were my hope," the redhead whispered.

"I'll dance with you," she said, reaching over Harry to pat their friend on his head. He grumbled against Harry's shoulder good-naturedly. "Now, you get along with the Patils, don't you?"

"We know Padma," Harry said reluctantly. "Not her twin."

"Well, one of you can ask her," Hermione pointed out.

"I was hoping to ask Daphne," Harry muttered quietly, "but that's not going to work right now."

Herione shook her head regretfully in agreement. "I think Blaise wanted to ask Ginny, actually. They became close friends over the summer." He sighed and got to his feet. "I'm going to go ask Susan."

Hermione grabbed his arm and stopped him. Ron slid off his shoulder and almost fell onto the bench. "Not until you look moderately happy to be speaking to her," Hermione scolded him. "And Ron, you perk up a bit, and then go ask Padma."

"Yes, ma'am," they chorused, plopping themselves back down on the benches and started drowning themselves in their sorrows.

Suddenly, Harry sat up straighter and a grin spread across his face. "Wait, I have an idea." He scrambled off the bench while the other two looked at him, bewildered. "I'm actually going to have fun at this thing."

Both watched as he hurried away towards one of the other tables. After a moment, Hermione started to grin. "Oh, Harry, you're brilliant."

"I can't wait to see the look on Maxime's and Karkaroff's faces when they see who one of the Hogwarts champions is bringing..." Ron whispered gleefully.

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Hotch met a surprisingly chipper Harry in the FBI infirmary the evening after the Yule Ball, though his son was looking significantly more exhausted than usual, from a late night and the surgery. "It went well, I take it?"

Harry nodded quickly. "Ron and I took Hermione's advice and asked close friends. He went with Padma and I took Luna."

No wonder he was in such a good mood, and he couldn’t stop himself from raising an eyebrow at the image. "I can't imagine that was a mundane night."

"I wish I'd taken a picture of Shane Fawcett when he saw who I was going with," Harry said smugly. "And Luna was calmer than me about being in front of so many people at the beginning, so it worked well because she helped me out a bit."

"I'm surprised Ron didn't ask Hermione," Hotch admitted, nursing a cup of coffee in his hands. The
surgery had taken place at stupid-early o'clock, but had taken relatively little time since they knew what they were looking for and had basically done the procedure before. Harry had just woken up a little while ago, a little disoriented but otherwise all right.

Harry tilted his head at him curiously. "Why?"

His pause was brief, and he quickly but calmly said, "Just thought he would have been more comfortable taking a close friend. I'm guessing he asked too late?"

"Yeah, Krum took her. The two of them spent most of the night with us, actually, and he was fine. It was kind of funny to watch him stare at her all night, and I think she thought so too at the beginning, but by the end Ron started waiting for Krum to leave to get him and Hermione drinks so Ron could ask Hermione if she wanted to dance so she could get away from the staring."

"Padma didn't mind?"

Harry frowned thoughtfully. "No, because she said she wasn't surprised."

Of course not. It had seemed pretty obvious to Hotch that Ron was starting to pine after his friend, and he suspected a couple of the more emotionally-sensitive people around the pair were starting to notice as well. But if Harry hadn't figured it out yet, he wasn't going to say anything just yet.

The week passed easily, with Sean coming by for the holidays to see both of his nephews. Jack was ecstatic to have Harry back, and the two often spent most of the day together. Hotch was forced to stop by work for at least an hour most days, since they were still trying to figure out the Horcrux issue, but as that was related to a growth in his son's head no one could really begrudge him that. Harry had to go to work with him a couple of times to lie in bed and look like an invalid when a professor stopped by.

One of those days, Harry was still in the infirmary getting visually and critically examined by McGonagall while Hotch remained in his office, far from Harry in case someone happened to look between them and catch some similarities. Unsurprisingly, shortly after he knew McGonagall arrived, he had his own guest.

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"The doctors are saying that he’s going to need to stay here, at least for another few days,” Hotch explained to him. Snape nodded without complaint. “You’re not surprised.”

“If he has a re-growing Horcrux in his brain, it will surely be causing him problems. Tell them to take however much time they need,” he said. Snape had arrived with McGonagall and Harry, like last time, and then left both in the medical wing while Snape went to go visit Hotch. “Do they know why it keeps coming back?”

“They’re hoping it’s just because they have not been able to successfully get everything each time. That can happen with cancer growths. They don’t have any other explanations, but it may be feeding off him,” Hotch said, causing both to frown. “However, we took the two pieces we had already moved and put them in the same jar, and I’m happy to say that they reunited, so I don’t believe we’re creating more Horcruxes, or, at the very least, we are able to reduce the number at the same time.”

Snape paused, tapping a finger on his chin. “Dumbledore was concerned that some of the Horcruxes may be in cursed objects,” he said slowly. “I wonder if we couldn’t use this to pull the Horcruxes out of the objects to safely destroy them. It takes an incredible amount of strength to separate parts of the soul – perhaps because it is continuously fighting to reunite with the rest.”
Hotch nodded carefully. “We’ll set the piece that was just taken out aside, then,” he decided, “and
keep trying to destroy the larger chunk we already have. If you have need of a piece, just come let
me know.” Before he could protest, the agent added, “No offense, but the Horcruxes are safer here
than at Hogwarts. People keep breaking into the school no matter how difficult it is because that’s
where everyone expects this kind of object to be hidden, but no one is going to think that we have
been hiding them here.”

Snape tilted his head in assent. “Very well. Has any progress been made with-“

A knock on the door interrupted him and he quickly quieted as both turned to look at the man who
was entering. “Garcia called me when you didn’t answer,” he began. His eyes flickered over Snape
for a moment, obviously dubbing the man ‘suspicious as hell’ before turning his attention to Hotch.
“She said someone named Blackwolf is trying to get a hold of you. Something about a kid - Potter?”

Snape and Hotch exchanged glances, and the latter quickly called Garcia. “Is Blackwolf with you
right now?” he asked. After a response, he continued, “Snape’s with me. Does he want me to bring
him?” He nodded at the answer and flipped his phone closed. “Looks like you’re coming, if you
want,” he told Snape as both rose.

“What’s this about?” the agent at the door asked.

Hotch sighed. “It’s about a case we worked a year ago. The agents of that team had to receive a
ridiculous amount of clearance to work it, and we only barely managed to get Prentiss in on it. I filed
your paperwork months ago and it still hasn’t been approved.” The agent nodded sullenly and left.
Snape and Hotch followed him out and turned the opposite way.

“That is…?”

“Gideon’s replacement, Agent Rossi.”

“What happened to Gideon?”

“You saw the results of our last two cases,” Hotch said as they passed down a hallway. “What do
you think happened to Gideon?”

In Garcia’s office, she and Blackwolf were still talking when the pair entered. Blackwolf disregarded
Snape immediately, much to the potion master’s irritation, and asked Hotch, “Rossi still annoyed?”

“He hates secrets with a passion, which is ironic since he keeps so many,” Hotch said, closing the
door behind him and Snape. “I told him it’s due to a paperwork hold up.”

Snape glanced at him in surprise. He had a feeling that the agent had been telling his team more
information than Snape had wanted him to, and he knew that even if he hadn’t, the team had been
picking up on things they shouldn’t have known. They functioned on the ability to gather and
interpret information, and without that, they couldn’t operate. That Hotch would keep something so
critical from a member of his team, when all of them played such critical roles, seemed out of
character and counterproductive.

Hotch saw the confusion on his face and relieved him of the confusion. “Out of all of us, Rossi is the
most no-nonsense.” And knowing Hotch, that was saying something. “We tried to get someone to
explain it and he thought she was joking. The whole thing went badly and he had to be obliviated,”
he continued, grimacing at the mention of the memory charm. “Until we can find a better way to
explain it to him, we’re keeping him in the dark.”

“How did you explain it to Prentiss?”
“The situation was different, for one thing. We also had Elle help explain it, and since Prentiss was her replacement, they were able to connect easier. Since we can’t locate Gideon, we can’t use the same logic on Rossi, although Gideon would by far be the best choice to explain the magical world to him.”

“You can’t find Gideon?” Snape asked, shocked. Not only was he well aware of the team’s ability to locate almost anyone they wanted to find – if they were muggle, at least, although they had been surprisingly adept at finding magical folk now that they knew what to look for – but Gideon’s disappearance was such a security risk that the American wizarding government should have been in a panic over it. The man was a muggle who knew about magic, and governments kept a close eye on them in case they ever decided to spill.

“Gideon is…special. He has too many reasons against telling the world about magic, and he is too smart to honestly think that anyone would believe him,” Blackwolf explained. “It’s funny you should bring him up, though – he is the reason I called you both down here.”

He nodded at Garcia, who picked up a package on her desk to show them. “I got this by mistake,” she said. “It should have gone straight to JJ, but she wasn’t in her office so they got it to me instead. They said it had come with an explicit notice that the contents were important and, considering our job, they decided not to wait until JJ got back.”

The package was a simple FedEx cardboard box with all the regular markings, but someone had scribbled two messages on the side. One was the message that had already been mentioned. Beside him, he saw Hotch’s mouth twitch into the slightest grimace as he read the message, which was the message that the box needed to be delivered as soon as possible. The handwriting must have been Gideon’s. Below it was what appeared to be chicken scratch, or at least extremely bad penmanship. Snape recognized it immediately as a symbol of runes that were commonly used as a warning about dark or cursed objects. He said so.

Blackwolf nodded. “I recognized it as well. Garcia saw it and called for me immediately, assuming it was magical.”

“What’s inside?”

“A Horcrux.” Blackwolf opened his hand and tossed something small into the air. Catching it, he held it between two fingers to show Snape and Hotch. “Cursed, like he warned us.”

In retrospect, Snape should have been unsurprised by Hotch’s reaction, but at the moment it was so unexpected he had no time to monitor his own response. “That’s an awfully big box for a small ring,” he pointed out.

There was a snort of amusement, and only after the other three in the room startled and turned to him did he realize the noise had come from him. Without trying to draw too much attention to the uncharacteristic good humor, he said, “We are all but handed one of the items that can help permanently destroy the Dark Lord and you’re worried about the box.”

“Well. Yes.”

Blackwolf allowed a smile to break through. “Gideon found as much protection as he could and wrapped up the ring. Every inch of the box was filled with paper that had numerous protective spells and charms over it. Evidently, he found a curse on the ring and was worried that there were more he was unable to see. If you ever find him,” he told Hotch, “I would be very curious as to how he located the first one to begin with.”
“Did he leave an explanation of how he found it?” Hotch asked.

His knowledge of his team had paid off. Garcia pulled the box into her lap and pushed aside the protective wrappings until she unveiled a letter. “Yep, seems he did. Aw, Gideon, looking out after us, how nice.”

“Would be nicer if he could just show up and explain it himself,” Blackwolf muttered as Hotch took the letter and read through it. “What does he say?”

“He doesn’t tell how, but he managed to trace Riddle’s history back as far as he could.” After a pause, he added to himself, “So he left to get a break from horrible people and went straight to researching one of the darkest wizards of the modern age. Excellent choice.” It might have just been Snape’s imagination, but he was sure he could sense some frustration towards Rossi’s predecessor. Just a little bit. “He decided to start at Voldemort’s beginning and see if he could learn anything, and found his old home. While he was looking around, he stumbled across the ring, and then took it along with a few other items he thought were suspicious to get checked by a cures specialist. Only the ring showed any magical signature and whoever he showed it to thought it highly likely that the ring was cursed beyond repair. He adds a warning not to put it on, since they’re unsure what that might do.”

“Any mention of where he went?” Garcia asked hopefully.

Hotch shook his head. “No, and no names either so we can’t try to track him down.” He folded the letter up a bit stiffly and put it in his pocket, then turned his head to Snape. “I guess this is the best chance to test out your soul theory.”

“What?” Blackwolf asked, and the two quickly explained. “I see a major downside and a major upside,” Blackwolf said contemplatively once they were done. “Voldemort is probably going to be able to sense the destruction of any Horcrux, so gathering them all together for one large blow will give him a feeling of safety when he is in extreme danger, and a direct attack on him at the same time would almost certainly be successful because of his distraction.”

“That’s what we were thinking.” Hotch agreed.

“But they are also pieces of his soul. Gathering them together may create a force as strong as him. One of the soul pieces almost brought him back to life with relatively little help – binding two Horcruxes together may create a much stronger form.”

The group went quiet, each in their own thoughts. Something about Blackwolf’s statement seemed off, but he couldn’t quite put his finger on what. The logic was sound, however, and he did his best to shrug off any other concerns to focus on the immediate issue. Finally, Snape said, “What if we only bind two at a time, and destroy them immediately? It took months for the Horcrux to become as strong as it did, and it was able to fester without any suspicion. The Dark Lord will be aware that someone is destroying Horcruxes, but he will think fewer have been destroyed.”

Blackwolf nodded and added, “I also want the individual Horcruxes destroyed as soon as possible, and no one should be around them for too long.” He pointedly shot a glance in Hotch’s direction, and Snape realized with a pang of fear that the Horcrux had been sitting on Hotch’s desk for months now, possibly leeching off him. From Hotch’s expression, the same thought had occurred to him as well.

Despite his self-preservation, Hotch said, “We need a third before we destroy any. There has to be another way to get rid of them and I don’t want to rely on the same methods.”
Snape grimaced. There were only so many ways they could safely guard the Horcrux, and most involved someone keeping an eye on it. Snape had a feeling Hotch wouldn’t want to pawn it off to the rest of his team, no matter how much damage it was causing himself. Furthermore, with the arrival of the ring, they were going to have a second Horcrux they had to watch out for, making it even more likely that one of them was going to be able to mess with someone’s mind. “The way the first was destroyed… We may be able to do it again, but I am unsure as to how to get a hold of the poison.”

“Poison?”

“A basilisk’s. Potter managed to destroy the diary with a basilisk fang, but we would need him to open the Chamber again. While there is no danger in doing so, what with the basilisk’s death and all, we could not ask him to do that without raising his curiosity, and Potter has a tendency to search out the truth in spite of the warnings against doing so.”

Again, there was that feeling that something was wrong. Something in their reactions to the new knowledge… Like they weren’t filing it away, like they weren’t already turning the new information over in their minds.

“However, if you are more amiable towards a slightly longer delay, there may be another possibility. Potter killed the basilisk with the sword of Gryffindor, and there were suspicions that this may have given the sword more power. I will have to discuss the matter with Dumbledore, who will have to retrieve it from wherever it has been hidden, but then I can bring it back here to destroy the Horcruxes.”

“We would still need an alternative method of destroying them,” Blackwolf said. “I agree that it feels much safer to have more than one route.” In a totally even voice, he asked Hotch, “Have you tried singing to it?”

“I think it shouted obscenities at me, but I couldn’t be sure,” Hotch responded, just as expressionless and Snape suppressed a smirk.

Garcia grinned widely at their antics. “I tried seeing if I could use the frequencies it was emanating to locate any other Horcruxes, but no go,” she said as Hotch turned to her. “They’re useless to me. Feel free to destroy the little screaming menaces before they kill us all.”

“If you get the sword,” Hotch told Snape, “I can try to see if using the other Horcruxes will pull out the one from the ring. The piece that they removed from Potter today can be used for testing other methods.”

Snape nodded and left to get outside the anti-Apparition wards that had been installed at Quantico. Over the last few months, he had seen a surge in the protective measures taken for the building, and was rather impressed even if it seemed a little overboard. After all, what was really being kept at Quantico that was so important, besides the Horcruxes no one knew about? Wouldn’t the added wards just make it more suspicious?

The thought, which had started out so innocently, niggled at his mind as he forwent the elevator in favor of the stairs. It was true, he realized – there were far too many protections. And they hadn’t sprung up when the first part of the Horcrux had been removed from Potter. If anything, it had started before, when the BAU had first discovered magic. But there was no reason about why the BAU would have implored the magical government to take precautionary measures in the warding, not when no one else knew about the BAU’s knowledge of the wizarding world.

That meant the BAU couldn’t be the ones who the warding was protecting, if the warding was
protecting an individual at all. Maybe an object? But no, anything like that would be under layers of protection with one of the various tribes who ran the American magical world, not with muggles. The most interesting thing was that whatever or whoever was being protected was being kept at Quantico and not moved, even though it would have been simpler to put it somewhere warding was already in place instead of constructing an entirely new layer of defenses.

The oddest thing was the strength of the wards, he realized as he began passing through a few. None of them pertained to muggles, obviously, and were strictly designed at keeping magical folk out. He could only get through because… Honestly, he wasn’t sure why. Maybe they had keyed him in without him knowing, but he wasn’t sure how that would have been possible or when it would have happened. And the wards weren’t really meant to stand up to assault either. He swore it was more like they were meant to keep someone from noticing the building, which was ridiculous because Quantico was a bloody big structure and not hard to learn about.

His main clue was Hotch’s silence. There was no way the unit chief didn’t know what was going on, if only because the BAU seemed to know everything either from deduction or their tech analyst’s skills. Despite all the information flowing between him and Hotch, the latter had never made a move to share any hint of something hidden at Quantico, even though Snape thought they had developed quite a trusting relationship. Perhaps it simply had nothing to do with Voldemort, but Snape thought that unlikely. The BAU was already stretched between dealing with the Dark Lord’s rise and their own work; adding a third concern into the mix was just going to prove detrimental to all three causes by wearing themselves too thin, particularly when one member was being kept entirely in the dark.

What else was Hotch keeping from him? And why? If he was worried about information getting back to Voldemort, it was a valid concern, but he still would have expected Hotch to try to get some warning to Dumbledore if the matter was particularly urgent. And the matter must be urgent if the wards were anything to go by. What the hell was going on?

As Snape pondered the strange hole of information in his correspondence with Hotch, something else finally made itself clear. Throughout the Horcrux conversation, something had seemed extremely wrong. Even when he had been talking to Hotch in his office, there had been an odd disconnect that Snape’s mind just hadn’t been able to assimilate with reality, but it had only become apparent when he saw Garcia and Blackwolf acting the same way.

None of them had been worried about the Horcruxes and, really, none of them had been particularly concerned about finding a way to destroy them. Just as panic began to fill Snape – just who had he been leaking information to? – another realization settled over him.

“One of the soul pieces almost brought him back to life with relatively little help,” Blackwolf had said.

Snape had never told any of them what the diary had been doing at Hogwarts.

So who else was leaking information to the team?

Chapter End Notes

I'm so proud of my Hufflepuffs in this chapter. Taking down Crouch, Jr. all by themselves. And now we've got the real Moody! This is one of my favorite chapters
because of that scene and Lynch's introduction.

Gideon's role in the story came up again sooner than I remembered it returning, so if anyone was worried that he was completely gone – no frets, I got you covered. I feel like Gideon could have left a bunch of grown adults (and really, yes Reid needed help but he had other people who were there for him) but some of the students – like Blaise – relied almost completely on him so he knew he couldn't have strayed far. Besides, Gideon left because he didn't feel like what he did was making a difference. The QDA proves he did.
“The second act is called “The Turn.” The magician takes the ordinary something and makes it do something extraordinary. Now you’re looking for the secret, but you won’t find it, because of course you’re not really looking. You don’t really want to work it out. You want to be fooled. But you wouldn’t clap yet.” - The Prestige

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Ever since his string of epiphanies regarding his friend – and he did still consider Hotch his friend, because he could hardly believe that the man was doing this out of malice – and his subsequent return with the sword, Snape had been keeping a closer eye than normal on Hotch. He showed up unannounced for the third time in two weeks, bringing a batch of potions and a new series of scans on each occasion, and found himself in Hotch’s office as per normal.

“If the doctors have cleared Potter, I can bring him back to Hogwarts. I’m sure his entourage would appreciate his presence for Christmas tomorrow,” Snape said, running one of the tests over Hotch again. While he was using the tests as an excuse to return and try to catch Hotch off guard, he was also genuinely concerned that the prolonged exposure to the Horcruxes might have caused some damage. The first time, he had immediately discovered a serious drop in Hotch’s energy levels, but they had gone back up by the next time he arrived and they were unsure if the drop had been related to the Horcruxes or just general work.

Hotch nodded and sent a message someone’s way on his phone. “Dr. Anders is probably on shift right now, but I’m sure he’ll respond as soon as possible.”

“Does your team even get a break for Christmas?” Snape asked.

“Not always. Sometimes we get some cases we have to fly out for before the trail runs cold. We just had a lot of work to do this year, so most of us didn’t go home.” He smiled slightly. “My brother used his own break to come down and visit his nephews. I’m a little afraid of what they got up to while I was gone but I think I just don’t want to know.”

Snape looked at him in surprise. “You have a brother?”

“Yeah. Younger. I think he took them out to go somewhere today.”

After a pause, Snape cautiously asked, “You don’t get to see them much, do you?”

Hotch grimaced. “Not nearly as often as I would like, no. Especially not…” He trailed off and shook his head. “Too much work.”

Snape backed off from the subject and continued running the tests. If he found an irregularity, he would bring it up, but otherwise remained quiet. A half hour later, when he finished, he leaned back in the chair across the desk from Hotch, who had gone similarly silent.

“So you think I might have been affected by the Horcruxes after all,” Hotch said.
Snape nodded. “I do believe so. However, I think Horcruxes might latch onto magical cores, and since you don’t have one, the damage was not as severe to you as it was to the girl the diary attacked.”

Hotch made a humming noise. “Interesting.” He met Snape’s gaze in that odd way of his where he didn’t quite meet his eyes. At this point, they both knew Snape was never going to try to enter his mind no matter how curious he was, but it was a good habit for him to get into, what with all the secrets he had. “When did you realize something was wrong?” At Snape’s confused expression, he added, “The time Gideon sent the ring?”

Snape couldn’t quite suppress a small smirk. “You want to know how much I know you know.”

Hotch freely smiled back. “I do, yes.”

“If I tell you, will you give me some explanation for the secret?”

Hotch hesitated before carefully saying, “I’ll go ahead and give it to you now, as a matter of fact, since what you must have figured out can only be related to one thing. I never told you because it had to do with someone’s family, and out of respect for that my team and I decided we would never even remotely compromise the source. It was too dangerous, more than I can describe without giving names.”

“So you do have another source.”

“Is that what you suspected?”

“I realized someone must have told you that the diary was using Weasley’s life force, because I know I never did. But I’m also curious as to what is being hidden here at Quantico.”

Hotch paused, and he looked genuinely surprised. “Sorry?”

His reaction made Snape rethink his logic for a moment but, finding no obvious holes, merely explained what he had observed to Hotch in regards to the wards. As he did, the agent mulled the thought process over in his mind. When Snape finished, he said, “It’s true the BAU is the reason for the wards,” he agreed slowly, “and that the wards were not established for the Horcruxes.” Hotch stared at a corner of the room, frowning thoughtfully as he considered what he could tell Snape. “As for why it’s being held here instead of anywhere else… There are a variety of reasons, but particularly for the same reason we have the Horcruxes here. This is the last place anyone would look.”

“What is it that’s so important?” Snape finally asked, a little exasperated.

A long minute paused, and then Hotch settled on, “The wards help protect the family of our informant.”

Snape blinked in surprise. “All of this is just for the other source you have?”

“Jealous?” Hotch jibed.

Snape snorted. “Hardly. Just…confused. How could anyone be giving you so much information that they need this protection?”

Hotch made a wavering gesture. “As I said, there are a lot of reasons for the warding. The original defenses were for the family, but as the Horcruxes came to stay here and we began to hold more sensitive information, it became necessary that other wards be put in place. I know this isn’t quite as
detailed as you want, but that’s almost all I can tell you.”

Snape slowly nodded. “I’ll accept it.” He waved the matter aside. “If it is for someone’s protection, I can hardly argue more. Onto other topics. Dumbledore wanted to know if you would be willing to come for the second task.”

Hotch frowned. “I thought you were sure Crouch put Potter’s name in.”

“We know he did. He wants you to check the crowd anyway and see if Crouch might have been working with someone.”

There was a long pause.

“He wants to know why I didn’t come to the first task.”

“Black and I, for once in our lives, came to an agreement on something and decided we were never going to talk about that case again. Unfortunately for you, that means your explanation went from extremely solid to an average alibi, and there were a few Order members who are still suspicious, particularly after Moody was shown to be an imposter.”

“He was in the Order?”

“Crouch was, and now the real Moody is.”

“Provided I don’t have another case, I’ll try to come.”

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Finally, Hotch couldn’t excuse Harry’s supposed hold-up in the infirmary any longer to Snape, and Harry left for Hogwarts a week before break ended.

A case did in fact come up the day of the second task, but it was clear the team had it in hand and Hotch sent a message to Snape as a friendly warning that he might be a bit late because of his flight. One day, Snape would perhaps learn that he shouldn’t ask questions about Hotch’s job. That day was not today.

“Bad one?”

“Relatively normal. Angel of Death case.” After spending so long with the rest of the team, Hotch had to mentally remind himself that no matter how intelligent the company he usually surrounded himself with was, they normally didn’t know a whole lot about his particular field. “In such cases, the UnSub believes that they are putting people out of their misery by killing them. Mercy killings. They might believe the UnSub has reached out to them somehow and told them that they need help, because they can’t do it themselves. The team was closing in on a potential threat. They should be fine without me.”

Nevertheless, it had been agreed that he should arrive as close to the start of the Tournament as possible and leave quickly after. Snape had said that both he and Dumbledore were worried that one of the Golden Trio might spot and recognize him, although Hotch pointed out mildly that it was unlikely since it had been almost a year ago and they hadn’t seen him since. He made sure that all of the QDA students were fully aware that he was coming so none of them reacted strongly to his unexpected presence.

“They will not notice you before the task, but afterwards they are more likely to be facing the crowd and catch sight of you.” Snape was casting a series of charms around Hotch to dissuade anyone from
taking notice of him, particularly the three who had been with Hotch the first time he and the professor had met, and he could see evidence of them working as students’ gazes drifted over him and those who had already been looking at him shrugged and turned their attention somewhere else.

Hotch scanned the crowd as they approached on boat. The Weasley clan was easy to find, but Ron was not among them, and he didn’t bother trying to search for Hermione, who would vanish easily in the crowd. “Why?”

Snape cast one more charm, this time a silencing spell, around both of them. “Both were taken for the task.” When Hotch looked at him in alarm, he elaborated. “Each champion was told something important was to be retrieved. They were not told it was a person. Of course, if they fail to rescue them, the merpeople will bring them back up.”

Hotch suppressed a smile. Padma and Roger had stumbled on the merpeople theory together while researching in the library. They would be delighted to learn that they had been right. Apparently, Fawcett had been with them at the time as all three had been in the same section of the library, and Fawcett had tried to warn Harry about the task and creatures not long after to fulfill his debt. He had been rather disappointed to discover that Harry already knew.

“Isn’t someone going to notice you aren’t with the rest of the professors?” Hotch asked as they got out of the boat and slipped into Hogwarts’ floating tower. There was no excellent point from which he could watch the whole crowd, but Snape was at least able to get him into a relatively good place on the first platform.

“It is likely, but considering my post, they will probably assume I am closer to the champions in case particularly rare potions need to be administered. I will hardly leave you alone in the middle of a magical crowd.”

Hotch paused before slowly raising an eyebrow at him. “I believe I just heard you call me defenseless.”

Snape sniffed. “I did no such thing, surely.”

A blur of motion went sprinting past and both stared in bewilderment as Harry skidded to a stop by the forefront of the platform, almost falling into the water. Remarkably, his boat had been even later than Hotch’s. His hair was in disarray and he seemed a bit uncoordinated as he was guided into position, and he only barely cast a glance towards the crowd to scan for faces.

“Someone was either snogging or oversleeping,” Snape muttered.

“Could be both.”

“Weasley’s in for a rough rescue.”

“Well, at least he has a half hour to wake up, right?”

“More like ten minutes.”

Hotch cast a glance at the water. “I think once he jumps into that he should be suitably jolted into awareness. The lake doesn’t look particularly warm today.”

He knew they had come to some sort of conclusion about what to do about Harry holding his breath, but he fought to hold down his panic as he realized that he had never heard anyone talking about the temperature. Harry would be able to breathe, but hypothermia could still set in and-
He forced himself to calm down. They were prepared, and they had been so for months. Even if they hadn’t initially planned for it, someone would have caught all the details like that by now. The students were obsessively protective over each other, almost as bad as Hotch himself. The chances of something going wrong were extremely low.

Except things always went wrong with Harry. And in that murky water, if something went really wrong, no one would know anything until it was too late. And it sounded like there was a strict no-interference policy if so many people had been injured and almost died before and-

Hotch was relatively grateful to hear the horn blow to interrupt his thoughts. He had entirely missed the speech and quickly averted his gaze from the water to begin scanning the audience for any odd reactions. There – Karkaroff seemed all too focused on his own champion, while Maxime had been eyeing the others to check out the competition. That could be nothing, perhaps just overinflated pride, but still worth noting. He tried to ignore the splashes as the champions went into the water but one ear turned towards the sounds anyway. One-two-three-f… No four.

Despite himself, he turned from his assessment of the crowd in time to see Snape rub an exasperated hand over his face, and then his eyes locked on Harry, who was choking on something. Beside him, Neville’s face might as well have ‘Oops’ painted on it. Just as Hotch was about to ask Snape if someone should do something, a burly, scarred man – Moody, the real one – reached out and pushed Harry into the water before he could be disqualified. He didn’t resurface.

*Harry’s supposed to be under water, if it started working he wouldn’t come back up, he’s fine, he’s fine*, Hotch repeated in his head, but he couldn’t look away from the spot Harry had disappeared at.

“I’ve killed Harry Potter!” Neville shrieked a few feet away, ruining the vestiges of nonchalance Hotch had been trying to drag together.

“Snape,” he said, damn the consequences. The potions professor looked less concerned and more annoyed at the whole situation.

“This happens every time,” Snape said through gritted teeth. Hotch blinked at him in confusion.

“Woo!”

Hotch whipped around just in time to see Harry dive back into the water, and a few sprayed droplets hit his face.

“Every time,” Snape repeated. “I swear, one day, I’m just going to have a heart attack and wipe my hands of the whole matter, and maybe someone will have the good sense to blame Potter and he’ll finally get in trouble for something.” He eyed Hotch hopefully, but the agent just shook his head, trying to hide his relief.

“Don’t have jurisdiction,” he said as he turned back to crowd-watching.

Not even close to an hour later, a girl burst out of the water, half-choking. Hotch caught sight of bright red lines on her neck, and glanced at the professor for an explanation. “Looks like grindylows,” Snape quietly said. The girl confirmed it a few minutes afterwards in between sobs. Someone had evidently told her what had been waiting at the bottom of the lake.

After the hour mark, Shane Fawcett popped up, pulling some boy with him. They were immediately swarmed with blankets and motions by the awaiting medical staff, and then moved out of the way for the rest. Krum followed not long after with Hermione Granger, of all people. It took him a moment to remember that she had gone with him to the Yule Ball. He wondered how Ron had reacted to that,
considering the boy’s rather obvious crush on her.

Not long after, two more heads came into view, one red and the other platinum. Both hurriedly swam towards the platforms, although Ron kept turning back and ducking under water to look for something. Harry was nowhere to be seen. Hotch forced himself to at least keep one eye turned towards the crowd to keep up some appearances, but Ron’s nervousness was proving to be contagious. The pair were pulled up into waiting blankets, and Hermione rushed over to them to ask what had happened.

“I don’t know,” Ron told her. “But I couldn’t see him.”

Snape made a frustrated sound beside him. “The two of them shouldn’t have been able to the surface without him,” he muttered. Hotch had a feeling he wouldn’t have been admitting this if the silencing charms cast around them hadn’t been so strong. “The merpeople would have stopped them.”

“So then where is he at?” Hotch asked as a loud splash came from the water.

Snape grabbed him and pulled him down. A yelp flew over their heads, and Harry collided with a group of people behind them who had not been so quick to duck. Harry and the two who were unfortunate enough to take the brunt of his weight fell backwards into the water on the opposite of where Hotch and Snape stood. A few people nearby laughed and helped the spluttering and dripping group back onto the platform.

“On the border of danger and safety, as usual,” Snape said. “That blasted boy…”

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Hotch didn’t even try to sneak away to see everyone. Snape was with him the whole time, almost obsessively making sure that Hotch was entirely safe throughout the experience. The profiler was unsure how he felt about the avid protection, considering he was usually on the other end of such measures. The students were disappointed but understood.

“Take my arm. We’ll be Apparating,” Snape said. They had sidled away from the crowds and off the grounds until they were out of the reach of the protective wards. A few hours had passed since the end of the tournament, as Snape had been forced to remain with the students longer because of Head of House duties. No one had noticed Hotch walking with him, due to the multiple disillusionment charms placed on him, but he had still tailed the professor throughout the rest of the day. To his amusement, Snape sometimes would quickly scan the area until he managed to pick out Hotch under the charms, and it seemed to take longer each time as their strength increased with time.

Hotch frowned slightly at the statement. “I thought you couldn’t Apparate across the ocean. The distance is too great.” Snape didn’t respond, but he did smirk slightly and Hotch raised an eyebrow. With the conclusion that he wouldn’t be getting an answer immediately, he complied with the request.

“Side-Along Apparation is rather uncomfortable,” Snape warned. “And I am unclear as to how you, as a muggle, will fare. At any rate, be warned.”

Hotch barely stumbled when they landed and Snape blatantly stared at him for a moment in shock. “Blackwolf,” he said by way of explanation. “There were several instances he decided to avoid muggle transportation.” That, and he had been worried about them Apparating for the first time in a dangerous situation and having to find their bearings in the middle of a fight. At any rate, that was what he claimed. Hotch personally thought he might have been doing it because seeing the stoic FBI agents doubled over and barely holding onto their lunches the first few times was rather
entertaining.

Snape shrugged slightly and handed him a piece of paper. “Another wizarding technique that may or may not work. Read it and memorize it.”

_The Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix lies at 12 Grimmauld Place._

Hotch looked up at him and nodded, and Snape burned the paper, then pointed in front of him. Between the houses that had been present before was a new one, with the same address he had just read. “If only our marshals had something like this, their jobs would be a lot easier,” he said. A memory of Reid standing near the cooling body of a teenager, shot by one of the marshals’ witnesses, flashed into his mind but he quickly pushed it away. “What is this place?”

“In a minute,” Snape replied, leading him in. Before he opened the door, he warned, “There’s a painting we have yet been unable to remove. She will begin screaming if we are too loud.”

Inside, the house was dim and cold. The hallways were narrow, and Hotch had to step carefully for the first few paces to avoid running into anything. There was a staircase to another floor, but Snape led him past it to an open doorway, where a few people were already gathered. Among them were two redheads who clearly shared the Weasley facial features.

“You’ve met Black and Lupin,” Snape said, dismissing the pair in the corner. “Moody will be joining us later with the headmaster. Arthur and Molly Weasley are to your left, and Nymphadora Tonks at the table.”

An hour later, and he was unsure of many things. Chief among them was why they had decided to let him into the Order headquarters when he had almost nothing to do with the war. He was also a little unclear as to whether or not anyone was beginning to get worried about his absence, since he couldn’t contact anyone within the house, but that could easily be sorted out later.

He was sure that Molly Weasley was the red headed female version of his brother, and he was uncertain he would ever see Sean the same way again.

Everyone finally showed up, including a few more faces that had gone unmentioned. The meeting was quickly started, as several had to return to work or other responsibilities, and the small conversations that had been going on quickly hushed as Dumbledore called everyone to attention.

He began by shining the spotlight on Hotch, who inclined his head at the introduction but remained silent. He was glad he had already known about Moody’s eye or the thing would surely have crepted him out as it focused on him for the next thirty minutes. The introduction did solve one puzzle – Dumbledore called him their liaison to Blackwolf’s office, and Hotch could only assume the Apache had somehow been involved in this and hadn’t been able to send him a warning fast enough. He kept this lack of insight out of his expression.

Most of the information was out of context for him, such as names and places, and Snape had no desire to explain every detail to him. They both nonverbally decided to talk over all of it later, and Hotch tried to remember as much as he could to send back to Blackwolf, who the information was meant for anyway. When the topic turned to Hogwarts, he was relieved to find himself on more solid ground from his extensive knowledge of the people there.

“The Tournament can hardly be a coincidence,” a man named Kingsley was saying. “The timing is entirely too coincidental, especially regarding the press coverage it puts on England and Hogwarts in particular.”

“That’s why the Death Eater demonstration at the Quidditch World Cup got so much attention,”
Arthur murmured in agreement. “Are we sure no more got into the school through the staff of the other schools? Er, any more, I mean?”

“Possible, but unlikely,” Snape said. “An imposter would have to have incredible skill to convince the rest of the staff, especially considering Crouch’s revelation not long ago.”

“Could someone be tampering with the tasks? Maybe they were never a Death Eater during You Know Who’s active years,” Arthur suggested. “Then no one would recognize them as a potential threat.”

“You’re just worried someone’s after Potter,” Fletcher scoffed.

“Considering the boy’s record,” Snape pointed out, “it is not a terribly ill-placed concern.”

Fletcher shook his head so quickly Hotch was a bit worried he was going to hurt himself. “Potter’s been able to take care of himself so far – leave him to it, I say! We have more important matters to worry about, like this bloody war.” Speak for yourself, Hotch wanted to say, but kept silent.

“If something happens to Potter, regardless of the prophecy, it would have an incredibly demoralizing effect on the rest of Britain,” Dumbledore said firmly. “He must be protected, if only for that reason alone. Regardless, he is also a student at Hogwarts and is entitled to the utmost protection that the grounds can offer, as well as the support of the government. Since he is lacking in the latter, we must make up for it with the former.”

“What prophecy?” Hotch interrupted. Several people did double takes or looked around for who had spoken, having almost entirely forgotten he was there. Since his introduction, he had remained entirely out of the conversation up until this point.

Dumbledore nodded faintly. “My apologies. Fourteen years ago, Sybil Trelawney gave a prophecy concerning the downfall of Voldemort. She specified that a boy would have the power to defeat him, and that one of the two would have to kill the other to survive. Her specifications, including a birth in July, pointed to two children – Neville Longbottom and Harry Potter. By killing the Potters and attempting to do the same to Harry, Voldemort marked him as the boy spoken of in the prophecy.”

As he spoke, a cold hand wrapped around Hotch’s heart. “You’re relying on a fourteen-year-old to kill a dark lord,” he deadpanned before his logic could hush him.

“We are hoping it will not come to that,” Dumbledore said, weary.

Hotch held back any response. Whether minds could be changed about Harry’s role in the upcoming strife or not, now was not the time to argue it. Harry didn’t even know about the prophecy, did he?

“So we’re sure none of the staff at Hogwarts are going after him?” Tonks asked. “If an attempt to do something is going to be made, it’s going to be at the third task. That doesn’t leave us a whole lot of time to work things out.”

Fletcher turned on Hotch, who internally sighed. He’d see this behavior before. “That’s your job, isn’t it? To find criminals when no one knows their identity?” He folded his arms, a slightly smug look on his face.

“Like you?” Hotch asked, almost bored. Fletcher started. “Besides, the real question is finding their true identity. As in your case, plenty of people tend to know the pseudonyms and aliases criminals hide under, but those usually don’t track back to any information that can prompt an arrest.”

“I- What? Criminal?” If Fletcher’s response hadn’t been obvious enough, the reactions of the rest of
the room were all but proof. Beside him, Snape was trying to hide a smile behind one hand.

“Of course. In knock-offs, right?”

Fletcher gaped at him, then whipped around to glare at Snape whose responding snarl immediately made Fletcher pull away. “Don’t even entertain the thought that I wasted my time giving him your life story.”

“You’re just guessing,” Fletcher said with a faint laugh, eyes flickering between Snape and Hotch. The rest of the room was literally leaning forward in their seats in anticipation and curiosity.

“Hardly. When you first entered the room, Kingsley was asking your opinion on the markets, suggesting you are something of an expert in the area. However, you spoke of a wide variety of the markets in great detail, and in my experience, experts stick to one trade and don’t focus on markets that aren’t strongly interconnected with their own unless they’re an economist – a job which one can only hold under the Ministry in the magical world. You’re not a Ministry official.”

“In your experience-“ Fletcher began, trying to debase the idea.

“Furthermore,” Hotch pushed on, “you tried to sell no less than three people cauldrons and enchanted parchment, which not only confirms the diversity of the markets you are involved in but also brings up another point. I know no honest salesmen who try to sell their goods to their friends for such exorbitant prices, and I couldn’t help but notice no one entertained the thought of buying the products. You wear more expensive clothes than normal to make yourself stand out and seem more trustworthy, yet when you sat down you choose seats as far away from the aurors as possible. I could go on, but you haven’t answered my question.”

“And that is?” Fletcher asked through gritted teeth.

“Knock-offs?”

Fletcher heaved a great sigh and planted his face in his hands.

Moody turned to Snape while Fletcher wallowed in self-pity. “Where’d you find him and are there more where he came from?”

The question broke the tense mood and Snape replied, “Breaking into Hogsmeade and Hogwarts. As for others, I believe most of them are occupied.”

“Although, there were others accompanying you at the inn, where there not?” Dumbledore asked Hotch unexpectedly. “Profilers tend to work in groups, not with one or two.”

The profiler blinked in surprise and nodded. “We did originally work alone, even if we mostly do work as a group now. It just so happens the rest of the team actually was with us that day, behind the couch.”

Dumbledore made a humming noise. “Ah, what a shame. I had thought they were under the bar.”

“Two were. They couldn’t all fit behind the couch.”

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Reid was the last one to enter the briefing room, and from the way that he all but bounced in and the steaming mug in his hands, Hotch could only presume his delay had been due to a stop to grab coffee. The rest of the team had spent the time catching up with Elle, who had come through the
Floow system that morning as per Blackwolf’s request.

Once everyone was settled, Blackwolf convened the meeting by putting a privacy charm around the room. “Remember the Fidelius Charm?” he asked immediately after.

“The one that failed the Potters?” Morgan replied.

“Right. I think we need to place one on Hotch’s and Harry’s relationship. I was thinking it might be too obvious, and that the presence of a Fidelius-kept secret could actually jeopardize its own existence once someone realized there was something none of us could talk about, but your reputation as the FBI should make it less concerning.”

“Give us another rundown on it, just to make sure we’re all on the same page,” Hotch said.

“The Fidelius Charm essentially puts an entire secret into one person, called the Secret Keeper. Only that person can disclose the secret. Anyone else who knows is unable to share it, even those directly affected by it. Its most common use, particularly during war time, is to protect safe houses and headquarters, like that of the Order of the Phoenix. There are some technicalities to the charm that no one has ever completely confirmed or disproved, which has led to some speculation about the charm. For that reason, I was also concerned about using it, but I found some ways around the problem.”

“Why does the charm work so well?” Elle asked. “I mean, couldn’t someone just figure it out?”

Blackwolf empathetically shook his head. “No. In the cases of houses under it, people will walk right past the building when they know it’s in the neighborhood and won’t be able to see it. The charm is very strong.”

“Is the Secret Keeper in any danger?” Prentiss asked.

“Not really, since they can’t be coerced into revealing the secret against their will. If they’re tortured or put under Veritaserum, they still can’t reveal it if they don’t want to. However, if that person is known, they may inadvertently give others clues as to what the secret may be, through their behavior or conversations with others. Some say that can be enough to tell someone else the secret if there is an eavesdropper, while others disagree.”

Morgan leaned back in his chair and gestured with one hand as he said, “Why do this now? Why not earlier?”

“Because now I think I know how we can protect the secret and its Keeper, and I’m concerned the secret may be critical to Harry’s safety. If this place is to stay as a safe house, it needs all the covert protection it can get.” He pulled out his wand and muttered something, and a piece of paper appeared before all of them. “Write down the names of everyone you would trust as Secret Keeper, as soon as they come to mind. Don’t overthink it.”

“Everyone?” Reid asked doubtfully. “Even if they’ve never met Harry?”

“Everyone you would trust, as if it were your own child.” Blackwolf confirmed, and after a moment of hesitation, the room filled with the scratching of pens.

Five minutes later, Elle was the last person to put her pen down. Hotch’s cursory glance around the room showed Morgan’s list of nine to be the shortest, and JJ’s list of twenty-one to be the longest. There was an even range in between and everyone seemed confident in their choices, but Blackwolf shook his head and told them to add more. The group collectively frowned, but started adding more names after a moment. Blackwolf didn’t let them stop until everyone had at least twenty.
“I just want to say I don’t quite trust half the people on my list with this,” Reid said hesitantly.

“That’s fine, because you can’t use anyone on these lists,” Blackwolf said flatly and a startled noise ran through the room. “All of these names are most likely people you speak to often or are close to, which means they could possibly be looked at as a potential Secret Keeper if someone realizes that the position has not fallen to any of you. Usually, the person chosen to hold the secret is someone very close to those who it protects. If none of you, and no one you know well, is the Secret Keeper, than it’s highly unlikely that anyone will realize that one of you is the parent.”

“Then who do we pick?” Elle asked, bewildered. “If this is the entire list of people we trust…”

“It can’t be someone from Harry’s end, either,” Prentiss pointed out. “If someone realizes Harry knows, they might start paying attention to people around him.”

“I put a bunch of the students down anyway,” Reid said, “so we couldn’t use them.”

“Could we use a relative of a relative or something? They’re only going to go back so far,” JJ suggested.

“But at the same time, we still need to trust them,” Hotch reminded her. “I don’t think we should hand this over to someone we don’t know at all.”

“Wait,” Garcia said. “What if we make it someone who you met on a case? Someone who’s indebted to you for stopping a criminal?”

Hotch started nodding. “That could work. Some of our more gruesome cases got us some very grateful allies.”

“It would have to be one of the more serious cases,” Morgan said, “which narrows it down somewhat.”

Garcia pulled out her laptop. “I can start looking for names.”

“No, it should be someone we immediately remember if we’re going to make them Secret Keeper,” JJ said. “What were some of the worst murders we’ve worked? Those are most likely to get the strongest appreciation.”

“Josh Cramer,” Reid immediately said. “We’ve worked two cases with him in Baltimore, and the first time was against a serial killer who’d killed hundreds.” Those who had met him were nodding their heads in agreement.

“I’ll find an excuse to talk to him,” Blackwolf said. “I would say one of you should come with me, but there is a chance someone from the Order has already been sent to watch each of you.” He smirked slightly. “At the last meeting I participated in, there were some complaints that your team knew too much.”

“What happens to the people who already know the secret?” Morgan asked.

“They forget, usually. Since you’re muggles, I’m not quite sure how it will work. It has been observed that muggles tend to have odd reactions to the Fidelius Charm.” He took down the privacy warding when no one else spoke up. “Keep the line of communication open,” he said, taking his wand out.

“You as well,” Hotch responded, and Blackwolf apparated out. “Anything else or should we get back to work?”
“Have there be any leads in finding Jason Gideon?” Prentiss asked. “I know all of you trust him not to say anything, and he’s clearly not working against us, but there’s a lot of information he’s missing now that’s he been out of the loop for so long.”

“We couldn’t find Gideon when he was working for the FBI,” Morgan said flatly. “I really don’t think we’re going to find him now. It’s just a waste of resources, and if we did have any leads, it might make it easier for someone else to track him down. I think we should just let him do his own thing.”

Hotch leaned back subtly and folded his arms, watching the discussion. His own thoughts on Gideon were divided. On one hand, he was worried about having a potential information leak running around, especially since they had no clue what he was doing. On the other hand, Gideon was one of the least likely people to divulge what he knew, particularly considering why he had left in the first place. Besides, with the application of the Fidelius Charm quickly approaching, it wouldn’t be long before Gideon would be unable to tell anyone about Harry’s parentage anyway.

That didn’t mean he didn’t want Gideon back. He badly missed the man’s wise council, and with Rossi’s aggression towards believing in magic – they were now on their third failed attempt to tell him about it, leading to yet another obliviation – he had no one else to bounce ideas off of when it came to magic. The rest of the team looked up to him, and it was hard to show signs of uncertainty around them. Morgan saw through his defenses the best, but he was too much like an uncle or older brother to Harry and could hardly put the necessary emotional distance between himself and the teenager to look at the situation objectively. No, he needed Gideon for something like that, but the ex-agent was doing everything in his power to avoid being found.

Elle lightly drummed her fingers against the table for a moment before asking, “Is there any way we can send him messages, though? Or is he keeping an eye on us somehow?”

Reid frowned in confusion. “Why would that be important?”

“Well, does he know we have a way to destroy the Horcruxes?”

“I assumed he must have known when he sent the ring,” Garcia said, but there was uncertainty in her tone now that she considered the dilemma. “After all, why else would he have sent it?”

“He must have realized we would know what it was and that we were already trying to destroy them, considering Harry’s situation,” Prentiss pointed out. “I don’t think he had to know for sure whether or not we had a sure way just yet, so long as he had faith in our abilities to figure it out.”

“By the way, have the labs figured out a way to replicate the basilisk venom?” Reid asked.

Hotch shook his head. “Blackwolf pulled the plug on that, since what destroys the Horcruxes are certain magical properties. Whether or not the labs could figure it out, it’s too close to breaking the Statute of Secrecy, and the lab technicians could inadvertently find themselves holding onto some very dangerous information about a potent poison.”

“What are we going to do about Rossi?” Elle gestured in the direction of Gideon’s old office. “I haven’t even met the guy yet, but from what all of you are saying, it’s not likely that he’s actually going to believe in magic.”

“Not from the way we’ve been trying to make him understand, at least,” Reid muttered glumly. “I’m a bit worried we’re going to give him brain damage if we keep wiping his memory, not to mention the breach of trust.”
“And he knows something’s up,” Hotch added. “I know he’s already gone so far as to ask Strauss what’s going on. That only caused more problems because she told him we no longer work directly for her, even though official papers say so, and she couldn’t tell him who our actual head was.”

“Until he believes in magic, there’s not a whole lot we can do for him,” Morgan said. “I think we should just leave it there for now. It’s a secret of national security for a large portion of the population, so we really don’t have to try to bring someone in on it if we think it’s potentially dangerous. It hasn’t caused a problem so far.”

“It might later if everything goes wrong.” JJ rubbed her hand against her forehead. “Nothing’s worked? Not Apparation, not anything else?” Hotch regretfully shook his head. “What does he trust?”

“His own mind and logic,” Reid said slowly. “Hotch, isn’t Snape a Legilimens?”

“I don’t think we can do that,” Prentiss said before the idea could grow further. “We’d have to do it without his permission, since he wouldn’t truly understand what we would be asking him to agree to. In the long run, I think we would regret it. Doing that would set up a bad standard.”

Hotch finally waved the matter away. “Let’s worry about it later,” he said. “At the moment, this isn’t going to help us much and we have larger concerns.”

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Harry jerked awake when he felt someone tapping his forehead. He scowled up at Ron, who beamed back at him.

“What,” he deadpanned.

“It’s three in the afternoon, Potter,” Draco said from somewhere over his head, and he tilted it back to find the blond reading a book on a nearby cushion. The Slytherin sensed his gaze and sent a smirk his way. “You won’t be tired enough to rest tonight if you sleep the whole day away,” he admonished and Harry scowled deeper at him without real heat. He’d had another nightmare that morning about the werewolves, which had become a common occurrence, and his sleep schedule was entirely screwed up.

He propped himself up on his elbows and looked around the Room of Requirement. It was the three of them, Hermione, and a few others, but almost everyone else was in class. The first few months after they had returned from Quantico had found the group bonding in the room, but many had begun to drift away as they regained the flow of their lives. Surprisingly, however, many had come back. Warrington, who had been one who had stayed throughout, had pointed out that many of the students were dismayed at how little they could relate to their fellow peers after everything that had happened.

“Hey, Harry,” Terry said eagerly when he saw that Harry had sat up. He shoved the textbook he had been reading away along with his homework, and the young Hotchner felt apprehension growing in his stomach. “Hermione said you can do a Patronus Charm.”

Justin’s head shot up at that. “You can? Is that what you cast in third year, when the dementors were chasing you and- and Cedric?”

“Yeah,” Harry replied hesitantly. “I got Blackwolf to show me how last year since I had so many problems with the dementors. Why?”

“Can you show me?”
Now the entire room was watching Harry, who had by this time realized he had no hope of going back to sleep. “Sure,” he relented, and the Ravenclaws all grinned at each other as he got to his feet. “Okay, who all is learning?” As soon as the words left his mouth, everyone’s hands became unoccupied and their eyes were acutely focused on him. “Oh, well then. Er, I’ve never done something like this before, sorry.”

He cast his mind back to when he had been learning the Patronus Charm and tried to remember what exactly Blackwolf had told him. “So, the incantation is *Expecto Patronum*. The spell is fueled by the happiest, strongest memory you can think of. It took me a long time to find one that worked, but once you’ve got it it’s not that bad. Your charm will take the form of an animal that you closely relate to, if it takes a corporeal form at all. It may just appear as shimmering light, which is a lesser form of the charm. I’m not entirely sure how your animal is determined, but from what I heard from Travis over the summer, it usually is the same as your Animagi form, although it can reflect someone important to you.”

“Can you show us?” Anthony asked eagerly and Harry nodded.

He pointed his wand and called, “*Expecto Patronum!*”

And almost immediately fell back in surprise as an enormous animal stampeded out of the end of his wand. Beside him, Hermione and Draco yelped and Ron swore loudly.

In front of him, the elephant raised its trunk and trumpeted silently before slowing down and beginning to curiously meander around the room, ambivalent to the stares it was attracting from every member of the room.

“I thought yours was a stag,” Hermione said faintly.

“It was,” Harry responded, aware that he was on the floor. He gingerly picked himself up and cleared his throat. “So, uh, today we’ve learned that your patronus can also change form.”

“Call Blackwolf,” Draco recommended. “He should know why that could happen.”

“Call Reid, too,” Ginny suggested. “I’ll bet he could tell us why it’s an elephant.”

“Got Reid,” Anthony quickly said and Harry grabbed the other laptop to ring up Blackwolf.

It took them a half hour to get a hold of the Apache, who was understandably busy. Reid had answered almost immediately and passed the time entertaining the students. The Ravenclaws had decided they were going to find a topic Reid knew nothing about, but had so far been entirely unsuccessful. Both sides found the game entirely too amusing to stop despite the complete failure so far. Harry cancelled the patronus spell and tried again, only to get the same result, and most of the other students watched the elephant stroll.

When Blackwolf came on, everyone’s attention immediately went to the computer screen. Harry quickly filled him in on what had happened, tilting the screen at one point to show him the new patronus form. The man didn’t even look surprised by the change.

Blackwolf started nodding towards the end and Harry quickly hushed. “This happens sometimes,” he said. “When a large event changes someone’s life, it can also change their patronus form. For instance, sometimes they take the same form of a loved one’s patronus or Animagi after they are married.” He paused before somewhat hesitantly adding, “I am unsure as to what exactly caused this particular change in yours, since I don’t know when it changed, but I would assume this is directly tied to what happened over the summer.”
“So it switched to my own form instead of taking the Potters’?” he asked.

“Not quite,” Blackwolf said, even more reluctant than before. “When a patronus form changes, it almost always takes someone else’s form.”

“Wouldn’t that mean...it took Hotch’s form?” Hermione asked. Blackwolf opened his mouth, as if to disagree, but decided against it at the last moment and said nothing instead.

The room went dead silent as the students tried to apply the image of an elephant to Hotch, but the quiet was broken by Reid’s audible moment of clarity. “Ohhh,” he exclaimed loudly, and everyone looked at him. Anthony turned the screen so he and Blackwolf could see each other. “Elephants are odd animals,” he explained. “They’ve been noted as some of the most intelligent and empathetic animals that we know of. They sometimes strike out alone and can survive well enough, but primarily stick to herds to better protect their young, who they are incredibly good at defending. Remarkably, they’ve also been sighted protecting animals of other species, and generally use their size as a deterrent. That being said, they kill over five hundred people a year, which is more than are attributed to bears, lions, sharks, jellyfish, and tigers combined.”

“Well,” Harry said.

“This could be a bit of a problem,” Blackwolf admitted, eyeing the elephant, which was now scuffing one large foot against the ground. “How many people know your patronus was a stag in your third year?”

Harry’s eyes widened in realization. “Most of the school, after I cast one in the middle of a Quidditch match when the dementors got onto the pitch.”

“And anyone they told,” Hermione said quietly. “What happens if they realize his patronus changed?”

Blackwolf slowly said, “They might just attribute it to his traumatizing summer.”

“But?” Harry prodded.

“Your transition does not make sense,” Blackwolf continued. “Like I said, a changed patronus form usually mimics someone else, but you have not met anyone with an elephant patronus form. By all accounts, it should have solidified as a stag out of respect for the Potters, since their sacrifice kept you alive long enough for you to reach this point.”

“Is there anything we can do about it?” Draco asked, worried.

“Don’t cast a Patronus,” Anthony said.

“You can hide your Patronus,” Blackwolf said. “Are you coming back to Quantico for Easter?”

“I was hoping to.”

“I can show you then. I do not think it to be a good idea to let anyone know your patronus changed, especially not this drastically.” He paused as the elephant threw its trunk at the ceiling and silently trumpeted. “You are rather adept at that charm, by the way.”

“Thanks.”

“But I don’t know how well you could deliver messages with it. I have not heard of summoning a patronus that large in a room too small to hold it, so I do not know what would happen.”
Harry blinked. “Wait, you can send messages with them?”

Blackwolf smiled at his sudden enthusiasm. “I'll show you over Easter.”

“And then you can show us,” Draco said non-too-subtly, prodding Harry lightly in the ribs. The latter swatted him back good-naturedly.

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Usually, Blackwolf's superiors just wanted to stay ignorant about what was going on at Quantico and trusted him to handle the whole situation. It meant he had a lot more work to do, but in cases like this one, it meant he didn't have to cover anything up.

Harry's patronus couldn’t have taken Hotch's form. Hotch was too subtle for an elephant. It was much more likely that the stag had been a mimic of James Potter and now the elephant was Harry's own form after he came into himself. Harry was no longer listening to the people who were telling him he should be like his Potter father; he wanted to be Hotch, but the Hotch he idolized and the Hotch who went after criminals were too very different people. Harry was turning into the person he wanted to be.

A transition like this wouldn't have been cause for alarm, especially considering that there was assuredly a situation that had caused it to change, except the form had taken that of an elephant. Anything that large was exceedingly rare, but anything that was recognized as so powerful was even rarer. Patronuses like this were unheard of outside of the strongest of wizards.

Blackwolf asked around quietly, and what he heard was not appeasing.

He managed to talk to Hotch about Harry's magic and uncover an event a while ago that had resulted in an extreme burst of accidental magic. He found the agents who had trained with Harry when he had first arrived at Quantico, and they have him a general idea that he just couldn't ignore – all of them had just been drawn to him, like a moth to flame.

And then he went wider, contacting seers across America and Europe, and asking them if they had started to notice anything unusual. They had.

Something's coming, they all whispered. Something's coming.

Without telling anyone, he went to Hogwarts, slipping in and making his way up until he found Trelawney's room. She smiled when she saw him, recognizing him immediately by what little contact she had with the Apache seers and their interpreters.

"You are out of dream-viewing," she said as he sat down on a cushion across from her. "You're not here to talk about what I've seen."

There was a tea tray in between them. The hot water had just started to whistle when he had entered, just enough for two.

"I have...an interest in what you've seen."

Trelawney nodded, pouring the tea. "The leopard-spirit. You want to know about it." She gave an impish smile. "It's the only prediction I've made that you would take so seriously to come here immediately."

"I know who it is," Blackwolf admitted. "Or at least, I strongly suspect. But I need to know more about Harry. What exactly did you see in the cup?"
She sniffed imperiously. "I always tell my students everything. It is their right to know their fates, so that they might prepare for them."

He shook his head firmly. "But not this time. You left something out."

She hesitated, eyes flickering away behind her enormous glasses. "I haven't."

"Sybil, what else did you see?"

Without looking at him, she whispered, "Darkness. There is so much darkness in his future...and the leopard-spirit will cause it."

Blackwolf felt his stomach drop and the temperature around him go cold. "Will... Will the darkness be caused by..." He took a deep breath, trying and failing to steady himself. "Is Harry going to go dark because of a fight between him and the leopard-spirit? Or will the leopard-spirit go dark and swallow his light?"

She gave him a pitying look. "You should already know the answer. Leopard-spirits are not to be trifled with. They keep close company and hardly care for the outside world. The curses on them for any who cross their paths... You would be better to stay away. The boy can manage himself."

"You see it too."

"His power is growing, John. Between every class, the signs around him become sharper, and I see more and more of what he will become. I cannot tell him half of it without him failing to understand. If he comes into the full potential of his power...he could be as destructive as You Know Who."

"But he could also be Voldemort's very opposite," Blackwolf protested.

"There have been so few with that sort of power. Albus has been the first Light wizard powerful enough to face a Dark Lord on his own and win in over two and a half centuries, and even he is not as strong as You Know Who or he would surely be the one to destroy him." Her expression turned sad and she looked down at the table. "And a Light Lord and a leopard-spirit at the same time... What are the chances the Light Lord will not fall? They never survive long."

And, for better or worse, Blackwolf knew. "His chances are the same as a red dragon appearing in Harry's tea leaves."

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There was another Order meeting in the next week that Snape picked Hotch up for, since Blackwolf was once again occupied. Not everyone had shown up quite yet, due to some pressing matter at the Ministry that held many of the officials back, which irked Snape since he was forced to waste quite a bit of time waiting. At least, that was what he said. In reality, he and Sirius Black were doing their very best to avoid each other in what were becoming increasingly awkward maneuvers.

Hotch, the only one who knew why they had managed to come to some sort of truce, decided to just let the two of them skirt away from one another while he met the rest of the Order. He really needed more background information on what was going on if he wanted to be able to keep up during the meetings more, if he kept getting pulled into them because Blackwolf claimed he was busy. At least, that was his initial plan.

As soon as he walked into the mostly empty meeting room, Molly Weasley perked up at the sight of him and immediately physically pulled him into the kitchen. Remus Lupin, the only other witness, alternated between looking at a book in front of him like he was pretending not to notice and staring
after the pair like he was considering saving Hotch. Finally, he picked up the book and walked after them tentatively.

"Excuse me," Hotch started as he was ushered into the kitchen. Black was somewhere nowhere near Snape and Snape was somewhere on the opposite side of the house as Black. The whole thing between them was starting to truly get ridiculous.

He didn't think the witch even heard him as she finally let him go and began bustling around. "Right this way, oh, really, I can't thank you enough – and I know their memories were adjusted, unavoidable, really, I understand, but do you think they remember you at all? Oh, here, here we are, this was where I left it."

Hotch glanced at Lupin, who was watching the whole thing in mortified amusement, and turned back just in time to take the large basket that were pushed into his hands. The smell of bread wafted out from the crevices of the wood. "Ah-"

"Wait a moment, wait, where did I put that jam – if Sirius took it, I'll skin him..."

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Lupin put a hand over his mouth and turn away to hide a laugh.

"Mrs. Weasley," he started.

"Oh, none of that," she scolded him. "Molly, please."

"What's this about?" he asked.

"Well, it's not every day that my children have to get saved from murderous werewolves, now is it?" she replied, opening and closing cabinets as she looked for the jam. "Take that back for your whole team, there's a dear."

He could honestly say he'd never been called 'dear' in his entire adult life. Or, for that matter, anytime after seventh grade.

He opened his mouth to give a mild protest, but caught sight of Lupin quickly shaking his head at him, panicked, and decided to defer the matter to Lupin's experienced suggestion. "On behalf of my team, thank you," he said instead.

"Oh, bread's hardly a proper exchange for what you did for my family," she said. "All of you simply have to stop by the Burrow some time, perhaps when all this unpleasantness is over." She scowled to herself. "If Sirius took the jam..."

"I'll go ask him if he knows where it went," Lupin said, gracefully saving his friend's life, and hurried out of the kitchen.

"Hm," she said to herself. "Well, in any case. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

Well, since she asked. "Honestly, I don't know as much about the magical world as I'd like to, and a lot of the names are unfamiliar to me."

She smiled. "Ah, I imagine so. We've got about an hour or so until everyone else shows, so why don't we clear a few things up?"

Lupin - "Remus, please" - showed up a few minutes later and gathered the jam from the bottom of a cupboard, where Black had stored it to keep it safe from anyone wandering through the house. He
sat down with them at the kitchen table, and between the pair, they managed to answer as many questions as they could before the rest of the Order started filtering in. Tonks perched over Remus's shoulder when she showed up and gave her two cents on some of the questions asked, and a couple minutes later they were all ushered into the meeting room.

Dumbledore was waiting for them, along with Snape and Black, who had gotten in there early to assure that they got spots far from each other. Hotch took a spot next to Snape as the rest of the chairs slowly filled up, and then the meeting started.

"What happened at the Ministry?" Molly asked immediately.

"Pixies got loose in the atrium," Arthur said cheerfully while the rest of the Ministry officials winced. He had small cuts on his cheek. "Bit of a mess, really." The haggard appearances of the officials contradicted the 'bit' part of that statement.

"We were worried it was a distraction to get to the prophecy," Alastor gruffly said, a complete contrast to Arthur's bubbly response. "If it was, it went poorly. No one had a chance to get down to the Department of Mysteries." With a disdainful snort, he added, "Hardly matters when the damn thing's so vague it makes no difference."

Lupin sighed, running a hand across his face. "What we do know about it is just assumed, and I'd really rather that someone else besides Harry use that power it spoke of. It just said that it was granted to him, not that he actually has to use it, right?"

"It was sort of implied," Tonks said hesitantly, "but I suppose... Maybe."

"Not if I can help it," Molly muttered and Hotch silently agreed.

"Can you repeat it again?" Sirius asked, rubbing his fingers against his temples irritably. "I feel like I need the damn thing tattooed on my forehead if I'm ever going to make sense of it."

Beside Hotch, Snape opened his mouth, probably to point out that Sirius would hardly be able to read it if the prophecy was written on his head, but kept the silence between them by closing his mouth.

"The power to defeat the Dark Lord will be born in the seventh month, granted to that who will defy him with action rather than word. Neither can be secure while the other survives," Dumbledore murmured. "From the youth to the old of that power, forgiveness must be granted, else the power will never match that of the Dark Lord..."

There was a long pause as most of the table mulled it over.

"That's it?" Hotch asked, unimpressed.

"Prophecies are rarely understood until after the event has passed, I'm afraid," Dumbledore said with a small sigh. "However, we suspect the power that is being spoken of are the blood wards of Lily Potter over Harry. As their very existences are at odds with one another, it also stands to reason that one must destroy the other to ever be safe."

"You can't increase the potency of the blood wards, though," Hotch said, "not once they're already in place."

Snape shifted ever so slightly beside him, and Hotch just had to hope that it was only movement and not a curious reaction to how Hotch could have possibly known that.
"Blood ward magic is a fickle thing, and we know little of it," Dumbledore replied, still in that calm tone that Hotch was beginning to loathe. "It may be that he cannot fully tap that power until he knows where it comes from, which includes any his bloodline. That blood magic, in part, extends to the Dursleys."

"So he's got to forgive them," Sirius said, quizzically, "for...what, exactly?"

The last part caught a great deal of the group off guard, to Hotch's horror. They'd never considered that. "Severe abuse and neglect," he said caustically before he could bite his tongue. "What else?"

Everyone's gazes snapped to him, but his eyes were on Dumbledore. There was no shock in the man's gaze, only a greater sadness.

"You can't be serious," Moody scoffed. Most of the room looked unconvinced. "The boy's aunt and uncle know what he did – they have no reason to treat him poorly. Without him, they'd be under Voldemort's thumb by now."

"Have you ever had a conversation with him?" Hotch demanded, breaking his stare at Dumbledore to glare at the ex-auror. "A complete lack of self-preservation, immediate defensiveness against any sort of aggression, a smaller stature than normal, a tendency to recoil from loud sounds, an ingrained concern for where his next meal is coming from, an inability to trust adults, an increased sense of responsibility, a stronger independent streak than most kids his age or a couple years older- Do I need to go on?"

McGonagall started frowning, but he wasn't looking at directly and couldn't see if it was out of concern or disagreement. Sirius was leaning forward in increments, attention rapt on him. Molly opened her mouth to interrupt, but Moody pressed on, offensively skeptical. "Give us five specific things we could look for, and if all five match up we'll look into it."

"He came back from the Silent Massacre the most well-adjusted of all the kids, because he was accustomed to unexpected and undeserved violence. He either never goes home over break, or he goes home desperate to try to gain acceptance from the Dursleys. He never asks for help from any adult unless there's a specific reason he'd trust that teacher. He's never gone for help when he's been injured, either, unless he's been pushed to or knows he'll get in trouble if he doesn't. And I'll bet that when you told him he had magic he didn't believe you because he never believed he of all people could have magic."

"That's ridiculous," Fletcher said immediately. "His parents were Lily and James Potter! Of course the Dursleys would have told him he had magic!"

"Hagrid told me that Potter argued with him when they first met," McGonagall said suddenly. "According to Hagrid, who found the phrase particularly amusing, he claimed he was 'Just Harry.' Furthermore, he never went home until these last couple of years, and when we tried to stop him because we thought Sirius was trying to kill him, he was incredibly distraught at the idea of not being able to go home to try to repair the relationship with his family."

So that part had been based more off Hotch's knowledge of the change in Harry's home situation than real profiling. Sue him.

"He didn't even come for my help when he wanted to learn the Patronus Charm, instead learning from books," Remus added. "He knew I was a friend of his father's by that time but still didn't come for help. And didn't he go straight to the headmaster's office after the Chamber incident, instead of the infirmary?"
"He did," McGonagall said sharply, eyes growing cold. "And not only did he come back from the massacre with his wits about him, much more so than I would have expected, the other students have flocked to him for help when they start having problems."

"I thought they were exaggerating," Molly interjected, and the room turned to her in surprise at her shaking, angry tone, "but the summer before his second year, the twins and Ron brought Harry to the Burrow in the middle of the night. My boys said that they'd put bars on his windows but I couldn't fathom that they'd truly done that."

"Why the hell would they do something like that?" Black demanded, shaking with rage.

Dumbledore had been oddly silent this entire time.

"I'll bet, after Riddle's death, none of you thought to stop by and explain to the Dursleys everything that had happened. All they got was a child they didn't understand and no way to deal with him. They probably thought that if they could suppress anything they thought was strange, it would be safer for them," Hotch said, trying to keep as calm as he could. They were just putting all this together now? "They were scared. And so they hurt a child."

"He can come stay with us over the summer from now on," Molly said firmly.

"He cannot," Dumbledore said gently.

The room might as well have been filled with the dead for the amount of noise it made.

"What," Molly deadpanned.

"I thought we just decided the Dursleys were dicks who were going nowhere near my godson again," Black said, just as flatly. "If they've done...whatever he thinks they've done," he said ambiguously with a wave towards Hotch, "who know what else they've done or plan to do to him?"

"If he does not stay with the Dursleys," Dumbledore said, "the blood wards will not be renewed as they should be. Should he face Voldemort again soon, he would have no protection from him."

"So in the meantime," Hotch said, trying to be as angered as a parent and not Harry's parent but instead coming across as just dangerously quiet, "he's going to stay in a position where he could easily come to see things from Riddle's point of view and fester a hatred against the nonmagical world because of his stupid relatives. I wonder if the prophecy is really talking about two dark lords dueling it out, if this is how we're going to treat your acclaimed savior. The abused fourteen-year-old, you know."

"Albus, this can't continue," Molly said, horrified at his lack of reaction. "Surely there must be another choice."

"He is simply not safe enough anywhere else."

"He's not safe with them!" Hotch snapped.

"But if Harry can learn to forgive even the cruelest of relatives...than perhaps he can learn to forgive Tom for everything he's done, and often times, forgiveness can be a worse punishment than hate," Dumbledore said cryptically. "The tragic years he's lost as a child will be more than made up for by the wonders he'll experience once he's defeated the threat to the light of this world." To Hotch's horror, several Order members seemed strangely satisfied by this.

Molly Weasley, however, was not. Her lips pressed together tightly, eyes narrowing at Dumbledore.
"I certainly don't forgive them, and I don't expect anyone ever to. Instead, they'd be better off in prison, like they were last year. Once this is all over, that's exactly where they're going to return."

Dumbledore, whatever his position on the matter was, nodded neutrally. "As you will. They have broken the law."

No remarks to the cruelties and injustices they'd inflicted on Harry. Just the law-breaking. Well, Hotch wasn't unfamiliar to that excuse, and he wasn't going to deal with it again.

Snape clearly expected more argument from him, but now the Order knew about Harry's situation and Hotch had to grudgingly admit that there was little he could do without giving away his own position. Blissfully, he also knew that Harry was going nowhere near the Dursleys that summer.

*He's mine,* Hotch thought viciously. *Let's see you try and take him from me.*

Chapter End Notes

And Harry's new patronus form is revealed! (Robyn S. Mockingbird, that section should partially answer your questions about Blackwolf. Feel a bit better about him now?)

I feel like Blackwolf would be more like the centaurs in reading the signs of the future. Less drama and flair and more logic.

By the way, the break's ending soon. Things start to pick up in the next two chapters again, and then a bunch of things happen, then there's a very short break once more, and then relaxation is over for most of the rest of the story.
"The mark of the immature man is that he wants to die nobly for a cause, while the mark of the mature man is that he wants to live humbly for one." - J.D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*

When the BAU team arrived at Quantico the next day, they found their briefing room already half-full with people. As each member entered the bullpen, Hotch gestured them to join the rest of the group in the conference, which was already growing quite heated. Someone must have convinced Rossi not to come in today, since the man didn’t even appear in the office area.

Prentiss, the last to arrive by less than a minute, slipped across the back of the room to stand by Reid. “What happened?” she asked.

Morgan, on Reid’s other side, answered. “Blackwolf is pushing for a new search for the Woodsmarked Killer. He’s the only one searching for the Secret Keeper right now and if he finds out who it is, he’ll kill him and go to Riddle.”

Prentiss frowned. “But he’s the loner type.”

“Yeah, but it seems like he’s prioritizing his love for purity in blood over his own independence. England just had a string of three back-to-back murders with his MO. He’s trying to get Riddle’s attention and show how powerful he is.”

“If he’s in England,” Reid said, “is there anything we can actually do?”

A hush fell over the rest of the group, and Blackwolf called for everyone to take a seat. Some were left standing in the back. The magical side had brought ten agents to the meeting, including Travis, who were paying rapt attention to Blackwolf and Hotch. Both had remained at the front of the room, and Blackwolf quickly began introductions around the table. Most of the magical agents had been part of the operation when the BAU team had first been told the Woodsmarked Killer was a wizard.

Without further ado, Blackwolf handed control of the meeting to Hotch, who briefed the agents over the current profile and the most recent attacks they were attributing to the Woodsmarked Killer. He had returned with a savagery that suggested he was making up for lost time, and that bore no hope for any other victims he might have already identified. The Ministry in Britain hadn’t yet made any moves to track down a serial killer, but they were moving to catch the man behind the individual murders.

At that point, Blackwolf stepped back in to explain the magical side of things. “We have no jurisdiction to take this man down in the UK,” he said, bringing the meeting to Morgan’s earlier point. “Therefore, we can only give the information we have to the Ministry and hope they apply it. Depending on how we serve it to them, they might be all too willing to use the profile to track him down. The Ministry is scrambling to find any excuse for all the violent crimes rising that doesn’t involve a certain dark lord.”

“Gather all the information you have on him and send it to Garcia,” Hotch instructed. “We’re going
to formulate an analysis of which cases he is connected to in England and where we think he’s going to strike next, as well as what we think would be the best plan to catch him.”

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With the Easter holidays rapidly approaching, the QDA convened for an emergency meeting.

“We have three matters of discussion to bring before everyone today,” Fred announced. When the group didn’t immediately hush, he sent red sparks over everyone. “Quiet, you all. This is important!” With some grumbling, they finally settled. “Where was I? Right, three things. Okay, first off. Who all is going back to Quantico this break?”

“Just Harry,” Hermione insisted. “If more go back, that’s going to be extremely obvious. The only others who have a hope of managing it would be those living with Warrington, but either the whole group goes or none of them can go, and I know for a fact several of them were planning on staying at Hogwarts to study for their tests.” She glared in their general direction and none of them argued.

George, sitting on the arm of the chair not claimed by Fred, pouted. “So Harry gets them all to himself?”

“Well, I hate to break it to you, but I am related to one of them.”

George waved it off. “Whatever.”

“Actually,” Draco hesitantly said. “I’m thinking of finding a way to get over there. Garcia promised to show me more technology tricks if I could, since I doubt I could manage it over the summer. So long as someone covers for me over break…”

There was no immediate disagreement, and Hermione tentatively said, “Well, I suppose we could use a Polyjuice potion, but we would have to start brewing that today. Actually, we’re going to need to do the same for Harry, but I was just thinking that he takes a Polyjuice potion pretending to be me for the train ride and I would take potions pretending to be him while I’m here.”

“We can trade off who’s pretending to be Draco,” Theo suggested. “Our entire dorm knows, so that won’t be a problem, and over break we won’t have an issue with one of us always missing in class. I think we can cover for him. But I’d suggest checking with the BAU to make sure it’s all right first for Draco to come over.”

Draco sent out a text immediately, and Fred moved the meeting along. “Next up, who’s going to Quantico over the summer?”

“My cluster can,” Warrington said. “We’ve already been invited over considering our lack of necessary parental supervision, since I’m seventeen. Some of you might be able to piggyback off us if you have friends under my roof. You could say you’re coming to spend time with us, and we could all leave for Virginia together.”

Roger made a frustrated noise. “But everyone thinks the Slytherins hate all of us.”

“Well, that’s not my problem, is it?”

“Can’t they go with you?” Hermione asked. “You turn seventeen soon.”

“That might work, but we’re going to have to make sure we’re not all gone at the same time. That’s not exactly subtle.” He turned to the twins. “And you guys might be able to take a group, too, if your parents let you.”
The twins nodded and George said, “Okay, third item of business. Third task.”

“I feel so over-prepared,” Harry flatly replied. “No more.”

“Yeah, whatever. Anyone else got any more ideas?”

The entire group looked at the Ravenclaws, who sighed in defeat. “We’ve gone through just about everything we can think of,” Terry admitted. “We’ve kind of exhausted our resources. So long as Harry keeps practicing, he should be fine.”

“I still think he should take a basilisk fang with him,” Draco grumbled.

“I’m pretty sure that’s against the rules,” Harry said.

Draco gestured wildly at their whole group. “This is against the rules!”

“No fang,” Harry insisted. “I’d be worried about falling and accidentally stabbing myself with it, and then where would we be? Besides, it’s not like I’m going to meet Riddle in there.”

“What about that knife Blackwolf gave you?” Blaise asked, but Ginny beat Harry to it.

"Too large. He might be able to hide the fang, if he needed to, but that knife might get discovered. Blackwolf was more focused on showing us how to use them rather than hide them.” The four had kept up in their training, too, asking the Room for blunt versions of their knives to practice with or dummies so they could use the originals. Blackwolf, of course, had been very pleased to hear this.

“Hey, who’s got a laptop?” Hermione asked without looking up from her phone. Something in her tone made the rest of them pause.

Justin reached over and grabbed one off a table. “Call Garcia?” he guessed, and Hermione nodded. “What about?” he asked as the request went through.

“I just got a text from my mum,” she said slowly. “She wants to know if an FBI team in New York was okay, since the news isn’t really saying anything. She said there was a pretty big explosion.”

Harry frowned. “What are the chances the BAU was involved?”

“She denied the request,” Justin said quietly and gazes sharpened on him. “Should I try again?”

“No, wait for her to call us back if she can’t answer now.” Hermione said to Harry, “I’m sure it’s nothing,” but she didn’t sound sure.

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Harry hadn’t left the Room of Requirement since that dinner before the call, opting to stay instead of going back to Gryffindor Tower. Everyone else had slowly filtered out, not wanting anyone to wonder why so many kids were missing from their dorms, but they had made Harry promise he would let them know what was happening as soon as he could.

He practically jumped on Garcia’s call as soon as he saw it. Her immediate question was not at all reassuring. “Have you heard from your father at all?” she demanded. His eyes went wide. “He could feel when you’re in danger, so can you- Is there- Anything?” she pleaded, and he quickly shook his head.

“No,” he whispered. “Garcia, the news says that there was a bombing in New York.”
She bit her lip.

“Garcia-“

She heard something behind her and glanced nervously over her shoulder. “Harry, I’ll call you back when I know something, okay?”

“Wait!”

The line had already disconnected and Harry slumped back in his seat. They were involved with the bombing. He buried his face in his hands and took several deep breaths, trying to think about it logically. There were plenty of times when Hotch’s phone had died when he hadn’t had any time to charge it. Just because he wasn’t answering his phone didn’t mean something had happened to him.

He sat up and got onto the internet, paused, then looked for New York news stations. Thanks to Garcia’s introduction to technology course over the summer, what would have taken him an hour before now only took a few minutes. All of the stations were reporting on the same matter, throwing out theories and speculation about what might be going down as the government stonewalled their inquiries. Harry hardly cared what had caused the explosion; he just wanted to know the result.

“The police are asking we don’t film any footage closer than this,” one reporter said, standing in the middle of a dark street. Far behind her, flashing lights from police cars lit up shop windows and wet pavement. “However, we can tell you what we saw when we stood next to the first responders. Something seems to be stopping them from getting any closer, and they’ve been remarkably quiet as to what is happening.”

“Patricia,” the news anchor said, “do they seem to know what’s going on?”

The reporter paused before replying, “I would say so, yes. They are approaching the bombing with peculiar caution and specific techniques, beyond what we usually see them do. There seems to be some concern with entering the area, even though there was talk of two injured FBI agents who were still by the explosion site. One is severely wounded, and we don’t have any information about the other.”

Harry tuned out the rest of it as they continued describing the area and what was happening in connection to the bombing. Someone was injured. Two were injured. But if one FBI team had been there for a bombing, and it sounded like they knew the bombing might happen, then wasn’t it likely for other teams to be present? Maybe no one from the BAU had been involved.

And yet Garcia hadn’t been worried about the rest of the team. She had been worried about Hotch.

“Something’s happening,” Patricia said on camera, and Harry looked up again even though he had no idea what she was talking about. “It seems someone’s gone into the area they had sectioned off. I can’t quite see what they’re doing… John, I’m going to get closer and see if I can find out what happened, but we have to shut the cameras off.”

Five minutes later, she came back on only to announce that an ambulance had taken away two FBI agents, even though the area hadn’t been deemed safe to enter yet. The useless news had nothing else to tell him that was of any interest to him, instead going over and over the information they had already provided about the bombings themselves. To pass the time, Harry sent a vague text to everyone else giving what little he knew. There were a few encouraging messages in response, but no one had any answers to give him or true comfort to give so most kept quiet.

Hours after Garcia had called him in a panic, the news had mostly simmered down. They announced
that whoever had planted the initial bomb – as well as a second, which exploded harmlessly in a field – had been caught and the members of the involved organization were being rounded up. Almost as an afterthought, they mentioned that one of the FBI agents died in the hospital, and Harry felt like his heart was about to give out. He planted his face in his hands again. There was nothing he could do from America, and even if he did manage to get there, he wouldn’t make it in time to help.

His father had been in New York, where there had been a bombing. Someone was dead. They couldn’t get in contact with his father. That didn’t mean he had died.

It just made it a hell of a lot more likely.

The seconds dragged by. Garcia had promised to call him back when she knew something. It was entirely likely she had been so busy that she had just forgotten, or had been so caught up in everything else that there simply hadn’t been time. He cupped the back of his neck with both hands, head resting lightly against the desk in front of him.

What *would* happen if Hotch was dead? He and Jack would go to Sean, right? Did Sean even know about all the people who wanted to kill Harry? And whether or not he knew, was there any way he was actually capable of protecting all three of them like Hotch was? Harry loved Sean, but the man was a chef and had no defense training whatsoever. If Hotch was dead, would Sean and Jack quickly follow once the Woodsmarked Killer or Riddle caught up to him? He remembered one of the werewolves taunting Fred, right before the BAU team came in, and telling Fred that they would kill the rest of his family in front of him. Was that about to become a reality for Harry?

The Woodsmarked Killer had been right. Everyone who got involved with protecting him really did have a much higher tendency to die sooner than anyone else. The only ones who hadn’t been endangered had been the Dursleys. Maybe Harry should just go back and stay with them.

Even as he thought it, he could hear Hotch’s sharp reprimand in the back of his head. He knew that even that mental outburst was nothing compared to what the real Hotch would have said, if Harry had actually told him. The chances of him ever hearing that retort were quickly dwindling. Was Garcia taking so long to reply to him because she was busy, had forgotten…or because she was mourning?

His body felt physically exhausted, but his mind was too anxious to let him sleep. A glance at the clock told him it was nearing five in the morning. As he did so, his phone vibrated and he jumped at the sudden sound. He pulled it closer and checked the sender’s name immediately, but it was only Draco asking for an update. Even though he had nothing else to do, he didn’t respond, instead setting the phone aside and skimming through news channels and articles again, futilely looking for anything that might be helpful.

All of the QDA filtered in within the next few hours, checking to see if anything had happened. They left quickly once they learned there was no new information, as if sensing that Harry wanted to be left alone. Breakfast came and went and he didn’t leave the room. Hermione briefly mentioned it, but he shook his head numbly. There was no way he could choke anything down in this state, even if he had wanted to leave the Room of Requirement for longer than a minute. In the end, neither Hermione nor Ron went either, instead remaining with him while they waited for some sort of response.

“*It sounds like everything’s been wrapped up,*” Hermione quietly pointed out as she watched another news report. “*Their case should be over.*” She pulled her phone out of her pocket. “*I’m going to call Garcia…*”

There was no response.
Despite his better judgment, Harry tried Hotch’s number. It went to voicemail, and Harry stared at the phone for a few minutes before trying again. Ron tried to stay his hand when he did it a third time. “Harry-“

“Well, someone’s going to hear it ringing and answer it,” Harry said shortly and Ron didn’t try to stop him again.

Three hours later, Hermione looked at the time nervously. “Ron,” she said hesitantly. “If all three of us aren’t in class, someone’s going to say something. We can cover for Harry if we go.”

Ron turned to her furiously. “Hotch might be dead and you want to go to class?!“

“I don’t like it anymore than you do, Ronald!” she snapped. “But what are we going to do if a teacher starts looking for us because they wonder why none of us have gone to class all day? They’re sure going to want an explanation then, and I don’t suppose you want to be the one explaining that we think-“ She stopped, biting off the rest of her words. Harry stared at his phone as it ring uselessly.

Ron slumped, energy fading. “I suppose you’re right,” he muttered. He clapped a hand on Harry’s shoulder, but his friend only looked briefly at him. “We’ll be back as soon as possible,” Ron said, and with a murmur from Hermione, the two left.

Harry redialed Hotch’s number again. He hadn’t stopped since his first attempt, even though each unanswered call seemed to reaffirm his suspicions. Garcia’s phone kept going straight to voicemail, but Hermione had pointed out that she might be on a flight back to Virginia since Harry had noticed she hadn’t been in her regular office during their short conversation.

“Harry?”

The voice made him stop dead, finger still hovering over the phone. It took a solid second for his brain to reroute.

“Dad?” he breathed.

“Harry, what’s wrong? What happened?”

What was wrong.

What.

Did.

He.

Think.

Was.

Wrong.

---

At Quantico, Hotch was in the middle of riding up the elevator with the rest of the team when Rossi frowned at his bag. “Hotch, is that your phone?” In the almost complete silence, the ringing was clearly audible to everyone in the tight space.
Or almost everyone. The other agent looked at him in confusion. “What?”

“Your phone’s ringing. You can’t hear that?” Morgan asked, quickly growing concerned. There had been a few times when Hotch hadn’t responded after the second or third time someone had called his name, and the rest of the profilers had all silently agreed his hearing had probably been damaged by proximity to the explosion. Rossi had already gotten Garcia to schedule his appointment to get checked out tomorrow.

Hotch dug in his bag for a moment and pulled out his phone. Over his shoulder, JJ’s eyebrows went up as she caught a series of missed calls. “Yikes. How many do you think there are?”

“How?” Hotch asked.

Garcia jumped slightly. “Crap, I said I’d call him back!” she muttered.

“About what?” Morgan asked.

“Well, um, I think someone was watching the news over there,” she began hesitantly.

Having not heard the tech’s quiet explanation, Hotch asked, “Harry, what’s wrong? What happened?”

Even with his wrecked hearing, Hotch had to yank the phone away from his ear with a wince and hold it at arm’s length as “What the hell do you THINK happened?” was screamed through the speakers.

“You can use my office,” Garcia quickly said, making sure Hotch could see her lips move. He nodded quickly. The rest of the team exchanged looks that were half-concerned and half-amused as Hotch bolted towards Garcia’s office in a manner that was as dignified as he could manage.

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Snape frowned as he arrived at the BAU bullpen. “Where is he?” he asked Morgan after turning away from Hotch’s empty office. The dark-skinned agent looked like hell, and Snape’s frown increased the longer he took in the damage the man had sustained.

“Do you want the politically correct or realistic version?” Behind him, Reid grinned as he walked past, evidently seeing where this was going.

“Realistic.”

“If anyone asks, he’s in a debriefing. In full honesty, he’s getting chewed out by one of his sons. It’s probably going to be a while until he’s available.”

His eyebrow quirked up. “His son? I thought he was on good relations with both.”

Reid snorted in amusement as he took his seat, coffee cradled between his hands. “I hope this wasn’t urgent, since it didn’t seem like his son was anywhere close to being finished.” At Snape’s expression, Reid explained, “His eldest’s sass is…”

“Legendary,” Prentiss articulated from her desk. “Insurmountable. Scathing. I could go on.” She shared a smirk with Morgan. “I don’t envy Hotch his position right now. He’s not in his office so no one walks in on him getting scolded by a teenager.”

“Why is he…in trouble with his son?”
The group shakily laughed in a manner that suggested they might be the next target of one of the Hotchners. “You’re going to have to ask Hotch about that,” Morgan said. “It’s classified and I’m not sure how much we can tell you.”

“Did it have something to do with the bombing in New York?” Snape asked, eyeing Morgan’s injuries again.

“Yep,” Reid responded immediately. “He was right next to it. We weren’t going to tell his kids, obviously, but it just so happened he was watching the news and tried to call Garcia, and, well… Hotch probably could have made it out from his son’s wrath alive if not for his hearing. He couldn’t fake that and H- his son caught on almost immediately.”

The stutter seemed so natural to Reid’s fast pace that Snape didn’t think twice about it, and instead frowned at the information. “His hearing?”

“Like I said, he was standing right next to it. Blew out his hearing completely for a while and it’s still kind of shaky. They think it’s going to return to normal with time but he’s still missing softer noises.” He made a face. “Hotch didn’t hear all the calls his son made, and according to Garcia, who checked out of curiosity, he apparently missed several hundred.”

Snape glanced at a clock on the wall. “There’s another Order meeting in ten minutes. Should he be done by then?”

Morgan shrugged. “Maybe. He’s being murdered in Garcia’s office, when you go looking for him.”

“What happened to you?”

Morgan glanced at his hands, which were covered in bandages. “Jumped out of a van near a bomb,” he calmly replied.

Snape made a hum of acknowledgment, then left without saying anything else. He saw Morgan shrug at Reid in response to his abrupt departure before the elevator doors closed, but he was already thinking about what he had in his stores. They would be at least a half hour late to the meeting, but if he added saffron and ground chimera scales to the two potions…

He walked back into the bullpen fifteen minutes later and set a vial down on Morgan’s desk. The agent looked up at him in bewilderment. “Don’t drink within an hour of consuming anything with high concentrations of sugar, cinnamon, or persimmon unless you want to be in the hospital in two hours. Try not to gag too badly on it.”

“Oh!” Morgan said in surprise at the sudden gift from the potions master. Reid leaned over the divider to peer at it in interest. “Thanks,” he said, but Snape was already moving in the direction of Garcia’s office.

If he were completely honest with himself, he was unsure if he liked the rest of Hotch’s team or not. Logic and previous experience with such people dictated that he would be at odds with all of them, but they were extremely competent and Hotch trusted them. They even managed to use their eccentricities to their advantages. Snape had the feeling they were going to grow on him the more time he spent at the BAU. In turn, he seemed to be growing on the region of the FBI he usually haunted. He was getting considerably fewer odd looks, now that he had begun to regularly show up. It helped that he walked confidently and within a certain radius, so the people who saw him began to assume he was there for a reason.

When he reached Garcia’s office, the door was closed but he could hear Hotch’s low tones from
inside. He liked to think that he was trusted enough to see a glimpse of one of Hotch’s sons, but he paused with his hand on the door before he even realized he had done so. Hotch was murmuring gently, inaudibly from Snape’s position, and soothing his eldest’s concerns away. There was a brief pause in which his son responded, and then Hotch gave a small laugh and reply.

How much time did Hotch really get to spend with his son, when he was forced into a call with his son from his office instead of going home to see him? And it wasn’t that he loved his work so much that he could hardly bear to leave before it was all done – Snape would never believe that Hotch would put anything above his kids, not when he spoke to one like that.

He let his hand drop back to his side and walked away silently. He’d give Hotch what little time he had with his son.

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When Hotch got out of Garcia’s office and back into the bullpen, he first went straight to JJ’s to tell Garcia, who had temporarily camped out there, that her office was once again free and to thank her profusely. Honestly, the rest of his team seemed entirely too amused about the whole thing. At least he knew that Morgan was probably going to be getting similar treatment later, since Harry had picked up rather quickly that Hotch’s hearing had not been the only injury.

Snape was already in his office when he walked in, and Hotch couldn’t really bring himself to be surprised. Before he could say anything, Snape handed him a vial.

“What for?” he asked, taking it.

“Your hearing.”

Hotch raised an eyebrow. “You heard about that fast.”

“I spoke to your agents down in the bullpen while you were on a call with your son,” Snape said as Hotch drowned the potion and grimaced slightly. “You will need your best hearing if you are willing to attend another Order meeting.” Thank God for magical potions masters. He swore that his ears had literally been ringing after Harry’s first outburst, and his ears were certainly damaged now if they hadn’t been before. At least Harry had toned it down somewhat once he realized Hotch’s hearing had been knocked out of whack.

“When is it?”

“Now.”

Hotch sighed. Today was just not his day. In all honesty, he would have rather spent another hour talking to Harry and making sure he was okay, but Hermione had interrupted with a reminder that they all needed to get to class. “Let’s get out of the anti-apparition wards, then.”

They appeared in the main hallway of Grimmauld Place minutes later, and walked into the dining room that had been repurposed for the Order’s cause. A few looked up at their entrance, but most stayed focus on the task at hand. The pair took seats closest to the door and listened carefully to what was being said to catch up. Once again, the names being thrown out were entirely unfamiliar to Hotch, although he was pleased he was beginning to recognize some of the family names and the importance attached to them.

When the matter of Harry’s safety finally came up, he felt like he was in his own waters for the first time. “He can’t go back to the Dursleys, not with Voldemort running around,” Black stated firmly. “Blood wards or no, if the Death Eaters get strong enough they could just destroy the whole area in
the hopes they kill him as well as anyone else.”

“We can keep an eye on the area, as we’ve done before,” Moody said gruffly. “It’s worked before and it can work again. Besides, Voldemort’s going to want to take Potter out as dramatically as possible. It won’t be a simple hit like that. He might destroy the area while Potter’s at school to hurt him, but that’s as far as he’ll go.”

“The blood wards offer him more protection against his inevitable confrontation with Voldemort than Grimmauld Place does,” Dumbledore said gently. “He will be safe there, Sirius.”

“How?” Fletcher asked curiously. His leg was jiggling up and down underneath the table.

“Lily Potter’s sacrifice is strengthened whenever Harry returns to their house. Staying there reinforces her protection and ensures that Voldemort will not be able to touch him.”

“But the protection works directly through blood, right?”

Hotch’s eyes narrowed slightly.

“Correct.”

“What is it?” Hotch asked sharply, watching Fletcher, who had started to go a bit pale.

The con laughed nervously. “What? Just asking questions.”

“Rather specific questions. What’s your concern about the blood protection?”

The entire table was staring at Fletcher by that point, and he was leaning as far back in his chair as he could go and avoiding eye contact with everyone. His fingers tapped against the table in a rapid rhythm and his leg was jiggling again. “Nothing, just… Well, it only matters so long as Petunia Dursley is Lily Potter’s sister, right?”

He knows, a part of Hotch whispered and he quickly stamped down on it.

“Yes,” Dumbledore said in the tone of a sailor in the middle of the ocean who has realized they overlooked a hole in the bottom of their boat. "Petunia allows Harry to remain at her house because he is her nephew."

The last bits of color fled Fletcher’s face.

“Fletcher,” Black demanded, “what do you know?”

“You see, ah,” Fletcher began with a nervous laugh. “Well, erm. It’s kind of a funny story—”

“There is absolutely nothing remotely amusing about this,” Hotch snapped and Fletcher flinched.

“What’s wrong with the blood wards?”

“It was Pettigrew’s idea!” Fletched said in a rush, then quickly backtracked when he realized how bad that sounded as half the table rose and pulled out their wands. He threw up his hands in a defensive gesture in front of him and started speaking as quickly as he could, barely coherent as his words tumbled over each other. “See, Lily was carrying a child when she was hit with two curses. They were able to hold the child in limbo until they could figure out what the curses were, but they failed after over a year, and she lost the child and was left barren.” Horror began to fill the expressions of those around the table as understanding settled in. “So, ah,” he laughed again. “Uh, Harry Potter isn’t actually a, er, Potter.”
The room was dead silent for all of two seconds.

In the calm, Hotch realized he needed a break from real life so he could go back to his less stressful serial killers and kidnappers.

And then it erupted into chaos.

A solid five minutes passed before everyone calmed down enough to regain their seats, and someone had to go out and stun Mrs. Black’s portrait to shut her up so they could continue the meeting. Black’s expression was absolutely murderous and his body was posed to spring across the table and strangle Fletcher. Hotch was tempted to just let him do it if not for the obvious half of the story that was missing, about why Fletcher had been involved.

At the same time, he was desperate for Fletcher to keep his mouth shut. If they tried to trace back who his real parents were, everything they had done over the last year would go to waste. And yet, his curiosity about why Harry had been taken from him in the first place was insatiable, and Fletcher clearly hadn’t recognized him as the father.

“So,” Snape growled in a furious voice. Right, he’d thought he was protecting Lily’s son all these years. Now he had supposedly been protecting a stranger’s. “She couldn’t have kids. Who the bloody hell is Potter?”

“Pettigrew came to me with the problem. He said Lily was upset about losing the child, since she had held onto it for so long and thought she could save it. James was pretty depressed about the matter as well. Pettigrew thought that if they could maybe just… slip another child in, and I could fake some of the medical records, and we could make them think that the child had been saved in the nick of time. See, the doctors had just told her it wasn’t going to work so there was still some leeway for us to get in there. So we went through the Blood Relocation Program – you all know what that is, right?”

“Get to the point,” Hotch snarled and Fletcher jumped.

“R-Right. We found a magical child in America – right gender, parents looked a bit like the Potters, the whole deal. Only he was just a bit too old so we brought him to England and told the Potters he had still been slowly growing inside of Lily under the stasis charms. I bribed some people and faked some records, and Harry Potter was born.”

“You stole a child?!” Molly shrieked. Fletcher jumped again. “You cruel, despicable piece of garbage!” Hotch was forced to leap out of his seat and back, along with Tonks, who was between him and Fletcher, as Molly drew her wand and threw a hex at Fletcher. The con man took the hex head-on and toppled to the floor. Molly made to hurry around the table to hex him again, but Shacklebolt blocked her way and stopped her from getting to him. “What did you tell his parents?!” she screamed at him. “What did they think happened to him, their son?!”

Tonks countered the hex on Fletcher so he could actually speak. “I- We-”

“Stop blabbering and speak!” Hotch shouted. Mrs. Black was screaming in the hallway again but no one bothered to shut her up.

“They think he died,” Fletcher finally muttered.

Molly hexed him again.

Hotch made eye contact with Snape, who looked just as miserable as he felt. After all this time, he’d hoped that maybe, maybe some good had come out of the whole situation. Maybe there had been a reason for it after all. Maybe the Potters had taken him in because there had been some danger Hotch
had been unaware of.

But all it came down to was a criminal who wanted to make easy money and a man desperate to please his friend.

“Did they know?” Sirius roared, right behind Molly. If Shacklebolt moved, Fletcher would be hexed and cursed into a new dimension. Hotch dimly noted that he himself was shaking with fury. “Did James and Lily know?”

Fletcher squeaked and backpedaled until he hit the wall. “I- I think so. Pettigrew said James Potter found out but he didn’t say how. I guess he just noticed something was wrong, but Pettigrew said he wasn’t happy about it. I don’t know if he ever told Lily.”

“When did they find out?” Hotch demanded before he could stop himself. His hands were itching to get around Fletcher’s neck, or at least pound some sense into him.

Fletcher glanced at him. “I don’t know. At the end.”

“Were they planning on giving the child back?”

Fletcher shrugged his shoulders and threw up his hands in ignorance. “I don’t know! That’s all Pettigrew told me, that Potter found out and that he wasn’t happy about it! Ask him!”

“Oh, that’s fantastic – the only other person who knows about this is with the Death Eaters,” Hotch snapped. An arm blocked his way, and his eyes flickered to the side to see Snape stopping him from moving any closer. His other hand was gripping Hotch’s upper arm, physically holding him back.

“Everyone, take your seats,” Dumbledore said wearily. Hotch was half a second from snapping at the old wizard, but Snape tightened his hold and Hotch took another look at the man. Even if everyone else was reacting emotionally, the headmaster had been hit just as hard. No matter how well he had planned everything, this was one, major detail had managed to slip through his net and put everyone in danger.

Had put the one person they needed to protect at all costs in danger.

“This information does not leave this room,” Dumbledore ordered, making eye contact with each of them. “You cannot tell anyone. You cannot even tell Harry. Make no attempts to find the family.”

Hotch was unsure if he should be relieved they weren’t going to be looking for him or infuriated that Dumbledore was so callously tossing aside the chance to reunite Harry and his family. Before he could make up his mind, Molly did so for him. “Albus, just imagine what that family’s been through already! What Harry’s been through!”

Dumbledore nodded wearily. “I know. And we can make an effort to find his parents after the war is over, but the Blood Relocation Program takes children from muggles. If we attract any attention to them, we will put them in extreme danger. So long as none of us speak of what has been discovered here today, that family stays safe.”

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Snape all but pulled him down into a chair beside him. Hotch couldn’t help but notice that the potions master had put himself in between Hotch and Fletcher. He wasn’t sure if it was so Snape could kill the con before Hotch if he got angry enough or to stop Hotch from lunging at the man later. Either way, he was grateful there was some deterrent or he wasn’t sure he would be able to last the whole meeting.

Molly took the answer with pursed lips and a heavy frown. “Fine,” she finally said, “but I am
looking for them the instant Voldemort has been defeated and the war won.”

Dumbledore nodded again. “I will assist you to the best of my abilities. But for now, let us focus on who we can protect. Without the blood wards, Harry is in much more danger.”

“Wait,” Hotch said suddenly. “Why was he able to kill Quirrell in his first year if there was no blood protection from Lily?”

The room collectively paused, contemplating the question.

Dumbledore tilted his head slightly before saying, “Sacrifice is its own magic. Even though Harry is not Lily’s child, she still gave him her protection through her selfless action. It is renewed every time he goes to stay with Petunia, because of the blood connection between the Evans sisters.”

When the meeting finally ended, Snape apparated him back to Quantico immediately without staying for Molly’s prepared dinner. As soon as they landed in a hidden spot by the parking lot, Snape asked, “Are you all right?”

Hotch started. “What do you mean?”

“I know you were just on a call with your son before we left, and you’ve said before that he reminds you of Harry. That meeting can hardly have been easy for you.” After a pause, he admitted, “I was sure you were going to attack him for a moment.”

Hotch grimaced, looking away. “It wasn’t easy,” he admitted. “But now there is all the more reason to end this war soon. What about you?”

Snape paused for a long moment, face pained, before he said, “Potter – or whatever his true name is – still deserves protection, no matter who his parents are.” In wry but grudging humor, he added, “At least now I know he’s not half James Potter’s son.”

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The next time Harry saw Snape, he had the fleeting illusion that the potions master had suffered brain damage and was turning his attitude around.

"Potter, this blood-clotting potion is remarkably adept."

He and everyone around him stared at the professor, who'd spoken in a completely surprised tone as he examined the contents of the cauldron, like his head had turned into a bundle of daisies.

"For a poison."

"Ouch," Ron muttered beside him as the man swept away. The idea that he hadn't been heard was knocked away when a piece of chalk hit him in the head with acute aim.

Easter came slower than Harry would have wished it to, but suddenly he found himself standing with Draco at Platform 9 ¾. Draco had slipped out of Hogwarts under the Invisibility Cloak, which Elle had sent back to them for this purpose, and Harry still had a little longer until his Polyjuice wore off. After knowing that it had been used to hide the real Moody from them, he liked the potion less despite its benefits second year, but he tried not to let it ruin his good mood.

A nondescript agent, who presumably resembled Mr. Granger, came to pick them up in a car. They drove for a little bit before getting out and entering a hotel, in which ‘Mr. Granger’ left them and Travis greeted them with a portkey, which launched all three to Virginia. They came out in an empty
parking lot beside a standard FBI van, which they quickly loaded into.

They were walking into Quantico not long after, and to Harry’s delight, they found themselves sharing the elevator with Agent Harris, from last year’s Christmas break. The two had a rapid conversation on the ride up, somewhat reluctantly parting ways once they reached the correct floor. Once she had left, Harry quickly explained who she was to Draco as they made their way to the bullpen.

Most of the team had gathered there, but they all made gestures for the pair to stay quiet even as they sent reassuring smiles towards them. The two were directed towards JJ’s office, and Travis waved them farewell as she remained behind. JJ was waiting for them, and she motioned for them to shut the door and take a seat.

“What’s going on?” Draco asked.

“So, uh, Rossi still doesn’t know,” she explained with a small laugh on the corner of Amusement Drive and Resignation Lane. “We’re trying to keep you out of his way, but unfortunately, he came back from leave a day early.” In a slightly lower voice, she added, “We think he’s trying to catch us on whatever secret we’re hiding from him, since he was really pushed to take these last few days off. Unfortunately, he’s a little too good at profiling and picked just the wrong – or right, depending on how you look at it – day to come back.”

“What are we going to do?” Draco asked.

“Well, you are going to be staying with Garcia over the Easter break, since the two of you are so intent on technology. Harry is going to be going home with Hotch, obviously, but both of them are currently in a meeting so right now I would suggest you go with Elle once she arrives in the bullpen.”

Harry ran a quick calculation in his head. “Oh, it’s that time of month again?” He stopped when he heard the inadvertent insinuation and groaned, much to JJ’s and Draco’s entertainment.

“Yes. She said she keeps hearing about Quidditch and was wondering if you guys wouldn’t give her a hands-on demonstration while the rest of us are stuck in meetings,” she said and the boys grinned at each other. “Try not to put anyone, or each other, in the hospital, okay?”

“We won’t try.”

“We’ll just do it,” Draco finished with a grin belying his truer, more benevolent intentions.

JJ smiled back. “I trust you two not to destroy my office if I head off to a meeting. Unfortunately, we’re in the middle of being briefed on the magical world, which is taking considerably longer than we had hoped. It looks like we’re about to formally begin work in both the wizarding and magical governments.”

Draco blinked and shook his head slightly as if to clear it. “Really? That would make you the first team in the world!”

JJ nodded. “Oh, we know. At this time it would all be going to our heads, except we’re trying to get over the magical folk who don’t think we’re smart enough for it. I think the team’s having far too much fun cutting everyone down to size.”

She left shortly after, and the pair settled for quizzing each other on History of Magic dates and rebellions until Elle came to grab them. They eagerly followed her to the training grounds in the back of Quantico, and a half hour later they found themselves standing in the area that had been fenced off
for Elle’s monthly transformations. As they looked around, they could see some signs of the werewolf’s presence from vicious marks left on trees, but without scouring the area it was rather difficult to detect the presence of anything unusual.

“So I’ve heard the pair of you are rather gifted on these things,” Elle said, pulling out two brooms from behind a tree. Both of the teenagers’ faces lit up in response and she laughed. “All right, show me what you’ve got.”

“Did you bring a snitch?” Harry asked, taking one broom and handing the other to Draco. Elle pulled a small golden ball out of her pocket and held it up. As she uncurled her fingers, two razor thin wings stretched out and began frantically beating the air, and then the snitch was gone.

Harry and Draco exchanged mischievous looks.

“Let’s see if your skills have improved since last year, Hotchner,” Draco jibed without real heat.

“Yours can only have improved, Malfoy,” Harry responded in kind, and the two launched themselves into the air.

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Hotch sighed for the umpteenth time as Rossi followed him back to his office. “This is why we suggested these dates for leave time,” he said as he walked towards his office. “I already told you that.”

“Yeah, and you still haven’t told me why the rest of this is so secret,” Rossi said, closing the door behind him and remaining a few feet away from it with his arms crossed. Really, Hotch didn’t blame him for his frustration. He’d been kept in the dark for months now about something that was clearly important, and all that he had been given were vague and cryptic hints. “Come on, Aaron. You know I’m not going to tell anyone.”

“That’s not the problem,” Hotch said patiently. “The issue is that we can’t get you to believe us. The answer is…rather outlandish. Extreme measures had to be taken for us to believe what we were hearing.”

Rossi frowned at his wording. “You make it sound like you’ve already been telling me the answer.”

Hotch shifted. “In a sense, we have. Look, there’s not a whole lot more I can tell you. My best advice is that you’re going to have to figure it out for yourself, and that you’re going to have to keep an open mind.” He paused. “A very open mind.”

Rossi’s frown deepened, and he strode out the door, slamming it shut behind him. Hotch sighed once more and settled himself at his desk to finish paperwork so he could actually enjoy Easter with both of his kids. Draco and Harry should have already arrived, but if he remembered correctly, Elle had taken them off the BAU’s hands and taken them down to the training field so she could get some more practical experience with Quidditch. She had been vague as to how exactly that would help her, but Hotch let her have her fun. Seeing people fly around on brooms for sport would probably be enjoyable for just about anyone else, but he was sure he wasn’t going to be too happy about having his son that far off the ground with very little support.

It was hours later when Hotch could acknowledge with satisfaction that he had significantly dented his work load, and he was almost ready to pack everything up for the day and head home after grabbing Harry and making sure Garcia was ready to take in Draco for the break. The knock on his door almost startled him, but random appearances in his office had made him constantly prepared for
interruption. He looked up as Morgan entered with a somewhat apprehensive expression. Hotch frowned and stood up, but Morgan was already talking before he could ask anything.

“I think Rossi might have lost it,” Morgan admitted.

“What do you mean?”

“When he realized he wasn’t going to be getting anything out of us, he went after everyone else. Harris came to me and said she was at the training room and heard some of the other agents talking about Harry. They remembered that he was with us but not your son, and most of them had come to the conclusion that he was just part of a case. Harris mentioned that she’d seen Harry in the elevator on the ride up. Rossi apparently put together that their excitement over hearing that he was back and our barrage of work load today, and thought they were directly connected. He talked to some of them, and a few told him they saw Harry making his way down to the training field with another teenager and Elle.”

Morgan was right behind him as Hotch sped towards the elevator. “This cannot go well,” he muttered as the doors closed.

Despite their speed, they didn’t catch Rossi before he made it to the training field. They were able to go straight to the correct area and tried to head him off before he could enter the fenced region, but a half hour later they realized he must have taken another route. Morgan suggested he could just be along the fence instead of trying to enter, and Hotch grudgingly agreed that they should look. After locking the gate to make sure no one could get in, the two split up and walked in opposite directions along the fence after sending a message Elle’s way about the potential security leak.

Fifteen minutes of searching had passed when Hotch heard an excited whoop come from above him. His head snapped up and he saw a broom and its rider go spinning through the air. Another flyer was swooping in larger circles around him, creating an intricate pattern as the two soared across the sky. At one point, Hotch was sure they were going to crash as both reached for something inches in front of them, but they suddenly darted apart and dove towards the ground. They vanished in the tree line a moment later and Hotch shook himself to bring his focus back to finding Rossi before he found them.

The next bend in the fence brought him to his target, and he didn’t bother hiding his approach as he walked over to the other senior agent. Rossi glanced at him as he approached before turning his attention back to the trees. The man hadn’t gotten around the fence and was still stuck on the other side, but with the boys in the air and no way of contacting them, it wouldn’t matter much which side he was stuck on if he looked up.

“I don’t see what’s so important about the training area,” Rossi mused, “so I suppose it’s what’s in the forest. Who are the kids?”

“One’s my oldest son, the other’s a friend of his,” Hotch admitted honestly. “There was a catastrophe last summer and they, as part of a larger group, almost died. A group of the agents here got to know them as a result when we brought them to Quantico for safety.”

“Some of them knew Harry from before.”

“He came here last winter, when I first met him.” Rossi’s head whipped around to stare at him in bewilderment. Hotch kept his gaze focused on the trees as he said, as neutrally as he could, “Harry was…taken from me and Haley when he was very young. We thought he died. Last year, we learned that wasn’t the case.”
“How old is he?” Rossi finally asked after a long moment.

“Fourteen.”

Rossi considered the situation. “You seem to be going to an awful lot of trouble for your son, so whatever’s going on involves him.” Hotch nodded. “We’re not supposed to get emotionally involved in cases like this.”

“There was no other option. Our team is the only one with enough members cleared for certain access to be able to handle this particular case, and my relationship to Harry made parts of it easier,” he said. “Besides, someone keeps trying to kill him. I think anyone would have a hard time getting me off the case.”

There was a sudden yelp from the trees, followed by a laughing, “Watch out!” There was a loud crash, and then, “Are you okay?” A groan. “Making noise. You’re probably fine.”

“What are they doing?” Rossi asked in confusion.

“It’s a game called Quidditch. I admit I don’t know a lot of the details.”

When the sounds faded after a few minutes, Rossi asked, “Why can’t you tell me?”

“The community it involves is too large to give out information about it without certain security checks. You’re still failing one of them.”

“Which one?”

“You don’t believe us when we try to tell you about it.”

Rossi stared at him with a mix of bewilderment, hurt, and anger. “I’ve never not believed any of you when you’ve told me something unless it was obviously meant as a joke!” Hotch grimaced. “What?”

“What if I told you that you don’t remember us telling you about it?”

“I’d say you would need an explanation as to how that worked.”

“Remember last month, when you were asking a lot of questions about this?”

“Yeah…”

“And then you came to talk to me about it during lunch?”

“Yes.”

“What did we talk about?”

Rossi started to answer and then stopped. “I don’t remember,” he said in astonishment. “There’s just a large blank. But I swear I went to go see you.”

“And before that, a few weeks earlier, you did the same thing with Prentiss.” From the look on Rossi’s face, he’d come to the same memory gap. “See?”

“How is that possible?”

“You are a menace!” he heard Draco cackle from somewhere to his right.
A moment later, Harry shot into view, shaking leaves out of his face and knocking a branch off his broom as he appeared from within the boughs of a tree. Draco came out a different way not a second after, and both raced after something seen only to them. The snitch, if Hotch remember correctly, darted through a hole in the wire-link fence, and both teenagers had to fly over the fence to get around it. Harry made the leap, already turning, and as a result was able to adjust his course to go after the snitch just a little bit faster than Draco was. It made all the difference, and Harry snatched the golden ball out of the air a second later. He shot a grin back at Draco, who stuck his tongue out at him before catching sight of Rossi and jerking back, eyes widening.

Harry looked at him in confusion before turning back around and seeing his course was taking him right into the Italian agent. He pulled up sharply on his broom, coming to a skidding halt only two feet from Rossi, who was openly gaping at the flying pair. Harry’s broom hovered a few inches above the ground with Harry still perched on it. When the agent didn’t say anything, Harry nervously glanced over at Hotch, who shot him a reassuring look before going back to watching Rossi’s reaction intently.

Finally, Rossi said, “So what was it you wanted to tell me?”

“Magic’s real.”

There was a very long pause. For a while, Hotch wasn’t sure if Rossi was even going to say anything or if he was just going to leave. But then, “Okay.” Hotch breathed out a small sigh of relief at the admission. “Okay, I’ll buy it. But there had better be a very good explanation.”

“Oh, trust me,” Hotch said. “More specifically, trust Reid. He has compiled more than enough explanations to satisfy you.” He turned to the other two. “Can you find Elle and tell her to meet us inside?”

Harry quickly nodded and took off with Draco right behind him. Rossi walked back with Hotch, who texted Morgan to tell him Rossi had been found and inoculated into the know of the wizarding world. All six of them arrived at the gate and, together, walked back into the building and up into the bullpen.

The entire fiasco had taken an unreasonably long time, and Hotch realized with an internal groan that it was going to take even longer yet to fully get Rossi up to speed on everything, especially with all the events that had taken place recently. Draco started to follow the rest of them to Hotch’s office for a complete debriefing, but Hotch shooed him off to go find Garcia, who was undoubtedly beginning to look forward to going home soon. He similarly sent Morgan away, since the rest of the team was in varying stages of packing up to head home.

“Can’t do the same for me anymore,” Elle said with a note of wistfulness.

He smiled slightly at her. He knew she regretted having to transfer out of the unit she loved so much, even if she still got to work with them and loved her new job. “Go home and get some rest,” he told her anyway. When her face twisted in annoyance, he added, “Don’t take it as an order, just some friendly advice. You have the chance to take off early for once, and I promise nothing eventful is going to happen while you’re gone.”

Elle nodded in reply, a content smile crossing her face. “Fair enough,” she replied, and followed Prentiss to the elevator.

Hotch turned back to the now-empty bullpen. Rossi and Harry had gone ahead of him to his office, and were talking easily when Hotch entered. They quieted almost immediately, and Hotch began the gruesome task of answering all of Rossi’s immediate questions about the wizarding world. Harry
chipped in once in a while, but more often than not, Hotch was able to provide all the answers. Rossi was quickly growing frustrated, which Hotch could hardly blame him for. It was a lot of seemingly ridiculous information to take in at once, and the rest of them had spent months trying to fully assimilate the new knowledge they had about the world with the old.

At least Rossi now knew about all the covert cases and strange people. There was still more to catch him up on, but at ten o’clock at night, Hotch called it quits and told Rossi they could finish it another time. The Italian agreed and went home to continue having his mind boggled in private as he reflected on the events of the day. Hotch was grateful he was past that stage, but having a direct blood connection to the other world made it considerably easier.

He turned to Harry to tell him it was time to go, but his son had slumped to the side at some point and had curled up on the couch. Hotch smiled slightly at the image, then retrieved a blanket from under his desk that had taken up permanent residence in his office for cases such as this and carried it over to his son. Harry stirred slightly as he tucked the blanket around him. Hotch’s smile turned wry as he realized Harry must have crammed all of his break work into the weeks before. And, like last year, it was now beginning to catch up to him.

Hotch went to his desk and grabbed a file from the middle of his stack. While Harry got some sleep, he could at least finish some work. Since Rossi could now be completely introduced to the wizarding world, there was a whole flotilla’s worth of paperwork that needed to be completed, and Hotch began the unpleasant task of sorting through all of it to determine what was immediately necessary and what wasn’t. Every few minutes, he paused and listened to the sound of Harry breathing quietly on the couch. No matter how safe everyone claimed Hogwarts was, having him behind its walls was nothing like having him right under his nose.

An hour or so later, he walked silently over to the couch and sat on the floor beside Harry’s head. Even in the dim light, he could make out some of Hayley’s features. Her nose, her eyebrows… The ears, a bit. The jawline and cheeks, though, that was straight from the Hotchner line. His eyes, too, and the area around them. Shadowed and controlled, but volatile and expressive when necessary. Jack really looked like his mother’s child, but Hotch couldn’t decide if he should be grateful or not that he and Hayley had a child to represent them. If only she could have been here to see both of them…

His hand came up, almost of its own accord, and softly stroked Harry’s hair. Unruly and wild, a perfect mix between his own and Hayley’s even if the color came from him. His gaze drifted to Harry’s face again, curious if he slept the same way Hayley had. She sometimes would frown in displeasure in her sleep, and Hotch had always wondered who was going to suffer her wrath in her dreams and hoped it wasn’t him. But Hotch saw with dismay that Harry was not quite relaxed in his sleep, muscles tighter than normal and expression mild. Disturbed and on guard, even while resting. No longer quite so trusting of the safety he was given.

The werewolves were still loose, and Hotch could hardly bring himself to think about it again when his son was close to him. The ones who had nearly killed him, who had almost robbed him of his ability to use his hands but had destroyed his innocence beyond all repair. Even the Woodsmarked Killer was still out there, somewhere. Yet Hotch was still intending on protecting Harry from the worst of the dark wizards and creatures in the magical world.

One hand rested in Harry’s hair while the other drifted down to his wrist, which was curled near his head. As gently as he could, he turned it to the side so he could see better in the lighting. The scars from the bindings were still as fresh as they had been the day Harry had taken off the bandages, jagged and dark. Hotch ran his fingers lightly across them, fury rising within him that this had been done to one of his children. And while he knew Harry had been in danger, no less.
“Dad?” Harry whispered, eyes slowly opening.

Hotch gave him a small, sad smile. “Ready to go home?” he asked quietly, and Harry nodded. Hotch moved back to allow Harry to get up, and the teenager sleepy rose to a sitting position to orient himself while Hotch got to his feet. He folded the blanket while Harry somewhat unsteadily stood, then grabbed his briefcase and guided Harry out the door, turning off the lights and closing the door behind him. “Give me a moment,” he asked, and Harry nodded while Hotch left him to go to JJ’s office, where he could clearly see her working. Harry descended to the bullpen while Hotch entered the open doorway. “It’s past eleven,” he said.

She glanced at the clock, startled. "Woah."

“Are you okay to drive home?”

She nodded, grabbing her coat. “Yeah, I’m fine. Still got enough caffeine running through me, just-” she froze, in the middle of pulling her coat on. Her gaze was fixed out the window into the bullpen. “Hotch,” she whispered, and he whipped around, mind already going to the worst case scenario.

In the bullpen, Harry had come to a dead halt a few feet away from a figure who had claimed Morgan’s desk for their own. As Hotch watched, the figure turned to face Harry, and immediately started. His eyes narrowed and he asked a question, but all Harry could do was stare.

And then everything clicked together, and Professor Snape slowly got to his feet, gaze flickering over Harry.

He turned and, through the window, met Hotch’s eyes.

Chapter End Notes

So I thought I’d post this early because not much happened in the last chapter, but I realized that so much happened in this chapter that it’s kind of overcompensating but whatever. The bombing, Pettigrew’s story, Rossi and Snape... Bet the reason for Harry’s kidnapping wasn't what you expected, was it?
"I don't see why it matters what is written. Not when it's about people. It can always be crossed out."
- Neil Gaiman and Terry Pratchett, Good Omens

Snape fully expected to see Hotch’s office lights on, which was precisely the reason he had decided to show up. There was another Order meeting the next day, mostly geared towards dealing with the shit storm that had flown up at the last one in which Harry not-Potter’s identity had been discovered. They were going to need Hotch again, since Blackwolf was involved in some sort of demonstration out west, and Hotch would probably want the forewarning that he was going to need sleep.

But when he reached the door, he saw someone sprawled on the couch, dead to the world, while Hotch crouched next to them. His back was to Snape, shoulders relaxed while one hand lovingly stroked a mess of black hair.

Snape backed away quietly, resolving to wait however long it was necessary for Hotch to leave. Why his son was at Quantico wasn’t Snape’s business, but he was…glad that it meant Hotch could finally see his son. He wasn’t sure he’d ever forget Hotch having to communicate with his oldest over the phone instead of going home for a regular conversation.

He took Morgan’s desk, figuring the man at least owed him for the healing potion. Twenty minutes passed in which he amused himself with guessing what might await the competitors in the third task, although the rather murderous creatures he imagined probably weren’t far from accurate. They were growing the maze in the Quidditch pitch, he knew, but no one was allowed anywhere near it.

He found his thoughts drifting back to Potter’s name emerging from the Goblet of Fire. It didn’t make any sense. Why not just kill the boy in his sleep, instead of going through this elaborate game? Crouch had had plenty of chances. They’d tried talking to him, but he just laughed when they tried to interrogate him.

The door to Hotch’s office opened and Snape remained where he was as Hotch directed his son towards the elevators, then left to go to one of the other offices ringing the bullpen. Snape’s eyes fixed on his oldest son for the first time, and he felt one of his eyebrows go up. The boy really did look like Harry Potter, especially from this distance, although the yawning ruined his evaluation a bit. Something niggled at the back of his brain, something odd.

He looked away, not wanting to intimidate Hotch’s son the first time they ever met. There wasn’t much to look at in the large room with the lights off and everyone gone, and he listened as the teenager groggily made his way down the stairs and towards Snape and, past him, the elevators. Then there was a startled jumping sound, and the teenager came to a complete halt, having caught sight of the professor waiting at the desk.

Snape turned to him curiously. Honestly, he would have only expected that reaction from one of his students and not some lad who had never met him before. He inadvertently locked eyes with the boy, whose green pair had gone huge, and the only thing that Snape could think was how much they
looked like Lily’s. He tore his gaze away. Hotch’s son, Hotch’s son. Not Potter, who wasn’t even Lily’s son anyway. But despite himself, his gaze traveled up, until they spotted-

The lightning bolt scar.

Snape found himself standing, eyes travelling up and down the teenager in front of him. It was Potter. No doubt about it, the boy in front of him was most definitely the same one that Snape had been teaching for four years. He would have recognized him anywhere, even if he had just seen the boy earlier that day with his friends at Hogwarts.

“Potter,” he snapped, because there was no way the boy knew about his lineage. None of the Order members would have told him. “How did you get here?”

Potter stared at him, the perfect image of someone who took a bad turn and ended up going the wrong way down a one-way street. There was no response.

The funny thing was, Snape couldn’t really find it in him to be as angry at the boy as he usually would have been. He couldn’t claim James Potter’s genes were running rampant through his son, and he couldn’t be infuriated that Lily’s son was endangering the last traces of her. He was just another student now, no personal connection to him. If anything, he was the ward of several interested parties from a large variety of backgrounds. Dumbledore’s grandfatherly but perhaps manipulative interest, Molly’s maternal coddling, Snape’s own invested concern, and even Hotch’s-

The third time he had met Hotch, in the dungeons after the werewolves had gotten out, what was it that had been said?

“What importance does this have to you?”

And Hotch’s response: “I’m a parent.”

Then later, when the students who had been taken had returned to Hogwarts. “The oldest… I couldn’t quite get over how much Potter reminds me of him. Is he safe? At Hogwarts? And you’re going to keep an eye on him?”

His almost obsessive concern over Potter, asking about him during almost every conversation, and keeping up on the dangers of the task when he wasn’t inquiring directly about Potter. Coming to Hogwarts for the tasks, spending so much time on matters in England, paying close attention in every Order meeting.

He turned his head to look at Hotch, who was now staring back at him from inside JJ’s office.

Snape glanced back at Harry.

“Bollocks.”

--

Harry took the couch again, resting his elbows on his knees and leaning forward over them. Hotch leaned against the edge of his desk between him and Snape, who had taken the chair opposite Hotch’s.

“So,” Snape said. He asked Harry, “How long have you known?”

“How long have you known?”

“The summer before third year,” Harry wearily replied.
Snape turned to Hotch.

“About an hour before he found out.”

“How?”

“The Woodsmarked Killer tracked him down and went after him. We were following the Woodsmarked Killer and he led us to Harry.”

“Who knows?”


Snape raised an eyebrow. “That’s it?”

Hotch nodded. “We’re about to put a Fidelius on it, just in case.”

“Were you ever going to tell me?”

“After the war, yes. Anyone who knows now is in danger, and you were already protecting him.”

Harry frowned in disagreement at needing protection but was too tired to argue the point. “Even once everyone at the last Order meeting found out he wasn’t the Potters’, you still said you were going to protect him.”

Harry’s head jerked up. “Wait, they found out?!”

“Mundungus Fletcher and Pettigrew conspired to get you to the Potters’ through the Blood Relocation Program. We were talking about the protection of the blood wards and Fletcher mentioned the wards wouldn’t work properly because you weren’t related by blood to the Evans’ family.”

“That’s why the wards on Quantico are so strong,” Snape suddenly said. “They’re based on your blood wards.” After a moment, he added, “And you two are the ones they’re protecting, when you said the wards were guarding family who were supplying you with information.”

Hotch nodded. “I tried not to lie to you, in case it ever came time that you needed to know.”

"Wait," Harry said. "If Fletcher and Pettigrew were working together, then doesn't Pettigrew know who you are?"

"No. The BRP does research on the child, not the parents, and they are so dismissive of muggles that they don't even keep records of who they take children from. If I had any remaining doubts that Pettigrew does not know about your lineage, they would be assuaged by the knowledge that he clearly has not told the Dark Lord the identity of your father. If he were able to, he certainly would have by now to get into his good graces." Snape leaned back slightly. “Now, which students know about this?”

Harry blew out his breath. “Here’s the fun part of the story,” he muttered. He exchanged glances with Hotch, who grimaced. “The whole thing?” Harry asked, and Hotch nodded. “Hermione and Ron knew initially. Then we were all taken by the werewolves last summer, and the BAU team got us out. Everyone who was with us knows.”

Snape frowned at him. “That’s not possible. Not all of them would have kept quiet about such sensitive information unless they were blackmailing people with it. Draco Malfoy, for one—“
“Came to Quantico with me this afternoon. He went home with Garcia about an hour ago.” Snape stared. “Hermione Granger is drinking polyjuice potion to look like me at school, and the rest of the Slytherins in Draco’s dorm are pretending to be him.”

Snape ran an exhausted hand over his face as he processed the new information. Both Hotchners in front of him seemed truly regretful about him having discovered this in passing, but Hotch wasn’t calling anyone to come Obliviate him and Pott- Hotch- Harry Hotchner was willfully giving away the confidential news. As for him, he was sure this was going to take days to fully wrap his brain around, particularly after he had just learned Harry wasn’t a Potter after all.

But he was still the son of a friend.

“All the students who were with you know,” he reiterated.

“After what happened, none of them were willing to…” He sighed. “We had to stick together. Then, and later. It just wasn’t…” He grimaced. “Things…happened when we were taken, and a lot of us couldn’t really stand by who we were before. The Slytherins in particular had to build an entirely new perception on the society they lived in and the families they were a part of. Most of us spend our time with each other outside of class now, instead of our regular peers.” He met Snape’s gaze directly. “We might not seem like it in class, but the students who came out of that cave are a lot closer than they appear.”

Snape nodded minutely in understanding. “The Slytherins have proclaimed their allegiances to the Dark Lord. A ploy?”

“It keeps them safe, since they’re the closest to the Death Eaters. We were worried several would go home just to be killed for renouncing Voldemort if they didn’t.”

“Well done,” Snape said, and his tone was so flat that it took Harry a moment to process the unexpected compliment. “When is the Fidelius being installed? Some of the Order may begin looking for his parents despite Dumbledore’s command.”

“Tomorrow,” Hotch replied. He hesitated, then added, “We decided to make the Secret Keeper someone that no one would suspect, so that person couldn’t be anyone even remotely close to us. I can’t tell you the name. Anyone who knows now knows, but no one else will find out until after the war. It allows Quantico and my home to remain as safe houses that no one is going to think of looking twice at them.”

“The Order isn’t going to tell anyone that his parents weren’t the Potters. They won’t think to go to you for assistance in finding his real parents.”

“We’re not taking any chances. I’d rather be paranoid than grieving.”

That was something Snape could understand all too well, and he nodded in understanding. “I will keep my silence until the Fidelius is removed at the end of all of this. Blackwolf has made you aware of the nuances of it?”

“He has. A benefit to the person we’ve chosen is that they are so far removed from all of this that they wouldn’t know how to tell anyone with a grudge against Harry even if they wanted to. We’re not sure if anyone would be able to figure it out, but even then, you’re the only one I ever expected to put it together. I would be highly surprised if anyone else saw both of us enough to realize why I’ve been so involved.”

“I was with you for months and I never suspected,” Snape admitted. “I don’t think you’re in danger
of anyone uncovering the truth.” His eyes narrowed slightly in thought. “Did you profile Black? Before the truth came out about him and Pettigrew?”

“Yes, why?”

His eyes slid to Harry. “You used profiler techniques on Black in the Shrieking Shack, didn’t you?”

Harry smiled. “Yeah, I did.”

It also explained Harry’s lack of interest in moving in with Black. He would have thought the boy would have jumped at the chance, yet he only seemed to have been grudgingly going along with it. And, while he was on the same track, it also explained why Harry had seemed so much more stable and dedicated over the last year. It was amazing what a good parental figure in one’s life could do. Now that he thought about it, Harry’s education in England also explained why Hotch rarely saw his son despite their obvious closeness.

Of course, this also meant that Harry was the one with the “legendary, insurmountable, scathing” sass.

He wasn’t sure how he was going to be able to go back to teaching him the same way after this. He took some comfort in the knowledge that the rest of his Slytherins had apparently been able to do it with little problem.

Hotch straightened slightly. “By the way, when I said the rest of the team, Rossi knows as well. The next time you’re both here at the same time, I will likely be introducing you properly. We’re still getting him used to magic.”

“He found out?”

“Earlier this evening,” Hotch confirmed.

“It’s been a long day,” Harry added.

“You want this kept even from Dumbledore, don’t you?”

“I think it would be for the best, for a number of reasons.”

“It’s your family. I will honor that.” Hotch tilted his head in thanks. “I assume the rest of your group is going to hear about today’s events soon,” he said to Harry, who nodded. “Very well. So far, their efforts in taking care of each other have been adequate in making up for the staff’s failings to react to the emergency. We are well aware that our aid was not sufficient in treating everyone for what happened.”

Harry nodded slowly. “Well… I suppose you did what you could.”

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Snape left an hour later, and the pair of exhausted Hotchners made their way down the elevator and to the parking lot. The building was mostly dark by the time they left, and there were very few people left besides the janitorial crew. Not much conversation passed between them, too busy trying to stay awake and process the wild range of events that had occurred throughout the day.

For his part, Hotch was a bit surprised Snape hadn’t been more shocked by the revelation. It definitely helped that the potions master had already been putting some of it together, even if he had missed the major part he had been dancing around the whole time. Harry and Snape were in for an
awkward re-introduction, as Snape learned to treat one of his students as the son of a friend who he had no odd relations with and Harry started looking at his professor as the friend of his father. Hotch really didn't envy them the next few weeks, although it did mean that things were about to get a lot less complicated between himself and Snape.

Harry was going to need all the support he could get, and there was only so much the BAU could give him when they weren't even in the same country. And no matter how much Hotch wanted to be there for Harry every day, that just wasn't possible right now. That didn't mean there was nothing that could be done, but the securities around Harry just couldn't be as airtight as Hotch would have preferred. There were far too many dangers for him to be satisfied, and that had been shown enough times when Harry became endangered. The worst part was that several of those times the dangers had not come from Riddle, but rather Hotch's own past.

“T'm sorry, Harry,” Hotch said quietly as they pulled into the driveway. He stared straight ahead at the driveway while Harry turned to him in surprise. “I know this isn’t the life you want to live, and it’s not fair. Not in any way is it right for you to have to do what you’ve been doing, and you’ve never complained once about it.” His eyes met Harry’s and he continued, “Whatever I can do, Harry, I will – you just have to let me know.”

"This wasn't your fault, any of it. And after today, some of the pressure's off of us."

"That doesn't mean you should have to deal with what's left."

Harry's gaze flickered across his expression. “Dad… Is something wrong?”

Hotch opened his mouth, a denial on the tip of his tongue, but he stopped himself. If he started giving Harry false assurances, he could hardly argue when Harry did the same to him. And Harry trusted him to be honest, when few adults around him were. He let out his breath in a sigh. “No,” he admitted. “Hayley died exactly three years ago.”

Harry’s shoulders sank slightly. “Oh.”

“Tstill haven’t caught your mother’s killer, and he’s still after you.” His gaze hardened in determination. “But we will catch him, Harry, we will.”

His son hesitated, gnawing on the inside of his cheek for a moment. “Is he still killing other people?” he finally asked.

“Not in America. He can’t move past you now that he knows you’re alive. He’ll keep trying to kill you before he can properly return here. He won’t succeed.”

“I’d rather you don’t look for him,” Harry finally blurted, and Hotch stared at him. “Not if- Not if it means you’re going to get hurt. Last time…” He scrubbed a hand over his face, and Hotch caught sight of the darkened skin under his eyes. “Last time it almost went very badly.”

“Harry,” Hotch began, but Harry shook his head. He was trembling slightly, a combination of stress and exhaustion.

“I can’t lose you too,” Harry said, little more than a whisper, parroting Hotch’s own words back at him from when Harry had wanted to help catch Pettigrew. “Not after everyone else, not after Mum and everyone last summer. I…” His voice cracked. “You can’t leave me too.”

Hotch knew they weren’t quite talking about the Woodsmarked Killer anymore.

“Harry,” he said soothingly, reaching out to him. Harry weakly batted one hand away.
“No, you have to promise me,” he begged, shaking now. Hotch couldn’t remember ever seeing Harry actually breaking down before, not even after he had woken up in the hospital with broken bones and flayed wrists. Something else was going on. “Dad, please, you can’t- you can’t-“

Hotch reached forward again, ignoring Harry’s weak protests and pulling him closer. “I won’t leave you,” he whispered. “I promise, not ever.” Harry shook against him, stifled sobs audible. One of Hotch’s hands ran through his hair. “It’s going to be fine. We’ll get through this, through all of it.” He waited a moment, hesitating, then quietly asked, “Is this about the bombing?”

“I thought you were dead,” Harry whispered, clutching at him as if to reaffirm that he was real.

"Harry..."

“Garcia wouldn’t call us back, and then she did and she wanted to know if I could feel anything from you because you weren’t responding, and... The news said someone was dead, an FBI agent, and you still hadn’t called... I thought you were gone too.”

Hotch stopped his motions and pulled Harry closer yet to him. “I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I’m so sorry, Harry. I didn’t mean to do that to you. Everything was happening so fast, I just didn’t have time and I didn’t think you were watching the news or that you would put things together.”

“You need to stay alive.”

"I'll always be here, as long as you need me."

"Longer."

Something cold wrapped around Hotch’s heart. He moved back slightly to see Harry’s face, which was streaked with tears. “What?” he whispered. Harry wouldn’t meet his gaze. “Harry, what are you talking about?”

“I’m a fourteen-year-old teenager whose spent most of his education focusing on things other than school and who spent most of his home life up to the last two years locked in something. And Riddle’s had all the time in the world to prepare.”

“You think Riddle’s going to kill you?” Hotch quietly asked. Shit, how long had Harry been bottling this up?

“I’m not going to win against him, and the prophecy said-“

“Fuck the prophecy, Harry!” Hotch snapped, aghast, and Harry stared at him. “You’re not dying until you’re old and grey! You are not allowed to leave before me, understand? Forget about how many people Riddle’s killed. You’re not going to be one of them. That’s not going to happen, not while I’m still around.”

“Then you can’t face the Woodsmarked Killer either,” Harry demanded, scrubbing tears away with one arm.

Hotch blinked. “What?”

“You can’t- You can’t tell me not to go up against Riddle and then do the same thing yourself. Not because of me.”

Hotch pulled him close again so Harry couldn’t see his expression. “Don’t worry about it,” he said quietly, but he didn’t make any promises.
“And you’re not weak,” he added, running a hand up and down Harry’s back. “I don’t care how much education you’ve had in comparison to him. You’ve got more people supporting you, more people who are willing to fight with you – and you have a reason beyond your own selfish gain to win, and he doesn’t have that.”

“But… Doesn’t that mean I have to kill him?”

“Your life isn’t determined by what some old woman said,” Hotch said firmly. “Forget about the prophecy, completely. You don’t have to do what it says, Harry. You’re not bound by it, any more than I’m bound by the law. It tells me what to do, but I can still break it. And trust me, a manslaughter charge for me is looking pretty likely if he comes anywhere near you again.”

He felt Harry give a wavering smile. “Or just don’t get caught.”

Hotch gave him a few moments, continuing to rub his back. His son continued shaking against him, but Hotch couldn’t tell if they were dry sobs or not. Harry sniffed, trying to get a hold of his breathing. “Harry… Do you really think you’re not strong enough?”

“It’s not like I could do much against the werewolves last summer,” he muttered.

“Harry, there were more of them than you and they caught you by surprise. You’re so much stronger now than you were two months ago. It wasn’t your responsibility then to be ready for an attack. And you shouldn’t have been prepared for that – you’re fourteen. You shouldn’t be fighting; you should be enjoying your teenage years. Very few people could have kept their heads together like you did back there. You’re a strong wizard, even if you couldn’t show it last summer.”

Harry went quiet, and Hotch rested his chin on the top of Harry’s head. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“Why were you so upset when I told you my hearing might be permanently damaged? You looked like I’d told you I had terminal cancer.”

Harry shrugged slightly. “Nothing, I just… Nothing.”

“Harry.”

“It was just… It was something someone said. It's stupid – don't worry about it.”

“Harry.”

He sighed. “It started when I began attending school. Regular school, I mean. The Dursleys reminded me every day before I got there that no one would believe me if I told anyone I lived in a closet and didn't get half the amount of food I should have been getting. I suppose they didn't want to risk an inquiry. They kept saying it after I started going to Hogwarts, and then… I tried to tell Hagrid and McGonagall that someone was going to steal the Stone and they didn't believe me. I tried convincing Lockhart that I didn't want to be a celebrity and I tried telling others that I wasn't behind the petrifications. The only things people seemed to believe me about were the obvious things, or things that didn't matter, that weren't dangerous.

“You…weren't like that, from the beginning. I didn't want to tell you about life with the Dursleys because I didn't want to get told off for lying, but you made me and then you believed me. You knew when I was actually lying and when I was really telling the truth. And you were the first person who had listened to me without skepticism or admiration or duty. You didn't know we were related and you didn't care I was a celebrity. Dad, when you first started talking about taking me
away from the Dursleys, I barely considered what that would mean because I was so happy someone was actually listening.”

He grimaced slightly. “So, when you said your hearing might be damaged… I was scared you weren’t going to be able to listen to me anymore, when you heard everything I was and wasn’t saying.”

Hotch sat there for a moment, eyes closing in agony. He heard Harry shift, and when he opened his eyes, Harry was looking at him with concern. After all this time, and the damage of eleven years was still apparent.

He reached across the armrest and pulled Harry to him, unable to watch his worried expression any longer. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you when I should’ve been.”

“It’s not your fault. I mean, you thought I was dead,” Harry replied, voice muffled.

“I should’ve been there,” Hotch repeated. “I can’t even begin to make it up to you, not after all that…”

“Well,” Harry said, as wryly as he could, “I suppose you can’t die anytime soon, then.”

“Are you that worried?” Harry nodded shakily and Hotch leaned back to see him. “Okay. I promise not to die if you don’t either.”

“I promise not to die,” Harry repeated, a small smile appearing on his face. Hotch ran a hand down the side of his head, giving him a fond smile. “Thank you.”

“I love you, and I’ll do anything for you,” Hotch insisted firmly, and the smile on Harry’s face grew. He knew the boy had never been told that by anyone else, would have hardly believed that anyone would ever tell him that. In spite of everything Harry had overcome, though, he had finally arrived in a place where he could hear it proudly and confidently stated.

But as he led Harry inside, he couldn’t quite suppress the feeling of trepidation and dread growing inside.

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Harry woke the next morning to a pressure on his leg, and he scraped one foot against it to dislodge the blankets. The weight vanished, but a few moments later, he felt a heavy warmth creeping onto his chest.

He groaned, still worn out from the night before and trying to suppress the memories of the event. He couldn’t believe he’d completely broken down like that, in front of his father no less. It would have been embarrassing in front of one of his friends, but Hotch was different. If Harry acted weak in front of him, he would go all out to keep Harry safe and make him feel protected again. Which was…nice, as no one had ever gone to war for Harry like that before, but it also put Hotch in too much danger. And his father was already in enough danger because of his job, and he couldn’t afford to be a shield for more threats just because Harry couldn’t pull his own weight.

Speaking of weight.

He opened his eyes groggily, peering down his nose without moving his head to see what was making it so hard to breath. A pair of small black eyes met his, watching him steadily from their secured position off the ground. The sleek, black coils of the black racer snake rested on his chest, with the cervical region of its body held in place over Harry’s body to allow it to peer at him.
“Hurry,” he hissed impatiently. “Move, come on!”

“Why?” Harry muttered in response, eyes slipping shut again.

“Someone has come to see you. She is injured and has another with her.”

Harry’s eyes flew open and he sat upright. The black racer fell from his chest in surprise at the sudden movement, flashing his blue underbelly at Harry for a moment, before recovering and sliding off the bed and onto the floor. Harry threw on a pair of pants, hopping in the direction of the door while the racer weaved back and forth on the wooden panels to work off nervous energy. He grabbed his wand, snagged a shirt, and opened the door, then hurried down the hallway as he tried to get into the shirt without running into anything.

“Who is it?” Harry asked as he reached the stairs. The racer darted onto the railing an instant later, sticking to the outside and slithering down it, hitting the floor the moment Harry did.

“Friend from the north,” was the reply. “She brings a child.”

Harry followed the racer as he flew across the floor and through the kitchen and back door, and then out into the yard. The dark scales allowed him to easily track the snake’s progress through the grass, and Harry sprinted after it until he was led to a corner of the fencing. Half-hidden by the brush there, Harry could make out the other two snakes that had taken up residence at the Hotchner home, an eastern mudsnake and kingsnake. There were two more, however, who he had never seen before, but he recognized neither species off the top of his head.

“What happened?” he asked.

“Dog bite,” the kingsnake said. “She is badly injured. Can you do something?”

“I’ll try. I learned some healing spells this year but I don’t know if it will work on snakes. Move aside, please.” The kingsnake and mudsnake gave him more space, revealing a dark brown-orange snake with dark brown markings, a large bite taken out of one coil.

Before Harry could get a better look, another, much larger snake darted in front of her, fangs exposed and hissing. The racer replied in kind, demanding submission. “Both of you, calm down! Look, I’m just here to help, okay?” He directed the last part at the new, panicking snake, who gradually lowered himself back to the ground. Harry gently moved the racer aside with his fingers and readjusted his grip on his wand. “Emmendo,” he whispered, and the bones that he could see began setting themselves back into place. The snake hissed in pain. He apologized, but quickly performed the spell again to repair more damage. He cast the spell a third time, directing it instead at the muscles and organs. “Scourgify,” he said, and the blood blocking his view vanished along with any foreign substances that might have gotten into the wound.

“Is my father home?” Harry asked. The moment he said it, he wanted to slap himself. It wasn’t like Hotch was going to be able to do anything about snake repair.

“I will go wake him,” the racer said.

“No, never mind,” Harry muttered. The racer wasn’t known for tact, and he’d rather not startle his father awake in that manner. “Reparo. Emmendo.” Once everything had been reset, he began fixing the wound and knotting everything closed as best as he could. He only hoped he was doing everything right, or someone else would have to come in and redo it. The snake had lost too much blood for him to wait for help now.

“Is she going to be okay?” her companion asked.
“He’s a good wizard,” the mudsnake replied soothingly. “Don’t worry.”

A few minutes later, Harry sat back and evaluated his work. “I think that’s the best I can do,” he said. “Sorry I can’t do more, but for now, you better come inside.”

“She can’t move me,” she asked, sounding rather tired.

“It won’t hurt. Leviserpentūs,” he said, and she lifted into the air in response to his wand’s movement. She jerked in surprise, but settled down once she realized he wasn’t going to drop her.

“Hm.”

The other four snakes followed Harry into the house as he set her down on a hastily made bedding of the couch’s pillows and a spare blanket. While she got into a comfortable position, he asked, “Is everyone staying inside?” He got four affirmatives and closed the back door. “Is anyone hungry, thirsty?”

“I could do with water,” the red-orange snake quietly said, and Harry filled a bowl and set it on the cushions by the female.

“How did you know to come here?” Harry asked curiously.

“No one else speaks with snakes,” the kingsake replied. “You are interesting. We talk about you.”

“Braggarts,” the one on the cushions deadpanned and Harry laughed.

“Harry?” He turned to see Hotch coming down the stairs, eyeing the conglomeration on the couch. “At least it’s not the middle of the night.”

“She was injured,” Harry explained. “They wanted help.”

“Who’s that?” the red-orange snake asked, remaining perfectly still.

“My father. Don’t worry about him.”

“Bite him and you die,” the racer snarled.

“Cool it, both of you.”

“Is she going to be okay?” Hotch asked, coming to stand a few feet behind Harry.

“Should be. These two are being bratty, though,” Harry said, glaring meaningfully at the racer and the newcomer. “Territorial dispute.”

“Are those the three from before?”

Harry nodded. “Yeah. They’re…” He paused. “Oh. There isn’t really a translation for their names.” He rubbed the back of his head with a small laugh. “Jack and I didn’t have a problem with it before. Did you know they’ve been keeping an eye on Jack whenever you’re out of the house?”

Hotch blinked in surprise. “No, I had no clue. Jack didn’t mention it. Why?”

“They were worried about him.” With a grin, he added, “They’re also worried about us because we don’t have fangs, but I think I’ve mostly convinced them that we can fend for ourselves to get food. The racer kept asking if he needed to go get us anything.”
“Tell them they can stay as long as they need to. We could always do with more protection, though at some point you're probably going to begin to feel like you couldn't possibly have any more. You do keep that knife Blackwolf gave you near, right?”

Harry started in surprise. "Wha- How did you know?!"

"When he didn't argue about us ruling out early on to teach you guys how to use weapons. I knew he was already planning on doing it, and he would have needed help to teach the whole group, so I can only assume he taught you and the other three when he took you off alone for physical rehab."

Harry opened and closed his mouth a few times. "Yeah," he finally said. "Are you leaving?"

"For a little bit. You, on the other hand, might want to get back to sleep. You got six hours at the most.”

Harry frowned, glancing through the window at the sun that was just peeking over the fence in the backyard. “Yeah, I suppose… Are you going into work?” he asked in disbelief. “It’s Saturday!”

“Order meeting,” Hotch reminded him. Once they had finally explained everything to Snape, the professor had mentioned his reason for arriving so late in the day. “He should be stopping by here for once, which means I don’t have to drive all the way to and back from Quantico.” He frowned slightly. “Harry… Didn’t you say that wizards tend to attribute parselmouths as dark magic users?"

Harry matched his father’s frown. He thought Hotch had been okay with it. “Yeah.”

“Do I need to meet Snape outside?”

It took him a moment to catch up. “Oh! No, he knows I’m a parselmouth. The whole school does, since I had a conversation with a snake in front of a bunch of students while everyone was freaking about who the Heir of Slytherin might be.”

Hotch nodded and walked into the kitchen. “So long as it's okay with you.”

“What's wrong?” the kingsnake asked, worried.

“He was worried about me,” Harry said honestly, smothering a smile at the thought. He quickly took note of where all the snakes had ended up so he could avoid accidentally stepping on one if he moved around. “It’s nothing.”

“Humans protect their young more than most snakes,” the wounded one noted. “I like it.”

A knock came at the door, and Hotch reappeared to answer it. Harry ignored him and Snape, who was permitted in, choosing to watch the racer quietly slither around to the arm of the sofa behind the red-orange one, who turned his head to hiss at the racer.

“Cut it out,” the injured female scolded before Harry could.

“What happened?” Snape asked, the closest to bewildered that Harry had ever heard him.

“Bitten by a dog,” Harry replied. He glanced over as the professor moved closer to inspect the quintet. “Oh, watch out,” he warned as he inadvertently brushed the mudsnake.

Snape jerked his hand back immediately, in fear of being bitten, but the mudsnake only let out a quiet squeaking noise before hiding her head in her coils, blunt tail outstretched and jabbing uselessly at any threat. Snape and Hotch both stared at the minute effort.
Harry reached over and scooped her up into his hands. She relaxed slowly, then slipped under his sleeve to curl around his forearm and soak in the warmth of his skin. “Sorry, she’s shy.” A spurt of movement caught his eye and he glared at the newcomer and racer again. “Do I have to separate you two?” he demanded, and the racer finally moved to the back of the couch. The injured snake backed up his question with a glare of her own, and the young one she had brought with her slid away from the racer.

“Quite the range,” Snape noted.

“Do you know the species?” Harry asked curiously.

Snape pointed them out as he named them. “An eastern mudsnake, a northern black racer, an eastern kingsnake, a copperhead, and a timber rattlesnake,” he said, with the second to last being the red-orange one and the last being the injured female. “The last pair are both venomous.”

“That’s nice to know,” Hotch murmured.

“We need to be going if we don’t want to be late,” Snape said, and Hotch nodded.

“Harry,” Hotch said as he moved towards the door, “keep an eye on your brother, all right?”

Harry smiled and called back, “Try not to kill Fletcher!”

An hour later, Jack came pelting down the stairs and beamed in delight when he saw they had guests. “Hey, Jack,” Harry greeted. “Want to help me come up with names in English for everyone?”

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“Ooh, ooh, Harry!” Jack exclaimed, jerking on his brother’s sleeve. “What about this one?”

Harry leaned over Jack’s shoulder to look at the page he was gesturing at. “Tloalc,” Harry read. “The thunder, rain, and lightning god of the Aztecs.” He frowned thoughtfully at the eastern kingsnake, a black serpent with yellow-white rings. “Your kind is also sometimes called the thunder snake or thunderbolt.”

“I’ll take it,” The newly named Tloalc replied, coils half-hidden under the mudsnake. She had been named for the Aztec’s fire deity, Xiuhcoatl, whose name literally and symbolically meant “fire serpent.”

“What about me?” the racer demanded.

“Calm down,” the rattlesnake ordered, and he hushed immediately. Harry sent her a grin when the racer wasn’t looking, and he swore she smirked in reply.

“Are you staying with us?” Harry asked her.

“If you’ll have us. I don’t particularly feel like going all the way back home,” she responded.

Harry flipped back a few pages. “I just ran into one- Ah! Kiyo, a Japanese dragon. She was originally a waitress, but she became a dragon to get revenge on a priest who lost his affection for her. I imagine his day went pretty badly after that.”

She hummed in approval. Harry’s phone vibrated in his pocket and he finished it out to check the text. Draco wanted to know if Hotch was going into the office that day and bringing Harry, since
Elle didn’t know how much longer she was going to be in town. Harry responded with a denial, but asked Draco’s opinion on naming the snakes.

By the time Hotch finally arrived home, they had settled on a name for the black racer – Seokga, a Korean trickster god – and the copperhead – Zagreus, the Greek god of Orphic mysteries and one of Hades’s children. Most of the snakes had departed by that time to go hunting in the yard, but the timber rattlesnake remained behind due to her injury. Kiyo coiled neatly in his arm and on his stomach, watching the TV flicker as Jack surfed the channels. Harry had a book open, propped up by his knees, and was reading through it to write one of his remaining essays. At his feet, Jack occasionally hoisted himself up to see if Kiyo was doing all right before settling back into position.

The door opened, admitting only Hotch, whose gaze flickered over the two of them and then around the rest of the room. It wasn’t paranoia if there was a good chance something might have happened, especially after Moody’s situation. “Got the names worked out?” he asked, and Harry gave him all five names. “Aztec names. Brave. Some of those can get rather difficult to pronounce.”

“There were a few we were going to go with before,” Harry admitted, “but we had to discard them because we had no idea how to say them. I’m not even sure we’ve got the two that we do have correct.”

Hotch nodded at the rattlesnake. “Is she going to be okay?”

“She’ll be fine. Just needs some rest.” Harry chewed the inside of his lip for a moment. “Though… I’m worried about having five snakes in such a small area. As it gets colder, they might run out of food.”

“We could go buy something for them.”

“Maybe I’ve been around Reid too long that I’m even thinking this, but they’re going to crash the ecosystem here. If they wipe out entire populations of their prey, we’ll be buying the food for the rest of their lives and I don’t think they want to be so reliant on us.”

“What’s the alternative?” Hotch asked, taking a seat in one of the nearby chairs. Kiyo lazily watched him move across the room. “Could you take one of them with you to Hogwarts?”

“I might be able to,” Harry said slowly. “They probably aren’t used to the extreme cold up there, though. Maybe Xiuhcoatl would want to go. She’s used to damp environments, and it’s going to be wet.”

“If you want to take her, go ahead,” Hotch said. “We only need so many snakes watching the house.”

“I just hope Seokga and Zagreus don’t kill each other,” Harry grumbled. “Five year olds, both of them.”

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Garcia and Draco were on the road as early as both of them could get up and get out of the apartment. The first order of business, to Draco’s surprise, proved not to be heading to Quantico so Garcia could begin working.

“I thought you said we were going to your office,” he asked, puzzled, as she drove them into a more commercial area of town.

“We are, padawan, but not quite yet.” She parked the car and ushered him out. “A little birdy told me
that your birthday is coming up.”

He shrugged slightly, not any less confused. “So?”

“So it’s not fair that you’re learning programming but you’re sharing a computer with, like, twenty others.”

Draco came to a dead stop. “Wait, what?”

She flashed a grin at him, walking on. “Tech shopping is the best shopping. Allow me to introduce you to the world of Fry’s Electronics.”

“I don’t have any muggle money on me,” Draco said as he quickly hurried to catch up.

“It’s a birthday present, you dope! I’m paying.”

He grinned as he walked beside her, and she smiled in return. The store was bigger than Draco had expected, packed with gizmos he had never before heard of. A few television screens lined the wall on the far side, displaying visual and auditory quality through the movies they were playing. He happily recognized one of the movies playing, remembering a group of students gathered in an FBI conference room around a screen.

“You said you learned Java and C?” she asked as she led him to the computer section. He nodded. “Try Python and Ruby next. They’re used more often in higher-level programming.”

“I started looking into Python,” he agreed. “Something about the wards doesn’t like Ruby, though. It gets odd reactions, which sucks because Ruby looks a lot simpler than Java.”

“That’s weird. Are the batteries still charging themselves?”

“Yes! We’ve never had to work out using plug outlets without running electricity. And we still have absolutely no idea why, mostly because I’m the only one who cares and I haven’t had time to look into it.”

Garcia groaned. “Ugh, you’re letting me down. If I could run all my electronics off whatever you guys have got over there… It’d be a glorious day.”

“I’m sure the world will thank me for never giving you unlimited access. Did I mention our internet is always over fifty megabits per second?”

“My soul weeps for my apartment’s fifteen megabits per second.” She dramatically waved one arm as the rows of displayed laptops came into view. “Tada! The gates of heaven have opened for you and are displaying a glorious view. Where to first?”

“This place is amazing,” he whispered.

“Heaven. Didn’t I just say that? Let’s get closer – they won’t bite.”

He looked slyly out of the corner of his eye at her. “But they have a byte.”

She smirked back. “And that’s why you get a laptop.” She followed him as he walked towards the nearest row, and asked, “Are your parents going to notice you have one?”

He paused before continuing his search. “I can hide it. I, well…” His voice lowered. “I’m going to talk to Harry about it to make sure he’s all right with the idea, but I think I’m going to find a way to get out of the house this summer. It looks like the manor’s going to be turned into the Death Eater
hotspot for a while, at least until Riddle comes back to full strength. Then it might permanently become the headquarters.”

Garcia’s gaze travelled wistfully over the laptops as she hesitated. “Draco, if having a laptop could put you in danger… If one of them saw it…”

He shook his head quickly. “That’s why I want out. I don’t think I can fake that much bigotry for the whole summer, and being surrounded by them is just going to make me scream. Besides, whoever takes the Dark Mark has to be completely loyal to Voldemort or it won’t work. I can’t risk them trying to make me a Death Eater or they’ll find out I’m not with them.”

Garcia frowned. Draco’s fingers ran along the edges of one laptop, but found something to their dissatisfaction and moved on. “What are you going to do?”

He shrugged. “Right now, I’m thinking of claiming that I’m looking for Harry Potter’s location,” he admitted, and, despite the seriousness of the situation, Garcia found herself smiling in amusement. “It would make me seem more devoted and no one would expect me to be have any free time to come back to the manor. Then I could just say I can’t take the Mark because it would give me away if anyone saw it, in case the search requires some undercover work.”

“Would they believe it?”

“His followers aren’t usually as young as me,” Draco said carefully, “but he had a few who were exceedingly desperate.”

“What about your parents?”

Draco stopped, his restless hands settling near the new laptop he was standing in front of. His eyes were looking in the direction of the screen, but they weren’t focused. After a long pause, he finally said, “I think they care. But I think they care about having a good son, not about… me.” He turned to her, eyes pleading. “Does that make sense?”

She reached out and rubbed his shoulder. “Yeah,” she said, bitterly. “It does. I’m sorry, Draco.”

He let out his breath, shoulders slumping under her hand. “It’s not your fault,” he muttered. “I’m just glad I realized it now rather than later after they made me serve a dark lord, you know?” A humorless laugh escaped him. “I thought, hell, a bunch of us just got tortured and some of their friends’ families were just wiped out. They’ve got to care about that, right? And then the first letter I get from them tells me that they are preparing the house for all of my father’s old Death Eater pals. And that’s just great, if it’s to keep themselves safe, only they make sure to remind me how important blood purity is and that I should do everything in my power to ensure the Boy-Who-Lived doesn’t get a following with the Light.” His face twisted in a grimace. “It’s not like blood purity kept us safe in the cave. We did that.”

He let his hands slide off the table to his sides. “I don’t even know if I want to be part of the magical world anymore,” he admitted. “When we came back, I tried to keep in mind that it was a very different society from the muggle world, I really did. But it was just so… disheartening. Ten kids were killed and the newspapers just covered it up, the government pretending it never happened and we were just exaggerating. Hell, my father told me not to talk about it because it would seem like I was against Voldemort if I did, since the ritual brought him back to life. The whole situation was so backwards and I just…” He shook his head.

“How do you think you’re going to enter the muggle world, then?” Garcia asked in surprise.
“I’ve started thinking about,” he said, moving once more down the line of laptops. “But I don’t know how I would do that.”

After a long moment, Garcia followed him and asked, “Where were you thinking of staying over the summer, if not at home?”

“Maybe with Cassius and everyone there.”

“Well,” she said slowly, “what if you came and stayed the summer with me?”

Draco halted and stared at her in astonishment.

“I’ve got space, and I could start introducing you more to the muggle world to help you decide if that’s really what you want to do. Then you can make the decision when you’re of age if you want to get a job in the magical world or start looking into muggle education to enter the workforce there instead.”

“Really? I could stay with you?” he asked.

She smirked slightly. “Honey, you’ve been staying with me already and the only problem so far has been your disastrous love for salads. And last summer you basically spent the entire time in my office when you weren’t with Blackwolf or the BAU. I think it’ll work out fine.”

Chapter End Notes

This is the end of what could be called the foundation arcs. Everything before this chapter was basically setting up relationships and later events. The next chapter is going to hit the ground running with plot, and we're going to build from there to the overall plot that certain characters have been telling you about the whole time. Things not to worry about: fewer Hotchner family feels, less emotional stuff, strictly sticking with canon, no fun. We'll have all those and more. Things to worry about: trauma awaits us.

Posting early because I've got a headache from doing Implicit Association Tests and I need a break. They're interesting but man my head hurts from staring at the screen.
"The saddest word in the whole wide world is the word almost. He was almost in love. She was almost good to him. He almost stopped her. She almost waited. He almost lived. They almost made it."
- Nikita Gill, *Tiny Stories*

When Vincent Perotta broke out of prison, it didn’t make national news.

In fact, even the local news didn’t seem to care that much. Baltimore was too worried about “bigger issues,” and he quietly slipped in and out of the media in a single, off-hand report that prison security wasn’t quite what it used to be. Perotta wasn’t soothed by this. He knew the Organized Crimes Unit was already on his trail, particularly Agent Josh Cramer.

The team had found his last victim before the undercover cop died from blood loss, but Cramer was going to be just as dedicated to take him off the streets again. He even had a suspicion that the lack of media coverage had something to do with Cramer and his team, trying to lull him into a false sense of security. Perotta took one last circuit around the city, stopping to search a few of his bolt-holes to grab supplies, and then took a meandering and seemingly ridiculous route to Phoenix, the complete opposite of Baltimore. If the OCU called in the BAU, they would hopefully keep searching for him in Maryland.

Four months later, he was in the kitchen of his rented apartment and happened to look out the window. On the front porch of the building next to him, his neighbor was talking cheerfully to a rather solemn pair, decked in suits and ties, and occasionally gesturing towards his own apartment building. Perotta turned from the window and packed everything immediately. He was heading back to Baltimore. If he was going to be caught anywhere, it wouldn’t be in Arizona.

His old mob boss had been jailed after the events that had brought the BAU down. There went his go-to job position, but if his boss had still been on the street, Perotta would have killed him before he asked for his job back. The man had sold him out after Perotta had done so much for him, even if Perotta had been catering to his own need to kill just as much as his boss had needed his help. He had begun suspecting his boss wasn’t nearly as loyal as he appeared, and he had been entirely unsurprised when his last meeting had proven to be a trap. As he had told Agent Gideon, was it really paranoia when he was right?

Of course, Gideon had switched in the interrogation with someone else. Agent Hotchner. He had taken Perotta down, sure, but for the first time someone had understood why Perotta had had to do it. Had abducted. Had tortured. Had murdered. He looked Perotta straight in the eyes, fully aware of what horrors Perotta had committed, and reminded him he was human. Comprehending while condemning. Challenging him at the same time. A silent *I survived it too* as Hotchner walked away free while Perotta felt handcuffs tighten around his wrist.

Instead of waiting, Perotta tracked down his old mob and began asking questions. Who were the OCU interested in? Where were they usually seen? Which agents were in the field nowadays? He used old contacts, the kind who were scared of and indebted to him. The kind who knew they could
use him, so long as they pointed him in the right direction and gave him a cover under which he could do his gruesome work. They kept quiet, saying nothing of what they had told, and not asking Perotta why he wanted to know about the OCU. If they dared think about it at all, they probably assumed he was trying to get back at Russo even while he was in prison. No one with a brain thought they could take out an important cop, let alone a federal agent, without serious repercussions.

Finally, a solid lead. Cramer was having a meeting in a park at ten thirty at night, though no one was sure who the contact was or what the meeting was about. Someone had overheard him cancelling another meeting in its stead.

Perotta showed up at eight and surveyed the area. The sun sank entirely, and he slunk into the shadows to wait. Cramer finally showed up at ten, and in spite of Perotta’s desire to let this last as long as possible, he only had so much time before the contact appeared.

He slipped out from behind a tree, not bothering to stay quiet. Cramer turned slightly, calmly, but the moment his eyes met Perotta’s his hand shot to his gun. Perotta lunged forward, knocking his arm aside and stabbing his knife into Cramer’s abdomen. “I heard you were looking for me,” he murmured.

Cramer feebly grasped at him, strength leaking out of his muscles until he finally collapsed against the ground. All too soon, it was over, and Perotta sighed at the waste. He’d had more time with his last victim, who he hadn’t even cared about. Less than ten minutes had passed, and he set to work cleaning up. It had been raining recently, and the small pond in the center of the park had grown significantly. Perotta grabbed the corpse’s legs and dragged it in until the water completely covered it.

As he was walking back out, he heard a loud crack and jumped for his knife. Someone was standing right where he had murdered Cramer, and he would have sworn no one could have approached when he was so tense without him hearing it. The woman waited patiently for him to come out, smiling all the while.

“Cramer?” she called, and he kept all emotion off his face. Cramer and his contact had never met before. “Ah, well, who else would be hanging around here in the middle of the night?” she rhetorically asked. She would have been horrified to know the answer.

He came to stand by her, and she gave him a short appraising look. “I need to stress one more time how confidential this is,” she said quietly. “I know you can probably assume that this is of the utmost importance, since we’ve gone to such lengths to get you here, but it’s direr than you understand. Before I even tell you about the real issue, there are two critical details you must know. I was told you already signed the secrecy waivers?” He nodded. He had half-decided to kill her immediately, but this situation was just getting more bizarre. What had he interrupted?

“Okay. The first,” she said, pulling out a stick and waving it down the length of his body, “and, really, the most important part of all of this is that magic is real and you can tell absolutely no one.” Perotta stared down at his clothes, which had been soaked from the pond water. They were now completely dry. She gave him a few seconds.

“The second is that Agent Hotchner’s son is a wizard.” Perotta’s head snapped up to stare at the woman, who stared solemnly back at him. “He’s also in a lot of danger.”

The next hour was filled with explanations, and he pushed it out further by asking more and more questions. He demanded proof, and criticized anything that made no sense. She tried to help him
assimilate all the information, but it was too much to take in at once. Finally, they settled into an uneasy silence close to midnight. He was scowling, arms crossed over his chest, and she was watching him warily. For once, someone wasn’t giving him that look because they were worried he was going to snap and kill everything.

“Fine,” he said. “What does this have to do with me?”

“Because of Voldemort,” who she had gone into great lengths about, “Hotch’s son is in a lot of danger. Voldemort won’t stop until Harry’s dead, and if Harry dies, the Light loses a lot of strength. He was a symbol of Voldemort’s downfall and many still credit him with his direct destruction. That aside, he’s fourteen and in school. He doesn’t deserve this.”

Perotta stared at her.

“We want you to be the Secret Keeper. Right now, no one but a few know that Harry is Hotch’s son. They think he was born to the Potter family. As long as the world is unaware of the truth, he is protected. He can stay at Quantico, and no one thinks twice of telling the BAU information about the war. We can get into places and talk to people we otherwise couldn’t. Hotch and Harry can’t be connected to each other, or they’ll both be in extreme danger.” She watched his reaction, but he was used to hiding his emotions. “You can turn this down,” she continued. “But we’ll have to find someone else.”

“Why me?”

“It’s dangerous. If anyone finds out you’re the Keeper, you could be killed so they can find out the truth. We couldn’t make the Keeper anyone Hotch or Harry saw often, which ruled out the team, family, and friends. Because of the two cases you worked with the BAU, you were a good candidate. You won’t ever see any of us again if you take the role. We will never contact you. Someone trying to figure out who the Keeper is should overlook you entirely as being too distanced from us.”

Hotch’s son.

How did he treat the boy? Was he like their fathers, angry and violent? Or was he the opposite in retaliation to his own upbringing, gentle and giving? (Hah, like he could apply that image to the unit chief.)

Well, there was only way to find out. He sincerely hoped he had learned his father’s best techniques.

Don’t disappoint me, Agent, he thought. I want revenge on someone.

“Who else knows?” he casually asked. If he could kill off any others, he could lessen the chance of them realizing there was something wrong with the Secret Keeper when they tried to check up on Cramer.

“A group of Harry’s friends, the BAU team, and some family.” She hesitated, then said, “He and his friends were almost killed in a ritual to bring Voldemort back. It’s become known as the Silent Massacre, since we didn’t even know who had died until over a month later, and the government keeps trying to hush it up. It was rather brutal – the children who died were literally torn apart.”

He frowned, showing a disturbed expression as was the proper response. It sounded like something he would have done to adults, to criminals and street vermin. Even he didn’t go after children who were Harry’s age. “Who did it?”

“A group of werewolves under Fenrir Greyback. He was known for turning young children to get
back at their parents, and then he’d raise them in his private elitist group.” She grimaced. “I was there when they were searching for the kids. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“What did you do? Were the werewolves caught?”

Her expression hardened. “The trail went cold. If we had chased them, we probably could have caught them, but… Hotch and Gideon had to make a decision, to chase down the werewolves or stay with the kids. They valued the children more than revenge.”

“I’ll be the Secret Keeper,” he said, and watched as she pulled out her wand.

He left Baltimore less than a few hours later after the witch again reassured him that they would never try to contact him. Cramer’s body hadn’t even been found yet. Under an alias, he bought a one-way plane ticket to England, and spent the next month crisscrossing London for a sign of the magical world. He finally came across a Diagon Alley, and, claiming to be a muggle parent, slipped in with some benevolent assistance from sympathetic diners in the Leaky Cauldron. They even showed him how to get a warded ring that would allow him to see magic, instead of being manipulated by wards against muggles. Such nice patrons. They told him so much.

He set out for Hogwarts immediately, leaving from King’s Cross and following the magical train tracks north. Without the charm, he would have easily walked right past it. The walk was far, taking him longer than he would have liked, but he was in good shape and made it into Scotland by the end of the week. He reached Hogwarts shortly after, settling in a room at one of Hogsmeade’s inns. No one noticed the new arrival, not with all the flurry over the Triwizard tournament. If anything, he was overlooked more because his late appearance meant he knew less about what was going on. There was speculation and gambling in the bars of the inns at night, and the flowing alcohol made it a simple matter for him to gather information.

Two weeks later, the town filled with students for a Hogsmeade weekend. With the easy takings that the wizarding world was filled with – he had killed three since arriving and no one had even noticed – he expected to be able to track down a fourteen-year-old without a problem.

It took him half the day.

When he finally located Harry and his friends, they were seated in a grove of trees away from the rest of town, facing a decrepit house a quarter of a mile away past a fence. As he watched discretely from behind a rise in the ground, he saw a fourth figure approach the trio and sit next to them. Their voices barely carried, pitched low so as to avoid anyone overhearing them. The damage from the kidnapping must have been more severe than he originally thought, and he realized this was the first time he had ever seen anyone showing after effects of torture. None of his victims had ever survived the experience. He slunk away before he was noticed, going back to the buildings of Hogsmeade to wait for them to pass through its streets on their way back to Hogwarts.

It was another hour before one of the boys, a blond, appeared. He was coming from an odd direction, misdirecting anyone as to where he had truly been, and sauntered in as if he owned the place. A while later, the other three came into view, strolling casually into the village. Perotta followed at a distance, watching Harry’s behavior.

Uncomfortable in a crowd. Sticking close to the other two. Posture too tense. Jumping at loud noises. Constantly alert. A typical victim of PTSD. Beside him, his friends behaved similarly, if less noticeably. Perotta increased his pace until he drew level with the trio for the briefest of moments, and he cast a quick gaze over Harry at the close distance. With Agent Hotchner’s features burned into his mind, he could easily detect signs of his family line in his son. There was none of the anger, the aggression, or the sheer formidability – but then, he and Hotch had met under rather specific
circumstances. Had Harry ever seen his father like that? How often?

He passed them by and returned to his room. He had come to do what he had intended to do at Hogsmeade, and now it was time to do some more research elsewhere.

Hopefully Voldemort needed psychopathic murderers just as much as other organized crime leaders did.

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The day of the third task, Harry found himself in the Room of Requirement being embraced by every member of the QDA. At one point, he was packed in too tightly to even move, and he couldn’t be sure if the hands that touched awkward body parts were just as hemmed in or if they had ended up there on purpose. Thankfully, the mood of the room was rather optimistic.

“I think I’m supposed to be heading to the Great Hall,” Harry said, trying in vain to leave the cluster. “One of the prefects told me this morning…”

Several hands held him in place. More than a few had an odd glint in their eyes, like they knew something.

“We know,” Blaise said, smirking. He turned to Hermione. “Got him?” When she nodded, Blaise gestured for everyone else to step back. “We’ll leave you to it, then, and see you at the tournament.”

“In which Harry will not die,” Ginny added.

“And will receive eternal glory and a crap-ton of gold,” one of the twins threw in.

“Yay,” Harry muttered without enthusiasm, and the group filed out with good humor. “Seriously,” he asked to the two remaining. “What’s going on?”

“There’s a long-standing tradition with the Triwizard Tournament, you see,” Ron said, throwing an arm around Harry’s shoulders. He ignored Harry’s grumble about how many traditions there already were. “It involves people coming to see the last competition.” More grumbling. “Specifically, this time they invite family.”

“So we smuggled the Hotchner family into Hogwarts?” Harry asked doubtfully. He was taken off guard by the two grinning faces.

“No,” Hermione replied simply. “We thought we’d let Snape take care of that, now that he knows about it.”

He stared at them, mouth opening into a gape.

The door opened a moment later, and he whipped around to see Hotch walking in. Snape shut the door behind them. Harry completely ignored him, darting instead to his father, who quickly wrapped him in a hug.

When Hotch finally pulled back, his gaze flickered over Harry discretely to check for any sign of harm. “Well,” he said, “I’d be interested to see the school at a time when I’ve actually been allowed in, but I think I’ll have to settle for a time when I’m at least supposed to be here.”

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Hours later, Harry found himself standing in front of the maze with the other three champions.
Fawcett looked like he’d rather be…well, Harry tried not to stereotype by House anymore, but the Ravenclaw really did look like he’d be much more at home reading about how to defeat the creatures inside than actually defeating them. Delacour had an almost scarily determined look on her face, and Harry was glad he wasn’t entering at the same time as her. Krum, on the other hand, could have been made of stone for all the emotion he showed.

Bagman was going on about something over the sonorous charm, and Harry cast his gaze discretely back at the stands. This time, he could make out both Ron and Hermione, sitting with the rest of the Gryffindors and a few innocuous members of the QDA. The Slytherin QDA were in their own section, but were watching Harry no less intently. Harry’s eyes drifted to Draco, who had an unexpectedly smug look on his face, and raised an eyebrow in triumph at Harry when he saw him looking.

Harry frowned in confusion, but Draco’s expression remained the same and he shrugged slightly. Next to him, Theodore muttered something, and Draco and Blaise snickered in amusement. The only thing that kept Harry from panicking immediately and intensely was the knowledge that none of them would have dared played a potentially harmful prank on him right before he was about to enter the third task.

Hotch, of course, was nowhere to be seen and was hidden under a series of Disillusionment charms by both Snape and Dumbledore. Somehow, Snape and Hotch had managed to convince everyone that it was absolutely necessary to have Hotch there as a precaution, and the Fidelius Charm meant that it was unlikely anyone would realize how odd their insistence was. Instead of trying to make out his father, Harry searched Snape out in the crowd, eventually finding him at the bottom talking to Professor McGonagall. And next to him, a figure who Harry couldn’t quite focus on. He sent a small smile in that direction before turning his attention back to the maze.

The whistle blew and he and Fawcett shot in at the same time. “Good luck,” they muttered to each other as they reached a fork in the maze and took alternate routes.

Harry loped along, wanting to conserve his energy but wanting the whole endeavor over with at the same time. It wasn’t long before he heard the whistles for Delacour and Krum, but he refused to increase his pace. If he was out of breath and tired when he met an obstacle, he was much more likely to get injured from it. All the same, he was glad he had continued running with everyone else after returning to Hogwarts, and he was confident that Blackwolf would have been proud of how easy it was to maintain a steady yet brisk pace.

The lack of obstacles was beginning to get strange, and Harry slowed to a halt. The large hedges muffled all noise, but he closed his eyes despite his instincts and listened. (Blackwolf was going to be smug when he heard about this.) After a minute, he realized he could actually hear the progress of a nearby champion by muffled spells and a few choice words. It did nothing to ease his concern, since he still hadn’t come across anything as quickly as everyone else apparently had. As for smells… Well, he had always been crap at that, and he quickly moved on to an assessment of himself. He didn’t feel odd, so it was unlikely anything was draining him. And there was no unexplained weight, like he had picked up something-

Wait. His eyes widened, and he gripped his wand tighter as he cast a lumos and shined it into his pocket. The fear immediately evaporated and he groaned aloud at Draco. Somehow, probably when everyone had been gathered in the Room of Requirement, the blond hand managed to slip not only his phone but also a basilisk fang into his pocket. Weren’t they breaking enough rules to get him through this thing?

Harry shoved his frustration aside for the moment. It still didn’t explain why nothing was trying to
kill him. Which was, y’know, nice, but also rather concerning. If Harry had to describe it, the path he
took was almost like he was following right behind someone else, but that was impossible since he
had been moving so quickly and two of the other champions had entered after him.

“Hominem revelio,” he cast, and lights hovered in the air around him. Three marked the other
champions, but the fourth, just around the corner in front of him…

Well, Harry could say he had definitely learned from the first lesson with Blackwolf when the
Apache had told them what to do when encountering someone unknown.

“Aero absento!”

Not like he was going to take the nicest route when he was in a freaky maze with high-strung nerves.
Anyone who would really want to help him would likely have taken into consideration that he
wasn’t someone to startle, not after last summer.

He darted around the corner, holding his breath as he did so. He was still in the range of the spell,
which had sucked away all the air, and he kept moving until he was out of it again. As soon as he
could draw a deep breath again, he turned back, now able to see whoever he was casting on.

“Hominem revelio,” he said firmly, and the Disillusionment Charm fell away from Lucius Malfoy,
who was crouched on the ground and turning a funny shade of blue as he struggled to bring in
oxygen. Harry frowned, then turned slightly as he heard Fleur scream nearby.

Mind made up, he turned back to Malfoy. “Stupefy! Petrificus Totalus!” He cancelled the air
displacement charm, allowing Malfoy critical oxygen again. “Locomotor Mortis,” he added, then
accio-ed Malfoy’s wand because why not. He sent up red sparks, not envying whoever was going to
find a most unexpected guest in the maze with absolutely no explanation.

He turned a corner and shoved Malfoy’s wand in his pocket, heading in the direction of Fleur’s
scream only to run straight into a clawed and fanged man. Harry stumbled back, trying to draw his
wand, but the werewolf lunged towards him and yanked him closer before he could cast anything.
His wand hit the ground.

Both hands went up automatically to protect his head and neck, but a familiar, dark chain rose up of
its own accord and wrapped around both wrists, tying them together. The werewolf held on to the
other end, ignoring the sparks that emanated from the chains. Harry’s chains burned his skin and tore
into his wrists, marking the already-present scars. The werewolf’s hand shot forward, grabbing Harry
by the neck and lifting him off the ground just far enough that he couldn’t get into a good stance to
push him off. With a smirk, the werewolf moved to the side and tilted his head at the view he wanted
Harry to have.

Harry’s gaze slid away from the werewolf and saw a familiar pair of bodies, one small and one much
larger, sprawled on the ground, necks torn out.

In the end, that was what gave it away. His father would have taken a lot more damage than that
trying to protect Jack.

“Boggart,” Harry whispered, but somehow the knowledge did nothing to help him. Laughter made
the creatures go away, but there wasn’t anything funny about this. Not the bodies, nor his inability to
move his wrists.

He dropped his hands away from the grip on his neck, yanking Malfoy’s wand out of his pocket and
slamming a Reductor Curse into the boggart. The werewolf burst apart with a scream, and the chains
fell away as the bodies disappeared. Harry heaved in his breath for a moment, then slowly crouched
to pick his own wand up. He shoved Malfoy’s back into his pocket, glad to have it out of his hand, and continued on.

There was no sign of Fleur, but he did run across an odd mist that completely messed up his equilibrium. There must have been an easier way through it, but the important thing was that Harry got out of it with his senses intact. The unfortunate thing about taking Malfoy out was that he now found himself running into obstacles at every turn, and he quickly put his arsenal of spells to use. The boggart had done nothing to him if not making him angry enough to take out absolutely everything in his path, and his pumping adrenaline kept him running when he might have wisely slowed down before.

Krum came around a corner at the same time Harry did from the other side and both shot spells at each other. When Harry recognized him, he quickly undid his Stunning Spell and reversed the Jelly-Legs Jinx on his own legs. “Sorry,” he muttered.

Krum waved it off. “Good one,” he commented.

He started to take off again, but Harry grabbed the Bulgarian before he could go any further. Krum stopped, eyeing him suspiciously. “Hang on,” Harry said a bit unnecessarily. “Early on, I ran into someone who shouldn’t have been in the maze. Lucius Malfoy, an active Death Eater.” Krum’s eyes went wide. “I don’t know why he was here and I knocked him out and sent up sparks for someone to collect him, but I also don’t know if there are any more in the maze. Keep an eye out, all right?”

Krum nodded quickly, then paused. “When was this?”

“First hour, maybe. Why?”

There was a long silence. “I felt like I was under the Imperius at the beginning,” he finally admitted. “I think it only properly vore off a little while ago, and… I think I may have hurt someone.” Harry’s mind flashed back to the scream.

There was a choice word from their left and both cast a curse without looking.

“Just me!” Fawcett groaned as he picked himself up from the ground. They lowered their wands and he approached. “What’s going on?” he asked.

“Harry saw a Death Eater in the maze and I think I vas under the Imperius,” Krum bluntly said.

Fawcett scowled. “Oh come on! The Death Eater activity’s been hyped up all year, and it was probably just something in the maze that made you think you saw one. And the same with you!” he added to Krum. “I felt all sorts of weird from these challenges.”

Harry showed him Malfoy’s wand and both wizards stared at him. Fawcett cast a quick spell to determine ownership.

“You disarmed Lucius Malfoy,” he said. “Damn.”

“Shane,” Krum asked. At this point, they were in this pit of misery deep enough to go by first names. “Did I hurt you before?” Shane, confused, shook his head. “Or you?” he asked Harry. Another shake. “I am afraid I may have put Fleur under the Cruciatus,” he quietly said.

“I don’t really know about the aftereffects of the Imperius,” Harry admitted. “Could you still be partially under it?” Viktor shrugged and Shane obviously was uncertain. “Okay…”

“It may be safer for both of you if I remove myself from the task,” Viktor said quietly, and Harry
looked at him in a new light.

“No, I don’t think that’s necessary quite yet,” Shane said after a moment. “But I do think we should alert someone that this task has clearly been manipulated by someone other than the tournament officials. Let’s send up sparks and get someone in here, and then we can also ask them if Fleur’s okay. If… If you did Crucio her, she might still be here, unable to get help, depending on how… bad… it was…” His last sentence became considerably more awkward as he went along, and Viktor looked more and more distressed at the notion.

The Bulgarian cast the sparks, and the trio waited for a long minute before McGonagall appeared. She frowned in confusion and disapproval at seeing all of them. “What’s going on?” she demanded.

Shane and Viktor both turned to Harry, who recounted everything they had just said. As he went on, McGonagall’s expression became tighter and tighter until she stiffly nodded at the end. “No sparks were sent up for Miss Delacour,” she said. “I will alert the others and we will begin searching for her immediately. Hopefully, she is – relatively – safe within the maze and is simply unaware of what has happened. We collected Malfoy, and Moody, who found him, cast some charms on him to see what spells were acting on his magical core. He discovered a series placed on him by Mr. Potter, but he also found the Imperius Curse being placed on someone else. Mr. Krum, it may make you feel better to know Moody severed the connection immediately, which means you are no longer under any effects of it.”

Viktor breathed out a sigh of relief.

“If it were up to me, this task would be cancelled immediately. There was talk of it after we discovered Malfoy, but the judges are unsure what the effect would be on you due to the magical contract. The risk is greater to stop the task than it is to allow you to finish it. Therefore, I urge you to be careful above all else, but to finish as quickly as possible. I will alert everyone else about what you have just told me,” she said, eyes flickering over all of them. Harry recognized the protective gesture, having seen Hotch do it not hours before to look for any signs of injury. McGonagall frowned slightly whenever she saw traces of blood, expression darkening particularly when she saw the bruises growing on his own neck.

“What are the chances there are more Death Eaters in here?” Shane demanded, and McGonagall’s already grave countenance became more pronounced.

“That I cannot tell you,” she said. “None should have been able to get in initially. I can’t imagine how he managed it, although I would assume he used his close contacts to several of the judges to learn how the wards had been set up.”

“So… less likely there’s another one in here,” Harry said slowly, but it did nothing to calm his nerves.

“Mr. Potter, how exactly did you encounter him?” she asked.

“I had been in the maze for… half an hour, maybe forty-five minutes but I hadn’t hit a single obstacle. It seemed weird so I was doing a scan to see if there was anything alive near me. Malfoy came up, but he didn’t realize I had spotted him so I knocked him out and sent up the sparks.” He paused. “But, Professor, why would he be protecting me? He’s hated me all my life; if anything, he should’ve been making sure all the creatures in here ganged up against me.”

“I haven’t the slightest idea,” McGonagall admitted softly, and Harry’s stomach dropped. “But you should be very careful the further in you go.” She looked over the group. “Are there any more questions?” They all shook their heads, and she regretfully nodded. “You need to finish your task.
To all of you, good luck. Be safe. And when in doubt, ask yourself if the Cup is really worth your life.”

She disappeared, leaving the three standing in the maze once more.

“I think I’ll answer that question with a hell no,” Shane deadpanned.

“I’d be right behind you in dropping out, but if we all do it, I think we’d risk breaking the magical contract,” Harry pointed out. “We wouldn’t actually be competing.”

Shane said some rather impolite things about the judges and whoever originally came up with the idea of the tournament, following it up with derogatory remarks as to his own intelligence which had allowed him to enter his name in the first place, continuing on to the horrific nature of a society that thought this was fun, and concluding with scathing comments about the maze and its mother. Throughout the rant, Viktor and Harry just stared at him.

When the Ravenclaw finally let out all his steam and crossed his arms to sulk quietly, Viktor slowly said, “I do not particularly care about vinning. I vould rather see my parents again.”

Harry rather agreed but, considering the other competitors believed both his parents to be dead, thought the comment would come across as rather morbid if he said so. “I never wanted to be in this thing anyway,” Harry said instead. “In fact, I’d rather not win at all. You two can split the winnings, but what if the three of us stick together from here out? We don’t have to help each other with the obstacles, so we’re sort of competing, but we can at least keep eyes on each other.”

The other two exchanged looks and slowly nodded. Shane grinned. “Hey, I don’t know if that would quite work for competing,” he said, “but we could see who could perform the best defensive spell. That should satisfy the magical contract.”

That was how the three found themselves setting out as a pack, wands out and ready. Viktor led the group, and Shane stuck to Harry’s side while the youngest watched their backs. Shane was ready to support either one of them if it came to a conflict. Less than five minutes later, a large Blast-Ended Skrewt reared up in the middle of their path. No one was quite sure who hit it first, Shane or Viktor, but they agreed Krum’s Incendio and Stupefy had probably done the trick.

“That went well,” Shane cheerfully said as they continued on.

“I rather like this form of competition,” Harry agreed. “Not the whole ‘Go fight a dragon on your own’ business. Honestly. And what’s the point of banning us from outside help when everyone does it anyway? Has there been a single task yet when no one’s gotten help?”

The pause he was given from both was enough of an answer.

“Exactly.”

An hour passed, filled with elaborate spells as each competitor sought to outdo the others. It quickly turned playful, and Harry could almost say he was enjoying it. If not for Malfoy’s appearance and his subsequent encounter with the boggart, it might have been downright fun. Instead, he kept a constant eye behind them, unwilling to allow himself to be easily grabbed from the back.

“Hang up,” he called, and the other two stopped while he walked back and fired a blasting curse at what looked like an innocuous part of the hedge. A clump of leaves fell to the ground, swore, then picked themselves up and scrambled away. He shrugged when the other two looked at him.

“Heinous Devils. Sneak up behind people and…basically papercut them to death. Lupin covered them third year.” After this was over, he was definitely thanking that man. Last year’s courses were
definitely covering his butt from incineration this year.

The next obstacle made the three stop dead. Head of a woman, body of a lion, wings of an eagle…

“Sphinx,” Shane said incredulously. He could have been killed by the creature and been delighted. “A real-“ He dropped into a quick but deep bow. “A sincere pleasure to meet you, Lioness!” The sphinx smiled at him, slightly startled by the unexpectedly gracious display. He whispered to the others, “They’re one of the brightest – oh, if not the brightest – creatures alive! Smarter than us! Can you imagine- Oh! My manners, you can hear me, can’t you?”

The sphinx chuckled at him, a low noise deep from her chest. “Indeed, but I will forgive you in the midst of your excitement. You are very near your goal and the quickest way is past me. Answer on your first guess – I will let you pass. Answer wrongly – I attack. Remain silent – I will let you walk away from me unscathed.”

Shane was actually vibrating.

“Oh Merlin, this is amazing.” After a moment, he remembered his situation and cleared his throat. “Ah, we find ourselves in a bit of a dilemma. We believe the task may have been tampered with by outside forces.”

The sphinx frowned. “That does not bode well for the champions within, then. Nonetheless, I will not sway from my rules.”

Shane quickly waved his hands as if to brush the idea from the air. “No, no, of course not! But the three of us have decided to stick together for the remainder of the task. If I answer a riddle for each of us, will you let all of us pass?”

Viktor opened his mouth to argue that he could solve his own riddle, but Harry kicked him and shook his head. Shane was having way too much fun to interrupt him.

“I will allow it,” the sphinx conceded with a dip of her head, ”but you will take the punishment should your answer be unsatisfactory.”

“Oh,” Shane said with a grin. “First riddle?”

In rapid succession, he knocked out all three and Viktor and Harry began to walk on. Before they could turn the next corner, they realized Shane wasn’t following them. The Ravenclaw was still back with the sphinx, who had sat up eagerly and whose tail darted excitedly behind her. Shane looked just as delighted, hands gesticulating wildly.

“Hey, uh, Shane?” Harry called. Shane turned to him, eyes bright and grin wide. Harry pointed in the direction he and Viktor were about to go. “We sort of need to go.”

Shane’s face fell slightly and the sphinx let out a sigh. “You should continue on your journey,” she said.

“Wait, what if I just stay here?” Shane asked. “You have all the obstacles handled between the two of you, and I’m not in any danger here.”

“Would that mess with your contract?” Viktor frowned slightly in worry.

“Shouldn’t! I’m paying Harry back for helping me with the first task. Without him, I wouldn’t have known about the dragons.” He waved them off. “Good luck!”
The pair continued on, and as soon as they were out of sight they exchanged grins. “I don’t feel bad at all about leaving him,” Harry admitted.

“They looked very happy,” Viktor agreed. They took a corner, and Viktor abruptly skidded to a halt. “Vhat…”

“Acromantula,” Harry whispered, staring at the large spider standing in their path. Behind it, the Triwizard Cup gleamed a brilliant blue. “I am so done with this stupid tournament.”

The arachnoid darted forward, and both cast a series of furious hexes and jinxes. It barely slowed, and Viktor turned his wand on Harry when the creature was less than ten feet away. Harry’s eyes widened and he had no time to react as a sudden burst of energy knocked him off backwards. He hit the ground roughly and rolled, coming up to his hands and knees halfway across the clearing and far away from the Acromantula. Viktor was dangling from its grip, and his legs kicked weakly at it.

“No!” he shouted as he saw Harry pulling up his wand. “Get the cup!”

Harry stared at him. “What?”

“The cup! It vill get us all out! Take it, now!”

Harry shouted a frustrated noise but made the short sprint.

His hand closed around the handle, and then he was whisked away.

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He landed heavily on the ground then threw one arm out instinctively to push anyone around him back, and was surprised to actually hit someone. There was a grunt, and Harry’s arm was grabbed and someone was snatching his wand away from him. Harry twisted his caught hand to grab the forearm that was holding him, then pulled down sharply and threw his other hand up at the same time to slam a punch into his aggressor’s throat.

The man let go of him, choking hoarsely, and Harry started to scramble to his feet. Something large and solid slammed into him from behind just as he got his balance and was about to try to get his wand back, and he and the force hit the ground roughly. He started to thrash, but rough claws scraped against the bruises on his neck and he stilled. With his face towards the ground, he couldn’t see anything above him, but he immediately recognized Peter Pettigrew’s voice as he began talking.

“See?” he whined. "I told you I shouldn't be the one to grab him!"

Harry’s hands quietly reached into his robes, one pushing folds of fabric aside while the other stretched for the basilisk fang. His weight was holding it in place, and his fingers scrabbled uselessly against it. Liquid made his grip slick, but he wasn’t quite sure where it was coming from. He tried rubbing it off on the fabric and his other hand, but the fang was just as slippery when he tried to grab onto it again.

Whoever was holding Harry down growled. “Go do your duty,” he snarled, and Pettigrew scampered off.

Harry bucked, throwing one elbow back into ribs, and slammed his head up into a nose. He twisted one leg to lock it around his opponent’s, holding it in place, then threw another elbow and rolled into the motion. His inertia forced him and his opponent to turn, ending with the other man’s back on the ground, and Harry used the brief surprise to yank himself free. He twisted around until he could throw a punch into the man’s face, then kept going even as blood squirted under his fist and his
knuckles screamed at him.

Scars layered the man’s face, and his skin was wild and untamed. Bundled muscles flexed underneath Harry as he moved, and enlarged nostrils sniffed at the air as the man tried to fight back. His mouth opened and Harry caught sight of fangs even as the claws scraped against his sides. After days under the control of others, Harry recognized a werewolf under the effects of the enhancement potion from a mile away.

He launched a particularly aggressive punch into an eye, aiming to at least damage vision if not blind the eye completely. As he drew back, the werewolf gave a howl and snatched his fist out of the air, squeezing hard. Bones popped in Harry’s hand, and he bit back a scream, pushing the pain back long enough to throw everything he had into a punch to the werewolf’s diaphragm. His fist was released immediately, and the werewolf instinctively curled slightly to protect the important muscles. Harry used the brief moment to hit the exposed throat, then pushed himself off and started running.

He didn’t make it more than a few feet before he felt ropes around his ankles, and he hit the ground for the third time. He gave a frustrated shout.

“Watch him, Greyback,” a high voice hissed.

The werewolf staggered to its feet and moved towards Harry. He pushed himself back as best as he could, but before he could go any further, Greyback threw a heavy boot into his side, then dropped one knee onto Harry’s stomach. Harry wheezed, and Greyback grabbed his throat with one clawed hand.

There was a sudden light behind him, a bubbling noise, and the sound of something dropping into the bubbling concoction. Harry could hear Pettigrew muttering as he moved around. “Bone of the father, unknowingly given, you will renew your son.” Dirt shuffled around, and something heavy dropped into the concoction with a clink. “Flesh of the servant…willingly sacrificed…you will revive your master.” There was a short scream. Something else fell into the potion.

Then Pettigrew was stumbling into Harry’s sight and crouching beside him. Greyback grabbed his nearest arm and held it out at an awkward angle to Pettigrew, who drew an already bloodied knife and held it to Harry’s arm.

“Wait!” Harry shouted. He knew where this was going to end. “Didn’t you care for my father? Didn’t he ever matter to you? Peter, please! This isn’t you! What about James?”

“I betrayed them fourteen years ago,” Pettigrew whispered. “It’s too late now.”

“That doesn’t mean you can’t still do something about it!”

Pettigrew pinched his lips together and harshly shook his head. “No, no. You have no claim to him! You can’t give me forgiveness for what I’ve done!”

Harry stared at him, faking bewilderment. “What?”

“He’s not your father,” Pettigrew panted out. “You’re not a Potter.”

“Well, well,” Greyback murmured above him. “Look at that.” Pettigrew stared at him and Harry twisted his head to try to see Greyback’s expression. “I can hear your pulse. No change. You already knew?” Harry stilled. “Ooh hoo, that makes this all the more interesting.” He paused. “Do you know who it is?” he asked curiously. “Or did the Order just tell you that no one really wanted you and left it there?”
Harry squirmed against the tight grip. Next to him, Pettigrew was gaping at the sudden turn.

“Hah! You do know who it is!”

“Shut up!” Harry screamed, arching off the ground against his oppressor. His arm twisted further, and he was sure it was going to pop out of his shoulder or break if he pushed it any farther.

Greyback forced him back down, and Pettigrew’s knife dug into his arm. Pettigrew shakily got to his feet and stumbled away, vanishing from Harry’s sight again. Greyback was still chuckling, releasing Harry’s arm in favor of stroking Harry’s hair mockingly. “What’s his name?” he purred.

“Go fuck yourself,” Harry hissed, throwing his free arm up and twisting it behind him. His wrist laid across the back of Greyback’s neck and his fingers caught the underside of his chin. With a twist, Greyback was forced to either move with the motion and release Harry as he rolled off him, or suffer a broken neck. Harry scrambled back immediately, but Greyback pounced on him, pinning his legs and crawling the rest of the way up him. Greyback’s forearm pressed into his neck, and the other claw moved to his abdomen, pressing threateningly against the skin.

“Move again and I’ll start sending your organs, one by one, to your father,” Greyback growled. “I’ll find out who he is. There are only so many people it could be, and I’ll bet his smell is on you.” Harry stiffened in horror. He had seen Hotch that day. He knew his smell was on him. “Then I’ll find him, and I’ll make sure you’re still alive when I rip him to shreds. Don’t. Move.”

“Blood of the enemy, forcibly taken, you will resurrect your foe,” Pettigrew was saying.

There was a sharp pain in the Harry’s head, and he could only imagine how horrible it would have been if the entire Horcrux had still been there. As it was, he gritted his teeth together, agonizingly aware of what was happening just feet away.

And then Voldemort was fully risen this time, with no half-performed ritual to limit him.

There was some murmuring between Voldemort and Pettigrew, followed by a soft padding of bare feet and Harry could see Voldemort looming above him. Greyback looked up in appreciation, but Voldemort ignored him as he crouched down beside Harry.

“I thought Lily Potter was the one responsible,” he murmured, one long, pale finger, tracing his scar. “I would say your mother, but…we both know that’s not true. The one who protected you…must have been your real parents, through the strongest blood wards they could manage when separated from you. How special you must be to them. And you know who to thank for that protection now, the identities of your real parents?” There was a cruel smile in his voice as he said, “Good for you. You’ll tell me their names soon enough.”

Riddle. Not Voldemort, Harry firmly told himself. Voldemort was a self-made title the man had made to instill fear and worship. But this body in front of him wasn’t a creature or a god, it was a human, no matter horrible his actions in the past had been and no matter what he looked like now.

He was human, just like Harry, and that was something he had to remember if nothing else.

Because a god was an idea, something that could never be destroyed, but humans were just as fallible as any other mortal being.

Riddle rose and drew Pettigrew to him. There was a harsh dialogue, and Pettigrew was hissing in pain and something was clearly happening that Harry wasn’t aware of.

Above him, Greyback narrated, “He’s summoning the others. One big family get-together.”
Harry wasn’t sure if he was grateful for the knowledge or not.

Moments later, he could hear faint whooshing as more people landed in the clearing. There were several expressive, delighted cries as they saw Riddle’s new form. Harry counted the number of landings, coming to forty-seven, then focused on Greyback above him. The werewolf was still paying close attention to him, and he wasn’t sure he could throw him off. Then there was the problem of his threat. If Harry failed this one last time to get free, Greyback would make good on his promise and try to get the scent off him. There weren’t many smells on him from adults who could potentially be his father. However, if he didn’t try, Riddle was going to attempt to pry it out of him anyway.

The werewolf was responsible for so much already, Harry realized. Remus Lupin, Elle…and, through his direction of his forces, everyone who had died in the Silent Massacre. Not to mention the leftover effects the rest suffered, or everyone Harry didn’t know about who Greyback had hurt. Fury rose up in him. And he was planning on killing Harry’s father too.

He had one chance at this.

His fingers curled, and he threw up his hand directly into the eye he hadn’t already damaged. His nails dug through the cornea, through the iris, and liquid dribbled out down his fingertips. Greyback screamed, and Harry grimaced but pushed harder. The werewolf’s hands released him, instead clawing at his forearm to try to force him to let go. Greyback roared in pain, finally succeeding in yanking himself free, and Harry pulled back at the same time to release himself from the werewolf’s claws.

He grabbed Lucius Malfoy’s wand out of his back pocket. “Accio!” he shouted and his wand flew into his grasp.

Riddle was smiling wickedly at him. “Well,” he murmured, “it would seem little Harry Potter has some blood on his hands.” Snickers broke out at the pun. “Harry, did you have a quarrel with Fenrir? I imagine it must have been quite the insult he gave you, for his eye to be worth the price.”

Harry stayed quiet, shoving Malfoy’s wand back into his pocket to keep one hand free.

“Why don’t we duel, you and I?” Riddle asked. “Let’s settle this matter for once and for all. Who is the stronger? Was it really you who defeated me at Godric’s Hollow? Or just sheer luck?”

He didn’t have a chance of winning this in a duel. He didn’t have the power or experience to hold off against someone like Riddle, especially not when all of his followers were surrounding him and could jump in at the end if it looked like Riddle was losing. Maybe Harry could last for a little while, stir some discontent into the ranks present, but he needed a sure way of causing discord.

Riddle wanted to meet his parents? Fine. Harry might not be able to introduce them that night, but he could give Riddle a taste of what his father was like. Time to put magic aside for something more powerful—words.

Let the bastard bring about his own fall.

Harry lowered his wand and tilted his chin up. “I don’t need a duel to prove I’m stronger than you,” he said, tucking his wand away. The last of the snickers died, and Harry met Riddle’s red gaze. “And I’m not going to entertain your little mind game, trying to threaten me into doing what you want me to do.”

He was done being the victim of a power play. Not after the Dursleys. Not again.
Riddle smiled. “Very well. Then I suppose the only option is for me to fight your parents, and see if it’s their protection that has kept you safe all these years. Why don’t you tell me who they are? If they really are so strong, strong enough to beat me, then I suppose you have nothing to fear.”

“I’m not going to tell you anything.”

“We’ll see. Imperio!”

**Just tell him, it’ll all be over soon, just tell him-**

**Just tell him who your father is. It’ll be over quickly for him too.**

*I won’t be a victim anymore!* Harry howled back at the voice.

A scream broke out of him, fury and anger rolling out in a wave. He was distantly aware of a solid crack and subsequent thump as a large headstone behind him broke in half and fell.

When he looked up again, panting and enraged, he saw the entire group staring at him. The lull lasted for only a moment. “You’re a coward,” he hissed, furious. Behind their masks, he could see several eyes widening. “You use other people to do your bidding instead of doing it yourself, because you’re too lazy and you’re too scared that you’ll get hurt. You play off people’s fears and you become their worst nightmare - you’re just keeping them alive instead of actually helping them. You hurt them just as much as you hurt your enemies. What kind of a leader are you?!”

Riddle opened his mouth, but Harry interrupted him the moment he started to speak. He was keenly aware of the impact he was having on those watching, and he needed to draw this out for as long as he could. Especially if he wasn’t going to be around later.

“You can’t even solve your problems!” he snapped. “Instead of trying to work things out, you just kill people instead of trying to work with them! You’re uncreative and selfish, not revolutionary! Just because you can kill a lot of people doesn’t mean you’re powerful, doesn’t make you stronger than everyone else! It’s not hard to kill someone! A child could do it! So maybe that’s all you are, Riddle. A childish creature who never grew up, never understood how the real world works. And you’re just pulling all your followers down with you.”

Dead silence.

“So no, I’m not going to duel you,” he snarled. “Because that’s just stupid. It doesn’t prove anything. Kill me, if that makes you happy. Everyone knows that’s just about all you can do. I’m just the unlucky kid who you’ve been obsessed with for years. I’m not anything special.”

**Crucio!**

Harry hit the ground, muscles thrashing and body contorting in a futile attempt to get away from the pain. A scream tore at his throat, but he held it in, what little he had left of his control forcing him to keep quiet. It went on and on, longer than he thought it could possibly go. There was dirt scratching against his face, against his sides, against everything as he thrashed against the ground. Even the chains on his wrist had only touched this sort of pain.

Then he started screaming.

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Outside of the maze, Hotch could say with certainty that his nerves were completely fried after hours of receiving bursts of fear and pain from Harry through the blood ward connection followed by
secondhand reports of what was going on from Moody and McGonagall. Both had been forced to leave the maze temporarily to get instructions as to what to do with Malfoy, who had been captured inside the maze and left behind by a contestant, and Fleur Delacour, who was being taken to the infirmary for treatment for the Cruciatus Curse.

Hotch had followed Snape up to the judges’ box after Moody had first appeared, and the two were now as up to date about what was going on as anyone, except the competitors. In the beginning, Snape would lean over whenever he felt Hotch shifting uncomfortably. He quickly stopped when he realized that was going to happen whenever Harry ran into danger, particularly because he was so close. His blood connection was screaming for him to run in there, and Hotch noticed that Snape had drawn his wand at some point in case he had to stun Hotch.

It never came to that, and Flitwick reported to the box on the hourly check up to announce, grinning, that the remaining competitors had decided to team up in an effort to keep an eye on each other in case there was any more interference with the tournament. There was some grumbling from the government officials, but Maxime and Dumbledore both quickly expressed their approval of the decision. The knowledge took a weight off Hotch’s shoulders, allowing him to wait somewhat more easily.

His phone started vibrating, and he sighed. The others were getting anxious after three hours and wanted an update. He muttered this to Snape, who made an excuse and followed Hotch down the steps and around the back of the stands. They remained there after Hotch returned the call, Snape keeping an eye on the judges’s box in case anyone approached.

“Something else?” Snape asked quietly as Hotch rubbed his forehead again.

“Bigger than before. They must have run into something bad.”

Snape looked thoughtful for a minute before he said, “The last obstacle before the cup was a rather dangerous creature. Even with two or three of them, they might find it hard to handle.”

Not long after, Hagrid appeared with Shane Fawcett, who looked surprisingly downtrodden about being taken out of the maze, and Moody arrived with Viktor Krum just a bit later. The Quidditch player was limping with a wounded leg and what looked like broken ribs.

“I didn’t see any sparks,” Hotch murmured.

“Someone’s won. Harry must have reached the cup,” Snape replied. He didn’t look relieved by this prospect. “But… The cup was a portkey. It should have transported the winner out here immediately.”

In front of them, Moody and Hagrid looked similarly disturbed at the lack of a third appearance. The crowd seemed to notice something was wrong, but the champions were led away to be checked over for injuries. The two kept looking for Harry’s emergence.

Pressure was building up behind Hotch’s head, but it felt more distant than it had before. Snape started to say something beside him, only for Hotch to suddenly drop his head into his hands and hiss in pain. He needed to go south, south, south, that’s where Harry was-

A sudden, sharp smack across his cheek made him look up furiously, but it had roused him from the state. Snape grabbed him firmly by the shoulders. “Where is he?” Snape demanded.

“South,” Hotch replied through gritted teeth. “If you can start apparating us south, I can narrow it down and find him.”
Snape cast a glance towards the judges’ box, but decided it wasn’t worth the time to tell Dumbledore he was leaving. “We’re going to have to run,” he said, and set off towards the edge of the wards.

Hotch followed closely behind him, grimacing at the agony in his head. Harry was panicking, but it was controlled. He had no idea if it worked, but he sent encouraging thoughts his son’s way. If Harry could just hold his own for a little while longer…

“Here,” Snape said, grabbing Hotch’s arm and Apparating them away from Hogwarts.

Hotch gave himself no time to take a look at his surroundings when they landed, immediately focusing on his connection with Harry. “Further,” was the only thing he said, and Snape moved them once again. “Further,” he repeated, and they jumped a third time.

Before he could give the same response, Snape asked, “Can you give me a more specific direction? It’s less dangerous for us if I can make this in as few jumps as possible.”

Hotch glared at him, although he was hardly able to see past the pain. “I don’t give a damn how dangerous it is!”

“You won’t be able to do anything for him if you’re bleeding out through the open wound where your arm used to connect to your shoulder because I splinched you.” Hotch growled at him but closed his eyes, focusing. After a moment, he pointed in a south-east direction, and Snape transported them again. “Again.”

Three more jumps later, Hotch pointed them west and said, “We’re getting close.” They vanished and reappeared in a field, but before Hotch could gesture again he dropped to one knee, clutching his head. The messages from Harry’s end were jumbled, incoherent. There was no conscious organization to it, nothing to explain the sensation or combat it.

Snape fell beside him. “Hotch, what happened?” The agent shook his head wordlessly. “I can take a look if you let me in,” Snape said, “but I have to see your eyes.”

Of course, Snape was a Legilimens. Hotch forced himself to raise his gaze, and Snape locked onto him almost immediately. He felt a second pressure in his head, and the pain was put under intense scrutiny as Snape began to examine it. Snape withdrew a moment later.

“The Cruciatus,” Snape said bitterly. “Give me a direction.”

Hotch pointed roughly, and Snape apparated them. They hadn’t made it much further when Hotch felt something wrong. The connection was clearer than it had ever been before, much clearer. He could almost see what Harry was seeing, and he could feel the panic, the fear.

Dad?

*I’m here*, Hotch said, doing his best to give the sensation of standing by him. *I’m here. I won’t leave you.* There was fear and the rush of adrenaline. And something else. A dark understanding that Harry felt resigned to, but Hotch couldn’t quite grasp it. *Harry, hold out just a little longer. Snape and I are almost there.* He tried to pry his eyes open to give another direction to Snape, but there was an urgency from Harry’s end that made him focus on his son instead.

There was a reprieve from the Cruciatus, and his thoughts became more frantic. *No! Don’t, there’s too many! Panic. They’ll kill you both!*

*As soon as we get there, we’re taking you and running.*
Dad… There was profound grief in that one word. His thoughts sounded choked, as if with tears. In the background, he was saying something to Riddle. He was closer to Hotch than he had ever been before, pain making him take shelter through the connection the blood wards made.

Harry, Hotch said, a dawning horror growing as he felt Harry desperately cling on to whatever he was telling Riddle, what are you doing?

I love you, Dad. Thank you, for everything. A pause, and then, I’m sorry.

Hotch lunged forward with a scream, grabbing onto everything he recognized as Harry. He pulled and tugged and tried to yank it all inside of himself as he felt Harry give up. For the briefest instant, Hotch used the lack of resistance to drag Harry to him, mentally throwing him behind barricades of safety without contemplating the uselessness of it.

And then the connection was gone, and he was back in his own mind and on his knees, head clutched in his hands as he screamed.

Chapter End Notes

I'm bringing this up because I know you're all going to be stuck on hating me for the cliffhanger and might not mention what happened in the first section of the chapter so...

What do you guys think of Perotta's involvement? (He's canon from the first season of CM, so you might not remember him. He's the dude who Hotch was talking to when Hotch all but admitted that he was beaten as a kid.)

Oh yeah, and there's the second half of the chapter too. Kindly feel free to scream about me about that if you want.
Acceptance

Chapter by AlexTheReaper (daviesroyal), daviesroyal

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I mean if they’re running and they don’t look where they’re going I have to come out from somewhere and catch them. That’s all I do all day. I’d just be a catcher in the rye and all. I know it’s crazy, but that’s the only thing I’d really like to be.” – J.D. Salinger, Catcher in the Rye

Harry sat up, eyes blinking at the whiteness around him.

As soon as he saw King’s Cross around him, he came to two conclusions. The first was that he absolutely hated magical transportation. The second was that he most definitely despised the Triwizard Tournament even more.

After brief consideration, he decided he knew one more thing. His father was going to murder him if he wasn’t already dead.

There was a couple sitting on a bench nearby, chatting calmly. He had his arm around her, and she was leaning against him with a soft smile. As if sensing him, they both looked over as he got to his feet. He walked closer, cautiously, and panicked inwardly when he realized he didn’t have his wand on him. This also wasn’t King’s Cross and he was almost positive he was dead, though, so he kept moving closer.

“Excuse me,” he said, then broke off abruptly. “Hang on.”

Lily and James Potter both gazed warmly at him. She stood first, arms reaching out to hold him in place while she looked him up and down. “Harry,” she said. “You have been growing up well, haven’t you? He must be so proud of you,” she continued, running one hand through his hair. “You look like him, you know. I mean, I can see how everyone mistakes you for James’ and my son, but… No, that’s your father, through and through.” She tapped his head lightly. “And that mind in there is certainly brighter than either mine or James’ were at your age.”

James grinned unabashedly behind her. “Not to say Lily wasn’t tough as nails in a battle of wits back then.”

“Wait,” Harry said, gaze flickering between the two. “Where are we?”

“I’m at a river near my home,” Lily said.

“A corner Padfoot and I used to meet Pettigrew and Moony at when we were making Order rounds,” James added, voice turning bitter when he mentioned his Secret Keeper. “You’re at a crossroads, Harry. Everyone sees it differently. This is the place between your life and death.”

He frowned in bewilderment. “Between? I’m not already dead?”

“No,” Lily said. “The Horcrux was destroyed, not you, so you came here instead of passing straight on. But because your father protected you, he saved your essence. You have a choice now, and it is entirely yours to make. But we came here to wait for you, so that when it came time for you to make
this choice we could help you. If you want, you can go back.”

“Then…yeah.”

“Harry,” James said firmly, the humor gone from his face. “You will go straight back to your body if you do so. Should anyone realize you are still alive, you will likely be tortured for days before they finally try to kill you again. And even if you get away, Voldemort will still be trying to kill you.” He smiled slightly. “But if you get home… I think you would find that well worth the risk.”

Harry pursed his lips together and nodded. “I want to go home.” He paused, then said, “Can I ask you some questions first?”

Lily frowned into the distance for a moment, watching the faraway tracks. “You can,” she relented, “but make it quick. I wish we could talk longer but there’s only so much time. If you really want to go home and you don’t leave at the right time, you’re going to be stuck here permanently.”

Harry shivered at the thought. “I guess the first question… Did you know?”

Lily’s expression soured. “Oh, we knew almost immediately. Pettigrew was a terrible liar when he had to lie directly to someone’s face and he was shit at coming up with excuses.”

“If only we realized he was lying about something else too,” James muttered crossly. He looked at Harry. “Tell your father to give him hell for us, all right? And if you get the chance, tell Pettigrew that I’m still right pissed at him.”

Harry grinned and nodded. “If I can.”

James rested a hand on his shoulder, squeezing gently. “We never meant for that to happen,” he said quietly. “We were going to take you back immediately, but then….” His breath flowed out of him. “It leaked that we’d had a child. If we had dropped you off with the Hotchners, people would have thought we were trying to hide our own child in the muggle world. It wouldn’t have been safe for any of you. So we thought…” He grimaced. “I’m sorry for all the hurt we caused. And for what it’s worth, I now think you would have been plenty safe with the Hotchners if we had taken you back. I’m delighted you finally met your real family.”

“Is my mother…? Is she on the other side?” They nodded. Harry paused for a moment, considering his words. “Can you tell her something for me?” When they nodded, he said, “Tell her…we miss her, and we love her. And I wish I’d known her. And I imagine Dad would want to say something, but I can’t think of what.”

“Maybe a story?” James suggested. “We can look in on the living world when we want – that’s how we knew about your Horcrux situation – but we don’t always see everything if we’re not paying close enough attention.”

Harry smiled slightly. “Well… Jack is a Parselmouth, like me. There’s a group of snakes at home keeping an eye on all of us. When he found out, I was afraid Dad would… I suppose I never really thought he was going to freak out, since I can’t even picture that… I thought he would reject me for it.” His smile widened. "He called us his little dark lords and made hot chocolate.”

Lily kissed his forehead. “We’ll tell her when we find her.”

“By any chance, do you know where the other Horcruxes are?” Harry asked eagerly, but both shook their heads.

“They were made long before we died,” James said, “and he hasn’t gone near any of them.” He
glanced at his wife speculatively for a moment before saying slowly, “However… There is a snake, Nagini. She’s usually around him. I wouldn’t be surprised if she were a Horcrux.”

“Harry.” He looked to her immediately, attention piqued by her odd tone. “When you go back… Can you tell Severus…that I forgive him?”

His expression turned bewildered. “Forgive him? For what?”

She closed her eyes, grimacing. “It’s too long of a story,” she said. “But I hope it gives him some relief.”

James brightened in realization. “Hey, I don’t want to send you chasing after everyone we ever met,” he began apologetically, “but can you tell Remus and Sirius that… Well, we’re happy?”

He smiled. “Yeah, I can do that.” He paused. “Hey, so, uh… At some point we’re going to have to tell Sirius that… Er.”

James winced, one hand coming up to rub the back of his head. “Right…” He blew out his breath. “Just, uh… Talk it through with him and…have a lot of patience. He might just have a nervous breakdown. Especially after what happened to him in Azkaban…” James chewed the bottom of his lip for a moment. “The thought of you kept him going through that time. Unfair for you, I know, but…”

“No,” Harry replied. “It’s fine, really. Even if I’ve already got a godfather in Uncle Sean, I know Sirius cares.”

Lily looked away sharply, eyes focused on the train tracks again. “Harry,” she said urgently, “your train’s coming. Remember – pretend to be dead.”

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He certainly felt like he’d been hit by a train, and a dry part of his consciousness snidely remarked that he couldn’t even catch transportation correctly anymore. There was a lot of gleeful laughing and chatter going on around him, and it took him a moment to realize they were celebrating his death. Harry really hoped Hotch and Snape didn’t show up anytime soon. His father would probably shoot the lot of them and try not to regret it later.

Riddle said something, and the group calmed down, eagerly listening. While he talked, Harry opened his eyes a slit. He was behind the last row of hooded figures, all of whom had their backs to him. Through legs, he could make out Riddle walking, barefoot, in front of them as he began gloating.

*Good on you,* Harry thought disdainfully. *Killing someone less than half your age. In the words of Penelope Garcia – ‘life goals.’*

Ever so carefully, he stretched out his left hand and found his wand, which he grabbed and held tightly, waiting. Riddle said something rousing, and there was an outbreak of approving murmurs. Harry used the quick rise in noise level to cast a Disillusionment Charm over himself, then crept quietly behind a headstone, where he cast a muffling charm.

There was a shriek behind him, and he groaned in dismay. “He’s gone!”

A panicked flurry broke out, and Harry scrambled behind a headstone a little further away.

“My lord-“
“Master-“

“What-“

“Silence!” Riddle shouted, and later Harry couldn’t quite say what made him do it.

“Sonorus,” he hissed, pointing his wand at his own throat. And then, in the laziest drawl he could manage, perfected from one Draco Malfoy, he said, “Well, you just can’t kill people like you used to, hm, Riddle?”

“Find him,” Riddle roared, and Harry fought every instinct of his by getting down lower and sending a short breeze over the grass up ahead of him. A Death Eater caught sight of it and soon had a whole pack of them running in that direction.

A good thirty minutes later found him in the same place, waiting for the last of the Death Eaters to leave the graveyard. There were only two left, who were fervently discussing something with Riddle. Finally, the trio Apparated away, and Harry resisted the urge to let his head fall back against the stone behind him and groan in relief. Instead, he climbed to his feet and quietly made his way out.

He stumbled out of the graveyard, swearing under his breath and taking stock of his injuries. Too many, he quickly decided. Damn, this was going to suck. Once more, he sent up a grateful thanks to Blackwolf, wherever he might be, for the time in Colorado. He had a long ways to go to get back to Hogwarts.

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It turned out Voldemort did need batshit killers. Unfortunately, he already had a few in his arsenal, but it didn’t take long for Perotta to get his attention through systematic murder of annoying reporters. He started with Rita Skeeter, which caused more waves than he would have normally liked, and quickly claimed enough deaths to make a mark. Before he even had the chance to reach out, two Death Eaters found him on his way to the home of his next victim. He was fully aware of them observing during the torture and murder.

They took him to Voldemort when he was done. The dark lord looked rather miserable in his weakened state, but no one was brave enough to say so. Perotta personally thought he could probably kill him and get away with it, but that wasn’t really what he was here for so he discarded the idea. Voldemort accepted his proposal and gave him a list of names. Perotta promised to contact him when all of the names had shown up in the obituary.

The Death Eaters collected him more politely and with more wariness the next time. Voldemort was excited about something, and he had a new list of names. Again, Perotta departed without asking what the importance of these individuals were. He took a glance into their mundane lives while he killed them, but none of them really struck him as being important to his mission so he cast them aside. It seemed like he had settled into an easy cycle of receiving a hit list and crossing it off like a demented Santa Claus bringing torture toys to all the good and bad boys and girls. Voldemort trusted him, because he was insane and killed and killed and killed.

But the next time, his list only had one name, and it wasn’t certain. Harry Potter.

He was told the boy had escaped. Had fought Voldemort…sort of. Had thrown off the Imperius, persevered through the Cruciatus, and survived the Killing Curse all in one night. And then vanished without a trace, leaving the Death Eaters completely baffled as to where he might be. If Perotta could, he was to find Potter and bring him back to Voldemort immediately. The unspoken truth was
that Voldemort wasn’t going to try killing him again, and Perotta was going to be given the job of torturing the boy to death.

Perotta took his new task in the same blasé manner he received his other instructions, then promptly grabbed a bus to a spot a few miles north of the graveyard. He waited.

Harry never showed. When he determined that the boy was nowhere to be seen and had already passed him by, he grabbed a map and spent a half hour assessing where the most logical progression would have been. He took five more posts that day, each time further north, trying to locate the boy. None of them got him a young wizard, and with increasing frustration, he chose the least likely bus stop within extreme walking range almost forty miles away from the graveyard.

The teenager slunk around the corner of the bus stop, so silent Perotta wouldn’t have seen him if not for his limping gait and lowered head. Perotta turned to him with a smile, sudden enough that Harry jumped back in surprise. Before he could flee, the serial killer had him by the wrist. Underneath his fingers, he could feel heavy scarring and smearing blood, but he didn’t stop to look.

“How long until the bus gets here?” Harry asked, keeping his voice as calm as possible. Perotta lightly stroked his fingers across his wrist but was unsure if the gesture came across as comforting or creepy. Maybe a mixture. There was swelling, and he wondered how bad the damage was.

He launched into a story spun on the spot, glancing around surreptitiously in case any Death Eaters had followed him. He doubted they could be so subtle as to evade his attention this far, but it didn’t hurt to be cautious. His instincts had saved him before, and the one time he hadn’t truly listened to them, he had ended up in jail.

The teen got comfortable, and Perotta gently but firmly tugged him closer. His grasp on Harry’s wrist allowed him to feel the pounding pulse beneath his skin, belying his true state. The boy had good instincts.

“Another ten minutes. Did I tell you about what Abigail did this weekend yet?”

He stopped himself mid-sentence, allowing the façade to fall away, and Harry noticed the change in mood.

“Who are you?” he asked immediately, eyes narrowed in suspicion. He had been edgy ever since they had sat down, with Harry at the window and Perotta at the aisle. The boy kept glancing over him and the seats, as if judging how well he could get out in an emergency. Perotta had already done the same, just more subtly, and knew he could grab Harry and hold him down if necessary. And, if he did it well enough, he could probably even escape notice from the driver.

“How did you know where I was?” Harry demanded.
“I met your father through work. Our job is intelligence.”

Harry looked entirely unsatisfied with the answer. If his opinion hadn’t mattered, Perotta would have left it there without a problem. But if Harry asked his father how the Secret Keeper had found out…

“I was paying attention to the behavior of the Death Eaters. I wasn’t supposed to have access to the files, but I kept an eye on them and noticed something strange and thought I would come over just in case.” He smiled slightly at Harry. “Looks like it’s a good thing I did.”

Harry leaned back, though his back was ramrod straight. Now that he was seeing him in a stressful situation, Perotta could easily see Hotchner’s influence.

“Are you in contact with the BAU?” he asked after a moment. Perotta shook his head, and Harry’s shoulders slumped slightly.

“Why?”

“Wanted to know if you knew what happened to my dad,” he mumbled. He groaned, running one hand through his hair. “He’s going to kill me if Riddle doesn’t.”

Perotta’s ears perked up but he didn’t outwardly display any more interest. “In trouble with your dad a lot?”

Harry snorted in amusement. “No, never.”

Perotta chose his words carefully in his head, then asked in a nonchalant tone, “I never really heard the whole story, to be honest. How did you two meet?”

“I was…” He looked up just to be sure the driver still couldn’t hear them. “I was kidnapped when I was very young. The Woodsmarked Killer – did you hear about him?” he abruptly asked. Perotta nodded. “He found out Dad had another magical family member, somehow, and came after me.” He smiled slightly, the first sign of happiness Perotta had seen yet. “Which turned out to be the best thing that ever happened to me. We wouldn’t have met otherwise.”

The trouble was asking questions without, as the police technique books read, leading him into an answer. “How’s living with him?”

“So much better than it was living with my previous guardians,” Harry said, smile widening a bit more. “I love it. He’s… It’s great.”

Agent Hotchner raising a child. One image Perotta never thought he would have wanted to see but that he was now undeniably curious about. “I could never picture him with kids,” he admitted.

“Yeah, but you only saw him at work, right?”

Perotta tilted his head slightly in acknowledgment. “I suppose.” He checked his watch. “It’s getting late. If I get you back to Hogwarts as soon as possible, this is going to be your longest stretch for some sleep, and you look exhausted.”

Harry nodded and shuffled to rest his head against the window. The position didn’t look comfortable, but Perotta said nothing and he certainly didn’t offer his own shoulder. He leaned back, watching the scenery pass by as he turned his thoughts over in his head.

Hotchner’s son was right next to him. This opened up all sorts of possibilities, ones Perotta was only just now beginning to understand. From what Harry was saying, Hotchner hadn’t followed in his
father’s footsteps for fathering style. He internally scowled at the letdown. If Hotchner had hit his kid, Perotta would have had more enticing options open to him, foremost being that he could have taken Harry and twisted him into a version of himself before unleashing him back on his father.

As it was… Well, Harry could only be so strong if Hotchner had been coddling him. Maybe it was time for Perotta to see how much of a beating the young Hotchner could take before breaking.

He eyed Harry out of the corner of his eye, then immediately paused in confusion. It had been nearly an hour and the boy was still awake, breathing too quick and not steady enough to be asleep. A line of tension down his back proved his state. On close inspection, Perotta realized one of Harry’s hands was tucked under his jacket, likely grasped around his wand.

He turned away. Harry didn’t trust him enough to take a nap and was still on guard even though Perotta had introduced himself as a friend of his father’s.

Interesting.

He knew more about magic after spending time around the Death Eaters, but it had been limited interaction. The ones he had killed hadn’t had time to fight back, so he knew little about the sort of retaliation he might find from attacking a wizard. He was going to have to get Harry’s wand off of him before he could-

Harry bolted upright suddenly, eyes wide. Perotta stared at him, waiting for an explanation, but Harry just frantically searched his pockets. “Is something missing?” Perotta finally asked.

“I don’t know- Shit,” he swore. He slumped in resignation. “It must have fallen out,” he muttered, rubbing his hand against his head. “I don’t think I can summon it over this distance.” He straightened, looking eagerly at Perotta. “Do you have your phone on you?”

Hah. Fat chance, kid.

“No, sorry. I didn’t want to risk the chance of it being tracked while I was with you. What’s wrong?”

“My dad, he’s- he’s going to think I’m dead. Because of the blood wards, he could always tell when something was wrong with me, and I did die…”

“Wait, you died?” He had thought Voldemort must have been wrong about that.

Harry nodded quickly. “Yeah. So Dad must be…” He dropped his head in his hands with a groan. The hand closest to Perotta had enormous swelling and the bones looked disfigured, like they’d been broken. The skin around it was bleeding, in the marks of someone who had done a lot of punching. “This is a mess. He’s probably…” Another groan.

“You sound like you have experience with this.”

“You didn’t see him when he met the people I had been staying with,” Harry muttered. “Or when he thought I was chasing around an escaped mass murderer who was working with a werewolf on a full moon. I have to get in contact with him.”

If Hotch already thought Harry was dead, this wasn’t going to be any fun. But if Harry mentioned that he was traveling with the Secret Keeper, his position could be uncovered. He grudgingly acknowledged that he was going to have to immediately make a decision about whether or not to kill Harry.
Perhaps it wasn’t *Harry* he had to kill. If Hotchner cared half as much for his son as Harry did for him, he would be devastated to see him die. It sounded like Hotchner was really trying to make his son’s life better. Perotta could destroy all that work easily. Since the rest of the wizarding world didn’t know about Harry’s true parentage, he could start killing off the people who could possibly take him in and then alert the right people to Harry’s location. He would leave Hotchner until the end, until he could say that Harry was going to go back to the place they had fought so hard to take him from in the beginning. If he wanted, he could also tell Hotchner he was going to torture and kill Harry before his eighteenth birthday, before he was free from the abusive home.

“There should be a stop coming up,” Perotta said. “We can get off for a minute then and you can call him. But Harry, you can’t mention you’re traveling with me. I’m not supposed to be here.”

Harry nodded slowly, but Perotta doubted its authenticity. If Harry showed more signs of distrust, Perotta might just have to kill him before Harry slipped away. Maybe he could let Harry call Hotchner, and then when Hotchner was confident that his son was alive and safe, he could torture Harry and force Hotchner to listen to it over the phone.

Decisions, decisions.

The bus came to a halt at a stop next to a gas station not long after, waiting for more to get on. Harry quickly got off and began searching for a pay phone, but they quickly realized there was a problem. Perotta only had American money on him, and there was no one else in the area besides the irritable cashier at the gas station, who refused to give them any change. Perotta was hoping Harry was just going to give it up for now and get back on the bus.

“You’ll see him in a few hours,” Perotta pointed out.

“Yeah, but… He’s been through enough because of me. I don’t want him to have to go through any more.” After a moment, he began looking around frantically, checking the distance between the road and the gas station. Before Perotta could stop him, he took off towards the back of the station, until he was out of sight of the road.

Perotta turned the corner, ready to chase and tackle the boy to get him under control. Instead of running, he found Harry standing with his wand out, muttering and casting a few spells. When Perotta moved closer, he looked up and explained, “My wand was put into the American wizarding system without anyone noticing, which means it’s not in the British registry anymore for underage magic users. I can use magic without anyone knowing now,” he said, laughing slightly and then wincing when the movement aggravated a few injuries.

“Can you send him a message with magic?” Perotta asked.

Harry nodded quickly, then pointed his wand. “*Expecto patronum!*”

Perotta jumped backwards as an enormous, silvery elephant thundered into view from the tip of Harry’s wand. It came to a stop, tossing its head and trunk for a moment before turning to look at Harry. The boy smiled at it, relief coloring his features. Then the elephant pulled its head around to meet Perotta’s gaze.

Perotta froze. The elephant looked…furious. If it had been a predator, it would have snarled at him.

“What is that?” he demanded.

“It’s a Patronus,” Harry explained, too excited to notice the tension. “Mine changed after last summer. We think it’s my dad’s form now.” He looked at Perotta, sharing the importance of the
event.

Perotta took a moment before slowly nodding in agreement. Would he have acted like this, if his father had cared about him? “Impressive,” he said.

The elephant threw its trunk, ears flapping wide. Perotta would never be accused of being a zoologist, particularly not one with a focus on elephants, but even he knew that wasn’t a good sign. He leaned back surreptitiously, and asked “What can a Patronus do?” like he wasn’t worried about getting gutted.

“Oh, a lot of things. They’re most commonly used for driving off dementors and some other Dark creatures, but they can also be used for messages.”

So they were defense mechanisms. That explained why the elephant was acting aggressively towards him. “Can they interact with the real world?”

“No, unfortunately.”

He and Harry had a different opinion about that. The elephant was definitely eyeing him.

“Take a message to my dad, but wait until he’s alone,” Harry told the Patronus, and it turned from Perotta to him. “Hey… It’s a long story, but I just wanted you to know I’m alive and I’m heading back to Hogwarts. I should be there…within a day, maybe. Can you meet me there?” After a pause, he nodded at the Patronus. The elephant slowly moved to face the open field behind the gas station. It began trotting off, but just as it really started to gain speed it vanished, leaving nothing behind but Perotta’s unease.

"You can create artificial life."

Harry shook his head. "No, nothing like that. It's just a sort of spirit guardian."

The hell it was. That thing had definitely had more than normal magic to it when it looked at Perotta.

"How did you come back from being dead, anyway?" he asked.

Harry frowned. "It's complicated, but it was really Riddle's fault. He destroyed a part of himself that was in me." With a small smirk, he added, "I was hoping that might happen, if he tried killing me."

"You probably could have managed to stay alive, and just get rescued later, if you'd really wanted to," Perotta scolded. "Rather than risking permanent death." It sounded like something a worried friend of Harry's father might say.

Harry glanced at him oddly. "I could have," he said slowly, "but it wouldn't have been worth it. If they'd used me as a hostage, there would have been a number of influential people in the magical world who would have been forced to negotiate with Riddle. Besides, I couldn't win a duel with him, but I could unsettle his position by forcing his followers to consider why he was so set on killing some insignificant kid, rather than a real enemy."

"But you would have been alive if you'd behaved differently."

"It wouldn't have been worth it," Harry said, then added quietly, "not if it lead to the deaths of people I cared about."

There was a heaviness in the air, one Perotta thought he was imagining until he realized it was
literally getting harder to breathe. No matter what Harry believed, he had power, the kind Perotta had only felt before when standing next to Voldemort. It was the sort that was so potent that the people around him were drawn to him as a leader, a Nazi's Hitler or an Indian's Gandhi. The type of person who led because people naturally followed, for better or for worse.

It wasn't something Perotta had ever witnessed before no matter how often he had heard of this sort of thing in historical references. He had thought it was exaggerated. Voldemort had something similar, sure, but he wasn't Harry's age and Perotta wasn't sure that Voldemort could have managed the same aura standing outside a bus stop cut, bruised, and weakened. He certainly hadn't expected to find this strength in the son of a man he respectfully considered his enemy.

“Are your ribs broken?” he asked.

Harry shrugged, wincing slightly again. “Everything hurts,” he admitted.

Perotta moved closer, paused to make sure Harry knew what he was doing and wasn’t going to attack him, and then gently prodded along his ribs. Two of them gained a reaction.

“Greyback kicked me pretty hard,” he muttered.

Greyback had also returned to Voldemort’s base with one eye gone and the other swollen shut. Some of the Death Eaters had been trying to fix it with magic, but Perotta had heard muttering that the damage was permanent due to the magic that had been imbued into the attack.

Perotta took off his jacket and shirt, then put his jacket back on and tore strips out of the cotton still in his hands. “Lift your arms,” he instructed and wrapped some of the bandages around Harry’s midsection under his shirt to protect the ribs. “Try not to jostle them,” he added as he grabbed Harry’s wrist to inspect the damage. “Did you hit someone?”

“Greyback,” he said. “We kind of tore each other apart.”

He took the last of the strips and bound Harry’s hand in them to prevent him from moving the bones out of place any more. “You need to aim your punches better so you don’t hurt yourself so badly.”

“I did. He grabbed my hand and broke my knuckles.”

Perotta nodded, scanning him for anymore injuries. There were some scratches, nothing too bad, along his throat. “Those from him too?”

“Yeah.”

“You must have put up quite a fight for him to have to do this much damage to subdue you,” Perotta said. Harry smiled slightly at the compliment. “He must have looked like hell.”

They got back on the train a minute later, and Harry settled down against the window again to try to get some sleep. He still wasn’t managing it. Perotta’s mind was still on the elephant. It truly had been his father’s form. Kind to its own kin, aggressive towards threats. The last time Perotta had been made to feel like that had been when Hotch had been in the interrogation room with him, right before he had seen Perotta taken away.

Returning favors wasn’t in Perotta’s blood. Doing the ‘right thing’ wasn’t something he did. He certainly didn’t plan to start now.

But Hotchner hadn’t given him a gift. The man had arrested him, not praised him. The weird thing was that it was Hotchner’s empathy that frustrated him so much. No one had ever told him before
that his actions made sense, that there was a cruel *reason* for why he did what he did.

No one had ever, in a roundabout sort of way, proved to him that he was still human despite his monstrosities.

After all, he was just reacting to a harsh world. And that, more than anything else since his mother’s death, had given him a remarkable amount of comfort.

“Don’t mention me,” he reminded as he left Harry at the edge of Hogsmeade almost fourteen hours later. If he were honest with himself, he knew Harry would say something the moment he could tell Hotch. Harry nodded, thanked him profusely, and walked back to Hogswarts, alive and intact without a clue as to who he was turning his back on.

Despite himself, Perotta could admit he rather liked the younger Hotchner. It seemed like a waste to kill him, even if he wasn’t completely sure why he felt that way. There was just something about the kid that drew Perotta to him, like an animal circling prey or listening to an alpha. Perotta hadn't decided what he was going to do about the boy yet, but he knew it was far too early in the game not to let this play out.

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The last few hours were quite possibly the worst of Snape’s life, perhaps even equaling the death of Lily. This time, not only had he failed a child, but his friend was slipping out of his grasp. Shortly after Hotch’s connection with Harry had snapped, Hotch had broken off mid-scream and collapsed. Snape had Apparated them back to Hogwarts immediately and taken him to Madame Pomphrey, who diagnosed him with a wiped “magical” core.

“It’s rare,” she had said as she tended him. “Very rare to see what little latent magic they have get used up like this. What happened?”

No matter how hard he tried, he just couldn’t make her understand that Hotch was Harry’s father. He would have thought Harry’s death would have nullified the Fidelius, but something was keeping it alive. More alive than Harry was, at any rate.

Hotch had sunk into a coma, as many did who overextended their cores, and was being shielded in the infirmary. Dumbledore allowed him to remain because of his role in the Order. Snape had also tried explaining it to him, but Dumbledore had been likewise incapable of understanding. Eventually, the potions master had given up and told the pair he thought it might have had something to do with Hotch having grabbed the arm with the Dark Mark on it shortly before it flared to life. They took the answer.

Recently, he had begun stirring. Snape fervently hoped he would remember what had happened. He couldn’t imagine breaking the news to him. He had already been forced to contact Blackwolf and explain, and had thankfully been spared from having to tell the rest of the BAU. They were waiting on breaking the news to the other two Hotchners until Hotch woke up.

A tentative knock came at his door. It was at least midnight, he thought crossly. All students should have been in bed, and any staff would have Flooed him if they hadn’t known better when he was trying to finish work so he could be there when Hotch woke. “Come in,” he said, tone emotionless.

It opened, to reveal no one. He scowled crossly, in no mood for games with the blasted Invisibility Cloak. “What?” he snapped.

The door closed, and the top of the cloak shook free to reveal-
He stood up so quickly his chair toppled over backwards.

“Afternoon,” Harry said dryly. He looked thinner than when Snape had last seen him, almost gaunt, but in a more athletic than unhealthy way. It was the muggle clothing – outlining the strong physique instead of hiding it in cloth folds. His eyes were sharp and his stance strong. His wellbeing aside, he was very clearly alive.

“How?” Snape breathed.

“Basically, I have no idea,” Harry admitted. “It had something to do with my dad and the Horcruxes. At least, that’s what they said.”

“Who are ‘they’?”

“Lily and James Potter,” Harry said somewhat reluctantly. Snape felt like collapsing beside his fallen chair. “And, uh… She told me to tell you…she forgives you?”

The blood drained from his face.

The whole story came out, and he listened, astonished, as Harry related his tale. At the end, he took time picking up his chair as he ran the details over in his mind. It seemed stranger than fiction, and yet…Harry breathed. However bizarre it might be, though, he had a feeling there was an explanation after all to how that happened.

“I believe your father tried to hold you here,” he surmised finally. “I can hardly imagine him simply letting you go when something was wrong. If he brought your being into his mind right before your body was killed, you might have escaped death. Your being would have gone to the in-between location, only to return to your body and awaken it.”

Harry nodded slowly. “Sir, while I am curious about how all of this happened, I really came to ask you if I could see my dad.”

Snape gestured for him to put the cloak back on. “He’s in a coma,” Snape said bluntly and he practically felt Harry’s pain rolling off him. “He felt you die, and the breaking of the connection was too much strain on his body while he was magically that close to you.”

“No,” he heard Harry whisper from under the cloak as he opened the door. “I sent him a Patronus…”

“It won’t appear until he wakes up to fulfill its duty.”

"Is... Will he wake up?"

"It stands to reason that your presence may rekindle enough of the connection to revive him."

The walk to the infirmary was absolutely silent. No one else was in the halls at this time of night, and they made their way there without being stopped once. Almost everyone was grieving, mourning the loss of the savior of the wizarding world.

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Hotch heard low voices as he started to come to. He felt exhausted, like he was recovering from running a race, and his nerves sent short sparks of pain wherever they came into contact with something. Both internally and externally, there was a second weariness, the kind that came from screaming and screaming.
Harry, he remembered, and he felt physically sick. He might as well have been holding the mental protection in his hands, the protection which had been so strong to begin with because he had failed his son before. He could hear Harry’s words again, a bleakness and grim understanding to his emotions when he realized he wasn’t going to make it. Grabbing the connection, fighting against the inevitable as Harry let go. And it had just…broken in his hands.

Without opening his eyes, he could feel a standard hospital bed beneath him and a sheet over him. There was pressure on one side of the bed, making it tilt down, but whoever was sitting there stood back up and said something rapidly. Hotch could hear them moving around, fidgeting uncomfortably, before finally coming to perch on the bed on the opposite side.

After minutes of this, when Hotch realized he wasn’t going to be able to just slip back into an unconsciousness where he could still believe both of his sons were alive, his eyes slid open.

Snape was standing at the foot of his bed, arms crossed and nodding at the teenager who was waving his hands energetically, sometimes gesturing at something or running his fingers through his hair. And that tense posture, those scarred wrists… He’d recognize them anywhere.

“Harry,” he whispered, and both figures turned quickly to him. Snape’s shoulders sank slightly in relief and Harry’s entire face lit up.

“Dad,” he responded.

“I’ll be outside,” Snape said, turning and leaving the pair with some privacy.

Harry moved closer to him, and Hotch struggled to sit up. His son reached out with one hand to help but Hotch took the arm and pulled him even closer. There was no resistance, and the feeling was reminiscent enough of trying to yank Harry away into his mind, to futilely protect him from the horrors around him, that a sharp stab of pain pierced the back of Hotch’s head. Harry frowned at his reaction. “Are you okay?”

“No,” Hotch answered truthfully, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. His other hand joined his first in holding Harry in place, and his eyes flickered up and down his son, taking stock of injury.

There was bruising on his neck, still changing colors and implying the damage was much worse than it appeared. Faint scratches littered the fine skin, and Hotch recognized the werewolf claw marks after seeing so many. He suspected broken ribs from the way Harry carefully held himself, and something told him there was more damage underneath his clothes that had been covered up. One forearm had been clawed, and the other hand was heavily bandaged. His wrists had been mangled again, and a wave of fury rose when he saw they almost perfectly mirrored the scars.

“What happened?” he demanded, looking at the wrists.

“Boggart,” Harry told him. “Worst fears.” He looked like he was going to add something else but decided against it.

Hotch scanned him again. One of his fingers resting along Harry’s wrist sought out his pulse, just one more sign that Harry was alive in front of him. His hands were dry and cold, face scratched and bruised, and there was a current running under his skin, a light and uncontrollable shaking. “What else happened?” Harry didn’t meet his eyes. “Harry?”

“Riddle’s back. Stronger.” He shook his head angrily. “They took my blood. I couldn’t stop them.”

Hotch gently maneuvered him into the chair waiting beside the bed. He knew Harry was upset about
Riddle, and he should probably be at least a little concerned, but at the moment… He just couldn’t
care. Harry realized his attention was elsewhere and looked at him curiously.

“I felt you give up,” Hotch said quietly.

Harry hung his head, fingers overlapping over the back of his neck. A protective gesture, curling in
on himself and getting away from Hotch. Shielding his eyes in shame.

“No,” he said firmly, before he even realized the word had left him. He slipped his arms between
Harry’s, pulling his son into an embrace. “No, come on…” Harry rose back out of his chair to return
the hug, clutching at him tightly. “Why?” he murmured.

“He was just going to keep coming back, as long as any of the Horcruxes existed,” he whispered,
"and...there were so many Death Eaters, I knew I wouldn't be able to make it out." Hotch felt him
swallow. "Greyback was there." An unconscious shudder ran through him. "He said... He said he
was going to find my family using the scents he could get off me."

"They know?"

Harry nodded against his shoulder. "Pettigrew told everyone what he'd done. And Greyback could
tell I already knew, so he realized...your scent would be on me. I figured Riddle was going to kill me
either way, so… A body in one piece was going to be better for everyone else than a mangled body,
which he seemed to be aiming for.”

His grip on Harry tightened, and he reconsidered Harry’s condition. “He tortured you?”

“Cruciatus,” Harry confirmed quietly, moving to sit next to Hotch. The agent reluctantly let him go
so he could change positions. Harry stared at his hands in his lap, and then a small smirk crossed his
face. “He seemed upset the Imperius didn’t work.” He blew out his breath and the smile faded.
“There were at least forty-seven of them, that I counted. If you and Snape had appeared…you
wouldn’t have made it out, so…”

“You goaded him,” Hotch breathed.

“I told him he was an uncreative coward who couldn’t think of a better way to solve his problems
than killing people, and then I gave him a list of anger management techniques. He cut me off
halfway through my list.”

Hotch couldn’t decide if he wanted to laugh or cry.

Harry met his eyes miserably. “I’m so sorry, Dad. I didn’t… I didn’t want to see anyone else die in
front of me again.”

Hotch sighed and wrapped an arm around his shoulders. “I understand,” he quietly said, and Harry
sank slightly in relief. “I don’t approve of your methods, but I understand. Don’t ever do that again,
even if you think I’m in danger.”

“But.”

“No, not for me. My job is keeping you safe and happy. Your job isn’t to take care of me.” Harry
nodded quietly. “What happened once you got in the maze?”

Harry took him through the entire task, from the beginning all the way to the portkey. Some of it he
had already heard while standing by the judges’ box, but hearing it again filled in some details. They
were both going to have to ask Snape to tell them what else they were missing. Harry stumbled only
briefly over the boggart, but Hotch didn’t say anything and he quickly moved on. When the story took them to the graveyard, he went quiet for a minute.

“Harry?”

“Right, sorry.” He shook his head furiously. The explanation was as fast as Harry could make it, but it was hard on both of them to hear what exactly had happened. It confirmed Hotch’s suspicions further about how bad the damage was to his son underneath the clothing. He turned to Hotch, who was surprised to see a grin breaking across Harry’s face. “I saw the Potters!”

“When you died?” he asked, bewildered.

“Well, apparently I only sort of died. Something stopped me from going on. They think it might have been a combination of you protecting me and the Horcrux. They wanted me to tell you they’re sorry about what happened, and that they would rather appreciate it if you could give Pettigrew hell.” Hotch smiled slightly.

“When I woke up, Riddle was gloating again. I grabbed my wand and used a Sonorus Charm to make them panic about me being not-dead so they would get out of the cemetery. I left once they were all gone, and I went to a bus station to see if I could somehow get a ride, in case magical methods could lead someone to me.” There was a pause. “Um, he told me not to tell you, but… The Secret Keeper was there. He found out something had happened and showed up to help. We took a bus up as far as we could go and then he got me to Hogsmeade.”

Cramer? “Did he say how he knew where you were? Or that something was wrong?” Hotch asked, bewildered.

“No, he never said. He just reminded me that his job was in intelligence, and he said he’d been watching Death Eater movements.”

“Well, however he found out, I’m glad someone was there,” Hotch admitted. They should probably send someone to tell Cramer not to do that again, but it was just one more risk that could reveal his identity, and... it had saved Harry this time.

Harry’s stomach rumbled loudly and his father frowned. “When was the last time you ate?” When Harry was about to answer, he added quickly, “And don’t just give me an answer like you did the first time we met.”

Harry smiled. “You know me too well.” He added more seriously, “I haven’t eaten since lunch before the tournament.”

“Let’s go see what’s in Hogwarts’ kitchens at this time of night.”

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Once they got back, Harry insisted he was fine and shrugged off the offer of medical attention. In all honesty, he really just didn’t want any more focus on his injuries, which he knew were worse than he had first assumed and which Hotch would be understandably upset over. Besides, as he pointed out, if he showed up at the same time Hotch woke up, someone might make the connection that they knew each other more than in passing. He hid while Snape and Hotch alerted Pomfrey that Hotch had woken up, and she discharged Hotch once she saw he was in perfectly good condition.

The agent immediately received word that Dumbledore wanted to see both him and Snape in his office. He actually talked to Snape about forgoing the meeting in favor of staying in the Room of Requirement for a while longer with Harry, but it was decided that Hotch really would do more good
Stomach happily full from a meal, Harry went up to Gryffindor Town for a long overdue rest. He hadn’t been able to sleep on the bus, too anxious about someone finding him to really get any true rest. And, to be honest, something about the Secret Keeper had just rubbed him the wrong way. He would have gone to sleep as soon as he arrived at Hogwarts but the thought of his father thinking he was dead any longer had been too horrible to contemplate.

He had first gone to the Room of Requirement to grab the Invisibility Cloak, and then to Snape’s to meet his fate. At least Hotch had taken the whole thing...well, better than he had imagined. In spite of his keen knowledge of the federal agent, he had expected some outburst of anger, but the most he had gotten was a flurry of concern and panic.

He muttered the password to the Fat Lady, who parted to let him in. He trudged his way upstairs to his dorm, where four forms were asleep on each of their beds. Ron’s outline was tense, coiled underneath his blanket. Harry looked between his own bed and Ron’s, then heaved a sigh and walked closer. If their positions were switched, he would have expected Ron to do the same.

“Ron,” he said, shaking his shoulder. “Hey, wake up.”

Ron jerked into consciousness, and Harry frowned slightly. The redhead had woken without trouble for a month now, and he guiltily realized what his own death had caused. “What?” Ron said sharply, mouth moving before his mind could catch up. Harry dodged as Ron bolted upright.

In the next bed over, Neville stirred at the sudden noise. Harry wasn’t sure who recognized him first in the moment of silence that followed, but both shouted his name and Ron lunged out of bed to tackle him to the floor. He barely suppressed a scream of pain as all of his injuries were jostled. Dean and Seamus were startled awake, and once they could make out what had happened, the pair joined in with their own shouting and hollering.

The door flew open, and from his place on the floor below Ron and Neville, who were both yelling inarticulate questions at him, Harry could just make out their prefect. “What the bloody hell is all the racket about?” he demanded, still only half-dressed. “I can hear you lot from- Is that Harry Potter?!” he screeched.

Harry groaned and let his head fall back against the floor.

“I just want to sleep,” he complained as Ron dragged him up to his feet. “Careful, careful,” he hissed.

Ron finally stopped and really looked at him. “Merlin, are you okay?”

Harry shook his head.

For once, the rest of the Gryffindors spread news just as fast as the QDA did, but only because the QDA opted to scream the message up and down the stairs like everyone else instead of using their phones. Harry was forced down to the common room, where everyone and their sister demanded their own explanation as to what had happened. Harry buried his face in his hands and just groaned loudly, until people finally began to take pity on him.

The twins blocked everyone else off and began gesturing for them to go back upstairs. For the stragglers who were reluctant to leave, they set off a batch of fireworks to encourage their retreat. Finally, it was down to Hermione, the twins, Ron, and Neville. Ginny had taken off to alert
McGonagall when Harry had admitted that he didn’t know if she knew he was back or not.

“Seriously,” Harry said, “I haven’t had more than a half hour’s nap in four days. Can I just rest?”

The group looked at him, frustrated that they had to wait any longer for an explanation. The answer turned out to be no as they sent him to the infirmary, where Pomfrey promptly panicked all over him, gave him potion after potion to heal his injuries, and then finally ordered him to rest, which he had wanted to do all along. He fell asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow.

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He woke up when his stomach growled, and he wearily propped himself up on his elbows. The infirmary was almost completely empty, and the light shining through the windows told him it was sometime in the evening. His skin still felt electrified, either a result of his revival or the Cruciatus. Either way, he felt like curling up and going back to sleep, but his stomach wouldn’t let him.

“Harry?”

He turned to see Ron sitting on the floor next to his bed. His friend was looking at him with earnest eyes, and he smiled back reassuringly. “Yeah. What are you down there for?”

“Pomfrey tried kicking me out last time,” Ron whispered.

Pomfrey’s bat ears kicked in and she swooped to Harry’s bed just a few minutes of conversation later. Ron dove under the mattress, tucking himself in entirely to avoid being spotted, as she inspected his injuries. “You look like you’re good to go,” she said, somewhat reluctantly. “Make sure you get enough sleep tonight. Dinner’s just about to start, and make sure you get enough to eat. And be healthy.” Harry quickly nodded, and her face softened minutely. “I’m glad you’re all right,” she said. “We thought the worst when you didn’t show up.”

It was just a few minutes before dinner, and they slipped in as quietly as they could. No one noticed them immediately, but the ploy was up as soon as Harry sat down next to Hermione and Ron. Anyone who saw them went nuts, and Harry found himself groaning again as more questions were aimed his way. His friends were brilliant, halting all attempts to speak with him, and finally everyone gave up long enough for him to eat when the food arrived. As soon as he’d had his fill, he slipped out of his seat, the other two right behind him, and hurried out of the Great Hall.

“Room of Requirement?” Hermione guessed once they were a safe distance away, and Harry nodded.

When they were inside, they sat on cushions the Room provided for them. Harry sank into his happily. Ron sprawled down without grace.

"I spoke with Professor Snape while you were both in the infirmary," she said. "He went to Riddle to find out what happened."

Harry's eyes widened. "I didn't even think about him! Is his cover blown because he didn't answer the summons? He did get the summons, right?"

"He did, but Riddle apparently didn't expect him to show because he knew he would have to keep his cover with Dumbledore. Snape claimed that Dumbledore wanted him close by as an advisor and aid so early this morning was the first chance he had to return to Riddle's side."

"That's good," Ron said. "Sounds like he covered it up."
"I hope so. In any case, Riddle doesn't know how you survived or got away, but he's furious. He apparently had people stationed all over the country watching Floo networks and broom shops to wait for you to show up."

Not long after they had gotten comfortable, the door began opening and closing to admit the rest of the QDA. Draco showed up almost instantly, demanding to know if his father had hurt Harry while simultaneously apologizing. Harry shut him up by slapping a hand over his mouth so he could explain what had happened. The Slytherin didn’t look entirely pleased that his father had been anywhere near his friend, but at least he quieted. He did ask if the fang was helpful, and Harry admitted he had never gotten the chance to use it. Later, when he had taken it out of his robes, he discovered that it had cracked open at some point in the fighting and wasn’t even usable anymore.

When everyone had arrived, Harry sighed before summarizing the events of the night of the task until now. He was quick to explain just what had happened that had prevented him from letting anyone know he was all right. Once he was done, he cut off any more questions with a plea for more sleep, which they granted him. The rest of the group stayed behind while Ron, Hermione, and Harry left, so that there wasn’t an enormous group of kids appearing out of nowhere.

“Harry,” Hermione said quietly as they walked back. “I know you don’t want to hear any of this right now, but this is sort of important. When you came back, you went to Snape so you could talk to your dad.”

“Yeah,” Harry said slowly.

“Well, no one could think up a reason for why you would talk to him if they were going to stay quiet about Hotch being your father. They never said anything, so when you appeared at Gryffindor Tower and Ginny went to go tell McGonagall…”

“That was the first they heard of me being alive,” Harry guessed wearily, and Hermione nodded. “I have to tell Dumbledore what happened again, then.” He sighed. “Fourth time. Great.”

Someone was sprinting towards them up ahead, and the trio came to a stop as Shane Fawcett slowed down by bodily slamming into Harry and crushing him in a hug. “Oh Merlin we thought you were dead!” he exclaimed. “How are you?” he asked, holding him back at arms’ length for a moment. “Are you okay? What happened?”

“It’s a long story,” Harry said tiredly and Shane quickly nodded, not pushing the issue. “Glad you stayed behind with the sphinx?”

“Definitely,” Shane said. “I’d like to say I would have fought beside you two, but I realized something about myself in this tournament - I’m really not cut out for this sort of thing. You two probably would have gotten to the Cup while the acromantula was feasting on my dead body.”

Harry laughed, and patted him lightly on one of the forearms that was still outstretched towards him. “Well, so long as you learned something.”

“And she told me where I can find her, and she invited me to come to Egypt to see her sometime! Harry, I’ve a sphinx contact!”

Harry shook his head in disbelief. “I almost can’t believe you, but at the same time I wonder if you aren’t the sanest of all of us who went in there.”

Shane beamed at him and finally let go. “Anyway, just wanted to make sure it was true that you were alive. What do you think you’re going to spend all that money on?”
Harry blinked in bewilderment. He honestly hadn’t even thought about it. Getting out alive had been good enough for him. Besides, “I thought the three of us were splitting it.”

Shane shook his head. “Not how it works. You touch the Cup, you win.”

Instead of relenting like Shane expected, Harry frowned. “No, we said we were all going to share it. I may have touched it, but I sure as hell wouldn’t have been able to if you and Viktor hadn’t helped me get there.”

Shane groaned. “Ugh, and here I was just listening to Viktor bemoaning how he would have given the winnings to Fleur Delacour because he was so upset about what happened. Can’t someone just take the winnings and leave it be?”

Harry paused, then asked, “Do you know where the other two are? Fleur and Viktor?” Shane nodded. “Let’s go talk to them. I’ve got an idea.” To Hermione and Ron, he added, “I’ll meet you in the common room.”

Shane led him out to the courtyard, where the other two champions were talking on a bench. They perked up when they saw him, and Fleur greeted him with two kisses on the cheek as soon as he was close enough.

“We ‘eard about what ‘appened!” she exclaimed. “Iz terrible. The cup as a portkey!”

“Where did it take you?” Viktor asked.

“Graveyard,” he admitted quietly. After everything all three of them had been put through, just to get to him, he felt like they deserved the truth. “The Death Eaters needed my blood to make Voldemort stronger.”

It made him cringe to use Riddle’s chosen name now, but the others weren’t going to have a clue who he was talking about if he used his real name and they’d want an explanation about how he knew about it.

“Oh my God,” Shane whispered. “He’s back to his full power?” Harry nodded reluctantly.

“What vill be done to stop him?” Viktor looked like he was already planning a war.

“Probably nothing, knowing our Ministry,” Harry said with a scowl. “They didn’t believe us when we said he was back the first time.”

“Disgraceful,” Fleur snapped. “And to pretend children were never murdered…!” Harry winced slightly at the reminder. “Sorry.” Her expression hardened further. “I will be talking to my headmistress. We will not make the same mistake in France.”

“Nor in Bulgaria,” Viktor said firmly. “And I vill come to help as soon as you need me. Just send me an owl.” Fleur and Shane nodded in agreement, and Harry found it in him to smile slightly.

“Thank you,” he said. “I’m just glad some people are finally starting to understand the danger.”

Viktro suddenly looked in the direction of the lake as he caught sight of someone waving urgently at him. “Karkaroff vants to speak to me,” he said gruffly, starting to walk away. “Good luck, Harry.”

“Wait,” Harry said. “About the winnings. I really don’t want them, and when the three of us teamed up, we said we were going to split them. It wasn’t out of talent that I won. And Fleur, you were attacked in the maze from an outside force, so you didn’t really fail the task, in a way.”
“What are you saying?” Fleur asked.

“Let’s split it. No, seriously,” he continued when they began to protest. “I don’t want it. I’ve already got money from my family’s vault, so I don’t need it. And it feels wrong to take it when I don’t deserve it any more than the rest of you.” He paused. “Unless you’re all just really eager to try the third task over again.”

“I can do without that experience,” Shane said. “Are you sure?”

Harry nodded and, in a complete deadpan, added, “And we’ll split the ‘eternal glory’ in four too.”

Chapter End Notes

We finally answered one of the questions many of you have been asking – What was the Potters' perspectives on what happened when they found out Harry wasn't theirs? I threw that part in for some resolution between them originally, and I had no clue that many of you were going to be asking about it so I was pleasantly surprised that you asked and I'd already planned the answer.

I'm going to clarify something about Perotta's current status – he is actively staying neutral right now. He doesn't like or follow Riddle, and while he likes Harry he doesn't want to follow a kid with no experience. At the same time, he recognizes that Harry is different enough that he also doesn't want to kill him now because he thinks keeping an eye on Harry could be very interesting until he decides what to do.

It's going to be answered later if you didn't connect the major hints, but I'm wondering if anyone caught onto why Greyback was blinded? This isn't really a big deal, I'm just curious.
"We don’t read and write poetry because it's cute. We read and write poetry because we are members of the human race, and the human race is filled with passion. Medicine, law, business, engineering, these are noble pursuits and necessary to sustain life. But poetry, beauty, romance, love, these are what we stay alive for." - Dead Poets Society

Snape and Hotch returned to the BAU as soon as the Order meeting was over. No one was in the bullpen or Rossi’s or JJ’s office, so the pair went to find Garcia. Her corner was packed with the BAU team, Elle, Blackwolf and a box. All of them were speaking rather urgently, pointing and gesturing at the box.

“What happened?” Hotch demanded as soon as he entered.

The entire group went dead silent and stared at him, eyes wide. A few glanced at Snape, who was expressionless.

“What?”

“We heard about Harry,” Garcia whispered.

“He’s alive,” Hotch said quickly and there was a breath of relief that swept through the room. “It’s a long story, but he’s alive and safe. He showed up at Hogwarts a couple of hours ago. I’ll go into the details later, but for now…” He gestured at the box questioningly.

“Gideon mail has arrived,” Garcia said, riffling through the box for a moment until she could present the cup that had been packaged within. “And this time, they didn’t bother cursing the hell out of the thing, so we were easily able to destroy it.”

“Any news from him?”

“Not a lot,” Morgan said, shaking his head. “He left a note saying he found it in the Lestrange vault. It sounds like he convinced some of the goblins at the Gringotts bank to tell him about it, but someone realized what he was doing and he thinks he’s being hunted now.”

Hotch grimaced, frustrated. “We could protect him if he came in.”

“It’s Gideon,” JJ said with a sigh. “He’ll do his own thing.”

“That’s three down,” Prentiss murmured, looking at the cup. “Leaving the one in Harry, and three others.”

“Something from Slytherin, and something from Ravenclaw, if I had to hazard a guess for two of the three he intentionally created,” Blackwolf added. “I don't know if he'd do one from Gryffindor.”

“There's no more Horcrux in Harry,” Hotch corrected. “By killing him, Voldemort accidentally destroyed it. Harry heard that the last one could be in a snake Voldemort keeps with him.”
Blackwolf frowned slightly and looked at Hotch. “Harry did die, didn’t he?” Hotch reluctantly nodded. “When did he come back?”

“Almost immediately after. Is that important?”

Blackwolf paused for a long moment. Next to him, understanding dawned on Morgan’s face, and he closed his eyes in distress. The Apache slowly said, “The wards were shattered. They haven’t come back up.”

“Quantico’s?” Blackwolf nodded. “Why didn’t they revive?”

“There are two possible reasons. The first is that they naturally broke at his death and can easily be put back up again as soon as he returns from school. The second… The snapped blood ward connection between the two of you might have caused irreparable damage to your own magic supply. It’s possible you can’t support the wards anymore.”

“Shit,” Rossi muttered crossly. “Is there anything we can do if that’s the case?”

“I have absolutely no idea. Nothing like this has ever happened before, to my knowledge. For now, we just need to keep an eye on the situation and hope it will be an easy fix.” He shook his head and asked, “Can you fill us in on what happened? All we heard was that Harry was presumed dead from rumors.”

Hotch quickly obliged, recounting what Harry had told him and what they had discovered in the Order meeting, when McGonagall had described what the other champions had reported after they had left the maze. The rest of the team looked similarly befuddled to hear that Cramer had shown up in England to help get Harry back and seemed just as confused as Hotch had been when Harry had described Cramer’s actions.

“He’s too brash,” Elle said first, once Hotch had finished the story. “I can’t see him remaining that calm, not when Harry was just in serious danger.”

“We never saw him undercover,” Morgan pointed out, but his heart wasn’t really in it.

“How did he even know? If that had been me, I would have told Harry immediately in case there was an information leak I was using.” Prentiss paused. “Is there a leak? Is that how he knew?”

“Is it possible Gideon somehow found out and contacted him?” Blackwolf asked.

“No one knew who the Secret Keeper was but those of us in the room,” Morgan said firmly, shaking his head. “Hell, even Snape doesn’t know. We never wrote it down, we never told anyone, and none of us have spoken to him. Gideon could have, but he’s not a long-distance mind reader.”

“Someone needs to go talk to him,” Rossi said, but Hotch regretfully shot it down.

“We can’t. If anyone knows we have a Secret Keeper, this would be when they’re watching us the closest. They will be waiting for us to slip up, and if they follow the right person to see him it’s all over. But Prentiss is right – if there’s a security leak somehow, we need to find it and shut it down immediately.” He turned to look at Snape. “Is there a way someone could have used Legilimency on one of us to find out who the Keeper was so they could warn him Harry was in danger?”

“I would have to check each of you for signs of tampering, as well as the subsequent removal of the event from your memory, to find out,” Snape said. “But it is possible, yes.”

Hotch glanced around the room, but everyone looked determined. “I suppose you better get started,
As Snape began individually testing them, Morgan jerked a thumb at him and asked, “Is there a way for us to prevent that?”

“Not unless you want to spend years practicing Occlumency, and I doubt it will be useful in this war by the time you master it,” Snape responded as he pulled out of Prentiss’s head.

“Let me try something,” Rossi said, and Snape approached him next.


And then Snape pulled out with a shout of pain, one hand flying up to cover his eyes reflexively. The rest of the team divided themselves between Rossi and Snape, making sure both of them were okay. Blackwolf had both eyebrows raised, impressed, as he moved close to Snape. Hotch steadied the potions master, sending a questioning look to Rossi as the British man was finally able to straighten.

“Effective,” Snape gasped as he got his breath back. “Underhanded, but effective.”

Rossi took the compliment with a smile. “Thank you.”

“So…?” Elle prodded.

“Think of the most gruesome case you’ve worked and send it his way. If it’s physically painful, all the better.”

“Excuse you,” Snape snapped.

“Send it towards whoever’s trying to get into your mind,” Rossi corrected.

“**Excuse** you.”

“Project it onto the consciousness of a malevolent figure who is ransacking your head.”

“We understand,” Hotch interrupted before the pair could take it any further. “For the purposes of this exercise, let’s leave Snape alone so we can find out if someone was ‘ransacked.’”

Snape scowled at Rossi, who gave him an innocent smile. The potions master cast the spell again to actually check the Italian’s mind, and the rest of the room passed without incident. “No one’s memory has been tampered with,” Snape concluded. “If there was a leak, it wasn’t from a Legilimens.”

"Did you see the identity of the Secret Keeper?” Blackwolf asked.

"No. Small pieces of information like that require an in-depth look while a search for tampering requires a general overlook.”

“Was there anything else from the meeting?” JJ asked Hotch.

“They have a plan to get Harry to the Order Headquarters for summer break, to keep him safe,” Hotch said neutrally.

“Which, considering you now know the details, I assume means that we’ll be kidnapping him before they can,” Rossi pointed out, and Hotch nodded in agreement. “They’re going to panic if he suddenly goes missing, and it might not be a good idea to have them distracted from fighting
Riddle’s forces,” he cautiously added.

“That’s why we’re going to tell them we’ve taken him,” Hotch agreed. “They can’t risk focusing so much on protecting him, and they can’t afford diverting the necessary forces to search for him if he goes ‘missing.’ As soon as we have him and they know he’s missing, we’ll claim that I had recognized several flaws in the plan and was skeptical that it would work. I asked all of you to try to kidnap Harry, acting as Death Eaters, and if you were able to, then the system was too dangerous to trust with Harry. We’ll say we moved him to a secure location over the summer, and we’ll return him when school starts back up.” He glanced at Blackwolf. “I expect I won’t be allowed back to the Order after this, and I am planning on telling them that you were not involved in any way. However, that means you’re going to have to attend meetings from now on.”

Blackwolf shrugged. “A necessary sacrifice in this case. I don’t expect them to be pleased about you kidnapping their precious Chosen One, but it’s their fault if their security measures were inadequate. Snape, there may be accusations that you knew.”

“Hardly. He works in intelligence and I’ve already stressed that the FBI works under secrecy. No one would be surprised if something slipped past me, especially not if Hotch had handed the planning over to the rest of his team to avoid giving me a chance to catch on to his scheme.”

“Are we letting Harry in on it?” Morgan asked. “If we’re planning for this to succeed, he might have to know.”

“At this point, I think not telling Harry something is a terrible idea,” Reid replied with a small laugh. “We’re not asking him to participate in anything dangerous, and I think he can fake it long enough for us to get to him.”

Blackwolf jerked his head at Hotch, and the two left as the rest of the team, Snape, and Elle began planning. They continued on until they were in Hotch’s office with the door securely closed behind them and a muffling charm was cast over the room.

“Snape might be the leak,” Blackwolf said, arms crossed. “He’s right. He would have detected the marks of another Legilimens if they had intruded someone’s mind, which means he was either the one who scanned someone’s head or he knows who did it.”

“I don’t think it’s him.” Hotch leaned back against the desk, fingers tapping along the edge. “He would have told Dumbledore first if he were suddenly doubting us, not our Secret Keeper. He knows that it’s dangerous to have too many secrets layered on top of each other, and we’re beginning to reach critical capacity with the number of lies we’re keeping up. Telling Cramer… That doesn’t sound like something he could do.”

“We only talked about Cramer in this room and the briefing room,” Blackwolf said. “There couldn’t be a magical or a technological bug planted in either place. The wards take out almost every magical item that walks in, and a bug would have been knocked out by the amount of security measures we have in here against just that. Are you sure you never let it slip to him who the Secret Keeper was?”

Hotch shook his head, grimacing. “Never.”

Blackwolf was silent for a long moment. “Hotch, you know what this means.”

The agent glared at him. “No, that’s not possible.”

“It’s the only explanation.”

“Blackwolf—“
“It wasn’t you, it wasn’t me, and you’re saying it wasn’t Snape. No one could have listened in on us talking about Cramer. It couldn’t have been Gideon. But somehow, Cramer found out what was going on. And he didn’t just find out, he found the exact location Harry was at. Hotch, someone in your team is keeping him updated. And if it wasn’t Snape, my next guess is Garcia.”

“She wouldn’t. No,” he said emphatically as Blackwolf opened his mouth to argue. “She wouldn’t. Even if it were just Harry in trouble, she would have contacted us first. As it is, she’s gotten close to Draco as well. She wouldn’t risk both of them by telling secrets to Cramer. She never even met him.”

Blackwolf through his hands up. “Then who else on your team was it!”

“I don’t know! I’m still not convinced it was any of them!”

“Hotch, Cramer’s actions could very well have led Death Eaters straight to both of them. Harry moving on his own was dangerous, but Cramer tracking him down made it easier for someone else to find him. You know this wasn’t a simple breach of information.”

Hotch’s eyes narrowed. “You’re accusing one of my team of working with Riddle.” Blackwolf remained quiet. “Okay. Let’s analyze this, shall we?” Hotch snarled. “Rossi first. Of all of them, he has the most self-confidence to do the right thing even if everyone else said it was a bad idea. Got here too late in the game to do anything. He doesn’t know the magical ropes, and he still hasn’t quite gotten his footing on how the magical world even works. He wouldn’t trust himself to contact Cramer without making a blunder that could be traced by the magical world. Garcia would be next on my list, but I already said why it couldn’t be her.”

“Greenaway.”

“It’s not Greenaway.”

“No? She’s a werewolf. Of all of us, if Riddle takes over she’s the most likely to survive without being enslaved. Not to mention we have no idea who she’s been hanging around while she’s been gathering information for making profiles.”

“Because she’s a werewolf she wouldn’t do it. She hates stereotypes of strength and weakness, and that’s what the werewolf packs under Greyback work for. Have you ever seen her address an UnSub with a power complex over women? Someone usually keeps an eye on her to make sure she doesn’t hurt him. And if you want the truth, I’m positive she’s been using her new post to track down some of the werewolves who took the kids last summer. She might be a vigilante in her own way, but she would never work for Riddle.”

Blackwolf still didn’t look convinced, and Hotch continued. “She’s too busy. She spends all of her time gathering information, and she’s not here often enough to keep updated on all the goings on. It’s the same problem Rossi has. Neither of them would trust themselves to have enough up-to-date data to make the best judgment on what – or even if – to tell Cramer.”

“Morgan.”

“Morgan would have questioned my judgment in keeping Cramer out of the loop first,” Hotch dismissed easily. “He never brought it up. Besides, if he knew where Harry was, he would have mobilized the team and gone straight there to protect him, damn the consequences.”

“Reid.”

“Speaks before he thinks. He would have told the others his thoughts on telling Cramer and if he
knew where Harry was. Everyone else would have been in on it, but they would have all gone to England instead of calling Cramer.” He held up his hands. “No one on my team would have done it, so we need to figure out how Cramer knew. And more specifically, if anyone else knows too.”

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Most of the student body actually seemed to believe Harry. Some of it was because a portion had already believed Riddle’s return, while others were now persuaded into taking the statement for fact because the other three champions were supporting his claim. The other two schools, who had not heard as much propaganda against the results of the Silent Massacre since their governments didn’t care as much, quickly cried out against the injustice of turning such a blind eye to a horrific event. Gryffindor House had rallied strongly behind him, since most had seen the state he was in after he had returned from the task and showed up in the middle of the night.

He got a message from Sirius that he was going to be moved to Grimmauld Place that summer because it was just getting too dangerous for him to stay with the Dursleys. Two days before, however, he had been on a phone call with Hotch, who explained to him that there was going to be a kidnapping operation by the BAU to test the strength of the Order’s precautions. Should the precautions fail, they were going to take him to Quantico for the summer. Harry hoped the precautions failed epically.

Draco grabbed him and explained his own dilemma about going home over the summer. Harry quickly agreed to it, even though all it required from him was acting more irritated whenever Draco got angry in the middle of school. The pair schemed and exploded at each other in the middle of Potions, which resulted in a detention for both of them when the fallout destroyed half a row of desks. Snape glared at both of them in exasperation, and the week’s worth of detentions passed cheerfully as the two helped sort out the potions inventory.

The QDA trained like the next day was going to be a battle. They had all been good runners after the summer, but now the Room of Requirement was almost always in use as a track or a dueling grounds. Anthony Goldstein held the current record for running ten miles in just over fifty minutes, while Blaise Zabini’s long distance record kept increasing until he hit twenty miles just before they left school for the summer. Glamour charms became everyone’s best friend as they kept training with defensive tactics and defensive spells, and bruises showed up almost every day on someone due to the ferocity with which they attacked. Hermione, brilliant Hermione, went to Snape and asked him if he could start teaching them how to brew healing potions. He actually complied.

The end of the year came rather quickly after the conclusion of the final task, and Harry only halfheartedly studied since he didn’t have to take any finals. Hermione pushed him to because of the OWLs next year, and he mainly looked over the information just to help everyone else. He was often found in the Room of Requirement, helping others train or occasionally calling back home. Hotch had discovered just how badly he had been injured from Snape, and Harry instantly regretted not telling him more even if he hadn’t thought much of it at the time. Once in a while, he even got a call from Sean, which he would eagerly accept. It was nice to talk to someone who wasn’t freaking out about a war.

On the train ride to Platform 9 ¾, Harry got into a compartment with Hermione, Ron, Neville, and Luna. They spent most of the ride playing Exploding Snap. Luna asked if they could bring back a muggle game when Harry and Draco returned, since it looked like no one else would be able to get away from their parents to go to Quantico over the summer.

The Order’s plan to take Harry involved him first arriving at Privet Drive, after being escorted by a
subtle guard of ten from the train station. To Harry’s shock, he saw Vernon Dursley pull up outside the station and patiently wait for him to get in. He didn’t say anything, and they were five minutes away when Dursley finally spoke…in Travis’s voice. “We’re going to hit a stop light in about another ten minutes,” she said, “and I’m going to tell you it’s time. There’s going to be a car difficulty, supposedly, and the person in the car next to us is going to get out to help me fix the car. You’re going to stand nearby and ‘help,’ but when it’s over, get into the other car instead of ours. Got it?”

“Yep. You're sure they won't notice?”

"The distance they're following at is too great for them to notice you changing cars."

It went off without a hitch. Harry felt embarrassed for the Order members who were going to be freaking out, but he didn’t feel bad at all for the Dursleys, who were going to be yelled at for not realizing Harry had never gotten back into the car.

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Draco arrived in Quantico only a week after Harry, and gleefully showed up with a tattoo-free arm. “I’m not a Death Eater,” he sang, then touched Harry on the forehead. “And I found you! Oh, so difficult.”

“You’re in a good mood.”

“I have a full summer with a tech goddess who is planning on teaching me all the tricks of the trade,” Draco said as the two walked through the Quantico halls. The BAU team was in the middle of a briefing, and from their expressions, it didn’t look good. The two were taking their conversation to Garcia’s office in case the team needed the bullpen without distraction. “Why would I not be absolutely delighted?” He paused when he caught Harry’s grin. “What?”

“You’re picking up her terminology,” Harry said. “You sound like her.”

“Terminology? Now you sound like Reid.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

They opened the door to Garcia’s office and found the tech taking to Kevin Lynch. The man beamed at them when he turned to see who had walked in, eagerly greeting them. The two responded in kind. “Sorry, boys,” Garcia said once that was over. “I guess you’re stuck with me for the next few weeks. This case they just got handed is going to take them out of the state.” She pointed a fluffy-tipped pen at Draco. “Well, you are.” The pen turned to Harry. “You’re going to be getting family bonding time with your uncle, who, as I hear it, is trying to be upset at his brother and is failing miserably because he is delighted to see his two nephews.”

“I was sort of hoping we could get all our homework done as soon as possible,” Draco admitted to Harry, who looked delighted at the prospect of spending time with Sean. Harry paused and frowned slightly at him. “Like,” he continued, reddening, “by the fifteenth, say? I know you were planning on working together so we could get it done faster.”

“What happens on the fifteenth?” Harry asked. Garcia was grinning, but Kevin looked just as bewildered as Harry.

“I… Er…” Garcia poked him, hard.” Ow! Fine! I’m starting school!”

Harry blankly stared. “Um. You’re in school already.”
Draco’s face turned redder. “Not…this kind of school. Not, uh…nonmagical school.”

He blinked rapidly a few times, and then took a deep breath to prolong the moment so he could think of something to say. “I… Congratulations?” he guessed.

Draco sighed, shoulders deflating. “Just say it,” he muttered.

“I don’t get it,” Harry admitted.

“I don’t think I’m going to stay in the magical world,” Draco began, clearly expecting to have to explain everything, but Harry brightened immediately.

“Oh!” he exclaimed. “So you’re taking muggle classes while you’re here?”

Draco nodded. “Yeah. I’m going to start them online over the summer, and then I’m going to do distance learning when we get back to school.” He looked relieved Harry was accepting it so quickly, which sort of made Harry want to smack him upside the head. Honestly, he’d been raised in the muggle world. What did Draco expect? Though, to be fair, spending a lifetime with pureblood elitists would probably give anyone insecurities about suddenly moving into the muggle world.

“We’re going to fake some records for him, so he doesn’t have to take ten years’ worth of classes to catch up,” Garcia explained. “It should work, since Draco’s planning on dropping off the grid as soon as possible.”

“On paper in the muggle world, I’ll have been in witness protection. Isn’t that cool?”

Harry grinned back at him. “You can come up with so many crazy stories and none of them will even touch the truth. So what are you studying over the summer?”

“Well, I’m going to starting taking classes from a local high school, and we’ll see how that goes. I might not actually be able to graduate, since I don’t think I can take all the required classes for four years of high school, anything I might be interested in for college, and then still keep up with all my classes at Hogwarts.”

“I’ve been wondering this for so long,” Kevin sighed. “Why in the name of everything cool-sounding did they decide it was a good idea to name a school Hogwarts?”

“I have absolutely no idea,” Harry admitted, before turning back to Draco. “What are you going to study in college?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. Honestly, I wasn’t expecting there to be so many possible degrees I could get… And I can get a minor and a major if I want! Just…not really sure how I’m going to be able to pay for college,” he admitted. “Everywhere I’ve looked at has been pretty expensive, and it’s not like I’ll be getting money from my parents to do this.”

Behind Draco, Harry saw Garcia and Kevin exchange a smirk and he knew Draco would find himself covered if he couldn’t manage to get enough scholarship money. He didn’t say anything and let the agents have their secrecy.

“I’ll bet Hermione will help you over the year in keeping up with your homework if you explain the situation to her,” Harry pointed out.

“Oh, no, I couldn’t,” he said quickly, shaking his head. “What if this goes wrong?”

“Draco,” Harry said flatly and he deflated.
“Fine.”

The door opened again, and JJ walked in with a file. “For you, Garcia,” she said. “Kevin! Nice to see you again. Draco, Harry.”

Both gave brief greetings, and then Garcia brushed them aside with a wave of her hand. "JJ," she said with a playful tone, "how was lunch?" She dragged out the last word meaningfully.

JJ rolled her eyes. "Fine," she replied.

"Anything...tasty?"

"Garcia!"

"That sounds like a yes," Lynch whispered loudly.

"What's going on?" Draco asked Harry.

"JJ's got a man in her life," Garcia whooped.

"Garcia!" JJ scolded without any real scold.

"I'm just saying!"

"Who is he?" Draco asked.

“Oh, I’ll have to introduce you. I think you’ll like him. He should probably know there are already some kids in the family,” she said, giving a one-armed hug to Draco, the nearest. Both teenagers grinned at her in response.

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The two spent most of the next few days at the Hotchner home while the BAU team was away. Sean and Draco got along well, thankfully, and both were fascinated to watch Harry and Jack speaking to the snakes. The reptile quintet appeared uncertain as to how exactly to react to the new, unexpected humans, but Zagreus, the copperhead, got over his inhibitions first because he realized it was far too much effort to avoid the humans all the time. This was discovered when he climbed over Draco to get to the kitchen cabinets so he was closer to the warm vents, and the Slytherin remained absolutely still until the last of the scales had passed over him. Harry decided not to translate Zagreus’s comment about Draco’s wimpy-ness, considering the other boy had been worried about getting bitten by a venomous snake.

Most of their homework was done within the first two days, and the snakes and Hotchners watched with a sort of mortified curiosity as they raced through essay after essay. Hermione was delighted to hear they were on top of their work, and promised to help Draco over the year in getting a high school diploma.

“Why a diploma from America?” Harry asked as he set aside his final potions essay. “Why not England?”

“Because there are a lot of records I’m not going to have, and it’s really not worth faking them because I’d have to come up with some ridiculous back story. The FBI is going to vouch for me, through Garcia. And I think I’ll have to come to America for schooling, because England is going to be in turmoil whether the war is over or not, and someone could track me down there easier. Here, I’ve got more of a safety net.” He glanced up from his book to look at Harry. Wafts drifted in from
the kitchen, where Sean was cooking and talking to Jack. “Have you thought about getting a diploma?”

“Not until now, no,” he admitted. “I don’t have a reason to. Magic… It got me out of a bad situation, and I feel like I owe it, in a way.”

Draco frowned in bewilderment. “But we were rescued by muggles.”

Harry shook his head. “Not that. Er… Do you know who I lived with, back before I found out Hotch was my father?”

“No…”

“Lily Potter’s sister and her husband. It was…” Harry sighed. “It wasn’t good. Dad charged them with child abuse, and when we had to let them out of prison so the magical world didn’t know what happened… We almost told everyone instead.”

“Holy shit,” Draco muttered. “I had no idea. I mean, I thought it was odd that you never went home for the holidays, but I thought…” He flushed slightly, and Harry tilted his head at him in bewilderment. “Well, I originally thought you just liked the attention,” he admitted.

“No, I just didn’t want to spend break in a cupboard if they decided Dudley needed his old room back,” Harry said, trying to make it come out lightly and failing miserably. “But hey, I’m not there anymore. You’re worse off.”

Draco snorted in amusement. “I’ve all but been adopted by Garcia. Trust me, I’m fine.”

“Why do you like the nonmagical world so much?” Harry asked, going back to the original topic.

“It saved me,” Draco said simply. “Not just the BAU. The way the nonmagical world works, it’s… I think it’s based on better ideals than the magical world is. It doesn’t care about blood purity or anything stupid, and it tries to protect everyone as well as it can. In the nonmagical world, it seems like people care about each other more, and whether that’s true or not… I just feel that… I needed to know someone cared, after what happened. And this world told me someone did.”

Harry nodded slowly. “I understand. Do you think you’ll ever come back to the magical world?”

“I won’t completely leave it. I might even do something like Elle, where I act as a liaison in some field. Here’s to hoping that’s a job by the time I reach the work force, right?”

Harry snorted. “I’m sure if that’s not a job you’ll just create it for yourself. So how are you planning on getting through all those classes? How many do you have to take anyway?”

“Twenty-two. Well, twenty-four if I want the advanced studies diploma.”

“Let me guess which option you’re going for. Perfectionist.”

Draco shrugged. “I have to stand out, since I won’t have much of a record. My academics have to be kick-ass.”

“You’ve been around Garcia for far too long,” Harry mock-whispered, and Draco nudged him. “What classes?”

“Well, some of them we’re just sort of going to say I took. I’m required health and physical education, but Garcia agrees with me that the joint Blackwolf-BAU training camp definitely covers
that. I’m taking arithmancy and I’m going to continue with it, so Garcia thinks that should count for two of the four mathematics I need. She thinks I need some muggle math, just so I have some background in it. She also wants me to look over the English classes that are required, but we might just say I already took those depending on how it looks. We already write a bunch of essays for class, but we don’t do anything with literature, which is the major reason she thinks I might still need to take some classes.”

“Does that really matter unless you take English in college?”

“Yeah, because the advanced studies diploma requires I take a standardized test, and those usually have some sort of language portion. I’m going to have to take a few history courses since I know nothing about U.S. history, but we haven’t decided on how many, considering I already have some history classes that I take, even if they’re British and magical. As for the science… There’s no way around them. I’m going to have to take all of them, and I’m going to have to start from the ground up. That’s going to be a train wreck.” He eyed Harry’s grin. “What now?”

“Train wreck. Muggle idiom. You’re catching on!”

“I’m surrounded by Garcia for days on end. I should hope so. She’s also assured me that I’ll be more up to speed on technology than most of my peers. I haven’t told her yet out of fear that she’ll explode into glittering delight, but I’m thinking about getting a minor in computer science.”

“Not a major?”

He shook his head. “I like it and everything, but I couldn’t stay in an office all day. I’ve got a few years to work it out.”

“If this makes any sense,” Harry said, “I feel confident that you’ll figure it out because you know what you want now. Before…everything, I didn’t think you really did.”

“No, I get it. I was just upholding Malfoy family tradition.”

“Ready to start classes in a few days?”

“Yes!”

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The case ended up being a long one, and Sean had to get back to work before Hotch returned. Draco begged Sean to teach him his cooking secrets before he left, but the chef just laughed at him. The three kids all moved into Garcia’s home temporarily, even though she was at work most of the time, and Harry kept Jack occupied while Draco began to start school.

The first day, Harry thought, went rather well. Considering the circumstances.

“I can’t do this,” Draco whispered.

“Draco.”

“No, Harry, I legitimately cannot do this. I know absolutely nothing about science. Nothing! I need to make up ten years of it! What the hell are tectonic plates?!”

“Draco.”
“And- And ions! Are they alive? Do they move? What’s their purpose?”

“Draco.”

“The fuck is an ecosystem!”

“Draco.” He put a hand over the blond’s mouth. “Calm down. Calm way down. You’re taking two science classes at the same time to catch up. And it’s all new. The first few weeks are going to be stressful.”

“And every week after!” Draco whined around Harry’s hand.

“Come on, you can do this. You’re brilliant and talented. And I’ll kill you if you repeat that to anyone, but you are. Now, some of this I can explain, but the rest you’re going to need someone else’s help for since I haven’t had any science in five years.” He grabbed Draco’s laptop and tugged it closer. “Okay, what’s the course talking about?”

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They were halfway through the summer, and Draco was maintaining a solid C. He felt he was performing substandard. No one else was sure how he wasn’t failing the class, since he had barely known the basics of science just weeks ago. Reid and Garcia, who had been helping him through most of it, were just as incredulous. From her letters, Harry got the impression that Hermione was screaming in excitement back in England about Draco’s success.

Elle stopped by and expressed her congratulations, leading Draco to wonder how she had found out since everyone had agreed not to say anything in case it went wrong although they had complete faith in his abilities. Harry reminded him that they were surrounded by profilers.

In the middle of celebrating about Draco’s accomplishment, there was a serious problem that was beginning to develop. The blood wards around Quantico had only barely appeared.

“I don’t think they’re going to go back to full strength,” Blackwolf admitted. “I can hardly believe your magical core, weak as it was initially-“ He paused. “Strong for a muggle, weak in terms of magical cores in the way we usually talk about them.”

“I get it,” Hotch said, gesturing for him to move on.

“After the damage it sustained-“

“Sorry,” Harry interrupted. Hotch reached over to rub his shoulder.

“-I’m surprised the wards came up at all. They probably won’t get much stronger than this.”

“All the protections relied on those blood wards,” Hotch said. “There were temporary protections put up when the blood wards crashed, but those won’t hold against the kind of assault we’re worried about. What can we do to make it that strong again?”

“We can’t. Blood magic is the strongest magic we know of, with family blood being the strongest of that category. There is no supplement we could use.” Hotch grimaced, turning away slightly. “Keep in mind that the wards did do their job. Without them, we might be in a very different situation right now. Had your wards been any weaker, I don’t think you could have managed what you did.”

“Is having a weakened core going to affect him?” Harry asked when Hotch went silent beside him at the reminder of how close his oldest son came to dying permanently.
Blackwolf shook his head. “He’s never relied on it like magical folk do. His body doesn’t really care what happens to it. The only reason he went into a coma was because his body was shocked by the sudden mental and magical damage it sustained, and it was forced to retreat to deal with the damage. He came out when you neared him because it helped renew some of his core by repairing a small portion of the blood wards.”

An hour later, they were no closer to coming to a conclusion, and Blackwolf left to get back to his department. To be honest, Hotch still wasn’t sure what he did, but he decided there was probably a good reason for that and didn’t dig. They were at wits’ ends as to how exactly Cramer heard about Harry’s location in England, but there had been no progress on the mystery and they had decided to let it rest for now.

Hotch turned to Harry once Blackwolf was gone. “I have news about Greyback,” he said, and Harry stiffened immediately. “Surprisingly good news. Elle heard a rumor and she went to confirm it. Apparently, the whole werewolf community is talking about it. When you attacked Greyback, did you…tear his eyes out?”

Harry opened and closed his mouth, then said, “I thought I pierced one of them, and I hit the other a few times. But I didn’t take them out. Why?”

“In any case, you damaged them both badly enough that he had to have them completely removed. Magical repair wasn’t even possible. You completely blinded the most feared werewolf of the century.”

Harry frowned. “But the only reason magical repair wouldn’t work would be if I cursed him or something.”

“Or, if I understand it, attacked him with an item carrying magical properties.”

“I didn’t have one of those.”

Hotch nodded. “I think you did, but I don’t think you realized you used it. You told me that the basilisk fang cracked at some point in the task, right?”

“Yeah, so?”

“There would have been venom inside.”

Understanding dawned. “I was trying to get to it when Greyback was holding me down at the beginning,” he said. “I couldn’t get a good grip on it because it was covered in some liquid. It got all over my hands.”

“The basilisk venom must have caused the damage. It sounds like he’s had other serious injuries from the fight that he hasn’t completely recovered from either, so I think you did more than you thought when you fought back. His werewolf blood kept the venom from killing him, but you’ve debilitated him at least.”

“Finally, someone’s out of the war,” Harry muttered.

“I wouldn’t count him out just yet,” Hotch warned. “He’s determined and vicious. But for now, at least, he won’t be active.”

It was just after four, leaving a couple more hours until they usually left for home. Harry often came to work with him now that they were trying to rebuild the blood wards, and he usually spent the time helping Draco with science or getting kidnapped by Harris or one of the BAU members for
unexpected training. Some obsessively protective behaviors just didn’t die, he supposed. The other
days he spent at home with Jack, and he was positive his younger brother might just be the most
adorable creature on the planet.

“I’m taking the rest of the day off. You ready?”

Harry stared at him in bewilderment. “Sure?”

The drive from Quantico was easy going, and Harry relayed Draco’s progress as Hotch nodded
occasionally in the driver’s seat. Once Hotch was updated on that, he dove into what was happening
at the Warrington home, where all the orphaned Slytherins were staying over the summer. The group
was apparently making use of the time to prepare themselves as best as they could, and were
performing well with rather terrifying results. Hotch admitted he was a bit worried they had
accidentally begun training an army of kids, but Harry pointed out that even if that was the case, they
were a defensive army.

Harry paused when Hotch made an unfamiliar turn, but kept talking. He kept his eyes carefully
scanning their surroundings as they went further into unknown territory, but he didn’t say anything.
At a stop sign, Hotch happened to glance over and see his unease.

“I swear I’m not kidnapping you,” he said.

“I figured you’d bring Jack along if you were,” Harry replied, some of the tension in his chest
loosening. Polyjuice potion was a synonym for trust issues these days. “Is there a reason for the
secrecy?”

“Yes, but it’s not bad.”

“So…it’s a good surprise?”

“That’s something you’re going to have to tell me. By the way, for the purposes of this evening,
you’re almost sixteen. And if anyone ever asks, this absolutely did not happen.”

Harry raised an eyebrow.

"Anyway, what are you planning on doing with the Triwizard earnings?"

"Oh. Well, we split it in four between us, since the last task really wasn’t a competition at all. What I
had left I gave to the twins. They're planning on start a joke shop, but they don't really have any
funding right now." Hotch smiled without taking his eyes off the road. "What?"

"Nothing. I'm just not surprised."

"That the Weasleys are going to start a joke shop?"

"That too. But also...you."

They came to a stop in an empty parking lot, and they both got out of the car. “Wow,” Harry said by
the passenger’s door as Hotch began to walk around towards him. “You chose a…beautiful spot to
kidnap me to.” He eyed a piece of trash that fluttered on the ground for a moment before flailing
across the pavement until it got stuck on a light pole.

“Not a kidnapping, unless you decide to go wild with this and kidnap me,” Hotch replied as he
reached Harry, who tilted his head in confusion. He held out his hand, something in it, and Harry
opened his palm underneath so Hotch could drop the item with a jingle. Harry stared, open-mouthed,
at the ring of keys in his hand as Hotch walked behind him and got into the passenger’s seat.

“I…” he started.

“Well, you’re not going to learn to drive while you’re at Hogwarts,” Hotch pointed out as he closed the door. Harry stared at the keys for a moment more before walking around to the other side and getting in. “Okay, so there are two major differences in British driving and American driving. The first is rather obvious, and it’s that the wheel is on the left instead of the right. You also drive on the opposite side of the road. The second difference is not as noticeable. Most British cars are stick shift, although I’ve heard that’s changing, at least with rental cars companies, because of the foreigners who don’t know how to drive a car that’s manual.”

“What’s the difference?”

“Automatic transmission means the gears change without you having to do anything. With a stick shift, or manual transmission, you have to change the gears. You’ve probably seen the Dursleys do it and just not realized what they were doing. I think Reid’s got a stick shift car, so we might be borrowing that, since you’re more likely to use it.”

Harry paused, eyes narrowing slightly. Without turning, he said, “Are you, very subtly, implying I might possibly need to drive in England?”

“Why ever would you need to do that?” Hotch calmly replied.

“Or, say, steal a car?”

“I’m sure renting one would do the trick.”

Harry decided it really wasn’t worth it. A federal agent had given him the go-ahead. Besides, Hotch’s concern was valid after he’d walked for miles to get to a bus stop so he could get to safety. “Okay, so gears.”

“Don’t worry about them for now. I’d explain them more to you if I were to tell you how to fix a car if it ever breaks down, but I think you’ve got that handled with spells. Anyway, keys go in the ignition.” Harry looked around for a moment before finding the insertion spot. “I think every single car has everything but the steering wheel in a different place, so you’re going to have to relocate all of it each time you get into a different car. For this one, the gear shift is here,” he said, tapping the shift between the driver’s and passenger’s seat.

“The windshield wipers are on your left and your lights are on your right, but we’ll get into that another time since it’s neither raining nor dark out. Gas and brake are always in the same places.” He pointed down at Harry’s feet, and Harry peered down to see the pedals. “The left one is your brake, right is your gas. Don’t mix them up.” He paused. “I may or may not have driven through your grandparents’ garage door.”

“I don’t see any garage doors for me to hit out here,” Harry said. “I’m sure I can find something else to hit, though.”

“Let’s not try it with a federally-owned vehicle. Okay, go ahead and turn the key in the ignition. If you do it part of the way, the car will turn on the battery but not the engine. Turn it all the way, and both will come on. You just need to hold it in place for a second, and then let it go.” Harry gave it a try, and Hotch coached him through it as the car came to life. “Ready?”

“If I said no, I’d still have to do this, wouldn’t I?”
“Harry, as you pointed out, there is literally nothing out here for you to hit but that paper bag thirty feet away. I’ll admit that my only concern in giving you the keys comes from having watched you fly, but I think you acknowledge this needs a lot more consideration. You’ll do fine. Now, put your foot on the brake. You won’t have to push it hard to get the car to stop once we get going. We’re just going to go a few feet. Now take the car out of park…and let go of the parking brake.” They rolled forward gently. “All right, now apply the brake gently.” They jerked to a halt and Harry winced. “Don’t worry about it. This is your first time. Okay, try it again.”

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“I,” Draco triumphantly announced one day at the middle of July, “have an A in all my classes.”

Harry stared at him, gaping.

“And I have finished five of the seven classes I was planning on taking this summer, and I’m almost finished with two more.”

“Holy shit.”

“And,” he continued, “Garcia’s decided to verify that I had one mathematics, two English, and two history classes, in addition to the two health and three electives we’re claiming I have. She’s letting me off with that since arithmancy should count for mathematics and history of magic should count for history, and all our other classes knock out the electives.”

“So by the end of the summer, you’ll have…” He did some quick math. “Eighteen done of…?”

“Twen-ty-six,” Draco sang, enunciating each syllable. “Of the remaining eight, I need two mathematics, one more English and history, and two foreign language. And economics or something. I’m not even sure I know what that is.”

“If you keep up that pace, you can graduate by the end of this year.”

“I know! But I’m not going to. The science is murdering me.”

They’d acquired a bouncy ball from Garcia and were throwing it back and forth in a corner of her office while she was in a meeting with the rest of the BAU team, who were about to set out on another case. Harry couldn’t help but think that magic did make some things easier – namely, travel. It was hard to imagine being stuck on a plane for so long all the time. This one was taking them out to Las Vegas, which they totally didn’t know because it would be illegal for the agents to have shared that detail with them.

“Does it make more sense?”

“Yeah. You want to know the funny thing? I don’t think I can perform magic as well now.”

“Really?”

“I’m overthinking it now. No wonder they don’t teach science at Hogwarts. But now I’m actually thinking about how things work.”

“Think you’ll go into a science degree?”

Draco snorted as he tossed the ball back. “Think you’ll become a Death Eater anytime soon? I still have no idea what’s going on half the time. I asked what evolution was on the class’s chat system and I thought the rest of the class might have exploded.”
“What do you like?” Harry’s throw went too high, but it bounced harmlessly off one of the safety shields they had put up so the ball wouldn’t hit any of the tech around them. Draco stretched to grab it from where it had rolled, but as he came up, he hit his head on the desk.

Something small rolled around for a moment, then fell off by Draco’s leg. Both of them exchanged glances, embarrassed, and Draco picked it up. As he brought it out of the shadow the table cast, Harry could see it was a black stone, shaped almost like a ten-sided die.

"What is that?" Harry asked curiously, moving closer to see it better.

"Garcia said it fell off the Horcrux ring Gideon sent. There wasn't any magic on it, so she figured she'd just keep an eye on it in case they needed it later," Draco said, turning it this way and that to get a look at it. "Probably just a useless stone," he continued, just as he flipped it over to look at the back.

And then there were two people standing on either side of them, both dressed in Renaissance-style clothing and staring in shock. Both were bearded, old, and definitely not supposed to be in the room. One of them gave an indignant utterance.

Draco flipped the stone back over and they vanished.

"What the hell?" Harry deadpanned.

"They looked like..." Harry gestured for him to continue when he hesitated. "Copernicus and Galileo. We were just going over them in one of my classes..."

They both looked at the stone. Draco tentatively put it back on the desk where it had been before.

"A stone that creates illusions about what you're thinking of," Draco said. "Huh. I'll warn Garcia."

Harry moved back to where he'd been, content to just ignore that had just happened. "Uh. Right. So. Favorite class?"

“Er.” He gave a cough and moved on. "Oddly enough, English. I never thought literature evaluation would be interesting, or that muggles would reflect their society so much in their writing. It’s actually really neat.” He snagged the ball and sent it Harry’s way, pointedly turning his back on the desk with the stone on it. “French sucks. Je ne sais pas. That’s it. That’s all I know.”

“...What does it mean?”

“ ‘I don’t know.’ ”

Harry grinned at him. “You know Garcia speaks French, right?”

“I don’t have the heart to tell her it’s a crappy language. Seriously, there are six different forms for every verb in every tense it has. Yes, there are multiple tenses. And they all conjugate differently, not to mention the irregular verbs. Oh, and there are different times of verbs, like –ir versus –er or –re and – ”

“Stop.”

“Feel my pain,” Draco hissed dramatically. “French is a horrible language.” The door opened and someone gasped. “French is a lovely language and everyone should learn it,” Draco immediately corrected.
“Too late. If I didn’t love you so much…” Garcia shook her head as she entered, and they stopped throwing the ball back and forth to let her through. “It pains me to hear you say that.”

“You’re a tech goddess,” was Draco’s peace offering.

“Suck up,” Harry deadpanned.

“But it’s true.”

“Have you two heard about the emergency procedure yet, that’s not quite a procedure but more like a strong recommendation that you’ll take if you value your lives?” Garcia asked, taking a seat and swiveling her chair around to face them.

“What?” Draco replied.

“So no. Okay, basically we're putting up some portkeys around the places you guys usually go, and they'll be there in the case of an emergency. They'll take you to the Apache wizarding base, near Blackwolf’s office, if something goes really wrong here. But there're also to be used if someone in the upper ranks comes in who doesn’t know about you guys, so you can vanish quickly. We'll be able to get you back easier than having to explain your presence here or obliviating someone who was in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“Are you about to say we can’t be here?” Draco pouted.

“Darling, you weren’t supposed to be here ever. You guys can still come in when there are out-of-state cases, particularly since we badly need those blood wards rebuilt. So that’s that. Draco, I heard you ordered finals for five classes?”

“Yep.”

“‘Yep,’ he says. You’re becoming so American and not pureblood-y, it makes my heart swell. Ah, what great work I’ve done,” she said, complete with dramatic gestures.

“I hear my ancestors rolling in their graves. If I cared, I’m sure I’d be appalled.” The door opened once more, and they went quiet until they saw it was only Elle and she had closed the door behind her. “But you’re right,” he continued, “you’ve done an exemplary job.”

“Suck up,” Harry whispered again, loudly.

“What’s going on in the Garcia tech world today?” Elle asked, dropping into one of the spare seats.

“Happily complaining about my crappy family,” Draco cheerfully replied. “And complimenting Garcia, my favorite past time.”

“Draco, you flirt,” Garcia called over her shoulder as she checked something on her computer.

“What about your family?” Elle asked. Her legs crossed, revealing the fit tone to her calves. Harry couldn’t help but compare her to Lupin. It was amazing what a difference there was in between the two, when one had actively made an effort to make something of the disease and the other lived in fear of it. He wondered if the two would ever meet one day, and he hoped for Lupin’s sake that they did.

“Other than them being pompous dicks? I mean, that was the only thing I’d gotten to, but I’m sure I could go into more detail.” He glanced at Harry. “Man, you’re lucky your family was nonmagical. Can we switch?”
“Pfft. No. And you’ve got Garcia. But maybe remember that you are, in fact, a wizard.”

Draco shuddered, and Garcia and Elle exchanged a quiet glance. Harry tilted his head curiously but didn’t say anything.

“What’s your problem with the magical world?” Elle asked nonchalantly. Harry would have thought nothing of it from her tone if not for the look he had just seen pass between her and the technical analyst.

Draco shrugged and said, “They don’t reason things out. They have absolutely no common sense, they’re either too slow or too quick to act… If nothing else, they’re practically stuck in the dark ages when it comes to social norms and advancements in anything. They don’t change.”

Something flashed over Elle’s face, and she leaned back to rest an elbow on the arm of her chair and tap her finger against her chin. “Perhaps,” she said slowly.

“What do you mean, ‘perhaps’? Definitely.”

“Well,” Elle carefully continued, staring at a spot on the ceiling in speculation. “Perhaps not. I’ve been looking into social and behavioral psychology this entire time to identify disorders and patterns. I haven’t had time to focus on cognitive psychology.” Her eyes slid to Draco. “What you’re saying is what you feel, but we don’t actually know.”

After a moment, Draco responded, in a calculating tone, “It sounds like you’re suggesting something.”

“How would you feel about running some tests at Hogwarts?” Elle asked. “I could show you how we usually run psychological exams, and it could give me some more information to work off of. Maybe we could prove whether your hypothesis is right or not.” With a frown, she added with a mutter, “Although I suppose Hotch is going to want to know if we’re running experiments in Hogwarts.” Her eyes lit up. “Hey, I’m not really supposed to be seen in the bullpen since the official story is that I got transferred. Can you go take this,” she pulled out a file from her bag, “to him and tell him about it?”

“I… You think he’ll listen to me?” Draco asked, stunned as he took the file.

Elle grinned. “Hell yeah. He’s got a soft spot for you guys. You know how I can tell?”

“…No.”

“He looks like an impassive human instead of a robot when he’s around you guys.” Elle caught herself too late and realized Harry was in the room. She dropped her head into one hand. “Oh shit,” she irritably muttered as Garcia laughed at her.

Draco smiled and gripped the file more securely. “I’ll be right back!” he said and hurried out the door.

As soon as it shut behind him, Harry turned to the pair. “What was that about?” he asked.

“I needed to talk to you without him hearing,” Elle said simply. “God, you’re perceptive.”

“Don’t turn into a mini-Hotch,” Garcia whispered. “One’s good. Two’s scary. And if the other two also become Hotches, it’ll be like an army of Hotches.”

“Um.”
“Anyway. How long has Draco been talking like that?” Elle asked, gesturing in the direction Draco had gone. With him out of the room, her brow was furrowed in concern and most of the good humor had left her expression.

“About halfway through last year. He…” He swallowed, using the pause to buy himself some time in thinking through how much he should say. “Well, you know the magical world doesn’t have psychology, right? Or, by extension, psychiatrists? They have no clue what PTSD is, and most of us had it, and… A lot of us came back and no one understood why we acted the way we did. They didn’t get it was still going to take a while to recover. When Draco tried to talk to his family, they told him to deal with it fast so he could serve Riddle. Really, the only adults who have actually understood him and tried to talk him through what happened were you guys.”

He studied the carpet, choosing his next words carefully. They technically hadn’t asked, but… “Besides, after everything, a lot of us started…questioning the magical world. I guess you could say.” Elle looked like she was about to say something, but he shook his head. “No, not in the way that we questioned its morality. We got that immediately. More like…questioned how it worked.” He paused, grimacing.

“I mean… It took half a day for them to convince everyone that kids had been taken. It took another half day for them to convince the Ministry to act because they had to persuade the right people an attack had actually occurred, and that the children might still be alive. It took a complete day for them to decide how they were going to act, and then four more before they found out who took us. That doesn’t even cover how long it took for them to figure out where we were taken. They would have found us over a week after we had been taken. Everyone would have been dead. You found us in under half the time, without any sort of magical background.”

“You shouldn’t completely reject your world,” Elle quietly said. “It’s taken a lot from you, yes, but it’s also given you a lot.”

Harry smiled wryly. “You’re talking to the one who was rescued from the Dursleys first by the magic, before I knew about any of you.” Elle smiled back in concession. “But I am worried about Draco. He seems…set on making the entire magical community out to be the enemy. He’s withdrawing from it more and more.”

“Do you think it’s a good idea that he keep going through muggle high school?” Garcia asked nervously.

Harry mulled it over in his head, before saying, “I honestly think that even if he gets over this phase he’s still going to want that other education. But he can’t…villainize an entire community like this.” His eyes narrowed slightly as he looked at Elle. “Which is why you said something,” he added carefully and she nodded.

“I know he’s not right, but if I can get him to gather the information to prove it, maybe I can change his view. And it’s less work for me, and I can get twice as much done. I was beginning to get concerned that I was focusing too much on one branch of psychology for understanding magical folk, when there are so many different ways to approach it.” She groaned in exasperation. “I haven’t even looked at biological aspects. Ugh, that’s going to be a mess. I’m thinking about asking Reid to do it for me. He’s more likely to know what he’s looking at.”
This is the last chill chapter of the story. On that ominous note, I leave you.

I was kind of surprised that no one thought about the Resurrection Stone in Marvolo Gaunt's ring. So now you know what happened with that! It won't be important for a while, but keep it in mind.
“Here’s the thing – you’re not supposed to like Daisy Buchanan, at least, not in the uncomplicated way you’re supposed to like, say, cupcakes. …Daisy Buchanan doesn’t have to be likable to be interesting. Furthermore, what makes her unlikable – her sense of entitlement, her limited empathy, her inability to make difficult choices – are the very things that make you unlikable! That’s the pleasure and challenge of reading great novels. You get to see yourself as others see you and you get to see others as they see themselves.” – John Green, Crash Course video "Like Pale Gold"

Harry jerked awake with a cry, then slowly relaxed back into his pillow and mattress with a frustrated sigh. He muffled his groan, trying to transfer his leftover shaking fear into annoyance. A full year and he was still waking up in the middle of the night from dreams. Stupid, he scolded himself, even as he tried to slow his breathing.

The door creaked open softly, and light footsteps crept close to the bed. After a pause, a weight settled beside him and a hand, one Harry had grown used to over the last year and a half, ran through his hair. “Harry?” Hotch whispered quietly, not fooled for a moment into thinking his son was asleep.

“I’m fine,” he whispered back, embarrassed. If he had been back at Hogwart’s dorms, at least the rest of the room would have had soundproof charms around the beds since the students had woken each other up so many times. Here, it was a safety concern if he did that. “Sorry.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

Harry sighed, reluctantly accepting that his father wasn’t just going to ignore what had happened. “No,” he said honestly. “It’s just the same as always.” It was impossible to keep the weariness out of his tone, but Hotch correctly interpreted it as being directed towards the prolonged effects of the torture and not at Hotch himself.

In the dim light, his eyes began to adjust until he could better make out his father’s form. Ever since the events of the third task, he’d made more of an effort to keep Harry wrapped up safely, ensuring he was either bundled in Garcia’s office or secured at home. Harry couldn’t bring himself to be irritated, not after what Hotch had been through. Even though the younger Hotchner had come back bearing more scars, he doubted the elder had suffered any less. For the trauma and shock to be enough to put his sturdy father into a coma…

He knew the Death Eaters were still looking for him. But his gaze landed on Hotch’s hand, the one that wasn’t gently mussing his hair. Right below his index finger, a dark, layered scar started and stretched across his palm, ending on the other side halfway between the bottom of his pinky finger and the bottom of his hand. A matching scar was on the palm over Harry’s head, a second-degree
burn scar from a cursed chain. Hotch had regained complete use of both hands, just as Harry had
despite the damage to his nerves and tendons, but the scarred skin, tighter than the old, naturally
pulled his hand closed when it was relaxed and prevented anyone from seeing the terrible mark. It
wasn’t often Harry saw it, and he was surprised each time at how severe it was, at how furiously
Hotch must have torn at the chain to get it off him.

His father stayed there, one scarred hand gently brushing across his hair, until Harry drifted off to
sleep again, slipping away with such unexpected contentment he was hardly aware of it happening.

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Perotta was only half-listening to the discussion around him as they talked about taking the Ministry.
No one really cared what he did anymore, not with his track record written in blood. Very few ever
approached him, and it was only on command of Voldemort. A rumor had spread months ago that he
was inhuman, some sort of monstrous creature. He had done nothing to stop it from spreading. There
was never any criticism that he didn’t pay attention in meetings, hardly gave suggestions or even
seem to care if they won. Not when he fulfilled his duty in killing and more with such brutality and
efficiency. Not when the only time he focused on someone involved his eyes flickering over the
weakest portions of their body. Not when he had taken down powerful witches and wizards with
nothing but brute force.

Not when the only time they had heard delight from him was when he had laughed as Voldemort
used the Cruciatius on him when he hadn’t brought Harry Potter back alive or dead.

“His movements are erratic,” one of the Carrows was saying. Voldemort sat impassively at the head
of the table they were seated around, letting the conversation progress around him without his
interference. Only so much could get done when his presence kept threatening to curse everyone
around him. “He knows we’re following him.”

“Has any progress been made to discover who he is?” Malfoy asked.

The Carrow scowled. “We don’t even know what he looks like. He waits for us to get close to him,
then he sets up a trail for us to follow while he backtracks. He eludes us when we’re right on top of
him, and we have absolutely no idea how.”

It sounded a lot like something Perotta would do. He was pretty sure the individual they were
hunting was muggle, but he kept quiet. If they couldn’t figure out something so obvious, it wasn’t
even worth telling them. The man they were following was giving him some amusement, even if
they’d had no interactions, through his repeated bamboozlement of his stalkers in spite of their
determination to track him down. Voldemort hadn’t revealed why he was so intent on killing this
man, but Perotta figured the muggle must have come across some information that could compromise
Voldemort’s image or potentially destroy him from the way the dark lord was acting.

The door opened, and two Death Eaters entered with a third, unmasked man whose gait was as
cocky as his expression was still. Perotta recognized that missing portion in himself, that part that
people claimed was humanity, in this new man immediately.

“My lord,” one of the Death Eaters greeted, bowing low before gesturing to the man beside him,
who gracefully inclined his head. “We found him.” There were only three people they were looking
for at that time. Harry Potter – obviously -, the invisible and slippery muggle, and… “The
Woodsmarked Killer,” the Death Eater finished.

“State your purpose,” Bellatrix Lestrange snapped. “And be quick about it.”
“Any strike you promote against the muggle world is a strike for the benefit of the wizarding world,” the Woodsmarked Killer said. “I support your cause, though I regrettably am unable to play well with others.” A few dared glance sideways at Perotta, as if wishing he’d had the same view on his own antisocial skills. He’d deal with them later. “Over the last few years, I’ve been on my own mission to purify the American society, showing them the ignorance of their ways by trying to intermingle themselves with muggles,” he spat.

“We know of what you’ve done,” Malfoy said, not quite dismissive but borderline. He gestured for him to continue.

The look the Woodsmarked Killer gave Malfoy was expressionless. Too emotionless. Masking all the hate and vicious nature that Perotta also concealed. “A few years ago, I killed a squib married to a federal agent. I hardly thought anything of it at the time.” Across the table from him, Perotta was surprised to see Professor Snape’s gaze suddenly go blank, a sure sign of Occulumency shields going up. It would seem the potions master had a secret besides his spying, and Perotta found himself wondering again just whose side the man was really on. And, more importantly, what about that statement had caught his attention.

“I was afraid any mudblood offspring they might have could soil the rest of the American community, but it would seem I overlooked the children they already had. One, the youngest, I already knew about, but he had shown no signs of magic and I assumed he was as horribly mundane as his father. But when I went to check…blood wards kept me out.”

“I do hope this is not going to end with you asking us to kill an insignificant toddler,” Malfoy sneered.

Perotta thought about saying something about the boy they had been trying to kill for over a decade for no apparent reason but decided not to.

“No, this is going to end with me telling you where Harry Potter is,” the Woodsmarked Killer spat back and the entire room went still. Perotta scanned the room discretely, finding everyone riveted to the loner wizard at the front of the room. Voldemort’s eyes were flashing dangerously, and the gigantic snake that so often roamed the room let out a hiss. Snape, however, showed no signs of triumph. His eyes were darting ever so slightly, planning. And wasn’t that an interesting reaction. “The blood wards were divided. Part of them were devoted to trying to protect an absent child, a boy who had never been home.”

No one was even remotely comprehending what he was saying. Perotta resisted the urge to smirk. With a sigh, the Woodsmarked Killer picked up on the same problem.

“However,” he continued, “Potter did meet up with his biological father eventually.”

“James Potter’s dead, you moron,” Lestrange drawled.

“Not James Potter,” Voldemort said, and the entire table whipped around to stare at him in astonishment. Most of them, anyway. Snape looked more resigned and Perotta was only vaguely interested in how Voldemort knew that. “A scheme was concocted by Pettigrew and another when Potter’s child died to steal another’s. Harry has no blood claim to the House of Potter.” He let several moments pass to let the full effects of that revelation sink in before tilting his head at the Woodsmarked Killer. “Who is his father?”

“I cannot say in a way you would understand,” the Woodsmarked Killer said, annoyed. “It would seem a Fidelius Charm was placed over that knowledge. However, I can say that I know where he will be this summer.”
“The Order reported him to have been taken,” Voldemort said. “An invested third party snatched him from under their noses to keep him safe from their bumbling mistakes.”

A smile crept over the Woodsmarked Killer’s face. “Yes. And I know who took him, and I know just where he is. Virginia, under the roof of SSA Aaron Hotchner. All I ask in return is the completion of my original mission. The death of both boys. Leave the agent to find what has become of his precious, mudblood family.”

Perotta could see how badly that was going to go for the Woodsmarked Killer if Hotchner ever discovered what he had done, but he gave the man no warning. He would see his mistake soon enough.

“Bellatrix, Lucius, take everyone you can gather in the next thirty minutes,” he ordered. To the Woodsmarked Killer, he said, “Show them the way.” The man smirked faintly in appreciation. “Severus, dear Albus will be wanting to know of this development immediately. In forty minutes, tell him it’s too late.” Snape nodded as Voldemort turned from him to Perotta. “It’s time you started on members of the Order and their families. Perhaps they should think more about their own kin than someone else’s for a change.”

The first name on his list was Weasley. The father worked at the Ministry, and Perotta managed to coax a Death Eater into dropping him off there with the claim that he would start with the father and work his way through the children before finishing off the mother. As soon as he had arrived and the Death Eater had returned to headquarters, Perotta did in fact make his way to Arthur Weasley’s desk.

The redhead looked up brightly as he approached. Without saying a word to him, Perotta dropped off the slip of paper he had written on in the elevator. The smile faded from Weasley’s face as he picked it up and began to read, and Perotta turned his back on him. Weasley couldn’t have been halfway through the letter when Perotta heard a flurry of motion as the man began grabbing the essentials and called after him, demanding more of an explanation. Perotta was gone before he could catch up, hurrying to a restricted portion of the Ministry, snatching up a Ministry worker passing by and forcing them to use a portkey to transport both of them.

They landed in D.C. and Perotta killed the worker, not bothering to dispose of the body, and started in the direction he knew the Hotchners lived in.

The benefit of being the Secret Keeper – he had gotten that address from Travis.

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The moment he was allowed to leave, Snape bolted for the Order to raise the alarm only to find the alarm already soundly and frantically raised. Sirius saw him first and dragged him into the fray before he had time to react. “Severus’s here!” he shouted as he was pulled to Dumbledore, Moody, and Kingsley, who were standing in the center of the room.

“Severus,” Dumbledore greeted, for once without a twinkle in his eye.

“I came as soon as I could. How did you hear?” he asked. Surely there wasn’t another spy he didn’t know about?

“Someone warned Arthur at work,” Kingsley said, frowning. “We thought you had sent the messenger.” Snape shook his head slowly.

“We can figure that out later,” Moody snapped. “Snape, we need the address. It’s under too much
“We have something of an advantage on them,” Snape said urgently. “Hotchner moved houses after his wife died, but the Woodsmarked Killer doesn’t know that. I’ve got a portkey that can take me to right outside Quantico, and I can apparate a group of us the rest of the way to his house.”

“We have the team assembled,” Moody said, gesturing sharply. Tonks, Lupin, Black, Arthur Weasley, and four others stepped forward and everyone else fell back. “Get the portkey.” Snape pulled out a lanyard, one that had been offhandedly grabbed when the need for a portkey had arisen, and held it out so everyone could touch it.

They landed in Quantico moments later. A part of him instantly wanted to go inside and get the rest of the BAU and Hotch, but he knew apparating directly to the Hotchner house would be faster to get to Harry. Besides, he’d already sent them a message telling them what had happened. The strike team let go of the lanyard, and one by one he apparated them to their final destination. Immediately, they cast disillusionment charms over themselves and quickly tried to enter the property.

And then promptly found themselves in someone else’s yard.

“What the hell?” Kingley muttered as they backtracked.

Twenty minutes later, they were finally on Hotch’s back door and Snape realized they had spent the last two minutes discussing Quidditch. He blinked and shook his head harshly, focusing on the sound of distant sirens. “Alohomora,” he hissed at the door and pushed it open, ignoring everyone bickering behind him. Something slipped away out of the corner of Snape’s eye, but when he turned to look it was already gone. He refocused his attention ahead of him, just as Black pushed his way through and tossed their element of surprise away.

“Harry!” he shouted, and turned sharply around the corner. There was a loud crashing sound, followed by a thump, just as Moody called a warning. Lupin rushed after him, only to meet the same fate with a rabid yell from someone else.

Moody’s eye warned him as he followed, ducking under what looked like a…frying pan?

The rest of the group stared in disbelief as Moody tried to back away from the man to give himself enough space as he tried to get his wand out to attack. The man, in return, kept pushing his advantage, until the pan had bloodied Moody’s already messed-up nose and smacked him over the head. Too late, the man yelped as he realized he had completely exposed himself to the rest of the group and jumped back behind the wall that had previously been hiding him. Luckily for him, everyone else had been stunned into inaction.

Everything went quiet with the man with the pan waiting around the other side of the wall, three Order members bleeding on the floor, and the rest standing stupefied by the back door.

Finally, Snape said slowly, “Who are you?” Kingsley gave him a look of disbelief at asking such a simple question.

“You’re the one breaking into the house!” was the irate response, and something in Snape’s head clicked.

“You’re Hotch’s brother, aren’t you?” The silence was enough. “This house is compromised. Voldemort’s learned that Harry’s here, and he’s sending Death Eaters here now. We only have a few minutes. Where are they?”

Next to him, he saw Weasley mouth in confusion, “They?”
There was a concerned pause. “Someone already came and took them. He said Aaron sent him,” he said, fear growing in his voice. “Oh my God. Oh my God. Who was that?”

Snape’s heart began thudding frantically in his chest. There was a soft click from the front of the house of the door opening and he pulled his wand out. “Hotchner, stay still,” he hissed quietly, moving past the wall and keeping his wand focused on the entryway between the living room and the kitchen. Anyone walking through would have to come into his range of attack, and it kept Hotch’s brother and the downed Order members covered. Behind him, he felt more than heard the rest of the Order moving to back him up.

“FBI! Put it down!” someone yelled from the front of the house.


There was a palpable relaxation from the front, and Morgan came into view immediately. Several people were running up the stairs, and Hotch appeared a moment later behind Morgan. Both agents quickly scanned the group, double taking when they saw the trio on the floor. Lupin was beginning to stir. Hotch caught sight of the pan in his brother’s hands but shook his head slightly and demanded, “Where are they?”

“Aaron,” his brother said, on the verge of completely panicking. “Someone came, maybe ten minutes ago. He said you sent him, and-and Harry knew him so I thought—”

“Someone took him?” Hotch said urgently. “What did he look like? Did Harry call him by name?”

His brother shook his head in response to the last question. Tonks quietly rejuvenated the three Order members on the ground. “No, but he knew him. He said something about the man having come to help him before.” Hotch’s eyes flashed, and Snape realized at the same time that it must have been the Secret Keeper. In his brother’s frantic state, however, he just kept going without knowing Hotch already knew the identity. “He was… I don’t know, taller than me? Just under or at six foot? Bald, severe. Abrupt and rather strict. All muscle. Sharp and square bone structure.”

Hotch and Morgan exchanged a look, the temporary alleviation gone. “What’s wrong?” Snape demanded.

“That’s not him,” Hotch said, shaking his head in mute horror. Snape froze. “And Sean’s met every member of my team, so the only person who has come to help Harry before has to have been…”

“If that wasn’t him, who was it?” Morgan asked, shifting impatiently and frustrated at the lack of knowledge.

“Who?” Moody demanded, already back on his feet. “Who the hell are we talking about?”

“It doesn’t matter if we keep his identity secret,” Morgan said. “He’s already compromised if he came to get Harry after the third task.”

Sean’s hands were on the back of his head and his breathing was almost a hyperventilation. The rest of the Order was in Morgan’s boat, anxious to jump into danger and rescue Harry from the new threat but frozen without a direction. Hotch was completely still, mind racing, and all Snape could do was stand there and wait for the pieces to click.

Hotch nodded in agreement with Morgan. “Call Garcia, tell her to get in contact with him immediately. He must have told someone.” Morgan pulled out his phone and dialed the number. Hotch turned to the Order. “If someone used magical transport nearby, could you trace it?”
“We wouldn’t be able to find out where he took them to,” Tonks said.

“But we would know if they’re still in the area or not,” Snape quickly replied.

Moody pointed out Weasley and another to do that, and both hurried out front. “Who all are we looking for?” he demanded. “You kept saying ‘they.’ Harry and who?”

Hotch locked eyes with Snape, and he felt his stomach drop. He gave Hotch a quick nod, and the agent turned back to Moody. “Jack, my son,” he quietly said. Moody grimaced, the seriousness of the situation for Hotch beginning to become clear.

“It must be a muggle,” Moody said. “We were wandering around trying to get in for at least twenty minutes and Snape knew where this place was. Your blood wards are in overdrive. Did you know someone had broken in?”

“I knew they were in danger, and the phone lines had been cut,” He turned to Morgan. “Also tell Garcia to start looking for- What?” he suddenly said, interrupting himself at Morgan’s expression. The phone slowly dropped from his ear. “Hotch,” he whispered, eyes wide. “Cramer’s dead.”

“What?”

“He died the same day Travis went to talk to him. Garcia got a hold of her, and gave her the description Sean just gave us. That’s the person she met with. The Secret Keeper was never Cramer.” He couldn’t hear anything except what Morgan was saying, all sound narrowing down to the kitchen. “We have absolutely no idea who it is.”

There was a moment, a single moment of blissful ignorance. And then a terrible knowledge dawned on Hotch, his face morphing from shocked outrage at their miscalculation to agonized understanding. “Tell Garcia to send me a picture of Vincent Perotta,” he said, dread seeping into very word.

“Garcia, did you catch that?” Morgan asked, bringing the phone back up. He nodded, expression mirroring Hotch’s, as Garcia told him it had gone through.

“Who’s Perotta?” Lupin asked. Snape’s eyes widened.

“Someone who matches that description,” Hotch said, pulling out his phone and bringing up the picture that had been sent through. He showed it to Sean. “Is he the one who came here?”

“Hotch-“

Sean nodded quickly. “Aaron, who is it?”

“We need to find them immediately,” Hotch said, tone taking on a dark edge.

“Hotch,” Snape tried again. “Perotta joined Voldemort a few months ago. That’s how he knew where to find Harry. Voldemort ordered him to kill the boy.”

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Harry told himself he wasn’t sulking as he sat down at the table. He most definitely was not. He was just frustrated about not being able to do anything. Jack was nervous about the new location and waited impatiently on his lap, legs kicking. His heel hit Harry’s shin every once in a while, but he didn’t have it in him to tell his younger brother to stop. He was keenly aware of the frailty of the situation, shifting every once in a while, but he kept his eyes on the man pacing in front of them.
“Who are you?” he asked suddenly, before he could overthink it. The man turned to look at him.
“You’re not Cramer.”

The man smirked and leaned back against the wall, halting his previous movement. “What gave me away?”

“You don’t have FBI training. I recognize it by now. And you don’t have it.” He was painfully aware that he was much farther from the door than the other man was, and that there was absolutely no way he could make it out with Jack before the man reached them. He wasn’t even really sure where they were. The man had grabbed a portkey and whisked them here by having Harry activate it, which made him think it was some sort of prearranged safe house, but he hadn’t the slightest clue where the safe house was located. It was barren, almost entirely unused, with the only furnishings being a table and a couple of chairs.

They had appeared in the room and hadn’t left, and Harry was hesitant to go near the window while the man was there. No sounds drifted in from outside, so he couldn’t quite be sure if they were in a rural area or if the room was soundproofed. To make it all worse, the nervous feeling that Harry had gotten the first time he had met the man had only intensified, particularly when the man had given him the cold shoulder and completely refused to answer any of his questions about where they were or if his father was aware that they had left the house. The latter was weighing heavily on Harry’s mind. Had the blood wards recovered enough that Hotch could detect where they had gone?

“I don’t,” he responded. “Who do you think I am?”

Harry slowly shook his head. “I have absolutely no idea, and I’m really inclined to take Jack and run right now so you better have a good reason for lying to me.”

“If I wanted to kill you, I would have done it when we met a few months ago,” he replied simply. “I may not be Cramer, but I am doing this to balance the scales with your father.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed. “What do you mean?” The man didn’t respond, and Harry began frantically trying to reason it out. He had initially claimed Hotch had met him through work, and while he wasn’t Cramer, that looked likely. He’d been surprised that Hotch had such a good relationship with his kids, and he had thought of Hotch as a rather serious person, which Harry knew to not be so true around his family. But he was right, the man didn’t move with FBI training, or any proper training really. If anything, he moved more with Blackwolf’s instinctive and responsive motions. “Did he… save someone you knew? Or catch the killer?” But that didn’t sound right, and even as he said it he knew it wasn’t accurate.

The man’s smirk widened. “The opposite.”

It took a moment for him to truly realize what the man meant, but then Harry stood up abruptly from the chair. Jack yelped as Harry suddenly deposited him on the floor, one hand reaching for his wand. With horror, his hand met nothing in his pocket. The man must have grabbed it off of him when he wasn’t looking. He wrapped one arm around Jack and pushed his younger brother behind him.

“Harry?” Jack whispered.

“Shh,” he whispered back, keeping an eye on ‘Cramer’ as he did so.

The man was rather amused. “You know,” he said. “I’m not going to kill you.”

“I know enough about what my father does to know that’s not the only thing people do,” Harry breathed out, trying to hide his tremble. He couldn’t go through torture again, but he definitely
couldn’t see Jack die in front of him. No one else. “Look, eye for an eye. He did this to you alone. If you want to get back at him, fine, but there’s no reason to hurt two of us when you can just hurt me.”

He arched an eyebrow. “Well, since you seem to know me so well,” he said mockingly, “why would I do that? Why you?”

Harry took a steadying breath. “You know I’ve already been tortured. If you want to hurt him, you’d go after me instead of Jack.” He gestured shortly to his brother. “He won’t have a clue what’s going on. He won’t really get what’s happening to him. I will.” The man didn’t look completely sold by the idea. “Please,” he said, though he knew it was futile, “let my brother go.”

“I will,” the man said, so unexpectedly Harry was taken aback for a moment. He began walking closer, and Harry’s heart leapt into his throat. Despite himself, he started to back up, until he remembered what he had said and forced himself to stand his ground. Even with the promise, he pushed Jack back a little further. Behind his brother, there wasn’t much space until he hit the wall.

The man stopped when there were only a few inches between them, and at this close of a distance Harry’s hopes sank as he realized that there was no way he could possibly overpower the man. He had too much experience in a fight, if the faintly visible scars and layered muscle were anything to go by. Harry felt his hands beginning to shake, and Jack was tugging against his arm.

“Harry?” he whispered, and then louder, more panicked, with the tone begging for understanding that only children seemed capable of, “Harry!”

The man reached up with one hand until he had it completely wrapped around his throat, applying a light pressure but not enough to choke him. “It’s okay,” Harry responded, voice cracking as he kept his eyes on the man in front of him. His hands found Jack’s arms, and he pulled his brother securely behind him so he couldn’t see what was happening.

The man’s free hand reached into his pocket, and Harry looked away as he saw him pull out a pocket knife. The sheathed blade was tucked between his thumb and index finger, and his fingertips lightly brushed Harry’s abdomen. He jerked away reflexively, but the hand at his throat prevented him from going far.

“Twelve pairs of ribs,” the man said calmly, a finger tapping each one on his right side as his hand moved down toward his pelvis, “covering your lungs and your heart, though a long enough and thin enough object could still get to them.” Harry fought the urge to move away as the fingers moved towards the gap between the two sets of ribs, right below his sternum. “The liver. Causes serious damage to the rest of the body when malfunctioning.”

The fingers trailed lower, circling a new organ. He flicked his hand and traced the shape with the folded edge of the pocket knife. “Stomach. Contains a lot of acid, capable of eroding the tissue layers of other organs if it happened to spill out.” The knife moved to the side, pressing just hard enough to hurt. “Gallbladder. Useful, but not necessary – you can live without it. Kidneys.” He tilted his head slightly, moving the knife down. “Ever been punched in the kidneys before? Over and over?” Harry didn’t respond, keeping his eyes focused on the other side of the room.

“I have,” he continued in the tone of someone who hadn’t really expected an answer. “Rather painful.” His hand returned to the center of his body, palm flat over his muscles. The knife was tucked back between his fingers, no longer pressing so obviously into his skin. Harry didn’t care anymore that the man could definitely feel him shaking. He just wanted it over. “Your small intestine. Getting that thing messed up is sure to wreck your digestion until the end of time.” His palm moved lower, lower than Harry was reasonably comfortable with, before moving up and
following an invisible path. “Large intestine, connected to…”

His hand finished its trail across Harry’s abdomen, ending only centimeters above his groin. “The rectum and anus.” His palm didn’t move, its warmth searing, and Harry had to use all of his self-control to not step back. He couldn’t risk him doing this to Jack. “The anal canal is designed to stretch and relax to allow large objects to pass through, Harry,” he said calmly, but his grip tightened on his neck as he spoke his name. “That’s made it hard for people like your father to prove that anal penetration ever happened.”

The man didn’t say anything else, just stood there watching Harry’s reaction. When Harry continued to stare at the wall opposite him, shaking, the man pushed his palm sharply inwards and Harry shut his eyes with a wince, half from the pain and half from the knowledge of what was coming. He’d overheard enough about what kind of people his father went after to know.

The hand squeezed warningly around his neck and his eyes flew open. He expected a quick release, but the pressure continued, cutting off his air completely. It took considerable effort to keep his hands closed around Jack behind him, instead of frantically scrabbling at the man’s face. He was too close – if Harry attacked, the man could easily get to Jack and hurt him.

He couldn’t move his hands, and it was almost as bad as being tied up again. He couldn’t fight back, couldn’t even lash out to show his anger. Just stand there, and hope the criminal wanted to play with him a bit longer. Block Jack’s way, so he couldn’t see what was going on. Pay attention to anything else, and try to pretend this wasn’t happening.

Then, all of a sudden, the pressure was gone, and Harry sucked in a deep breath. “Focus,” the man murmured to him, and he kept his eyes open this time. “This is important. I’m teaching you something.” His hand moved, slipping under Harry’s shirt. He thumbed the edge of Harry’s jeans for a moment before swiping under for a brief second, then his hand moved up and up until it was resting over his sternum.

“Your heart. Not off-center, and one of the hardest organs to damage because of its protected place behind layers of bone from all sides. It’s arguably harder to damage than the brain, which can be reached through the eyes, the back of the mouth, or the lower bottom portion of the head. Also arguably the strongest muscle in your body, since it’s the only one that constantly moves day in and day out without stopping. The pressure it creates is strong enough that you can feel it easily in other parts of the body, and it keeps you going throughout the most…rigorous activities,” he said, hand moving down and to the side to cup his ribs.

Harry hoped Jack couldn’t see what was happening from behind him as the hand dipped lower, partially into his pants until it came to rest on his flank. There was a soft murmur of distress from behind him and Harry whispered for him to close his eyes. He didn’t look at the figure in front of him as he did so.

His hand hadn’t moved, but now it shifted until his fingers touched Harry’s inner thigh. “Now,” he said, quietly enough that Harry knew Jack couldn’t hear them. “What kinds of people do you think your dad chases? And what kind do you think I am?”

Harry didn’t say anything, focusing again on the wall on the opposite end of the room. His breath shook as it went in and out.

And then the hand against his thigh was gone, slipping out of his clothes. “Exactly. You don’t know. And you certainly don’t know me.” Despite himself, Harry’s gaze flew up to meet the man’s eyes. He realized a moment too late how it might be seen as a challenge to his authority. “You look like your father, but you’re not him. Don’t you ever try to profile me again, or this isn’t where I’ll stop.”
The hand around his neck dropped, and then the man was moving away from him, turning his back to Harry, and walking to the other end of the room. He took up his post by the window again, posture entirely relaxed as if the last five minutes hadn’t happened.

Jack whined softly behind him, and Harry quickly let him go, abruptly aware that he had been gripping Jack too hard in his fear. With an eye on the man, he slowly went back to his original place at the table, heart eventually beginning to resume a normal tempo. He tried to calm his breathing and keep a few stutters quiet, but he was sure the man could hear him in the quiet of the room. Jack climbed back into his lap, not quite oblivious as to what had happened but unaware of the details. He wrapped his arms around Harry’s neck, and Harry hugged him close, always keeping part of his attention focused on the man on the other side of the room.

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The entire BAU team found themselves sitting around a long dining table in Grimmauld Place. Hotch recognized it as the normal meeting site, but they were among the only ones sitting down this time. Kingsley had taken a spot at the end, and most of the Order members present were gathered around him or Dumbledore on the other side. The BAU was in the middle, with Snape behind Morgan and Morgan opposite Hotch. The unit chief realized Snape had positioned himself so that Hotch could easily read his features if he needed to get a better understanding of the situation, and the slight advantage gave him more comfort than he would have liked. With Perotta loose with both his kids, he felt the rest of the situation quickly slipping from his fingers, and now he had been forcibly portkeyed here with the rest of his team and kept from investigating.

Morgan scowled furiously at an Order member who stared at him for too long, and Reid had his arms crossed in the most petulant manner possible. Prentiss was regal, dominating her chair as if it were her throne and the rest of the room were filled with servants. JJ was the most mobile of the group as she examined each person in the room, making everyone nervous as she filed their faces away for later. Rossi was using the complete silence to his advantage, waiting until just enough time had passed before spouting a random fact about one of the Order members in the room that made the group collectively uncomfortable as he seemingly pulled the information out of nowhere.

If the situation were different, Hotch would have been extremely proud of his team. As it was, he didn’t have time for this, and he stared at Dumbledore, eyes focused on the point right between the headmaster’s eyebrows to prevent him from getting a Legilimency connection.

The door open and closed, and a few more people filed in. He turned to see Sirius Black pulling up the rear with Sean, who looked disgruntled and a little sick after the portkey travel. Sean took the empty seat next to Hotch with a scowl, glaring just as ferociously at everyone around him as Morgan was. Hotch went back to narrowing his eyes at Dumbledore, who finally called the meeting to session and gestured at someone behind Hotch, who deposited a vial in front of him.

“It’s veritaserum,” Dumbledore said calmly. “You can choose to take it or not, but it will force you to answer honestly.” Damn, they should have thought of building up an immunity to this before. The headmaster remained silent, his point made. The BAU team, Hotch in particular, had lied and misled the Order enough that their credibility for honesty was all but shattered. Unless he took the potion, there wasn’t much chance anyone would believe the most important things they had to say, and if he didn’t take the potion, everyone would believe he was lying or hiding something.

“When we came into this,” Hotch said, “there were many people involved who were endangered. That’s part of the reason the American government allowed us to know. Some of those people are still in danger, and I don’t trust everyone in this room with their lives.”

“I did say you could choose not to take the potion.”
“I’ll take it,” Hotch corrected, “so long as some questions are restricted.” He nodded at Snape. “He knows the questions I’m talking about.”

Black narrowed his eyes across the room. “Oh, really?”

“There were a lot of Unbreakable Vows and Fidelius Charms involved,” Hotch said before the situation could devolve. It was only half true, but then, he hadn’t downed the potion quite yet. “Once he figured some things out, Blackwolf decided he had to be brought into some secrets.”

Dumbledore nodded in acceptance and Hotch took the potion.

“Who is this man?” he was immediately asked.

“Vincent Perotta. He murdered close to two hundred people, that we’re certain of. We were called in to solve a series of murders, but we got stonewalled by the local OCU when—”

“OCU?” Moody interrupted.

“Organized Crime Unit,” Rossi said nonchalantly. If the rest of the team regularly gave information about insignificant details while Hotch was under the potion, it would make all of them seem more credible. It might also allow one of them to slip a big lie in if necessary. “They mostly deal with mobs and gangs.”

“In this case, they had an undercover agent in the local mob, but he went missing, and they got in touch with us when we realized he was connected to our case. In the end, we found Perotta and arrested him for the murders we could prove and for the kidnapping of a federal officer. The agent, though still alive, had been tortured and was barely alive when we found him, which is why I’m wondering why we’re sitting around talking instead of tracking him down,” he said, ending in a snarl.

“I thought your team liked having more information,” Moody snapped back. “We’re sharing.”

“No, we’re telling you what you want to know. We already know what we need to know and could be in the middle of finding them,” Morgan replied.

They hadn’t brought in Garcia or Elle, who had both remained at the BAU in case anyone showed up there. Hotch had a feeling they were still working on the case, since Morgan had managed to completely update Garcia before they were taken to England, and he hoped they could score a breakthrough while the rest of them were confined.

“It seems odd that he shows up right as Voldemort finds out where he is,” Black pointed out, although he wasn’t nearly as aggressive as Hotch expected him to be.

“I can explain that,” Snape said, and the entire room turned to look at him in surprise. He quickly gave them a rundown of what had happened since Perotta’s appearance in Voldemort’s service, confirming Perotta’s brutality and explaining his inside knowledge. At the end, he added, “There’s one more thing this may explain. Hotch, can you pull up the picture of Perotta again?” Hotch did so and passed it over, and Snape took the phone to Arthur. “Is he the one who gave you the warning?” Arthur started and nodded quickly.

“What?” Black said.

“What warning?” Prentiss asked.

“I wasn’t supposed to leave to tell the Order what had happened until a group of Death Eaters left to
“Kill Potter,” Snape said. “Perotta was given a list of Order members who he was supposed to kill, along with their families, to distract them from going to protect Potter. The first name on his list was Weasley, and no one thought twice when he asked to be dropped off at the Ministry.”

The room went silent.

“What the fuck is going on?” Black finally demanded, summarizing the general mood of the room eloquently. “Is this guy murderous or not?”

“There’s more,” Hotch grimly said. “We know he found Harry after the third task and stayed with him until he got back to Hogwarts, to make sure he arrived safely. This was after Riddle had sent Perotta to track him down and bring him back.”

“To me,” Molly said slowly from one side of the room, “it sounds like he’s protecting Harry. But he’s not working with us, he’s not working with you, and he’s not working with Voldemort. So why?”

Having met Perotta in the midst of an interrogation focused on the long list of murders, that insight had entirely escaped Hotch’s grasp, but even as he opened his mouth to refute her he realized she was right. Perotta had brilliantly managed to not only help mislead the Death Eaters twice in searching for Harry, but had also created a back-up plan in case he failed to get Harry away from the Hotchner home in time. He had even taken Jack just to be sure.

Suddenly, he turned to Sean beside him. “What happened when he left? Why didn’t you go with him?”

“He said he could move faster with just the two of them, but he told me to get in contact with you immediately and then get away as soon as possible. I tried to call, but the phone lines were down, and by the time I had given up I realized there were people outside who couldn’t seem to find their way onto the property.”

Half the Order frowned at that last bit of information but Hotch quickly derailed them from that thought process. “The lines were down?”

“Yeah.”

“That sounds like something Perotta would do, not Death Eaters,” JJ said. “Why wouldn’t he want Sean contacting Hotch?”

“I don’t think it was about that,” Hotch replied. “He couldn’t take Sean with him. He has to be in control, and with only Jack and Harry, he can play them against each other. Throw Sean in the mix and it’s one too many. Sean and Harry could overpower him if they needed to, and that kind of potential threat is something Perotta wouldn’t want to deal with.”

“Who’s Jack?” Lupin asked, and then horror dawned in his expression. Hotch nodded back grimly as everyone else looked between them in confusion. “Oh Merlin,” he whispered. “That’s why we couldn’t get in. That’s why you took him at the beginning of the summer, because you knew…”

“What?” Moody demanded.

“Jack’s my son,” Hotch said quietly.

Molly clapped a hand over her mouth. “How old is he,” she whispered as she removed it.

“Six.” He took a deep breath and let it out. “He’s magical. I knew there were blood wards around the
house, and I’d been told they were strong enough to derail anyone from getting in. They took a blow earlier this year, but so long as Jack was behind them, no one magical could get in. If Harry were behind them at the same time, the wards protecting Jack would also keep anyone out who wanted to harm Harry.”

“That’s why you knew he would be safer at your house instead of here,” Lupin murmured. “Blood magic is stronger than anything, even the Fidelius. The only reason we could get in was because we had benevolent intentions and someone who knew where to go, and even then we wasted almost half an hour.” Hotch nodded. Around him, the expressions were beginning to change from suspicious and betrayed to understanding and welcoming.

“What did you mean when you said he could play them against each other?” Kinglsey asked.

“He tells Harry that if he fights back he’s going to hurt Jack, and he tells Jack that if he screams he’s going to hurt Harry,” Morgan said.

“Albus,” Molly whispered.

“One more question,” Dumbledore said. “I’m afraid this has gone on for too long. Why is your team so invested in protecting Harry?” He held up a hand and shook his head regretfully as Rossi, Prentiss, and JJ all moved to answer. “Just Hotchner, please.”

“He’s shuntlefarthen polumper.”

The entire room stared at him and he turned to Snape in absolute bewilderment.

“Hotch?” Morgan asked tentatively.

Snape stared back, for once with an open expression of confusion. Then it cleared and he said, “It’s because there’s a Fidelius over that information,” he finally said to Dumbledore. “It’s combatting the veritaserum, which is forcing him to answer. He can’t tell you no matter how hard he may want to.”

“Who’s the Secret Keeper?”

“Oh no,” Reid breathed. Hotch and Morgan hadn’t had time to fill in the rest of the team as to their discovery, but with the new information, it wasn’t too hard to figure out. “Don’t tell me…”

“As far as we can tell,” Hotch said, “Perotta figured out Cramer was going to meet someone the night he went to see Travis. Perotta killed him minutes before she showed up, and he knew Cramer well enough to pretend he was him while Travis explained what was going on. Perotta’s the Secret Keeper.”

“Fuck,” Morgan swore under his breath, rubbing a hand over his forehead.

“We need to see if Garcia’s found anything,” Rossi said, getting up from his chair. No one stopped him.

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“What happened?” Harry asked before he could stop himself. The man turned, raising a curious eyebrow. None of them had moved in hours. “Between you and—my dad.” He hated the stutter and kicked himself for it, but he wasn’t sure if bringing up his father would frustrate the man or not. The man had brought up his father easily before, but if he was angry at him, maybe the man would want to take his anger out on the nearest substitute. And after last time, he wasn’t quite as eager to volunteer, even though he’d do it in a heartbeat to keep Jack safe. Yet, they were going to be stuck
here for a while, and Harry had no idea why the man was holding them.

“Nothing,” the man replied simply. “I killed some people. He arrested me. Simple. Last time I saw him was when he had to come to Baltimore to testify in court against me.”

Harry blinked, staring at him. There was no animosity. He immediately shook himself, realizing he was still trying to profile the man. “But then… Why? Why all this for revenge?”

The man walked towards him, a slow, steady gait only possible for those with lots of muscle tone. Harry tried his best not to physically react, refusing to give him the satisfaction, and didn’t turn as the man walked behind him. He jumped when both hands settled on Harry’s shoulders. Two of his fingers were hot against his neck. “Why do you think?” he asked, and the question was far too similar to what he had asked right before he had threatened Harry for profiling him.

He tensed despite his self-control screaming at him to make no move. “I don’t know. That’s why I’m asking.”

The hands slid off his shoulders. Jack was watching the man with a frown.

“My old man’s beatings were a daily thing. There were times I had broken bones and I had to put myself back together without so much as a needle and thread. Discovered quickly that the only way to stop others from hurting me was to hurt them first. Killed my old man the first chance I got and hit the streets.” He didn’t move from behind Harry, who sat frozen in the chair. A pressure on the back of it told him the man was leaning his weight on it.

“I got involved with the local mob, and they paid me to kill. I did whatever they wanted, all the gruesome jobs no one else could stomach. I kidnapped, I tortured, I maimed, I killed. I did it all and more. Then I caught a mole from the local FBI and your dad’s team got called in. Within a few days, I went from slipping through shadows to sitting under a spotlight in an interrogation room. And you know what your dad told me?”

This time the silence dragged out longer, and instead of growing more fearful Harry just felt himself growing more irritated with the macho routine. “No, I wasn’t there and he hasn’t gotten around to filling me in on every single one of his interrogations,” he said sourly before he could stop himself. “Hm,” the man hummed in mild amusement. “He told me why I killed. He told me my upbringing wasn’t normal, that people who got the shit kicked out of them like I did only acted in extremes. He said they either became like me or they became like him.” He felt the man lean closer, until he was right behind Harry, on the side farthest from Jack. “And that was the closest anyone had ever come to telling me I wasn’t a monster because of what I was born as, but because of the choices I made. And I figured, what the hell, if he could come out of it human, than so could I.”

Harry heard the annoyed grimace in his voice as he walked away, back to his post by the window. “I think I’m doing it wrong,” he said absently, as if they were chatting about the weather. “I don’t think your dad had to kill over forty people to join the FBI.”

Jack was squirming, and Harry had to let him go as he dropped to the ground. He watched as Jack pulled another chair next to his and climbed up into it, then took Harry’s hand. When his brother was settled, he looked back to the man, who had gone back to staring out the window. “Then… Why did you take us?”

“Oh, I didn’t lie. The Woodsmarked Killer really is right behind you. He told Voldemort where you were at, and a bunch of Death Eaters were sent to go find you. They went to the wrong house, and I beat everyone else to the right one. We’re staying where we’re at until the Woodsmarked Killer gets
my message and finds us here.”

Harry bolted upright to his feet. “You told him where we were?!”

“Of course. I told him to come alone so he could finish what he started.”

He glanced at Jack, who looked back at him in blank confusion. The man still had his wand, which left him with four chairs and a table as weapons. They wouldn’t do him much good against two psychopathic serial killers.

“And I need to kill him before he’s any more of a hassle,” the man continued, and Harry stared at him. He was talking about murdering the Woodmarked Killer. The one who’d taken Harry what felt like ages ago, had gone after Jack, had tried to kill his father for getting in the way. Had killed his mother. Was the reason he’d never met her. Was responsible for his only communication with her being a short message transmitted through ghosts.

“What’s your name?” Jack said, the first words he had uttered the entire time that weren’t Harry’s name. They both turned to stare at him, and Jack flushed at the attention but continued frowning at the man and said, “Dad says you have to introduce yourself when you meet people. But you didn’t.”

“Well, your dad’s right,” the man said, recovering from his surprise. There was a long pause as the serial killer realized he had no idea how to introduce himself to a kindergartner. “I’m Vincent,” he finally said.

Jack nodded sternly. “I’m Jack. This is Harry.”

“Hello, Jack and Harry.” He caught Harry’s expression. “What?”

“Nothing, just… The last Vincent I knew died.”

Vincent tilted his head slightly. “You know how people always do that thing where they say ‘You remind me of your father’ all the time?”

“…Yeah.”

“You don’t. You look a bit like him, sure, but…” He shrugged at Harry’s scowl. “Maybe it’s just age. He could have grown into it. I can’t see him having been a calm teenager, can you?”

Despite the oddness of discussing his father’s early years with a serial killer, he said, “No, I suppose not.”

“You’re…more forward. You seem to listen to your heart more than your head.” Harry’s scowl increased. “Not in a bad way. You’ve still got plenty of brains in there, but you use them differently.”

“I genuinely can’t tell if you’re trying to insult me.”

“I’m not.” After a pause, Vincent asked curiously, “What’s Hotchner like as a father? I just…can’t picture it.”

“Fuck off.”

An eyebrow went up. “Ouch. Sore spot?”

“I thought we talked about it before.”
“We did. I just didn’t realize someone had hit you then. I’m just curious if it’s Hotchner or not.” One look from Harry and he raised his hands in defeat. “Okay, not Hotchner. Got it.” Beat. “The people you stayed with before?” Harry nodded sharply. “Whoo, wonder what Hotchner did to them.” There was no response, and he asked, “What’d they do to you?”

“They told me to shut my mouth and stay quiet or I’d get a pick between going a few days without food or a broken arm, which, oddly enough, is what I’m going to tell you except you don’t get the choice.”

“So life before Hotchner is a rough topic. Understood.” Vincent looked out the window again and leaned back slightly. “Ah, here he comes. About time. I guess I’m going to have to cut our lovely conversation short.” He strode back over to Harry and reached into his pocket. Harry stiffened, instinctively expecting the knife, but all that came out was his wand, which Vincent placed on the table. “You did a good job of keeping it up, but try better against people like me,” Vincent said. “Stay in here until I come back,” he continued, reaching out to ruffle Harry’s hair.

He couldn’t say quite what happened, but in the next moment he was up, fist cracking against Vincent’s nose. Jack gasped behind him, but Harry was shaking with fury and didn’t mind the blood dripping off his knuckles. “See?” he said frostily as Vincent looked up, staring in surprise at the blood on his hand from where he had swiped it across his nose. “I do know how to punch someone without breaking my knuckles.”

The man shrugged in concession, sniffing up some of the blood. “I suppose so. Stay.” He started to turn away.

“Wait,” Harry said, catching himself a moment too late. Vincent tilted his head curiously at him. Blood dripped off his chin. “You may be a jackass but it would suck if you died before you take him out. Get as close as you can before he knows you’re there. Wizards can’t fight as well in close distances.”

Vincent stared at him appraisingly for a moment, at Harry’s defiant stance and then at Jack’s firm but childlike nod as he agreed with whatever Harry said. Then Vincent smiled, the first true smile of the day or even, as Harry suspected might be the case, in years. “I’ll be back soon.”

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Garcia tracked Vincent to a town in England, equidistance between Hogwarts and London. Through a mixture of tracing portkey trails, which Travis had gotten access to, and catching a glimpse of Perotta through a camera on one of the streets, Garcia could even tell them the building he was in. In no time at all, the BAU was arriving with a significant portion of the Order.

The only problem was that no one was in the building. Tonks cast a spell in one of the upper rooms. “Someone was here not long ago,” she said. “There’s magical residue.”

“Can you tell whose?” Hotch asked.

“Magic doesn’t work like that,” Tonks said regretfully as they all hurried back onto the streets where most of the Order was still looking around. The various disillusionment charms that had been cast over them prevented anyone living in the town from seeing the odd collection of people wandering all over, but it didn’t stop Hotch from wincing at the technique. He hoped they were more subtle when they didn’t have the use of charms.

“Garcia’s got nothing for us,” Morgan said as he got off a call with her.
Rossi was suddenly beside both of them and he muttered, “Don’t look. Rooftop.” Both froze, and then Hotch reached over to pull Tonks into the conversation. She stumbled and flailed, and Hotch and Morgan steadied her as her hair went from Christmas red to ocean blue to bubblegum pink. “He’s on the roof. Can you stun him before he realizes you’ve seen him?”

“I can try, but from here my aim is going to be hard to get on target,” she admitted.

“He’s running,” Morgan said, catching movement out of the corner of his eye, and the four took off after him on the ground.

Perotta ignored them, easily eating up distance with a strong body and firm footing. He leaped from roof to roof easily, as the buildings were rather close to each other, and he took several turns that they couldn’t quite run parallel to. “How can he see us?” Morgan asked Tonks.

She shook her head, panting. “He shouldn’t be able to.”

“He’s not watching us,” Rossi said. “He’s following someone else.”

“The kids, maybe?” Tonks asked.

“Harry can’t run that fast carrying Jack,” Hotch pointed out.

Perotta dropped off the edge of a roof, and by the time they had rounded the corner he was gone. There were three roads he could have possibly taken and Hotch pointed each of them down a route, then told Tonks to send a message to everyone else before following. He took off alone as Rossi and Morgan each went down their own route, and then he heard Tonks send a few Patroni to the rest of the Order before going after Rossi.

It worried him that they hadn’t found the boys in the room, but there hadn’t been traces of blood. Besides, Tonks had said there was magical residue. Someone must have cast a spell, and it wasn’t Perotta. Maybe Harry had defended himself and gotten Jack out of there, and if he’d taken the invisibility cloak, it would explain why Garcia hadn’t seen anyone leave. That still left the question of what Perotta was doing. Shouldn’t he have been keeping a closer eye on the pair?

“Confringo!” someone shouted as he rounded a corner, and a flaming body flew past him.

He only had a moment to recognize Perotta hitting the ground with a curse behind him before he drew his gun and aimed it at the wizard who had attacked Perotta. Asshole murderer or not, the serial killer knew where his kids were and he would be damned if some do-gooder accidentally took out his only chance of finding out what Perotta did to them.

The wizard smiled. It wasn’t a nice smile. “Ah, Agent Hotchner,” he drawled. “You seem to show up exactly when I don’t want you around. How are the kids?”

He fired twice. The Woodsmarked Killer jerked back in surprise. Hotch fired a third time as he began to fall, spared a moment to make sure Perotta had put the fire out, and then advanced towards the man who had murdered his wife and tried twice to kill both of his children. Cold fury roared through him, and the adrenaline forced him to walk forwards. A fifth bullet, and then a sixth.

He was standing over the man, and he realized he never even knew his name. He couldn’t bring himself to care, though he knew he would find out one day, because he refused to give the man the glorification of a fancy title.

The Woodsmarked Killer wheezed, wand fallen somewhere over his head, as one hand trailed listlessly and the other feebly attempted to cover one of the wounds Hotch had inflicted. His eyes,
already dimming, found Hotch’s.

“They’re doing great. Thanks for asking.”

One more shot.

He slowly lowered his gun, numb for a moment. There was now someone else who was never going to hurt his family again, and even if there were still more out there, he could at least appreciate the loss of one of them.

He turned sharply back to Perotta, who was still lying on the ground. He still had another to take care of.

Perotta tried to sit up as Hotch approached, but slumped back immediately. His shirt had been almost entirely scorched away by the fire, and his throat was a mass of burns. His shoulders were just as destroyed, and were the main reason Perotta was unable to push himself up. He rolled his head to the side to look at Hotch, and the motion caused him to wince ever so slightly in pain. There was some dried blood caked on his nose and chin. His mouth moved, but the sound escaping it was hardly a rasp. Hotch’s gaze flickered back to Perotta’s throat, and he realized his vocal cords or trachea must have been damaged.

“Hotchner,” Perotta mouthed again, and Hotch narrowed his eyes. “You’re right.”

“About what?”

“Your kids.” His next intake caused him to choke, and his hips bucked off the ground as he struggled to hack his way through the blockage in his throat. Hotch remained where he was, unable and unwilling to do anything to help. When he was able, he looked at Hotch again. “Did I do it right?” he struggled to mouth, blood flecking his lips.

“Do what right?”

“Catch a bad guy.”

Hotch’s eyes widened in realization just as Perotta’s rolled back. “Perotta. Perotta! Wait!” He reached out and tapped his cheek, then tried shaking him. “No, Perotta! Where are they?! Where did you take them?!”

“Hotch!” He looked up desperately to see Rossi and Tonks running towards him. She glanced between the two bodies and him, but Rossi just watched his expression. “Hotch?” he said as they slowed to a halt.

“He didn’t say,” Hotch said, staring at the dead man he’d been seconds too late in getting to. “He just said they were all right.”

“Do you believe him?”

“I don’t know what to believe anymore.”

Chapter End Notes
Posting this now because I am currently trapped in the middle of a huge storm in a university building but I have to make a run for my house, which is almost a mile away, before the storm gets worse. There's lightning and monsoon-worthy rain. If I don't post in a couple days, maybe my beta will be nice and post the rest of the story because she has access to it.

But on the off chance I do somehow survive, reviews would be a nice You're Alive! present.
"Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, exhibit number one is what the seraphs, the misinformed, simple, noble-winged seraphs, envied. Look at this tangle of thorns." - Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*

The BAU returned to Grimmauld Place, without either of the Hotchner children. In their absence, the rest of the Order who had stayed behind had begun contacting family members to ensure that Perotta hadn’t been the only one instructed to kill someone. Everyone was accounted for, and the Weasleys brought their family and Hermione to the headquarters, knowing they would be prime targets because of their connection to Harry. The twins, Ron, Ginny, and Hermione all looked to the BAU for answers as soon as they arrived, but there were none to give.

Days passed with no leads. The entire town had been scoured with no sign of either boy. In a flash of insight, Hotch had returned home to look for Hedwig, who would surely be able to locate her owner, but was stunned to find the snowy owl gone. Sean was sent back home, after he had apologized profusely to everyone who he had repeatedly smacked with a heavy metal object and cooked for everyone with Molly by way of recompense.

There were others who were not so apologetic about anything ethically skeptical they may or may not have done during the search for Harry. One particular person was Hotch, who was subtly met by Dumbledore one evening in the meeting room. One minute he was in there alone, furiously thinking over what he might have missed in the silence, and the next Dumbledore was with him.

"Your concern for Harry is admirable," Dumbledore said quietly. Hotch kept his gaze fixed on the wall opposite him, arms folded. "Not many would have acted as you did."

"You're going to have to elaborate on that," he replied stiffly.

"Instead of turning your back on his unfortunate situation, you made an effort to help him. It was a kind gesture."

He was pretty sure Dumbledore was trying to be noninflammatory. It wouldn't have worked even if Harry wasn't his child, not with how pissed off he was.

But the last thing they needed was division among his sons' searchers. "Not right now," he said abruptly. "I know what you're going to say, and I'm not dealing with this until we find him."

"He will be found, rest assured." Hotch stayed turned away from the headmaster before he did something stupid. "But things cannot return to the way they were." That was obvious, in the opposite way the wizard intended. "He must reconcile with the Dursleys."

"Why?" Hotch snapped. "For a ridiculous prophecy that doesn’t even pertain to them?"

"So that when the time comes, he can learn to forgive his family." Hotch couldn't help his hands, already naturally half-curl from the scars on his palms, clenching into fists at his side. "So he learns to understand the horrible and come to terms that everyone is human, from the abusive Dursleys to
lost Tom to his absent parents."

Getting roped in with the Dursleys and Riddle snapped the fine threads holding Hotch's patience in check.

"Is that all he is to you?" he demanded, turning sharply on his heel to glare at the old headmaster. "He's not your child, but he's definitely not your weapon either. You can't let him stay in an abusive situation just because you think it might be best for him a little later down the road."

"But I do think of him as my child," Dumbledore said.

"Then you've never had children of your own!" Hotch bellowed at him. "He is not an object for you to tinker and mess with, just so you can see how he reacts! You cannot play with his emotions to push him into the kind of person you want him to be! Did you ever take his safety into consideration when he was young, did you even care he had no self-preservation - or did you know about the Horcrux, and did you want him to mind as little for his own health as possible so he wouldn't think anything of sacrifice to get that thing out of his head?"

"Agent Hotchner," Dumbledore said, warmth gone with the twinkle in his eyes. "Do you really think so lowly of me?"

"I can't think anything higher after what you put that boy through," Hotch snapped back.

"If he were not prepared, he would have died or will die in one of his encounters with Tom," Dumbledore said firmly. "He is not ready to handle the pain that will come in the oncoming war without understanding injustice."

"He wouldn't die from Riddle if he had anyone at all to turn to!" Hotch snarled back. "Year after year after year, he's run into danger because he's had nowhere else to go! You're telling me that he won't make it out if he's not prepared, but he wouldn't be in those situations in the first place if not for the fact that he doesn't go for help!"

"And if he goes for help and his rescuer is hurt or killed?" Dumbledore responded. "What then? Harry is an incredibly empathetic creature – it would destroy him more easily than Tom ever could."

"If Harry dies because he doesn't go for help, I hope you remember this conversation," Hotch snapped, and turned abruptly towards the door. He stopped and glanced back at Dumbledore. "You want him back at the Dursleys from now on. That's not going to happen. I don't care if I have to kidnap him from Hogwarts on the last day of each term just to ensure you can't send him back there, but I will not let him step foot in that toxic house again."

"I'm afraid," Dumbledore said quietly, "that matter is quite out of your hands."

Hotch aggressively stepped towards him. "Try and stop me." Then he was out in the kitchen, slamming the door behind him so loudly that it bounced back open as he strode out into the hallway, only somewhat trying to clamp down on his emotions. On one of the balconies above him, he saw a couple of red and brown heads pull back abruptly and belatedly.

The kids started to scramble back to their rooms, only slightly more subtle than Black and Arthur Weasley on the third floor and Nymphadora Tonks on the fourth. He paid none of them any heed, instead set on going back up to one of the rooms that the BAU had allocated as their own to try to profile their way into Harry's head to figure out what had happened.

He must have been louder than he'd thought, because all of them looked up rather calmly as he entered.
"Is Dumbledore still alive?" Reid asked easily.

"Yes," Hotch said shortly as he closed the door and stood angrily by the wall.

"Not for much longer," Morgan translated to Reid in a mutter, leaning back briefly.

"If you decide to strangle him," Prentiss said offhandedly, "you can probably just use his beard."

Before they knew it, two and a half weeks had gone by. Snape told them that Riddle’s forces were just as baffled as to Harry’s disappearance, which meant they hadn’t found him either. All Hotch could linger on were Perotta’s final words, asking if he did it right, and what he said right before, when he told him both kids were safe.

The time finally came when the BAU needed to return to America. There were no leads, and searching had proved completely fruitless. Though they didn’t mention it to anyone else, Hotch’s blood connection still wasn’t strong enough for him to even remotely point them in a direction. But there had been no flare ups, and he knew Perotta hadn’t been lying to him in his last moments. It didn’t make it any easier to turn his back on England and go home, even though he knew there were more people who needed their help.

Molly found him right before they were about to set out, and she pulled him aside into one of the drawing rooms. Before he realized what was happening, she had both arms wrapped around him and was tightly embracing him. “Thank you,” she whispered. “Thank you, thank you. For everything you did for him.”

He hesitated, and then patted her back. “He’s a good kid.”

She pulled away and looked at him through wet eyes. “I always thought of him as my own, but… When this is all over, will you help me find his parents?”

“I think it’s my turn to thank you, for being his family when no one else was,” Hotch said, drawing back early memories from when Harry had talked about the Weasley clan. “While he stayed with me, he talked a lot about your kindness, and how much it meant to him when he didn’t have anyone else.” Molly was shaking now, wiping away tears from her eyes with one hand. “Even if he didn’t know who his real parents were, and even if the Potters were dead, he still had you.”

Molly clasped her hands to her chest, as if she could somehow hold Harry there. “Thank you,” she whispered again, and when Hotch finally left, he wondered when they could tell her the truth so he could fully express his gratitude for everything she had done for his son when she had claimed him as her own.

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“If this is beginning to become a goddamn pattern,” Draco said crossly, “it needs to stop right the fuck now.” He ignored Harry’s frantic gesturing for him to be quiet. “No, I will not shut up, you turd! Everyone went apeshit when you vanished and then you just show up here again like ‘What the fuck ever I’m Harry Hotchner!’” Harry was pointing at something behind a couch at the other end of the Room of Requirement, but Draco brushed him off. “You better get a laptop out and start explaining what happened real fucking quick because I am so many levels of pissed to hell right now that I’m ready to-“

He swore loudly as a head popped out from behind the couch Harry had been pointed at, and the Boy Who Lived dropped his own head into his hands with a groan. “Hi!” the young voice chirped, and Draco gaped at it. “Dad says it’s not nice to interrupt, but he also said that you’re not supposed
“Jack!” he exclaimed. He dropped the bag that he had brought up to the Room, and a plush cushion appeared to catch it before any of the tech equipment inside broke.

“I brought him here immediately,” Harry explained, “but I couldn’t get my phone or my laptop to work, so I decided I would wait for you to get back to fix it. If I left or sent Hedwig, someone might see her or me and realize where we were at.” Quieter, he added, “I couldn’t risk him.”

Draco let out his breath in a sigh. “Okay, fine,” he muttered. “I get it.” He pulled out his own phone, then frowned at it in confusion. “That’s weird. You’re right, it’s down. They must have changed it up quite a bit since last year for it to have entirely taken out technology again…”

“Figure it out later. We need to get to the Welcoming Feast. Who knows I’m missing?”

“The only people who are going to freak are your friends and the Order,” Draco said. “They never told anyone, because if someone saw you and made an uproar they were worried it would get back to Riddle.” He looked up from his phone. “Seriously, talk to your dad,” he continued, but one glance at Harry’s face shut him up. “Sorry.”

“Is he okay?” Harry asked quietly, pulling out his invisibility cloak.

“No,” Draco replied honestly and Harry winced. “But Perotta told him you were all right and he didn’t feel that you were in danger so he was able to hope for the best.”

“Perotta talked to him?”

“I’ll tell you on the way down. We need to hurry if we’re going to make it and not walk in at the same time. Everyone in Slytherin still thinks I spent all summer trying to kill you, remember?”

“Dobby!” Harry called, and the house elf appeared. Draco blinked in surprise to see his old house elf show up but stayed quiet. “Can you watch Jack while I go to the feast? I can’t take him with me but I don’t want to leave him alone.”

“Of course, great Harry Potter sir!” Dobby chirped. “It would be an honor.” Jack was peering at him curiously. “A good afternoon to you, great Jack! How are you?”

“I am amazing!” Jack said cheerfully. “How are you?”

“They’ve met?” Draco asked as Harry threw the cloak over both of them and they slipped out of the room.

“Dobby let me into Hogwarts, actually,” Harry said. “He’s been getting us food from the kitchens ever since. Wouldn’t have made it without him. What were you doing up here?”

"Dropping off that bag so none of the Dark Slytherins would see it and wonder what was inside."

Harry nodded. "So what happened while I was gone?"

Draco quickly filled him in as they sprinted to catch up with their peers, who were just now reaching the Great Hall. Draco slipped out from under the cloak to go stand at the back of the line, while Harry located Hermione and Ron as they muttered between themselves and Neville and Luna. He grabbed Ron’s arm and pulled the redhead back as subtly as he could, but his best friend’s eyes went wide at the sudden force. Harry stepped into the middle of the pack, pulling Ron after him so no one would see, and then yanked his cloak off and began quickly bundling it up.
“Shh!” he hissed immediately as their mouths dropped open. “Act natural!” They hadn’t quite managed it by the time the doors opened and they were ushered in, but at least no one started shrieking. Luna even followed them to the Gryffindor table, and none bothered stopping her. As she sat between Harry and Neville, the twins caught sight of them and pushed a few second years out of the way to claim the spot across from them while Ron and Hermione took seats next to Harry. Ginny left the two girls she had been talking to so she could sit next to Fred.

“Later,” he whispered at their wide eyes. “Technology’s out for a while, by the way.”

Hermione immediately twisted around and looked for the first person she could find from the QDA. Anthony interrupted her search by walking directly towards her and pretending to start a friendly conversation. “Harry, what the hell,” he said with a cheerful smile.

“Hi, Anthony, please don’t kill me,” Harry responded with a similar expression. “And please spread that to everyone else on your way back to your seat.”

“Harry-“

“I’ve already been chewed out, trust me. Midnight?”

“You got it,” Anthony replied with a nod and went back to his table, alerting a few QDA members along the way.

Harry turned back to his table, then paused and glanced at the staff table. “Oh my God, is that our DADA professor?”

“Kill me now,” Ron deadpanned when he saw what had caught Harry’s attention.

“She can’t be for real,” Harry whispered as he turned back.

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The QDA’s reaction at midnight was about what Harry expected, except a lot politer because Jack was in the room and was already asking about the meaning behind some of the words Draco had spewed out. Harry was quick to explain the whole situation to them, while Draco furiously started working on getting the technology going.

“Draco, is that going to be finished by the end of tonight?” Hannah asked. Draco scowled at her. “If not, we should send a message to Hotch.”

“Snape will tell him,” Blaise said dismissively. “In fact, he probably already knows.”

“But he doesn’t know where Jack is,” Hermione said suddenly.

“I’ll see if Snape’s awake when we head back to the dorms later,” Draco said. “If he is I’ll tell him we’ve got Jack. They can figure out how to get him home.”

“That shouldn’t be too hard,” Harry pointed out. “I mean, they let my dad in all the time last year.” A bunch of the Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs nodded, but the rest seemed much more hesitant and Hermione winced.

“None of you really listened to what Umbridge said when she interrupted Dumbledore, did you?” she asked, and they looked at her in bewilderment.

“I didn’t have to,” Daphne said reluctantly. “I recognized her. She’s the undersecretary for Fudge,
and she’s avidly supported his efforts to prevent the public from knowing Voldemort’s back. There were also some reports in the paper about Fudge giving Umbridge unprecedented control within Hogwarts. She’s already got the power to pass orders equal even to Dumbledore’s, and there’s nothing the school can do about it.”

“What?” Harry demanded.

“She’s cracked down on security already,” Daphne continued. “I overheard her talking to Fudge about the new measures they had placed on the school to prevent muggles from getting in like two years ago. They weren’t happy that Hotch got in twice last year either.”

“Wait, how did you overhear them?” Ron asked incredulously.

“I got permission to talk to Fudge about what happened with the werewolves,” she said. “He keeps asking for some of the survivors to come in and refute what we said, so no one will believe Voldemort came back, and I basically told him what he wanted to hear.”

“Why the hell did you do that?” Fred demanded and she looked at him like he was an idiot.

“To drop a listening bug in there, you dope,” she replied and the group stared at her. “I was listening in just in case he heard about Harry reappearing before anyone else did. I didn't have time to put permanent wards around it so it would last in the presence of magic for long, so it died a couple days ago.” She scowled. "I just wish I'd gotten more information out of it."

“Daphne,” Harry said, astonished.

“Oh, don’t look so surprised,” she scolded. “We all look out for each other. It would have been negligence to do otherwise.”

“Yeah, but…still. Thank you.”

“In the meantime, it seems like we’ve got a little one to take care of,” George said, watching as Jack chased Dobby around the room. Perhaps it was the other way around. He turned back to the rest of the group. “How do we keep him secret?”

“Dobby’s going to take care of meals,” Harry said. “I was going to stay here with him as often as I could.”

“I think we’re going to have to tell Seamus and Dean about this,” Neville said hesitantly. “I mean, they’re already sort of starting to get suspicious about where we go all the time, and with this… They’ll know something’s up, and if Umbridge is cracking down, we need them on our side. Harry, they believe you about Voldemort, and they won’t turn you in for hiding your brother here.”

Harry nodded slowly after a long moment. “I think you’re right,” he said, but glanced around the rest of the room. “Any problems?”


“Oh!” Draco exclaimed, pulling something from the large bag he had brought. “As per request, I brought a muggle game. I have absolutely no idea how it’s played, but it’s called Monopoly.”

At that moment, the muggleborns looked at each other with wide eyes.

“Cool!” Susan said. “Let’s see how it works.”
“What’s wrong?” Harry whispered to Hermione as the students who wanted to play began surrounding Draco.

“You’ll see,” she whispered back with a shudder. “In two months.”

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The next day, the first thing Harry did before he even went to breakfast was to go find Snape. The man was in his office, thankfully the first place he checked, and he quickly shut the door behind Harry when he walked in.

“Where the bloody hell have you been?” Snape demanded, and Harry repeated the story again. He was beginning to get the sense of déjà vu, after the last time he had been gone for a while and then returned. Snape slowly began to nod as he realized Harry had been focused on keeping his younger brother safe. “I already told your father that you were here,” he said. “I assumed you knew where Jack was and you appeared calm at the Welcoming Feast so I told him I was sure Jack was safe as well.”

“Can I talk to him?” Harry asked eagerly but Snape was already shaking his head.

“Professor Umbridge brought a team of spellcasters to the school over the summer and added a series of new wards. I believe they were specifically aimed at keeping muggles out and students in. A tab is placed on each student, and if they leave the perimeter, alarms go off. Your father can’t get in and you can’t get out. Your mutual adventures over the last two years have cost you.”

“I need to talk to him,” Harry pleaded. He wanted to know more about Perotta, for one. Draco said he’d died, but there had been no explanations for what he’d done. Surely his father knew more about the man, and whether he was as psychotic as he had seemed to be. Or maybe he didn’t want to talk to his father about him. Whenever he thought about Perotta, he remembered fingers on his throat, hands fastened on his shoulders, a palm moving downward...

And then a hand trailing through his hair, so alike what his father always did but so wrong. And just enough to push Harry from defensively angry to overtly furious as his fist swung through the air.

Only his father ever touched his head like that.

“I can pass a message,” Snape said, but Harry shook his head.

“No, I need to…” He blew out his breath. “Never mind. I can probably just write to him.” Snape paused. “What?”

“There is a chance the mail is being watched,” Snape said cautiously.

“What.”

“Umbridge is taking her new role very seriously, and McGonagall and Sprout have already seen her around the owlry. Neither were able to get close enough to see what she was doing. Are you sure you don’t need me to deliver a message?”

Harry shifted slightly, debating. Finally, he said, “Can you give him a letter from me?”

Snape nodded. “I can do that. You’ll need to get school supplies for this year, so for now I would advise borrowing books from your friends in other houses, to keep the appearance that you had everything before now. I will see about ordering your supplies from Diagon Alley as discretely as possible, and I will attempt to get your trunk from your house.”
Harry deflated in relief, having not even thought about school supplies yet but glad someone else was taking care of it. "Thank you," he said emphatically.

"I believe, in this instance, you have much more important considerations to be thinking about."

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Ron stared at his schedule in horror. "This can’t be happening."

Harry looked over his shoulder and nodded with certainty. "Yep, I’d rather be back in the cemetery with Riddle right now." He got a sharp elbow from Hermione. "Ow!"

"You two!" Hermione said, her attention suddenly diverted as she spotted the twins. Harry turned to look at Ron in confusion as Hermione marched up to them.

"What’s up with her?"

“Oh, the twins are aiming to start a joke shop so they’re starting to market their wares and get people to help them test their products. Hermione reckons they shouldn’t advertise that in the Gryffindor common room, but I’m staying out of it even though she’s saying it’s our duty and all." Harry gave him a blank look. "Oh, right! We both made prefect this year. Dumbledore probably figured we could give all the little ones advice on how not to get into trouble, seeing as how we’ve done it already. He might’ve asked you instead of me, but, you know…"

Harry snorted. “Don’t sell yourself short. I just fall into trouble. I don’t actually know what I’m doing half the time. You and Hermione are the ones who get me through it. Even last year, I got out of the tasks alive because you guys had my back, even if you weren’t there with me.”

Ron was still staring at him, open mouthed, when Hermione sat down next to him with a huff. "Honestly!" She glared at Ron. "Really appreciated the backup, Ronald."

Harry glanced across the room as the two began bickering. "Hey, where is everyone? The hall’s almost full but a bunch of the QDA are still missing."

Ron shrugged, but Hermione gave the hall a scrutinizing stare, followed by a groan. "Oh, you must be joking." When the other two stared at her, she explained, “It’s all the students who stayed late to play Monopoly. They must still be in there.”


“Not exactly. I bet no one’s pride is letting them leave before they have a winner, and that’s going to take them a while.”

True to Hermione’s words, Neville and Hannah both slipped in ten minutes after the bell rang for History of Magic. Harry looked up from the letter he was writing to his dad, raised an eyebrow at Neville as he hurried to take a seat before Binns noticed – which he didn’t – and then went right back to the letter. Hermione glared at him and Ron, who was playing tic-tac-toe with himself on a spare piece of parchment.

“We’ve got OWLs this year!” she exclaimed when they finally left the class. “What do you two think you’re doing?!?"

“Harry!” Neville hissed behind them, and they slowed to let him catch up as they made their way to the Room of Requirement. “Sorry about, uh… Well, we might have kept your brother up last night. It got pretty…rowdy.”
“What happened?” Harry asked in bewilderment.

Neville glumly replied, “Blaise stole everyone’s money halfway through so we ousted him from the game and tried to redistribute it but the Ravenclaws ‘overestimated’ everything they had so they ended up with more money than they really needed, and then Daphne somehow ended up on top at about seven this morning only for us to realize that some of the money Blaise had stolen hadn’t gotten redistributed so we finished at about nine.” The trio stared at him. “Er, sorry again.”

As he hurried off, Ron breathed, “What the hell.”

Hermione waved the matter away just as Harry began to understand what she had been talking about when she said Monopoly was a dangerous game. “OWLs are important!” she insisted. “More than you realize! How else are you planning on getting a job?”

“I’ll just do it Draco’s way,” Harry muttered and Hermione swatted him.

“No, you aren’t, or you would have started this summer like he did! You have to pay attention in History of Magic if you want to pass!”

“What are you planning on doing after school, Hermione?” Ron suddenly asked. “I mean, you could be anything you wanted, with scores like yours.”

For once, she was interrupted mid-flow and her entire thought process came to a grinding halt. “I don’t know,” she said. “I mean, when I was younger I thought I was going to be a doctor like my parents, but once I came here I realized I could do something I’d never even heard of before… I need to think about it some more. What about you?”

“A job where I can be with you,” he said in such a regular tone that it took all three of them several paces to fully process what he’d said. Harry finally slowed down, staring at his friend in bewilderment, and Hermione just came to a dead halt. Ron picked up speed, face turning beet red as he realized he had said that out loud.

“Ron…?” Hermione breathed, and the teenager took off running. “Ron!” She looked at Harry for clarification, and as a spur-of-the-moment decision he gestured for her to follow him. He watched, still unclear as to what had just happened, as he saw his two best friends sprinting off, one fleeing and the other in quick pursuit.

He winced as he saw Hermione finally catch up to him and grab him roughly by the shoulders. There were some loud voices, which Harry couldn’t quite make out, and then there was loud responding, which Harry also couldn’t make out, and then there was simultaneous loud shrieking which Harry definitely didn’t understand. He winced again, edging backwards in case it became apocalyptic, and then he spared a glance again and the two had gotten quiet and were pressed up against each other’s fronts and their faces were-

Harry turned sharply on his heel and hurried away.

Well.

That happened.

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The first day of school at Hogwarts passed agonizingly slowly for Hotch back at the BAU. He found himself staring off into space before furiously shaking himself, and then when he finally was able to focus on his work – because evil never slept, though everyone knew he certainly needed to
eventually – Blackwolf interrupted him.

“First, Strauss is pissed at you.”

“What else is new?” Hotch said shortly without looking up.

“Well, your team hasn’t really been focused the last few weeks.”

“I wonder why,” Hotch snapped. He knew if he met the Apache’s gaze he was going to explode, and what little part of himself remained in control was aware that he really didn’t want to do that. Between Blackwolf and Strauss, he really needed Blackwolf’s support if he wanted to keep helping the kids at Hogwarts and stay involved in the wizarding world. Besides, it wasn’t Blackwolf’s fault everything had happened.

If anything, it was Hotch’s own damn miscalculations.

“Second, Snape got a message through to me about the state of Hogwarts. Undersecretary Dolores Umbridge has taken significant power and is exercising it as excessively as possible. The first thing she did was put strong anti-muggle wards around the entire school, and the students confirmed they’re strong enough to have temporarily blocked out all their technology. Draco Malfoy is trying to fix it but he told Snape that he thinks he’s going to need Garcia to help him troubleshoot.”

Any other time, Hotch would have cared. Really. But it didn’t matter to him when he couldn’t communicate with the two people who mattered.

“Third, Snape said that Harry showed up at the Welcoming Feast.”

Hotch’s head snapped up.

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In double potions, Draco performed the most laughable attempts to get Harry’s potions to blow up in his face. Harry eagerly retaliated, and the half of the class who didn’t know what was really going on watched as the two tried to kill each other. Snape stared at the pair with the look of someone who is on the verge of murder and finally evaporated both potions before they did significant damage to themselves or the others around them. They spent the rest of the class bickering about whose fault it was before Snape cast a silencing charm on both of them, and then they finished it with rudely gesturing at each other.

Hermione, who would normally have scolded him and stopped him from going any further, was busy staring at Ron, who was busy staring at her, and as a result Hermione was sure to receive her first failing grade in a potions lab ever. Harry didn’t bother trying to correct her, having already tried speaking to both of his friends earlier only to discover that they were both too busy soul gazing to focus on anything anyone else was saying.

Divinations was next. Ron somehow separated himself from Hermione and followed Harry up to Trelawney’s classroom. They started on dream interpretation, and when Harry asked if Ron remembered any the redhead just sighed and said, “Hermione. And it’s come true! Hey, for once this class helped me in real life!” Professor Trelawney was shocked to get an honest grin from the boy as she circled around, and Harry felt like leaving the classroom to be done with it would be his best option.

Instead, he stayed until the very end, when Trelawney grabbed him and said, “I told you, Mr. Potter. You were fated to die.” She patted his shoulder. “But I’m so glad to see you back among us!” She let him go, and he stood there for a long moment before darting down the ladder with the panicky
feeling of someone who has just come across rather unfortunate knowledge they never wanted to be forced to consider, somewhat like the sensation of realizing that one's parents must have had sex to have had their offspring.

When he found himself standing in the DADA classroom not long after, he realized with horror that he would much rather be back in Trelawney’s room. He took a seat by Hermione and Ron, who had finally settled down now that they had been apart from each other for more than five minutes and had entered the enemy’s lair.

“Good morning, class.” Umbridge simpered, and Harry had a dark feeling of foreboding.

Ten minutes later, and Hermione raised her hand. Another ten passed until everyone had stopped reading and was waiting for the professor to acknowledge her. Umbridge looked up with a sigh. “You should be reading, unless you have a question about the textbook, Miss…?”

“Granger, and it’s about the course aims. We have OWLs at the end of the year. I trust that we will be practicing defensive spells?”

“Why ever would you have to? What would you need to practice defensive spells against in this classroom?”


“Raise your hand if you want to talk in class.”

His hand shot into the air.

“Name?”

“Weasley. What do you mean, we won’t be practicing spells? How else are we supposed to know how to use them?”

Umbridge gave a mild laugh at the childish figures before her. “Oh, but why would you ever need to know how to use defensive spells?”

Beside him, Hermione had gone completely white, and he knew she was hearing the screams he was hearing.

A hand went in the air across the room. “Parvati Patil,” she said before Umbridge could ask. “You’re saying that the first time we’re ever going to use the defensive spells we need to pass the class is going to be when we’re standing in the OWL testing room?”

“I don’t see why you shouldn’t be able to manage it if you study hard enough.” There was an angry mutter and Umbridge turned to the source. “I’m sorry, I didn’t quite catch that…?”

“Longbottom, and I said studying hard isn’t going to give us any practical knowledge.”

“But there’s no reason you would ever need practical knowledge. That is, after all, why the Ministry is here for your protection.”

Harry scoffed, and Umbridge turned to him. “Potter,” he said. “And Riley Thans, and Abigail Wrottan, and Cho Chang, and Gregory Goyle, and Vincent Crabbe, and Marietta Edgecombe, and Cedric Diggory, and Tracey Davis, and Leanne Wyory, and Mara Jenkins, and Sebastian Campers! The Ministry didn’t protect us! It came too late, to save them, to save us, to stop Voldemort from coming back-“
“Ten points from Gryffindor,” Umbridge interrupted.

“Make it twenty. I’m not done.” He held up his wrist, for once openly displaying the scars on it. There were a few sharp gasps, and he realized just how few had actually seen it. “You think this is a joke? You think a bunch of us just faked getting tortured? That we set alarms and wake up screaming in the middle of the night? Did we draw fake scars on each other, make it look like we’d been torn apart and put back together? Where was the Ministry then? We didn’t make it through that because of the Ministry, we made it through because of how we learned to protect ourselves!”

“Detention!”

“Yeah, detention’s terrifying after someone gets murdered in front of you! Did you ever talk to their families? Did you ever see what state we were in when we got back? No? Then don’t talk about the real world like you know something about it. Yeah, we do need to protect ourselves, because you’re not there for us. We saw the real world, we survived it. And don’t you dare dismiss us, and don’t you dare dismiss their deaths by saying it’s a safe world out there because the Ministry is there to protect us.”

“Detention for a week.” She scribbled something down on a sheet of paper and held it out to him. “Take this to Professor McGonagall.”

“Gladly,” he sneered, stalking forward to snatch the paper out of her hands. He hoped he gave her a paper cut.

The walk to McGonagall’s was spent fuming more than anything else. The bitch cut off their communications between each other through their phones and to everyone else through the owls, and now she was trying to minimalize everything from the inside. He was so furious that he almost walked right past McGonagall’s door and had to backtrack and knock.

“Enter. Potter?” she said in surprise as he closed the door behind him. He handed her the slip.

“You shouted at her in class.”

“Yes.”

“And told her she was a liar.”

“Yes.”

“And told her You-Know-Who is back.”

“Yes.”

“Have a biscuit.”

He paused, then took one with a “Thank you” and sat down in the chair opposite her desk. “You know, I don’t think enough students tell you how awesome you are.” He shocked her into laughter, and he grinned around his biscuit, feeling some of the tension leaking away.

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Thankfully for everyone around them, Ron and Hermione were soon completely back to normal. Harry discovered this the loud way when he found Hermione yelling in exacerbation at Draco, who had been backed into a corner and had his hands up like he was fending off a wild animal. Ron watched on from the couch, legs tucked up in front of him in a pose mirroring Jack’s beside him. The
two had a bowl of popcorn between them and would absently reach over and grab a few pieces.

“There’s no way you’re going to be able to do all your homework unless you get started now!” Hermione shouted. “Honestly, Draco, what do you think you’re going to do? Fail all your classes this year? It’s ridiculous. I know you’re better than that! I know you can get all of this done, and in plenty of time too! I mean, sure, I expect this sort of thing out of Ron—” the redhead choked, suddenly panicking that he might be included in the conversation but not at all insulted by the part he played in it—“but not from you!”

“Er, Hermione?” Draco said tentatively. “You do realize it doesn’t matter if I pass these classes or not, right?”

Hermione just stared at him, mouth gaping.

“Harry, you did tell her, right?”

“I thought you did.”

“I just said I was taking muggle classes.”

“Oh.”

“Ah, Hermione,” Draco said carefully, reaching out to her for a moment and then retracting his hands on second thought. “See, I meant to say this before but—”

“You’re going to graduate from muggle high school,” she whispered, “so you can go to a muggle college.”

“…Yeah.” After a pause in which neither said anything, he continued, “Er, I sort of thought you’d be, I don’t know…excited…?”

“Excited?” Harry winced, moving to stand closer to the other two. Hermione threw herself at Draco and for a moment Harry started planning a eulogy. “I’m ecstatic! Draco, you’re going to love it!”

Ron let out his breath in a whoosh and dropped his head against the back of the couch. “I was going to keep something from you guys, but now I’m too scared,” he admitted to Harry. “I want to try out for Keeper this year, since Wood’s gone and there’s an opening.”

“Well, you’ve got the reflexes for it,” Harry agreed as they watched Draco and Hermione flailing in their own corner in excitement. “I’m glad you and Hermione finally got together. Took you long enough.”

Ron nodded in agreement. “Yeah, I suppose so. But hey, we got there, right? I admitted it.”

“I don’t think what you did qualifies as ‘admitting it’.” He took the spot on Jack’s opposite side, ignoring Ron’s scowl. “Hey, how’s your day been?”

Jack grinned at him. “Dobby played card games with me! He says he really likes them!”

“That’s good!” Harry said. “So, uh, it sounds like we might not be able to see Dad for a while longer,” he carefully said, but Jack’s face fell immediately. “But I talked to Professor Snape, and he said that he could deliver some letters for us. So, would you like to write a letter to Dad?” Jack nodded his head, but it didn’t have his usual enthusiasm. Harry grabbed a scrap of parchment and a regular muggle pen for Jack, and the six-year-old quickly set to work.
“Have you spoken to Seamus and Dean yet?” Ron asked and Harry shook his head.

“I think I might need you and Neville to back me up,” he said. “I suppose we better give them the same story the Order knows, but it’s a bit…outlandish. If we have to, we can introduce them to Jack.” He rubbed his brother’s shoulders absently as he spoke, feeling Jack unconsciously lean into the touch. “I’m going to tell them tonight, so I can sleep in here until Dad can come get Jack.”

Ron nodded in understanding. “That should work.” He paused. “Don’t you have a detention tonight?”

Harry barely stopped himself from swearing in front of Jack and found himself sprinting down the hallways minutes later until he came to the DADA classroom. He caught his breath and composed himself before he walked in, right on time, and made his way up to the office.

“Come in,” she called after he rapped his knuckles on the door. He had to take a moment to recover from the whiplash of seeing the new décor. The last time he had seen it, the fake and the real Moody had both covered it in Dark artifacts. Now it resembled a lace doily factory that had been force-fed pink dye until it vomited all over the room. “Take a seat,” she said, gesturing to a small chair and table that had been brought in. “You’re going to be writing lines.”

“Writing what and how many times?”

“I will not tell lies. And you’ll write it until it sinks in.” She stopped him as he moved to grab his own quill, and deposited a black feathered quill on his desk. “You’ll be using one of mine today.”

“Ink?”

“You won’t need any.”

He picked it up, and he wondered if something was wrong with him for immediately looking for signs of dark magic. Nothing caught his attention, and he eyed Umbridge in case she might reveal what its purpose was. She smiled at him, and he put the quill to the paper, ignoring the scratching against the back of his hand.

He looked up a few times, enjoying how Umbridge was steadily getting more and more frustrated. Finally, after half an hour had gone by, she stood up abruptly from her desk and strode over to lean over his shoulder as he wrote. He didn’t think there was anything strange about what was going on, although maybe the magic on the quill was misbehaving. He scowled in annoyance at the itching, which was the only real bummer. Sometimes his nerves sent strange signals to his brain when he moved his hand a weird way or when he did a lot of repetitive motion. He scratched the back of his hand absently, although he knew it would have no effect, but felt liquid under his nails as they came away. Despite Umbridge’s presence, he stopped and stared at his hands, just now realizing what had happened.

The quill was using his blood.

This was a freaking joke.

He let a laugh escape him as Umbridge’s frustration finally made sense. Instead of explaining his amusement, however, he plowed on with his lines, snirking to himself as he just kept going instead of stopping to throw a tantrum like she expected him to. She stormed off back to her desk, dropping into her seat and glaring at him for the rest of the detention. He started yawning at what he expected to be midnight, a little irritated that he wasn’t going to be able to talk to Seamus and Dean like he had wanted but hopeful that maybe Ron and Neville had just done it for him and spared him the pain.
“Stop,” she finally said and he put the quill down. “What did you do to it?”

He stared blankly at her. “I…don’t know? I didn’t do anything to the quill, if that’s what you mean.” He stood up, grabbing his bag and slipping the strap over his shoulders.

“Impossible,” she hissed.

“Not really,” he replied easily. “See, the werewolves caused severe nerve damage to the area around my wrist. Most of it was healed, but there are a few weird after-effects. I’ve got a few spots I just don’t have sensation in, and I’ve got other areas where I do have sensation and it’s just muted. I don’t really feel pain quite the same way in them either, which is really helpful for cramming essays into an hour because I can’t feel my hand cramping.” He beamed at her. “So, tomorrow, same time?”

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The next morning, he made sure he was up early. If last night had been anything to go by, his next detention was going to run far too late for him to get any homework done. Draco might not care this year, but Harry definitely needed to do well on his OWLs. How embarrassing would it be to survive a dark lord only to be killed by standardized testing?

True to his words with Umbridge, his hand suffered no cramping as he scratched out line after line on the ridiculously long essays he had for Sinistra and McGonagall. Instead of going back to Gryffindor tower, since it didn’t really matter if he came back at all when Dean and Seamus weren’t going to see it anyway, he had gone to the Room of Requirement and slipped in quietly to find the room rearranged again.

There was a section in the back that was completely blocked off, with only a single door permitting entrance, and the rest of the room was dedicated to throw pillows and couches in a general lounge area. A few students were sprawled around the cushions, having not bothered to make it back to their rooms, and a couple more were gathered around a game of Monopoly. They looked so intent that Harry didn’t go anywhere near them and instead made his way to the very back, where he opened the door to find that someone had willed beds for himself and Jack into existence. He would have kissed whoever had done this, except he was sure it was Hermione and he supposed Ron might take offense with that.

He looked up from his essay as Jack sat up in his bed, only a few feet away from Harry’s. The room was large enough to comfortably fit both of their belongings – what few they had brought with them and gathered over the last few weeks – but the beds remained snuggly close together. As a result, it was easy for Jack to slide out from under his blankets and crawl into Harry’s at six in the morning. Harry set the parchment aside to help him in, the technical terms about astronomy fading from his mind as concern overtook them.

“You all right, buddy?” he asked softly as Jack burrowed his way to Harry’s side. A nose poked him in the thigh for a moment until Jack rested his forehead against the same spot. He shook his head back and forth. “Nightmare?”

“Don’t wanna be alone again,” Jack whined quietly, and Harry wrapped a hand around him.

“I’m here, it’s okay,” Harry whispered, rubbing his shoulders. “It’s going to be all right.” He pushed his school work aside as he felt Jack begin crying, and he shuffled down until he was lying parallel to Jack and could more easily wrap his arms around him.

A few hours later, when Jack was wide awake and had completely forgotten the summer’s end in the
haze of the sleep that had come over him, Harry grabbed his letter he had written for his father and added a note at the bottom.

*Jack’s having problems, but he won’t really tell me what about. He keeps saying he doesn’t want to be left alone but he’s been with someone this whole time, and when I ask him to explain he just keeps repeating what he said before. Help?*

He felt bad about asking the agent for assistance when Hotch couldn’t even see his own kids and was only able to worry over them, but he knew he was out of his league and mental health was really what his father did best.

Well, technically he evaluated horrendous mental health and predicted its behavioral patterns but still. He knew more about it than Harry did about moonstones, which Snape was going to be able to attest to once Harry turned in that essay.

He took both his and Jack’s letters to Snape, who didn’t say anything about the second one and simply stated that Hotch should be getting them within a few days. Harry expressed his gratitude again before heading back to the Room of Requirement. He’d left Jack with Blaise, who had been at the Monopoly game last night and hadn’t gone to back to the dorms, but he didn’t want to leave his younger brother longer than he had to, what with the state he was in at the moment. He already felt like a failure enough for not being able to keep his brother away from psychopaths – he should at least be able to keep Jack’s mental demons away from him, especially when Harry knew so much about those from personal experience.

A full schedule of classes in which the word OWLs swam through his head like the Loch Ness, a stack of homework with about the same weight as a mastodon, and a few more detentions with Umbridge that were as entertaining as watching Hermione and Ron stare lovingly at each other. And then finally, the weekend.

The first item of the day on Saturday was to sleep in, long past breakfast, simply because he could. The second item was to gather all his homework, stare at it mournfully, and then begin trudging through it with a few others who had gathered in the Room of Requirement to do the same. Draco said he’d finished everything for his muggle classes for now and was deigning to actually do something in his magical classes, so he joined Harry and they managed to get a surprising amount done before dinner. The Slytherin proved more helpful than even Hermione in Astronomy, since he had taken a similar course over the summer for science credits.

The third item was the part he was dreading the most, even more than his Transfigurations essay, and he grabbed Neville and Ron to meet Dean and Seamus up in their dorm room.

“Hey,” Dean greeted cheerfully. “I feel like I haven’t seen you since you got here. Where’ve you been hiding?”

Harry sighed. “Yeah, so about that…”

He sat down on his bed. Neville turned his back on him – traitor – and started sorting clothes that didn’t need to be sorted. Ron was avoiding his gaze in case Harry tried to look to him for help, which was exactly what Harry had been going to do.

"Well, it's a bit of a long story," Harry continued. Dean and Seamus were staring at him in confusion. "But, uh... There was a muggleborn kid who I got really attached to over the last couple of summers and we think the Death Eaters found out about him. He wasn't safe where he was at and the Death Eaters were closing in on us so... Er, I sort of brought him with me to school."
Dean and Seamus stared at him, mouths gaping.

"There's a room in the castle that provides anything the user requires of it, so he's been staying there. I'm going to sleep in that room with him to keep him company since no one else knows he's here. I just figured you should know so you don't wonder why I'm not in here."

Seamus put his hands up. "We'll keep silent. Not a word out of us about this."

"Thanks," Harry said, relieved. He would have tried to say he was having trouble with nightmares but the pair knew that the terrors had begun to ease for their three roommates over last year and a resurgence would have seemed odd.

"Who else knows?" Dean asked.

"Just a couple friends. I had to walk us here because I couldn't get him on the Hogwarts Express so I had to tell the people I knew would be looking for me on the train."

There were a couple more generic questions, but the two were still reeling from the sudden statement and didn't push too hard yet. When there was a significant pause while they organized their thoughts, Harry took the excuse to dart off to the Room of Requirement and take shelter from anymore queries.

That had gone better than expected.

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The process of getting letters to Hotch proved to be quite difficult because Snape had to leave the castle to send them if he wanted complete assurance that the letters wouldn't get caught up in Umbridge's letter scan system. He sent them from Hogsmeade and tried to ignore his irritation about muggle technology not working in the castle anymore. When the letters arrived on Hotch's desk, two days had passed because of how long it took mail to cross the ocean and get delivered to the proper address, but they were secure and had arrived without tampering.

He read Harry's first. It began with an apology for not communicating, which Hotch could have predicted almost word for word. He knew Harry was serious, but he couldn't help smiling faintly. Some things about Harry just never changed over the years. The apology bled into an explanation about what happened, which they had largely guessed by that point. Once Perotta had gone, Harry had ignored his demands to stay still and had pulled Jack under the invisibility cloak with him and then snuck out of the town.

A day later, they were smuggling themselves into Hogwarts with help from the house elf Dobby, who had taken care of them until school started. There was an explicit mention that he and Jack had arrived completely unharmed. He ended the letter with a request for what had happened from Hotch's end, since he'd heard different details from everyone who told it and was wondering if there was anything else Hotch knew that he had missed. Oddly enough, he also asked for more information about Perotta as a person. He had signed his name, but had later come back with a question.

Hotch set Jack's letter aside for the moment to compose a reply. He told Harry his point of view, but stopped part of the way in when he read back over Harry's letter and realized that, in the wake of Perotta's death and all its implications, no one had thought much of the Woodsmarked Killer. How could he tell Harry that in a letter? And yet he didn't have much choice.

In the end, he explained what happened from his end as well as he could, skimming over what Harry
evidently already knew and finishing with a seriously edited version of the final confrontation in which he explained that the Woodsmarked Killer had fatally wounded Perotta and Hotch had returned the favor. He put it as bluntly as he could, not wanting to tell Harry that he had essentially shot the man seven times in a fit of rage – he knew what kind of example that would set for a teenager in the middle of a war – and reminded him that he and Jack were safe from one more killer now, hoping that would give him some comfort. It took him some effort to find the right words, but he somehow managed to describe Perotta to him, trying to explain the man’s actions.

It proved more difficult than he had thought it would be, and his main trouble lay in explaining the key words that had been exchanged between the two of them, the words that Perotta had been fixated on ever since he was arrested.

“It’s not surprising that some people grow up to become killers.”

“Some people?”

“What’s that?”

“You said some people grow up to become killers.”

“And some people grow up to catch them.”

How could he explain that?

In the end, he decided there was no way around it. Besides, there was no point in hiding it from his son, who had already shown to be terrifyingly adept at interpreting the people around him, and who already knew the basics of his past home life anyway. Maybe Harry was picking up too many tricks from being around profilers all the time, and giving him anything else to work with made Hotch almost apprehensive. Finally, he mentally scolded himself – it was easier to all but tell his son to his face what had happened than do it so impersonally – for trying to wimp out of this. He described the conversation that had transpired, and trusted Harry to read between the lines. Harry might have known about the bad relationship between Hotch and his father, but he didn't know quite how badly it had gotten.

He breezed past any explanation he might have given of that and instead moved to Harry’s final question. Jack had been terrified of being left alone after Haley had died, and it seemed recent events had brought that old fear back up. The best way Hotch had found to treat it had been to simply keep him surrounded by as many people as possible, which had often led to frequent trips in parks and museums, and prevent him from being anywhere quiet for too long. Even while he slept, some background noise had proven helpful in keeping away bad dreams.

If only he could have found such an easy method to take care of Harry’s nightmares.

Or his own.

He set his letter aside, turning now to Jack’s. It was much shorter, written in his childlike scrawl, and was painfully abrupt and to the point in the way that only children could be. He took a moment just to look at the handwriting at the top of the page, forcing himself to acknowledge that despite what had happened, his children had made it to safety without harm.

“Dad,” Jack began, “We got to Hogwarts, and it's so cool! The pictures and the stairs move and the ghosts are really creepy but they're cool too. Peeves is mean but the Baron made him leave me alone. Everyone’s scared of him but he found out I was scared in the middle of the night so he came in and told me some bedtime stories because Harry was in detention.”
It took Hotch a moment to process the final word, but when he did, he was even more confused. What on earth had Harry done to get a detention so quickly? And, while he was wondering, who were Peeves and the Baron? He might be adding his own side note to Harry’s letter.

“Dobby keeps coming to bring me food, and he’s great to play with. Sometimes he brings some of the other elves and they stay with me until classes end. Gred keeps coming in when they’re not supposed to and Ron says Hermione is letting them get away with it.” He hoped the boy knew the twins were two separate people, even if he was combining their name into one. “Everyone says Harry’s not sleeping where he’s supposed to be because he’s supposed to be in the dorms or something, but he’s staying with me in the room.” Room of Requirement.

“A bunch of people keep talking in the other part of the room. They’re playing Monopoly, but Hermione says I shouldn’t join in because they’re being childish. I told her someone called me childish and she said I was more mature than them.” So Garcia had decided to send Draco back with Monopoly. That could only go badly. At least Hermione had the good sense to keep Jack away from the ensuing chaos.

“Hermione also said I should tell you what happened in case Harry forgot something.” Which Harry wouldn’t, but Hermione also knew it would probably be good for Jack to talk about what happened to his father. He hoped that girl realized she was worth far more than all the books she had ever read and all the knowledge she had soaked up from them. “Vincent came and got us from home, and he took us somewhere and we waited a long time. Harry and Vincent got upset at each other, and Harry made me stay behind him, which was stupid because I can take care of myself.”

The small smile that had been present on his face through the rest of the letter fell off as the image of Harry putting himself between a mass murderer and his eight-year-old brother implanted itself in his mind. Harry’s alive, he reminded himself. Harry said they came back unharmed, and Harry had promised to never keep a secret like that from him.

The next few lines wiped away the traces of hope about how it had been resolved.

“Vincent started touching Harry and Harry didn’t like it. He was moving his clothes weirdly. I think Harry stopped breathing and it sounded like he was choking, but that stopped. Then Vincent went away and we went back to the table and waited some more. Then Harry asked him about something and Vincent put his hands on him again, and Harry got upset but he didn’t show Vincent. I asked him about it later but Harry said he didn’t want to talk about it. Then Vincent left and Harry said we should go so we came to Hogwarts, and Dobby took us to the room. He gave Harry something to make him sleep so he could do something about the bruises on Harry’s neck. He didn’t tell me where those came from either.”

He grabbed his phone and was pacing as it rang, already wondering if they could possibly use the same ceremony that had resurrected Voldemort so they could bring Perotta back just so he could kill him without the Woodsmarked Killer’s help. Over and over. And then a few more times, to make sure he got the message. He’d probably have to look back through Perotta’s case files to see how he’d done it to his victims in the past.

Perotta had touched his son. Perotta had laid his hands on Harry.

And Harry had had no choice but to let him because he was paying for Hotch’s stupid mistake, for not going with Travis to make sure it was Cramer they were talking to, for not ever. Fucking. Checking because they’d been so confident, they’d been so prideful, they’d been so arrogant that they’d gotten away with their little secret.

Someone called his name, and he realized Blackwolf had answered. “Hotch,” he said again, and he
had the tone of someone who was ready to grab the nearest shotgun in preparation for the apocalypse. “What’s wrong? What happened?”

“I need to go see Harry. Now.”

“What happened?”

“There’s- I” He growled in frustration, and he heard the door to his office open. He glanced over, eyes narrowed at whoever had dared intrude, and saw Morgan cautiously closing the door behind himself. Hotch gestured for him to leave, but Morgan stood his ground, watching Hotch furiously pace back and forth. “I need to ask him something, and I’m not having this conversation with him over a series of goddamn letters because he already forgot to mention something.”

As soon as he said, he regretted it. How exactly was Harry going to put something like that in a letter? Hotch hadn’t even been sure as to how he was going to tell Harry just how abusive his home used to be, and that had been years ago. He strode to his desk and picked up Harry’s letter, scanning it quickly. Had he tried to tell Hotch? Was there any sign that something hadn’t gone well with Perotta? Maybe that was why he’d wanted to know more about Perotta’s history, as a coping method.

Maybe he’d wanted to know if he was the first or not, so he could figure out how to tell his father.

“Hotch,” Blackwolf said cautiously. “There’s no way we can get you in. The security on Hogwarts is ridiculous now, and it’s because of you, a muggle who’s somehow broken into the school an unprecedented number of times. Umbridge and the Ministry are literally waiting for you to walk in. Is this worth getting sent to Azkaban for? If so, I’ll help you, but you have to go in knowing the risks.”

He couldn’t get sent to Azkaban. He’d already failed to protect his sons enough that day three weeks ago, and the only thing he had managed successfully was to get rid of someone who had already taken away a fourth of their family. Still… He had to talk to Harry. He couldn’t wait for the letters to go back and forth again. At this rate, it’d be a week before he got a reply, and that didn’t mean he’d get a definite response.

But if he were completely honest with himself, Hotch wasn’t even sure he’d be able to catch Harry in a lie face-to-face about something like this. He could only hope that Harry would just be honest with him, but he couldn’t fault Harry for lying about it when the man who had done it had died saving him and his brother while going after the one who had killed their mother. He needed more experience in this matter, but there wasn’t time, and-

He froze, staring at Morgan. To his credit, the other agent did not lean away, although he looked tempted to jump out the window before he got eaten.

“Blackwolf, you’re saying I can’t get in because they’re looking for me specifically?” he said urgently.

“I heard rumors that they caught a sample of you, maybe hair or something,” Blackwolf replied. “You’re keyed into the system to set off an alarm. Not to mention she’s probably got people on the lookout in the surrounding area for someone who looks like you. If she could manage to catch you, they could denounce how Hogwarts was previously run and take it entirely under the Ministry’s wing. They’re dying to catch you, Hotch, which is why I really don’t think it’s a good idea to-“

“Could someone else make it in?” Hotch interrupted.
There was a long, speculative pause. “Gideon might be keyed into the system too,” Blackwolf said slowly, “but I don’t think anyone else should be, since they didn’t know who else was on your team.”

“I’ll call you back, but I’m going to be sending someone in to Hogwarts.”

“Hotch,” Blackwolf said as Hotch moved to end the call. “Is he okay?”

“I don’t know. That’s the problem.”

He put his phone away and reached over his desk to grab both of his son’s letters. Morgan hadn’t moved, determination holding him in place. “What happened? Are they okay?” he asked, unknowingly repeating what Blackwolf had just said.

In response, he handed Morgan Harry’s letter. “Tell me if anything at all sounds off.”

Morgan quickly read through it, then looked up. “I’d say it seems strange that he wants to know more about Perotta, but… Well, he’s been around us for a while. Other than that, he seems fine.”

Hotch paused. The reason why he was so willing to trust Morgan with this was because he knew the other man’s experience with this kind of situation far outweighed Hotch’s own. But was it fair to shove Morgan into that sort of situation again because Hotch thought there might be some danger?

“Vincent started touching Harry and Harry didn’t like it.”

He gave Morgan the next letter.

Morgan visibly stopped reading halfway through. “Hotch,” he whispered.

“He said he couldn’t see,” Hotch said, uncomfortably aware that his voice was shaking. “But there are only so many ways to interpret whatever Jack was hearing, and he might be young but he’s a bright kid and he’s nothing if not attentive to the people around him, so if he said Harry didn’t-“ He cut himself off. “Morgan, I need to know.”

Morgan nodded resolutely. “I’ll talk to Elle about how to get in.”

“If you have to, take her with you. She might be able to manage it easier because of her magical traits right now.”

“We’re going to need Garcia’s help to break through the wards, but if it’s like normal it shouldn’t take her too long. They might know we broke in, though.”

“I don’t care.”

“Do you want me to tell Elle what’s going on?”

“If you think you need to.”

Morgan nodded in understanding. “If we can, we’ll try to bring Jack back with us.” He hesitated, and then placed a comforting hand on Hotch’s shoulder. “We’ll find out what happened. And Harry… He’s strong. Maybe stronger than we give him credit for.”

“Morgan, strength only gets people so far, and Perotta… Harry’s whole letter reads of Stockholm Syndrome in comparison to Jack’s.” The moment he finished his last sentence, he remembered just who he was talking to and looked away as Morgan’s face started to darken in understanding.
“I’ll talk to him,” Morgan said firmly. “We’ll figure this out.”

Chapter End Notes

I survived the storm! Got home fine. And thankfully the water didn't soak through my backpack and damage my laptop, which I'd been really worried about because the rain was coming down so hard.

So happy about the response with last chapter! There seems to be a divide between Perotta's Good and Perotta's Evil with a healthy mix of uneasiness in the middle about where he stands. I really wanted to create a character who helped the BAU and Harry but wasn't necessarily acting in the best way. Seems like I managed that! I'm surprised that no one brought up what Hotch was going to do when he heard about what happened, though.

We're on fifth year! This year is the most...interesting...school year Harry has.
"In all great works of fiction, regardless of the grim reality they present, there is an affirmation of life against the transience of that life, an essential defiance. This affirmation lies in the way the author takes control of reality by retelling it in his own way, thus creating a new world. Every great work of art, I would declare pompously, is a celebration, an act of insubordination against the betrayals, the horrors and infidelities of life. The perfection and beauty of form rebels against the ugliness and shabbiness of the subject matter." - Azar Nafisi, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*

Harry got back from another detention, much later than he would have liked. Maybe this would teach him to run his mouth, but frankly, the lines weren’t bad when he couldn’t really feel it. Finally, he’d found a use for torture scars: detention didn’t suck so much.

Hermione and Ron had found out about it, but it was hard for either of them to take it seriously when Harry spent the next ten minutes regaling them with a description of just how furious Umbridge was when she realized that Harry couldn’t really feel it. Besides, he was almost done with the detentions, and there wasn’t any real point in throwing a fuss when it couldn’t hurt him besides some scratching. It would heal up in a few days and that would be that.

He went back to the Room of Requirement, checking every once in a while to make sure no one was following him. He had been stunned to learn that all of the ghosts were apparently keeping eyes out for the kids, and was even more shocked to learn it was because the Bloody Baron was scaring them all into obedience. No one had been able to explain that to him just yet, but he hoped the ghosts stayed on their side. It made it much easier to get back to the Room of Requirement without worrying about being discovered.

To make it even easier, Dean and Seamus now knew some of what was going on. They’d even gone to the Room to meet Jack, and, like everyone else who met the boy, had instantly fallen in love with him. There was no way they were going to turn them in, even if they hadn’t hated Umbridge as much as everyone else did. Not with Jack’s little innocent eyes seared into their brains.

Roger shifted, allowing Harry to see just what was the source of everyone’s attention. He grinned and set off in that direction, joining the back to listen to Elle continuing her talk about one of the werewolf communities near Dover. She was in the middle of a particularly entertaining story when Harry felt a tap on his shoulder, and he looked up to see Morgan standing over him. He gestured, and Harry got to his feet and followed him to the other end of the room. As they walked, Elle’s voice got quieter until it went completely silent, and Harry knew the Room was responding to a wish for privacy. They grabbed two chairs in the very corner, and Harry could swear the room added a slight curve to the wall just so they were unseen from everyone else.

“How did you guys break in?” he asked eagerly. “Snape kept saying it was impossible. Did my dad get in?”
“Your dad’s and Gideon’s breaking in to Hogwarts apparently irritated the Ministry so much that they set the wards to alert someone if they walked in. Had he tried to come with us, we’re sure he would have met some very annoyed aurors on the way out, and we can’t give the Ministry that satisfaction. Garcia helped Elle and I find a weak spot at the top of one of the towers, and we slipped in that way.”

Harry blinked in surprise. “Wait, how’d you manage that?”

“With a lot of difficulty and help from Snape, which is why we’re not going to be able to safely get Jack out of here with us when we leave,” Morgan said. “Think you can manage him for a while longer?”

“Quite the contrary. I’m not sure what we’ll do when he leaves,” Harry said with a laugh, and Morgan smiled but it didn’t quite reach his eyes. “Not that I’m not glad to see you, but… Why are you here? You never had to break in before.”

Morgan nodded slowly, and a part of Harry’s mind began screaming warning signals. “Yes,” Morgan replied. “Harry, can you tell me exactly what happened after Perotta took you and Jack?”

“Sure,” Harry said, frowning. “Is something wrong?” He’d already told Hotch and Snape. Surely they knew by now.

“Maybe,” Morgan said ambiguously and as neutrally as he could, but this close, Harry could see he was far too tense. Was someone in danger? But no, if they were, Morgan would have said so from the start, and he wouldn’t have waited so long to start this conversation.

“The portkey dropped us in a room. I think Perotta had the place set up as a safe house. We were there for a few hours, then he spotted the Woodsmarked Killer and he told us to stay put and he left. I grabbed Jack, and we came here to Hogwarts until the end of summer. I’d had the invisibility cloak with me when we left the house.”

There was a pause. “Did you ever talk with Perotta?”

“A little bit,” he said, shrugging and shifting slightly as he did so. “Why?”

“Just wanted to know what about.”

“I asked him about why he was helping, is all. He told me he wanted to pay my father back for empathizing with him when no one else had.”

“How long were you with him?”

“Maybe six or seven hours. Why?”

“In that whole time, is that all you talked about?”

Morgan’s voice was calm, a bit curious, but his word choice was way too specific. Harry paused, running through what had happened. There hadn’t really been anything noteworthy, right?

Phantom fingers ran across his stomach again and he winced away from the memory. Morgan’s eyes sharpened slightly, and he sighed internally as he knew the profiler had caught the gesture. “Mostly, yeah,” he said, hoping that if he ignored it Morgan would ignore it too.

“But? You talked about something else, right?”
“Why does it matter?” Harry asked abruptly.

“Harry,” Morgan said, leaning forward. “Is there something you don’t want me to know? About what happened with Perotta?”

He knew.

But he couldn’t know, right? Harry hadn’t said anything, and the only ones who had been there were him and Perotta…

And Jack.

Before he could think of the implications of the action, he found himself staring in the direction of the sectioned-off bedroom area, where Jack was fast asleep in his bed. Sure, Jack must have heard some things, but he couldn’t have understood what was going on. He was too young, and there was no way he would have even thought to remember something like that.

“What did he say?” Harry whispered.

Morgan reached into his pocket and took out a folded piece of parchment, then handed it to Harry without a word. The teenager quickly read through it, and when he reached the second to last paragraph he closed his eyes and groaned softly. He let the letter fall out of his fingertips to the low table at his side.

Jack had understood a lot more than he had hoped.

He dropped his head into his hands, facing the floor because it was a lot easier than facing Morgan. “It wasn’t- It wasn’t like that,” he said weakly.

“Harry,” Morgan said softly.

“No, I’m serious. It just…it sounds bad, the way he wrote it.” This would probably have been mildly convincing if he could bring himself to look at Morgan as he said it. Morgan took in a breath like he was about to speak. “No, I- Really, he didn’t…” He muffled a groan against his palms. “He just wanted to scare me. He didn’t do anything.”

“But did he touch you?”

“No-“ he began, but a hand resting, all too close to an unwanted place, came to mind and his throat closed off. He already knows, a part of him pointed out. “He put his hands on me,” he finally admitted. “He scared me at the beginning with it and then would do it whenever he needed to show he was in control.” He looked up, eyes stinging. “Did Jack say anything else? What did he hear? Did he see anything?”

“Elle talked to him earlier,” Morgan said. “The only thing he said was what he put in the letter. He kept saying he knew you didn’t like it.”

“I was afraid of what he’d do to Jack if I didn’t let him do it to me,” Harry said. “I thought I’d convinced him that it would be pointless to touch Jack because he wouldn’t know what was going on.”

“You thought?”

Harry shook his head. “He didn’t care about that at all. I thought he had taken us just out of revenge, that there wasn’t really anyone after us. He told me he was only there because we were in danger,
and he warned me not to try to interpret his intentions again.”

“Or?” Morgan asked softly.

Harry looked back down. “He told me where he’d put his hands.”

Morgan reached out slowly and took one of his hands, starting to rub it comfortingly. Harry winced immediately, knowing he’d grabbed the wrong one, and Morgan started in surprise when he felt the cut tissue. “Harry, what—“ He kept his eyes locked on the ground, knowing what had made Morgan stop. “Harry.”

“Detention with Umbridge,” he said, resigned to the questioning. There was no way out of it now.

“Does anyone know?”

“Well, I suppose she does,” he muttered, then sighed. “Hermione and Ron. I can’t really feel it because of the nerve damage, so it’s really just boring.” He looked up miserably. “How mad is Dad going to be that I didn’t tell him? I swear, I didn’t even think about it. I just… I didn’t want to put it down on paper, and I didn’t think Jack would have thought enough of it that he would have said anything.”

“Harry, your dad isn’t going to be mad at you for keeping something from him,” Morgan said, still holding his hand. “He’s going to be mad someone made you feel like you had to. He’s angry for you, not at you.”

“You’re not going to tell him, though, right?” Harry pleaded. “Nothing happened.”

Morgan shook his head regretfully and Harry’s heart sank. He’d never truly seen his father mad, not yet, and he didn’t want to. He thought he knew his father well enough to understand that he would never hit Harry, but what had kept him going through living with the Dursleys was knowing that the anger directed at him had been undeserved. He didn’t know what to do if the anger was because of something he did.

“Morgan, please, Perotta’s dead, I- There’s no point. He saved us, it’s over.”

“Harry, I have to tell him. He knows something happened, and if I lie, he’s going to think it’s worse than it really was. And I don’t think you want that.” Harry shook his head numbly. “But I need to know what I’m telling him, and he needs to know what he’s dealing with,” he prodded.

Harry sighed quietly, stiffening his resolve, and reluctantly let the whole story out. “Tell Dad I’m sorry I didn’t push him off, will you?” he asked at the end, looking up hopefully only to see Morgan’s face fall further, if that was at all possible.

“This isn’t your fault. Hotch knows that. I know that. I’m not sure you do. You weren’t giving up,” Morgan said, and his words twisted into Harry. Of course the man had known exactly what was wrong. “You were protecting your brother. You said he took your wand? Harry, I’ve met Perotta before. He was big. You’re right — you wouldn’t have been able to fight him off. And if you want to know the truth, Perotta got the better of your dad in a hand-to-hand fight. Your father definitely isn’t going to think less of you for what you did, not when he knows firsthand how strong Perotta was. You were more concerned about Jack than yourself, and you protected him. How can your father fault you for that?”

Harry scratched his shoe against the carpet. “Still,” he muttered.

“Still, what?”
"I..."

"You couldn't have done anything."

"I could have, afterwards."

Morgan frowned. "What do you mean?"

Harry avoided his gaze. "I didn't call Dad."

"But it wasn't possible for you to do that."

Harry shook his head. "The first few days we were here, Umbridge's wards hadn't been put up. I could have called home."

He wallowed in his silent guilt, waiting for Morgan's horror. Morgan tried to hold it back, knowing Harry was going to use it to punish himself further, but couldn't. "Harry, you had to know we were all looking for you."

Harry nodded quickly, tightly.

"Why... Why would you..." Harry bit his lip. Morgan leaned down, inspiration striking. "Harry... Were you afraid you'd have to go home if someone knew you were safe?"

Harry put his hands to his face, covering it from view. He blew out his breath, shoulders slumping.

"You didn't want to tell Hotch what happened. Once school started, you thought you'd be able to send Jack home without a problem, but you wouldn't be able to go home until winter break. And by then, you figured you'd have yourself under control and could hide the truth."

Harry dropped his hands and gestured sharply. "I couldn't tell him! And even if I didn't - He'd know something was wrong! He wouldn't have let up until I told him everything that happened, and then... He'd... He'd know. He'd know how...how weak and pathetic I'd been against Perotta."

"Harry..."

"I'm not," Harry said sharply. "I'm not like that! And I couldn't let him think I was. I don't need his protection. I can handle myself."

His desire to gain the trust and respect of his father had been something Morgan had seen as adorable, humorous even. It wasn't funny now.

"So yeah, I hid here longer than I should have because I didn't want to admit what happened. And now Jack's stuck in here with me, to top it all off."

"You couldn't have known that would happen."

"But if I'd been responsible instead of a coward it wouldn't be a problem."

"Harry," Morgan said firmly. "Look at me." Harry glanced up. "You didn't run from what happened because you were afraid. You didn't know what to do. Things weren't black and white. You probably figured we thought Perotta was a hero for saving you guys and you were worried about what would happen when you told us what else he'd done. You took on more responsibility for the situation than you should have, and you tried to control every aspect of it instead of coming to use for help. You're not a coward, but yes, you should have come to us."
"Is it wrong that I didn't want to talk to my dad?" Harry asked.

"No," Morgan said. "Everyone who's ever been in the same position as you has dreaded having to tell their parents – or anyone, for that matter – what happened. You tried to hide it. I get why, and so does he. We wish you'd told him, but we understand why you didn't."

"This wouldn't have happened if I'd done something to stop him," Harry muttered. "If I'd just realized that he wasn't going to hurt us... He wouldn't have done anything if I hadn't opened my mouth."

"Perotta's responsible for his actions, not you," Morgan said. He grabbed Harry's wrist since the back of his hand was scratched. "Do you understand? Perotta's at fault. You can't blame yourself for this."

"But he did it because of what I said!"

"If Ron had told him the same thing," Morgan insisted, "you would be calling him resourceful for trying to get himself and whoever was with him out of the situation. You'd say he was brave for choosing to act instead of sitting around and waiting for help to come." Harry sighed in resignation, nodding slightly. Morgan nodded back, satisfied. "Besides, what were you going to do against someone like him? You couldn't overpower him. You knew you had to use words."

"What's the point of learning all that self-defense if I'm still useless every time something like this happens?"

Morgan was silent for a moment, then he said, "You know, Jack did say something else. He said Perotta touched your head and you broke his nose."

Harry couldn't help the small smile the spread across his face at the memory of the satisfying crunch. "No one gets to ruffle my hair like I'm Jack's age except my family."

Morgan laughed. He pulled him into a tight hug and ruffled his hair with his free hand. A smile darted across Harry's face as he playfully tried to duck away. "That is something I'll be sure to pass along."

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Morgan was sure Snape’s hand was on his hip not because it was a comfortable place to rest the appendage but because it put him closer to his wand, which would knock out the pacing Agent Hotchner in a matter of seconds. Normally, Morgan would have been the first to scoff at such ridiculous measures. This time, he was considering putting his unit chief out himself.

Out of the corner of his vision, he saw Blackwolf beginning to approach from Rossi’s office. He caught Blackwolf’s eye and shook his head slightly. Blackwolf stopped, startled, took in Morgan’s expression, and then backtracked back to Rossi’s to wait it out.

“I'm going to kill him,” Hotch snarled.

“That’s going to be more difficult than it's worth,” Snape pointed out. If the potions master had ever been tentative, it was in this moment. And if it were possible for someone to just suddenly explode into bits of hot magma and kill everyone within the blast radius, Hotch might possibly become the first.

“No, it really won’t be.” He stopped abruptly. “Do you have the recipe Pettigrew used to bring back Voldemort?”
“Hotch, you can’t do that,” Morgan said in a voice that was filled with more weariness than anything else. Then Hotch’s gaze landed on him, sharp and fierce and ready to kill, and Morgan remembered just who he was trapped in a room with. “Perotta doesn’t have any servants to give flesh.”

Hotch went back to pacing.

“I talked him through it. Him and Jack. They’re both going to be okay, Hotch, I mean it,” he said as soothingly as he could.

“That’s what he says every goddamn time and then something else happens!” Hotch shouted.

Morgan winced, but he couldn’t deny that he would probably be acting the same way if it were his own kid. “There are only so many catastrophes that can happen in one year, and he finds all of them!”

Maybe it was a good thing Harry was at Hogwarts. It looked like it was going to be a while before Hotch could redirect his anger, since the object he really wanted to take it out on was dead. As a result, he was just lashing out at anyone possibly involved. It was definitely a good thing the room had been magically soundproofed long ago, even if anyone could see the state the unit chief had worked himself into if they walked past.

The worst thing was…

He hadn’t even mentioned Harry’s hand yet.

He was genuinely worried about doing so when his boss was armed and already fit to kill.

His phone buzzed and he spared a glance at it. Reid had sent him a text: “Nod if you need back-up.” He looked back up at Hotch before the man saw what he was doing, but he didn’t nod. There was no need to get anyone else slaughtered.

He had to mention the detentions. Snape already knew, and had spat out a list of reasons why he couldn’t do anything about it. If that wasn’t going to make Hotch even more pissed off, he didn’t know what would. Perhaps if he mentioned why Harry had been given the detention in the first place.

“Hotch,” he interrupted. He wasn’t even sure what the man was yelling at this point. Morgan raised both of his hands in a placating gesture. “Perotta’s dead. The Woodsmarked Killer’s dead. They can’t hurt either of them anymore. You’ve proved it – you can stop people from hurting Harry. This isn’t a situation where we’re useless. We can help.”

“Really?” Hotch snapped, and Morgan suddenly realized he hadn’t quite gotten that much further in his thinking to come up with more support.

“Yes,” Snape said suddenly. “We got Morgan and Greenaway in easily without a problem, and Greenaway said she used to use the Marauder’s Map and the invisibility cloak to get around. You could sneak agents in on a regular basis.”

“We could continue their training in the Room of Requirement,” Morgan added on. “They want to learn, and Umbridge isn’t allowing them practical knowledge in the classroom.”

Hotch’s eyes sharpened again. “She’s what.”

“The kids are working around it,” Morgan quickly said. “Hotch, this isn’t a roadblock. We can get over this, and more importantly, they can get over it. They’re already practicing to keep their skills sharp. They don’t really give a damn about Umbridge. They hate her because she’s annoying, but...
that’s it. She’s not standing in their way of learning.”

Don’t kill the undersecretary to the Minister of Magic.

Hotch’s jaw muscles twitched, but he relented. “Fine.”

“I’ll go get Blackwolf,” Snape muttered, giving Hotch a wide berth as he circled to the door. Hotch stepped away, even though he was already ten feet from the door, and Snape quickly left down the walkway.

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When Reid, Morgan, and Elle showed up two weeks later at Hogwarts, Harry thought the Ravenclaws were going to die. Or Reid. Or both. In any case, Reid found himself surrounded by a pack of them, rapidly answering questions as quickly as he could. A few ran and grabbed books from the library for him to read through, and when he had the smallest break, he quickly flipped through all of them. Someone also handed him their new DADA textbook, and he winced horribly the entire way through it. His expression quickly grew horrified as he was filled in on everything else that was happening, including the Educational Decree allowing the teacher assessments by the High Inquisitor, which Umbridge had been appointed as thanks to Fudge.

Elle grabbed Draco, and the two began conspiring in a corner. Harry eyed them but decided that he most definitely didn’t want to know. Hermione was alternating between pride and concern for the Slytherin, since he was doing so well in his muggle classes but epically failing all his Hogwarts courses. She had asked him if he couldn’t devote a little more time to them, but Draco told her he was busy maintaining his grades in the online Virginian school and helping Elle with a project.

A cluster of students were around the Monopoly board, as per normal. Their ferocity was getting a bit terrifying. Two couples had already broken up over the game and there had been three duels. All relationships had been mended, thankfully, but Harry was beginning to wonder if he shouldn’t check the board for curses. There was some sort of painful cycle of elation and depression going on with that game, and he was glad he was staying far away from it.

Morgan had grabbed the invisibility cloak and gone to see Snape immediately, presumably to give him an explanation about what was going on in the BAU since the potions master couldn’t leave the school like he had been able to last year. Umbridge’s eye over the building was proving to be more difficult to navigate around than they had thought, and even the professors’ movements were restricted. He came back soon after to start going over defensive tactics with a group of students.

The Bloody Baron had somehow managed to deliver a puzzle to Jack, and the young boy was working on it beside Ron on the couch opposite Harry while Harry did his homework. If he were honest with himself, it wasn’t so much because he was behind as it was because he was avoiding the BAU agents. He wanted to join the Ravenclaws and listen to Reid ramble, and he really did want to know how Elle and Draco were progressing on their evaluation of the muggle and magical world differences, and he definitely wanted to do some defensive tactics with Morgan. But he knew that if he talked to any of them, he was going to have to talk about some things he really didn’t want to think about.

Morgan took the spot next to him on the couch, and his shoulders slumped slightly. He should’ve known Reid and Elle were acting as a distraction again so Morgan could come talk to Harry virtually unnoticed. The students he’d been working with were matched up against each other and sparring without him.

“I heard about Draco and Elle. Should the rest of us be concerned?”
“Draco’s been conducting tests on the entire student population for weeks now. The best part is that no one has even the slightest clue, not even the rest of the QDA. I have no idea what he’s working on but he looks like he’s having fun.” Morgan nodded, and Harry sensed the mood change. Before the agent could speak, he sighed and said, “Do we… Do we really have to talk about this again?”

“Yes,” Morgan said regretfully, but he made sure to keep his voice down so Ron and Jack couldn’t hear. “I’m sorry.” He pressed himself back against the couch as far as he could go. “Harry, have you talked to Jack about what happened?” he asked.

Harry looked at him in horror. “No, of course not! What would I even tell him?”

“The truth. Perotta didn’t hurt you. But right now, he doesn’t know what happened, and if I know him half as well as I think I do, he’s worried about his older brother.”

“I don’t know what to tell him,” Harry said.

“Just tell him what you think he needs to know. He just wants to know you’re all right.”

“How’s my dad?”

Morgan was quiet and Harry risked glancing at his face. He looked uneasy, and when he saw Harry watching him he let out a quiet sigh. “He’s not handling it so well. He made it through those three weeks on radio silence from you because he believed you were okay, based on what Perotta told him before he died. And then he found out that, after you had both trusted Perotta, he’d done something to you. He feels like he failed to protect you.”

Harry buried his face in his hands with a groan. “Why did you have to tell him?!”

“Because you’ve got a father who loves you, and you don’t have to go through this alone. And Harry, you shouldn’t. You really shouldn’t try to work this out on your own. He lied to you, but he treated your injuries. He acted like he cared, but you don’t know if he really did or not. He saved you, but he betrayed you and he hurt you in the process. It’s okay to have trouble dealing with what happened. And it’s okay that you need to work through it with someone.”

“I’m fine, Morgan! He didn’t do anything!” Harry hissed, then winced when his raised voice caught Ron’s attention and his friend looked his way in bewilderment. “Can we just stop talking about it?”

“Harry-“

“Why do we have to keep going over this? I just want to forget about it!” He studiously ignored Ron staring at him and Morgan from a few feet away, but it was difficult to avoid looking at either him or Morgan. “Yes, everything you just said was true. Yes, it’s complicated. But I can figure it out for myself without you pissing off my dad anymore!”

He was uncomfortably aware that now both Ron and Jack were watching him. He focused on the ground, but Morgan stared at the pair meaningfully until Ron grabbed Jack and muttered some excuse to go somewhere else immediately. Morgan turned back to Harry. “Look, I get how hard it is to talk to him about this.” Harry started to interrupt. “No, Harry, I work for your dad. He looks intimidating as hell and sometimes he doesn’t know just how aggressive he looks. But if I’ve learned nothing in the years I’ve worked with him, I’ve learned to tell when he’s scared. And he’s terrified right now, and he’s terrified you’re not okay. And you’re not.”

He held out a hand when Harry tried to say something again. “You never worked through what the Dursleys did to you. If you had, you wouldn’t be telling me you don’t want to tell Hotch because you’re afraid he’s going to get angrier. You did your best to forget that you killed someone your first
year and fought a monster your second year. Your third year, you were scared for what was going to happen to your new family, and you chose to talk to a presumed madman and fight off dementors rather than go for help. Afterwards, you brushed it all off like it was nothing. "You’ve spent a year stewing in what happened when the werewolves took you, and the only effort you made to move past it was to get stronger. You always compare yourself to how you were then, and if you don’t see a difference, you feel like you’ve failed. Then a place you thought you were safe in put you in a dangerous tournament, and you had to face one of your worst fears in a cemetery, alone. You didn’t ever talk about what happened except to tell us how things went down so we had more information, and you often made light of it so no one would worry. And now this. You had two last sanctuaries, and one was just destroyed by someone you thought you could trust. Then he threatened to hurt you in the worst way he could, just because you’d said the wrong thing. "Harry, you’re not okay. You can’t be. But I believe you’re strong enough to move past all of this. I just think you need a little help. Let us give you that. What you’re going through isn’t normal, and you don’t deserve having to go through this alone.”

Harry sighed, anger long gone. “I just…” He rolled his head across the back of the couch to look at Morgan. “I don’t want to be a victim anymore. When I met all of you, I was the domestic abuse kid. Then I was the rescue case. Then I was being stalked by a murderer. And then I was tortured, and then everyone was trying to kill me, and then someone had killed me, and now…this. It just seems like it’s not worth it, in comparison to everything else.”

“But it feels just as bad, doesn’t it?”

Harry sat upright. “I don’t get that! I mean, he told me he had no interest in me when he was done, but I still… I can still feel it every once in a while. When we thought Sirius was trying to kill me, and then we learned he wasn’t, I didn’t feel half as bad when we left. And I was just tired when I got back from the cemetery.”

“It’s because it’s a betrayal of trust,” Morgan explained. “You’ve been expecting people to hurt you for years. It’s what the Dursleys taught you. But the people who you care about, they’ve been faithful to you. None of them have let you down, not unless they’d tried their hardest and still couldn’t manage to help you. This was different. Although accidentally, he’d been entrusted as your Secret Keeper this whole time. He’d kept you safe, and he came and found you twice when he knew you were in danger. He protected you. That’s the difference. Betrayal.”

“Do I have to talk to my dad about it?” he sighed, but he wasn’t avoiding looking at Morgan anymore. “He already knows what happened.”

“It’ll be good for both of you. He wants to know you’re all right, and it gives you the chance to recover.”

“He’s got better things to deal with.”

“He doesn’t. Trust me, he doesn’t.” There was a tone to Morgan’s face like he was holding something back, something about the extent, but Harry didn’t press.

“No one’s going to get it. You guys aren’t victims, and you definitely don’t end up in the situations I seem to get into all the time.”

Morgan gave him a humorless smile. “I think you’d be surprised. There’s a reason all of us can do this job as well as we can, and there’s a reason why we have such a high turnover rate. In one year, Elle was almost killed by a werewolf and was turned, Reid was kidnapped and tortured by an
UnSub, and a serial killer targeted Gideon and made his life hell. None of us can fully understand all of what’s happened to you, but we do have experience in the details.”

“Yeah?” Harry muttered. “Bet none of you almost got raped.”

“No,” Morgan agreed. “He went all the way.”

Harry froze, one hand in the middle of running through his hair.

“Why do you think Hotch asked me to come talk to you, instead of Reid or Elle?” He waited for a moment while Harry examined his face, reassuring himself that he wasn’t being lied to. “It started when I was younger than you, and it was someone I trusted.”

“Morgan…”

“I’m telling you this because I was in your position and there are a lot of things I regret. One of them is never talking to my mother about it. Maybe she couldn’t have done anything, but when I was older and she still didn’t know, it felt like I was lying by omission to her, and that wasn’t fair. She would have been upset. Hell, she might’ve killed the guy who did it had she known. But I always wish I’d trusted her more.”

“I do,” Harry said quietly. “I do trust him, I just… It seems like every time I need to talk to him, I screwed something up. I couldn’t keep myself safe, or Jack. I did fail.”

“So did your father. He couldn’t find you before you saved yourself.” He reached over to touch Harry’s shoulder. “You’re right. Your dad’s upset. It’s because he cares about you. And you’re upset, because you care about him.” He smiled wryly. “Might as well be upset together, right?”

“Okay,” Harry gave in. “Okay, I’ll do it.”

“I think it’ll help. I really do.” He pulled out a letter from his pocket. “Here. He wrote this before he read Jack’s letter. It should answer what you wrote. He spent the last two weeks…focused on something, and he didn’t quite get around to rewriting it after he read Jack’s.”

Harry frowned. “Did a case come up? Is everyone okay?”

“Not a case, no.” Morgan paused, then said, “Your dad is…set on killing Perotta.”

“I thought he died?”

“Yeah… That’s sort of the problem…” Morgan winced. “If you can get a letter written to him before we leave, maybe it’ll help derail him from revival rituals.”

Harry’s expression mirrored his. “I’ll get to that, then.”

Morgan got to his feet. “We’ll be here until about four in the morning. No one should be paying attention if we head out then.”

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“Harry?” Ron asked when everyone else had left. The only ones remaining were Ron, Harry, Hermione, and Jack, who was asleep. Even the Monopoly crowd had been so exhausted by the routines the three BAU agents had put them through that they had gone back to their dorms. “What happened earlier? With Morgan?”

Harry sighed silently, wishing Ron hadn’t brought it up in front of Hermione of all people. Jack’s
head was resting on his lap, and he ran his fingers through it absentmindedly. It was strangely reassuring to be able to prove to himself that Jack was all right just by touching his head, and he was beginning to understand why Hotch always reached out to him for physical contact whenever Harry was upset.

Hermione had stiffened at Ron’s question and was looking sharply between the two. “What happened with Morgan?” she asked suspiciously.

“Guys, it’s four thirty in the morning,” Harry replied wearily. “I’ll tell you, but… Can we do it later, maybe?”

Hermione wavered, but Ron frowned. “You both looked pretty upset. It must have been something big.”

He sighed again. “It was…” Nothing, he wanted to say, but after talking with Morgan he couldn’t quite deny that he was twitching whenever someone brushed against him suddenly. “Something… happened while I was with Perotta, and I just…tried to forget about it. You know, respect for the dead and all that. He’d saved our lives, and it seemed…stupid to mention it when there was nothing to be done about it and ungrateful when he helped us. But I didn’t realize Jack was listening, and Jack told Dad, and Dad flipped out but he couldn’t come, so Dad sent Morgan. This was a…follow up to see if anything had changed. Look, I really don’t want to talk about it.”

“I didn’t hear a lot, but it sounded like that was the whole purpose of Morgan coming here,” Ron pointed out cautiously.

He twisted some of Jack’s strands of hair between his fingers. “I suppose.”

He told them.

Hermione’s hands were pressed against her mouth when he was done, and Ron had gone completely red with fury. “Why didn’t you say anything?” Ron demanded and jumped to his feet. Harry watched him morosely as he began pacing. “That happened and you just… You just…”

“I get it,” Hermione said quietly, and Ron stopped to stare at her in shock. “Like you said, there was nothing we could do, and he couldn’t do it again.” She bit her lip, then asked, “What does Hotch know?”

“What Jack told him, which was…more than I thought he’d understood. I thought he just heard us arguing, but… And then because I hadn’t said anything in my letter, Dad sort of went…ballistic, apparently.” He dropped his head into his hands. “I just want to go see him,” he said quietly. “Freaking Umbridge…”

“Harry,” Hermione said abruptly. “We’ve got a Hogsmeade weekend coming up.”

“The wards preventing him from entering extend around Hogsmeade too,” Harry said grimly. “They went all-out. Whoever can keep breaking in is going to keep coming as often as they can, though. They’re not happy we can’t practice defensive magic, and while they can’t teach us that, they are going to keep doing what they did tonight. So, kudos to inappropriate touching, right?”

“Harry,” Hermione scolded lightly, but her heart wasn’t really in it. She continued, “Actually, I… Well, I was sort of talking to some others about, you know, how she won’t let us learn anything. And we realized… We sort of do have a really good defense teacher who knows what to do in a fight.”

Harry straightened. “You’re right!” Hermione grinned, having evidently expected an argument.
“Snape’s been wanting the post for years, and we know he’s on our side!”

Her face fell and she winced. “He can’t. If he kept appearing in places nowhere near the dungeons, Umbridge would get suspicious. And we can’t get everyone down there all the time without the same problem.”

Harry frowned. “Then… I don’t follow.”

“Well, no one’s really defended themselves against the Dark Arts like you have, Harry,” Hermione pointed out. “When we were in Colorado, you were the best of the group, even over the older years, and you’ve been fantastic at dueling whenever we’re practicing, and every year you’ve come out on top of a fight with dark magic!”

“First year I had you two, second year I had Fawkes, third year I had my dad, and fourth year I had a serial killer,” Harry said.

“Your first year you figured out what no other teacher had put together quickly enough, no one else would have survived your second year, you threw off a hundred dementors on your own, and you made a fool of Riddle in front of his Death Eaters before you had any help,” Ron summarized with a raised eyebrow. “And Hermione’s right. You’re brilliant at defense.”

“I- Well-“ He looked from to the other, but they were both grinning at him. “You’re going to make me do this anyway, aren’t you?”

“Oh yes.”

Harry deflated and held his hands up in defeat. “You know what? I’m not even going to argue. I clearly don’t have a vote. Are we telling everyone else tomorrow, then?”

“When’s Draco going to get the phones working again?” Ron muttered in mock-annoyance. “Otherwise we could just text them now.”

Hermione gave a nervous chuckle. “Well, Harry, um… The people I were talking weren’t… in the QDA.”

“Oh no.”

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Harry stared blankly as person after person began to fill the Hog’s Head. There were a few friendly faces, people he already knew well from time spent in the Room of Requirement, but there were also plenty he had only met in passing or hardly knew at all. Colin came in without his brother since Dennis was too young for Hogsmeade weekends, but he promised Dennis wanted to join later. The Patil twins followed him soon after, and Angelina Johnson with Alicia Spinnet.

Dean and Seamus walked in, talking with Neville, and had to move quickly to make way for the Weasley twins and Lee Jordan. Katie Bell came in alone, and Michael Corner appeared to have been pulled along by Justin and Ernie. Lavender Brown and Ginny came in together, and then Terry, Roger, Susan, Zacharias, Anthony, and Luna brought up the very rear.

“A few,” Harry whispered in a deadpan to Hermione.

“Well, a few you don’t know.”

“I don’t know about fifteen of these people.”
“Learning curve,” Hermione said before getting to her feet. “So, now that everyone’s here. I think we’re all aware of the purpose for this, since none of us are going to pass our OWLs at this rate. And, whether you believe it or not, none of us are really in a fit state to defend ourselves in the real world.” There was no argument. Not with almost every survivor of the Silent Massacre present, stone-faced and solemn.

“Let’s get to it, then,” Angelina said with a nod of her head.

“If there aren’t any questions, then,” Hermione said, pulling out a sheet of parchment. “I think everyone should sign this, so we know who was here.” When everyone had finished, she continued, “I’ll let you know where and when the first meeting is going to be held. So until then… Have a good rest of your weekend!”

Harry left feeling surprisingly good about the meeting, and the others expressed the same when they got back to the Room of Requirement hours later. After dinner, they called another meeting, this one for the QDA, and soon had everyone settled around the room.

As had become their norm, Fred and George dominated and directed. “All righty,” George began, rubbing his hands together excitedly. “First, I’d like to know if anyone is interested in testing out some of our Skiving Snackboxes—"

“George!” Hermione hissed.

“-because they would be out of luck because we’re out of stock at the moment!” George quickly corrected, looking away from Hermione’s scowl. Fred nodded in acknowledgement at someone who had subtly volunteered when Hermione wasn’t looking. “Second, the meeting. So, uh, there isn’t anywhere else that’s really big enough to hold that many people, and we can’t do it outside because of the winter weather, and- Oh, Hermione, just take over.”

“Right,” she said, sitting up straighter. “Most of you are already in it,” she continued, sending an apologetic look to the sulking Slytherins, who couldn’t have shown up without revealing their true loyalties. “But we wanted permission from everyone. Can we use this room for practices?”

“Yeah,” Theodore sighed. “That’s okay. Just let us know so we don’t accidentally walk in on you, all right? That’d be a right mess.”

Hermione nodded. “There’s also the matter of… Well. They might need to know about Jack, if they’re coming in here all the time. It’d be terrible if we didn’t explain that to them and then someone found out on accident.”

“I think it might not be a bad idea to eventually tell them everything,” Ginny said. “I mean, they showed up because they want to learn defense, because of what happened to all of us. If we explained why the Slytherins act the way they do in class, I’ll bet they’ll understand. They aren’t stupid, and really, there aren’t that many of them who don’t know. It’d be, what, fourteen? And they all know at least one of us, if not more.”

“Let’s give them some time first,” Padma said. “See if they stick around or not.” She grinned. “But I can’t wait to tell Parvati about all this!”

Harry felt a pang of sympathy. Of course, before now, she’d never been able to tell her twin. He knew they were close, but being in separate houses had made it easier for her to keep the secret.

“Until then,” Draco said, “Jack could stay with us. We’ll have to borrow the invisibility cloak, of course, to hide him, but we’ve got the ghosts on our side and there’s no way Umbridge is going to
think to check the Slytherin House.” He glanced at Harry, who nodded his approval. “That’s covered, then. New defense group gets the Room of Requirement for practice. So long as you show us what you went over afterwards.”

“Most of the stuff at the beginning will be things you already learned in Colorado,” Harry pointed out. “But we’ll fill you in as we start getting into new spells.”

“Which brings us to the third item that we were asked to bring up. To teach them non-magical tactics or not to?” Fred said.

Neville shook his head quickly. “I doubt they’d listen to us when we tell them it’s important. Maybe later, if we decide to include them in on everything else.”

“Okay, fourth order of business. Draco, how the hell are you doing online classes without internet?”

“I downloaded everything just because I could before I left,” Draco said. “I’m not using the internet. And before you ask, no, I haven’t been able to fix it. Garcia and I are trying to work it out, but it’s taking longer than it should because we have to send letters back and forth and that takes days. We’d have it fixed by now if not for that.” His nose scrunched in annoyance. “I can’t believe I ever lived on owl post when it takes so long.”

“When do you think you can have it worked out by?” Hannah asked eagerly.

“It might be another month or two at this rate.” His scowl bled into his words. “If we could even double the time it takes for us to communicate we could have this done much sooner. Fred, George, you might have to start accepting packages from her soon. I’m going to have to manually build a transmitter to knock out the magical frequencies that are causing us problems.”

“Why them?” Zacharias asked.

“No one thinks twice if we get packages, because everyone thinks we’re up to no good anyway,” George said dismissively. “We did it two years ago when the BAU sent us the laptops and whatnot for the first time.”

“Draco,” Hermione asked, frowning. “If you’re doing…whatever you’re doing with Elle, finishing high school classes, and trying to fix the internet… When do you have time for studying or homework?”

There were a few lighthearted chuckles at the stereotypically-Hermione response, but they died away when Draco gave a fake laugh and responded with, “You just explained why I’m failing all my classes right now.”


“Already gotten messages from my parents and everything,” he continued. “My wonderful father is asking me why I haven’t just slipped something into Potter’s food yet to kill him so I can get my grades back on track.”

“Yeah, I think we might need to do something about that, by the way,” Harry said. “The professors are seriously worried. Grubbly-Plank won’t let the two of us anywhere near each other and I swear she has her hand on her wand whenever Draco comes within ten meters of me.”

“If we tell them, then they’ll act differently and someone could notice,” Hermione said regretfully. “More concerning, Umbridge could notice.”
“Luna!” Padma suddenly shrieked, making everyone jump. “What the hell is that?! Are you okay?!”

“I feel absolutely lovely,” Luna replied in her dreamy voice. “Are you quite all right?”

“No! What happened to your hand!” Padma demanded, and Harry had a sinking feeling in his stomach.

“Oh, that,” she said, and several people near her sucked in horrified gasps as they saw whatever Padma was pointing out. “Professor Umbridge wasn’t too happy when I told her that her classes were a clump of codswallop and left.”

“Way to be, Luna,” Anthony muttered.

“So she had you carve your hand out?” Adrian snarled furiously. His eyes flashed as he scanned the rest of the group. “Who else got detention?” he demanded, and Harry tried to sink down as much as he could.

“Harry,” Ron said immediately and Harry shot him a glare.

“Terry,” Cassius ratted out at the same time.

“Ginny,” Neville finished.

“Did she do this to all of you?” Adrian shouted.

“Adrian-“

“Don’t you dare, Harry! This isn’t all right!” He reached over and grabbed Luna’s hand, surprisingly gentle as he held it up despite the fierceness of his words. “This-“ he shook her limp hand lightly “-is not all right!”

“Listen, no one talk back to her,” Hermione said, hands up as she tried to appease everyone. “There’s nothing we can do right now, not when she has so much power.”

“So we’re just going to let her get away with this?!” Theodore demanded.

“No, we’re fighting back,” Ginny insisted firmly. “That’s why we’re forming this defense group!”

“That’s blood fantastic when she doesn’t even know about it!” Roger shouted.

“Quiet!” Harry snapped, jabbing a finger at the back of the room pointedly. Everyone hushed, remembering the sleeping boy. “Look, this obviously isn’t the ideal situation. But we’re not going to be able to do anything about it tonight. I know how hypocritical this is, since I just got another week’s worth of detentions from her today.” he said, pausing as there was some angry stirring, “but Hermione’s right. We can’t just keep getting angry at her when that’s what she wants.”

“Does anyone have their potions book with them?” Anthony asked suddenly.

“Er, can’t you do your homework later, mate?” Ron replied. “Kind of in the middle of something right now.”

The Ravenclaw shook his head quickly. “No, but remember the potion last week that Snape gave us? It was about brewing surface wounds. I’ll bet you anything he’s already seen some marks on students, and he knows we always meet up like this. If someone’s got their potions textbook, it shouldn’t take more than an hour to brew once we get the ingredients together.”
Hermione smiled, some of the tension leaving her body. “Anthony, you’re brilliant,” she said and he flushed. “Fred, George, anything else?”

“Just one more article. You people playing Monopoly – what the bloody hell is wrong with you?”

“I refuse to admit defeat,” Blaise said defiantly, nose pointed in the air.

“I’ve gone this far,” Neville said with a sigh. “I can’t back out now. I’ve got to win at least one game.”

“I won’t stop until I’ve destroyed my enemies,” Ginny said with a blank expression that was a little disconcerting. “I’ll crush them all.”

“Someone needs to burn the Monopoly board,” someone muttered in the back. Harry agreed rather strongly with that assessment.

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Harry had an uneventful night once everyone went back to their dorms, though the potion that was lathered onto the back of his hand smelled funny. He left Jack with Dobby and the Bloody Baron – which officially made the oddest trio Harry had ever laid eyes on – and went down to breakfast, only to be immediately assaulted by Hermione and Ron.

“Bloody bitch,” Ron snarled and Hermione sharply reprimanded him with a look.

“Who?” Harry asked as he took a seat.

“Umbridge passed three new Educational Decrees last night,” Hermione explained. “The first requires all groups, associations, etcetera to get approved by the High Inquisitor.”

“How did she find out?” Harry exclaimed. “Did someone tell?”

“We’ll know soon enough if they did,” Hermione replied, glancing at the other tables. A few students looked like they wanted to come talk to her and Harry about what the decree meant for them, but the QDA students were keeping them in their seats for now. “That parchment was charmed. Whoever tattled is going to have rather a bad day.”

“Nice one,” Harry murmured. “Well, we figured this was going to be against Umbridge anyway. It’s not a big difference.”

“Harry, the third one’s a problem,” Hermione said urgently. “The second decree allows Umbridge to form an Inquisitorial Squad to do her bidding. They’re basically going to be her secret police, and they’ll have even more power than prefects and the Head Boy and Head Girl do. Their job is to enforce her decrees, and I suspect she created them now rather than later for the third decree that was passed last night. The Squad is going to check all the dorms every night to ensure that everyone is in bed.”

Harry’s eyes went wide. “No,” he whispered. He couldn’t sleep in the dorms – not with Jack in the state he was in. His brother was getting better, but he was nowhere near comfortable enough to be left alone every night. He still needed to hear voices when he drifted off, and sometimes he woke up in the middle of the night and needed to be coaxed back to sleep.

Hermione nodded grimly. “There’s nothing the professors can do about it, either.”

They went to Professor Binns’s class, which Harry dragged his feet all the way to. It was dull as
ever, and Harry spent the entire time trying to plan a way around the decree. There were no outs that he could see. Maybe he could convince Dobby to stay with Jack each night, but... Well, he liked Dobby and all, but the house elf was a little odd and sometimes his ideas weren’t exactly safe.

By lunchtime, word was spread that there would be an emergency meeting in the Room of Requirement right after dinner. It wasn’t hard to guess what the topic was about, and sure enough, the first item of business was –

“Someone has to stay here at night,” Fred said firmly. “I don’t care who it is. If I have to drop out of school and stay here illegally, I’ll do it. But someone’s got to be here.”

“Maybe we can bribe the Squad,” Hannah muttered. “What assholes were stupid enough to join it anyway?”

A grin spread over Draco’s face. “Me.”

“And us,” Theodore added, jerking his thumb at himself and Daphne.

“Same,” Cassius continued. Adrian nodded, smirking.

“You shits,” Fred said flatly and the group burst into laughter. “I was freaking out over here and you five go and-“

“Honestly, Weasley,” Draco scoffed. “Did you really think we wouldn’t have your backs? Please. You should know us better by now.”

“Only problem is that McGonagall is positive Draco’s Mordred incarnate,” Daphne said. “Spent all of Transfigurations glaring in our direction, and specifically at him.” She leaned back, resting her weight on her palms pressed to the ground behind her. “We volunteered to search Gryffindor Tower every night already,” she continued. “We had DADA this morning and talked to Umbridge after. She seemed delighted by the idea of having such attentive and dedicated students dealing with the worst group in the school.”

“I can’t thank you enough,” Harry said, the panic that had been building up over the day slowly subsiding. “Really. You, and everyone else who was already planning,” he said, nodding towards Fred and the others who had been about to speak after Hannah’s comment.

“Don’t mention it,” Daphne said with a shrug.

"Why did she even pass that third decree?" Neville asked. "She must have known Harry's been staying down here, but why?"

"She couldn't have known it was Harry or she would have just called him out on it," Blaise said.

"Did any of you ask her?" Hermione asked the Slytherins.

"I did," Draco replied, "but she wouldn't say. Seemed smug though."

"Wait, it's been the QDA students who've been missing from bed so far," Cassius said. "She's trying to go after us since we're – well, everyone but the Slytherins – are the ones rebelling against her."

"Damn it," Ron muttered. "I forgot that decree was going to impact the rest of us too."

Daphne waved the matter aside. “We’ll handle it. On another note, shouldn’t Jack’s school have started by now?”
“Don’t make the poor boy do school work,” Cassius groaned. “Hasn’t he been through enough?”

“No, she’s right,” Roger quickly agreed. “At this rate, Jack might not be able to get home until winter break. He’s going to be seriously behind, and that’s not fair for him. When Elle stops by next time, we should ask her to get us everything he’s already missed.”

Ernie clapped his hands together once. “Now that that’s settled,” he said, “who’s up for Monopoly, since we can’t play late anymore?”

“Yes!” Ginny crowed while half the group groaned.

“Are you ever going to learn?” Hermione shouted after them while they convened around the board. Someone cackled in response. “Honestly,” she muttered.

“Harry?” Draco asked, and he looked up at him. “Can you show me how to do a Patronus?”

“Yeah, sure,” Harry said, a little confused. “But…can’t you do one already?”

“I never got it to be corporeal,” Draco said as Harry got up and followed him to a corner of the room. “And we might need it if we need to pass a message in an emergency, in case we haven’t gotten the phones working yet. I’m worried about the rest of you, who aren’t in Slytherin. Umbridge is set on this, and I’m afraid we didn’t take her seriously enough at the beginning of the year.”

Harry nodded his understanding. “All right, let’s get started then.”

That night, Ron and Neville got back just in time for the first Inquisitorial dorm check. Seamus and Dean had wide eyes, and they kept glancing at Harry’s empty bed, but there were footsteps on the stairway and not enough time. Dean pulled out his wand and cast a spell on Harry’s bed, pulling the curtains shut around it just as the door opened.

Draco stepped in and cast a lazy glance around the room, stopping in surprise when he saw the curtains. Theodore passed behind him to go up another floor, to the sixth years. Draco leaned back to see if anyone was watching behind him, then moved in and closed the door behind him.

“We’re all accounted for, Malfoy,” Seamus snapped. “So why don’t you just bugger off and leave us alone for the night? You’ve done your God-granted duty already.”

“I just wanted to say that if you’re going to close one set of curtains, close another just to be safe,” he said, calmly and without any hint of the vitriol he usually displayed in class. “They’re more likely to just move on instead of bothering to check two beds.”

Seamus and Dean stared at him, and he turned to Ron. “We confirmed that we get to search the boys’ tower for the rest of the year,” he said. “He should be in the clear, but you’re going to have to get people to stop mentioning about how he always gets back so late that no one sees him.”

“Damn,” Ron muttered. “I’m not sure there’s a subtle way to get everyone to hush up about it.”

“It’s going to be awfully suspicious if we keep reporting you’re all here and yet Harry still only shows after we’re gone,” Draco said. “I don’t care if you have to cast a Silencing Charm on the rest of your tower, but they need to at least keep their voices down when talking. Turns out that’s how she heard about the defense group.”

“What – the – hell,” Dean breathed.
“Dean, Seamus, meet Draco, who shows up only out of the public eye. Draco, the rest of our dorm,” Ron joked. To Dean and Seamus, he explained, “Draco and the rest of the Slytherins who were with us two summers ago are all in on it. They’ve been helping us get away with a lot, since no one suspects them of helping us break any rules. Sorry, but we honestly forgot to mention it earlier. We didn’t think twice about it.”

Seamus just stared.

“This is going to take some getting used to,” Dean said.

“Remember to hate me in the morning,” Draco said, waving absently as he left. “Good night.”

“Good night,” Neville called after him, and Draco closed the door behind him. Seamus was still staring at the place he had been standing. “Need more of an explanation?”

“That’d be nice,” Dean said, as calmly as he could manage.

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Author's Note: There's going to be a chapter added into an upcoming section soon, so I need to write and edit it so I can post it where it needs to go. This could mean a delay in posting, but it's dependent on my homework.

We are getting so, so close to when things really start to get interesting!
She’d enhanced the magic on the blood quill.

Harry winced as he tied the bandage tighter, wishing he could at least stop it from bleeding so much. The potion was helping, but there was a limit to how much he could use in a day without giving himself Snarkrans’ blood poisoning. At least, that’s what Draco said, but he trusted his word even if the Slytherin was hardly paying attention to classes anymore.

Draco had finished another mathematics, English, and French class, leaving him with only five classes to go before he could officially graduate with a high school diploma. He was thinking about taking some more classes before he did, however. Some of the Advanced Placement courses looked interesting, but he was thinking about starting them next year instead to let him actually focus a little bit on his magical classes so he didn’t have to sit through the courses again with fifth years next year. The extra time would also allow him to put more time on his and Elle’s project, which appeared to be shaping out nicely if their grins were anything to go by.

Which was why Harry was so wary when Draco approached him. “I need to run a test,” he said, matter-of-factly, “and I need your help, and I need you to be nowhere nearby when it occurs.”

“What do you need me for?” Harry asked, leaning away slightly from the gleam in Draco’s eyes.

That was how he found himself daily giving way too many hair samples for any measure of safety to the blond. A week later, when the blond had finally collected enough, he left Harry alone to stew in concern while he finished up the other preparations for his project. The next time Morgan showed up, he had asked if the agent had the slightest idea as to what Draco was concocting, but the man had simply shrugged.

“I don’t know,” he had admitted, “but Elle is already bemoaning how it won’t be possible for her to be there to see it.”

“Detention again?” Ron asked, nodding his head towards him as he started heading out the door an hour later.

“Yeah,” he said. “I’ll see you later, okay? Let me know what happens at Quidditch practice.” Ron nodded again, broom already in his hand. Harry left, trusting his brother to the capable…well, sort of…hands of the Monopoly players and Ron. Draco was in a corner, alternating between testing what tiny radio signals he could manage on a strange device Garcia had sent over and trying the Patronus Charm. He was on the verge of a corporeal form, and he had begun encouraging the others
to try the same so they had some sort of communication network in case of an emergency. Draco was beginning to remind Harry of Hermione in their third year, overextended and stressed, and Harry made a mental note to remind him to slow down a bit before he wore himself out.

When he sat down in Umbridge’s office a few minutes later, he realized something was wrong immediately. The quill was on his desk, as per usual, and he couldn’t quite lay his finger on what set his nerves off, but he just knew this was going to end badly. He eyed the pink toad for a moment, waiting for the other shoe to drop, until she tilted her head at him to begin and he began writing. The quill dug into his hand, now harsh enough for him to “properly” feel it, and he occasionally gritted his teeth against the pain. Really, it wasn’t anything in comparison to what had happened two summers ago, but the repeated, scraping sensation was starting to wear him down.

Three hours later, she said, “Stop.” He turned his head to her. Usually he would have gone for hours longer before she said he was done. She got up from her chair and removed the quill from his hand, then gestured for him to sit at the chair across from her desk as she put the quill in one of her drawers. “Have a seat, Mr. Potter.”

He slowly moved to do as she said, and, without looking up at him, she pulled a dish covered with a cloth closer to her. She removed the cloth, revealing two prepared cups of tea underneath, and tapped the cups to warm up the contents. One went in front of Harry and the other went in front of her as she sat primly in her chair.

“Now then,” she said, smiling at him, “I feel like we should talk a little more. You see, I am very interested to know what life must be like as a student. It makes it easier for me to help you and guide you.” He didn’t say anything, and he kept his hands in his lap instead of reaching for the tea. She took a sip of her own. “How are your classes going?”

“Fine.”

“Any difficulty?”

“No.”

“Very good. Oh, do have some tea, Mr. Potter. Wouldn’t want it to get cold.”

“I’m fine, thanks,” he said stiffly.

Her eyes narrowed ever so slightly in warning. “I am trying to keep the peace between us, Mr. Potter,” she chided. “Do not make this more difficult. Have some tea.”

“I’m not thirsty.” Whatever was in that liquid was going nowhere near his mouth.

“Mr. Potter, if you don’t have any, I can only assume we need to spend more time together until you trust me,” she said.

He’d met someone before who he had instantly disliked, whose entire aura had emanated a sense of wrongness that had put him on edge. He’d come to trust that man when he had saved his life. He hadn’t trusted him so much when he’d put his hands on Harry instead of keeping them to himself.

“That could be a while,” he said before he could think it through.

“Then I suppose another week’s worth of detentions are necessary,” she said with a regretful nod. He ground his teeth but kept quiet. “Well, to pass the time, I hope you don’t mind me asking you some more questions.” No response from him. “Are you aware that, over the last few years, there have been several intrusions into Hogwarts?”
“More than you can imagine. “Yes. I met two of the ones who got in, if you recall.”

“Ah, yes. Agents Hotchner and Gideon. Did they ever tell you how they got in?”

“No. We were a bit more preoccupied with the dementors.” He kept his voice level, giving her nothing to pick on. If they were going to be doing this for the rest of the detention, though, he wasn’t sure he could keep all of his snark back.

“Understandable. Did you ever meet them again?”

Harry gave no reaction, even though he was beginning to get apprehensive. Not even the Order knew about Harry and Hotch’s true relationship, even though the Secret Keeper had died. It was impossible for someone to have figured it out…right? “No. Why’s this important?”

“It has come to my attention that there has been another recent intrusion,” she said.

Shit, Elle was going to have to be more careful, as was whoever came with her.

Ironically, the best way to get her off that potential lead was to point her right towards it. “What, more muggles?” he asked, almost in a bored tone. “I would have thought your wards would have taken care of that.”

“It would seem this one got in before the wards were ever put in place,” she said primly, smile just a little too tight. “We also believe he had help from the inside. So, Mr. Potter,” she said, one fat finger tracing the edge of her cup. “Do you know of a boy within the castle walls?”

His heart stopped, and it took everything in him to give absolutely no reaction besides surprise. “A-What?” he asked, almost in a bored tone. “I would have thought your wards would have taken care of that.”

Umbridge’s smile was gone. “Yes. A boy. As for the why… Well, I would be very interested to know that myself.”

“And just how did he get in?” Harry asked, leaning back in his chair with an easy smile, like they were joking. “Did someone mistake him as a first year and let him in with the rest?”

“No, Mr. Potter,” she snapped irritably. “Someone let him in on purpose. What do you know about this?”

He held up his hands in shock at the sudden frustration. “Nothing! Professor, if you want the truth, between my homework and your detentions, I wouldn’t have time to babysit someone. If there’s really a kid in the castle, there’s no way I had anything to do with it.”

“Oh, but you did. And I very much want to know why,” she said sharply, getting to her feet. Harry’s smile slipped from his face as he watched her movement. “Drink the tea.”

“What’s in it?”

“What do you think?” she snapped. “Drink it.”

“No.”

She sighed, shaking her head. “I’m afraid you give me no choice, Mr. Potter.” She pulled her wand out and aimed it at him. He moved his eyes away from hers before she could enact a Legimency connection. “Crucio.”
He fell out of his chair with a shout, cracking his head against the desk on the way down. The movement saved him, cutting off her view of him and ending the curse. He panted, hand already searching his pocket for his wand as she started to walk around the desk towards him. He grasped it just in time, holding it up at her and adopting a defensive stance. “Stay the hell away from me,” he snarled.

“What are you going to do?” she murmured softly. “Attack a teacher?”

“You just attacked me!”

She smiled sweetly. “But Mr. Potter, don’t you remember? The Minister of Magic himself gave me powers as the High Inquisitor, among them the ability to enact and employ Educational Decrees. If you can recall it, you would know that the last Decree gave me express power to determine just punishment for students who misbehave.”

“Then kick me out of school,” he snarled, and was surprised to realize he meant it. “Because I will fight you this whole way, and there is no way in hell I am letting you do that to me again. No, stay back,” he shouted as she stepped closer.

“Kick you out? Oh, no, no, no, I don’t think you understand at all. You will stay here, with me, for as long as is necessary until you understand that I am trying to help you.” She gestured with her wand, and the door’s lock clicked into place. “I have class in fourteen hours, Mr. Potter. I have time to wait you out. But you? Well, you need to be in bed before the Inquisitorial Squad comes around to check, or you will find yourself punished for failure to comply with the rules until the end of the year. Since you cannot manage to be in the right place at the right time, you will be escorted everywhere by Filch or myself, and you will be sleeping in confined chambers away from all your friends.”

Against the screaming of every pore in his body, he lowered his wand. “Well,” he ground out, “let’s see if you can do a Cruciatius as well as Voldemort.”

Harry woke to someone aggressively shaking his shoulder. “Harry!” Hermione hissed at him. “Get up! You’ve got ten minutes to get to class!”

He blinked blearily and groaned. “Is Jack…?”

“Dobby’s getting him food right now,” she said impatiently. “Come on!”

The events of last night came back to him and he jerked upright in bed. “Umbridge,” he hissed, and Hermione stopped mid-flurry. “Umbridge. She knows. Hermione, I don’t know how, but she knows Jack’s here. She asked me if I knew about a boy staying in the castle.”

Hermione went white. “That’s impossible,” she whispered as Harry started grabbing his clothes, not even caring that Hermione was standing there as he threw his robes on. “We never spoke about him outside of class. And no one would ever betray him – and if they did, she wouldn’t have stopped to talk to you about it.”

He shook his head roughly, leaving the bedroom. It was a little difficult to move after the prolonged exposure to the Cruciatius. “We’ve got to warn everyone else. We need to know how she figured it out.” He hurried past Dobby and the Bloody Baron, who were respectively chattering away with Jack and lurking ominously.

The rest of the day was plagued with fear. Other than her secret police, was Umbridge spying on the
school in another way too? And if so, what was it? The school had just gotten much more dangerous for Jack, and Harry wasn’t sure he could protect his brother anymore unless he just stayed in the Room of Requirement with him the whole time, and even that was impossible.

He saw the Slytherins in potions that day, and all of them were curiously subdued. Draco kept trying to catch his eye, but Harry was in no mood to mess around with the threat on Jack looming over him. The Slytherin finally crumpled up a piece of parchment and threw it at him. It missed, landing instead on his work table beside his cauldron.

“Potter,” Snape drawled, “do focus on your own potion instead of playing games with Mr. Malfoy. Five points from Gryffindor.”

Harry did not glare at the potions master because that would be immature and stupid. He did, however, wait until the man had turned his back to unfold the paper and read the lines scribbled inside.

“She knows about Jack and she’s using veritaserum on any students who have detention to find out if they know anything. Warn everyone.”

Harry’s felt numb. She was doing the same thing to everyone else, and he knew most of the students who had gotten detentions from her were members of the QDA. Their options were to drink the tainted tea or undergo torture.

He heard a sharp intake of breath beside him and knew that Hermione had read the note. He sighed quietly but took out his quill when Snape wasn’t watching and added a note to the bottom. “She’s using the Cruciatus if they don’t take the tea.” Instead of making the obvious throw Draco had, he turned and tossed it underhand so it skidded along the floor until it hit the side of Draco’s chair. The Slytherin bent to scratch his ankle and grabbed the letter up at the same time as Harry turned back to his potion.

Hermione was shaking slightly beside him, and when he risked a quick glance at her he saw that she was biting her lip and fighting back furious tears. Snape walked past a moment later and didn’t say anything, but on his next circuit he stopped a few rows behind Harry and said, “Mr. Malfoy, are you going to proceed to step six before the end of the period?”

There was a long pause, and Harry looked away from his own potion towards Snape and Draco. The blond’s hair was covering his face, and both of his hands were resting on the desk in front of him. Finally, he said, “Sir, I think I’m going to be sick.”

“Excused.”

Draco bolted from the room.

Harry turned back to his work station.

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When he got back to the Room of Requirement after his detention that night, he could feel a bruise growing on his forearm from where he had repeatedly stumbled into the stairway railing on his way up. His head was faintly buzzing, and if he closed his eyes long enough and then opened them again he had double vision for a few seconds. There was a faint tremor running underneath his skin.

He was hoping for a quiet return so he could fall asleep immediately. He got nuclear fallout instead.

“Let me go!” Draco screamed, and Harry quickly shut the door behind him and sprinted forward as
fast as he could manage without falling. Most of the students were gathered in a huddle, and there
was a flurry of motion towards the center, where Harry could only assume Draco was. “Let me go!
I’m going to kill her!”

Harry stumbled against Anthony at the back, muttered an apology, and then started pushing his way
towards the center. If he were honest with himself, he was touching shoulders less to warn people he
was coming through and more to steady himself. It took far too long for him to reach the center.
Draco was thrashing, legs kicking and elbows flailing, and Elle was holding onto him with
everything she had. A few meters away, Luna was sitting quietly in a chair, a cup of hot chocolate in
her hands and a blanket wrapped around her shoulders. Reid was crouched in front of her, talking
quietly as his hands gently probed the sides of her head to check for injury.

“Harry!” Ron shouted, shoving his way through to dart across the opening in the middle of the
group. He grabbed Harry’s arms as everyone turned to look at him, and his eyes searched Harry’s
face then widened in horror. “No…”

“What is it?” Harry demanded. Draco had slumped, shaking and half-sobbing, in Elle’s arms.

“Did she use the Cruciatius on you too?” Reid asked quietly. Harry nodded, the immediate panic
fading. “How long?”

“Couple of hours. She alternated it with the Stinging Hex.” He took a closer look and saw Luna bore
similar welts on her arms. “I guess she figured she needed to step it up with us, since we were used
to the more mundane tortures.”

His vision of Reid and Luna was suddenly interrupted as Ron’s shoulder blocked the way, and the
redhead embraced him in a tight hug. He mumbled something into the side of Harry’s neck, but it
was incomprehensible and Harry just patted his back.

“I understand if anyone else who has detention tomorrow wants to tell her,” he said. “I just need to
know now so we can move Jack.”

“Don’t be daft,” Padma scoffed. “He’s practically ours too.” There was a small army of consenting
nods, and, despite himself, Harry smiled slightly. “What do we do?”

“If you openly attack her,” Elle said, arms still wrapped around Draco, “she’ll use it to confirm
Fudge’s fears that Dumbledore is building an army. You can’t give her that. At all costs, you have to
avoid getting a detention.”

“She’s giving them out for no reason at all!” Terry protested. “She doesn’t know who brought Jack
in, so she’s grabbing as many people as she can and giving detentions.”

“Wait,” Hermione said. “We can’t be in two detentions at once, and she has class so she can only
give detentions in the evenings.”

“What do you mean?” Harry asked.

“Draco, you’ve been scheming for weeks now,” Hermione said. The blond looked up weakly. “Is it
going to get someone in trouble?”

He wiped his nose with the back of his hand. “I won’t do it,” he said defiantly. “Not if it risks
someone like this.”

Hermione smiled. “Well, whoever said it was going to be Umbridge giving detentions?”
Over the decades, McGonagall had developed something of a sixth sense for misbehaving children who had suddenly decided now was the perfect time to have a little fun. Her sixth sense was screaming at her to pull out her wand and start hexing students before the damage could start, but she resisted. Her initial concern was that the Weasley twins and Jordan were nowhere to be seen yet, but that was beginning to fade into a dawning horror as she noticed that there were at least twenty kids missing at the Gryffindor table who were usually on time. As she cast her gaze across the rest of the room, she noticed there were quite a few more holes in spots that were regularly filled.

She began to turn back to the Gryffindor table, but a flash of movement caught her eye. She searched for a moment, then located the source as something darting around the Hufflepuff table and over one of the benches to slip under the Ravenclaw table. Her mouth dropped open slightly. If she had to guess, it looked like a young boy.

As subtly as she could, she glanced down the row of staff towards Umbridge to see if the atrocious woman had noticed. The High Inquisitor had gathered the professors earlier that week to demand answers about the presence of a muggle child within the castle, and had been frustrated to learn that no one had the slightest clue what she was talking about. Her wish that the child had gone unnoticed was trampled as she saw the gleam in Umbridge’s eyes. The DADA professor slowly got to her feet, smugness radiating off her. On her right, Snape had also caught sight of the small boy, and was watching impassively. Any who didn’t know him as well as McGonagall or better would have missed the small darting of his eyes, revealing the quick actions of his mind.

It was too late. Umbridge had already seen him. And as the boy continued climbing up and over tables, hiding behind people for an instant only to pop into view a second later, the students were beginning to notice him as well. Within minutes, the entire body had been alerted to the boy’s presence, and many were standing in shock to watch his progress across the room. He wove from the front to the back, zig-zag and sideways, slipping around anyone and everyone. The students who were entering the hall just continued their path to their seats, entirely dismissive of the boy.

McGonagall glanced up at them, wondering if they were at least curious as to their unexpected guest, and saw—

Harry Potter.

Everywhere.

“DETENTION!” she roared, startling the entire room. “Detention, all of you!”

“Run!” someone screamed, and all two hundred some Harry Potters stampeded out of the Great Hall as if the hounds of Hell were chasing them. McGonagall’s age was no deterrent to her as she vaulted the table and sprinted down the aisle after the horde. Her wand was out, and she was casting barrier spells in a flurry to stop her prey for escaping.

The Weasleys were dead to her.

Hermione had informed them that this was the first time in Hogwarts history that the Great Hall had ever been used for serving detentions because there were so many students involved.

Harry didn’t really care about that. He just hoped McGonagall’s head didn’t blow right off her neck. In all his years, he had never thought he would see the professor as furious as she was right at that moment.
“I would like an explanation immediately,” she seethed. The twins and Harry had been pulled to the front of the Great Hall that evening, while the rest of the involved students sat in absolute silence at the house tables. “Mr. Potter. You first.”

“I have no clue what happened,” he said, eyes darting between the twins and McGonagall. He was well aware that Umbridge was standing at the back of the room, as furious as could be. He hadn’t witnessed it, but Umbridge had protested that McGonagall was stealing her detention students from her. McGonagall’s rage was great enough that Umbridge’s argument had quickly died away and she had “permitted” McGonagall to take over the next month’s worth of detentions. “Honestly, professor!” he quickly added when her eyes narrowed at him.

“He didn’t know,” Fred admitted. “Well, he sort of did. We kept asking him for hairs every day but we didn’t really tell him what it was for.”

“Did you… Did you make over two hundred polyjuice potions of me?!” he demanded.

“Ah, quite a few more than that,” George said with a weak grin. “We actually had some others who were going to participate, but we ran out of supplies.”

“How on earth did you convince everyone to join in this ridiculous activity?” McGonagall snapped.

“Uhh,” Fred said, sharing a look with George. “Well. You see, we sort of promised everyone free Butterbeers. In retrospect, I’m not quite sure how we’ll be paying for that, but…”

“You should think yourself lucky I don’t give you an extra month,” she hissed.

“Er, professor,” Harry said hesitantly. “Since I didn’t have anything to do with this… Can I go?”

“Absolutely not! Did it not occur to you to ask what exactly the twins intended to do with your hair? Foolish boy! Perhaps this will teach you a lesson. Take a seat, all three of you.” She glared out over the rest of the bunch as they quickly complied. “The same goes for you. Just because you did not orchestrate this event does not mean you are not responsible for your actions! Immaturity of this sort is not tolerated here!”

They were out of detention hours later, and the QDA immediately reconvened. The Slytherins were waiting for them.

“How on earth did you get so many people to agree to drink the potion?” Hermione demanded.

“When we went around for dorm checks last night,” Draco replied with a grin, “we secretly left five drinks in each room without anyone noticing, and we left instructions to down them right before they went to the Great Hall if they wanted a free sample of a Skiving Snackbox. It worked out for us, and it was free marketing for the twins.”

“Why were you planning this in the first place?”

“So some of you have probably figured out by now that I’m running psychological tests on the students.” There were a few nods. “Elle and I are trying to compare the psyche of the magical world versus the nonmagical world. I’m helping her get more data. One of the things she wanted to test is a phenomenon called selective perception. The mind can only focus on so much, so it blocks everything else out to pay attention to what it really cares about. When we’ve got internet back, I’ll show you the most famous example of this, called the Moonwalking Bear Test or the Basketball Test. Anyway, I cast an illusion over Crookshanks and let him loose in the Great Hall so everyone would be paying attention to the image of a boy running around, and then once they were distracted,
the twins sent in all the Harry Potters.” His smirk widened. “We’re calling it ‘How Many Harry Potters Does It Take To Get Detention?’”

“Two hundred and fifty-eight, apparently,” Hermione said dryly.

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The next gathering of the third defense group, on Halloween, was far different from the last ones. With recent events, Harry felt it was only fair to let them know what they were getting into.

“Look,” he said to the gathered students. “Some of you know what I’m about to say; some of you have no clue. But here’s the thing. Umbridge is looking for someone in the castle, someone we smuggled in.” Gasps ran through the group, and a few started whispering. “She’s been giving people detentions for no reason; surely you noticed. She makes them write lines for hours with a quill that uses the writer’s blood and carves the message into the back of their hands, and then she gives them a choice between veritaserum and the Cruciatus.”

“You must be joking,” Alicia whispered.

“No,” Terry said quietly behind her. Others whipped around to stare at him. “She’s already gotten to quite a few of us, but that Educational Decree that gave her the power to give whatever punishment she deemed fit… We can’t do anything about it.”

The hushed talking began to get louder, and Harry held up his hands. “I thought you might want to know, in case she gives you a detention.” He paused. “And because there’s something else we’ve been hiding, and we don’t think it’s fair to keep quiet about it any longer. When a portion of us were…taken two summers ago, we were rescued by a…” He smiled slightly at the twins, who were smirking at his dilemma. “Ah, a rather…peculiar group.” The twins muffled their snickers and Hermione raised an eyebrow at him. “They taught us a different sort of defense, but it wasn’t… Well, it wasn’t magic. The group didn’t have magic.”

“Wait, you were rescued by…by muggles?” Michael demanded.

“Yes.”

The group stared at him.

“Then- What- Why did no one mention this before?” Angelina spluttered.

“Well, it wasn’t like anyone believed us when we said Voldemort was back, so we decided not to push our luck there either,” Ron pointed out. “Besides, then it kept them safe.”

“If you want, we can start teaching you this other defense. It’s useful in close quarters – we’ve been going based off what’s called the twenty-one foot rule, which means within twenty-one feet hand-to-hand combat wins and outside of it magic wins. We’ve worked on narrowing the gap in a fight until we can get close enough that the opponent can’t use magic, because no one in the magical world has a clue of what to do in a fight without using their wand.”

“Does it work?” Angelina demanded.

“Saved my life at the end of last year,” Harry said immediately. “It’s the only reason I could get Fenrir Greyback off me.”

“Wait,” Dean said, “you won in a physical fight over Fenrir Greyback?!”
Harry nodded.

Dean threw open his arms. “Teach me. I’m all in.”

Harry glanced over to Hermione, who gave him an encouraging nod. “There’s a little bit more,” he continued. “They didn’t want us to mention it initially, but since Umbridge is using the Cruciatus now they want to make sure you all know.” He took a deep breath. “Draco Malfoy, Cassius Warrington, Theodore Nott, Blaise Zabini, Daphne Greengrass, and Adrian Pucey are all on our side.”

The room exploded into chaos. Fred finally shut the lot up by firing a firecracker into the air over their heads.

“He’s right,” Seamus said, and the nonbelievers stared at him in shock. “Malfoy’s our dorm checker every night. He’s been counting Harry as present even though he knows Harry’s down here most of the time.”

“Why are you down here?” Lavender asked, bewildered.

“The kid we smuggled in is here,” Harry said. “I’ve been keeping him company.”

“Kid?”

“He was in danger from Death Eaters so we brought him here. Unfortunately, because of Umbridge’s wards, we haven’t been able to get him out and back home.” He looked over each of them. “Umbridge already knows he’s here, and we have no clue how. Until we find out, I have to ask you don’t ever mention him outside of this room. We can’t risk her learning anything more. Maybe she’ll think he slipped out if she doesn’t hear about him for a while.”

There were severe nods from the group. “Thanks. Anyway, the Slytherins just wanted you to know they joined the Inquisitorial Squad to give us some protection. They know who you are, and they’ve been trying to protect you as much as they could. I know it seems ridiculous – especially since Draco’s been faking assassination attempts – but they really are just acting. If they didn’t pretend to be Death Eater supporters, Voldemort could go after their families.”

At the mention of Riddle, the last of the protests stilled.

“Questions?”

He shooed them out early that evening. There was a chance Elle was going to come by, and he didn’t want to introduce her to everyone before he’d given them a bit more of an explanation. When she did show up, she immediately sequestered herself with Draco in a corner, and the two compiled their recent notes.

“It makes me feel so much better to know what he’s doing,” Ron sighed.

His relaxation was short-winded as the Baron floated through the couch between him and Harry. Ron yelped, falling over sideways, and Harry swore under his breath in surprise. “I discovered Umbridge’s source,” he said, and Harry recovered so he could focus on the ghost’s message. “The first two days you were here with Jack, no one was present in the castle. Jack wandered without the cloak of invisibility over him.”

Harry nodded. “I remember.”

“Weeks later, the paintings were still discussing the strangeness of the event. Filch overheard them
and ordered them to explain what they had seen. He told Umbridge.”

“That explains why she knew about Jack but not who brought him or why,” Ron muttered.

“Thank you,” Harry told the ghost, and the Baron faded away into a nearby wall. “We need to get Jack home. Badly.”

“Your hands,” Ron said quietly.

Harry looked down at them. There was a faint tremble that made them tap out an uneven pattern across his knees. “It happens when I get stressed. It started after the third night she used the Crucius,” he said blandly.

“She needs to go,” Ron snarled.

“What?!” Draco shrieked across the room and they whipped around. Elle was trying to soothe him, but the Slytherin was inconsolable. “How?” The two hurried over, Hermione detaching herself from her books and skidding to a halt right behind them. Draco glanced up at them and said, “Reid was poisoned!”

“He’s fine!” Elle quickly assured them before they could panic any more. “I just wanted to tell you why he didn’t come like he said he was going to. He was exposed to some anthrax-“

“Anthrax?!”

“Hermione, they had a cure! Reid found it! It’s all right, he’s just still in the hospital recovering.”

“They had to hospitalize him?!”

"I promise he's fine," she said. "I was there in the hospital with him."

Draco narrowed his eyes suspiciously at her. "So when you couldn't come at all last week, was that because you were hospitalized with him too or because you really weren't sure you could risk coming the days before the full moon?"

She winced. "Yes, but I wasn't poisoned. I had a run-in with some American werewolves. Besides, it turned out for the best. The doctor thinks-" She paused. "Well, you'll see if anything comes of it."

An enormous force slammed against the door. They all stared at it in shock as the entire frame was shoved in a full meter. A second force hit, but the door refused to cave even as the wall shook violently.

“Jack!” Harry shouted, sprinting towards the back room. “Jack!” They needed another door, an exit. The room was compromised. His brother was already sitting up in bed, wide-eyed and bewildered. “Come on, we’ve got to go!” His eyes caught sight of a door that he knew hadn’t been there before. “In here!” he shouted towards the others, and there was the briefest of pauses before Ron and Elle ran in. “What are the other two doing?” he snapped in exasperation.

“Grabbing anything incriminating,” Ron said, pushing him towards the door. Harry wrapped his hand around Jack's and tugged him. “Don’t worry about us – go!”

Harry threw open the door and didn’t look back. Jack's hand tightened in his. They sprinted wildly, sticking to the shadows and hiding whenever Harry thought he heard footsteps. There was a triumphant holler in the direction he had come from, and he could only hope it was the squad entering the room and not them finding anyone inside. A few moments later, he heard a frustrated
shout, and then a myriad of responding voices before he could hear pounding footsteps splitting
down different hallways.

He took a sharp corner and slammed abruptly into someone else. The green and silver tie caught his
eye immediately and he shoved his hand into the air, palm up to hit the nose. A quick block threw his
aim off and he hit empty space instead, but it was enough of a pause for him to see who it was.

“Cassius,” he breathed in relief.

“Come on,” the seventh year said, pushing him and Jack ahead. “We’ve got to get you out of plain
sight.”

“Where are you thinking?”

“Slytherin common room.”

“We’re on the seventh floor and it’s eight in the evening – there’s no way we can make it to the
dungeons and not be spotted by someone!” he panted, mind racing as he ran. “What about- What
about the Hufflepuff common room? They’ll hide us, won’t they?”

Cassius thought for a moment, before shrugging. “It’s not close, but it’s closer and the Ravenclaws
might have a few bad apples mixed in with them. It’s going to have to work. Umbridge told us to
check all the classrooms nearby, and I’ll bet they’ll start searching the professors’ offices after they
tear apart Gryffindor Tower.”

The next corner ran them straight into Justin and Zacharias, who had been casually walking in the
direction of the Room of Requirement. Their eyes widened, instantly deducing what had happened,
and hurried towards them. “What do you need?” Zacharias asked, keeping pace easily.

“We’re going to Hufflepuff for now,” Harry gasped out. “Can you lead the way and make sure
we’re not going to run into anyone?”

A painful ten minutes passed, with Justin trailing far behind them to make sure no one was following
and Zacharias moving ahead to prevent them from running into anyone else. Whenever a hall was
occupied, they had to reroute or somehow slip past, and it cost them precious time. Finally, the
Hufflepuffs brought them to a halt by a painting on the third floor. Zacharias tapped out a rhythm on
a portion of the painting, but Harry was too exhausted to pay attention. The painting swung open and
Zacharias ushered the Hotchners and Cassius in.

Cassius went first, and there was an aggressive shout. “Just because you’re part of the Inquisitorial
Squad does not mean you can just waltz in whenever you- Harry Potter?”

Harry put his hands on his knees, wheezing. Cassius was in the same state beside him and Zacharias
leaned back against the wall to regain his breath. Jack slipped behind Harry to hide from everyone,
but Harry could hear him gasping too. There were voices around them, students talking excitedly
about their sudden appearance, but Harry couldn’t bring himself to look up just yet. The painting
opened again and he looked behind himself sharply, but it was only Justin.

“What’s going on?” someone demanded, and Justin ran to the center of the room and jumped on top
of a table.

“Everybody, listen up!” he shouted. “I need a full house meeting, right now! Is everyone here or in
the dorms?”

“There are a few in the courtyard,” someone replied.
“We’ll have to fill them in later. Go get everyone in the dorms.”

A boy and girl hurried to comply, each running off in opposite directions. They returned a few minutes later with at least twenty more people each, and the common room was packed to the brim. Zacharias stood with Harry in front of Cassius, who had taken a seat to avoid some rather venomous glares. Jack was clinging to Harry’s legs, nervously eyeing the large group. He waved to Ernie and Susan, who smiled back comfortingly.

“Okay, first off – everyone, say hi to Cassius Warrington, who is not, as a matter of fact, a dick. Well, he is sometimes, but he’s not helping Umbridge, so in my book he’s a good guy. Second,” he pressed before anyone could interrupt, “I’d like everyone to meet Jack.” As one, the group stared at Jack, who leaned back into Harry.

“Jack, tell everyone hello,” Harry said softly.

“Hi,” Jack said quietly, and it carried in the dead silence of the room.

“Jack’s a young wizard,” Justin continued. “Umbridge thinks he’s a muggle, but she knows we smuggled him in. He was being followed by Death Eaters because of his father and Harry brought him at the beginning of the year to protect him.” He glanced at Harry for the rest of the story.

Harry raised his voice loudly and said, “We were keeping him safe in a room on the seventh floor, but Umbridge somehow found out where we were hiding. She’s having the Inquisitorial Squad search the area for him, so we brought him here.”

“Why’s Warrington here?” someone snapped.

“He found me right after Umbridge blew the room apart and helped get us away from the Squad,” Harry said firmly. “Trust me when I say he’s with us.”

“I get that this is dangerous,” Justin said from his place on the table. “We’re hiding a fugitive from Umbridge.” He paused. “But really, who likes the bitch?” There were a few murmuring voices of assent. “This house is known for loyalty, for tolerance, for kindness. Zacharias and I brought them here because we knew this was the safest place in the castle for someone in danger who needed help. But if someone thinks Jack needs to find another haven, they need to speak up right now.”

No one said anything.

“All right, thank you,” Justin said, relieved.

“We’re going to have to move him after dark,” Cassius said, getting up. “Umbridge is going to keep tearing the place apart until she finds him, and she’ll eventually search the whole castle room by room herself if she has to. I’m going to come back later and hide him in the Slytherin dorms.”

“What?” a girl shrieked from the back. “We just said this was the safest place!”

“Exactly,” Harry agreed. “Even over Gryffindor, you guys are more likely to band together to protect him. In Slytherin, it’s the least likely, especially since most of the Squad is there. Umbridge would never think to check it.”

“I need to get back upstairs to make it look like I’m searching,” Cassius regretfully said, and Harry nodded at him to go. “I’ll be back, I promise.” He smiled at Jack and waved slightly. “Bye, Jack!”

“Bye, Cassius!” Jack replied, waving energetically with one hand. The other was fist into Harry’s trousers.
After that adorable display, no one stopped the Slytherin from leaving.

“Okay,” Justin said, “we’re going to have to work together on this. If someone comes in here, we have to keep moving Jack so they never find him.”

“Or we can just keep him in the common room,” someone suggested. “Hiding in plain sight and all that. Bury him in blankets and cast a few disillusionment charms.”

“I’d rather we don’t accidentally suffocate him,” Harry dryly replied.

“One of the girls’ dorms,” someone else said. “Most of the Squad are boys. They won’t be able to get up the stairs, and no one would be surprised that the girls are fussy about someone going through their personal things.”

“He can stay with us,” Hannah said, and Harry was grateful he was passing Jack over to someone he knew. “Hey, Jack, ready for a sleep over?”

Jack nodded, but he was still clinging on to Harry. “Jack, I’ve got to go,” Harry told him. “But Hannah’s going to stay with you, all right? I’ll come check on you when I can.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.” He nudged him slightly towards Hannah. “Go on.”

Jack reluctantly detached himself, and Hannah took his hand. Susan joined her, and Harry saw one of them lift him to carry him up the stairs. If only he could go hide away for the rest of the day, he thought mournfully, wanting nothing more than to go sit in a corner with his brother.

He turned to the group. “Thank you, everyone,” he said. “Just keep him safe, please?”

“Harry, we’ve got it,” Zacharias said, a bit amused. “No Squad and no Umbridge is going to get past us to get him. You better get back to Gryffindor Tower or at least somewhere less suspicious before they really begin searching everywhere.”

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It turned out not to matter where Harry went, because he was dragged up to Dumbledore’s office anyway. Kingsley, Fudge, Percy, and a host of aurors were waiting there, standing opposite a scowling McGonagall. Umbridge looked triumphant and was in the middle of a dramatic explanation.

“You see, Minister,” she said as the door closed behind Harry. The Slytherin who had grabbed him, whose name Harry was clueless to, finally released their tight hold. “It was relatively easy to find them, once we knew what we were looking for. After all, someone had to be taking care of the boy. Filch had his cat follow Potter’s scent – and it led us straight to the room they were hiding him in.”

Fudge’s eyes were wide as saucers. Harry mentally groaned. That was something they could have easily covered up, if they’d stopped to think about it.

“No one was inside when we got there, but we found several books and clothes. A young child’s. Proof that he was here, just like I told you!” She pulled a third grader’s math textbook from within her robes and dropped it dramatically on Dumbledore’s desk. “A muggle’s child, no less!”

“So it’s true,” Fudge said eagerly. “You really are trying to infest Hogwarts with muggles. Are they an easier army to train?”
“Especially if he starts from a young age,” Umbridge purred.

Harry wanted to throw up at the very thought of someone training his brother to be a soldier.

“This is preposterous,” McGonagall snapped. “This is hardly evidence! Minister, there was a practical joke played not long ago about a child running loose in the Great Hall! This is likely just a continuation in the making!”

“But as you said yourself, Minerva,” Umbridge said, and Harry thought his Transfigurations professor might pluck out the toad’s eyes for using her first name so personally, “Mr. Potter was not involved in that.” She pulled out another book, one Harry recognized easily. It would seem Hermione and Draco hadn’t managed to grab everything. “But this is Mr. Potter’s potions textbook. I wonder how that got in there, if he wasn’t involved in this.”

Harry gaped at the textbook. “What the- That’s been missing for a month! I searched all over for it!” he blurted. The aurors looked half-convinced, but Umbridge shook her head mockingly at him.

“I’m sure you did.” She turned to Fudge. “So you see, Dumbledore must have instructed Potter to watch over the boy while he was here. That’s the only reasonable explanation!”

“Arrest him!” Fudge ordered.

“For what?” McGonagall shouted.

“Conspiracy against the Ministry!”

The aurors were not very keen on going anywhere near the headmaster.

“Go on, get him!” Fudge said eagerly.

“I think not,” Dumbledore said mildly. “Azkaban is rather dull this time of year, is it not? Perhaps it’s time I took some vacation leave.”

Fudge spluttered. “You can’t honestly expect to get past all of us?”

“Why ever would I take the front door? After all, is the façade of a home not the perspective given to guests? I see no reason to leave through such a portal when I know the inner workings of my home much better than a guest.” The Ministry employees stared at him in befuddlement. Harry, however, was rather surprised Dumbledore could come up with such an eloquent analogy right on the spot.

“No, I think I’ll take my own exit without your assistance.”

And then Fawkes shrieked and swept overhead, and Dumbledore raised his hands to grab the tail as it passed by. With a flash of sound and light, the pair disappeared.

“Well, you have to admit,” Kingsley said to Fudge when he’d recovered. “The man’s got style.”

“In any case,” Fudge said hastily. “new control must be exerted over this institution if it is to flourish. My apologies, Professor,” he told McGonagall with no real meaning behind the words, “but I must overlook your position in favor of appointing my own headmaster to bring Hogwarts back to its glory. Or, in this case,” he said as he turned to a beaming Umbridge. “My own headmistress.”

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Harry slept in the Slytherin’s fifth year dorm that night. The four boys conjured a mattress on the floor for him and Jack, who spent the night curled tightly against his side. They had absolutely no
idea what had happened to the others. Draco had split up from them to join the Squad’s search, claiming he had been late to the summons because he had been discussing a matter with Professor Snape. Umbridge had been too enthralled by her success to even care about his tardiness and just sent him searching.

That morning, they called Dobby into the dorm, but the house elf already knew what had happened. He promised to take care of Jack the rest of the day in the dorm room, but Harry decided to forgo breakfast in favor of spending the time with his brother. Draco came back to collect him when it was time to go to class and walked him out, just in case they crossed paths with another Slytherin and Draco was needed to fake an incident that explained Harry’s presence since Elle had the invisibility cloak.

He sank into a seat between Hermione and Ron in relief. “Where were you?” he whispered immediately. “We were panicking last night!”

“Hagrid’s back,” Hermione whispered eagerly. “I saw the smoke, and we all went there. Elle was going to spend the night in his cabin, in case we needed her help, and then leave once we gave her the okay. What happened to you?”

Harry gave her a quick rundown, but didn’t mention Jack’s location. There was no telling where Umbridge had ears, and from the expressions on their faces, the two had a pretty good guess as to where he had ended up. When they heard Dumbledore had been ousted and Umbridge had taken control of the school, they both sat back, aghast.

“They can’t do that!” Ron hissed.

“It’s done,” Harry grimly replied. “Think there’s any chance we’re going to learn something this year with her running all of Hogwarts?”

The destruction of the Room of Requirement weighted heavily on his mind. It had been much more than a place for him to sleep each night. They’d used it as a haven when they were struggling with their nightmares, and a secret cove to gather in where no one else could find them. It was more important than the sum of what it had been used for, and there wasn’t a replacement for it in the building. He temporarily pondered having everyone gather in the Chamber of Secrets, but he didn’t want to have to open the sink every time someone wanted to get in, it was too close to regular traffic, and the place was really rather unpleasant. Not at all like the Room of Requirement.

The event followed him all the way to DADA, which he was too depressed to even pay attention to. He got a detention for…who even cared what, and he couldn’t say he was surprised. He just glared at her before going back to reading the section she had instructed, while Ron and Hermione stiffened beside him. He would have been surprised that she was still teaching, except she needed the satisfaction of seeing her power impressed upon everyone else. She had to be in the classroom, actively making lives miserable.

In the following week, she sacked Trelawney and replaced her with some useless moron who was hardly any better. Honestly, Harry could hardly tell the difference between their teaching styles, except the new one was a lot less dramatic. Hagrid went next, but he stayed as the groundskeeper since the entire staff was emphatic that no one knew the land like he did. Grubbly-Plank seamlessly filled his role, continuing classes like she had been.

The QDA didn’t meet. There wasn’t anywhere adequate, although they were all frantically searching. The obvious choices, Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom and the Hufflepuff common room, were both ruled out because they were either in an area of high traffic or were too exposed. Nowhere else was close to satisfactory. Dobby offered the kitchen, but there was hardly enough room to fit all
of them. The search died out as they slowly gave up, instead focusing their individual efforts on taking down Umbridge one piece at a time.

There was a full-scale revolt going on at the school. The hallway the DADA classroom was on was turned into a swamp within days, and Filch had to ferry people to class. The room itself had the unfortunate habit of misplacing critical pieces of furniture, and the defense books would sometimes spontaneously light on fire. Umbridge was spending most of her time in class trying to fix the chaos instead of teaching.

Outside her room, mayhem ensued in other manners. The Baron let Peeves off his leash, and the poltergeist wreaked the castle like it had never been wrecked before. For once, the mischievous ghost found himself being praised by the students, and they even helped him when he had trouble moving large amounts of something from place to place. Harry was positive he heard McGonagall calmly instruct Peeves on how to properly drop a chandelier as she was passing by.

Of course, the other professors were concerned about intruding on Umbridge’s power and humbly deferred to her to fix the messes they were surrounded by. Not a single one offered any advice, and Harry smugly noted that many of the charms could have been easily removed by Flitwick and the transfigured objects could have been restored to normal in a moment by McGonagall. Even the professors who didn’t specialize in those fields would have been incredibly helpful, but Umbridge’s power was “too reassuring,” so they let her handle it on her own.

Harry would have been more excited about the whole situation if not for regular detentions/tortures. A full month had passed when Umbridge decided enough was enough and decided delegation was necessary. He still had three days left of detention when she stopped him from leaving and said, “You will be finishing the rest of your detentions with Professor Phalarope.”

“Who’s that?” Harry asked impatiently, hand resting on the door knob. He could feel it shaking, an aftereffect of the repeated exposure to the Cruciatus and the numerous stinging welts over his body.

“You’ll see,” she said, a smirk crossing her face.

At dinner that night, Umbridge rose to her feet. “Hem hem,” she said, even though everyone was already quiet. Many glared at her interruption of their meal, and Harry knew numerous of them were bearing marks from her detentions. “I have seen fit to find a replacement for my post as Defense Against the Dark arts professor,” she announced, and Harry reeled back in surprise. “This will allow me to truly focus on my place as High Inquisitor and Headmistress of this illustrious school.”

“Yeah, except she can’t even get into the office,” Ron muttered beside her. Once they had all left the room after Dumbledore had vanished, the gargoyle blocking the entrance had refused to move aside, even when Umbridge had raged at it for hours on end.

“The professor we have selected is highly qualified and is an exemplary figure of the hallmarks that the Ministry prides above all else. He will be critical in the reformation of this school as we bring it back to its glory,” she said. “He will be arriving tomorrow morning, and I expect a warm welcome from all of you.”

They turned back to their meals, and Harry rested his forehead against his palm as quiet murmurings sprang up at the news. “Great,” he said. “Now Umbridge can really devote her attention to screwing everyone over, and we’ll have a DADA professor backing her up and torturing kids just the way she likes.”

“Harry, this has to stop,” Hermione whispered. “You can’t go on like this!”
“I don’t have an option.”

He hadn’t seen Jack since the morning he had slept in the Slytherin dorm. It was too dangerous for both of them. As far as he knew, Jack hadn’t left that room the entire time. With the increased security, the BAU hadn’t tried getting back in, which meant Jack was going to be stuck in Hogwarts for even longer.

I’m sorry, Dad.

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He didn’t have DADA classes the next day, what with it being Sunday, but he trudged his way across the swamp to get to the classroom after dinner for detention. He wondered if Phalarope was going to continue with Umbridge’s techniques or develop his own, but he supposed it didn’t really matter when the result was going to be about the same.

The office door was open and he carefully stepped in with a tentative knock. There was no response, and he dropped his bag beside the desk and leaned against the wall. Thankfully, Umbridge had cleaned out the office entirely, moving all of it to…wherever it was she was now making her own. The new professor clearly hadn’t had time to settle in yet, as the walls were barren and the desk didn’t even have meager stationary on it.

His eyelids were drooping, and he yawned. His sleep pattern was shot between worrying over Jack, homework, and the detentions, and he knew he was far behind on rest. There wasn’t anything to be done about it, not until Jack was somewhere safer or Umbridge had been removed from the school. He let his mind wander while he waited for Professor Phalarope to show, and before he knew it, he was lightly dozing in his standing position.

“What’s that?”

“A lark sparrow.”

Laughter. “No, I meant that, below it.”

“A Kirtland’s warbler. A young one, too.”

“Gideon! That!”

“Oh. That’s a sand pit for a golf course.”

“…What’s that?”

“A golf cart.”

Hesitant smile. “No, below it, by the water.”

Amused smirk at the turnabout. “That’s a… Well, I can’t quite tell from here, but that’s either a buff-breasted sandpiper or a Wilson’s phala-“

The door closed, startling him out of the memory. The sudden noise caused his hand to jump to his pocket and reach for his wand, but he stopped himself and took a steadying breath when he realized it was only the professor who had entered. Only the professor, who was likely here to continue Umbridge’s torture routine.

With that thought in mind, he turned a glare on the man who had shut the door, only to find a
curiously blank expression looking back at him.

One he recognized rather well.

“You…?” he breathed.

Chapter End Notes

Jack was originally about six years old during this section when I wrote all of this, so I only recently went back through to make adjustments to his age. I think we were a couple of chapters earlier where I forgot to change his age when it was mentioned. At this point, he should be eight years old.
“It is a principle which permits a state, in the selfish pursuit of power, to disregard its treaties and its solemn pledges, which sanctions the use of force or threat of force against the sovereignty and independence of other states. Such a principle, stripped of all disguise, is surely the mere primitive doctrine that might is right, and if this principle were established through the world, the freedom of our own country and of the whole British Commonwealth of nations would be in danger. But far more than this, the peoples of the world would be kept in bondage of fear, and all hopes of settled peace and of the security, of justice and liberty, among nations, would be ended.” – King George VI, King’s Speech to the public announcing England’s entrance to World War II

Gideon stumbled back as Harry slammed into him, and he wrapped his arms quickly around the teenager. The relief leaking off the teenager was palpable in his faint trembling and startled laugh, and Gideon clutched him a bit tighter. Finally, one of them pulled back, and Harry looked at him in delighted confusion.

“They said they keyed the wards to you and Dad. How did you get in?”

“They followed your father to a crime scene he was working in America and got a sample off of him then. I was already gone – they never got one from me.” He reached up and put the back of his hand against Harry’s forehead. Feverish and clammy. He frowned.

Harry hardly noticed. “How did you know we needed you?” he asked, still laughing slightly in bewilderment.

“I made acquaintances with Fudge in case I could convince him to see some reason. I didn’t manage that, but I did gain his trust, and he introduced me to Umbridge. I pretended to agree with both on numerous issues, and I stayed in contact and emphasized my support of Umbridge’s practices here at the school. Then I started suggesting to Fudge that someone else take over as DADA professor so Umbridge could focus on her other duties. Fudge said I should do it.”

Harry grinned. “I thought it was weird that she would give up this post.”

“She was especially adamant against no longer overseeing punishments, but I convinced her it was beneath her and Fudge agreed with me.” One of his thumbs traced over a faint scar on his neck left from Greyback’s claws. “It seems you had an eventful year while I was gone.”

“A lot’s happened,” he agreed.

“Well, we’ve got a few hours. Fill me in.”

They sat down, with Gideon pulling the professor’s chair around to the other side so the desk wasn’t between them. Harry started talking, slowly at first as he reoriented himself to back when Gideon left but then picking up speed as he got the flow of the story. Gideon smirked sympathetically as Harry recounted their struggles to get Rossi in on the secret, and raised a surprised eyebrow to hear that Snape was also in. Some of the story he already knew - he’d been lurking around the magical world
long enough to hear what happened in the graveyard from everyone’s point of view, though now he had a better understanding as to why the Death Eaters were so frustrated and scared of Harry.

There was a long pause, and then Harry continued on to explain who had picked him up while he had been trekking back to Hogwarts, explaining the whole fiasco with the Secret Keeper. There was another pause a few minutes later, and then he was telling Gideon something else about what Perotta had done.

“What?” Harry asked, noting an odd look on Gideon’s face.

“I’m just…surprised you’re telling me,” he admitted.

“Well, the last time I heard about my dad he was still pretty pissed off, so I figure you’d be better off knowing what’s got him in such a state. He’s apparently biting people’s heads off.”

“I can hardly say I’m surprised, knowing your father and his situation,” Gideon murmured.

Harry wrapped up the rest of the story, filling in the holes from what Umbridge had already told him about the school year. His eyebrows shot up when Harry described How Many Harry Potters Does It Take To Get Detention? That had been one detail that Umbridge hadn’t given him. The punishments, however, were exactly as she described them, and Gideon remembered the faintly shaking body against his when Harry had hugged him.

It was hours later when Harry was finally done, and Gideon drummed his fingers lightly against the edge of the desk thoughtfully. “Obviously, I can take care of Umbridge’s detentions,” he said slowly, “but the matter of the QDA…and Jack…” He shook his head with a grimace. “I’ll think about it, but I don’t see a way around it. You might have to wait until Umbridge has been deposed.”

Harry nodded morosely. “I was afraid you’d say that.” He sighed. “We’ve gotten used to it, even if it sucks.” He looked up and met Gideon’s gaze. “What happened to you?” With a small grin, he added with a gesture to his own chin, "And what's with the...?"

Gideon brushed his beard. "I grew it out to make myself less recognizable. Fudge only met me briefly, but since I was a muggle he didn't pay close attention to me. This and the fake accent knocked him off track enough that I was able to slip past his radar as a threat."

"And...?" Gideon tilted his head to the side. "Are you going to tell me the rest?"

He acquiesced, explaining how he’d taken a few months off to get his head together and then had decided abandoning the students wasn’t something he could do. Instead of returning to the BAU, who were bound by red tape and needed to stay focused on the crimes that crossed their desks, he split off on his own and went to England for his own investigating. Within a few more months, he’d traced Riddle’s lineage back and found the old family home, and he used his newfound contacts in the magical British world to help him check the Horcruxes he found for curses.

He developed different contacts as well, ones that got him connections in the Ministry without him having to actually join. And then he gathered a few more people in the underground, people talented in spellwork who could cast charms over him to allow him through any anti-muggle barriers. He picked up a fake wand and an equally misleading British accent, and he slipped into Fudge’s and Umbridge’s confidences with all the ease of someone who had mastered flattery and praise.

“I heard the Death Eaters were chasing you,” he said.

“Riddle heard someone was collecting his Horcruxes,” Gideon confirmed. “But he didn’t know who. He didn’t even know what I looked like. They were hardly chasing me.”
Harry smiled. “I’m glad you’re back.”

“Me too,” he admitted and glanced at the time. “How late does she usually keep you?”

“As late as midnight.”

“You look exhausted. You’ve still got a few more hours, so why don’t you get some sleep?” Harry looked stricken. “I work here now. We can talk later, but right now you really look like you need the rest.”

Harry nodded reluctantly, and he took a spot on the floor out of the way, using his backpack as a pillow. Gideon dug around in his belongings, still in the other room, until he found a quilt that he draped over the teenager. Harry relaxed into it slowly until he slipped off into a deep sleep.

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Harry woke up on the office floor of the DADA professor when a beam of light crossed his face. He opened his eyes, blinking, and saw Gideon doing some paperwork at his desk. Or, at least it looked like paperwork. It could have been a crossword for all Harry knew from his angle. He sat up, running a hand through his hair. From the sun, it looked like it was about breakfast time.

“I tried to wake you, but you were so exhausted you didn’t even stir so I let you sleep,” Gideon explained. “I hope it was comfortable.”

“Your quilt was,” Harry said. “Thanks.”

“Better get on down to breakfast.”

Harry grinned. “Am I going to see you there?”

“Unfortunately, though the idea of public meals is abhorring. What?”

“The QDA is going to. Flip. Out.”

“You may want to warn them, in that case,” Gideon said, and Harry quickly nodded as he folded up the quilt with a wave of his wand and slung his bag over his shoulders. “And perhaps find your dorm mates so they don’t think I’ve murdered you.”

Harry nodded quickly. “It’s great to have you back,” he said, and then darted out the door.

He didn’t bother heading back to his dorm, instead sprinting right to the Great Hall where students were already beginning to gather. He quickly scanned Gryffindor table until his gaze alighted on a bushy mane of brown hair and a shock of red hair, and he hurried across to them, controlling his features as best as he could to make it look like he hadn’t been making friendly conversation with the DADA professor who was supposed to have been torturing him.

Both of his friends jumped when he sat down next to them. “Harry!” Hermione exclaimed, throwing both arms around him. Into his neck, she added, “We were so worried!”

“What the bloody hell did he do to you, mate?” Ron asked, horrified. “Were you there this whole time?”

He nodded but grabbed both of them and pulled them closer. “It’s Gideon.”

“What,” Hermione whispered, even as a grin began to creep across her face.
“We need to warn everyone else before we all start looking way too excited when he shows up for breakfast,” Harry said.

“I can use the fake galleons,” Hermione quickly decided, pulling out her master coin. “Someone should think to tell the Slytherins, but even if they don’t, Umbridge won’t be watching them.”

Harry kept an eye on the rest of the tables, and saw few visible reactions. Anthony’s head snapped up suddenly and he looked at Harry in shock, but both quickly averted their gaze and found interest in another part of the room. It was still early and many students and professors had yet to come in, so not all of the QDA kids were present.

He turned back to his own table as the twins and Ginny took seats across from them. The twins were failing horribly at suppressing their grins.

“I got tortured last night and that’s how you greet me?” Harry asked in mock indignation and they struggled some more to wipe away their smirks.

At some point in the last twenty minutes, Gideon had slipped in unnoticed. Harry only knew this because he spotted Gideon making his way out of the hall through the teacher’s exit, and he smirked internally at the man’s reclusive behavior. The public meals might quite possibly be the death of him. He was in and out too quickly for many others to actually see him, and Umbridge didn’t have time to make a dramatic speech, although perhaps she was saving that for dinner when everyone was more likely to be there.

For once this year, he was edgy through the rest of his classes in anticipation for DADA class at the end of the day. When it finally came, though, he was one of the last students to arrive. Everyone else who knew Gideon was teaching had had the same idea Harry had to get there as quickly as possible. They were buzzing in their normal seats, the very air vibrating with excitement. The door to his office finally opened right as the bell rang, and the group watched with complete attentiveness as he made his way to the desk. The two students who had never crossed paths with him blinked a few times, a symptom of the whiplash of going from Umbridge to…Gideon.

“So, your year has been a wreck,” Gideon calmly said, coming around to the front of his desk and then leaning back against it. His arms folded loosely across his chest as there were some murmurs of agreement. Lavender and Parvati looked entirely baffled. “You’re one of my few classes where almost everyone knows what’s going on, it seems.”

“Sir,” said Parvati, raising her hand, “…what is going on?”

“I’m a muggle.”

Lavender fell out of her chair.

“So, unfortunately, I will not being showing you any defensive magic this year though you direly need it.”

“You’re what?” the Parvati shrieked.

“A muggle. Umbridge is, of course, unaware of this and I’d rather she remained that way.”

After a moment of her flustered gaping, Ron took pity on her and said, “He’s from the group who rescued us.” Then to Gideon, he explained, “She and Lavender are both in the DA.”

He nodded. “So everyone in this class has been practicing some defense since last year, at least?” There were numerous nods in reply. “All right. I am not telling every class this information,” he
“Just the ones like yours where a disproportionate number of the students are already aware. Please keep this to yourselves.” There was a lot of hurried nodding. “With that out of the way, I, unlike my predecessor, have absolutely no qualms with asking if any of you know how to get the chairs and desks unstuck from the ceiling.” The students, sitting on the floor or on their bags, shook their heads and Gideon sighed. “A pity. I hope you don’t mind where you’re at, then, because there’s no way I’m fixing this.”

“The twins might be responsible for it,” Neville pointed out. “Try asking them later.”

Gideon nodded in appreciation. “I’ll do that. Now, it’s best we get started on an actual lesson since you’re so far behind. I was going to do Dark creatures, but the only one I had access to told me that she was too busy trying to stop Peeves from blowing up the west tower.” The class grinned at Gideon’s dry humor. He glanced at Harry. “How much did you cover outside of class?”

“Well, we’d gone over quite a bit in the Room of Requirement before it got blown apart, but we weren’t really going off any sort of schedule,” he said, surprised at being singled out so soon.

They spent the rest of the class had just been filling Gideon in on what Elle and the others had gone over with them and then shown the ones who hadn’t ever been to Quantico what they were talking about. Towards the end, Hermione was helping demonstrate a wrist lock to Seamus and Lavender while Neville helped Dean and Parvati. The rest of them talked with Gideon about who else was in the DA so he would recognize them, and then started discussing what would be best for him to go over in the classes that had been practicing and those that hadn’t. A few students could probably be filled in, like the Hufflepuff classes since they already knew about Jack, but the class agreed they were going to have to do that step by step to get everyone fully accustomed to the idea.

When the bell rang and they started to gather their books, Gideon called after them, “Remember to look abused!”

There were a few snickers at that, and it was rather difficult to rearrange their features to match the command.

Harry was about to walk out when he heard Gideon call his name. Hermione and Ron paused along with him, and Gideon gestured for them to wait as well. The rest of the class departed and the four met halfway in the middle of the empty classroom.

“I might have an option for you,” he said. “Umbridge said Dumbledore’s office is refusing her entry, correct?”

“Yeah, but it hasn’t opened at all since he left,” Harry said, shaking his head.

“Has anyone else besides her tried to get in? And if they have, did they tell the gargoyle why they wanted to get in?” The trio exchanged glances. “This entire castle is fighting against her. I would be extremely surprised if it did not support a student defense organization.”

“It’s small,” Ron said hesitantly.

“Not really,” Harry replied slowly. “I mean, it is, but that’s just because the space is broken up by the stairs and desk and everything, but if we’ve got pairs practicing, then we should all be able to fit. And for the QDA, it’s rare that everyone’s in there at the same time.” A grin spread over his face. “Gideon, you’re brilliant!”

He smiled slightly. “It’s nice of you to say so. You three better get to your next class.”
Harry stared at the gargoyle for a minute before releasing his pent-up breath. “Look,” he started quietly, since it was close to midnight, “I feel kind of crazy talking to you like this.” Its stone eyes stared impassively at him. “But… There’s a group of us who want to learn defense. And the Umbitch destroyed the place we were using, and we can’t find anywhere else that’s safe and large enough. So we were kind of wondering if we could use the headmaster’s office.”

The gargoyle didn’t move, and Harry’s shoulders slumped in dismay as he slowly turned away. “Sorry, we were just wondering. We’re starting to get desperate, between Umbridge’s harassment, and Jack’s situation, and—” A grinding noise made him stop and turned back to see the entrance was unblocked. “Awesome,” he whispered, hurrying forward and up the stairs. The door was unlocked, and he pushed his way in.

Since no one had been in there after Dumbledore had let, there were still vestiges of the damage Fawkes had caused in the explosion. A few scorch marks littered the desk, the floor, and the walls, and several pieces of furniture had been blown back by the force. Delicate instruments were knocked out of place, and papers had strewn across the desk and onto the floor. Harry looked it over and nodded to himself. It would do.

He pulled out his wand out and cast his Patronus. The elephant appeared before him, insubstantial wisps of memory holding the figure together. He hadn’t cast it in ages, and certainly not since the only place large enough to hold it had been destroyed. Its wise eyes watched him as it shuffled back and forth, tail swishing behind it. Harry sighed, reaching out a hand to touch the trunk, but his fingers passed through it. He knew logically that the creature was just an embodiment of how he perceived his father, but he couldn’t stop himself from wishing it was an actual embodiment of his father.

“I need you,” he whispered, hand drifting back to his side. The elephant pawed the ground with one massive foot. “I feel like I’m barely keeping up.”

Just for a moment, he thought he could feel the elephant’s warm breath.

Then the sensation was gone, and he knew he must have imagined it.

He took a deep breath, steeling himself for the next part. He could perform the spell well enough, could even do it before the elephant came out of his wand, but he always struggled to do so when he thought about what he was doing. Even if the rest of the world already believed it, he hated to show everyone that his prized patronus, the one he could conjure at such a young age in his father’s memory, was a stag. It should have been an elephant, the defensive but gentle creature that stood before him now.

He was tired of hiding its true form, tired of nodding to people when they told him how much he looked like his father – how much he looked like James. He didn’t want to be an orphan anymore, not when he had a surviving parent. Looking at the animal in front of him, he just wanted to be able to proudly display it. If he were honest with himself, he wanted others to know that someone out there cared about him, not just because he was the Boy Who Lived but because he was family. Because they loved him.

Instead of casting the transforming spell, he sank into one of the chairs opposite Dumbledore’s desk and stared at his patronus. There wasn’t any room for it to pace, but he got the feeling it was eager to move and do something. Its tusks butted against the air, aggressively demanding release. Harry ran his eyes slowly over it, stopping to take in the wrinkled lines and the flaps of skin over its body. He had no doubt that if the creature were alive, it could easily kill him through sheer strength. He also had no doubt that, were it alive, he would never face harm from it.

“What is that, lad?” one of the paintings on the wall said. Harry jumped and looked to whoever had
spoken. Most of them had been asleep, but now they were beginning to stir at the voice.

“My patronus.”

“Well, clearly, but what’s that look on your face for? That beast won’t be giving you answers any time soon.”

“I know,” he quietly replied. “It’s just… It’s my father’s patronus, really. I just… I wish it were him here instead.”

“Well, lad,” one of the other paintings said, “you’ve done half the work already. Send the patronus along with a message. It’s not quite what you want but it should do the trick.”

Harry dropped his chin into his open palms, whose elbows rested on his knees. “Can’t. He’s… He’s too far away.”

There was a snort from another voice. “Boy thinks he knows so much about patronuses,” it scoffed, and Harry looked up sharply. “They’re different from regular magic. They’re made of memory and emotion, and they’re not bound to normal limits. That creature can go however far you want it to go.”

Harry gaped. “Really?!?”

The portrait nodded.

Harry whipped around to look at the elephant, which hadn’t stopped watching him the entire time. “Okay,” he whispered. “Take a message back to my father, for when he gets home. Wait until he’s alone, or the BAU’s there.” He took a deep breath, feeling something catch in the back of his throat. “Hey, Dad,” he started softly, then coughed slightly to clear his airways. “I’m really sorry, but I didn’t know there wasn’t a distance limit of patronuses, or I would have sent this ages ago.” He stopped. What was there even to say? It wasn’t like he could have a real conversation with his father through the patronus. “Jack’s… Well, he’s not happy but he’s fine. The Slytherins are taking care of him, right under Umbridge’s nose. I haven’t been able to see him since we had to split up, but Draco’s been keeping me updated when we see each other in potions.”

He didn’t want to say it, but… He liked to think he’d learned his lesson from not telling his father everything. “Umbridge has been, uh… Well, she- She’s been torturing some of the kids.” He swallowed, pushing back the memory of Luna’s hand and Terry’s shaking. “She was having us use a quill that drew blood, but then she… Well, she found out Jack was in the school and she started using the Cruciatrus Curse on anyone who had detention with her to try to get answers. No one’s told her anything.” He laughed weakly. “The whole Hufflepuff House knows about Jack, by the way. They were hiding him for one night, until we could move him to Slytherin. They’re outraged about the whole situation.”

He rubbed his palms against his knees. The elephant’s tail batted away nonexistent flies. “We had to stop the meetings because the Room of Requirement was destroyed, but I think I just found a replacement. Dumbledore’s office let us in. I didn’t even think to use it but- Oh, yeah! Gideon’s here! He fooled Fudge and Umbridge, and then convinced them to let him take Umbridge’s place as DADA professor so she could ‘focus on her High Inquisitor roles’. It’s fantastic, but I wish we could tell McGonagall because she looks like she’s going to snap his head off if he so much as glances at someone. I think she’s worried Umbridge found another psychopath to replace her, and Gideon’s fantastic at playing along with her in public. The only problem is that we keep having to kick each other so no one starts laughing.”
His good humor faded and he was quiet for a minute. “I’ll try to make it home for break,” he said, “but I’m going to stay behind if we can’t get Jack out of here.” He paused. “Please be safe,” he whispered. “I miss you.”

He nodded jerkily at the elephant, and it turned, vanishing before him.

He stared at the spot it had stood for a long moment, before sighing and getting to his feet. “Okay, let’s get to this,” he said firmly. He couldn’t afford to get distracted again, so he cast the transformation spell first. “Priori morpheus. Expecto Patronum.” Two stags darted out, throwing the antlers Harry had once been so ecstatic to see. “Hey, Prongs,” he whispered. “You would’ve made a great father, too, I’ll bet.” He stood up a bit straighter and said in a stronger voice, “Take a message to Draco and Ron. Tell them: we can use Dumbledore’s office. I’m cleaning it up now.”

The two stags bounded off and vanished into the walls. Harry turned his back on the spot they had vanished from and began casting the scourgify spell on all the scorches that had blemished the room. While he worked, the paintings slowly began to stir, eager to see who had come into the office after such an absence. They gave him pointers, correcting his stance or intonation when he was trying to repair a jar filled with crackling purple fire, and prodded him towards a few damages that he hadn’t seen. Within an hour, the room was back to its normal shape, sans one headmaster.

“Well,” Harry said finally. “That’s that.” He looked up at the nearest portrait. “Hey, we’ve got a six-year-old in the castle, and he’s been staying with the Slytherins this whole time but that’s not really fair for him. I know this is…unorthodox at best, but is there any chance that he might be able to stay here?”

“Albus cleaned out his rooms, in case he was unable to return,” one headmistress said. Harry blinked in surprise. “He came shortly after everyone else had left, since he accurately suspected the Floo system would soon be restricted and regulated.”

“He came back?”

“For five minutes, hardly enough to do much more. He trusts the school, but there were some important pieces of parchment he needed as well.”

“Huh. So you think it’s all right?”

“I’m sure he would be delighted,” another grumbled, though Harry got the impression that that headmaster wouldn’t have let a child sleep in his bed if he were being held at wand point.

Harry grinned. “Fantastic! Thank you.” He waved his wand and the papers on the floor picked themselves up to sort themselves into neat stacks. Another wave and those on the desk rearranged themselves. “I’m going to put stasis charms on everything. If we’re going to use this to practice defense, I don’t want us to accidentally damage anything.”

He had just gotten started when Hermione showed up with Ron in tow. “You did it!” she exclaimed. “Well done!”

As he’d hoped, Ron had grabbed her before leaving Gryffindor. The door opened and Draco slipped in. He quickly filled the trio in on what he had already discussed with the portraits.

Draco said, “We’ll miss him, but I think he’ll like the company here more. They won’t be off to class all the time.”

“Tell the Bloody Baron,” Harry suggested. “He would help you get him here.”
They joined him in casting the stasis spells over the room, and sometimes the portraits had one of them clean up a spot that had been overlooked. Harry grudgingly acknowledged that Dumbledore probably could have managed this all with one spell, but Hermione pointed out that Dumbledore also knew how everything was supposed to look.

“Move that- There, yes. Well done,” a headmistress applauded Draco as he readjusted a cabinet in the back of the room. “Wouldn’t want it to get out of sorts.”

Harry didn’t want to know how a cabinet managed that.

“Excuse me,” Hermione said, taking a temporary break to look up at the portraits. “None of you would happen to have been defense professors in your time, would you?” A few murmured in acknowledgement and Hermione’s eyes lit up.

Ron stopped what he was doing and stared at her. “You don’t think…?”

“What?” Harry asked, reminding the pair that their recent telepathy wasn’t inclusive to everyone else.

“We only know so many spells,” Ron said, then pointed at the portraits. “They’ve got to know loads more!”

“Would you be willing to help?” Hermione asked.

“It is our duty to protect this school and those within, miss,” a stern headmaster told her. “To deny you instruction would be to fail our purpose.”

It was nearing dawn by the time they were finally done, and the exhausted group went up to investigate the headmaster’s lodgings to be sure it would work for Jack. The room was large and spacious, with easily double or even triple the floor space their dorms had. The main benefit proved to be the biggest downside. With such open space, since Dumbledore had taken all of his belongings, Jack was sure to feel even lonelier. Harry was probably going to have to come stay with him again, though he likely would have anyway.

“Got the cloak?” Draco asked.

“Yeah.”

“Give it here and I’ll go get him.”

The Gryffindor trio went back downstairs to wait, and Draco showed up with Jack in tow quickly enough that they were sure he must have run to the dungeons. Jack bolted, tearing his hand from Draco’s, and sprinted to Harry, who dropped to his knees and caught him in a hug. There was no crying, and Harry didn’t know what he would have done if Jack had suddenly burst into tears. The Slytherins must have taken good care of him. He looked up at Draco with a meaningful expression, and Draco nodded in understanding, smiling slightly.

“Jack,” Harry said, finally leaning away. “We’ve got a new place for you to stay. It’s not with the Slytherins anymore – sorry – but it’s safer and look!” He pointed up at the portraits. “You’ve got more friends.” Two portraits glared at him for his terminology but Jack was too busy staring to notice the exchange.

Jack turned away from them to look at Harry. “When can we see Dad again?” he asked softly and Harry’s thoughts stuttered to a halt. He had finally managed to push the very same question out of his mind for a few hours, but he should have known it would be the first thing Jack would ask about.
“I don’t know, Jack,” he replied. “It might be a while. But I told him you’re doing all right.” Draco and the other two looked at him in surprise. “The portraits told me there wasn’t a limit on the distance for patronus charms,” he explained quickly.

“A patronus?” Jack asked. “Your elephant?” Harry nodded and Jack grinned. “So an elephant is going to come visit Dad at work?”

Harry smiled. “Well, probably not. I expect he’s home at this time.” Not to mention he had specifically told it to visit him at the house for that very reason.

“Aww. It would have been funny if it had shown up at his work.”

Harry grinned back. “Yeah, it would’ve been.” Harry said. “Come on, Dad’s all right. Let’s get you taken care of for now, okay?”

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After Elle’s return from Hogwarts with the bad news, the BAU had mostly been dealing with nonmagical cases. Blackwolf wanted them to lie low for a bit, and even Hotch had to admit that there wasn’t anything they could really do for the students at the moment. Garcia spent most of her off time troubleshooting with Kevin, and the two felt that they were making headway in fixing the communication problem. It relied on Draco’s help, but with the recent panic, they were reluctant to try to get in contact with him. Even Snape had broken off communication with Hotch months ago, saying he was sure Umbridge was watching the normal channels, even the Floo network, and his leaving the school grounds was sure to gain suspicion.

He had to remind himself that even if there was no good news, there was also nothing to show that the kids were in more danger. Elle had stayed until she was sure the kids were fine and no one needed to be smuggled out, wards be damned. She went back to England to continue her research, and to stay closer to Hogwarts in case they needed help, while the BAU assimilated the new information she had given them into what they already knew about the magical community in Britain.

Hotch hadn’t seen hide nor hair of Strauss in months, despite the recent tensions surrounding the unit. Blackwolf, it seemed, had taken the remaining power over the BAU that she had, and her only control left was on paper since Blackwolf couldn’t be listed as their supervisor. He was sure she was fuming about the state of affairs since they were keeping her entirely out of the loop, but the new limitations placed on her made it illogical for her to even bother pressing for information when not a single member of the team was required to tell her anything. That was about the only good thing that had come from this whole situation.

While they were waiting for news, they tried to go about their cases like normal. It was impossible to push Harry and Jack from his mind, but he did his best to focus on the people he could help right in front of him. Still, he knew all of them were wondering if Reid’s exposure to anthrax had been because he was emotionally distracted or if it would have happened anyway. The next case, he forced everyone to be more cautious, reminding them that in no way, shape, or form were they to be focusing on the kids in England. It would just make their job harder, and it was disrespect to the dead victims in front of them. He knew his words would only go so far when he was the most distracted of the group.

It turned out to be one of the cases where they were at their peak proficiency and it still wasn’t good enough. Rossi’s combination of disturbing the Unsub and forcing information from him was seamless as he used the man’s paralyzed state against him, and JJ’s handling of the veteran who they had initially believed to be the killer was remarkable. They did nothing wrong. Their work was
perfect. The outcome was entirely out of their hands, and Hotch had to remind himself of that when they were flying back home with a dead Unsub and his manipulated brother on his mind. They had saved the girl, he tried to impress upon the group in the debriefing, but Morgan was looking at him with eyes that had just seen a caring, autistic man shot to death by startled officers and Prentiss’s handcuffs had gone with Hightower to the jail.

They needed a break. They needed something to go well, and Hotch had absolutely no way to give them that. It was the job they worked in, and it was now also an effect of their involvement with the QDA. Some things simply didn’t go right. And it seemed that nothing was going anywhere but down the drain.

His home was too quiet when he dropped his briefcase on a chair. Jack should have been upstairs sleeping, or waiting up despite the house sitter’s advice. He was seeing the snakes rather often, despite the language barrier, and they were keen on rubbing up against him for warmth. He wondered what they had to say about the two boys who had taken him in, and he was reminded of his words when he had first learned his kids were both snake-talkers.

“Do the dark wizards want hot chocolate?”

Everything had been simpler than. Yes, they knew someone was trying to kill Harry, and yes, he was new to magic, but it hadn’t been like this. Hotch hadn’t been torn between his job and all its responsibilities and an impossible problem in England. He hadn’t looked at crime scene photos and thought of how alike a victim looked to one of the students they had rescued. It was easier. It was simpler. Protect Harry. He had at least been able to act, to do something.

Now he had no clue what to do.

Sometimes that ridiculous prophecy ran through his head, the one predicting the power that was supposed to come to Harry. Some would say that would make him strong enough to protect himself. Hotch knew it meant that more people would flock to kill him. The prophecy was too damn vague to be even the slightest bit useful anyway.

It was easy to blame Pettigrew for everything, but there was no way that Pettigrew could have known what would have happened because he had decided to kidnap a child. The events that had followed were too bizarre and obscure to be predictable. Pettigrew’s jump to the BRP had been extreme, but Hotch had a feeling that he had been more concerned with his devotion to the Potters than anything else. Still, he couldn’t help but snarl over how much chaos had been caused by Pettigrew’s actions and how safe Hotch could have kept Harry if not for the meddling.

He walked into the kitchen, intent on pulling out a shot of whiskey before he overthought everything. He knew he needed to get to sleep and get to work early the next morning to clean up the mess of paperwork, and he couldn’t do that if his swimming head kept him awake. He had just reached the end of the counter when a silver presence at the back door caught his gaze. His head snapped up and around even as a part of him scolded himself for jumping at imaginary things.

But no, there it was. Large and impossibly real, Harry’s patronus was waiting at the back door.

He stared at it, breath stopped. Despite the long period of radio silence, Harry had chosen now to finally send him a message. He wondered if Harry had possibly forgotten to send him one earlier, but dismissed it – from Morgan’s description, it would have been one of the first things he would have tried. It was possible it was someone else’s, but the chances were too slim. Blackwolf had said that most patronuses were rather small, and large ones like Harry’s elephant were incredibly rare. If all of that were true, then something drastic must have occurred to bring the patronus to his home.
Someone moved behind him and he turned around sharply. The Reaper’s mask greeted him. “You should have made a deal.”

He pulled the trigger.

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Hotchner held perfectly still as the bullet hit the wall behind him, having passed inches away. “Is this part of my profile? You can’t show me fear?” Foyet asked. It wasn’t any fun if the profiler refused to react, though he would soon enough whether he wanted to or not. There was only so much pain one could take.

“If you don’t see fear, maybe it’s because I’m not afraid of you.”

“You said that like you actually meant it.” Maybe he did. Maybe the agent was just far too prideful for his own good. “How’s my friend Agent Morgan?” he asked as he tore his mask off, letting it drop to the ground behind him. When Hotchner stayed quiet, he smirked, head tilting arrogantly. “I went upstairs. So, two kids, huh? I wonder when they’re getting back home,” he said, moving forward a step.

That got a reaction. Hotchner crossed the distance, fist swinging up into Foyet’s face. Foyet was ready for it, and he swiped his knife across the air between them, slashing down at Hotchner’s forehead and grazing the site above the temple. Hotchner stumbled back, but before he could recover, Foyet planted a solid kick at his stomach, knocking him onto the ground. Foyet followed him down and landed on him, using the force to slam the knife into his abdomen.

Hotchner grunted in surprise and pain, and one hand went up in a useless attempt to push Foyet off. Foyet easily knocked his hand aside and drove the knife in again twice more. He might be confident that he was going to win, but he wasn’t going to let his own ego get in the way. He knew Hotchner could deal him some serious damage, maybe even enough to stop him completely, if he were given half a chance. Truly, he had been relying on the kids to be home so he could use one of them against him. Bad luck that they were both out.

To Hotchner’s credit, there was no begging or screaming. Instead, he took a few moments to adapt to the pain, and then weakly rolled his head to the side and tilted it until he could see the back door. Foyet frowned at the motion and rose, walking over to stand where Hotchner had been earlier. Right before he’d announced his presence, it had seemed like Hotchner had been startled at something in the backyard, but Foyet had dismissed the idea as ridiculous. It wasn’t like anyone could have gotten back there – the fence was too difficult to navigate over. Besides, he doubted anyone could be unlucky enough to get targeted by a burglar and a serial killer at the same time.

The yard was completely empty. “Something catch your attention?” he asked without turning, as his eyes scanned the dark lawn once more just to be sure. Seeing nothing, he turned back and snarled, “Funny, since all your focus should be on me.”

Black eyes flickered from him to his left. “And yours should be on what’s behind you,” Hotch hoarsely whispered. Foyet frowned and looked over his shoulder again despite himself.

Standing there was an enormous creature, shoulders touching the ceiling and large, sharp tusks pointed directly at him. Even as his mind told him it was impossible, Foyet recognized an elephant when he saw one. He staggered backward, gripping his knife tighter and holding it out in front of him. The elephant tossed its head as much as was possible in the confined space, flapped its ears once and then charged, twisting its neck so it could catch him and throw him with its tusks.
Foyet stumbled over his own feet and hit the ground with a thump, then threw himself out of the way of the charging elephant. It was unable to turn fast enough and ran into the living room, then made a tight twist to face him again. Foyet grabbed his knife that he’d dropped when he’d fallen and scrambled backwards to the front door.

“This isn’t real,” he said with a shaky breath. “Hotchner, what the hell is this?”

“My son thinks it’s me,” Hotch managed to say. “I don’t think he knows himself well enough yet to know differently.”

The elephant raised its trunk, and Foyet flinched in anticipation for the growl. It never came and he relaxed slightly. “You can’t expect me to believe you have an elephant in your house,” he said, furious that the agent had managed to startle him so badly. This was just embarrassing.

He barely managed to interpret the sound Hotchner made as, “It’s not.”

He was glad Hotchner couldn’t quite see him as he forced himself to straighten out and approach once more. “How did you manage it, huh? Strange new technology the FBI is asking their agents to test out at home?”

Hotchner tried to say something, but Foyet couldn’t make it out from across the room. The elephant charged him, and it took everything he had not to fling himself out of the way again. Just as he thought, the ethereal beast passed right through. He plastered on a grin as the elephant roared silently again.

He dropped to one knee beside Hotchner. There had been more he wanted to say, but a part of him just wanted to get this over with now after the interruption. Having that elephant, real or not, at his back was beginning to creep him out. He put one palm over Hotchner’s sternum to hold him down. “Your son thinks it’s you, huh? He’s looking for a guardian?”

"Not exactly," Hotchner pushed out.

"And you think it's him so... Well, that sounds like you think your teenager's all sorts of tough."

"He could take you," Hotchner said without sarcasm. Then he winced as Foyet put pressure on the stab site.

“You don’t seem like someone who’s been in this kind of pain before,” he said in mock sympathy. “See, you’re doing it all wrong. Relax. It loosens the muscles, which means-“ He slid the knife into his side, hitting a kidney. Hotchner grimaced in pain and one hand jumped up reflexively before falling back to the floor. “It goes in so much easier.”

The marks needed to mirror his own. Hotchner would understand when he woke up, but he wouldn’t get the true effect in his current state. Foyet scanned him carefully, taking note of his physique. The next three wounds were more difficult to mimic when he wasn’t doing it to himself, which was why he had saved them for last when Hotchner was less likely to be able to resist him. One mark needed to go across the upper bicep, he mused, but Hotchner’s shirt made it more difficult to see exactly where he was cutting. And he didn’t have time to go discard his clothing, not when he’d already had a delay in his planning. There was a certain point after which Hotchner was going to die from blood loss, and he had to be around later to see Foyet take his children from him.

He adjusted his grip on his knife and held Hotch’s bicep in place with one hand. “Now,” he murmured, watching Hotchner’s expression. “Let’s see how good your aim is after you’ve recovered from this, huh?”
Sharp pain raced up his arm and he howled furiously. He fell backwards and threw his hand out, inadvertently sending the knife flying across the room. A snake, black with red markings on the underside, was latched onto his wrist, just under where his palm ended, fangs sunk deep into his skin. The gesture didn’t force the snake to let go, and it caused the fangs to tear further along his wrist. He grabbed it with his other hand behind the jaws, but before he could even try to yank it free the snake’s body wrapped around his forearm tightly. In his flailing, the snake was able to get loose from his hold and slash at his other forearm.

Foyet hit the ground, slamming both his arms into the ground to faze the snake enough to get free. The snake was knocked off on the third blow and it slunk away as quickly as it could, body moving a bit oddly as if some bones had broken. Foyet gasped in his breath, watching where it had disappeared to under the coffee table. Its eyes gleamed in the dim light, and he could swear it was glaring at him.

What was wrong with this house?!

He groaned softly before pushing himself up off the ground and turning back to Hotchner, only to find another snake resting on top of the almost-unconscious federal agent. Its coils were more muscular, accentuated by a tan body with dark stripes. Its head was raised as if to strike.

Foyet threw himself backwards, moving as far away from the snake as he could in one force of effort without pushing himself closer to the other snake. He scrambled to his feet and ran around Hotchner’s body to get to his knife again. His fingers were just starting to close on the handle when a third slim form, light black this time, darted in front of him, faster than he could react. It struck, sliding under his outstretched arm to latch onto his hip. The fangs scraped against his pelvis and he shouted in pain, smacking at the snake.

A flash of movement from the stairs beside his head made him turn around, and the largest snake yet flung itself off the railing and onto his shoulders and back. Its russet scales tightened around him, wherever it could hold on, and its large mouth opened wide before tearing into his arm. The body wrapped tighter, restricting the movement of his other arm and pressing against his neck.

Foyet crashed on his back, frantically trying to dislodge either one of the snakes. He had made no progress when yet another pair of fangs tore into his Achilles’s tendon. He screamed, bucking off the ground, and one of his hands collided with another snake slithering towards him. It was the same one that he had injured previously, but it easily sank its fangs into his ribs now that he was distracted by all the others.

Too late, he realized his flailing motions had pulled him closer to Hotchner’s body. The final snake, still raised on his chest, looked down at him for a moment.

Then it struck.

Foyet choked around blood, spitting it out even as he felt more draining from the holes in his neck. The fifth snake withdrew, returning to its post on Hotchner. Its head prodded along Hotchner’s belt at the clip holding his phone in place until it managed to pull the device free. The phone clattered to the ground, and one of the snakes slipped off Foyet to collect it. Only when he had been rendered immobile, with cut tendons in both wrists and ankles, did the other snakes leave him to bleed out. The elephant crossed the room to kneel by Hotchner’s head and watched the snake – the snake – pressing weight against the phone to activate it.
Harry was in a good mood when we went to detention that evening. The QDA had reconvened for the first time in a month before dinner, and they’d set a date for the next DA meeting in two days. He could see Jack again, and his brother was no longer sleeping in the lion’s den.

His light humor fell the moment he opened the door to the DADA classroom and heard voices from the office. At first, he thought Umbridge might have come to watch, but both voices were male. He quietly shut the door behind him. If it was someone who knew about Umbridge’s instructions for punishment, he was just going to have to leave and get in trouble for not showing up rather than reveal Gideon had no magic to cause Harry harm with. His footsteps were almost silent as he crept across the platform and to the base of the stairs leading up to the office.

By the time he had reached the fourth step, he let out a silent sigh as he recognized the voices. Gideon and Snape. He straightened and walked more confidently up the stairs, but he froze halfway up at Snape’s panicked tone.

“- bitten – in surgery – dead…”

He moved up another two steps, straining to hear and wishing he’d brought one of the Weasley’s extendable Ears with him.

“Are they sure?” Gideon asked, voice raising in concern. “There weren’t any on the property?”

“Not a single one, but I’ve seen the timber rattlesnake and the copperhead. They must be hiding from the officers examining the scene.”

Snape had met Kiyo, a rattlesnake, and Zagreus, a copperhead, but that didn’t explain why officers were transforming the Hotchner house into a crime scene. Harry held his breath.

“And Hotch?”

Nothing.

Then, “They don’t know. It took paramedics too long to get to the home after Garcia dialed 911. He had almost completely bled out, and they just managed to get him to the hospital in time. His heart had already stopped - CPR barely worked. A few minutes later and they wouldn’t have had a live body to pick up.”

Harry gasped in shock then clapped a hand over his mouth, squeezing his eyes shut.

“Harry,” Gideon said wearily. “Come in.”

His hand dropped as he climbed the last of the steps and opened the door. Snape shut it firmly behind him once he’d moved into the room, preventing any more eavesdroppers. Both adults were pale and out of sorts. “What happened?” he demanded.

“Sit down,” Gideon said quietly, taking the seat beside Harry’s when he shakily did so. “Harry… Last night, Snape got word that your father was severely injured. It seems that one of the snakes at your house managed to press the speed dial button, and Garcia answered. She realized something was wrong from the sounds she was hearing on the other end and called for the local police. He’s in the hospital right now.” He glanced at Snape. “The letter we got was written in code to avoid identifying anyone, and it was a little vague as to what exactly happened. It sounds like someone broke in and attacked him.”

Harry looked between the two in horror. “What?” he whispered. “Is he… Is he going to be okay?”
“It’s too early to tell.”

One glance at Gideon’s torn expression told him there was more. “But?”

“He crashed several times and they think they might have to put him on life support. They’re not sure he’ll wake up.”

Chapter End Notes

For those of you who wanted more from the Reaper arc, don’t worry. Foyet's got two parts, and this was just the first. He's dead but his involvement isn't over, which makes absolutely no sense for another couple of chapters and then you'll see what I mean. And no, he's not getting resurrected.

Most of you were right! Gideon's back! (I love hearing your theories. Some of them I wish I'd come up with myself, and some of them I'm glad I didn't because they would have been horrible and this story has enough pain it. Robyn S. Mockingbird thought I'd put the new DADA teacher under the Imperius. That would have just been...oh my.)
“Humans…and how I love you talking monkeys for this…know more about war and treachery of spirit than any angel.” – The Prophecy

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The QDA, relishing in their newfound hiding spot, conglomerated in the headmaster’s office as soon as they could to practice. Some of the portraits eagerly began giving pointers, but the rest dismissed them and went back to doing…whatever it was they were doing. There was a lot of eager dueling and chatting, especially among those who hadn’t been able to see each other since the Room of Requirement had been destroyed.

Harry left them to it when he got back from dinner, instead visiting Jack, who was nestled in a corner reading a small book. His brother jumped up the moment he saw him and Harry pulled him into a hug. He was glad to see so much of him now, even if they were trying to find a way to get him back home. A Ravenclaw had been sitting on Jack’s other side, and from the looks of it, they had been taking a short break from going over some of Jack’s homework. Harry settled down on his other side, and the three of them got back to work.

The door opened, and everyone suddenly went silent, attentive to whoever had entered but not defensive. Harry and the other two got to their feet, and Harry spotted platinum hair at the entrance. “Okay,” Draco announced as the rest of the Slytherins slipped into the crowd. “We just got out of a meetings with the Umbitch and Gideon, and we’ve got a problem and a couple of solutions to some different issues.”

“Is it the WiFi?” George demanded. “Please tell me it’s the WiFi.”

“It’s not the WiFi.”

Groans filled the room.

“Gideon pulled us aside afterwards, and he said that he can get in and out of the school without much challenge. He can’t do it as often as he’d like, but he can get out to talk to Elle and fill her in on what’s going on, and she can pass messages. He’s wondering if there’s anything we need to send out right now.”

Everyone silently turned to Harry. “I need to know what happened to my dad,” he said firmly. “That’s it from me.”

“He said that was the first thing he was going to check. He’s already gone outside of Hogsmeade to get a signal on his phone so he could contact Elle, and he’s arranged a meeting for later this week to talk with her about what happened. She said he’s okay but didn’t go into detail.”

Harry nodded, but he didn’t feel comforted, not until he knew for sure what had happened.

“Anyone got something else? I’m going to go back to trying to fix the internet with Garcia.”

There was no reply, and Hermione said, “About the internet… If you take that up again, you’re definitely not going to have time to do your homework.” He sighed, but Hermione cut him off before he could reply. “What if we do your homework for you, and you rewrite it so it’s in your hand and
This time, it was Hermione everyone was staring at. Harry felt his mouth hang open. She flushed at the attention. “Look, his grades here really don’t matter if he’s graduating from somewhere else, and what he’s focusing on is much more important. And once he’s gotten everything else out of the way, he’s going to go back to doing his own work.”

“So, what’s the bad news?” Hermione quickly said, diverting attention from her uncharacteristic statement.

“Other than Draco’s slip up?” Daphne snickered and Draco turned red.

“We don’t need to talk about that,” he quickly said.

“Right. So, it would seem Draco hasn’t had a lot of sleep recently and is using more Garcia-isms than he usually would,” Daphne began and Draco groaned, burying his face in his hands. “Draco was in the middle of agreeing with everything Umbridge said, and she told us that she was going to try to replace all the professors with Ministry officials eventually and Draco goes, ‘Oh, bitching.’” Draco flushed harder at the laughter. “And then she looks at him, and Draco kept this total straight face, like he’d totally meant to say that, and she goes, ‘What?’ and he says, ‘Witching. You haven’t heard that? Witching, like… When you’re…um…”’

“Yeah, the rest of us had to come up with some excuse from there,” Theodore snorted. “She thinks it means cunning actions or something. I’m not sure how we kept our shit together but damn, it was hard.”

“Draco,” Ron said through his guffaws.

“Shut up,” he grumbled. “I’m tired, okay?”

Minutes later, Draco said, “If you’re all done…” and they managed to get their snickering under control. “We think we can get Jack home.” Harry smiled down at Jack, who was standing next to him, and rubbed his shoulder. Part of him didn’t want Jack to leave, glad to have some of his family with him, but he knew it was too dangerous for his brother and he was disappointed at that selfish bit of him for even thinking of keeping Jack to himself any longer. “Gideon can smuggle him out of the school to Elle, who can take him the rest of the way.”

“When is he going to try that?” Harry asked.

“Later. He needs to warn Elle first.” Draco let out a sigh. “Okay, bad news. None of us can leave to go see the BAU over break.”

“What do you mean?” Ron asked, bewildered.

“Remember the wards that are up around the school, the ones that prevent any student from leaving without being tracked? If we go to Virginia, the wards will tell her immediately.”

Harry’s face fell. If that were the case, he wouldn’t see his father until the summer. And then a horrible thought hit him. “Wait,” he said, “when we leave at the end of the year, will the wards still be tracking us then?”

Draco’s eyes widened. “I- I don’t know. I’ll ask.”
“Harry…” Hermione whispered.

“If I can’t go home then, I can’t go anywhere,” he said, horrified. “I can’t even go to the Order, or she’ll will know where the headquarters is.”

As the hour grew later, the students filtered out one by one to get back to their dormitories before curfew. By the end, only a few were remaining, mostly the Slytherins who were going to leave soon for the dorm check. Harry, Ron, and Hermione also stayed behind, though Hermione was beginning to move closer to the door. Luna had fallen asleep in a chair in a corner and no one had the heart to wake her.

Before Hermione could leave, the door opened and Gideon walked in. Those left smiled at him, even Harry who was still grimly turning over the new information in his mind. "Gideon," Blaise said warmly.

"Now that we're not running to classes, and I've got seven of you gathered here," Gideon said. "Can I ask for an update?"

"Blaise hit a six minute run," Hermione said immediately and a flush crept up the Slytherin's cheeks as Draco snickered.

"Oh, Hermione, you're behind on times. He hit five thirty last week."

Blaise was bright red. Gideon smiled.

"Guess you were right," Blaise muttered.

"I wasn't going to say it," Gideon calmly replied. "Where were you running?"

"Room of Requirement. It was really accommodating before the Umbitch wrecked it. We could work on Patroni easier, too. Now it's kind of distracting when someone else's keeps running overhead."

Gideon frowned thoughtfully. "Tell me more about the patronuses. I heard you're using them more, but I didn't get the specifics. I thought they only worked on dementors." Luna blinked open her eyes and sat up without a hint of weariness, and beamed in her distant way at Gideon. He smiled back.

For a moment, Harry wondered if she was a profiler's nightmare or dream.

"Blackwolf told us that they can also be used to carry messages in their corporeal form, so Draco got everyone to start practicing them." He smirked at Blaise. "Some of the forms have gotten to be pretty interesting."

Blaise's flush deepened. "Like yours isn't!"

Gideon raised an eyebrow. "The stag?"

"It changed forms," Harry said sheepishly. "Because of the Silent Massacre, we think. Apparently extremely emotional events can change the form of the Patronus if they change the person enough. So...mine changed. Current working theory is that it took Dad's form."

"I don't know which of yours is better," Theodore said with a grin. He and Daphne had both claimed the guest chairs usually in front of Dumbledore's desk. "It's a pretty hard choice between yours and Blaise's."

"There's no contest," Ron scoffed. "It's definitely Blaise's."
"But Harry's is just so...unexpected," Hermione pointed out.

"And Blaise's is expected?"

"Well, I suppose when you put it like that..."

"Let's see them," Gideon suggested.

Blaise gestured at Harry, who relented and summoned his. The elephant threw its trunk and trumpeted silently before starting to wander around the room. Gideon watched it, both eyebrows now up.

"It...does fit, actually," Gideon said, following it with his gaze. "It certainly could be your father's, although this wouldn't have been my first guess."

"Blaise, your turn. Best for last," Harry said as he moved out of the way. Blaise was still red. "Oh come on, yours is fantastic."

"Expecto patronum!"

The scaly creature leaped out of Blaise's wand and into existence. It tilted its head back, level with Harry's eyes, to emanate some unheard noise, then proceeded to sniff the air curiously before it walked off into the air to examine one of the paintings. They were all sleeping at this time of night, unaware of the scene in the room. The creature's muscular body moved easily, but the physiology of it, unusual in this age, appeared disjointed before one got used to watching it.

Ron sighed happily. "Never gets old."

"Is that...?"

"A velociraptor?" Daphne cheerfully finished. "It sure is!"

Gideon's smile widened into a full grin. "That is incredible," he said as the velociraptor ducked its head to Luna, who stood so it didn't have to bend. She rested her chin on the very end of its muzzle and stroked its neck with both hands, giving the illusion of touch.

"It is, isn't it?" Theodore said, reaching out and letting his hand pass through Harry's elephant as it strolled past. "The rest of us weren't nearly as lucky. I would've settled for a platypus so I would at least have originality in mine."

Gideon watched the velociraptor for a few more moments. "Sorry, Harry, but I think Blaise wins out."

"I have no problem admitting defeat to a dinosaur. Absolutely no problem."

"What's the spell?" Gideon asked. "Expecto patronum?"

"Yeah, why?"

He frowned slightly, pondering the phrase. "Well, the literal translation would essentially be 'I expect protection.' But the patronuses can only protect you from a few things."

"You think they should be able to have a substantial form?" Hermione asked curiously.

"It would seem so. Has anyone mentioned the possibility?"
"I've never heard of a substantial patronus," Hermione said hesitantly. "I think I would have, if it were possible."

"If it had happened before," Gideon corrected. "There's plenty that hasn't been discovered yet."

"What would that be?" Draco said, fingers tapping against his thigh. "Latin, so... Substantia for substance...? Salus for safe, sollus for entire...? Esse or essentia for being...? Manifestare for manifestation...? Nasci or natura for nature...?"

"Try one of the last two," Gideon said slowly. "If you want to try it at all. What happens if it doesn't work?"

"It could go very badly," Luna said, the unexpected coherence making everyone else pause for a moment. "That's how my mother died."

Harry gave it no thought. It had been months since he'd last seen his father and he was looking at the potential of having some twisted form of contact. Wasn't this what he had wanted for so long, some touch, some sensation that his father was alive?

He moved in front of his elephant, which looked up at him curiously. Its ears fanned itself absently as he lifted his wand. "Nasci." Nothing. "Natura." An orange glow built at the end of his wand for a moment, then violently pulsed down his wand. Harry shook it, dispersing the energy, and the wood regained its normal color.

"Harry, I'm not sure this is a good idea," Hermione said cautiously.

"It could save us later on," he pointed out, though he had to admit his real reasons had nothing to do with that. "Substantia." His wand hand burned and he quickly tried to shake out the excess energy again.

Gideon had a disapproving expression on his face at the risks Harry was taking, but he made no effort to stop him.

"No, Harry," Luna said, releasing the velociraptor. It walked away from her to patrol the room. "You want to make something exist. Use esse." She hummed thoughtfully. "And then... You are creating form, so an -ria ending... Essearia? Esseoria?"

"Essearia." His hand tingled, but not unpleasantly. "Esseoria." He sighed as nothing happened once more. "Any other suggestions?"

"Shh!" Theodore suddenly said, abruptly getting to his feet.

Harry blinked at him in surprise, but everyone had fallen silent and he heard a faint swishing sound. Slowly, he looked back at the elephant. There was a soft pat as the elephant's tail swatted an imaginary fly off, and he could hear air moving when the elephant's large ears beat it back. Before he could stop himself, a wide grin split Harry's face, and he raised a hand carefully towards the elephant.

Its trunk moved up in reply, the wet end touching Harry's palm for a moment before it snaked around his arm and pulled him closer. He ignored the others, who had gone completely still behind him, and focused on the magnificent creature in front of him. Standing closer, he could see that the wrinkles and hairs were indeed more definite, more defined. It was more than misty wisps - it was substantial in a way Harry hadn't thought possible before.

The trunk left his arm and started nosing its way across his head. Harry couldn't stop a small laugh
from escaping as it rubbed at his scalp in its investigations, tugging at hair and nudging his head this way and that.

"Gideon, can you, I don't know, teach DADA forever?" Daphne asked calmly.

"Please," Ron added.

"We'll see."

"Blaise," Hermione said.

"On it. *Essearia.*" There was a curious noise somewhere by Blaise, almost like a chirping noise, but Harry didn't turn to look.

"Let's *Jurassic Park* this shit, why don't we?" Draco said excitedly.

"Jur- What?" Blaise asked, bewildered.

"It was a series of movies about dinosaurs being created. The first ones were them studying it, and they made a recent movie about an amusement park focused around them. Went pretty badly for just about everyone involved." The trunk had moved from Harry's head back to his hand, which it found particularly curious.

"But did they have velociraptors is the important question," Blaise said.

"They did. There were four or five in the newest one who they really focused on, actually. It was hard to tell with all the explosions and I swear one of them died twice, but whatever. Only one of them survived the movie, though."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, Blue."

"Hey, Harry?"

"I would turn and face you to show I'm paying attention," Harry said as the elephant's trunk began investigating his clothing, "but I can't so you're just going to have to have faith that I'm listening."

"Isn't it common to name patronuses?"

He paused. "I know James Potter did, but other than that, I'm not sure."

Ron snorted. "We've got actual, solid patronuses. I don't care if it's normal or not - we're naming them."

"Draco, I trust your judgment. Is Blue a good name?"

"Hell no. You're our only dinosaur, so you're going to get an awesome name. Gideon, ideas?"

They had come to no consensus by the time everyone needed to leave. Gideon lingered behind the others as Harry stayed near his patronus - the velociraptor had been dispersed when Blaise left. Gideon stood by Harry for a moment, then pulled him into a hug. Harry slumped and let his breath flow out.

"I know you're worried about him," Gideon said quietly. "Don't be. He'll come out of this, a little bruised and a little battered, but he'll come out of it. He's tough and he's got something to fight for."
Okay?"

Harry nodded into his shoulder.

"Good. Try to get some rest."

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“You have no explanation?” the agent asked, exasperated.

Hotch sympathized, he really did. But the situation was just too outlandish to even try to explain. “I don’t remember anything after the first time he stabbed me,” he said. “I’m sorry, but I can’t help you.” The agent looked glumly down at his notes and Hotch hid a wince as he accidentally stretched some of the stitching on his side. “Do you know when I can move back into my home?”

The agent eyed him. “I think you should be more worried about getting out of the hospital first. You look a little too peaky.”

Fortunately for him, he had access to better treatment, specifically blood-replenishing potions and tissue mending spells. He just had to get out of the muggle hospital first so no one saw a near-death patient walk out a day later without a scratch.

“I have no idea what I’m going to do,” the agent said, on the brink of whining. “The Boston Reaper showed up at your home, stabbed you, and at some point was bitten by five different kinds of snakes, two of which are venomous and one which does not live anywhere near this area.” He looked up hopefully. “You work strange cases. What would you do?”

“Talk to a herpetologist?” Hotch suggested and the agent sighed miserably. Behind him, Prentiss smirked.

When the agent was gone, Prentiss plopped down in the chair that had been vacated and watched Hotch for a moment. He waited for the inevitable, until she asked, “What do you remember?”

“Everything up until Tloalc managed to call Garcia,” he admitted. “Which includes Foyet screaming like a five-year-old when he saw an elephant charging him.”

Prentiss blinked in surprise. “Harry’s patronus? What was it doing there?”

“I have no idea,” he said. “It kept trying to drive Foyet off but couldn’t make contact with him.” He set his jaw in determination. “I need to get back to the house and see if there’s anything else that Harry sent. Maybe there was something I didn’t see before Foyet attacked me.”

Prentiss frowned at his state. “You know, Agent Morrison was right. You’ve got other concerns right now.”

“Not if Harry sent a message with the patronus,” Hotch pointed out, sitting up painfully and pulling his legs over the side of the bed. “Not if he was trying to ask for help.”

“Wait, you’re just going to get yelled at by the doctors,” Prentiss said, standing and holding out a hand to stop him from moving further. She ignored his glare. “Look, let me just call Blackwolf. I bet he can get you out of here with minimal fuss, and it won’t take as long as us trying to argue with hospital staff. Besides, you shouldn’t be moving in your state without better treatment, not unless you want to bleed to death.”

Prentiss drove him back to his house with Blackwolf in the backseat. It was remarkable how often
the Apache was able to respond immediately and show up personally whenever they had a request to make, but Hotch knew he cared more about personal relationships than politics. Even if they had a tendency to bicker, Blackwolf enjoyed their company more than the paperwork that accompanied his supervision over them.

He had brought a series of potions with him, as well as two fake doctors and an official-looking paper claiming that he needed to be moved to a more secure location. The hospital staff had reluctantly let him go with a series of strict instructions about his transportation. Blackwolf had confounded a couple of them so they could get Hotch into a waiting car instead of an ambulance, and then had proceeded to throw a series of potions down Hotch’s throat. They might have tasted horrible, but Hotch had to admit that by the time they were ten minutes away from the hospital he felt considerably less like dying and more like resting in bed for a couple of days. Neither was an option available to him.

The crime scene tape was still up, but the house had been cleared so Prentiss tore it off the front door to let them through. There were still patches of blood on the floor, but Blackwolf vanished them before he had time to linger on it. He was a bit concerned about the five snakes, in case Foyet had managed to injure any of them, but he couldn’t do anything about that unless they showed themselves.

He turned the corner to go into the kitchen from the living room and came face to face with the elephant. “Found it,” he said calmly, trying to ignore how he had to steady himself against the wall beside him or fall down.

The elephant waited a moment before opening its mouth. Harry’s voice issued from it. “Hey, Dad,” he began, and Hotch took a moment to note that he wasn’t panicking. He sounded tired, a bit relieved and simultaneously stressed. But not scared, and that was important. “I’m really sorry, but I didn’t know there wasn’t a distance limit on patronuses, or I would have sent this ages ago.”

Prentiss and Blackwolf slipped out of the room behind him when they realized it was just a personal message, and he heard the front door close softly after them. Hotch made his way to the kitchen table so he could sit down as Harry’s voice filled the room.

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"Diminuendo!"

The hooded figure shrunk to a meek size and Neville patted the triumphant Dean on the back in congratulations. Dean grinned and stepped aside, and Neville repeated the spell. Harry, at the end of the other line, watched the two groups of students circling through. Each line was devoted to a certain spell, and when a student accomplished it, they went to the end of the other line. Almost all of them had it down by this point, so they were mostly just going back and forth between the two lines happily.

In front of him, Parvati was muttering the spell under her breath and flicking her wand. Harry tapped her on the shoulder and whispered, "Try moving your wrist forward on the last syllable."

She nodded gratefully and stepped up as Hermione went to the other line. "Perdatio." She turned to grin at Harry. He returned it as she followed Hermione.

"Okay," Gideon called out. "If you've gone through both lines more than five times, form up over here." Harry cast the spell one more time for the sake of it and followed a group of others to the new line. "Even if you're in the other line, pay attention for a minute. These are tripwire charms - not standard defense, but I think you'll find them useful." He caught Hermione's confused look. "I'm just
calling this collection of spells that. You'll be learning them over the year.

"This is not the usual use for these spells, but they'll do the trick. Essentially, you're going to use them to slow people behind you or alert you that someone's coming when they fall down. You'll create a small barrier, low enough to avoid notice but large enough to trip. It shouldn't take a lot of power, especially if you're throwing it over your shoulder in retreat. You can transfigure something, if you want, or cause something to move in the way of your follower. Whatever you're most comfortable with. Give it a go, but try a different one once you've got the first spell you use down."

The new line started cycling through, each person focused as they thought up their own version. Not many did transfiguration, since they had to do so and then move it in the way of the charmed, wooden figure moving towards them, but a lot grabbed books or bags off desks and held them at shin height to startle the figure. Many had problems with the figure stumbling but not falling, and they'd have to cast a different spell to make the figure fall. Ron got frustrated and slammed his useless defense textbook into the backs of the figure's knees, causing the figure to flip over and fall heavily. That gained a few laughs and Gideon raised an eyebrow.

"Does that work?" Ron sheepishly asked after his angry outburst.

"Did it delay the figure?" Gideon asked as the wooden thing struggled to get back up. "Then I'd say yes."

The bell rang shortly after, but Gideon held Harry back. Hermione and Ron left after he nodded them on, and the door closed behind them. "How did you get the mannequins charmed?" Harry asked curiously.

"A seventh year," Gideon replied. "They wear off at the end of each lesson, especially if used a lot." They both looked at where the one of the figures was still trying to get back off the floor. "A little creepy, too. He comes back each evening to make sure the spells have completely worn off."

"Some of the seventh years know?" Harry asked, leaning against a desk.

"A few students you don't know were repeatedly getting detentions from Umbridge, so I told them. Speaking of which, she's keeps asking if you've had detention with me yet. I said you did last week, but..."

"She could figure it out," Harry agreed. "All right. I'll be back later."

"Let's do seven. Gives us both enough time to eat dinner."

Harry was there a few minutes early with his bag. He didn't think he'd be sleeping through the detentions like he had the last week he'd been in a Gideon detention. Gideon was already there, sorting through some books. Most of them were focused on defense, although he caught a few from other classes.

"I have to fake a magical education," he said. "She might notice something is amiss if I don't know what some basic spells are."

Harry set his bag down next to the desk in Gideon's office. It hadn't ever been moved out, since students were still getting 'detentions.' " Might want to look into some creatures, too."

"I just went down and talked to Hagrid," he said, and Harry grinned. "That did the trick."

"He knows?"
"No," Gideon replied with a grimace. "I trust that he has a good heart, but..."

"He speaks a bit loosely, sometimes," Harry agreed.

"Do you have homework?"

Harry paused, thinking over his load. "Not a whole lot." With some hesitation, he admitted, "I haven't been sleeping well, so I've got more time than usual to get it done."

Gideon frowned at the statement. "Do you still have nightmares?"

"Yeah. And there's so much to think about, and I'm worried about Jack, and..." He shrugged roughly. "Nothing to do about it, really. But no, I'm not sleeping well."

"Hm. There's a few things you can try. Calming music, or just soothing noises, can help if you listen to it while you're trying to sleep. You could try clearing your mind, but in your current state I don't think that's likely. If you time it correctly, and you don't tell your father I told you to eat junk, you could eat sugar in advance and then wait for the sugar crash to help you get to sleep."

Harry blinked in surprise. "That works?"

"Reid used to do it on the plane all the time. But then, he drank copious amounts of sugar in his coffee. I think more sugarcane was used than coffee beans in the making of his cups." When Harry appeared satisfied, Gideon leaned back against his desk. "If you don't have homework, I'd like to try teaching you something."

He perked up immediately. Everything he had learned over the last few years had been going towards the QDA and DA, but it still didn't feel like he had enough. He could understand why the Ravenclaws were so ravenous about knowledge. "Sure!"

"I'm going to teach you some basic profiling techniques," Gideon said and Harry grinned, all but vibrating with excitement. "But you can't teach anyone else," he warned, and Harry deflated slightly. "It's dangerous if not done right. You could make the situation worse. The only reason I'm going to teach you is because you seem to have some of your father's knack for it, and I'm sure knowing how Riddle is manipulating his followers could help you. You've got to be careful with it, and promise me not to use it if you're not sure if it will work or not." Harry nodded eagerly.

"If you dad asks about how you learned profiling techniques," Gideon said, "and he seems irritated... Your magical blood somehow carried some of his profiling attributes to you." Harry was startled into a laugh. "You definitely did not learn this from me."

"Oh, of course not."

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Christmas break came, and no one was surprised to see an Educational Decree mandating that professors could give detentions over the holidays. Gideon told Harry he would practically be permanently in detentions, which Harry rather cheerfully acknowledged.

Gideon found the British tea appealing, although he missed some of his usual brands that he had difficulty getting in the magical world. It still had a similar effect, he admitted to himself over a cup of Darjeeling. There were a lot of things he was just going to have to get used to going without in the castle. By this point, he was at a month and a half within the castle, and none of the staff was any of the wiser, so far as he knew. The gazes watching him were getting frostier, except for Umbridge's, which couldn't have been more gleeful. Filch was clearly debating between supporting him for his...
supposed disdain of the students and hating him for taking away some of Umbridge's reliance on him, but Gideon tried to stay away from the man. Ironically, Filch was possibly the one most likely to oust him since he was the one most likely to recognize the signs of a non-magical in the castle.

He tried to make his visits down to Hagrid as a biweekly event, with the excuse that he was keeping an eye on the half-giant. Hagrid, the poor man, was bitterly divided over trusting the Phalarope persona or not. After all, Gideon did enjoy listening to Hagrid's ramblings about magical creatures, but he was also supposed to be working with Umbridge. Gideon's unfortunate position meant a lot of people were divided over their perceptions of him, which he regretted. A lot of his coworkers seemed like the types of folk he would enjoy talking with, if not for their current situation.

The students were in a similar boat. Some of them knew everything, obviously, and he loved the classes that he had complete free reign in. There were others, namely a few of the upper classes of Slytherins and Ravenclaws, in which he could do nothing but Umbridge's horrible textbook method. Some of the students just couldn't be trusted, which left the rest of their classmates at a disadvantage. There were a few he identified as definitely being caught between their own desires and the wants of their family and friends. He didn't envy them their position, and he finally brought the matter to Hermione, who seemed to be largely in charge of DA membership. She immediately set to work trying to feel out the students she had been directed towards to determine how much they leaned towards the Light or Dark.

Of all the students, he was the most concerned about Harry. For the first few weeks, Gideon noticed that Harry was almost violently shaking whenever he was still for longer than a minute. He overheard McGonagall and Sprout discussing it in furious whispers, and the two confirmed what he had already suspected - the after effects of the Cruciatus Curse were long-lasting. There wasn't a treatment for it.

Just before they realized he was listening, McGonagall also mentioned some concerns about Harry's mental wellbeing, citing several Order members from the last war who had been permanently damaged by the curse. Gideon had spent the next week of 'detentions' keeping a close eye on Harry, and while he had noticed on the first day that there was clearly something wrong, he was relieved to now notice that Harry seemed to be regaining himself the longer he went without the Cruciatus.

Over break, most of the QDA stayed at the school. With the new wards, Harry couldn't leave no matter how badly he wanted to, and Jack stayed as well. Gideon was now regularly going to the headmaster's office to help the kids train, which was what the students claimed. He knew they wanted him there for moral support; he certainly wasn't doing a lot of helping by dodging the spells all the time. What little he could do came from Snape - he often got the man to give him some ideas for spells the students could practice, and Gideon would pass them on to Harry. A few times, Snape actually showed up at Harry's 'detentions' to give him instruction on a spell.

He walked into his office on December 20th, and stopped. A smile broke over his face to see the person sprawled over his chair and onto his desk. "Elle," he said warmly and she sat up with a snort.

"What? What? I'm awake," she insisted before her eyes focused on Gideon. His own widened, startled. Most of her eyes had turned violet, except for a few scattered flecks and a ring surrounding the pupil that were a dull gold. She grinned at his expression. "Ooh, I caught you off guard for once. This is a first."

He shut the door behind him. "How'd you get in?"

"Same way as always," she replied with a shrug, leaning back in his chair. Harry was right. She was looking much better than he expected. "Her ward upgrades don't have an effect on me, since the
lycanthropy gives me magical inclinations." Reluctantly and regretfully, she said, "I didn't have time to come back until now."

He raised an eyebrow. Without the admission, he would have hardly believed that anything could keep her from the students. "What happened?"

"Lycanthropy treatment. I was the first test subject so we didn't know what would happen."

"I thought there wasn't a treatment."

"There wasn't. We developed one. We were already in the middle of testing the last time I was here, actually, but we decided not to mention it so we wouldn't make the kids worry." Her fingers tapped along the edge of the arm of his chair for a moment, then she pushed off and got to her feet. "I heard you were back, so I figured I'd stop here first."

"I don't expect you'd be able to get into the headmaster's office without me, so you're in luck," he pointed out. "A group of them are probably there now. Walk with me?"

"Of course."

They descended the stairs from the office to the classroom, and Gideon glanced over his shoulder and asked, "Do you mind if they hear about the treatment, too?"

"Nah, they should know. We think it's done, but the doctors recommended that I stay around people who know me so they'll notice if something's wrong. If they don't know, they won't look for anything."

Gideon opened the door and glanced both ways. "I doubt anyone is out at this time," he said, "but we should hurry to avoid being caught."

There wasn't a problem, but he still wished that they'd had the invisibility cloak to be safe. The headmaster's office let them in as per usual, revealing a host of children sending defensive spells every which way. Elle paused, hands on her hips, and surveyed the group she'd rescued what seemed like so long ago.

"Elle!" someone shouted after a moment, and the room went quiet as everyone turned to look. Gideon held up a hand for silence while he shut the door, and then it erupted. "When did you get back?"

"Woah, your eyes!"

"Hey, can you show me that wrist lock again!"

"Hang on!" Elle called out, holding both hands up. A grin was spread across her face. "I'm planning on staying here through Christmas." There were many high-fives. "We've got time, trust me." Draco slipped to the front of the crowd, and the two exchanged a smirk. "And you are going to have no time because I'm putting you to work on something."

"Yes," he hissed in excitement.

"Okay, munchkins, gather 'round. Got what we hope is good news about lycanthropy." She walked to Dumbledore's desk and sat on the front. One of the portraits grumbled in disagreement at the gesture but she ignored it. "All right. Basically, we think we've managed to treat it. She had to wait a moment for the hushed whispers to quiet down, and people began to take spots around the room as they settled in. "I'm going over everything off the assumption that you don't know most of it. I know
you all probably heard that Reid got anthrax poisoning, but I doubt you also heard that he was treated by a fantastic doctor who specialized in toxins. It just so happened that I was in the hospital at the same time, and she glanced over my situation to see if there was anything she could do to help."

"Lycanthropy is caused by toxins?" Dean asked, confused.

"Not quite," she replied, "but it was similar enough that she still formulated a plan. Now, there's been a growing problem in the muggle world with a disease called HIV. The immune system essentially shuts down and fights itself, and it's a pretty horrible disease. A few decades ago, the survival rate was practically nonexistent because the cells carrying it replicated and adapted so quickly. Recently, drug treatment has gotten better and better, and people are beginning to beat it. One technique is called antiretroviral therapy. A combination of drugs are used to knock out different stages of the virus."

"So that would work on lycanthropy because of your rapid cell division," Draco said, understanding beginning to dawn. A few looked at him in confusion. "It's why werewolves heal so quickly, compared to the rest of us."

Elle nodded. "Right. The nice thing about lycanthropy is that it doesn't mutate as badly, or at all, really. There are just a series of cell strains within the body, and each do something different. The doctor put me on a series of medications, each to knock out a different strain, but we don't think we got all of it. What's left is benevolent, and shouldn't cause a problem, but it was recommended that everyone around me keep an eye out for anything odd."

"What's left?" Draco asked.

"We think I can still turn someone if I bite them," she said. "I can turn into a werewolf, but I can actually do it at will now so that's nice."

"Wait, what?"

"Yeah, but it's really painful and I don't really feel like doing that right now."

"Go back to the part where you can turn into a wolf," Fred demanded.

Elle looked at him in amusement. "We haven't left that part."

"That is so awesome. Does this mean you're the first created animagus?"

"Maybe. Didn't consider that. I'm not sure if I even count as a werewolf anymore."

"But you still have magical traits in order to get into the school," Gideon said. "Do you have anything else from it?"

Elle gestured to her eyes. "My senses are sharper. It seems like some wolf traits bled over into my human form and vice versa. I have this weird pack instinct now; when I get pissed at someone, I keep trying to move into a position so anyone with me can help take them down. I assure you that does not work when the person I'm with doesn't have the same instinct, which is to say, it never works."

"I am still so impressed," Hermione said, shaking her head. "Any other widely-accepted theories you guys feel like breaking in the next year?"
Harry showed up for a Christmas detention, in which Gideon decided to forgo teaching him anymore profiling techniques in favor of telling him stories. He didn't rest until he had Harry laughing, and he tried to thread in as many as he could about Hotch without being overtly obvious. They went from Gideon's office to the headmaster's to pick up Jack under the invisibility cloak, and they smuggled him down to the Hufflepuff house, which had sent a myriad of students to Harry rather pointedly saying they wanted to see Jack again. Jack wanted to see them too, and Gideon hid in the corridor out of sight of any students while ensuring no one uncovered Jack on the way there or back.

Harry went back to the headmaster's office at lunchtime with Jack, and Blaise tracked Gideon down before he could settle into grading again. The Slytherin raised an eyebrow at him, quill poised over the first of a stack of papers, and took the parchment away from him.

"I think not," he scoffed, dropping it all on the 'detention' desk in one corner of the room. "You need some break time."

"Blaise..."

"It's this, or Umbridge asking you later why you weren't out killing all the holiday cheer," Blaise said and Gideon relented, setting aside his weak arguments.

"What are we doing?" he asked curiously after Blaise instructed him to grab a cloak.

"You'll see."

He did see, a couple of minutes later. They didn't go far, just to the top of the Astronomy Tower, but the air that was blown in by a brisk Arctic wind made the heavy cloaks necessary. Blaise didn't give any sort of explanation, just leaning against the railing and overlooking the grounds. Gideon joined him.

Below, the walls of the castle were covered in a faint film of an icy sheen, and a couple of owls were flying around the owlery. The same wind that chilled them was kicking up swirls of snow on the ground, creating small drifts and ample ammunition for the two groups of students who were pelting snowballs at each other. Past the open, snow-covered land on one side was the lake, with traces of ice along the edges. On the other side was the forest, still dark and dim as always but muted by the snow on its top branches. Smoke from Hagrid's cabin obscured a thin strip of light.

"I didn't take you for the sort to enjoy a spot like this," Gideon commented after a couple of minutes of silence.

"No, but you are," Blaise replied without turning to look at him, and Gideon smiled warmly at him until Blaise cracked a rare, small smile of a job well done.

The magical community didn't really celebrate New Year's, but the QDA gathered together in the headmaster's office to throw confetti in the air, which, thanks to the twins, quickly devolved into throwing confetti at each other and finally down each other's shirts. Even with Umbridge's oppressive power, the QDA was magnificent at keeping upbeat. Gideon regularly saw them encouraging and comforting other students in the hallways, and their holiday cheer easily bled into the new semester when it started back up. The new semester also brought some new faces to the DA, which was still recruiting, and by the second week, their number had grown from twenty-eight to sixty-one. Part of it was due to the inclusion of the Slytherins, who were now joining in without dispute since everyone knew.

Really, the only difference between the QDA and the DA now was their experiences, the DA's compete focus on defense without social meetings, and the QDA's ingrained need for support from
one another. Gideon was sure that by the end of the year, the two groups were going to have completely merged.

The DA was now meeting outside of the office, which was a point of much worry at the beginning. There was only so much that Harry could teach, and a lot of the QDA members were constantly calling for more FBI-styled training, like what they’d had over the summer two years ago. Gideon got together with Snape, and between the two of them started handing out detentions like candy.

When the rest of the staff rounded on him for contributing to Umbridge’s reign, Snape assuaged them by saying he was trying to get them out of detentions with Phalarope, who would most definitely be torturing the students instead of making them clean cauldrons. Neither was true. Snape would have the students practicing spell casting while Gideon trained them to think on their feet and use ingenuity to get out of dangerous situations. Elle even showed up sometimes, though she was also busy gathering information for the BAU and the Order.

Harry was still shaking from the Cruciasus, but it was definitely nowhere near as bad as it had been. In fact, unless Gideon was standing close by and looking for it, the tremors were almost undetectable. Harry told him he didn’t really feel it anymore, but Gideon thought he might have just been acclimated to it by now. He was also getting much better at some of the profiling tricks Gideon was teaching him, and they were both eager to try to get him some real life experience. It was nigh impossible in their current situation, however, and Gideon hoped to get him out of the school over the summer to test it, even if Harry couldn’t go back to America.

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Harry was on his way from Transfigurations to lunch in February when it happened.

The cluster he was walking with started when their wands flew from them, but there wasn’t time to grab them before the second part of the attack came. His mouth opened in a silent scream as he hit the ground hard, writhing against the pain. There was shouting around him, frantic behavior, but none of it helped. Just the pain and the memory of it happening before.

Then it was gone, and Harry lay there trying to suck in as much air as he could.

“Oops,” came Umbridge’s sickly sweet voice.

Harry opened his eyes and saw a crowd had gathered around him. He must have been under the Cruciasus for longer than he had thought. When he tried getting to his feet, Neville grabbed his arm and helped him up with a pale face. Harry wildly looked around, and his gaze came to rest halfway down the hall where Umbridge was standing with two men, both of whom Harry had never seen before. The Ministry-appointed dictator was turned towards a motionless form slumped against a wall.

McGonagall. She must have heard the commotion and stepped in to protect him.

“No!” he screamed, lunging forward, but hands held him back.

“Harry, she’ll do it again!” someone hissed but he thrashed against the hold.

Umbridge turned back to him, smirking. “Mr. Potter, I think you forget,” she told him as he strained against the ones restraining him. “I have absolute authority here.”

Beside him, Hermione was glancing between Umbridge and her two cronies and McGonagall, gauging whether or not she could make it to her beloved professor before she was stunned. It was impossible to tell if McGonagall was breathing or not from where they were. Harry’s hands clenched
into fists, and he was tempted to throw his elbows back at whoever was fighting him. He was shaking, from rage and the aftereffects of the torture curse.

There was a sharp gasp from beside him, and Harry turned his head slightly to see that the Weasley twins had pushed their way to the front. Having not been walking with them earlier, they still had their wands, and Fred’s was out and up before anyone could stop him. “Incendio!” he bellowed and Umbridge’s fluffy pink robes caught fire. She shrieked and tried putting it out, and whoever was holding back Harry was shocked into releasing him.

George sent up a shield spell just as the other two wizards shot curses at the student group. Harry and Hermione took the chance to bolt forward, and they sprinted straight to McGonagall. Ron and the twins focused on Umbridge, and Harry ignored them as he heard Umbridge get sent flying down the hallway and away from the kids. They were still trying to handle the two wizards.

“Is there any blood?” Hermione asked.

“Not that I see. She’s breathing. It’s unsteady.”

“Is it safe to wake her?”

“I don’t know if I can float her all the way to the infirmary. What did the Umbitch do to her?”

“I didn’t recognize the curse. McGonagall was in such a rage, she would have taken Umbridge out given one more second, but she was so caught off guard by seeing you tortured that she hesitated for one moment too long.”

“Just grab McGonagall and run,” Fred shouted at them. Harry and Hermione hesitated. “Run, now! Ron, help them!”

Hermione and Harry managed to pick their fallen professor up between the two of them and Ron backed behind them to keep his eyes and wand on the approaching pair. The twins were hurling spells, more offensive than defensive, as they reached the crowd.

“We’ll cover you,” Neville said reassuringly. “Get her to safety.” Then, quickly, he added in a mutter, “Our safety.”

“Not the infirmary?” Harry asked, bewildered.

“No.” In a shaky voice he fought to control, he said, “Those are the Carrows. Ex-Death Eaters. If they’re in the school, who knows where else they are.”

Ron cast a spell on McGonagall to make it easier to carry her and the three hurried as quickly as they could. Adrian caught sight of them and cast disillusionment charms on them, then went to the infirmary to start asking Madame Pomphrey for the treatment while they went to the headmaster’s office.

Ron swiped the desk clean with a single gesture of his wand and they laid McGonagall down on it. “What is it?” he asked Hermione desperately.

“I don’t know,” she whispered. “I’d never heard of it before. What are Death Eaters doing here?”

“Death Eaters?” one of the portraits demanded. Harry nodded. “Phineas, go tell the Order.” The other headmaster shuffled uncomfortably, but the rest of the portraits yelled at him until he left. “He has a portrait he can go to at the headquarters,” the portrait said reassuringly. “What happened to her?” he asked,nodding at McGonagall, who Hermione was frantically casting some basic
diagnostic spells over.

“The Umbitch tried to take her out,” Ron said.

Harry saw Jack coming down the stairs out of the corner of his eye and moved to intercept him before he saw McGonagall’s unresponsive body. “Hey, Jack,” he said, trying to be calm but not managing it by a long shot. “Can you go wait in your room?”

“Harry…”?

“Please, just… Go wait, okay? I’ll come tell you later. Go on,” he coaxed, finally succeeding in ushering him back up. Only when the door had closed did he move back down. “Well?” he asked as he stood by their sides again.

“No idea,” Hermione whispered, wand still moving.

"Why did they attack like that?” Ron demanded furiously. "Right in the middle of the hallway, where everyone could see?"

"Same reason why Riddle thought it would be a good idea to take me out at the beginning," Harry said. "He thought I would be an easy target, and a quick kill, no matter who it is, solidifies strength. Umbridge was hoping for a fast win by taking out me and the professors who would immediately come to help."

A silvery goat, Adrian’s patronus, appeared and they stopped to watch it. “There’re more Death Eaters blocking off the infirmary. They’re waiting for you to show up there. Guys, stay where you are. This whole thing was staged – they’re looking for you. Umbridge, she must be working with Riddle. She let the Death Eaters in.” The goat vanished.

“Oh my God,” Hermione said. None of them paid any attention as Phineas returned, only to be sent back with more news. “Oh my God.”

They waited impatiently, aimlessly moving around the room until Phineas came back once more. “The Order is mobilizing,” he said. “They’re going to come to storm the castle when they can.”

“The castle should let Dumbledore and everyone else in, right?” Hermione asked urgently. “Because it recognizes him as the headmaster.”

“Correct,” the headmaster with a plaque below naming him Everard Lornus.

Another patronus appeared, this one a horse. Ginny’s voice spilled out of it. “We’re going to tell them you took McGonagall and left the castle,” she said urgently. “We’re pretending there are some secret passageways you guys knew about, and that should keep them searching for those. Stay where you are.”

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Elle was still waiting at Arthur Weasley’s desk when his shift ended at seven. She had come in under the presumption of discussing malfunctions regarding muggle technology and magic, but they’d been forced to drag the conversation out for extra hours while Gideon continued not to show.

As it got to the end, Arthur scribbled down a question mark on a piece of paper and passed it to her, still talking. She shrugged in reply. This had been Gideon’s appointed place to meet at, since he also had a meeting with Fudge about the changes at Hogwarts.
“Stay here,” Arthur said as the clock hit seven. “I’ll go see a friend and be right back, and then I can walk you out.”

Elle obliged, folding her arms. Something at school must have kept him, but it had sounded like things were ironcally more under control now that Umbridge was headmistress without any distractions. It should have been child’s play for Gideon to get out, unless she had somehow discovered what had happened. The more she thought about it, the more she resolved to either ask Arthur to stay here until Gideon showed or do so herself. If he stayed, she could go to Hogwarts and try to sneak in.

Arthur had a grim look on his face when he returned. “Come with me,” he said in a not-quite-passable attempt at cheer.

“Arthur-” she began urgently, but he shook his head discretely and she followed him quietly as they grabbed an elevator and went in a way that most definitely would not lead them out the door. Finally, they walked into a rather remote portion of the Ministry, and Elle frowned at the gloomy, austere nature of it. “Where are we?”

He didn’t reply until they had come across another man walking the halls and Arthur waved him off. The man went in the direction they had just arrived from, and Arthur cast a few silencing wards. “I went and talked to Kingsley,” he said. “Gideon never showed for his meeting with Fudge either. I have to keep an eye out down here, and you can’t be seen up there alone so he’s going to watch for Gideon to arrive and he’ll send us a message if he shows.”

Elle nodded in understanding. “What are you doing down here?”

“We’re guarding a prophecy about Harry and Voldemort. He’s been trying to get to it in the hopes that it will tell him more about how to win the war. Severus heard the beginning long ago, which is why Voldemort became so obsessed with killing the Potters, Voldemort doesn't think he told him all of it and he wants to know the rest.”

“What does the rest say?”

Arthur shook his head regretfully. “No one knows. Only the ones who the prophecy is about can access it once it’s been given, and Voldemort can’t just walk down here and neither can Harry without raising suspicion.”

Elle nodded again, and Arthur began walking. “What’s in the bag, by the way?” he asked, gesturing at the bag Elle had brought with her.

She patted it lightly. “Friends.” Arthur gave her a curious look, but they had passed through the edge of the silencing wards and didn’t push.

The FBI agents assigned to investigating what had happened at the Hotchner home with Foyet had called in animal services in an attempt to find out where the snakes had come from. To protect them – and prevent them from accidentally biting someone traipsing around the property – he had decided it would be best to send the more hot-headed ones somewhere safer.

Elle, who had been at the BAU when this decision was made, pointed out that she could take some of them with her to get them to Hogwarts, where they might actually be needed for defense. Hotch would have sent all of them, but they agreed Harry would just send a few back considering what had just happened at home. Kiyo and Xiuhcoatl were staying, therefore, which lightened the bag a bit. Elle was rather surprised by just how heavy the remaining three were, but her lycanthropy thankfully made it a bit easier.
The passageways were gloomy, and Elle easily believed it when Arthur told her they were in the Department of Mysteries. There was no word from Kingsley, and their shift went longer and longer without any change. Arthur was yawning, and he thanked Elle for walking with him or he definitely would have been asleep. She replied that she was happy to have something to help her keep her mind off her missing old friend.

It was weird to see how much he had changed since leaving. Having already been gone, it was a shock to hear about it but she knew it hadn’t hit her as hard as it hit some other members of the team. Hearing the man had left and was hunting horcruxes down was somehow less surprising. So was discovering his presence at Hogwarts, although by that point, they’d had too many surprises in a short period of time to really be taken off guard. Having Gideon back was too much of a relief to hold his sudden departure over him, especially when he was keeping watch over the kids they were all so frantically worried about.

At about midnight, she sensed the snakes becoming restless in her bag. Since there was no Parselmouth with them, the snakes probably had no clue where they were or why they had been separated from the other two. The agents had been concerned about putting Seokga with Zagreus, considering that the two were usually at each other’s throats all the time. Elle just hoped they didn’t get into a fight while still in the bag, considering she and Tlaolc could both become victims if either snake’s fangs missed the other one.

Finally, the zipper on the bag started to slowly zip to the side, and she peered down in alarm to see Tlaolc moving it using one fang. Arthur startled when he saw what was in the bag and Elle quickly explained as Tloalc slipped out of the bag and hit the ground. He slid over to Arthur, looked at the man calmly for a moment until he relaxed, and then crept up the length of his body until he was soundly but invisibly nestled within the man’s robe’s folds by his neck.

Arthur looked at Elle in alarm even as Seokga slipped under her jacket and up her arm. “I have no idea,” she said even before he could ask. “They’ve never done this before. Maybe they’re just cramped in the bag.”

They started walking again after a minute, slowly and hoping not to antagonize either snake. Zagreus, thankfully, had remained in the bag, which was now lighter with the absence of two of the three snakes. Seokga’s scales tightened around her bicep, face lying uncomfortably near the point her back met her neck. He seemed to be seeking warmth if anything, and if he had wanted to bite he could have done it before, but that didn’t do much to calm her down. At least the venomous one, Zagreus, was still in the bag and wasn’t fighting with Seokga.

She stopped and swiveled around. Arthur shot her a quizzical look. “I thought I heard something,” she murmured, sharp eyes scanning the walls behind them. Her nose, keener than it had been, picked up nothing unusual, but she usually couldn’t smell people except at close distances anyway.

“It’s these walls, probably.” Arthur said, trying to laugh it off after a minute. “Whoever walks down here usually hears odd things because of the way they’re rounded. You hear things from a ways away before it comes anywhere close, or you hear your own footsteps get echoed back at you. I wouldn’t worry about it too much.”

She didn’t move and her frown grew. “It didn’t sound like shoes scuffing,” she said carefully, then winced as she felt Seokga’s scales tighten painfully for a moment before he rapidly accelerated out of her sleeve and onto her back. She turned her head to look at him, curious as to what had caught his attention, and the movement caused her gaze to sweep across the enormous snake sprawled in front of them that they had turned away from. “Arthur!”

He swore and pulled his wand, but the snake darted forward and latched onto his leg. Elle threw
herself forward, but the snakes were faster. Tlaolc slipped down Arthur’s front as he fell, and Seokga hit the ground and shot forward rapidly until he could sink fangs into the giant snake’s backside. The larger snake let go and turned its head to hiss angrily at Seokga, but the movement meant it turned away from Tlaolc, who used the distraction to latch onto a point behind the snake’s head.

As the large snake began thrashing, trying to bite onto Tlaolc and use its tail to throw off Seokga, Zagreus launched himself forward until he could snatch a bite somewhere in the snake’s center. He repeated it several times, safe from harm as Tlaolc prevented the large snake from turning around towards him, and began wrapping himself around the larger snake’s length to halt any other movement.

“Arthur, are you okay?” Elle asked, staying back from the fight to avoid getting accidentally bitten by one of the snakes.

He nodded hurriedly. “My leg feels funny, but I think I’ll be okay.”

“It could be venomous,” she said. He grabbed his wand and aimed it at the pile, but hesitated. “I wouldn’t,” she warned, watching them. “It looks like they’ve got it, and you don’t want to hit one of them by accident. I’m going to go get help. Who’s the closest?”

“Kingsley.”

By the time she’d made it all the way back up and down the elevator and had returned with Kingsley, the fight was long over. Seokga was gnawing - as well as one could with fangs - on a portion of the larger snake, which Elle found rather disturbing and, from the actions of the other snakes, was found just as disgusting by two more. Arthur looked paler, and his efforts to stop the bleeding hadn’t worked.

“We need to get you to St. Mungo’s,” Kingsley said, hurrying forward. “Elle, was it?”

“I’ll grab them and we’ll go out the front. Gideon’s going to have to wait.”

“Yes, but take the other snake with you. If they eat it, fine, but we think it might be a Horcrux. Make sure it’s properly destroyed.”

Elle nodded and grabbed the bag before approaching the mass. The snakes, including Seokga, backed off so she could stuff the snake in. Seokga and Tlaolc each climbed a different arm, somehow understanding her intentions, while Zagreus stared at the snake now taking up all space in the bag. Its head lolled out, as did a good portion of the body.

“It’s not going to fit,” she said. “Can you cast a disillusionment on it so no one notices?”

Kingsley stopped trying to cast spells on Arthur and instead cast one at the bag. It enlarged itself enough that the snake suddenly disappeared inside with a whump sound, and Zagreus could comfortably slip in. Kingsley cast a second spell, and when Elle lifted it she found it much lighter than she expected.

“You two good?” she asked.

“You can’t be seen with us,” Kingsley said with a nod. “We’ll be fine.”

Elle nodded and, with a last look behind at them and the bloody mess, hurried towards the elevator. No one was inside the Ministry at this time of night, and she was able to run most of the way until she was able to get out the way she came in. Once on the street, she took a moment to regroup. At this stage, the best thing was to get to Hogwarts. They had to be sure the Horcrux inside the giant
snake was destroyed, the snakes needed to get inside, and someone had to find out why Gideon was a no-show. She hefted the bag higher and started looking for a place she could grab a bus north to Scotland.

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Author's Note: I got behind in some school work and told myself I couldn't post until I totally got caught up (I'm one freaking assignment away and I'll finish it in under an hour but I need a break so I'm posting now, screw it). I would've been caught up sooner but I had a total freak out when I realized that a family member who I had been denying had dementia definitely does have dementia so...that sucked.

Hey, just be glad the hiatus wasn't after the Chapter of Horror that's coming up soon-ish.
"I make parents tremble in fear when I call home: Hi, This is Mr. Mali. I hope I haven't called at a bad time; I just wanted to talk to you about something your son said today. He said, 'Leave the kid alone. I still cry sometimes, don't you?' And that was the noblest act of courage I have ever seen. I make parents see their children for who they are and what they can be." - Taylor Mali, "What Teachers Make"

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Snape came into the headmaster’s office two days after the Death Eaters got into Hogwarts. He was armed with potions, and immediately set to trying to diagnose the curse. No one was quite sure what Umbridge had cast on McGonagall, and since they’d never heard it before, it was difficult for them to accurately reproduce what it had sounded like. He finally settled on some basic treatments that shouldn’t interact with anything but should keep her stable at least, then woke her up.

McGonagall looked wildly around the office and Snape had to stop her from getting to her feet. “What happened?” she demanded. Her eyes lit on Harry, who was standing by her shoulder. “Mr. Potter!”

“Professor,” he greeted. “Can you remember what curse she used?”

“No,” she said dismissively. “What happened to her?”

“She let the Death Eaters into Hogwarts,” Snape said grimly. To the kids, he said, “I spent the last two days working with them. Has anyone contacted you?”

“No, but the portraits let us know a bit about what was going on,” Hermione replied. “They’ve taken control of the school.”

“They think they have,” Snape agreed. “It won’t stand for long. The Dark Lord himself has yet to show, but someone let it leak under torture that you had escaped the school. He hasn’t bothered to come here, too focused on tracking you down elsewhere.”

“How many Death Eaters are still here?” Ron asked.

“Thirty or so.” He glanced at the portraits. “Have you been keeping the Order updated?”

“Yeah,” Ron said, then turned to McGonagall. “Are you feeling okay?”

“Well enough,” she said, glaring at Snape in an attempt to get him to move. He scowled back, standing his ground. “Oh come now, if I’m so badly wounded, I might as well die out there than in here,” she snapped.

“No one’s dying right now,” Harry said. “There’s only thirty Death Eaters. Not only do we outnumber them, we’ve got home ground and surprise. And back up, if it comes to it. Let’s take them out.”
“Most of the ones on your side who have been practicing have been restrained,” Snape pointed out. “It will be harder than you expect.”

“We’ve got the Slytherins,” Harry reminded him. “They can get everyone else loose. And if they can’t, Gideon or someone who they didn’t catch can. If I can get my cloak, I could.”

“Hey, what if we wait a bit after we get everyone free?” Ron asked. “Make it seem like we’re planning something and then draw more Death Eaters here. We could take more out at once. They won’t know that we’ve got back up coming, and I’ll bet they’re not going to be expecting kids our age to fight as well as we can.”

“Mr. Weasley, you should not be fighting in this war,” McGonagall reprimanded.

“Professor, it’s going to be easier for them to kill me if I don’t. I won’t give them that.”

After a long moment, she nodded. Then, “How did Gideon get in?”

The group grinned. “Professor Phalarope,” Hermione explained.

“Well, that was quite obvious,” McGonagall said immediately and everyone stared at her. "Oh, really, I’m nowhere near as dense as Fudge," she scoffed. "I recognized him immediately. But how did he get in?"

"He wasn’t specifically keyed into the wards. How he got into the building without help, though..."

“Let’s figure this out later,” Harry said quickly. “The longer we’re talking, the more likely it is that someone’s getting tortured. Professor Snape, what else is going on out there?”

An hour later and they were still planning when the door opened. No one was there until Draco took the cloak off, revealing himself and...Elle?

“You’re in a mess,” she said dryly, glancing between the two professors.

Harry looked at Draco in confusion, and he held up the cloak and map. “I grabbed both as soon as I could, in case your rooms were searched,” he said. “We were regularly checking them, and then we saw Elle getting into the castle.”

“What are you doing here?” Hermione asked, bewildered. “I thought Gideon was going to meet you at some point.”

“He didn’t show. Too busy with this. Besides, your school’s on lockdown,” she said, which they already knew from Snape. “The Ministry has no clue Hogwarts has been taken.”

“If we get the first and second years out like we were planning,” Hermione said, “they should be able to convince Fudge if they all go together.” She glanced at Elle. “Could you take them there, if we do that?”

Elle nodded, though she didn’t look entirely pleased at the notion of leaving the school. The bag she had been carrying on her shoulder slipped down as she dropped it to the floor, roughly at first and then slower as she remembered the contents. “Got something that might help,” she said. “Small scale, at least.” She unzipped the top of the bag and Harry grinned as Zagreus slipped out and slithered over to Harry, wrapping himself around his ankles and leaning his head against one leg. She shook both arms gently, and Tlaolc and Seokga both appeared, leaving her warmth for Harry’s.

“Yes!” he cheered, though McGonagall looked startled. Snape started to explain the snakes. “It’s
been crazy here. You’ve no idea how good it is to see you.”

Seokga’s tongue flickered out as he climbed Harry. “I smell Jack.”

“He’s here. Upstairs.”

Elle was explaining her presence with the snakes, and Harry half-listened to her while he continued his own conversation. “Listen, there’s about to be a battle here. Can you help?”

They nodded and Zagreus’s coils tightened around his ankles. “Always,” was the reply. “Are we fighting the same kinds of people who tried to kill the Father?”

A jolt went up Harry at the reminder. “I don’t know. Who was it?”

“We had never seen him before. But he did not have a wand,” Tlaolc said gravely. “We thought he was harmless because of it, but he bit the Father.”

“Bit?”

The snake shuffled her scales irritably, looking for the right word. “Not with his fangs. With… With a blade, like you use for food.”

Harry’s eyes widened. “What?”

“He came back later, and he seems all right now. I am surprised he has healed so quickly,” Tlaolc continued. “He went still under Kiyo. He was gone when they took him. Your doctors are amazing. One even healed me.”

It was hard to hear it confirmed, that his dad had actually died from the severity of his injuries. He could feel the gazes of the others on him, and knew his expression was giving away his horror. “Did he… Did he seem all right?”

“He seemed sad. He misses you, so he sent us. I do not understand why he did not come instead.”

“He can’t. The wards keep him out, but not you.” Harry swiped a hand across his mouth. “But…was he, I don’t know, healthy? I mean, did he seem physically okay?”

Zagreus looked up at him like he was stupid. “There is only one type of ‘okay’,” he said obviously. “One is either sick or not. They are either healing or they’re not. He is sad, so his body is not well. He was bitten, so his body is not well. There is no difference.”

“So…”

“He is not okay,” Seokga said. “An elephant showed up with your human voice, and it made him sadder.” Harry’s shoulder slumped and he sighed to himself. He knew he shouldn’t have sent it – there wasn’t anything it could do, and it’d just upset Hotch more. “No, don’t act like that,” Seokga said. He had a teenager-ish quality to his voice, sassy. “Don’t be stupid. After he was bitten, he was upset about something. The elephant made him sadder over all, but it helped him in healing.” There was a snake’s smirk on his face. “Besides, it sure scared the man who bit him.”

Harry couldn’t help the small smile. “Really?”

“The man screamed,” Zagreus confirmed smugly. “That’s how we knew something was wrong to begin with.”

He glanced between Zagreus and Seokga. “You two are getting along better.”
“We both helped kill the bigger snake,” Seokga said proudly and Harry’s eyes went wide.

“What snake?”

Zagreus nodded towards the bag. Elle guessed what the conversation was about and dumped the dead corpse out. “We ran into it at the Department of Mysteries,” she said, and quickly related what had happened. “Kingsley said to make sure the horcrux was destroyed.”

Snape looked around the office for a moment before spotting the Sword of Gryffindor on the wall. He pulled it off and everyone moved out of the way while he approached the dead snake and lobbed its head off. A wailing scream burst out, from somewhere in the center, and he leaned away as a foul mist rose from it. After a moment, it dissipated, leaving nothing behind.

“I knew there was something strange about that snake,” Tlaolc said. “Is the man who was bitten okay? We did not smell her approaching quickly enough. Sorry.”

“The second guy who appeared came to get him help. He should be okay. Without you, they might have had serious trouble.” Switching back to a speech everyone could understand, he said, “Before anything else, I think we need to get the first and second years out.”

“Agreed,” McGonagall quickly said. “Perhaps the third years too.”

“I don’t think we can safely do that,” Hermione said. “There’s too many. But we could hide them in one of the houses, or towers. Elle, do you think you can get two full years out?”

“Depends on the route I’m taking.”

“There’s a secret passage that will take you into Honeyduke’s in Hogsmeade,” Harry said, self-conscious of McGonagall and Snape in the room, who both started listening with rapt attention about a passageway. “It’s on the map, but Hermione, Ron, and I know where it is, and so do the Weasley twins if someone needs to show you.”

“That’s how they…” McGonagall started to mutter but ended up just shaking her head. Harry smiled faintly. “All at once or in stages?”

“Let’s make a big distraction at the opposite end of the school and get them out then. Fake an invasion or something.”

Hermione perked up. “There’s an idea. What if we fake multiple invasions, and then when it really happens, it’s just the boy-who-cried-wolf situation? They won’t think twice when they see another one.”

“We can just make it seem like we were using the distraction to get people out of the dungeons,” Snape pointed out. “However, by the end, it will get much more difficult to get everyone out if they anticipate escape attempts.”

“We can just let everyone else out when the real invasion takes place,” Ron pointed out, then added regretfully, “even if that means we’re going to be leaving people down there longer.”

“Not necessarily,” Hermione said slowly. “Draco pulled a pretty good illusion charm over Crookshanks, to make him look like Jack was running around the cafeteria. He could probably do so again.”

The door opened again, revealing a panting Blaise. "Draco, they're looking for you," he said. "Something...something about the Manor. I think they want you to go to the Death Eater base."
Everyone looked at Draco apprehensively, but he just muttered. "It's not like they could know, right?"

"It would be highly unlikely," Snape said carefully. "However..."

"It's more dangerous if I don't go," Draco interrupted, nodding firmly. "If I'm really in trouble, I'll send a Patronus."

"They want Professor Snape too."

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The Manor was darker than he remembered it. The few house elves he saw squeaked and vanished as soon as he saw them, and he winced internally when he remembered the last time he'd been here. He had faked an infuriated rage to convince everyone his only desire was to kill Harry, but he might have done it too well if the elves wouldn't even stay in the same room as him. They never immediately vanished for his father.

A hooded and masked Death Eater guided him towards the main meeting room, which was the reacquisitioned dining hall. The Death Eater quickly closed the doors behind him as he left, and Draco remained alone in the curiously empty hall. The table was barren, as was the rest of the room, and the chairs were perfectly aligned with each other. After a half hour passed with no sign of anyone, he took a seat at one of the middle spots and tried to appear calm and cruel.

The door finally opened, admitting Theodore Nott's father and Bellatrix Lestrange. Nott chose a seat away from both of them, but Lestrange's face lit up at the sight of Draco and she sauntered over to him. Her fingers danced around the tips of his hair for a moment and she cooed, dropping into the chair beside him. One leg hung over the edge of the arm.

"So lovely to have you back," she said. Not bothering to keep her voice down as others filtered in, she continued, "You'd be surprised by how many fools and incompetents we keep around here." Bending closer and smirking, she added, "Not like us, dear. We know what real screams sound like."

Draco forced himself to return the smirk.

Someone settled on his other side, and he turned to see his father. Regal and straight-backed as ever, Lucius Malfoy only glanced at him before focusing his attention on the others around the table. Narcissa Malfoy sat down next to her husband, but her eyes lingered on Draco for longer.

Expressionless, she asked, "Has Hogwarts been completely taken?"

"Of course," he replied, confused. She hummed and leaned back without a change in expression. What kind of question was that?

Snape slid into the seat opposite him and nodded minutely at the Malfoys. The table was mostly filled by now, though there were a few empty spots where Death Eaters who were holding the school in check usually sat. The Carrows, normally by Lucius, were notably absent. Moments later the room went quiet, and even before he turned to look Draco knew that Riddle had entered.

He walked almost silently to the head of the table, and then stared out over his gathered followers. "This is a momentous day for us," he said in that whispering tone of his. In the quiet, it easily carried. "With Hogwarts, not even the Order nor the Ministry has a strong enough position to hold against us. Furthermore, I have news that the Ministry's foundations are crumbling - many are beginning to sense the futility of resistance."
Draco cursed internally. They had been so concerned about themselves in Hogwarts that they didn't even think about the Ministry, which had been adamant against the truth of Riddle's return for too long to properly prepare. Of course they weren't going to be able to stand against the Death Eaters, even with a few who had been getting ready. Maybe if they teamed up with the Order... But no, the Order had too many parents and was focusing all its energy on regaining Hogwarts.

"When both are in our power, however, this war will not be won. We must first defeat all of our enemies, many of whom still walk among us. Only when they are defeated can we celebrate." Riddle's gaze fell on Draco, and he lowered his eyes in submission. No way was he letting Riddle's Legilimency ruin years' worth of work. The Dark Lord's gaze moved on, travelling over Snape and members with children. "Hogwarts is our primary advantage now, and we must hold it. To do so, its guardianship needs to be in the best hands. Our dear Dolores," he continued, earning a few smiles, "has done so much of our work for us, but I think she would do far better in the Ministry. She has agreed to return to Fudge's side and attempt to enlighten him."

"She's on our side?" Bellatrix asked with a grin.

"Whether she was an official Death Eater or not, she could hardly have done anything but work for us with all the good she did," Lucius pointed out.

"I would say the same of Cornelius Fudge," Avery sneered, "but I wouldn't suggest we give him the Mark!"

There were a few snickers, and then Riddle held up a hand and they went silent. "Yes, she will be receiving the Mark soon for all her efforts. She will be joining a few others who will add to our ranks tonight." Draco felt his heart rate quicken and hoped no one else could hear it as loudly as he could. Riddle's eyes did not stray towards him again, however, and that gave him some hope. "In her place, our own Severus will be taking over command of the school." Snape dipped his head demurely in gratitude. "We must keep the rest of the staff in place for now. They do know their subjects, and replacing them all would be unnecessarily tedious. Besides, we may be lucky and one might slip up while trying to contact the Order." Draco was one of the few who gave an excited grin at the prospect, though it felt like it would have been easier to stab himself in the stomach then revel at the thought of Sprout or even Trelawney facing the consequences.

"Now... While we are moving forward, I believe it is time that some awards be given for the most avid among us." Now his red eyes found Draco again. "Are you still confident that you can find our elusive Chosen Wonder?"

"Yes, my lord," Draco breathed.

"Very well. You have one month." There wasn't a following threat - it wasn't necessary. "However, for all your dedication until now... I should think you deserve something of a reward. You have proven to be one of my most devoted followers, perhaps even more so than some of those who are your elders. The time has far past when it would be necessary to hide your true alliances, don't you think?"

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw that Snape had gone curiously still. There was no pretending as to what Riddle meant.

"Y-Yes, my lord," Draco said again.

"Come here."

Draco got to his feet, trying to hide the shaking of his hands. He risked a quick look at Snape, but the
potions master had no silent advice to give him. Advice or no, Draco couldn't take the Mark. Someone had to be willing - he surely wasn't, and trying to accept it would kill him when he was a spy for the Light.

He stepped closer, mind whirling, and was about to continue when he saw his mother's face. Naturally pale, she now looked ashen, ill. Her eyes were searching his expression, looking for something lost, and then her gaze darted to Lucius to seek out some action. She saw nothing and looked back to Draco, struggling to keep a neutral expression.

"Narcissa?" Riddle asked. Draco had paused for too long. "Is something the matter?"

Say no, Draco pleaded. Say no.

Narcissa got slowly to her feet, chair sliding backward. Lucius looked up at her in surprise. "For you? Hardly." Her tone set off warning bells, and the mood of the room slowly became tense. Riddle's eyes narrowed. "I believed long ago that nothing could stop you, and I still don't believe any resistance stands a chance. But for me? You have taken my family. You have turned them into monsters, unrecognizable from their previous selves." Draco locked eyes with Snape. Despite the growing fear, all he could focus on was his mother's steady voice and her firm tone. "I won't watch this any longer. I will not attempt to drag this war out any longer by becoming a turncoat, but I will not watch my family burn either. Do what you want with me."

The room went dead silent.

Riddle spoke and Narcissa looked away, unable to gaze at him any longer. "I hardly expected this from you, Narcissa."

"What are you doing?" Lucius hissed at her furiously.

In trying to keep her eyes from either of them, she ended up glancing at Snape, who was firmly staring back at her. Their gazes met for a moment and Narcissa jolted almost unnoticeably.

"Goodbye," she said, resting her hand on Lucius's shoulder for a moment. "I did love you, before he turned your heart black and created an assassin of our son."

Her wand slipped into her hand, unseen by any but Draco standing behind her.

She wasn't going to make it, not against a room full of Death Eaters, Draco realized in horror. Was she actually intending to fight? And as her grip tightened on her wand, he knew she was. Before she could raise it and cast a single spell that would ultimately end her with swift retaliation, he drew his own wand and sent a spell down its length at the same time Narcissa flung her own at Riddle and Bellatrix screamed a curse at her.

A heavy cloud suddenly obscured the room, courtesy of Draco's spell, and he immediately followed it up with a second one that filled the air with pepper. Holding his breath, he grabbed his mother's arm and dragged her after him as he raced towards the door. A spell hit it right before he touched it, and Narcissa blew a hole through the wall beside it. The confusion behind them incited by the pepper, sending most into sneezing fits, and the wall of fog prevented anyone from quickly following.

Once they were out of the room, Narcissa turned her head to Draco as they continued sprinting down the hallway. Her eyes had turned red from exposure to the pepper. He glanced at her for a moment before waving his wand, sending a wall flying to pieces behind them. It wasn't subtle, but no one would see who was going that direction and they wouldn't catch sight of him. He knew the manor
like the back of his hand, but so did the Death Eaters who had made this place their home for months now. After a moment of indecision, he tugged his mother down a hallway that would take them up.

"We can accio some brooms and escape that way," he said as they climbed the stairs. "They'll expect us to go down."

"Draco, you have to be seen searching," she said urgently. He paused, and she came to a halt beside him. "I can make it, but if you're seen with me..."

He nodded in understanding. "Get somewhere safe near Hogwarts. I'll send you a Patronus when I get there."

"Do not let him give you the Mark," Narcissa said, shaking his arm for emphasis. "Do you understand?"

He smiled faintly. "I don't have a death wish, Mum." He kissed her on the cheek. "I'll meet you there."

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Gideon didn't make eye contact as he walked through the halls, keeping his head held haughtily and his pace relaxed. The few Death Eaters who were wandering around avoided him, unsure if he was above or below them and not willing to start a useless fight over it in case they would suffer Riddle's displeasure, and he made it unchallenged to the large front doors. Back in Dumbledore's office, McGonagall and several of the QDA were still waiting for Draco to return before they began enacting their plan, but they needed more information to do that. Gideon was now trying to get that information, walking the perimeter to see if Hagrid was still at his hut and if he could feel the a change in the wards. Honestly, he didn't really think he would even if there had been an adjustment, unless it had been to the muggle wards, but it was worth checking. In any case, Hagrid's hut still had smoke coming from the chimney.

He went back into the school and walked to Umbridge's office, which was an empty classroom that had been redesigned for her purposes. On his way, he saw Filch take a painting off the wall and shake the figures within out, much to their horror. Gideon paused, but continued on, unclear as to what had just happened.

Umbridge was in her office, which meant Gideon didn't have to wander the halls looking for her, as was one of the Carrows. Umbridge smiled at him when he entered and he nodded to both of them. Once this was all done, he was certain he was never spying again - the work was exhausting, no matter how beneficial. "Winston," she greeted. "A pleasure to see you."

"What's Filch doing in the halls?" he asked, keeping his tone curious but uncaring.

"Displacing the portraits. They can't spy for the Order if they can't see anything," she said smugly. At least she couldn't get to the ones in the headmaster's office. "Any luck on finding Potter?"

He shook his head. "It does look like he left the building with Granger and Weasley. I checked their usual dorms and no one's seen anything of them. Even after I encouraged them to tell the truth."

Carrow smirked. "We're beginning to interrogate the students we have down in the dungeons. Can you take a look at them, see if there's anyone else we need?"

"Of course." It would seem suspicious if he didn't give them anyone else. They might have to launch the counteract sooner than expected. "Is this it, for the Death Eaters? Or are we getting more? Someone said another group was getting sent for support, but I thought we had this handled."
Umbridge huffed out an irritated breath. "We're expecting an attack from the Order any time now," she said. "Or, if they can scrounge any competence together, the Ministry. The Dark Lord is sending more assistance now, and then a second wave will come to our aid during the attack. We should have double our current numbers by the end of the day."

*Shit.*

"Is there anything else you need me to do, before we go down to the dungeons?" he asked.

Umbridge shook her head and glanced to Carrow, who paused for a moment before saying, "See what's going on with the ghosts. They're the only ones in this building we haven't checked yet. We'll finish up here and I'll meet you in the dungeons."

"Oh, Winston," Umbridge said as he made to leave. "I may or may not be here after you look at the prisoners. If not, I hope we see each other again. It was marvelous working with you."

He nodded. "And y-"

An explosion shook the floor, and all three of them grabbed for something to hang onto.

"What the hell was that?" Carrow demanded as the three pulled out their wands - or, in Gideon's case, his useless, wand-shaped piece of wood - and hurried out the office. "An attack?"

They turned a corner and ran straight into McGonagall and Harry. "Ask them," Gideon recommended dryly as Umbridge's and Carrow's wands came up at the same time as their opponents' did.

A blast from McGonagall's wand caught Umbridge off balance and she stumbled, hastily throwing up a shield. Harry shot the Disarming Spell at Carrow, who waved it off but lost himself a precious moment as Harry darted forward, closing the space between them. Carrow's eyes widened, but his wand was coming back around and Gideon grabbed his arm and hauled him backwards. The sudden movement lost Carrow the battle, and Harry easily knocked him out with a *stupefy*.

Harry glanced behind Gideon to check for any others, then looked behind himself in case any were following them. "What happened?" he asked as he turned.

"I rather hoped you knew," was the reply, and Gideon glanced at McGonagall and Umbridge. The Transfigurations teacher, even while on the mend, was still more than a match for the terrible DADA professor. "I guess Umbridge should have trained more on defensive magic." Harry cracked a smile.

Umbridge went down. It was rather anticlimactic after everything she had done throughout the year.

"Here," Gideon said, opening a door to his right. It opened into a small storage closet. "Think they'll fit?"

"Do we have time?" McGonagall asked.

"If these two wake up and go for help, we're in trouble," Harry pointed out, dragging Carrow in. McGonagall did not attempt the same, instead levitating her over and dropping her on Carrow. "Hope he doesn't suffocate," Harry muttered, although it wasn't entirely clear if he meant it or not.

McGonagall snapped their wands and secured the door shut with a locking charm.

The trio hurried to the nearest staircase, which thankfully stayed still for them as they rushed to get...
down to the dungeons. Once again, Gideon wondered if the school was actually conscious, but he shoved the thought aside for later consideration. Movement out of the corner of his eye forced him to duck, and he threw an arm over the shoulders of both professor and student to force them down with him.

Peeves cackled as he flew past, and Gideon released the other two. "Little Weasleys, come out to play!"

"What's going on?" McGonagall asked.

"Prison break!" he crowed, and then he was gone.

"This is going to get interesting," Harry muttered as they hurried on.

"I don't know how much time we have," Gideon said as they turned sharply and took another flight of stairs down, "but Riddle was sending more Death Eaters here to fortify the school. Umbridge was expecting it would double the numbers."

"That bloody woman," McGonagall snapped. Her wand came up and she shot a Death Eater down as he passed in front of the hall entrance directly in front of them. They ran past, Harry jumping over the body, on their way down to the dungeons. "Do you think we can end this before they get here?"

"Depends on why Peeves was so ecstatic about the Weasleys."

The Death Eaters evidently had the same idea that they had, and they passed several on their way to the dungeons. McGonagall or Harry each took one out, and Gideon used his position as a spy several times to delay an attack or catch someone off guard. They also met a mob of Hufflepuffs, who were furious and battle-ready, which was how Gideon found himself at the head of a small badger army with the Gryffindor head and an old coworker's son.

One of them cried out behind him right before they began their final descent, and he turned back sharply. The student was pointing out the window, one hand over her mouth. McGonagall ran back as other students began to shout, and she turned to Gideon. "They're here," she confirmed. "Someone must have told them to hurry it up."

"Harry!"

All of them turned from the window to look at the stairs they had been about to go down. Luna waved at the bottom of them. She was one of the Death Eaters' captives – or rather, she was supposed to be. "What are you doing up there?" she asked cheerfully. Someone on fire went flying behind her, but she didn't stop smiling or even appear to notice.

Harry just beamed at her. "Nothing, really. Looking for you and the others. Everyone out?"

"Oh, yes, we're doing quite well down here. Is anyone left up there?"

"Stupefy!" a sixth year shouted, and Gideon saw a Death Eater who had tried sneaking up on the group hit the ground.

"Not for much longer," Gideon said. He faced the Hufflepuff army. "Stay here and make sure no Death Eaters block off this entrance." He glanced at Harry. "Can you take charge of this group?"

Harry was grimacing and watching McGonagall, who had gone back to staring out the window and counting the number of incoming Death Eaters from the sky. "I think it would be best if I go with you," he said finally. "My Patronus would do more good out there than in here." Gideon nodded and
Harry asked Luna, "Can you command this group?"

"Oh, I'm not a leader." She turned to someone they couldn't see behind a wall. "Justin, your Hufflepuffs have come a bit late for the fight, but they look rather eager to damage a few faces. Would you mind taking over them?"

"I get a mob of my very own? Cool!"

"They've got this covered," Gideon said to McGonagall as he passed her by, Harry on his right. "I don't think any remaining Death Eaters are going to be able to trap that group down there."

The three set off again, now without a student horde behind them. They passed two more Death Eaters, taken out by Harry and McGonagall easily, before they reached the large doors at the front. For the most part, the Death Eaters were still circling in the sky, but now a few were beginning to land, and the three pulled back before they were spotted.

Harry glanced at Gideon. "If you stay unseen for a bit longer, we might be able to use that to our advantage."

Gideon shook his head. "They don't know who I am, as Gideon or Phalarope. It doesn't matter."

McGonagall shot a curse at a Death Eater who tried to get through the doors. The body dropped. "We can either close these doors or use it as a funnel to make it easier to take them out. I'd like to do the latter, but there are really only two of us," McGonagall said as Harry took down another one.

"I guess it depends on how many are coming through this entrance," Gideon said, entirely okay with not being included in the count. "Sir Nick!" he called out as he spotted the Gryffindor ghost drifting closer curiously. The ghost straightened to attention. "Look outside and see how many Death Eaters there are, would you?"

The ghost frowned at him. "Aren't you working with our obnoxious, bloated, infiltrating, loathsome-
"

"He's with us," McGonagall interrupted.

Nick's face lit up. "Oh, well then." He drifted over until he was in front of the entrance. "There looks to be about fifteen," he said, ignoring a red spell that passed harmlessly through him. "And they all seem rather angry, though I admit it's hard to tell with those masks on."

"That means at least another twenty are landing somewhere else," McGonagall said.

"Close the doors. Let's get to a higher floor and aim down at them from there," Harry suggested. "Two against fifteen aren't preferable odds. Gideon, can you go back and tell everyone to look for the Death Eaters trying to get in from somewhere else?"

Reluctant as he was to leave Harry, the other two were going to waste time protecting him if he remained instead of fighting. He had a feeling Harry knew that too. "I'll tell them," he said, starting to move backwards. McGonagall was waving her wand and the doors were slowly closing as Death Eaters began shooting useless spells at the old oak panels.

Harry nodded, glancing his way one last time as he made to face the doors. He jerked back as something caught his eye, and Gideon whipped around to see three more Death Eaters making their way towards them. "Get between us," Harry ordered, and Gideon complied, entirely willing to follow the orders of a boy at least forty years his junior when said boy held much more power than him. McGonagall suddenly swore, and Gideon glanced behind to see that two Death Eaters had
gotten through the doors as they were beginning to close and were now forcing her into a fight. The doors remained partially open.

Nick swooped down, obscuring the vision of the closest Death Eaters, and McGonagall used their temporary distraction to promptly knock both out. The ones coming in behind them took her attention and the doors remained unclosed, but there was nothing for Gideon to do about it besides remain just where he was. He could try running past to close the doors, but there was no way he wasn't going to be knocked out before he could manage it, especially not when it required him practically running in the outskirts of McGonagall and the Death Eaters' battle zone.

Harry, on his other side, had already taken out one but was kept on the defense by the other two. Gideon cursed himself mentally. He'd brought a gun to the school, having already had it on hand and not seeing a reason to get rid of it, but he hadn't kept it on him out of fear that someone might spot it and realize he was a muggle. He should have grabbed it once everything went to hell, and as soon as they were out of this immediate crisis, his office was the first place he was going to go.

In front of him, Harry took a deep breath, steeling himself for something...and then lowered his wand and raised his left hand.

Two spells from the Death Eaters hit a barrier in front of him, inches from Harry's hand, and both stopped in surprise. At Harry's back, Gideon blinked. No one had ever mentioned anything like this before, but Harry was clearly holding the barrier. He'd never heard of wandless magic successfully performed by someone as young as Harry.

Holding the barrier up with one hand, Harry took another deep breath and then raised his wand, angled slightly away from the Death Eaters. "Expecto Patronum," he cast, and the elephant burst into view. One of the Death Eaters stepped back nervously, but his partner scowled and elbowed him sharply.

"It's a patronus," she snapped. "It's not real."

"Essearia," Harry added.

There was a long moment of silence as the two Death Eaters eyed it warily. Without turning, Gideon realized that the ones fighting McGonagall had seen the enormous beast and had also halted, bewildered as to what was going on. The elephant stared at Harry for a moment, then turned its giant head to the Death Eaters. Its ears stilled for a moment, then flared outward, so wide that they blocked Gideon's view of Harry's opponents. The trunk, previously hanging down by its knees, rose as the elephant tossed its head. Over the top, Gideon could see the large, pointed tusks butt the air. A bellow echoed through the hall, and then the elephant was charging.

The pair of Death Eaters began frantically casting spells and moving backwards, and the ones on McGonagall's side suddenly increased the frequency of their own spells, eager for the fight to be over. Harry threw up a shield to cover their backs, then hurried to join McGonagall while his elephant took care of his previous opponents. Between the two of them, they were able to get off the defensive and use the funnel to their advantage. After a quick count of the bodies on the floor, Gideon counted that they only had about four left. Down went the fourth, and the third, and the second...

More were still coming in. Gideon frowned and looked around for Sir Headless Nick, who was floating in front of the doors and frowning at whatever he was staring at. "Sir Nick!" he shouted, and the ghost turned to him. "How many more?"

"Twenty-three."
Gideon swore. They must have decided to all coagulate at the front doors when they saw the first landing party having trouble.

The elephant thundered past him, tusks bloodied, and aimed itself at the Death Eaters already engaged in battle. They turned their wands at the creature approaching them, but their spells had little impact on its thick hide. McGonagall used their distraction to knock one out, but the elephant had moved directly between them and the second. There was a short scream, and then the elephant was moving over the body, large feet trampling tissue beneath it.

The Death Eaters began pushing backward, trying to flee out the door, but the elephant followed them in its murderous rampage. Its trunk grabbed one around the midsection and hurled it into a wall, then lowered its head and speared another with one tusk. It tossed the body off, then turned and thundered out the doors in pursuit of the rest. The walls, thankfully, blocked their view of the rest of the carnage, but they could still hear shouted spells and pained screams filtering in as the elephant did its gruesome work.

Gideon tore his gaze from the last spot they had seen it and looked at Harry. The teenager had both hands clasped over his mouth, eyes wide. He was shaking. Gideon placed one hand on his shoulder and squeezed gently, but he didn't try to offer solace.

"Harry," McGonagall said breathlessly. "What was that?"

"My patronus," he croaked out, hands slipping to his sides. "We- We tried to make them substantial, so they could offer...protection against...other people..."

McGonagall was still watching the doors, quiet. Then, without turning, she said, "A patronus does not have a conscience of its own, and it does not use yours. Of all the patronuses I have seen over the years, they only have personality as what their caster intends and needs. Their behavior, however, is all the same. I have never witnessed two patronuses defeat dementors differently. It is their duty to protect them. Harry, I expect your substantial patronus will do whatever it takes to protect you, no matter what the cost to others."

"I won't cast it again," he whispered.

"I didn't say that," McGonagall immediately replied, and both Gideon and Harry stared at her. A bit quieter, she added, "You may find yourself needing him again in this oncoming war, when you just need that extra safety. The Death Eaters have made their choice to kill indiscriminately, and I fear we will lose many more than we can afford if we are not ready to fight back. Of all who have discovered this, I trust your judgment the most to decide when it is necessary and when it is not use lethal force."

It was quiet outside. The elephant outside had vanished, no longer needed.

"Let's go find the others," Gideon said, using the hand on Harry's shoulder to guide him away.

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It was an hour before Draco managed to successfully slip away. Snape initially tried to cover for him, saying he'd run off in a fury to get his mother back to the manor for punishment, but it soon became clear that the Death Eaters knew what had happened. He stole a broom before setting off back to Hogwarts. It took far too long without Snape apparating him back in a series of jumps, but they couldn't both be revealed in the same day. Draco was sopping wet from the clouds and the light rain falling from them by the time he landed outside Hogsmeade, and he cast several drying charms whilst regretting not casting the Impervious Charm before he had left.
He summoned his Patronus, and the raccoon peered curiously at him, awaiting direction, before he sent it off with a message to his mother. She sent her own in return, directing him to the Hog's Head.

He almost didn't recognize her when he slipped in, but she was one of the only four patrons and immediately looked up at the opening of the door. Keeping his hood over his head to avoid attracting notice, he walked quietly across the room and sat down across from her. She was also hidden by a cloak, and had masterfully adjusted her posture to give the appearance of a much older woman.

"It's not safe here," she murmured.

"No. Let's go to Hogwarts."

She frowned. "It's swarming."

He gave her a reassuring smile. "Not for much longer. But let's talk in there. I know a way in."

She followed him out, and they walked under Disillusionment Charms to the edge of Hogwarts. Several times they had to get off the beaten path when they saw Death Eaters coming their way, but none of them were moving quickly. Word must not have spread yet about Narcissa's actions. Draco took them to Honeydukes, where he sidled up to the owner behind the register.

"The twins sent me to bring something into Hogwarts," he said under his breath.

The owner nodded slightly, and Draco withdrew. A few minutes later of faked browsing with his mother later, a clerk came and showed them down to the cellar and the tunnel within. The Malfoys thanked him before heading on their way.

"Are they trustworthy?" Narcissa asked when the tunnel entrance sealed behind them.

"No idea," he replied truthfully. "But this is the safest way in. *Expecto patronum.*" The raccoon appeared again, ringed tail twitching behind it. "Tell Elle to meet me at the Honeydukes's tunnel entrance."

The raccoon turned and vanished, and the pair continued on their way. "Who's Elle?" Narcissa asked curiously.

"Ah, this is going to be a long story..." he said sheepishly. His expression darkened slightly. "But first... Why didn't you say something sooner?"

She stared at him. "What do you mean?"

"Why didn't you...?" He stopped. "I almost bled to death because of people who followed Riddle." He ignored her start at the name. "Why did you keep supporting them? Why didn't you use your influence with the Ministry to make them see reason, or force others to understand we weren't lying?"

She blinked a few times. "Because there isn't a force strong enough to stop him. I do believe that he will win."

Draco scoffed lightly. "I don't. Here, let's get to the castle. I think there are a few others we need to get up to speed, too."

"Draco, you... You really aren't...?"
He smiled reassuringly. "No. Harry and I talked before last summer about me pretending to kill him, and we had long ago decided that we'd pretend to still hate each other. We've been good friends since the Silent Massacre."

The rest of the walk was made mostly in quiet, and both of them had their wands drawn in case something happened. It was an uneventful journey, however, and they came to the end without incident. Draco knocked on the exit, and it opened to reveal no one. Elle's hands reached in, however, and helped Narcissa out first while Draco kept an eye behind them in case someone had been trying to sneak up. He slipped out when it was his turn, and Elle closed the entrance on the one-eyed witch statue while he hid under the folds of the cloak.

"This really does change size," Elle muttered. "How many people do you think we could fit under it?"

"We've comfortably done four..."

"Shh," Narcissa hushed them, and the three quickly made their way to the headmasters' office. Narcissa made a short, confused noise, but stayed quiet until they had slipped around the griffin and made their way into the office.

They opened the door, just in time to hear simultaneous shrieks of pain and one maniacal laughter. Narcissa jumped in surprise and the other two looked at each other in bewilderment.

"I AM THE CAPITALIST!" Ginny crowed victoriously. "Pay up, bitches!"

"Fuck," Blaise moaned.

"I am the Monopoly master!"

Elle closed the door behind them before the triumphant shrieks echoed anywhere else. The sound caused everyone to quiet down, and about twenty heads swiveled to face them as Elle took off the cloak. The regular Monopoly crowd was gathered around the board, but instead of an even dispersion, Ginny was hoarding all of the money. She looked entirely too smug to be up to anything good.

"We bet no one could win the game in under two hours," Neville explained glumly as he fished around in his pockets for change. "We were one hour and forty-seven minutes in."

"I have never seen the game," Narcissa admitted. She glanced around the room. The rest of the QDA had gathered and was sprawled in various locations, and McGonagall was talking to Harry in one corner. Zagreus was slumped comfortably across his shoulders, but the other two snakes were out of sight.

"It's Monopoly, Mrs. Malfoy," Blaise said courteously, trying to regain some of his dignity. "We have reason to believe the game is cursed. Too many broken hearts and wallets."

Narcissa frowned in bewilderment.

Draco looked around the room. "Everyone's here... I thought we were waiting?"

"It was too complicated, too many things could go wrong, and too many people were down in the dungeons," Fred summarized. "Everyone broke out. We're hiding this group up here, and we managed to get the rest of the school into the Chamber."

"Everyone else is down there?" Draco asked, impressed.
"Every single student," Harry confirmed smugly. His voice, however, didn't have quite the luster it usually held. "Which was made much easier by Peeves, the local helpful poltergeist. And the Baron, once we said Jack needed to be moved somewhere safer."

"And all the Death Eaters?"

"In the Astronomy Tower, tied up. Took us about half an hour. There weren't many." There were a few strange looks exchanged, and Draco decided he'd find out what had really happened once his mother wasn't there.

"You wrapped it up while I was gone?" Elle asked.

"Yeah." Harry glanced at Narcissa then back to Draco. "What happened on your end?"

Draco gave a quick explanation, then gestured briefly to his mother. "But I didn't have a chance to describe what was going on here... Snape should be showing up soon, I think. Riddle gave him control of the school. What are you thinking to get everyone out?"

"Right. I've got an idea for that."

"Yeah?"

"We're going to get everyone arrested."

---

Garcia quickly accepted the call coming through on her headset. The number on the screen made her frown and she dropped her usual eccentricities to greet the caller. "This is Penelope Garcia with the FBI." It was a British number, but not one that she recognized.

"Wait... FBI? Isn't that like MI5?"

Garcia paused. "Yes, a bit. Can I help you?"

A sigh. "Look, this... This is going to sound pretty bizarre, so just trust me on this. About ten hours ago, this woman and her kid show up. Well, they claimed they were related, but they really didn't look it. She was a blonde and he was a brunette and all that. Anyway. So they show up and want to rent a car, and of course we say sure, you can rent a car."

Garcia was already checking the number and found the address at a car rental spot. She hummed in acknowledgment. Once the man on the other end told her what she was looking for, she could ask Hotch if they should request some British files about the rental place or if Garcia should just start hacking.

"Then things got a little weird. We asked for an address and they didn't have one. And then they did a few minutes later. We asked for insurance and they gave it to us. Only now we can't find it. We asked for proof of identity and no one can remember seeing it but we somehow approved it anyway. On and on, things just seem weird. So finally, they pay us in cash and go outside. And then, I swear to God, at least twenty-five kids pile into the minivan they rented, and the woman gets into the passenger's seat and the kid who came in with her gets into the driver's seat. First of all, that's illegal - he's not old enough to drive a rental car. Second, he did not know how to drive-" There was a muffled conversation behind him. "Okay, fine. He knew how to drive, but it was weird. Like, er..."

A light bulb went on. "Like he was used to driving on the opposite side of the road and car?"
"Yeah! Is he American?"

"He might be. What else happened?"

"Well, we realized things were a touch off so we called the coppers and gave them the license plate. Except they couldn't find the van. Hours later, still no sign. And then just a little while ago, we get a call from this tiny town forty miles away that they've just pulled the van over for speeding. Kid didn't have his license and the whole situation seemed off so the police brought everyone in for questioning - all seventy-some people who were in the van. Insane, right? Anyway, so this whole situation is reeking of suspicious activity, so someone thinks it's a good idea to check the money in case they were counterfeits. They weren't counterfeits - they weren't even money! Somehow, between the time the kids left and the time we checked, the money vanished and someone left us a bunch of pieces of paper with this number and 'Sorry' written on them. Now, can you please tell me what's going on?"

Garcia breathed out a sigh of relief. "It's definitely too long of a story, but I'll summarize and say you just found the kids of some very grateful parents. Have you told anyone else about this?"

"No..."

"Okay. Keep this quiet, all right? Those kids are running from something. Can you tell me the town they were found in?"

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The portrait of Phineas had bunkered down for the night, and the Order began working off what it knew in its plans for the invasion of Hogwarts. There weren't a whole lot of Death Eaters guarding it, but the protections that had kept the school safe for so long were now providing a host of difficulties to those trying to take it back. It wasn't quite clear if the wards would let them in or not, or if they would provide resistance against anyone who didn't work at the school.

"Call the BAU," Bill Weasley suddenly said, startling everyone into silence. "Why didn't we think of this sooner? They broke in before, didn't they? I'll bet they could figure out how to do it again."

"It might not be a bad idea to bring them in anyway," Moody gruffly admitted. "They were damn useful last time."

"They were only useful because they'd screwed up so badly," Fletcher muttered.

"Pot meet kettle. How are Harry's real parents doing?" Remus dryly replied and Fletcher scowled. "Besides, they still performed admirably. Bill's right."

Twenty minutes later, almost everyone in the BAU had been gathered back into the meeting room. The exception was Garcia, who was more useful surrounded by her computers at Quantico. The group was quickly accepted into the planning, even though all of them but Hotch were completely unaccustomed to the regular formation of wizard schematics.

"Is it possible for you to break in again?" Dumbledore asked, the twinkle gone from his eyes for once.

"Elle Greenaway is already there," he said. No reaction - they already knew from the portraits. "But she has a unique situation. Her lycanthropy means that the wards recognize her as being magical, and since she broke into the school before, she's also recognized as something of a regular. The rest of us are going to have more difficulty because we haven't been in since the wards were adjusted. However, Garcia's been working on a way around this for a while."
Sirius raised an eyebrow dryly. "You were already trying to break in again?" Before anyone could reply, he muttered, "I can't even pretend to be surprised..."

"What do you know about the situation at the school?" Rossi asked, and Molly quickly filled them in.

By the end of it, Morgan's phone rang and he stepped away to take it when he saw the caller's ID. He came back almost immediately and interrupted the explanation on Snape taking over official control of the school. "It's Garcia," he said. "She got a call from someone in England and... Well, we don't know how, but at least all of the first years and second years are out of the school. And so's a blonde woman, and someone that Garcia thinks might be Harry Potter."

No one spoke.

Then a puzzled "What?" from Sirius.

"Do they have a location?" Hotch asked.

"Yeah. The police are completely baffled about how all those people managed to fit into a van. Someone must have put an expansion charm on the inside."

"That's advanced magic," Dumbledore said thoughtfully. "It must have been the woman's touch."

"Get a hold of Blackwolf and explain what happened," Hotch told Prentiss and she pulled out her phone. "He's going to need to run damage control for the Statute of Secrecy, since I doubt we can expect Ministry help." He caught Sirius's odd look. "What?"

"I'm just amazed you pulled out that detail in the middle of all of this," Sirius said honestly. "Okay, so where are we headed?"

"More importantly, where are we going to hide all of those kids?" Tonks asked. "They won't fit here, the Ministry's not safe, and we very well can't send them home. You've hidden students before, haven't you?"

Hotch grimaced. "It was a much smaller group and no one had the faintest clue that we might be involved. By now, I'd be surprised if Riddle wasn't at least on the verge of realizing we've been helping, and he's certainly going to find out soon if he hasn't already."

"All the same, it might not be a bad idea to get them out of the country," Remus said slowly. "Would Beauxbatons take them in for a short period of time?"

"That could very well work," Dumbledore agreed. "Agent Hotchner, due to your familiarity with the muggle system, perhaps it would be best if you and a few of your team accompanied Order members to pick up the children." Hotch nodded in understanding. "Remus, Molly, and Alastor, if you would please assist," he said, then left the room to contact Maxime.

"Let's go, then," Remus said. "Where to?"

Chapter End Notes
The next chapter is not the Hell Chapter, but it's pretty bad. Just in case you weren't worried enough or anything.

Okay, so here's the thing. There's a major plot twist that's going to happen in a little bit, and the story flows as it is BUT I could add another chapter in to help smooth the transition between the first half of this story and the second half when that plot really takes effect. Upsides: It would be a Blackwolf chapter and we'd see the Hotchners from an outsider's view. Downside: There's the possibility of a severe updating delay. Which do you want?
They were landing on the outskirts of the town an hour later. Most of the trip had been made in a few Apparition jumps, but the last leg had been made on broomstick, which had been rather harrowing for Hotch and Morgan. The police chief greeted them immediately and said that the federal government had already gotten in touch with them and given orders to release the whole group into the custody of the newcomers. The tiny station was practically packed to the brim with young students, and Hotch turned away from them to focus on the chief.

He pulled him away into the chief's office, and Remus followed them in. They spent the next half hour bullshitting their way through an explanation, only able to leave once Morgan ducked in to mutter to Hotch that Madame Maxime had arrived with several portkeys. The chief waved them off, clearly only half-buying the explanation but entirely willing to go without the truth when the whole situation was so bizarre.

"Can I have your attention?" Morgan asked loudly but calmly, moving to the front of the group. They quieted immediately. Many of the kids looked shell-shocked. Close to Morgan was the woman they had been told about. From the way her gaze flickered curiously over the muggle devices, Hotch thought it likely that she came from a pureblood family. Harry was nowhere to be seen, but with so many people, he wasn't surprised that his son might have gotten lost in the crowd. "We're going to be moving you all out of here, but since there are so many of you, we're going to have to do it in small sections."

"How many portkeys do you have?" Hotch muttered to Madame Maxime in an undertone.

"Four."

"Can each transport twenty people?"

"Yes. Zey are blankets."

Hotch nodded and told Morgan, "Four groups."

Morgan did a quick headcount of the kids nearest him. "Okay, you eighteen, follow him." He pointed towards Remus, who listened to an instruction from Maxime and then led his troupe out of the station. Morgan gave them a minute, then rounded up the rest into three other groups.
Moody walked over to Hotch. "That lady is Narcissa Malfoy."

He glanced over at her briefly. "Not what I expected."

"What do you think?"

"I don't know enough about what happened yet to make a decision. It's a good start that she's not using any of the kids as shields." As the second group followed Molly out the door, he scanned the audience. Dread began to permeate his thoughts as he still failed to spot Harry, even with the lessened crowd. He should have checked the moment he walked in, and now he was cursing himself for it. This was where arrogance had gotten him before. If he weren't so cocky about-

There, talking to one of the officers. He was standing away from the rest of the group, almost disconnected, and Hotch hadn't looked anywhere but at the large clump of students.

Hotch sighed internally. "I'm going to get Potter," he quietly said and made his way around the perimeter of the students. Remus was entering the building again, and the third group left as Hotch reached his oldest son.

Harry paused in the middle of his discussion, looking up as he saw a figure's shadow crossing the desk. The slightly guarded expression fell, breaking into a genuine smile that softened the lines around his eyes as some of the tension fled his shoulders. Hotch wanted nothing more than to be able to wrap him up in his arms, but he forced himself to settle for lightly bumping Harry with his elbow.

"Excuse us," he told the officer, who smiled and turned back to his work as Harry and Hotch went to the front of the station.

"Wait," Harry muttered and slipped away before Hotch could stop him. He returned a moment later, calmly with no obvious difference. "Okay."

Hotch raised an eyebrow but didn't say anything, and they joined Moody at the front of the station as Molly led the last group out. Maxime went with them to return to her school, and the remaining outsiders to the station quickly departed. After Molly came back, they turned down the road and began making their way to where the brooms had been stored.

"Someone tell me we're apparating back," Morgan said, expressing Hotch's own opinion.

Tonks blinked at him. "You'd rather apparate than fly?"

"Please," Morgan groaned and Tonks grinned. "I'm not cut out for being that far above the ground with nothing to hold onto."

"We'd better apparate," Harry quickly said, but he wasn't joking around like the other two were. The group looked at him. "Just... Flying's not a good idea."

They grabbed the brooms in the back of an alley and paired off. Moody took Malfoy, evidently not trusting her enough to let her out of his sight, and the two immediately departed. Harry was talking quietly to Remus, leaving Morgan with Tonks and Hotch with Molly.

In a series of jumps, using stopping points at places they had passed over while flying, they made it back to Grimmauld Place within a few disorienting minutes. When they finally landed and the world stopped swirling around him, Hotch realized they were standing in the kitchen. Moody had already ushered Malfoy into the dining room, if the shocked sounds coming from there were any inclination, and Morgan and Tonks were talking amiably as they moved in that direction. Molly and Hotch, however, both paused independently of each other.
After a moment, he turned to her. "Waiting for something?"

She flushed slightly. "I want to stay until Harry gets here," she explained. "You?"

He paused. "The same," he admitted, and he was treated to a smile.

"You really do care about him," she said fondly. "He's such a sweet boy, isn't he?" The smile faded. "You will still help me find his parents, won't you?"

It took a considerable amount of control not to say anything just then. He knew he could trust her, but he hadn't asked Harry about it and they were standing far too close to everyone else for his comfort. Instead, he gave her a small, comforting smile. "It'll work out, I promise."

They lapsed into silence, and both began to frown at the extended absence of their friend and son. The two had been talking rather seriously about something, but Hotch had expected that Remus would understand the need to move Harry to a more secure location as quickly as possible. Really, the two of them should have been the first to make the jump. Any delay was a serious problem, especially when the Death Eaters could have been following Harry or Narcissa Malfoy.

"Should we go back?" Hotch asked.

Molly bit her lip. "I'll go tell Albus we're leaving," she said, but before she finished the last word the missing pair appeared beside them. "Remus!" she scolded, putting the werewolf on the defense immediately. Harry blinked in surprise at the tone. "We were supposed to come straight back here! Are you two okay?"

"Had to get the little one used to it," Remus said. The hand not holding onto Harry was curled in an odd way, and it unfolded itself to pat something.

"What?" Molly asked as the invisibility cloak slid to the ground and a blur sprinted out of it.

"Jack!" Hotch dropped into a crouch, catching his youngest son in a hug. "Hey, buddy."

"Dad!" Jack pulled back, beaming. "You've got to see Hogwarts! It's so cool! The paintings move, and the Baron really likes me, and so does Draco and the rest of the Slytherin group even though everyone doesn't like them for some reason, and I think the Hufflepuffs are kind of crazy but, I think, in a good way? Sort of? And Phalarope's really nice but I'm not really sure what his name is because some people say he's Gideon and I don't get it – does he have two names? - and"

"Jack, breathe."

His youngest sucked in a dramatic breath and let it out.

"-And he knows all about birds and he was telling me about the owls in the owlrey but Harry said we had to go because we didn't have a lot of time and- oh! Oh! Harry got to drive! It was so much fun! But the people here drive weird. I don't think they're doing it right, because they're not on the right side of the road. And the van was enchanted by Narcissa, and we all got to fit in there even though it's the size of your van but maybe a bit smaller and there were, like, a hundred of us so we-
"

"Where the hell did he come from?" Fletcher demanded, startled. Hotch threw a glare over his shoulder and Fletcher retreated back through the door to the dining room.

Before the door closed, Sirius caught it and looked in to see who was talking. He blinked in surprise when he saw Jack. "It seems like we've got another visitor," he said with a smile. Behind him, a few
other faces were trying to peer past.

"We still have an invasion to plan," Moody pointed out brusquely.

"I'll stay with him. You all can fill me in later," Molly offered and Hotch nodded his gratitude. Whether she knew it or not, she'd already taken care of one of his children. He was willing to let her take care of another. She held out her hand to Jack, who reluctantly departed from Hotch. "Why don't you tell me some more about the Baron, hm?" she asked. Jack glanced back at Hotch, who coaxed him on. "I never really got to know him."

"You went to Hogwarts?" Jack gasped, worry forgotten.

"I did!"

"But I thought only kids went there. And you're old."
Hotch groaned softly and Harry hid his laugh behind one hand.

Remus also grinned, but he gestured for them to go into the dining room. "Let's get this scheming out of the way," he said. "I think I speak for most of us when I say that I'm fascinated to learn how you managed all of this."

"I trust you," Hotch muttered quietly to Harry, hoping his son understood what he meant. There was only so much he knew about the situation, but he was sure there were things that he was going to have to impart onto the Order for the invasion to be as safe as possible.

Harry hesitated. "That's going to be most of it," he said.

"If you need to."

Harry took a chair between Hotch and Sirius, and the rest of the Order regained their spots to listen. The rest of the BAU was clumped between Hotch and the end of the table. Harry didn't speak until he realized everyone was watching him, and Remus' comment had been less of a vague statement and more of an invitation to begin speaking.

"Okay, er," he began awkwardly. "Well, Remus said you're planning on taking back Hogwarts?"

"What's that got to do with this?" Moody asked.

"A lot, really. Uh, Mrs. Malfoy, Draco didn't have time to tell you everything that happened, did he?"

"He did not," she confirmed while others turned to each other in confusion at Harry's casual address of the boy who had been trying to kill him for the last few years. "It seemed like quite a tale from what little I did gather, however."

"Okay," Harry said again. "Well, I suppose the first thing you need to know is that we've already taken Hogwarts back. Everyone who was taken prisoner kind of got irritated with hanging out in the dungeons, so they launched a revolt and the Weasleys set off some explosions, and we cleared out all the Death Eaters. So we've got control of the castle."

There was a long pause.

"Just so you know. But if you're planning on using the school for defense, then I think there are quite a few other things you're probably going to be interested in before you accidentally hit a friend."
"You said Draco," Sirius said.

"Right... Full story, then." The eyes of everyone around the table were fixed on him, but he mostly ignored them in favor of mulling over his thoughts. "You know almost everything that happened during the Silent Massacre by now, but we lied when we told you how it ended. When we met the BAU in Hogsmeade, more things than Sirius came up in conversation. At one point, Hermione mentioned that it was a shame she couldn't just contact her parents using her phone while she was at Hogwarts. Garcia thought this was a crime against humanity, so she found a way to get technology to work around Hogwarts' magic. The two of them stayed in contact in case she started having problems so Garcia could help her get it working again.

"Because of that, Hermione had a phone that could work around magic when the werewolves were trying to sacrifice us. She also had Garcia's number. She called her, and not long after, the BAU showed up and got us out of there." Several shocked glances were aimed at the team, but most were still staring at Harry. "We went to Quantico, recovered for a few months, and then we went back to school. But when we returned, most of the public wouldn't believe us. After months together, everyone who had been at the massacre got along - even the Slytherins, who were impressed by what muggle technology could accomplish - so we decided we'd fake our animosity to protect everyone. It looked like Riddle was coming back, and if the Slytherins pretended that they weren't on his side, they could put their families in danger. If they had family left."

"That's why he pretended to follow the Dark Lord?" Narcissa interrupted. Harry nodded. "Oh, Draco..."

"Over the last year and a half, we've been using that every way we could, especially these last few months. We kept getting together in the Room of Requirement, so a lot of us were still practicing spells. That also meant our reflexes were still strong, as Crouch found out." A few grins broke out at the reminder of how they had come across the imposter. Harry paused. After a moment of internal debate, he continued. "At the end of the year, Draco pretended he was going to find and kill me. He was afraid that if he stayed in the manor all summer surrounded by Death Eaters someone would realize he wasn't really loyal." By this point, he was mostly speaking to Narcissa, who was intently listening to every word. "He stayed with Garcia instead, and he's been working with Elle to look at some of the psychological differences between muggles and magical folk."

"Shit, that's just about the exact opposite of what I was expecting to hear," Sirius muttered. "I hope I'm not the only one extremely embarrassed about being outwitted by a group of teenagers."

"Nope, you're in good company," Tonks shamelessly admitted.

"Yeah, the Slytherins kind of went all-out," Harry agreed. "Especially this year. They joined the Inquisitorial Squad so they could keep an eye out for the rest of us."

"Hang on," Arthur said. "How did Jack end up at Hogwarts?"

Harry sighed, shrugging helplessly. "I wasn't quite sure what was going on or who was still coming after us. Hogwarts was the closest and safest place, so I brought us both there before school started. He stayed in the Room of Requirement at the beginning. By the time I learned he could go back, school had begun, and the wards the Umbitch put up made it extremely difficult for anyone to leave. To make matters worse, she found out he was there from some of the paintings that had seen him, so we knew she was looking for him. We decided it was safer for him to just stay where he was at until we could think of a good way to get him out.

"I stayed in the Room of Requirement with him, so I wasn't ever showing up at the dorm like I was supposed to. For almost all of the last year, a bunch of us hadn't really had regular sleep schedules"
and we regularly snuck off to the Room of Requirement instead of sleeping so no one really thought anything of it. Umbridge tried to use it to her advantage, which is why she passed that Educational Decree. The Slytherins joined the Inquisitorial Squad so they could cover for me, and they just kept telling her that I was showing up at the dorm each night. Eventually, though, she figured out part of what was going on and blew apart the Room. Draco and Cassius helped us get out, and we hid in the Hufflepuff house for a little bit. Then we moved Jack to Draco's dorm, since everyone in there knew what was going on and Umbridge wasn't ever going to think of checking there."

If the expressions of the Order members were anything to go by, a lot of things were clicking into place now that someone was explaining what had been going on behind the scenes the whole time. Harry was certainly doing a fantastic job of describing the important details while still hiding that one critical point that they had been guarding this whole time - his lineage.

There was a long pause before Harry began the next topic, and Hotch reached under the table to grab the hand closest to him. He squeezed lightly, and, after a moment, Harry squeezed back. "When Umbridge had realized at least a few people knew that a child was in the building, she decided she was going to find out what was going on. She tried using blood quills initially, but the ones who were causing the most trouble, and therefore probably knew who Jack was, had all gone through the Silent Massacre so we didn't really give a damn about it. So...she started making us choose between taking a dose of veritaserum or undergoing the Crucius. She figured we weren't going to be lying either way."

"She used what?" Sirius whispered. Harry kept his eyes fixed on the table. "Harry..."


"She will be held accountable," Dumbledore replied. His tone stopped everyone before they could truly begin to get angry. "Harry, do you know how many students she tortured?"

"Me, Luna, Terry... I think some others were hiding it. Padma said she put Parvati under it because Umbridge figured Padma would have told her twin what was going on and Parvati wasn't going to be as accustomed to pain, but Parvati later took the veritaserum so Umbridge realized she really didn't know anything. I'd say at least six that I can be sure of, but I wouldn't be surprised if there were more. I know I didn't hear about everyone."

"How many times?" Sirius asked, voice rough.

"Depended on the student and how often she could get them into detention. She only got Terry in for a week, but I think Luna ended up in detention for four weeks. She started coming up with the most obscure reasons to give me one, so I was in there pretty often." Harry was still keeping his eyes focused on the table, and Hotch began rubbing the back of his hand with his thumb. "When she managed to take over as headmistress, things stayed about the same. Except, of course, no one learned a thing because the whole school rioted. One day, she told me that someone was going to be taking her place as DADA professor so she could better focus on her roles as headmistress." He smirked. "What she didn't know was that Gideon was damn good at pretending to be a wizard and British."

"Gideon?" Moody interrupted. "The BAU agent?"

Hotch smiled to himself. Although the Patronus had mentioned it already, it was still good to hear what had happened to his old friend. The man must have truly been in his element, teaching and profiling simultaneously.

"The same. He'd left the BAU a year before but came over to Britain to try to help in the fight
against Riddle. When he heard what was going on at the school, he convinced Fudge to let him help. Detentions were more like therapy than torture, and we actually learned something in DADA. He was the one who recommended we use your office, actually." He glanced up at Dumbledore, who tilted his head in acknowledgement.

"Then the Death Eaters broke in. Hermione, Ron, and I got Professor McGonagall to your office, and we waited until someone told us what was going on. Elle showed up at about the same time we got Professor McGonagall awake. Draco was told that Riddle wanted to see him, so he left. As far as I heard, Mrs. Malfoy gave Riddle a scolding," he said with a light smile, "and Professor Snape covered their exit while she and Draco left for Hogwarts."

Narcissa was sitting up proudly. The ones seated around her were looking distinctly more impressed than they had been a few minutes ago.

"We got rid of the Death Eaters in the school, including the reinforcements who had been sent. We also gathered up the first and second years, and we would've gotten the third years but we weren't sure we could safely get that many out. When it was dark enough, we walked to the nearest muggle town and rented a van. Mrs. Malfoy cast an expanding charm on the inside, and I charmed a bunch of pieces of paper to look like muggle money. They had Garcia's number on them, so once the charm wore off in a few hours, we knew someone was going to find out where we were. From there, I made sure we got arrested in a town quite a ways away from Hogwarts in a place mostly filled with muggles so we could rest and wait for you to catch up. I brought Jack along under the invisibility cloak. And now we're here."

It took some time for all of that to sink in for everyone. Hotch continued holding onto Harry's hand, the gesture hidden by the table, though Sirius might see it if he turned his head just the right way. On Sirius's other side, he saw Remus suddenly jerk in realization, but he didn't share what his sudden knowledge was.

"Well, since the kids have done all the work for us, we won't be invading Hogwarts," Moody pointed out. "Now we just need to keep it secured." He glanced over the BAU. "I suppose you better stay with us, considering your involvement until now. I reckon you'll find a way to wheedle your way in later if we don't let you help."

"It seems we understand each other," Rossi replied.

"And I would say you're too young to stay," Moody continued, his living eye looking at Harry while the other darted around. "But the same goes for you, considering your record with getting into trouble, and you know more about the school's defenses than we do right now. In particular, its student defenses." When there was adult protest, he added, "He'll be remaining here at headquarters, of course."

The meeting went on for hours, as Harry filled them in on how prepared the students were and what had happened since the last time contact had been made with the Order. The agreements with the ghosts and house elves proved particularly important, as the Death Eaters weren't going to think much of either being part of the defense. The training the students had been working on also greatly added to their potential to hold off another attack, particularly now that they were ready and weren't hiding under so many visages. He also touched a bit on what Draco and Elle had learned but hadn't been able to share, since it gave the BAU a better idea of how to treat any hostile wizards or witches they came across.

The respect the Order members were beginning to give Harry was palpable, as their curious expressions from when they had sat down now morphed into admiration. Harry was quick to gloss over his own advancements, but they kept cropping up no matter how hard he tried. The most
startling, however, was probably also the most inadvertent.

"Did any of you attempt to learn wandless magic?" Tonks asked eagerly.

Hotch frowned. "I thought that was common," he said, and everyone turned to look at him.

"No," Sirius said quickly. "Very few people can successfully do it with a wide range of spells. Accidental magic usually involves it, but it's really not common after that. Who told you that?"

"No one, but..." He glanced at Harry, whose brows had scrunched in confusion but now relaxed as he remembered what event Hotch was recalling. "Didn't you...?"

"Er," Harry replied, face heating up. "I suppose that would fall under accidental magic."

"Uh oh," Sirius said, amused at the discomfort. "What happened?"

"Nothing," Harry said too quickly. "Well, obviously there was some accidental magic. Um."

Everyone looked at Hotch instead. "He thought someone was endangering Sean and Jack so he put up and maintained a defensive barrier. And did away with all the glass in the house."

There were a few chuckles at the last bit, but Tonks's jaw dropped. "Wait," she demanded. "That was not a small house. How on earth did you...? And you maintained a barrier? For how long?"

"Maybe...twenty minutes?"

Now almost everyone was gaping at Harry. Even Dumbledore's eyebrows had shot up.

"Woah," Sirius muttered.

"So, uh, in answer to your original question, we haven't really been doing a lot with wandless magic as a group. I think Hermione was looking into it for a while but I don't know how far she got," Harry said, hoping to push the conversation along. It didn't work, and he was immediately bombarded with questions.

After the meeting was finally over, several of the members were sent off to various places to gather more information or to spread word of some things that needed to be known. Hotch offered to fill Molly in, considering she was watching over one of his sons, and no one thought it odd so he was quite easily able to go talk to her without the presence of anyone else but Harry. His oldest son followed him, managing to slip away from Sirius.

Remus, however, caught up to them at the top of the stairs. "Wait," he said, and Harry turned. "No, ah, Hotch, actually." Hotch had also stopped but he straightened slightly at the address. "You were the one who had the Dursleys arrested, weren't you?"

"Yes," he admitted. "What gave it away?"

"No one else could have known about the Harry's home life enough besides you, and you were the only one who knew Harry and would think to prosecute the Dursleys. I've been thinking it over for a long time." He stepped back. "Just curious."

When he was gone, Harry turned to Hotch. "I think he knows."

"If he doesn't, he's almost there," Hotch agreed as he started walking down the hallway. "Speaking of which, I think we should tell Molly Weasley."
"Okay."

"I didn't even say why."

"Well, I figure you're not just deciding to tell her for no reason at all, and she's always been wonderful so I don't have a problem with it."

"I think she's got too many kids in the front lines of this war to have one more concern," he said. "And someone in the Order should know, besides Snape when he's one of the most likely members to be injured in the upcoming months."

Harry was quiet next to him. Snape wasn't likely to just get injured. Hotch paused, noticing something wrong in his reaction, but it wasn't easily detectable. His scrutiny made Harry frown slightly in confusion at him, and Hotch realized what was wrong when he saw a cheek muscle twitch unusually.

"You're trembling," he quietly said.

Harry blinked, but he didn't look surprised. "It's prolonged exposure to the Cruciatus," he replied, just as softly. "Since she put me under it so many times. It's mostly gone by now."

Fury rose at the mention of the torture, but with it came something else. A topic he needed to bring up, wanted to bring up – but couldn't. Harry wouldn't talk to him about it right now, not when he was so raw after the semester from Hell he'd just had.

Harry read his thoughts on his face in a heartbeat before he could even think of concealing them. "Dad... Are you okay?"

"What?"

"I know you were hit hard by what happened with Perotta..."

Holy shit, he was actually going to talk about this. Without weeks of beating around the bush or dodging questions. He was seriously just going to lay it out.

"Because...well, for the same reasons I was. I mean, he saved my life but his bedside manner sucked. But..." He shifted uncomfortably. "I think I made it worse for you by not saying anything immediately. And I should have. So...I'm sorry, for any hurt I caused."

"You were trying to heal after what happened," Hotch said, shaking his head firmly. "You should have been focused on yourself, not me. You did the right thing."

One of the doors on the ground floor opened and both of them grimaced. There was a lot more to that conversation, but now wasn't the place for it.

But still.

Hotch wrapped an arm around Harry and rested his head on his son's for a moment. "I'm so proud to even know you," he murmured, and Harry's arms tightened briefly. "Let's go see Jack," he said, stepping back and reluctantly letting his hands slip from around him.

They found the room Molly had brought the youngest Hotchner to while the meeting had been going on downstairs. Jack was asleep on the bed, and Molly was reading a book in a chair beside him. She looked up as they entered and smiled at seeing both of them.
"He just went down a half hour ago," she said quietly as Harry shut the door.

"If it had been me in here, he'd still be up running around," Harry said. He sat down next to her on the edge of Jack's bed. "Months of practice and I still can't get him to sleep."

"He's a great boy." Molly marked her place in her book and made as if to stand, but Hotch gestured for her to stay sitting.

"I've got two great sons," he agreed.

Molly tilted her head. "Two, but I thought you only had.-" She froze.

"We wanted to tell you," Harry said as her eyes widened, "but it was just too dangerous for a while and... I'm sorry."

Molly gaped at Hotch. "That's... That's why you've been here this whole time. That's why you were always there when..."

Hotch nodded.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, trying to steady herself. "Well, I'm glad the two of you found each other, even if you nearly gave me gray hair with worry." She opened her eyes. "I hope you don't mind if I tell Arthur."

"No, it's fine. But we are still trying to keep this quiet," Hotch said. "If no one knows, Harry stays safer. People don't expect him to have blood wards to stay behind for protection. They also don't come looking in Virginia when they're trying to find him."

Molly was glancing between the two, eyes taking in the individual features of their faces and comparing them. "Now that you've said it," she said, "I can hardly believe I didn't notice it before."

"We avoided standing next to each other," Harry explained. "It was when someone was most likely to make the connection, so we tried not to give anyone the chance. I'm really sorry, Mrs. Weasley."

She huffed out her breath, and Hotch smiled at the sign of irritation. He knew he wasn't the only one who got frustrated sometimes with Harry's repeated apologies. "Oh, honestly, Harry, I'm just glad the two of you are both all right. I'm too relieved to care. Here I thought I was going to have to rely on Agent Hotchner to find out who your father was so we could get you to your parents and this whole time you knew..."

"Well, not the whole time," Harry said. "Middle of the summer, between my second and third years." Molly frowned, evidently sharing the same disapproval that Hotch harbored. Two and a half years wasn't nearly long enough.

"Are you going to be telling everyone when this is over?" Molly asked.

"We will," Hotch confirmed. "Although there are quite a few who are going to be difficult to explain this to."

Molly waved it off. "I'm sure once Sirius sees that Harry's happy he won't mind." She got to her feet, this time without Hotch stopping her. "Well, it's been a while since you two have seen each other, so... I'll leave you alone, then. And I'll put a privacy charm on the door, so you'll know when someone's there and they won't be able to hear you."

"Thanks," Harry said, and she smiled at him.
"Oh, it's no trouble, dear."

"Mrs. Weasley," Hotch said. " Truly, thank you, for everything you've done for Harry. I regret nothing more than not being here for him, and you were. If there's ever anything you need..."

Molly shook her head at him. "Oh, it sounds like you've been keeping an eye out for my children just as much as I kept an eye on Harry. And I know just how rambunctious Fred and George can be."

Hotch smiled, and she started to leave through the door.

"Alastor?" she said, backing up into the room again. Moody followed her in and glanced at everyone.

"Potter, go see Black," he said. "He's got something for you." Harry nodded and went out the door, and Moody turned to Hotch while his fake eye followed the young wizard's path down the hallway.

"Albus thinks there's going to be another Death Eater wave coming in, from what Severus just told him. You're directing your team and I'll be directing the Order members present. We're not supposed to go straight into the fighting unless it comes to us, so use that to make your decision on who's coming."

JJ was definitely staying behind. There was no way he could bring her in, not when she was seven months pregnant. The rest they couldn't afford to do without - he could hardly afford to leave JJ - but he was still going to give all of them the choice. He had a feeling he knew what they were going to say.

"When are we leaving?"

"Fifteen minutes," Moody said, then left.

"Someone will be here to keep an eye on him," Molly quietly assured him, looking at Jack and striking the exact chord that was causing Hotch so much worry. It was very different to face a murderous psychopath when his paternal worries weren't nagging at the back of his mind, especially when both boys had been near the front lines already. "Do you want some time with him, before you go?"

"No," he said reluctantly. "It'll make it harder to leave," he continued, casting a final glance at the sleeping Jack. He had no option but to get out of this alive.

Haley would kill him in the afterlife if he didn't.

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Sirius was not with the rest of the party preparing to leave like Harry had expected. Instead, he was waiting outside in the kitchen, which thankfully meant that Harry saw him on his way into the dining room-turned-conference room. Before he was in the kitchen for longer than a moment, Sirius was whisking him away, off the first floor and up to the second where he pulled Harry into a spare bedroom.

The up-to-no-good look on his face was easily recognizable after so much time spent with the Weasley twins, and Harry arched an eyebrow at his expression. "What?" he asked, amused.

"So, Molly and Remus both put their feet down and said you're not heading back to Hogwarts, but... Well, I think that's a shit idea and so does Alastor so we're sneaking you in. We've just got to do it while everyone's still getting ready so no one notices."

Harry grinned. He'd been planning on asking Narcissa to transport him over, since she had also been
banned during the meeting considering her high target status, but he had a suspicion she might be trying to slip away to stand with her son. This was better and got him over there faster. Before anyone else started interfering with how they were running Hogwarts, he wanted to see how much progress the joint QDA-DA group had made.

The door opened and Moody walked in. "I'll take you over and jump back before anyone notices I'm gone," he said. "Sirius, you're part of the first group with me. I'll let you get away and you can meet up with him to get to the headmaster's office. Potter, you might be coming over, but you're not going to be unaccompanied."

"Actually, I think I need to get up there as quickly as possible, and waiting is going to cost me a few minutes." Moody gave him a look, and Harry made a snap judgment. "Look, we found a way to make a patronus substantial. If I meet more Death Eaters than I can handle, I can cast the spell and the Death Eaters won't be able to kill it. It took out twenty last time."

Moody's expression became more appraising and Sirius had an oddly contemplative fugue about him. "Hm," Moody finally said and extended his forearm. "Hold on."

A tight twist of the stomach later, and they landed just outside the apparition wards. "I'll at least go with you halfway to the castle." His pace was a brisk walk, and Harry had to jog slightly for the first few steps to catch up and avoid being left behind. "The others didn't want me to tell you this either, but I'm asking you anyway. You're in charge of both the QDA and DA, right?"

"Yes."

"Merge them."

"Basically already done at this point. The QDA just refers to a specific branch within the DA now."

"Good. Most of the Order is of the opinion that they need to be evacuated along with everyone else, but I'm going to tell you this. We're not going to get Ministry support until it's too late, after the next attack. Make sure your group is the last to be sent out, so if anyone's stuck here when the attack comes, they'll be able to defend themselves adequately. I'd rather your group find themselves in a cinch than some hapless third year."

"I can do that."

"Hotchner is running the BAU coordination and I'm taking care of the Order. I need you to run the student population. For the most part, you won't be fighting, so we shouldn't get too much complaining about you still being here. Do you know how to lead without being directly at the scene of the battle?"

Harry frowned, mind racing over the possibilities, but he was dying to say no. He didn't want that responsibility, didn't want to be in charge of people relying on him for guidance and risking their lives based on his judgment. There were plenty of students and adults in the castle who were more qualified for this than him and the only reason he was being put above everyone else was because people had been taught to look up to him, and he had only enforced it, however inadvertently, by appearing competent and calm in the midst of danger. With so little field experience, Moody was practically handing him power over what was a small army of teenagers.

The office wasn't the place he wanted to be during this battle. He wanted to be by the sides of the people he had been training with this whole time, not using incoming information to make educated guesses. True, he was going to have two people at his side who were experts at strategy, but he was still going to be heavily relying on what he knew about the individuals, their strengths and
weaknesses. And no, he didn't really know how to lead without seeing what was going on. Hell, he
didn't really know how to lead when he was there.

"Not particularly," he admitted, adding dryly, "Haven't really led a war before."

"You have. Guerrilla warfare against Umbridge. It's the same thing, just more physical instead of
purely mental. And Potter, a good deal of this fight is mental. Winning relies on the morale of the
people under you, their hopes and desires. You already know how to fight that part, and you've been
training long and hard for the physical portion. This isn't impossible. I'm talking to you instead of any
of the others because you know what to do, and I know you're able to think clearly under pressure. If
you can't do this, I don't know who to turn to."

"All right," Harry said wearily.

"If you don't have a formal organization, get one together in the next hour. At least four unit leaders,
one for each of the wings of the castle, and tell them to organize the people under them. Consider
strengths and weaknesses, make sure you've got it balanced between all the groups. If you can, find
McGonagall and tell her to start mobilizing other resources like the ghosts and paintings if she hasn't
done so already." He came to a stop and put a hand on Harry's shoulder. "You have the castle to
yourself for about fifteen minutes. Try not to get invaded in that time. Good luck." His hand pushed
Harry almost gently in the direction of Hogwarts, then he whirled on his feet and was striding back
the way they came to get out of the anti-apparition zone.

Harry waited only until he was inside the castle before he started casting his patronus. He used the
shape-changing spell, not wanting to have to waste time explaining later why it was suddenly a lot
bigger than it used to be. His first spell summoned four, and he froze. They didn't have enough time
to get everyone adjusted to new roles, so he needed people who were natural leaders. Not only that,
they had to be able to confidently take that post, think clearly, and give orders without issue. Should
he reward time spent in the QDA/DA, or competency? Was a separation between the houses
necessary, or would they all overlap?

He vanished three of the patronuses. "Get me to Gideon," he said, and ran after the stag as it loped
through the hallways. Surprisingly, they came to the DADA classroom, and he opened the door to
find just the people he needed. Gideon was talking to Draco, Hermione, and Snape, and all four
looked up when he entered.

"I thought you wouldn't be returning," Snape said.

"Change of plans. Moody wanted me here." He closed the door and hurried towards them. The
patronus disappeared behind him, and he quickly explained what he had just been told, then set out
his dilemma.

"I don't think giving precedence to time with the QDA is a problem," Snape said. "The first ones
there have more training and are less likely to shy away from a fight than the others. They're stronger
in mind and spirit, and I'd recommend all four be from the initial group."

"Don't bother thinking about the houses," Draco added thoughtfully. "Among us, no one really cares
so much anymore. Shouldn't be a problem."

"My main issue is that I can't use the people who immediately come to mind," Harry grumbled. At
Hermione's gesture to continue, he said, "I can't use you, Draco, or either of the twins, or Cassius."

Draco frowned. "What? Why not?"
"You're the only person who knows muggle tech past the basics. If we need you, you can't be divided between leading and anything technological. I can't separate the twins - they work too well together - and Cassius is graduating soon." He paused. "I don't think we're finishing this term any time soon, actually, so I take that back. Cassius can take one group."

"I don't understand why those four stand out," Snape admitted, eyebrow raised.

"People naturally look up to Draco because of his presence and his recent specialties, the twins usually take control of meetings, and Cassius has been hosting a group of the homeless Slytherins over breaks," Hermione accurately summarized. "They're the logical choices. Maybe the twins could lead a group together?"

"I don't think they would want to," Gideon pointed out. "They might take control of meetings, but they like attention. It's not because they want to lead. Talk to them first, before you make a decision. They wouldn't make a bad choice, not when they excel at thinking outside the box."

A silvery horse appeared beside Hermione. "There's a distraction at Hogsmeade. They're raiding it."

Harry frowned as Ginny's patronus disappeared. "Professor, can you send a patronus to Moody telling him to start there? We can hold off here until that's taken care of." Snape paused at the order, not used to being given a command by a youth, then cast the spell, and the doe raced off with the message a moment later. "Okay, looks like brainstorming session is over. Roger Davies, the twins, Cassius. Draco, you're just going to have to take one of them for now if the twins don't want to split up, so come with me while we get that worked out." To the adults, he said, "Can you organize everyone else?" He got two assenting nods, and Harry gestured to Hermione and Draco to follow him out.

After the door closed behind them, Snape turned to Gideon and said, "He's his father's son."

"Merlin help us - there's two of them now." He paused and made a small 'huh' noise. "I'm picking up on your slang. Merlin help me."

Outside, the trio raced to the headmaster's office. No one was there, and the paintings told them that the group was entirely spread out around the castle. Harry made a frustrated noise. "Damn, why's everyone competent? Okay, we're each going to take a quarter. The twins are going to have to deal with each other and take a group as a pair." With barely a moment's reflection, he sent Draco off with a group to gather at the west wing, and the Slytherin hurried away, sending Patroni as he went. Hermione went in the other direction, also quickly casting Patroni. He'd given each a list of more than twenty names, and they wanted the messages sent before they forgot any of them.

Harry had another patronus lead him to the twins, who he inoculated into the world of leadership with as little pomp and circumstance as was humanly possible, due to the limited time frame he was working with. Both stared at him, but he quickly ushered them to work by giving them their own list of people to assemble. Then he left to go find Roger, who was thankfully close by, and gave him control of the south. Roger seemed a bit frantic when he started running south, and Harry made a note to check on him during the battle if possible. Then he cursed himself and sent patronuses to all the unit leaders, requesting that they designate someone to send him updates as to what was going on in each post and reminding them that they were probably going to need a second if not a third in command. It was at that point that he realized that he didn't have a second.

"To Hermione," he said, then paused as the elephant appeared. "No, not you," he muttered and cast the shape spell, causing the form to morph into the smaller stag. "Okay, tell her: You're taking my post if something, y'know, happens to me." As an afterthought to the rather abrupt message, he added, "Good luck." He sent it off, aware she was probably going to kill him for telling her that in
such an offhand manner. Well, she was going to have to get in line behind a long list of others.

With all of that out of the way, he ran to a window overlooking the side that Moody had dropped him off at. There was no sign of the Order there, but they were likely to stop first at Hogsmeade. Moody hadn't told him where they were meeting up, but he took an educated guess and decided to stay near the headmaster's office until he saw Order members reaching the castle.

Gideon showed up a few minutes later and came to stand by him at the window. "McGonagall has activated some of the castle's defenses, and she's managed to drop several of the more troublesome wards. She said to tell you that the anti-muggle wards have been restored to normal, so you might want to see if muggle technology works again."

Harry pulled his out of his pocket automatically. Out of habit, he'd kept it with him even once it stopped working. He breathed a sigh of relief when it turned on, then quickly sent patronuses to each unit leader to tell them the phones were back up, in case they hadn't thought to keep their phones with them like he had.

"Doing okay?" Gideon asked.

"Yeah, sure, totally. First war zone. Whoopee."

"You're doing fine."

"I'm freaking out."

"But no one else can tell, so you're doing fine. Everyone freaks out a bit in war zones. Even we still get nervous approaching some of our Unsubs, and we've been doing it for years. You've got a few minutes. Use them well. What do you need from me?"

Harry let out a strangled laugh. "I hope you know how bizarre it is to hear you asking me that."

"Then you'll have a clue how bizarre it is to ask."

Harry was quiet for a minute, then said, "What's going on with the staff? We should coordinate with them."

"Depends on the person. Hagrid is going into the Forbidden Forest to ask for help from the various creatures in there, McGonagall is still working on defenses, Flitwick is organizing the ghosts and paintings... Most of the others are patrolling the grounds, but Snape is in the middle of pretending to be captured. Assuming the Death Eaters gain control of the school, they'll find him bound in the dungeons."

"He's in for a rough battle," Harry muttered. "I'm at least doing something and I feel like it's not enough. He's just got to sit there and wait it out."

"He's also got more patience than you."

"Yeah... Hey!"

Gideon smiled slightly. "Does Hotch know you're here?"

"Heh. Heh. That's going to be a fun conversation..." Harry glanced at him, and his eyes lit on something. "You brought your gun."

"Got it during the lull." He sighed. "You know, there was a reason we went into the FBI instead of
the military. Shooting someone in combat is a lot different than shooting someone at home."

"Yeah?"

"In war, it's far too easy to lose yourself without that daily connection to civilian life. You need a reason - a very good reason - to kill someone in civilian life. There's a check on you to prevent you from going too far. Coming back from that kind of place, back to normal life where everything's not so black and white anymore... I never wanted to watch it happen to others, or to myself."

For the first time Harry knew him, he heard a bone-deep weariness in Gideon's voice, and he began to realize just why the man had left the BAU so abruptly. Whether he'd been in war or not, 'civilian life' had taken its toll on him, each year stripping a little bit more from him. He was beginning to reach the end of his rope. "And I never wanted to see this happen to children."

"Thank you, for coming back," Harry murmured. "No matter what you say, you didn't have to, but you did it anyway. We owe you for that."

A dash of black shot past the window. Harry jumped back in surprise, and Gideon did the same before quickly moving closer and looking in the direction it had gone. "Can't see it," he muttered.

"Are you sure McGonagall got all the wards?" Harry asked.

"She was still working on it."

Around the corner, there was a crashing sound, glass shattering against the cold, hard floor. Gideon pulled his gun from his holster and Harry drew his wand. Before either could be used, there was a shouted spell and a body hit the floor.

"Moody," Harry said, lowering his wand. Gideon followed his lead, and Moody and Hotch walked around the corner a moment later. The latter's eyes narrowed on seeing the pair up ahead.

"Damn fools," Moody muttered crossly. "Can't even duck." His roving eye stared at Hotch, who was glaring at him. "Oh, did I forget to mention something? Potter's in charge of the student defense."

Hotch sighed irritably without opening his mouth, but Moody ignored him for the moment. "Status?"

"Castle hasn't fallen. Got some shell-shocked students who were just promoted to command positions. Wards still going up and coming down. Oh, technology's working again."

Moody grunted and jerked his head in the direction of the headmaster's office. "Let's get out of the hallway. The Death Eaters are starting to make landings inside the castle while the Order's distracted in Hogsmeade, so we're in for a rough period until McGonagall gets those wards up securely. Should go faster with Albus here."

Something seemed off about that to Harry - why was Moody here if the major concern was in Hogsmeade at the moment? -, but he stayed quiet for now. They walked in silence to the office and got prepared to wait.

---

News started filtering in slowly, first from the Order in Hogsmeade and then from the students in the castle. The students did well, holding their ground until the Order had sent the Death Eaters running and were able to move to Hogwarts. The Order struck from the back, catching the Death Eaters
between two waves, and the control room - or office, rather - went quiet as information flow ceased. Their patronus-senders were all rather preoccupied as the fight came to a close.

Moody and Harry moved to the back of the room to prevent their voices from distracting Hotch or Gideon, who were fielding calls. The two both had their phones out and were gathering information about the Death Eaters from the various agents around the castle. Harry wasn't quite sure if it was doing any good, when most of the fighting was fast and had little time for discussion, but he wasn't going to be giving them any help by asking what they were planning. Something, it seemed, had them both high-strung, some sort of goal they were aiming for.

Then Adrian's goat appeared. "Another wave coming in on North tower."

"Incoming from east," Hermione's otter said.

"Priori morphus," Harry breathed under his breath, then louder, "Expecto patronum. To Adrian and Hermione: watch northeast corner." The stags faded away.

At the same time, Moody finished sending his own messages to a couple of Order members to warn them to redirect their focus. In the following pause, he asked, "What's your current patronus form then, Potter?"

He mentally swore. That damn eye. "What?"

"You cast the shape-changing spell. What's wrong with your current form?"

"It'll make the room a bit cramped," Harry muttered, slightly relieved to see Draco's patronus appear to tell him that there was also an attack coming also directly above the castle from the sky. His communications liaison must have fallen, but Harry didn't linger on whether it could have been permanent or not. He summoned a stag again. "Angelina Johnson. Get someone else to take over for communications in the south, and grab some Quidditch players. There's a group trying to get in from the top of the castle." When it left, he said, "Hope she grabs the Slytherin beaters. They're even more brutal than the Weasleys with those bats."

The otter formed again. In a shaky voice, Hermione said the words Harry had been dreading to hear.

"Cassius is dead. Neville's taken over- oh!"

The short scream punctured the silence that had taken over the room, and the otter vanished abruptly. No one spoke for a long moment. Harry stared blankly at the empty space the otter had just been, surprisingly numb. A part of him, a part that didn't feel connected to the rest, logically pointed out that he was definitely going to feel it later.

Several full minutes had passed when the Seamus's fox skidded to a halt in front of him, tail bristling and paws shifting anxiously. "I know it's not my zone, but it looks like the east unit is falling. Want us to send assistance?"

 Fuck, he needed more information. How many people had Angelina grabbed, and from where? Were some of the Death Eaters in the sky holding back, waiting for another wing to open up? Was the east wing pulling back, dissolving with injury and death, or holding under falling rubble? Where were the Order members concentrating?

Harry glanced at Moody. "Get some of the Order members to help cover the south."

"We could just send them straight to the east."
"The Order can move around easier. They're a mobile force. My students aren't, and the ones who are moved to the east will stay there for the remainder of the fight."

Another stag, another messenger. Don't shoot the messenger, Harry thought. It's not hunting season yet, not for deer. It's hunting season for humans.

"Seamus. Send half the number you can spare to the east. Keep an eye on them for a bit - something might have happened to their patronus-sender." Don't give a name - a title is impersonal, less distracting. Seamus didn't need anything taking his focus away from staying alive.

One more patronus. "Angelina. Are you in the air?"

A half minute later, a Jack Russell Terrier appeared. "Messenger for aerial unit," Ron said, a bit out of breath. "In air. Death Eaters hovering overhead, waiting for weak point before they dive. A few Order members here with us."

Harry grimaced. "To Ron. If possible, send help to east. Only if possible."

Shortly after, "Not possible."

"Damn it. ...Adrian. Status." Two minutes passed without a response and Harry made a frustrated noise. "Ron. How's north looking?"

Another long minute passed, but the dog dutifully arrived. "Steady. Wave repulsed."

Almost as soon as it vanished, the goat showed. "We're holding. The Death Eaters have gone back. What to do about wounded?"

Harry paused. "Adrian. Stasis charms until further notice. If able, send half the amount you can spare to east. Ron. How's the east?"

The dog was quicker this time. "Not as bad as a few minutes ago, but hard to tell if it's holding steadily or not. Still can't send help."

Seven minutes later, the otter returned, and Harry thought he was going to collapse with relief at the sign of life from Hermione even before it spoke. "Death Eaters pushed back temporarily. We've got the east wing in control again, but it's shaky. Too many down to hold it."

He turned to Moody. "I can help them out and come back. It won't take ten minutes."

"Potter, you're staying here."

"No, this isn't an irrational decision, and it's not just because I've got friends there," Harry said, forcing himself not to get angry. It would just make it seem like he was acting on emotions. "They can't handle the number of Death Eaters down there right now. As soon as they've got it, I'll come back." Moody opened his mouth to speak, but Harry cut him off. "You put me in charge to make decisions. This is my decision. Deal with it."

Without waiting for a sign of approval, he spun on his heel and strode towards the entrance. His father and Gideon both looked up out of the corner of his eye, but he knew he didn't have time to give an explanation and just kept quickly walking.

"Harry-" Hotch called after him, and Harry heard him starting to get up.

"Be right back!" Harry shouted without turning around. At the bottom of the stairs leading to the
office, he started running.

Halfway there, the raccoon slunk out of a wall and started running alongside him. "Riddle and Dumbledore destroying shit in front of us. No one wants to get near so we're holding pretty well right now."

At least there was one wing he didn't have to immediately worry about. He sent a stag. "If Voldemort wins, no heroics. Use guerrilla tactics. For the moment, if you can, send half the people you can spare to east wing."

Once he was within a few corridors of it, he was able to follow his ears to the epicenter of destruction. A large chunk of a wall was gone, and the rubble had provided some good cover for the students to hide behind while they tried to stem the flow of Death Eaters pouring through. There was a startling large number of students on the floor. He didn't look, didn't want to know who was down and who wasn't.

With a curse, he realized that he probably could have sent Blaise with the same result, but decided he didn't need to mention that to Moody when he returned. He was still learning.

"Expecto patronum. Essearia." He rested his hand on the elephant's shoulder for a moment, then, "Go."

It took off, and students and Death Eaters alike reflexively jumped out of the way. There seemed to be little rhyme or reason to where it was going, which made it more difficult for the Death Eaters to hide, and the students used their distraction to start picking them off without concern for counterhexes. The elephant thundered outside and out of sight, and they could hear it roaring as it slammed person after person out of its way.

"Harry," Hermione said at his elbow. A nasty gash on her temple was bleeding profusely, and he suspected her long silence had been caused by a forced fall into unconsciousness. "Is that... Well, is it going to hurt anyone?"

He turned away from her, eyes staring in the direction it had gone. He mindlessly sent a Stupefy towards a nearby Death Eater. "It'll do more than that," he said softly. "I wouldn't have come down here if I didn't have to."

There was no further argument for her, and Harry didn't need any other proof to know that the situation had gotten more dire than it initially appeared. "Thanks for the back-up."

"There are a few more coming from the west. Riddle and Dumbledore are dueling over there, so no one's even trying to get close out of fear that they'll get caught in the crossfire." It had gone quiet out in the courtyard and he ended the patronus spell. "I better get back. Good luck."

On his way, he sent stags to Ron, Seamus, and Adrian. "East taken care of." Through the windows he passed, he could see that the battle had gone long enough for the sun to set. A full moon had risen and Harry grimaced. Remus was out there somewhere, having surely taken his potion to stay in the fight.

An explosion shook the very air, and he stopped for a moment before hurrying back the way he had come. The situation there remained the same, so he retraced his steps once more while cursing himself for not just awaiting a patronus. He was halfway back to the office when he felt another explosion, and he started sprinting.

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Minutes after Harry left, they got the news they were waiting for. "I'm following him now," Reid said. "Elle's with me. We're at the north tower."

Hotch got to his feet. Across the room, Moody was in a momentary lull while he waited for more messages to come in. "Can you spare someone?"

"Depends on what for."

"I think we can get someone to tell us the battle plan, and possibly more," Hotch said.

The floor rocked beneath their feet, and all three reached out to grab hold of something to steady themselves. The paintings shouted in alarm while a few items around the room crashed to the floor. A patronus quickly arrived, from Tonks, announcing that the airborne fleet of Death Eaters had just started dive-bombing and had hit the north tower rather strongly. Not long after, Remus sent one confirming that they had gotten in.

"Damn it, Potter," Moody snapped in annoyance. "Get your arse back here..."

"Okay, going to need that person now," Hotch said urgently. "Tell them to meet us at the base of the tower."

"I'll send Tonks. You've worked with her before. She better come back in one piece, though."

"She will." Hotch hurried out, leaving Gideon to man the phones. Moody sent a patronus to Potter alerting him to the change in situation.

Tonks was already there when Hotch arrived, and from her expression, Reid must have filled her in. Elle had taken her wolf form and likely hadn't done any talking. Without further ado, the four began their ascent of the tower, Elle following a scent only she could pick up on. As they ran, Tonks occasionally grabbed stray pieces of rubble and transfigured them. By the time Elle brought them skidding to a halt, Hotch had thrown on a transformed cloak and was holding a pair of glasses in his hand. While Tonks peeked around the corner, he ran both hands roughly through his hair, messing it up as much as he could without appearing too obvious. Reid reached out and fixed it slightly, and then Tonks elbowed him and jerked her head around the corner.

Hotch put on the glasses and took the transfigured piece of wood Tonks shoved at him. He turned the corner, and... "Peter!"

Pettigrew came to a dead halt, back to Hotch, as he heard his first name. He glanced sharply over his shoulder, bewildered, and his eyes widened immediately when he saw Hotch. A gasp reached Hotch's ears, and then Pettigrew turned back around and hid his face in his hands. "No, no, no...!"

"Peter, look at me!"

A muffled noise came from the graduated Gryffindor in reply.

"Peter, just..." He sighed. "Just talk to me, please! Please..."

"James...?" Peter whispered, finally turning completely to face him. His hands slipped down his face enough to reveal his eyes. "Is that... Is it really you?"

Hotch sighed again. "Not happy with you, Peter, but...yeah, it's me." Peter raised his wand, but Hotch made a show of holstering his own. "Put it down," he said tiredly. "I don't want to fight with you."
"I don't have a choice!" Peter wailed. "You - You know what I've done! But you don't have a clue what I still have to do!"

"Maybe I don't, but I want you to tell me. Peter, I... I admit, I hated you. After Lily died, I... I swore I was going to kill you, but..." He dropped his gaze to the floor for a moment before looking back up. "I think I really understood some things, for the first time. It gave me some clarity."

This had to be done oh so carefully. They were relying heavily on guesswork, hoping that Hotch really did look enough like James for him to pass this off once Peter got closer. But everyone said that Harry looked exactly like James unless they knew the truth of Harry's lineage, in which case they said he looked exactly like Hotch. Hopefully, both were right.

"Peter, I think I finally understand why you did it. And... And I have to forgive you, because I was so, so stupid. I can't believe I didn't see it before."

"See... See what?" Peter tentatively whispered, the first glimmers of hope reaching his eyes.

"I think you knew it long before I did. You were always better at this kind of thing than me, weren't you? After everything you did for me... You even gave me Harry, Peter. Isn't he incredible? You did such a wonderful job. He really does look like he's my son."

Peter smiled faintly, weakly. He was visibly trembling, still caught between wanting to believe Hotch and not. Wanting to believe James. "I... I hoped you'd think so. But - But James, wh-what realization?"

Hotch forced a smile in return. Time to make it count and put everything on the line, rely on all of their previous profiling to say that this was correct. He couldn't let anything but confidence show, couldn't reveal that he was painfully aware of how badly this would go if they were wrong. Through it all, he couldn't help but remember that they'd been so terribly arrogant and misled before, and he knew this could have much worse consequences.

"That you loved me, of course. And... And that I loved you."

Pettigrew burst into tears.

Nailed it.

"Oh, Peter," Hotch said, moving towards him. Pettigrew broke into a run and fell into his arms. Belatedly, Hotch fervently wished that they had thought to test the cloak in case the outline of his gun was visible or could be felt through it. After a few moments, he realized Pettigrew was too emotional to notice if he was carrying a bazooka.

"I'll make it right, I swear," Pettigrew gasped out through his tears, and Hotch realized in horror that this ploy might involve him having to make out with his son's kidnapper. "I swear, I swear... I... James, I didn't mean to hurt you..."

"It's all okay now," Hotch murmured. Well, if this man didn't have mental problems before, he sure as hell was going to once he found out James was still dead.

Served him right for taking Harry. Bastard.

He wrapped an arm around the sobbing Peter's shoulders. "C'mon, let's get you out of here. I'll talk to everyone for you, don't worry. It's going to be okay."

Pettigrew looked up hopefully. "Voldemort, he trusts me! I know what he's planning, I can tell
you!"

"You would do that? For me?"

"Anything!"

James Potter had asked Hotch to get revenge for everything Pettigrew had done. Hotch was pretty confident he was doing a fine job of it so far.

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Harry stared in shock as Peter Pettigrew spilled out secret after secret. Hotch first got him started on the day's battle plans, and Moody and Harry quickly sent patronuses to warn each of their units about what was going to happen. The tide was turning into a sure victory embarrassingly quickly.

"That's what's he planned for Hogwarts, anyway," Pettigrew finished. It was a little nauseating to watch him swoon over his father. He couldn't imagine how Hotch was feeling.

Hotch frowned slightly. "Is something going on somewhere else?"

Pettigrew paused. "I'm not completely sure." When Moody made a displeased noise, he quickly added, "But- But I can tell you this, it's about the wards Dolores Umbridge put up! She did it because she knew she would be joining the Dark Lord by the end of the year. The wards tracked the whereabouts of any student who left Hogwarts."

That had the potential to be an issue with the students who had just fled to Beauxbatons, but the wards around Beauxbatons would prevent anyone from getting to them.

"What does that have to do with anything?" Moody asked. Whether he was intending to do it or not, he was doing a fantastic job of playing bad cop off of Hotch's good cop. Or good old friend. Or good old friend and now recently love int- Ew, okay, good cop.

"Well, the wards weren't controlled from here. She enchanted a blank book to tell her where the students went. She came in yesterday, so there wasn't any time to incorporate it into the plan, but You-Know-Who agreed to let Fenrir Greyback make use of the information."

Harry's heart began to pound. "Dad," he whispered, and Hotch's gaze focused on him, alarmed by his tone. "I went to headquarters. She'll know where it's at."

"It's under a Fidelius," Hotch said, but he looked at Moody.

"Magic reacts oddly to werewolves. It might get him into the neighborhood at least, but I don't think he'd be able to get in through the front door."

"Wait," Harry said, horrified. A memory was trickling back to him. "Dad, come with me." He darted out the door, Hotch on his heels, and hurried to the bottom of the staircase where the others above them wouldn't be able to hear. "Dad, in the graveyard."

"Harry, slow down-"

"No, Dad, it's Jack. Greyback said he could smell you on me, since I'd only interacted with so many people the day of the third task. He said he was going to go after you. Jack's- Jack's got your scent on him, and he's got my scent on him. Greyback won't keep trying to get past the Fidelius when he smells you again - he can just follow the scent into a house that happens to be under the Fidelius."
"No one can find a house under the charm no matter what," Hotch said, but he was pulling out his phone.

"Moody just said magic's weird around werewolves. Want to bet on our luck today?" he grimly replied.

The door opened above them and Gideon leaned out. "Everything okay?"

"No. Gideon, take over."

"I'm passing control to Hermione," Harry added, glancing at his father and daring him to argue. Hotch didn't. There just wasn't time, and they couldn't spare anyone else. He turned and started running, Hotch catching up quickly. The patronus ran alongside him once he cast it, and he quickly sent a message to Hermione to inform her of the change.

They were at the end of the hallway, and Harry was already considering how long Greyback had had to get inside. He had surely reached the building by now, if not broken in and...

"Expecto patronum!" Harry shouted. This one and the last had both been elephants. He didn't care anymore in the face of something much more important. "Sirius Black. I need your help. Meet me at the east wing." After his assistance, it was going to be the emptiest.

The elephant vanished, and Harry skidded to a stop as he looked down at the stairs beneath them. They needed to get down several flights and numerous corridors, which would take even Blaise several minutes to get to. For Hotch and Harry, probably closer to ten or fifteen, assuming they could go straight there without being stopped by the severe damage that had been done to that portion of the building or any Death Eaters. That was too long.

"Oh, fuck this. Expecto patronum! Essearia!" The patronus solidified this time, and Harry swung up onto the stair railing and started to stand. Hotch grabbed onto him to stop him from accidentally tipping over and taking the very quick way down the large, empty space containing the moving stairs. With the support, Harry quickly got his balance and hoisted himself up onto the elephant's shoulders. It snorted, catching on, and got down onto its knees. "Oh, now you- Whatever." He glanced at Hotch. "Coming?"

Hotch stared for a moment, then shook his head and climbed on behind Harry with a muttered, "What the hell. Why not."

The elephant surged to its feet, and Harry held onto the shoulders in front of him while Hotch grabbed onto him. Then he was trying to stop himself from sliding over the elephant as it started down, taking the whole stair set in one bound before turning and repeating the same action down the next set. Harry could already feel the bruises growing on his torso from each time he slammed into the shoulder bones. The elephant, if at all alive, probably couldn't even feel it.

They finally got to ground level, much to Harry's relief, and the elephant easily carried them the rest of the way, guided by Harry's mental map of the school. There were several times that the elephant practically ran over a barrier of stone and rocks that would have forced its riders to laboriously climb had they been on foot, but they ran across only a single Death Eater, who turned back the way he'd come and sprinted away at the sight of the behemoth charging towards him.

Sirius was waiting for them, and his eyes went huge and his mouth fell open as he saw what they were approaching on. The elephant finally slammed on the brakes and skidded to a halt a few meters from the Azkaban escapee, and then crouched down to let off its passengers. Once they were both on solid ground, Harry wished it gone. Sirius stared some more in what would surely have been a
comic way had the situation been less urgent.

"Greyback's going to try to get into headquarters and we think he might be able to succeed," Harry said quickly. "Can you get us there?"

Sirius shook himself and hefted the broom he held in his right hand. "Let's hurry."

Flying was much slower than Harry was used to, with the broom weighed down by three people, but they made it out of the anti-apparition wards much faster than they would have if they had been running. The moment they were in the clear, Sirius started apparating them south, and they flitted quickly from one spot to the next until they were standing in the kitchen of Grimmauld Place.

It was quiet. Harry muttered, "Personna revelio," but it only showed them. "Who stayed behind?" he whispered.

"Mundungus Fletcher."

If he was still there, he wasn't alive. "Greyback could be messing with the spell's detection somehow," he muttered.

"Kreacher!" Sirius hissed and the house elf appeared.

"Master is bringing in the lowest of creatures to the virtuous house of Black now," he muttered, casting a glare towards Hotch.

"Yeah, whatever. Who's in this house and where?"

"The strange thing and the strange boy. They are in the room the boy was taken to."

"Who's the strange thing? Is the boy hurt?"

"Strange thing is strange. Used to be man. Now is not." Kreacher grinned. "Boy is very hurt. Boy is not going to be the same..."

He disappeared with a loud snapping noise before any of them could grab him. Without a word, they hurried out the room and up the stairs, Hotch and Harry drawing various weapons before they even hit the first step. Sirius leaped ahead of them, landing as a dog, and the other two ran to keep up as he started sprinting, no longer carrying about keeping quiet. The room was quickly coming up on their right.

"Bombarda," Harry shouted, yanking the door off its hinges.

Sirius sailed in ahead of them, colliding immediately with a mangy beast heading towards him at the same time. The creature got its teeth into the scruff of Sirius's neck and tossed him aside, but Sirius scrambled up quickly and bit down on the werewolf's back leg. Greyback loped forward regardless, eyes fixed on Harry.

Twenty-one foot rule. Hand-to-hand wins, he realized in horror as Greyback closed the gap further with another bound.

Or it did usually, Harry amended as two bullets from Hotch's guns dropped the werewolf.

Sirius let go of him, and Harry sprinted past to the bed, ignoring the pants of the dying monster behind him. Jack was curled up on top, buried in blankets as he hid from the terrifying world around him. He was softly crying, and he flinched away from Harry as he heard him approach.
"Jack, Jack, it's me, it's just me," he whispered, hands reaching out to touch his shoulder. Jack jerked back, but he reached up with one hand to pull a blanket down far enough for him to see. "It's okay, I promise." There was a whisper behind him, and Sirius came to stand beside him in his human form. A quick glance back showed Hotch watching Greyback critically, keeping between him and the others with his gun still trained on the werewolf. "Jack, are you hurt?" After a moment, he nodded. "Where? Can you show me?"

Jack wiggled out from under the blankets, wincing. The movement allowed some of the fabric to drop away, revealing...

"Harry, it hurts."

An unmistakable bite, dripping blood down his back.

"I know, Jack, I know. We're going to take care of it, okay? We're..." He reached down and scooped Jack up into his arms, blankets and all. He made sure Jack's head was securely tucked against his shoulder and that Jack wasn't looking out before he turned, ensuring his brother didn't see the bloody scene in the room. Harry made eye contact with Hotch, whose face darkened in understanding.

Once, he'd been afraid of seeing that expression on Hotch's face. He'd seen it too many times on Vernon, the one he got right before he aimed to hurt Harry for the sake of it. The only reason he could imagine Hotch would ever be furious enough to make that face would be if he, too, had grown tired of Harry and decided to do something about it. Not to punish him, because that kind of aggression wasn't punishment - it was just inflicted for the sake of causing pain. The sort that people had when they could see no other outlet for their rage than violence.

Right now, he was all too relieved to know his father had a part of him that was going to take care of Greyback.

They were halfway down the hall when they heard another gunshot. Harry kept walking and Sirius didn't say anything.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, this story will get happy again. But things are going to get worse before they get better.
"You know, if I'm a king, where's my power? Can I form a government? Can I levy a tax, declare a war? No! And yet I am the seat of all authority. Why? Because the nation believes that when I speak, I speak for them. But I can't speak." - The King's Speech

The battle was over.

The medical wing held both dead and living, and each cot was full. The stasis charms Draco had taught the QDA - ironically, taught to him by his father - had saved numerous lives, and Pomfrey and a few mediwizards and mediwitches from St. Mungo's were able to take them out from under the charm one by one for treatment. Much of the injuries were minor and didn't require much treatment, and only three had been sent to St. Mungo's when Pomfrey had determined they couldn't be treated with the supplies available at the school.

Ministry help had shown up, predictably, half an hour after the fighting had officially stopped and the last of the Death Eaters had fled. Pettigrew had been secured by the Order, who had chosen not to reveal their capture of him quite yet. No one had told Harry whether Pettigrew knew who Hotch really was or not yet, and he hadn't asked. After returning, he'd discovered that Hermione had the situation in hand, but Moody forced him to take back over. Feeling empty, he did. Moody had a point when he said Harry was the only one who knew how the battle had been flowing for the students so far, and he was the most knowledgeable about what needed to be done. Hotch took Jack straight to the infirmary with company from Harry's Patronus and Sirius. The elephant guarded the injured until the very end of the battle, when Harry had shown up and wearily waved it away.

The results of the battle had slowly trickled in, the rapid pace of the day now dulled by exhaustion. The number lost was still uncertain, but two sixth year Ravenclaws outside of the DA and Cassius were the only three confirmed among the students. None of their bodies had been found, an oddity that hadn't yet been explained. Other members of the QDA had suffered some serious harm, with one included in those who had been sent to the hospital. Mundungus Fletcher was found dead in Grimmauld Place when someone had gone back to clear everything out of important information. They didn't know for sure if the building had been totally compromised or not, but they sure weren't going to risk it.

Almost everyone was asleep now. It was four in the morning, and the only ones awake were treating injuries, or were Hotch and Harry. Jack was curled in Hotch's lap, having screamed in such fear when the nurses tried to move him that they let him stay there. They'd done the best they could, but the damage was done. Greyback had turned him.

A vindictive part of Harry wished he'd seen his father shoot the murderous werewolf.

Hotch and Harry were sharing the bed, just barely fitting, but Harry hadn't been willing to leave his brother once he'd managed to return. His bent knees were resting on Hotch's thighs, head propped on one broad shoulder. Too many thoughts were swimming through his head to let him properly rest, forcing him to cruelly remain in a state of extended fatigue while he waited for sleep.
"It was my fault," he whispered.

"No, it wasn't," Hotch said. His tone betrayed just how tired he was, and Harry knew that no matter how long he was going to be forced to stay awake, Hotch would undoubtedly be up longer. "It wasn't your fault at all. You couldn't have known, Harry." His left arm, closest to Harry, was curled around Jack, holding him in place. They both stayed quiet to avoid waking him. "You were trying to save him, and you just wanted to make sure he got to safety. No one knew the Fidelius Charm wouldn't have kept Greyback out once he got hold of my scent and yours in the street. Harry, you saved him. None of the rest of us thought anything of it when Pettigrew said Greyback had left."

He bent his head and Harry looked up slightly. Hotch's free hand came up to thumb away something from his face, and it came away damp. "Oh, Harry," he murmured, resting his hand on his son's cheek and pressing his mouth to the top of Harry's forehead. "You did incredible today."

"Cassius is dead and Jack's a werewolf," he said against Hotch's shoulder.

"Moody lost twelve. You lost three out of a much larger force, and we've got a possible treatment."

"Is it going to work on him? He was just infected, and he's so young..."

Hotch sighed into his hair. "It's only been used on Elle before. We can't really know until we try."

He rubbed his thumb across Harry's cheekbone for a moment. Though it covered very little, Harry felt like his hand was covering him from the rest of the infirmary, giving him the illusion of privacy.

"Go to sleep. This is over for now."

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Harry slept fitfully, only managing a few hours of true rest before he resigned himself to the waking world. By that time, the sun was beginning to rise, and the infirmary was becoming more active once again.

Elle sat at the foot of the bed, talking in a low murmur to Hotch, as Harry sat up. Hotch's closest arm to Harry was still trapped by Jack, but he nudged his shoulder against him in a welcoming manner. "I need to talk to Moody," he said. "I think Jack will let me pass you off."

Harry nodded, and they carefully made the trade. Jack's eyes opened for a moment in panic when he felt movement, but he settled back into Harry's embrace after a short period of uncomfortable shuffling. Hotch glanced between the three of them, reluctant to leave, before finally making his way out of the wing to hunt down the Order second-in-command.

Elle waited until he was out of sight before saying, "Moody's behavior doesn't make sense."

"Tell the Hufflepuffs. They'll knock him out again if he's an imposter."

She smirked briefly. "Not like that. In magical war, battles are fought like the earliest in muggle history. The generals would be out in the fight with everyone else, for morale and because there weren't enough people to spare. They still did this in the last war against Voldemort."

"So why was he in the office with the rest of us?"

She paused before leaning closer. "I think he knows," she said, and she didn't have to elaborate for Harry to grimace in understanding. "He also knew you were the best candidate for leading the students, and that they were going to need your numbers since the Ministry wouldn't show up in time. What he did... It put you in a room with two people you trusted very strongly, and a third person who you knew was experienced in war and had what you needed to win. He made your first
role as leader as comfortable as possible, to get you used to it so you wouldn't panic, and he gave you people to rely on. Not only that, you could hardly have backed down or faltered at any point when people you respected were there."

"Moody wants me to take over the DA permanently for the war," Harry summarized.

She nodded. "That's what I think. Now that the battle's over, he can prove it was necessary."

"Well...he was right, wasn't he? We wouldn't have held them back if not for the DA. For a while, even with everyone, it didn't look like all the lines were going to hold."

She scowled at the reminder and at the implication that Moody's decision had been justified, but she backed down, much to Harry's surprise. "I suppose," she grumbled, then lightened up. "How are you feeling?"

"I killed over forty people. At least. I couldn't see everyone the last time." He turned to her, and he wasn't sure if he was seeking absolution or rejection. "Was there a way I could have stopped it peacefully?"

Elle was quiet for a long moment, then said, "From what I heard... Someone would have died either way. You made a choice about who it was going to be, and that's something you'll have to live with. Harry, you feel guilt because you're human and you, in particular, have boundless compassion for those around you, no matter what damage they've done to you or threaten to do. It's a remarkable trait, and it makes you powerful in a way Riddle and his Death Eaters can never be. I was talking to Remus about your wandless abilities, and he said he's never heard of such a late burst of accidental magic. You managed it because of an innate need to protect those you care for, but even then... Well, you never did hurt Hotch's father, did you?"

Harry started. "He told you what happened?"

She smiled. "No, but it didn't take much guessing. Most of us profilers suspected Hotch's past, and there aren't many people who could get into your home, threaten you, and walk back out without Hotch informing the rest of us about it. But you didn't, right?"

"...No."

"Harry, I would have. And I'll bet a lot of others would have too. Hell..." She trailed off, weighing her words, before shaking her head. "When I had first been turned, I was angry. I was afraid it was over, that I wasn't ever going to be able to live normally. Then I realized that the person who had done it to me had organized a group that had done the same thing to you and the others, and maybe I couldn't get at Greyback, but I could sure as hell get at them." She smiled wryly. "Trust me when I say you're a much better person than I am, Harry. Don't you ever doubt your empathy."

Maybe one day that knowledge would ease the pain, but his wounds were still too raw right then. Much of the unthinkable had happened within a short span of a day, and there were more important things he needed to deal with before he could face his own grief and remorse.

"Do you think the treatment will work for Jack?" he asked softly, looking at the small figure in his lap.

Elle reached out hesitantly and stroked her hand over Jack's head. "I hope so," she murmured. "But even if it does, he's still going to be like me. And I know you guys think it's kind of cool, that I can change form at will, and I've gotten used to it...maybe I even like it now too...but he's too young. The transformation is still painful, and the treatment won't fully settle in for a few months. He still has to
undergo a couple of the forced transformations, and even when the treatment's through, he might accidentally shift his form. This isn't going to be easy."

"Are you going to keep an eye on him?"

He couldn't promise that he could, not anymore. And he knew his father was just as deep in this as he was. To make it worse, Harry had the largest target on his back and, whether he was in the middle of the fight or not, Riddle's forces were still going to be seeking him out. No matter how much the pressure to find and kill him built up, though, he had a feeling Hotch was going to be sticking with him the whole time. They needed more help with Jack.

He remembered his grandfather saying he could take in Jack and him. With a sneer, he pointed out to himself that he still didn't trust the man to hand Jack over to him.

Elle seemed to have followed some of his logic about why he was asking her now, and she deflated slightly with a sigh. "I will," she said. "I'm going to start taking my wolf form around him, so hopefully he won't be as scared when he starts to change. And I'm going to talk to Remus about the treatment. Hotch and I are still debating on whether we should start it now on Jack, to save him a few painful changes, or if we should test it on someone else first." She stopped, clearly waiting for Harry's input.

He was tired. Too many people had been looking for guidance from him, handing him their lives. In this one case, he just wanted the adults to take over and make the decision. This wasn't something he needed to supervise, not when he wasn't an expert and he certainly wasn't the only one involved.

But this was his life now.

"Remus was turned early on," he finally said. "Talk to him first and see if there's anything different about child werewolves than adult werewolves. If not, there shouldn't be a reason why Jack can't begin treatment." He paused. "Won't this mean Remus will have to be out of the war for a bit while they keep an eye on him, in case something goes wrong?"

She nodded regretfully. "It's likely."

"Let me know if he's going to take the treatment and I'll tell Moody. If he's so interested in making sure I lead part of this war, he'll have less protest if I say it's for Jack."

Hotch returned a while later and told Harry that Moody wanted to see him, but that it would probably be okay if Harry waited a bit. It wasn't verbal, wasn't even tonal or behavioral, but Harry had the feeling that Hotch was pleading for him to stay. He also recognized the melancholy that had temporarily overwhelmed him after the Silent Massacre, and he detached himself from his family and the bed to wander out of the infirmary. If he stayed, he might not ever leave.

Moody was in the headmaster's office with Dumbledore, McGonagall, and Shacklebolt. The latter was giving a rundown on the state of the Ministry as he entered, and the auror paused only for Moody to motion for him to continue. With some hesitancy at the new presence in the room, he did. The Ministry was now warning everyone that Riddle was indeed back, which about half the population was already well aware of by that point, and was putting the government into the full swing of war. The problem now was to identify how much could be shared with the Ministry.

"Our best hope is that they put the actual war part of this in our hands like last time," Shacklebolt finished.

McGonagall was next. The restoration effort for the school was well underway, with structural
damage being the first to be fixed while professors helped in repairing wards and other defenses. They estimated that it should be done within a couple of days, since the students, particularly those in the DA, were rapidly accelerating the process with their dutifulness. A few outsiders, such as parents who had hurried to the school belatedly to help with the fight, were also doing what they could.

"Potter, did you just get out of the infirmary?" Moody asked and Harry nodded.

Shacklebolt frowned. "I didn't know you were injured."

Harry opened his mouth to say he hadn't been, but Moody cut him off. "Took a rather nasty hex. Albus, we'll be back soon. Potter's going to need to help repair the Room of Requirement."

They were halfway to the Room when Harry finally spoke up. "Why did you say that?"

"Boy, you need to be much more careful in hiding them," Moody said without looking at him. Even out of battle, his pace was still brisk and powerful, forcing Harry to stride to avoid falling behind. "I get that things aren't going well for you, but they'll go a lot worse if more people figure it out."

"How many know?"

"Quite a few of the Order suspect. You better hope Voldemort doesn't have a real spy among us. The two of you did a good job at staying away from each other before, but a couple put things together when they saw you sitting beside each other at the last Order meeting."

Harry sighed. "What else did I miss?"


Harry grimaced and turned away from him. "So?" he prompted.

"He can stay in the Room again once the damage is repaired. He can't leave the school again at any rate, not while Umbridge has that book. We warned Beauxbatons, but they said they had wards against that sort of spell after an incident two centuries ago so the students there are safe. Everyone who's here is stuck, unless they're going to public places."

"The whole Order came here. Doesn't that mean that we can't fight anywhere but here?"

Moody looked at him appraisingly. "You're better at this than I thought you would be," he said after a moment. "Yes, but Voldemort has to either take Hogwarts or the Ministry before he can continue. He needs control of the population through its government or through their kids. The Order is protecting this place, the aurors are protecting the Ministry."

"We need someone to get that book," Harry said. "Someone who wasn't here..."

"Later. I've already gathered your leaders at the Room, and they're working there under the guise of fixing it up. Use this time to get a better understanding of your force."

Moody left him as they turned the corner to the hall of the Room, and Harry walked forward to meet the group that had gathered there. They hadn't been able to repair the damage that Umbridge had done without suspicion, and it would hardly have done any good when she knew where it was anyway.

Ron looked up from his work when he saw Harry, and he smiled. Weariness pulled at his features, and Harry wondered with a pang of guilt if anyone else had gotten any rest or if they had
immediately been put to work fixing the castle. "Harry," he said, relieved, and hurried towards him. Harry opened his arms just in time to embrace his friend as the redhead collided with him. Ron leaned back after a moment to get a good look at his face, but his smile faded. "Mate, what happened?"

Harry closed his eyes. "Greyback... He got into headquarters. He... He turned Jack."

The whole story came out of him as they moved to the others, who stopped to listen. When he was done, there were several muttered threats, and Harry reminded them that Greyback was already dead. No one asked if he'd still been a danger to them when the trigger was pulled.

"What's happened here?" he asked. He didn't want to think about it any longer.

"Rearrangement. But we wanted your opinion on it," Hermione said. "Draco's going to run communications for Huther, so he stepped down and Daphne is unit leader with Anthony as her second. Neville's okay with running Gryven, and-"

"Wait, what?"

"Oh, sorry," Neville said apologetically. "Forgot we did that. We figured that if we're ever fighting out of Hogwarts or we need to move around, we don't want to limit ourselves to directions, so we gave each group a name, that way we won't really think too much of it if we need to switch."

"Good idea," Harry said, nodding. "So I'm guessing Huther was west, Gryven east..."

"And then Firin is north and Pucla south. And Aero, and you can probably guess who they were," Daphne finished. "We mixed around some of the names from the houses, and they're a lot shorter so we can shout them out quicker if we need to." Harry decided to puzzle over the combinations later.

"Okay. Go on."

"My second is Hermione and Padma's communications now," Neville said. "By the way, shouldn't Hermione take a unit?"

"I'm a little worried that Gryffindors are running everything," Harry admitted. "We tend to jump into things more, and while that's good to a degree, I want to make it less likely that everyone does something impulsively badly at the wrong time. Not to mention I just know someone's going to start complaining about favoritism."

"Hermione can take over another unit if..." Draco trailed off, then cleared his throat. "Well, if we need another rearrangement."

"You're okay with running communications?"

Draco shrugged. "Works a lot better, and I liked evaluating the situation more than directing it."

"Okay, so Pucla and..."

"Firin and Aero," Ginny said. "Pucla had no change. Roger's head, Blaise is second, Seamus is communications. By the way, Blaise was part of Aero in the battle, but we decided to take him off and keep him on the ground permanently. His Patronus is much more useful there. Aero, by the way, also didn't have changes. Angelina's head, Zacharias is second, and Ron is communications." She elbowed her brother gently in the ribs. "His time has Keeper apparently got him used to evaluating what's going on in the air," she said, and Ron grinned.
"Firin?"

"The twins split it. Fred's leader and George is his second. Susan is communications."

Harry gestured for them to work while they talked, and they began to pick up the repairs once again. The damage to the Room wasn't so much structural as it was magical, but they had to fix the first before they could deal with the second. Only the front had been blasted in, but Umbridge had told the Squad to tear the rest of the room apart in case someone was hiding in there. She hadn't done any damage to the back wall, evidently not realizing that it had held an escape door for less than a minute.

"I don't know if we need Aero permanently," he said, "but maybe they can be our standby unit. How many of them are there?"

"I grabbed ten this time," Angelina replied. "But I could definitely have worked with more or less, although more would have obviously been preferable. We're a much more fluid unit than everyone else."

Harry nodded. "You guys did a great job with the information you sent my way," he said, "especially since this was your first time. There were some things I needed to know that I didn't, but I'm not sure how you could have gotten me that information without some serious effort that would have endangered you. If you can, it'd be nice to have more numbers than general 'big group' or 'small wave,' since I can't tell what that means in proportion to everyone else's situation."

"Ooh, didn't think about that," Ron muttered. "Sorry."

"I didn't mention it either, so don't worry. How's everyone holding up?"

"A lot of anger," Blaise said. "A lot of anger, especially from the QDA. We've been through shit before and we didn't want to do it again."

"Hey, I never really heard about the BAU. What were they doing?"

"For the most part, they were looking for Pettigrew," Draco said, then paused to grin. "That was awesome manoeuvring, by the way. Can't believe they got so much information out of him like that. Sometimes they'd just try to hold lines with us, but they'd also talk down individual Death Eaters they came across. Last I heard, they actually made turncoats of three of them. Prentiss was helping Huther for a little bit and got hit by a curse, and you would've thought they'd killed someone's kid. We were about to push the Death Eaters completely out of castle grounds when Riddle and Dumbledore decided to do their throw down right in our way."

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Before reporters had even finished describing the events of the First and Second Battles of Hogwarts, taking place in the initial overthrow and the following attempt by Death Eaters to reclaim the school, the Third Battle began.

Like last time, Harry was forced to stay in the headmaster's office. Moody, who knew that Harry was well aware of why he was being kept there, no longer bothered to make it seem like all the leaders were required to be sequestered away, and he left immediately to go fight on the front lines. Hotch, too, went out, though Gideon remained behind to help Harry coordinate movements. That, and Harry was pretty sure he was supposed to ensure that Harry didn't suddenly bolt for it to fight with the others.

The actual battle dragged on and on, and it seemed like the Death Eaters were never going to leave.
Finally, at the thirty-six hour mark, Harry called on Aero. The unit had formed and disbanded multiple times already, alternating between supporting air and ground forces as needed, and had covered the most ground of any group at the castle in their movements. He asked for a reconnaissance on the situation, and the answer was what he expected. He had Gideon send some questions the BAU's way, and sent a couple more to Moody.

"It's a siege," he said wearily. "They're in this for the long haul."

"I'll start telling the others to plan sleep shifts," Gideon replied with a sigh, relaying the message to those he was in contact with while Harry did the same.

The siege lasted for a week and a half, but the random strikes were practically uncoordinated and were nothing more than annoyances. They hardly even detracted from anyone's sleep since those awake had no issue repelling them. Messages arrived from the Ministry, but Dumbledore emphatically told them to keep their aurors right where they were at. Riddle would be just as willing to turn his attention to the government if it appeared that the defenses were lowered.

Then all of a sudden, the Death Eaters vanished one morning, and that was more nerve-wracking than anything that had come before.

Snape sent a Patronus. He had been "freed" in the Second Battle by Death Eaters and was reporting on what he could. So far, they had been made aware that Riddle knew Draco was most definitely not planning on ever becoming a Death Eater, and that the plans were now changing so rapidly that it was difficult for anyone to know what was going on, let alone tell the Order. Pettigrew's sudden departure, as well as Narcissa's and Draco's, had shaken up Riddle's side, and the dark wizard was beginning to look for ways to encourage his followers.

"He's going to start attacking villages," the doe said grimly. "That's why he claims he's pulling out of Hogwarts for now, since he can do more good elsewhere. However...something else has him worried. A security breach would be my best guess."

"That wasn't us, was it?" Harry asked with a frown as the doe vanished. Moody shook his head. "Thought not. And I don't think it's really worth my breath to ask if perhaps the Ministry managed it."

"What seems weird to me is that Snape didn't seem to know what happened with the breach," Moody said. "No one died. Nothing searched. So...what was the point of it?"

"Maybe it just wasn't successful," Harry suggested, but he knew they were just throwing ideas around without any proper justification. Gideon, Hotch, Dumbledore, and McGonagall were the others present, and none of them even bothered trying to throw out a guess. "We'll wait until Snape knows more. It's pointless right now."

McGonagall waved the matter aside with her hand. "Damages to the castle are minor. Assuming they don't return to catch us off guard, we should be able to be up to full strength by the end of the day. No fatalities, but eleven captured Death Eaters." With those from the First and Second Battle, including Pettigrew, that brought their total up to nineteen. Pettigrew had, unfortunately, seemed to figure out the ploy and was now spending his time pitying himself instead of giving them more information, so he had been put with the others. "Can we get them out of here?"

"They would just go to Azkaban," Harry said but Dumbledore shook his head.

"News this morning said that they broke out a group of Death Eaters from Azkaban last night," Moody said. "It's no longer secure."
"We don't have the faculties to host any more," Harry pointed out. "Even if they don't have Azkaban, the Ministry at least would have somewhere to hold them."

"But they'd be more likely to have inside help to escape."

"Damn."

The door opened, startling most of the room into jumping out of their seats. Dumbledore, nearest to the door, raised his wand instinctively. The new presence, in return, immediately snatched it from his hands before any magic could injure her, scowling slightly. Most of the room recognized her immediately and froze, stunned to see her there.

"What the...?" Harry said, the pressure of the technical details forgotten immediately. A wide grin swept across his face. "You're not supposed to be here."

JJ in all her pregnant glory smiled and hefted a leather-cover book in the hand not holding Dumbledore's wand. "I missed all of you too much. I might have Garcia, but it's just too lonely in the office now. Beside, thought you might want this." She shook the tome, and Hotch stared in surprise.

"That's can't be... JJ, how did you get ahold of that?"

"Is that Umbridge's book?" McGonagall demanded.

"It is," JJ confirmed, setting it down on the desk. She seemed a bit jittery, a mix between euphoria and strain from a recent fight. "And it was not easy to get a hold of, I'll tell you that. It required a lot of law breaking, Blackwolf, Buckbeak the hippogriff giving us a ride through the wards, more law breaking, Garcia, and some serious rule bending." She winced slightly, resting one hand against the desk and the other on her stomach for a moment. "Sorry. Anyway, that should take care of that problem for you, right?"

"Did you break into Voldemort's headquarters?" Moody asked, astonished. Harry tried to ingrain a picture of what that looked like into his memory.

"Yeah. Me and two others, Blackwolf and Travis. But it was just a quick in and out, so we didn't get a whole lot more than this. We just wanted to free up your movements. It did give Blackwolf a better idea of what kind of warding Riddle has, though, and he said he would stop by later to describe it. He's in the middle of pretending that he definitely did not leave for a special ops mission in Britain, but once he's done he'll be right over."

Gideon passed the book to Dumbledore, who put it under Fawkes's perch. The phoenix had happily returned with Dumbledore, and now just as happily scorched the offending item to pieces. Dumbledore turned back to JJ, looking at her a bit curiously. She returned his wand to him, which he took with another odd look that wasn't disapproving or awed. Harry filed it away for later thought.

"That settles that matter," the headmaster said. "Considering your unique position as our first real contact with the outside in months, could you tell us what has been happening? I'm afraid we've been rather limited in what we could gather."

JJ obliged, though most of her information involved the American wizarding government rather than the British Ministry. It was well known, though, that Fudge was stepping down, which was both a relief to rid them of his incompetence and a potential disaster since almost anyone could theoretically take his place. Blackwolf was trying to muster the Americans to support the Ministry in the hopes of stopping the war before it could truly start, but was facing the same problem from the last war with
Riddle. The divided government rallied together slowly and precariously against vague threats, particularly foreign ones, and wasn't quite interested in sending anyone overseas when there was no real gain for them, particularly when Riddle didn't remotely care about America.

Every once in a while, she would stop and wince, and her hand rested on her swollen belly through most of the conversation. Harry was blissfully unaware of the details of pregnancies and was very invested for his own mental comfort in not asking, but Dumbledore asked her several times if she needed to stop and wait for the feelings to pass.

Finally, Hotch cut in with a much more immediate prospect. "JJ, when did it start hurting?" he asked.

"Right after we landed here. I think the apparation might have caused some discomfort."

"I don't think it was the apparation alone, though that might have set it off," he said as he got to his feet and prepared to help her up. "You're wincing in ten minute intervals, and that time frame's shortening each time. It's contractions - you're going into labor."

She refused his hand. "No."

He paused. "What?"

She laughed briefly, then grimaced in pain. "I'm not going into labor," she managed to say.

"...I don't think your body agrees with you."

"I am not going into labor, because I still have a month and a half."

"JJ, you can teach him or her all about proper timing and the dates of the year later, but right now, you need to get to the infirmary."

"Does Madame Pomphrey know anything about deliveries?" Harry asked as he and Hotch helped JJ to her feet.

"Well, if she didn't before, she's about to have a rather intensive hands-on lesson about it," McGonagall replied.

---

Harry met Will for the first time shortly after Sirius landed with him on the outskirts of Hogwarts. "Hi," he said. "I'm Harry. Has anyone told you about magic?"

Will looked distinctly green.

"I mentioned it in passing right before I kidnapped him," Sirius cheerfully replied.

"Welcome to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry," Harry said. "I'll be your host for the next...twenty minutes or so, and this will be my sidekick. Harry Potter and Sirius Black, at your service."

"I think I'm going to puke."

"Happens to a lot of people their first time traveling through-" Will bent over. "Yeah..."

When Will had regained some semblance of dignity, he asked, "Where am I? I mean, is this Maine, Montana...?"
"Close. Scotland."

Will stared at him. Sirius broke in with, "That's why we needed the portkey. Couldn't apparate you straight here across all that, or we might have left something behind."

"Why am I here?" Will asked faintly. "And... Well, what's going on?" He gestured to the wreckage behind them.

Harry glanced at in the motioned direction, grimacing slightly. While Hogwarts had been entirely repaired to protect against more attempted assaults, it still bore some signs of injury, such as large burn marks or craters. It was pointless to repeatedly repair them when the land was just going to get torn up next time and they weren't weaknesses. "That's...complicated, and rather a long story," Harry said. "Let's talk and walk. JJ wants to see you."

He perked up automatically at the mention of his wife's name, face brightening. "She's here?"

"So's the little one. And he's so cute!" Sirius cooed.

"But he's not due for over a month!"

"Yeah, that's what JJ said, but apparently he didn't care what the doctors thought so he decided now would be a fantastic time to pop out and say hi to everyone."

Will paused, eyeing the castle again. "Is it... Is it safe here?"

Sirius and Harry exchanged glances. "Yes and no," Harry finally said. "The defenses around the castle are very strong, but they have to be because we're in the middle of a war. That's why you couldn't land directly inside. We're in the middle of a lull period, because..." He smiled. "Well, because of JJ, really. But I'll let her explain that. Let's go in, and on the way I'll explain some of what's going on. It's nice to meet you, by the way. I've heard a lot, but I had to go back to school before I could make your acquaintance."

"Oh? What are you studying?"

It took Harry a moment to realize what he was asking. "Oh, no, I'm not at university."

"High school?" Will asked, blinking. "You look older."

Harry smiled humorlessly. "Yeah, I'd reckon so after these last few weeks." He nodded ahead of them. "This is a school, you know. The only safe place left in the British wizarding world, even safer than the government building and the bank." He paused, realizing the last didn't sound extraordinarily impressive. "The bank's run by goblins. I've heard they've got some dragons down there guarding some of the vaults."

"Yeah, my bitch cousin's got a dragon for the Lestrange one," Sirius put in.

Will shook his head. "Goblins and dragons... This doesn't feel real at all."

"Trust me. It is."

"When am I going to get used to it?"

"About the time you realize you've got other problems to worry about besides your sanity. Kinda in the middle of a war right now," Sirius said. He paused, belatedly remembering he was talking to a new father. "Er. Anyway. Happy baby birth?"
They left him in the infirmary, and he quickly hurried to the curtained-off bed they directed him towards. Sirius went to go find food while Harry walked over to his father, who was sitting on a bed with Jack. The youngest Hotchner had been spending his days in the repaired Room of Requirement for extra protection while the siege had waged on, and the DA members who had been on their quick sleeping breaks had kept him company.

Jack smiled up at him as he approached and Harry sat down beside him, on the other side as Hotch. "How you feeling?" he asked.

"Good!" Jack chirped. "Mamane Pamphree said I'm a quick healer," he continued, effectively mauling the title and name of the head nurse. Thankfully, Jack's turning had been on the last day of the full moon. He hadn't been forced into a transformation, though they were going to be facing his first in a few weeks. "And they said I can go soon." He frowned. "I don't want to leave Hogwarts."

Harry glanced over his head at Hotch. They'd done an excellent job at keeping him away from the danger, but that didn't help them now. "Well, things are going to get a bit hectic around here soon," Hotch said. "The others won't be able to play with you, so it would be pretty boring if you stayed. And you're going to go with JJ and Will, and JJ just had a baby. That's going to be cool, right?" Jack didn't look so sure about that, but he nodded anyway.

"Are you coming with us?" Jack asked his father hopefully and Harry winced.

"No," Hotch said wistfully. "I can't. But I'll be there as soon as I can."

Shit, Harry suddenly realized. They didn't really have a home to go back to anymore, not after their house had been compromised. Even if they could return right now, there wasn't a place to go that was safe.

It was kind of sad that Harry had such a long list of more pressing concerns that he quickly decided not to think too much about that at the moment.

"And Remus is going to go with you too. You like Remus."

Jack nodded again. Good, Harry thought, since a lot was riding on Remus right now. The two of them were going to start the lycanthropy treatment together, and they were hoping that having someone else who was going through it would help Jack deal with the painful but changing transformations that would take place as the drugs adjusted the disease in his body each time.

"It'll be good for you, okay?" Hotch said, hugging Jack. "Trust me."

"Is Harry coming?"

"No, Harry's got to stay here too," Hotch said, and Jack looked down, crestfallen. "Think of it like a vacation, all right? You get to go see some new places, meet some new people... I imagine you'll be having a lot more fun that Harry and I will."

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Remus and Bill gathered the entire DA into the Room of Requirement a week after the battle.
"Okay, we've borrowed this room for the day, so we don't really have that long," Bill said. "We're going to teach you lot how to apparate."

Harry's eyebrows shot up. Like the others, he had only been told that there had been a lucky break and they were going to be able to get some specialized training. Discretely, he cast his eyes over the group that had been assembled. It really was the whole group, regardless of age. The youngest was a
fourth year. It would have been Dennis or a Hufflepuff third year, except even they had been evacuated early on with the rest of their class regardless of their involvement in the DA.

"The Ministry doesn't know, so there's no way for this to leak to the Death Eaters," Remus added in. "The only ones who are aware you're getting this practice right now are all of us, Dumbledore, and Moody. And, I suppose, the BAU, because they know everything."

That got a few laughs, lowering a bit of the tension.

"Dumbledore did something to this room, so for today the anti-apparation wards won't have an effect. That's part of the reason we've got to do this fast. We'll just be making jumps in here, so if you splinch, we can repair it quickly. If it happens, don't panic. You're all extremely competent, but I wouldn't be surprised if we have one mishap today. All right, let's get started."

The room was loud as the cracking noises reverberated against the walls, and it soon became filled with talking and laughing. It was nice and, in a way, relaxing to learn a new skill, especially one that was forbidden to most of them due to age. For others, they were getting in lessons a few months ahead of time.

Remus sent Harry through ahead of everyone else, and once he'd finished, sent him out with an apologetic look and the statement that Hermione would be following soon. Harry nodded in understanding and went to the headmaster's office, where he and the other heads and seconds of the three major forces at Hogwarts were gathering. Not much had happened to change the situation since he'd left, but Moody wanted to go over some finicky details that Harry had never heard of before in his life. Hermione, when she showed up, seemed to have a better idea, but the Hotchners and Gideon were largely left in the dark and unable to help with the plans to better the magical defenses around the school.

It was almost midnight when they finally finished, having ended the meeting in the last few hours with an appropriation of wings, floors, corridors, and rooms for specific purposes. That was something they had all been able to help with, each group trying to get a hold of everything they thought they would need. Then, just as it looked like Harry might be able to get to sleep before one, there was a knock at the door and Flitwick entered.

"Ah, there are a few parents here," he told Dumbledore. "They want to talk to you. Well, someone."

"Whose parents?"

"The Davies."

Dumbledore sighed. "Their son is seventeen and of age. What he does is up to him."

"No, it's about... Well, their home was just destroyed by Death Eaters since they were known Light sympathizers, and they're looking for a place to stay. They'll offer what they can in return." After a moment, he added, "Mrs. Davies was owling Molly about joining the Order a month ago."

By that point, the entire staff had been inoculated in. There wasn't a point in not doing so when they refused to leave the school and were fighting the incoming Death Eaters. They were mostly under Dumbledore, who was heading both the Order and the castle, but they were also under McGonagall, whose duties were devoted to the castle, and Moody, who was solely concerned with the fighting.

Before anyone could say anything, Hagrid's form came into view behind Flitwick. "Ah, sorry, everyone, but, er, well, there's something you should 'ear." Flitwick skittered away a few steps, either to let Hagrid in or avoid being accidentally crushed. The half-giant took the opportunity to move
forward a bit. "Aragog came and stopped by the cabin," he continued, and Harry's eyebrows rose. The spider would never have left the forest willingly, he had thought. "He's starting ter get up in years, an' he's a bit worried about the young ones, 'specially since some'a the Death Eaters are destroying parts of the forest when they enter."

Harry didn't envy Dumbledore right now, and he was partially expecting someone else to enter at this point. Most meetings were beginning to include some sort of interruption.

"Hagrid," Dumbledore said in the tone of someone who has had this conversation many times before, "we can't protect the forest creatures as well. We'd overextend ourselves, and we'd lose everything."

"Oh, no, of course not, sir. Actually, they were... Well, Aragog's offering to help you. The ones who knew who Aragog was stared while the others blinked blankly. "He wanted me ter let you know that they've been...er, eating any Death Eaters who get near their nests."

No one spoke for a moment, letting that sink in.

"Wait," Harry said, "what about the wolf pack out in the forest? Have you heard from them?"

"What wolf pack?" Flitwick asked.

"Ah." Dumbledore nodded thoughtfully. "I had not considered them, put perhaps Elle could communicate with them." To the others, he said, "There is a wild pack in the forest, the offspring of two werewolves who procreated during the full moon." That last detail was something Harry wished he'd known before he'd sought them out his third year, thinking he stood a good chance at getting eaten by regular creatures.

"I can tell her tomorrow," Hotch said with a glance at the time. "Or, later today."

"Ah, the Davies?" Flitwick asked as Pomfrey walked in around Hagrid.

"We have a supplies issue," she announced.

Yep, Harry wasn't getting to sleep at all.

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The meeting ended, and everyone started trailing out, eager to get to bed but too exhausted to move quickly. Hotch paused ahead of him, for all appearances just letting others leave the room first while he waited for Harry, eyes on everyone else instead of his son.

A hand landed on Harry's shoulder. He looked back, and found Dumbledore watching him curiously. "A word, Mr. Potter?"

"Sure," he said.

"Everything all right?" Hotch asked as the last person left the room.

"As fine as it can be these days," Dumbledore said. "Get some rest."

Harry would be lying if he said he wasn't looking forward to the day that his father finally snapped over Dumbledore's parental routine. He just hoped he happened to be in the room at the time it happened.

The door closed behind Hotch. Dumbledore gestured for Harry to take a seat across the desk as he
sat in his own chair. "I would not ask this of you if I did not think you were ready," Dumbledore began. "However, I think the time is right, and I think you have the best chance of all of us."

"For...what?"

"The horcruxes need to be destroyed. You've proven beyond a doubt that you've become one of the most capable members of the Light, and you're smart enough to think on your feet. You can go out, find the last horcruxes, destroy them and then return. Your movements will be covered by the siege. With Umbridge's book gone, you can travel without concern, and Voldemort won't think you would leave the castle."

"That could take a while," Harry said, "and I'm running the DA."

"Miss Granger could take over while you're gone," Dumbledore said. Harry thought about asking Dumbledore to call them by their names like everyone else did, but decided to leave the matter for another time.

"She could, but I think she'd rather come with me," Harry said. "And I'd rather agree that I'd like her helping me."

"A small team will be going with you. Moody wanted to go, but he should remain here. Miss Granger may go, as can two other from your DA. Remus and Sirius are both eager to accompany you. Kingsley may also be going, but it depends on how large you want this group to be."

"Who all knows about this?"

"Just some members of the Order who I have approached about the matter."

"For future endeavors," Harry said carefully, "it would be best to speak to the other groups involved at Hogwarts so we can make our plans accordingly."

"That's why I'm speaking to you now."

"Agent Hotchner won't be happy about being kept out of the loop."

"He will be informed."

"The BAU's plans tend to be long term. They might be able to help minimize the damage of my absence if they're more prepared for it. Besides, I wouldn't be opposed to having one of them come with us."

"They don't have wands."

"They don't need them."

Dumbledore examined him for a moment. Harry was leaning back in his chair, eyes just barely not meeting Dumbledore's gaze to avoid inadvertently challenging him or allowing a Legilimency connection to be formed. "I was unaware that you were growing that close to Agent Hotchner."

Harry twitched. "War does that."

"He's a good man." Harry gave a noncommittal hum in reply. "He is not, however, a wizard."

"So? He's taken down plenty of Death Eaters."

"He did put you in danger by not allowing the Order to provide for your safety over the summer,"
Dumbledore said. "If we'd known where you were, we could have protected you from-"

"With all due respect, headmaster," Harry interrupted coolly, "you've put me in worse danger for years by not telling me information about Riddle that I needed to know, or about my general situation. I would have recognized Tom Riddle's diary, I wouldn't have stayed at the Dursleys' if I'd known about the blood wards, I would have known what was happening with Sirius..."

"I will let him know," Dumbledore said after a moment. "I imagine he would want to come with you."

No shit.

"Probably," Harry said. "Look, I've got to get some sleep. We'll talk in the morning?"

"Of course, Harry. You've had a long day." He smiled. "Until I can give you the finer details of the mission, please keep this information to yourself. We don't want this to spread around, and I would regret giving anyone the wrong impression about what we are planning to do."

"Okay," Harry said, even though he was going to have to communicate with others for some planning if there was a reasonable chance this would work. "We'll talk later."

"Yes. Goodnight, Harry."

As he walked back to his bed, he couldn't but feel a twinge of frustration over how mentorly Dumbledore's behavior was. Harry led a freaking war group now. He didn't need Dumbledore's warm leadership, not when he had his own power.

He shoved his irritated thoughts aside for now, organizing what he had been told. When he got back to his bed, everyone was asleep or off in a private BAU meeting to profile and plan. He slipped under the cover, hoping to find a chance to talk to someone about what he had just been told later.

Chapter End Notes

I didn't do a last-minute through this chapter so any errors – oops. But I think it's been over two days and I know I'm not going to get a chapter posted tomorrow. Holy shit, classes and everything else got intense all at the same freaking time.

By the way, you'll be delighted to know that we're having a short reprieve from the angst! But when we do return to the angst, I want you to keep this in mind: the angst wasn't done just for the sake of angst. Look for how the characters change because of what happens. We've still got a little bit so don't worry just now, enjoy the reprieve, but try to remember that the characters are going to grow and once things get better the depressing experiences actually make things better for everyone in the long run.

I just love how the relationship between the Hotchners develops throughout the story until the end, by the way. I could write whole books on Harry and Hotch. Some of my favorite chapters are in the angst because it shows so much about their relationship. I can't wait for your reactions, though.
"Rattle his bones over the stones. It's only a pauper who nobody owns." - T. Noel, "The Pauper's Drive"

"I'm coming with you," Rossi said, moving into step with Harry.

He groaned. "You don't even know where I'm going!" His direction was pointing him out the Great Entrance, though, so it wasn't like he was being subtle about his general plan.

"Out, and you'd be an idiot to go alone in the middle of a war."

"Where are we going?" Prentiss asked as she appeared on Harry's other side.

"I'm going to go talk with some of the creatures in the Forbidden Forest," Harry sighed. "Some of them have expressed interest in helping, but I need to make sure that they're on our side and communicating with us."

"Why don't you ask Hagrid for help?" Prentiss asked. They went out the large doors, not bothering to try to muffle the booming noise as the wood slammed closed behind them.

"He's not so good at negotiations," Harry said.

"Does anyone know you're coming out here alone?" Rossi asked pointedly, hiding a grin.

Harry rolled his eyes towards the sky.

"I'll tell your dad later, then."

"Don't you care about me at all?"

"Yes, which is why I'm telling him before he finds out on accident and comes to strangle you with overwhelming love."

"Who are we going to talk to?" Prentiss asked before Harry could protest.

"The acromantulas. Hagrid started talks with them but I need to confirm a couple of things. The centaurs. I don't have a clue how that's going to go. Probably going to get some foreshadowing from them about how we're all idiots, which, hey, that's not wrong. The werewolf pack. ...Also no clue. Not even sure how we're going to communicate. I think that's it."

"Why didn't you bring Elle to talk with the pack?"

"...Because then she was going to tell someone else I was going out of the castle."

Rossi and Prentiss exchanged an amused smirk, and then Prentiss pulled out her phone and started typing. "I'll tell her your plan and she can go handle it. Your canine skills need work before you start
conducting negotiations with them."

"Thanks."

"Do you know how to find the others?" Rossi asked.

"I think I can remember how to find the acromantulas. The centuars are probably going to have to find us rather than the other way around."

Their walk took them deep into the forest. Despite the morning sun, it was soon almost completely dark in the forest. Creatures flitted around them, sometimes yipping or snarling but mostly quiet. Their footsteps sounded unnaturally loud, but their attempts to muffle the noises failed. Harry almost wanted to cast a charm around them to hide the telltale sounds of their trespassing, except then the centaurs would have little way of knowing they were there.

A rotten smell drifted towards them from their left. After a few paces, a dead creature came into view, half-torn apart. Three enormous horselike creatures stood around it, bony and winged, ripping pieces of meat from the carcass. One lifted its head and stared curiously at them as they passed.

"Uh," Rossi said and left his statement there on the forest floor to be picked up by anyone who dared add to it.

Prentiss took the statement and followed it with, "Well."

"Threstrals," Harry said. "I think. We've got the only tamed herd in Britain."

"What are they?"

"Huge winged horses."  

"If a student gets smacked in the forest and there's no one around who will tell his father about it, did it really happen?"

"Well, if it didn't, the student won't learn a lesson from it," Prentiss pointed out.

Harry paused. Prentiss came to a halt beside him before she could even tell why he was stopping. A small threstral, whose shoulder barely came up to Harry's sternum, skittered across their path to join the others by the carcass.

"Awww," Rossi began, and then as the threstral ripped a piece of flesh off, "Ewww."

"Circle of life," Prentiss said. "Come on."

"Hey."

All three jumped as Elle grinned at them from Rossi's side.

"I almost screamed," Rossi told her, "and trust me, that's not something you wanted to hear."

"Your dad's planning on murdering you when you get back," Elle said, patting Harry's shoulder. "FYI."

"Oh joy," he muttered.

"Good luck. I'm off to find that pack. Anything specific you want me to ask them?"
"Just want to know what they'd be willing to do. And tell them that, if it's dangerous out in the forest, it might be less dangerous in the castle but they'll have to lend a hand."

"I'll try to translate that into barks," Elle said. She patted Harry on the shoulder, then darted forward and, with a painful series of cracking bones, transformed into a wolf and limped off for a couple of paces before sprinting more confidently as the pain wore off from the transformation.

The trio walked on in silence, listening to their surroundings more attentively now. They couldn't tell what animals were around them in the slightest, but at least they were making some sort of effort now. Harry wished Blackwolf was with them – he definitely would have been able to tell them what sounds were worrisome. Or he would have messed with them the whole time about venomous bats and man-eating bugs. Or he would have been totally honest and traumatized them with potential creatures that various sounds could be. Maybe it was good that he wasn't with them.

When the hooves came thundering, however, Harry didn't need Blackwolf to tell him what the sound meant. Rossi and Prentiss stopped without him saying anything and they waited as the centaurs made a half-circle around them before diving through the trees, weaving past them by inches and miraculously not running into each other or anything else. The agents stayed still beside Harry, who struggled not to put up a shield charm that the centaurs would surely find an insult to their dexterity. The sprint past them, after all, was surely a display of strength and unity.

Finally, the centaurs slowed until their herd was encapsulating the three in the center. Two in front of Harry stepped aside, revealing an enormous black-haired centaur stepping furiously towards them.

"What do you want?" he demanded.

"Just want to talk. We're trying to keep the castle safe and you're trying to keep the forest safe, and our territories are close enough together that we're sharing troubles. It doesn't make sense for us not to try to cooperate."

"We don't need the help of humans," he snarled.

"I don't think you do," Harry agreed. "And you definitely wouldn't have needed our help if our dipshit government hadn't been so inept as to let a war start under their noses without even trying to stop it. But the war's started, and it's bleeding over into the forest."

"You're not here to offer aid and you bring representatives of the very government you speak ill of. We need no reminder of the war, not when our blood shines as red as Mars when your kind spills it on the leaves of our home. Human – what do you want?"

"Neptune's return."

The centaur tilted his head, irritated but with a new edge of consideration. He stomped his back hoof and flicked his tail hard, hair smacking briefly against his thigh before settling down again.

"I've seen a lot of kids dying before they were adults, and I've seen a lot of parents leave children behind. But if we stop fighting, if we don't keep Hogwarts as a battleground simply because we don't want blood here, we'll lose. Hogwarts has been my home away from home for a long time, but I can't imagine having this kind of bloodshed in my own home. I don't understand your pain. But I do understand that I can't claim I'm not responsible for a large part of it, so I'd like to ensure that all of this sacrifice hasn't been useless."

The centaur's ear flickered but his expression didn't.

"If Riddle wins, the war for the humans stops," Prentiss said. His gaze turned towards her even as his
head stayed still. "It won't stop for you. When this war ends, we want all the bleeding to stop. We aren't going to wipe out nations of peoples just because they're not human. He will."

"He is mobilizing the werewolves and giants," the centaur said.

"He's not mobilizing you," Rossi pointed out. "He knows you're smarter than the giants and you'll see through his plots. The werewolves are serving him out of bloodlust. They killed ten students and tortured another twenty-three, an atrocity you would never commit for sport."

"Humans are the only kind who place pain upon their own species in that way," the centaur snarled. The skin above his eyebrows, beside the bridge of his nose, and just under his nostrils was all connected in a way that made the skin wrinkle when his nose pulled up, baring his teeth and displaying a fierceness that contrasted oddly with his words. At the same time, he was correct. The centaurs rarely had love for humans, but then, they weren't human themselves.

"Yeah, we suck," Prentiss agreed. "But we protect our children. My home is in America. You said Rossi and I are from the British government – we're not. We're here to protect the children we claimed as our own when their parents were killed or rejected them. We had spent over two years trying to mend their pain after the werewolves attacked them when this war broke out, and we came here to do what we could. We don't even have magic. We're just here to save as many people as we can."

The centaur stepped forward. Prentiss almost stepped back but just managed to hold her ground. He bent his torso so he was at eye level with her. Rather than making the motion self-deprecating by lowering his height, he performed it with enough disdain to emphasize how much of a difference there was in their sizes.

"So you thought you'd come in and save the day with regular human arrogance and fortitude?" he sneered. "Your tactics do not impress me."

"Five of us came," Prentiss said. "We work as profilers. We analyze human behavior and we predict future moves they will make. Because of our focus in psychology, we are skilled at helping others repair their mental strength after battles. We've also managed to nonviolently take down many of the Death Eaters by appealing to their motives to convince them that working for Riddle is going to end badly for them. We don't need physical strength."

"Only five of you came?"

"A sixth could do more work from us at home by researching the Death Eaters and a seventh was pregnant. She actually showed up anyway and gave birth at the school, but she's returned home to protect her son from the war."

The centaur leaned back up to his full height. "Hm. And you come to us now for information."

Prentiss nodded. "Yes."

"The wards around the school are the weakest at the edge of the forest. Each new attack comes from here. Sometimes we pick them off as they fly overhead, but more often than not, they are already through the forest by the time we are aware of them. If they wish for stealth from you, they dip into the forest, but if they wish for stealth from us, they have to go over the treetops. You often are too oblivious to notice them until they have reached your doorstep."

"They cloak themselves with Disillusionment Charms when they come near," Rossi said. "We can't see them?"
"Because you only rely on sight," the centaur snarled. "You fools."

Harry felt like he was talking to a taller, less passive-aggressive and more aggressive-aggressive version of Blackwolf.

"You came with an offer to extend aid. We do not accept it. We do not need your help."

Harry didn't think arguing with that today was going to get them anywhere. He nodded in acceptance.

"However. The acromantulas are also interested in protecting the forest. They guard sections of the trees that we never get to. We will cooperate with them to prevent the Dark from entering our lands. If complete bloodshed is about to occur in the castle, we will come to protect any children you have not managed to save."

Harry nodded again, this time in relief. "Thank you."

"You are the one they call Harry Potter."

"Yes. With me are David Rossi and Emily Prentiss."

The centaur's eyes flickered briefly to them. "Profilers."

Prentiss nodded.

His eyes turned back to Harry. "I am Magorian. You are not Harry Potter."

Harry frowned briefly. What the...? "What do you mean?"

"Those of strong magic are never from magic, and your fate is a sevenfold appearance."

"So... you mean that I couldn't have been from a magical family." Magorian looked at him like he was an idiot. Harry made a gamble. "My name is Hotchner. But we kept the truth quiet to protect my family."

"Look to the southwest before daybreak, towards the blue Neptune, if you care to know of yourself, then. But be careful, little lord, of what comes with knowledge."

"I was never gifted at foretelling the future," Harry said.

"When Mars' height is level with Neptune's, it bleeds. You have pain coming, pain you are not ready for. You cannot yourself for it. You cannot save yourself. And it will leave you destroyed in a way that Death herself is not capable of."

A man-loathing centaur was warning him. This wasn't a simple prediction by Trelawney in class; this was real, this was happening, and this was unavoidable.

"I'm one person," Harry said. "Why is my fate in the stars?"

"Sevenfold, boy. Your fate is sevenfold in the stars."

"But why? What does that mean?"

Magorian stomped his hooves impatiently. "You are one of the two most important souls to be born across the worlds and you are ignorant as a newborn!" He waved a hand sharply towards the forest canopy above them. "Time is a river, not a line! One occurrence here has another occurrence there! It
is all interconnected, but few see how it relates! You are one of those who will have the potential to
know. You will meet yourself before the year is over. And you will know by then of what I speak,
since I am not capable of drilling understanding into your brainless head without cracking open your
skull."

When Harry blinked, he tried not to look as foolish as Magorian was making him feel. "If my fate is
in the stars, does that mean it's going to impact everyone else?"

For a moment, he thought Magorian was going to turn and gallop away from him in a dismissal of
his life as a lost cause. Instead, he put both hands to the side of his head and then threw them towards
the sky in exasperation. "So man is capable of thought!" Harry thought that might mean he was on
the right track. "But you miss the finer understanding. It is...acceptable, for now." He looked down at
Harry again, grudgingly. "You do not see. But you will."

"I understand that the stars do not tell details," Harry said carefully, "but...can you tell me if it's likely
that Mars is bleeding because we will lose Hogwarts?"

"Mars will bleed into you," Magorian said. "I do not need to look at the stars to know that. You are
an empty vessel, Hotchner. Blood will fill you before the month is over."

So soon?

"You will feel your heart break open with the force of your blood. Your lungs will drown in blood
until you can't breathe. And your head will be bathed in blood until all you hear is the pounding of it
in your skull and all you smell is the coating of it on your skin and all you see is the red tears
swelling in your eyes."

"Stop," Rossi interrupted.

Magorian turned to him, sneering. "All I wish to say is that I am utterly aware of what is happening."
He looked at Harry again. "But I do not care for your pain. You will be unmade before the moon is
full again."

"I was already predicted to die," Harry said. "That's come and gone."

"This is not a physical death. But as before, so it will be again. You will return stronger. This is not
the end. This is the beginning." He shifted, tail swishing behind him. "Even so, I do not care. Take
the warmongers from our forest and all will be satisfied."

Harry nodded slowly. "I do not want any in my protection to die. And although you don't accept it,
your forest is under what I want to save."

"Tell me when the Dark killer is dead." He tilted his head curiously. "I would also be interested to
know when your hunter reveals himself."

"The leopard spirit?" Rossi asked.

Magorian glanced at him. "Yes. He has drawn ever closer to you. He is near. But I don't think he's
ready to make his move. His ninth life has not yet come."

"What's important about the ninth life?" Prentiss asked.

"It is when the leopard has sacrificed himself nine times. It is when the leopard is at his strongest and
when he is aware of what he is. It is when his enemies will perish."
"You can see that in the stars too?" Rossi asked, failing to hide his skepticism.

Magorian sneered. "No. It is in his eyes." He turned to Harry. "The leopard is hunting. You had best not be standing still when he finally reaches you."

"Are you saying he's coming in the next month?"

"No. He is not near enough yet. Do not concern yourself with him until your more immediate threat is past." He snorted, almost in amusement. "You should not overburden yourself with all your fears. You have enough that they will crush you if you attempt to manage them all at once."

At some wordless gesture, the centaurs stepped away from them. The outskirts of the herd began cantering back into the forest.

"We will speak to the acromantulas. Do not return here unless you have news that we must hear."

Magorian turned sharply, front hooves leaving the ground for a moment, and then jumped away, body extending as he took off. Within moments, the trees around them cleared, and a final red tail disappeared in the distance with the sound of pounding hooves.

"Well," Rossi said. "I don't understand half of what was said, but I feel like it was informative."

"What's Neptune?" Prentiss asked Harry. "You said you wanted Neptune to return."

"It generally refers to healing and dreams. I was trying to say that I wanted recovery. I think it worked. He at least talked to us." He turned around and started heading back in the direction they had come from. If the centaurs were going to discuss matters with the acromantulas, then there was no purpose in conversing twice.

"How reliable are the centaurs?" Rossi asked.

"They're loners, but they like their territory and they won't let anyone take it from them." He hesitated. "The centaurs take their ability to read the stars very seriously. They would never lie about what they've seen, even to upset someone."

"So whatever they said... That is what they saw?" Prentiss said slowly.

"Yeah. There's a slight chance that they could be wrong, but Magorian seemed pretty certain."

"What are you going to do?" Rossi asked.

Harry shook his head. "I can't stop something when I don't know what it is. We'll just have to work admirably and hope we can negate the damage." He blew out his breath. "I just hope that whatever's coming is only going to hurt me."

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When they got back, Harry spent most of his day finding activities that would keep him occupied so he wouldn't have to talk to his father, who had surely heard about what he'd done by now and was ready to lecture him for walking off into a dangerous forest filled with man-eating creatures alone. The rest of the day was spent being handed activities to do, which further kept him busy.

If he didn't go to the Room of Requirement to sleep, his father was going to track him down at least to make him get rest. But if he went, he was handing himself over to his father for the lecture. Putting it off would be more painful in the long run but...well, he'd get to put it off.
He slowed, puzzled, as he saw Dumbledore approaching him. The halls in this part of the castle were mostly empty, so the headmaster must have been relying on paintings to find him.

"The time has come, Harry. The departure team is waiting in the Astronomy Tower."

Harry paused. The horcrux hunting departure team? He'd just heard about that yesterday. "So soon? There are a lot of things I need to take care of first."

"Your DA is wonderfully organized. I expect they can handle it themselves. Nothing is happening right now, and the practice of independent management would be good for them."

Probably, but that didn't mean Harry's instincts weren't screaming at him. But, if anything happened, they could contact him by patronus, so it wouldn't be a big deal. "...All right. Let me just get Hermione." As his second, it would make sense for her to stay where she was, but if she was with them they could get the horcrux mission over faster and return back to the castle.

"I will be heading that way shortly. Allow me."

"Why?"

"I need to go tell Agent Hotchner about the new arrangements."

"I can come with you," Harry said.

"I'd rather you think about the away team. Agent Hotchner can handle himself, and you haven't had time to decide how you're going to lead a new group you haven't often worked with before."

As Harry walked up to the Astronomy Tower, he couldn't help but think about how weird it was going to be to have his own father in a team he was leading. At the same time, he wondered why Dumbledore didn't want him to return to the Room of Requirement before he left, but promised himself he'd find a way to slip down there anyway.

At least his father was going to be distracted from the matter of the Forbidden Forest for a while.

The team he'd been promised was already waiting. Sirius was grinning from ear to ear, ecstatic to be given a special assignment. Harry wanted to remind him that this was going to be dangerous and everyone needed to stay calm, but he didn't want to kill any lightheartedness either, since they were going to need to keep their chins up. Besides, the man did still think of himself as Harry's godfather since he didn't know Harry was fully aware that he wasn't.

Remus, however, was much more composed. "Harry," he greeted. Tonks' hair flickered from orange to purple beside him as she beamed at him. "Who else are we waiting for?"

"Not quite sure. Hermione and Hotch, at least. Two others." Who he needed to pick, so now he had his excuse to head back to the Room later. He glanced around. Kingsley was the only other one waiting with them. "How long have you guys known about this?"

"Three weeks," Kingsley said. "Albus thought it better to keep you focused on the castle until now."

Harry paused. "Okay," he said, "but I'd really rather know about these things in advance than last minute. You guys wouldn't have known if there was an issue with me leaving until it was too late to call things off."

"...Is there an issue?" Sirius asked reluctantly.
"By good chance, no. Just...tell me next time, even if Dumbledore doesn't want you to. I'd like time to actually prepare."

Why the hell was he being told so late in the game?

"Do we know where we're going?"

"We're going back over some of the places that Voldemort went to when he was younger," Remus said. "He used to work at Borgin and Burkes, and there are a couple other places we can trace him back to. Albus thinks he's leaving horcruxes in locations that mean something to him."

Harry nodded slowly. "I would agree with that." He was liking this plan less and less. They didn't need him for this mission. Why was he being sent away from the castle?

Because he wasn't destroying horcruxes here, he realized. He wasn't actively finishing off Voldemort. He wasn't completing the prophecy like Dumbledore had thought he would. He was acting like the profilers, doing the logical thing and staying put to protect a home base rather than coordinating preemptive strikes to take out Riddle's safety from underneath his feet. Dumbledore thought he would be better off doing the dramatic thing, running around killing Riddle piece by piece.

That was why he'd sent such a small team. Sirius, who was connected to his supposed father and would hopefully keep him energized. Tonks, who would also keep him entertained, with Remus, who had a level head and would keep the group focused but was also supposedly a friend of his father's. And Kingsley, who would probably remind Harry the most of the profilers but would still push Harry to do the job. Finally, anyone Harry wanted, to give him the illusion of complete control over the mission when it was really being run by Dumbledore.

He did not like this at all.

"But it sounds like you guys know what you're doing," he said. "The larger the group is, the more likely we are to get caught."

"Yeah," Sirius agreed, "but we've got a small group."

"Not small enough for something like this."

"Well, we could just go without anyone from the DA," Sirius said. He grinned at Remus briefly, before turning back to Harry. "This is going to be fun, won't it?"

Dumbledore arrived about fifteen minutes later with Hermione. If the expression on her face was anything to go by, she'd been filled in on what was happening and was just as disconcerted as Harry was.

"Looks like we're good to go," Sirius said chipperly.

"Where's Hotch?" Harry asked.

"He won't be coming with you," Dumbledore said. "Now-"

Harry glanced at Hermione, whose eyes had flickered in surprise at the statement. She would have been in the Room; she would have seen it if Dumbledore had approached Hotch. Nothing of the sort had happened.

Well...the horcruxes did need to be destroyed...
He'd rather do it himself and know it was done, and avoid putting anyone else in danger...

Hermione was still staring at him.

But Jack had just been bitten...and Hotch was not going to be happy if he lost temporary control over anyone he was trying to protect. It wouldn't hurt to just talk to him for a minute.

Dumbledore had been speaking the whole time. Sirius looked even more elated, if possible, as Dumbledore went back over the mission again for the benefit of Hermione and Harry, who weren't really paying attention.

Harry waited until Dumbledore was done before saying, "There are some people I need to talk to before we leave." His tone left no room for argument. "I'd rather not be worried about the situation here while I'm away. It'd be distracting. This won't take me more than a couple minutes."

"Please make it quick," Dumbledore said.

Harry started down the stairs. Hermione, without saying anything, followed. When they were about halfway to the end of the hallway, the flicker of a patronus went shooting past them. Neither of them spoke until they had reached the major staircases and started descending to the level the Room was on.

"What's he hiding?" Hermione asked.

"I don't know, but I'll bet that patronus was meant to stop us from finding out," he said grimly. "He didn't want me to talk to Hotch for some reason. I don't think he wants Hotch going with us."

"Is he worried about Hotch's influence on you?"

"Maybe, but he seemed genuinely surprised yesterday when he realized I was closer to Hotch than he thought. I think he just wants to get Hotch less involved in what's going on."

"Why? He hasn't caused any problems."

"But we're acting more logically, and I don't think that's how Dumbledore likes to do things. He works off of intuition and bravery. He wants me to do the same, so he put me on an assignment that's going to take me away for potentially weeks, surrounded by a group of people who'll make me more like James Potter."

"Are you going to go?"

"They could do this mission without me. I'll prove that quickly and then come back."

Hotch was not in the Room of Requirement. On second glance, neither was anyone else from the BAU. Ron saw the two of them and hurried over. "What are you guys doing here?" he asked.

"Long story, we'll tell you on the way," Harry whispered. "Where's my dad go?"

"He got a patronus, grabbed the rest of the BAU, and walked out. Why?"

Harry and Hermione exchanged a look.

"Okay," Harry said crossly. "If that's how we're going to play... *Expecto patronum*. Find my dad."

His patronus led them down the stairs and through the halls until Harry realized they were heading back to the headmaster's office. Harry frowned. There was no reason for them to have been brought...
there, unless Dumbledore was definitely trying to make sure Harry wouldn't have come across them before he left.

"Why do I have the feeling that we're all going to need to freshen up on our protection charms in the next five minutes?" Ron whispered to Hermione behind him.

There was faint, confused talking inside the office that became more audible as they climbed the short flight up the door. Harry opened it without knocking, revealing the entire BAU, including Elle and Gideon, as well as Moody and McGonagall.

"Would any of you happen to know what's going on?" McGonagall asked, irritable about the hour.

"I've got a feeling, and I don't like it," Harry responded. "What were you told?"

"Just to come here and wait."

Moody was staring meaningfully at Harry. The young Hotchner stared back and asked, "Do you know?"

"Watch yourself," Moody said in warning. "You don't need to make enemies in the castle."

"What's going on?" Rossi asked.

"We're about to have issues," Harry said. "Lots."

Dumbledore walked in behind him through the open door. His eyes flickered around the room, and then settled on Harry. "I thought you were just going to the Room of Requirement," he said calmly.

"Decided to talk to the BAU before I left," he replied.

"Left for where?" Hotch demanded sharply.

Harry tilted his head at Dumbledore, trying not to send off too much sass but aware he was failing. "So you didn't tell them."

"I did not think I had the time," he replied as the rest of the away team slipped in behind him, evidently having followed to see what was holding Harry and Hermione up.

"It would have taken a couple minutes at the most."

"Hey," Morgan snapped. "Where's Harry going?"

"Horcrux hunting," Harry replied, "apparently."

"Wouldn't it make a lot more sense to wait until Riddle's temporarily killed and then go after the horcruxes?" Rossi pointed out. "He's the only one who knows what needs to be defended. With him gone, a mission like that would be much less dangerous." Pause. "Much less dramatic too, but safety first."

Sirius shifted.

"If he realizes we're close to finishing him off," Dumbledore said, "he may put more protections on the horcruxes."

"Yeah, or move them, and then we wouldn't be able to get to them at all," Sirius chipped in.
"He already knows we're after the horcruxes," Prentiss said. "If he was going to put protections on them, he's done it."

"This won't take long. We'll be back within a couple weeks at the most," Sirius said. "And then when we take Riddle out, that'll be the end."

"Okay, but you'd be sending some of the best fighters away from Hogwarts, where a bunch of kids are fighting," Morgan said. "This needs more protection."

"I was afraid of this," Dumbledore said.

"Yes, the BAU is attempting responsibility." Harry said dryly, ignoring Moody's and Hotch's warning looks. "I have nightmares about being stopped from running off on harebrained missions too."

Sirius stared at him, hurt. "Harry... We could bring about Voldemort's end here."

"We're already doing that!" Harry argued. "We don't need to run around England for months! Just because it sucks and it's boring to sit here for weeks doesn't mean it's not the right thing to do! You guys can go on this mission if you really want to, but I'm not leaving. There's more to do here than there is out there, and it would kill morale if anyone thought we were jumping ship."

Sirius recoiled like Harry had punched him, and Harry would have felt sorry for snapping at him if not for the next thing he said. "Your father would have wanted to go for the sake of a mission," he told Harry sullenly. "He wouldn't have cared about the danger."

"Yeah, well," Harry shot back, "I'm not my father, and I want to live and keep everyone else around me alive, so you're just going to have to learn to deal with disappointment."

Sirius stared at him, mouth sliding open into a gape. No one else spoke, though Morgan's eyebrows went up and he turned his head to the side awkwardly. Prentiss stared down at the table with a 'Yikes' expression. Remus didn't look up to arguing against Harry.

Moody, meanwhile, was staring at Dumbledore, trying to tell him not to say it.

"Harry," Dumbledore spoke, causing Moody to roll both eyes to the ceiling in exasperation, "the fact remains that you not only need to do this mission, but are obligated to."

"Obligated by what?" Hotch demanded.

"Obligated by his duty to the school."

"His duty to the school keeps him here, actually."

"His school is asking him to leave on a mission, and since the school has custody over him, he is obligated to follow its orders."

"Obligated to follow your orders, you mean. And considering how quickly your government has fallen apart, I wouldn't use its legal reasoning as a basis for endangering a child."

"I know you don't particularly understand this society that well."

Harry turned around and found a part of the wall to lean against. This was going to be a while. Hotch, however, had been standing and now turned to directly face Dumbledore. Incidentally, he half-blocked Harry from the headmaster's view.
"-but the youngest are often the bravest and most likely to succeed in war."

"No, I'm not protecting Harry because I don't understand that this society likes using children as martyrs," Hotch snarled. "I'm protecting Harry because children are the first to die in war and are the most likely to succeed at dangerous missions because they often feel like they have nothing left to lose and are easier to pressure into making stupid mistakes because they're told to by older people who should know better."

Shots fired.

Harry turned his head to see what the rest of the room was doing. Behind the headmaster's desk, Moody was sitting calmly, normal eye on the argument while the other was staring at the BAU.

Harry frowned. At some point, Elle had turned into a wolf, enraged by the discussion. Prentiss was physically holding her back, as was Reid. Morgan had gotten out of his chair and looked like he was ready to get involved, while Rossi hid a smirk behind one hand, eyes flickering between Hotch's situation and Elle's.

Harry glanced over at the other side of the room. Sirius still looked injured, Kingsley would rather be back in bed, Remus was blinking slowly in resignation, and Tonks would have had a video camera out if she had one.

He sighed and redirected his attention to Dumbledore and Hotch.

"I am sorry that you don't trust me," Dumbledore was saying, "but I am looking out for his best interests."

Harry turned to Hermione and Ron, who had drifted back towards him, and whispered, "It's funny how I'm completely capable of running an army right up until I do something they don't like."

"Something to add to the discussion, Harry?" Rossi called from across the room.

"I'll wait until they're done arguing so I don't have to shout over everyone," Harry replied, ignoring the way he was almost literally shouting over Hotch and Dumbledore.

"I'd say you're looking out for your best interests instead," Hotch snarled to the headmaster. "He's safer here."

"Voldemort will come after him if he remains alive much longer."

"We weren't planning on setting him up with a Mediterranean home for the rest of his life," Hotch snapped. "We're going to kill him when we get the chance, which is the same thing we would do if you went through with the horcrux mission."

"I understand your valid concerns," Dumbledore said, "but you have no responsibility over Harry."

For years afterwards, Harry wondered if Hotch and Dumbledore were so focused on their argument that they didn't even notice the cacophonous thumping noise as Reid and Prentiss all jumped on top of Elle to stop her from attacking, or if they just had an enormous amount of self control that stopped them from turning to stare.

Rossi's face was convulsing in barely suppressed laughter.

Morgan, however, was ignoring the dogpile beside him and glaring at Dumbledore, a muscle in his cheek twitching furiously.
"You have used your position over him to manipulate him for years," Hotch said, slowly, steadily, and in a tone describing just how close he was to snapping. "However, you have also allowed him to maintain a position of authority. You've created a paradox in which you've treated him as an adult, but only as long as he stays within your control. He's old enough to understand what's going on around him anymore. You can't use the excuse of his protection as a reason to keep information from him or to control his actions. If you continue like this, it's only going to become more obvious that you're using him."

"I assure you-"

"Hotch," Morgan interrupted. "It's only worth it if Harry is kept safe."

The secret was becoming useless. Hotch's validity for protecting Harry was practically null if no one knew why he was doing it. Revealing everything would force Dumbledore to back off, but they could do it now with their Secret Keeper dead.

But, in the long run, it could lead to issues that they couldn't now foresee, so Hotch hesitated.

Morgan looked at Dumbledore when Hotch didn't say anything. "Harry's not going anywhere tonight. The mission can go on if you really want it to, but he's not going with it."

Dumbledore looked past Hotch. "Harry," he said quietly, "see reason."

"I have. That's why I'm not running off to the Astronomy Tower."

"I can't ask for permission from your parents to allow you to leave," Dumbledore said. "The closest I can get is to ask your parents' friends. They have all expressed a wish for you to go with them."

"Are you really trying to use the memory of the dead to get me on this mission?" Harry flatly asked.

"Harry," Sirius said. "As your godfather, I've got to insist that you come. It's not nearly as bad as they're making it sound. I'm giving you permission to do the right thing. Don't listen to them – they don't know you like I do."

Harry's head snapped towards him. "You don't know me at all!" Sirius's eyebrows furrowed and he started to argue but Harry cut him off. "What do you think you know about me? That I like running into danger? No, I just keep getting caught in miserable situations because idiots are trying to control my life or because someone is in danger and the same idiots aren't doing anything about it. That I followed the Potters' example as much as possible? Well, from what I've heard, Lily Potter was quite different from James Potter, so I'm not sure how I'm supposed to behave logically and run off thoughtlessly." He paused. "I can't even think of another misconception you might have because we never talk!"

"That's not my fault!" Sirius protested. "You're either at school or getting kidnapped by muggles!"

"They kept me safe!"

"You got snatched by a serial killer from his house!" Sirius pointed at Hotch.

"Yeah, a serial killer who saved me from another mass murderer who you guys should have known was after me and didn't do anything about."

"We'd never heard of him before!"
"Yes, you had! He was the reason I wasn't in England the summer after my second year! But because he wasn't involved with Riddle, all of you forgot about him!"

"Okay," Remus said loudly. The two hushed. "Now's not the time for that discussion."

Sirius scowled at the floor. Harry crossed his arms and set his jaw.

Dumbledore watched him sadly. "Harry," he said. "I know Agent Hotchner hasn't been too happy with some of our actions." Harry snorted at the understatement. "But he's not responsible for you. His actions have benefited himself more than they benefited you."

"Yeah, getting sent to an active war zone in a society you first heard about two years ago is a real plus."

"Be sensible. He's been abnormally invested in your life without reason. There is something he is not sharing with you."

"He's got his reasons."

"How did this conversation get turned on him?" Rossi asked. "We were talking about where Harry would be safest – oh wait, no, we were talking about where he could do the most damage. I forgot we'd degraded him from teenager to weapon at some point."

"I have never thought of him as a weapon," Dumbledore said sharply.

"But you knew he had a horcrux in him," Hotch snapped. "You knew he had a connection to Riddle, and you weren't surprised to learn that we were trying to remove something from his head. And since you weren't making any efforts to get it out of him, I can only assume that you were expecting Riddle to kill him."

Shock flashed across the faces of the few people Harry saw out of the corner of his eye, but his attention was focused on the verbal duel.

"I knew he would return," Dumbledore said instead of denying it.

"There's no way you could have known that," Harry said with a disparaging laugh. Dumbledore tilted his head towards him, a pause before a dramatic statement, but Harry pushed. "No, just stop! This is ridiculous! You can't honestly claim that you were trying to protect me from the horcrux, or you would have exhausted all other alternatives to get it out of my head. You didn't try anything! We still don't know why I returned, so you can't say that you knew I would come back! There wasn't any sort of precedent to suggest it!"

"Harry, when you destroy the rest of the horcruxes, then you'll understand. Horcruxes are-"

"Not something we know a lot about!"

"You've destroyed them before, Harry. They're pieces of the soul, and since your soul isn't connected to Tom's-"

"You've said before that it is!"

"It isn't anymore, Harry. You managed to break it. But now we need to find the rest of the horcruxes and destroy them as well."

"You don't need me for that."
"We do, Harry. We do."

"Stop saying his name," Hotch said sharply. Dumbledore looked back at him with a flicker of annoyance. "You're putting a verbal claim over him, and you're using it to increase a sense of familiarity. You don't use any of the other students' first names. You just use his when you're complimenting him and making him feel like you'll take care of everything – except you really mean that you'll take care of the small first steps and then leave him to do the hardest parts."

Dumbledore closed his eyes for a moment, giving off the appearance of someone exasperated by incompetence. "If you do not go," he told Harry, "someone else from the DA will have to take your place. The Order does not have enough members to send more people."

Harry pushed off from the wall and stepped forward angrily. "Don't you dare threaten me with that," he snarled. "My DA isn't going anywhere, and certainly not under your orders alone."

"You can't stand aside while Order members sacrifice time away from their families and friends on this mission," Dumbledore said. "This is not something you can ignore. If you don't go, someone else will take your place. They'll go out, with less protection and less experience, and they will be much less likely to return unharmed."

Harry gritted his teeth.

Dumbledore gestured with his hand towards the Order members. "Go with them. Some of them are the closest thing you have to family. You have a responsibility to stand by their sides during this task."

Harry shifted, but even before he was sure how that mission was going to be completed, Hotch flung his arm out in front of him and grabbed his opposite shoulder, rooting him to the spot. His arm seared across Harry's chest in a silent brand, burning with the same anger Harry felt in his heart.

"Don't think for a second that you can pick and choose who my family is," Harry hissed, words short and clipped.

"Your parents were James and Lily Potter," Dumbledore said lowly, firmly. "You can't turn aside from their memory. You can't forget them. Don't let strangers decide who you are. Be who your parents wanted you to be when they gave their lives for you."

"Harry's ours," Morgan snarled. "Everyone in the artificial family you tried to make for him hasn't stood up to inspection. He's ours now. You can't unmake that."

"You never even knew his parents," Sirius scoffed.

"You don't know him!" Prentiss shouted back.

"You've only known him for a couple of years!"

"You've known him for less!"

Hotch's hand tightened on Harry's shoulder. Harry reached up with one and wrapped it around Hotch's wrist reassuringly.

"This is a matter of his well-being, physical and mental! You can't just claim him because you want to be associated with him!" Sirius snapped.

"We took him in before we knew who he was!" Morgan shot back.
"I can see now that I was wrong to allow you to become so attached to him," Dumbledore told Hotch. "I thought you would not have such a negative effect on him." He turned his head, including the rest of the BAU in his next statement. "To prevent the fall of morale, we will be coming up with a reason for your departure from the castle. Begin gathering your belongings to prepare to leave."

"You can't force us out of his life by making us leave," Morgan snarled. "We've managed it for years now."

Dumbledore tilted his head slightly. He didn't seem so sure that he couldn't find a way around that.

Harry wasn't sure what was the final straw, but something did it. Maybe it was the blatant manipulation of a child, maybe it was watching Hotch not use the most obvious reason, maybe it was Sirius claiming that Harry's family didn't understand him. Rossi once told Harry, much later, that he thought Morgan had snapped because of the small...ish hero-worship that Morgan had cultivated for Harry's father, and that seeing Dumbledore and Sirius try to diminish Hotch's authority in the matter was what finally crossed the line.

At any rate, Morgan snapped, "You're telling him lies based on a presumption you know to be false." Dumbledore's eyes narrowed in warning. "He's not a Potter. Don't tell him they're his family when they never raised him."

The room went quiet.

"H-Harry," Sirius started. "It's not true."

"I knew for a while," Harry said.

Dumbledore's gaze went to Hotch. "We never agreed to tell him."

"I don't need your permission to do anything," Hotch said.

Dumbledore looked over the group again. "You will be leaving tonight. You cannot make conjectures about his family life simply because we are unsure about who they really are. Since you knew the truth, you should have known that he will be claimed by another family once this war is over. It is pointless for you to try to convince him he should be yours. Now. Leave my castle."

Something changed in the air. Gideon nodded slightly at Hotch. Hotch glanced at Morgan. The rest of the BAU stilled. Morgan tilted his head curiously in acceptance.

"I might not be a blood relative of Harry's," Morgan said in agreement, "but I was given allowance by his family to stand with him no matter what. As long as he chooses to make his stand here, I will not leave him."

"We don't know who is blood family is," Sirius protested. "You can't claim that you know what they would say just because you think you know what's best for him!"

"I'm his father," Hotch said.

Dumbledore's eyes widened like those of a mouse caught in a trap.

Sirius's gaze flickered between Hotch and Harry, denying, denying, denying, but Kingsley just blinked a couple of times before nodding like he should have seen that coming. Remus was utterly calm.

And then McGonagall, who had not spoken since Harry had first entered the room, said, "Merlin."
"You must be joking," Sirius whispered.

"We've known for almost three years now," Harry replied. "We're positive."

Dumbledore stared at Hotch, who met his eyes unflinchingly. "Agent... He's not really your son. You haven't known him for that long. Your life will be destroyed if you continue on this path. Your efforts have been admirable, but you don't have magic and."

Hotch gave an exasperated sigh and turned abruptly from Dumbledore to gesture to the rest of the room. "Everyone, back to bed. The mission's scrapped. You'd be better off getting some rest."

"Wait," Sirius said, voice starting strong but breaking in the middle. "I... How... Are you sure?"

"Yes," Harry said. "His blood wards have protected me multiple times." Sirius was wondering if he'd ever had a chance. Maybe the truth would hurt less than wondering, maybe it wouldn't. But they'd lied enough to everyone and Sirius needed the chance to work things out with himself. He looked at Dumbledore. "By the way, if they're leaving, so am I, so I'd cancel that eviction notice if I were you."

Hotch opened the door and walked out. He knew he didn't have to fight his cause any longer. Harry went after him. There was a pause, and then he heard steps behind him as the rest of the room filed out.

"That was awkward," Ron muttered as they started back towards the Room of Requirement. "Wicked, but awkward."

"Do you think Sirius is going to be all right?" Hermione asked.

"He needs to learn how to handle it," Remus said behind her. She slipped to the side, letting him walk between her and Harry. "It's rough, but he should have been prepared. He knew this would come eventually even if he didn't know that Harry had already met his father. I'll take care of him, Hermione. Don't worry."

He glanced over Harry's head at Hotch, who was staring at him evenly, waiting for Remus's inevitable response to what had happened.

"I'm glad it was you," Remus said. "I'm glad I was right."

"Why?"

"I've never seen a pair that was better matched with their strengths and weaknesses. You two complement each other. You both would have had a rough time without the other, I think. Everyone, have a good night."

He waved briefly before leaving them and walking back towards the office they had left, likely to find Sirius and handle the fallout. Before they could move on, however, McGonagall strode up to them, Moody right behind her.

"That could have been handled better," Moody said. Behind him, Prentiss was carrying a struggling Elle out. Harry didn't really want to know if Dumbledore had been in that much danger from Elle. "But I don't think it would have been nearly as satisfying."

"Probably not," Harry said.

"You and Remus both knew," McGonagall accused.
"Their body language was too familiar with each other," Moody said, "and they look a lot alike. I'm surprised no one noticed sooner."

"We avoided standing next to each other for those reasons," Harry said.

"Well, if you hadn't confirmed it today, I suspect most of the room would have figured it out eventually. You weren't exactly subtle. The secret protected you this far, but I hope you won't regret giving it up in the future."

"We'll deal with that when we come to it," Hotch said. Moody nodded briefly and walked past them, leaving McGonagall. "I suppose you wish we'd told you."

"I understand why you didn't. I'd like to know who the secret has been shared with so I don't spread this information further than you want."

"The QDA, the BAU, family, Snape, a couple random others who I doubt you know."

She nodded. "Good luck to you both. Harry, I'm glad you're not an orphan." Harry grinned at her. "And now, I'm going to get some sleep, because I seem to be the only person here who has not adjusted to these ridiculous hours."

"Goodnight, Professor," Harry said.

"And you."

The group waited after she walked away, but no one else came to talk to them.

"How pissed do you think Dumbledore is?" Ron asked.

"He's been planning for years with the assumption that I wouldn't know who my father is," Harry said as they turned and finally began walking towards the Room again. "I'll bet he's pretty ticked."

"Nothing he can do about it, though," Hermione said.

Harry smirked and glanced out of the corner of his eye at Hotch, who was wearing an identical look. "Nope. Not a thing."

Chapter End Notes

Rather fittingly, I am about to go play Monopoly.
"Fear is consciousness plus life. Regret is an attempt to avoid what has already happened. Toast is bread held under direct heat until crisp." - Welcome to Night Vale

Surprisingly, everyone who had heard the announcement about Harry's father was keeping the information to themselves. It would trickle out eventually, of course it would, but almost no one had heard about the situation yet. Hopefully that could just last until the end of the war, when they could deal with the fallout and the information would be less likely to put anyone in danger.

For the moment, until the housing situation could be worked out, most people were just finding places wherever they could in out-of-the-way places. Harry and the DA gravitated towards the Room of Requirement, along with the BAU, but it was obvious that wasn't going to last much longer as the Room was steadily being used for more and more things.

The sun was rising by the time Harry collapsed into one of the mattresses on the floor. He was sharing with Ron, who opened his eyes in a half-hearted glare at being woken before raising a mildly surprised eyebrow to see Harry getting back so late. More dignified, Hotch took a nearby mattress.

They were both up a few hours later for a day of more meetings and analysis, followed by general work around the castle to patch everything up. Right after dinner, which was really just all meals of the day being served at all times in the Great Hall since everyone came and went when they could, Hotch tracked Harry down before he could hurry off to do more work.

"Don't think I haven't noticed," he warned, leading Harry back to the Room of Requirement.

"Noticed what?" Harry quickly, guiltily, futilely asked.

"That you're not sleeping."

"Can't," he admitted. "And there's too much work to be done."

"You'll get more done faster and better with a good night's worth of sleep."

"So does that mean you're going to be going to bed, too?"

Hotch sighed, raising his eyes to the ceiling as if searching for help that would descend from above. "Why do you always turn this on me whenever I do something like this?"

"I win either way. If you refuse, I get to go back to work, but if you concede, you have to sleep. I can't lose."

"Get in bed, you brat." The ruffle to his hair belied his words. "I'll make sure you get to sleep."

Harry didn't see how that was going to happen, but he complied. A half hour passed before he could stop thinking about everything that needed to be done, and he heard Hotch shifting restlessly a few meters away. In the place of strategic thoughts came the regular series of tricks his mind played on
him, murmuring softly in Cassius's voice or carrying the scent of blood on his patronus' tusks. Each time, his body was started awake with a jolt, reacting to surprise or threat, before he could settle back down and try to sleep. At what he thought might have been the hour and a half mark, he got up and pretended to go to the bathroom but quickly fled to Gryffindor tower to help with repairs.

He was there for fifteen minutes when Hotch tracked him down and dragged him back to the Room of Requirement.

"Okay, sit down," Hotch told him, and he huffed, sitting cross-legged on the mattress. "And don't give me that look." Hotch sat in front of him on the floor and reached out to take his wrists. "Close your eyes."

Everyone in the room was asleep and knew about the situation, so Harry had no problem sighing irritably and saying, "Dad, this is stupid. If I just keep working, I'll tire myself out and I'll fall straight asleep."

"And risk an attack just when your body's about to crash?" No answer. "Thought so. Eyes." Harry shot him a weak glare before letting them slide close. Hotch turned his wrists so his hands were palm up. "Okay, deep breath... Let it out. Inhale... Exhale. Inhale..." Two of his fingers moved in gentle circles on the backs of each hand. "Exhale. Inhale..." On the other side, his thumb traced a similar pattern on the tops of his wrist, above his pulse. "Exhale. Inhale..."

His breathing steadied into a rhythm, dictated entirely by Hotch's voice. He let his head drop forward, chin almost resting against his chest as it swelled with each inhale. If he wanted to, he could hear the breathing across the room in the quiet and in the perceptive state he was lulled into, but all he wished to listen to was his father's voice.

"Exhale."

Harry felt himself slipping away despite his resolution to fake it long enough to throw his father off, but it was working too well, and he jerked suddenly, eyes flying open. Hotch was only mildly surprised and watched him for an explanation.

"Dad, I- I can't. Once I go to sleep, I'll just wake up. I can't... I keep seeing everyone. I can't do it anymore."

"It's because you're not thinking of anything but the war right before you go to sleep," Hotch said patiently. "Throughout the day, you're working to distract yourself from certain thoughts, but you can't do that at night. Clear your mind, think more calmly, and some of those nightmares will go away. The better you are at it, the easier it will be."

"Do you do this often?"

"No, I suck at it," he said bluntly. His hands left Harry's, instead coming to rest along the sides of his face, fingertips at his temple and the ends of his cheekbone and jaw. One finger gently prodded at the space right beside Harry's eyes, and he obligingly closed both.

"Even if this helps, it'll only work tonight," Harry murmured, face moving beneath his father's hands.

"If you need me each night, I'll be here," Hotch quietly replied. "Inhale...exhale."

A few minutes later, as he clung to the last moments of consciousness, he thought he felt Hotch lowering him onto the mattress before he slipped away entirely for a quiet night of rest.
More parents beside the Davies began filtering in as homes were destroyed and Hogwarts became a last place of sanctuary. Then the ones who were coming in weren't only parents, and the halls were quickly filling up with numerous people looking for a safety. Some of them joined the Order while others exchanged lodging for some form of work, usually repair after the regular short battles or skirmishes so fighters could get rest. Needless to stay, the house elves were beside themselves with excitement about the amount of work they were getting.

Harry was passing one group of them when he saw Prentiss coming from the other direction, and he turned around to walk with her. "Going someplace specific?" he asked. With everything that had been going on, he'd seen a lot of the profilers but hadn't been able to talk to them. It was ironic that after so long spent trying to get to them under Umbridge's dictatorial reign they were now able to see them but didn't have enough time to make meaningful conversation.

"Not really. You?"

In a mutter, he said, "I'm kind of getting tired of constantly leading everyone."

"Makes sense. You probably don't want to hear this, but you'll get used to it."

He groaned. "I know. I think I'm already starting to."

"Have you seen Elle and Draco recently?" Prentiss asked, smirking.

"...No?"

"Oh, they're going to town. It's fantastic. I think you'll see them at your next conference. They're trying to put together a general profile for the average Death Eater, using what Draco knows and what Elle can ascertain from it, as well as everything they learned over the last year with their studies."

Harry smiled at the mention of the Draco's repeated number of tests throughout last term. "Did you ever hear about How Many Harry Potters Does It Take to Get Detention?"

"Oh no."

He was just finishing the story when they passed Reid coming out another corridor, and they gestured for him to join them as they settled into a corridor. Harry waved his wand and dried a damp spot on Reid's shirt without comment, but Reid spoke up anyway.

"We're trying to take care of the people here who aren't really used to this," he said. "They don't know how to deal with this much violence and war, so we're helping them along."

Harry glanced at Prentiss. "That's why you're wandering around." She nodded. "How often are you doing this?"

"When we've got spare time," Reid said. Of all of the profilers, the war had taken a stronger effect on him. He had been wiry before, but everyone in the castle was losing weight from lack of appetite or lack of time to eat, and Reid was no different. In a way, he was beginning to look sick, and the weariness that was leeching at him from sleep deprivation and stress did nothing to help. "To be fair, there's nothing else to do when we're not profiling or fighting." Harry called bullshit - everyone needed more rest - but he didn't say anything, knowing he would rely on them to keep their silence when he did the same.
"That's because you went through the whole library," Prentiss pointed out and the two exchanged a grin then jumped as a house elf appeared between the three of them.

"Here you go!" she said, an old, matronly elf in her elder years. She held a steaming cup of coffee to Reid, whose face lit up as he accepted it. "Have a good one!" The moment Reid had the cup secured, she vanished, and the other two stared at him.

"Rossi was joking about my addiction but a house elf overheard and thought he was serious, so they bring me coffee at certain times of the day to make sure I don't have withdrawal," he said over the rim as he took a cup. "Ooh, right temperature."

Prentiss looked up to the ceiling in exasperation while Harry shook his head. "Hey, what is Rossi up to anyway? I haven't seen him at all."

"That's because he's off having way too much fun creating profiles for every individual Death Eater we know of," Reid explained. "We tried to help, but he said we'd be better off doing what we're doing now, since we're not even sure if the Ministry is going to bother using the profiles. It might just be us, but that can get difficult to do when everything happens so fast in a fight."

Harry nodded thoughtfully. "Hey, are you still wandering around?"

"Yeah."

"Once I finish this cup."

"Can I go with one of you?" he asked.

Prentiss smiled at him, and he knew she was thinking along the same lines he was. It was tiring constantly being in a command position and being surrounded by people who were either technically his subordinates or fellow leaders, and he just needed a break for a little bit. "Of course. Why don't you come with me while Reid continues to abuse the house elves' generosity?"

"I'm not-!"

They laughed as they left him.

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"I'm looking for Harry Potter," the man who had just run up to Rossi said, breathlessly. Rossi raised an eyebrow slightly at the wizard. "Moody asked me to give him an update on the Astronomy Tower ward situation."

"Why didn't he just send a patronus?"

"Potter's surrounded by people, so if it were to be discrete it needed to be delivered on paper." He patted his pocket, where the message was being kept. Rossi nodded in understanding and walked away from the Great Hall, leading him up to the second floor. "You can just tell me where to go," the wizard said.

"I don't quite know where he's at," Rossi said, "but I can help you track him down." He grabbed Elle as she walked past. "Where's Hotch?"

"Went to deal with the medicine shortage." She paused. "Well, one of them was, and you know what that means."
Rossi nodded his thanks and they parted ways. Rossi brought his reliant companion up another floor and went to an obscure classroom to find it packed with people. Some were trying to keep things organized, while others were cataloguing what they had or making notes of what they needed. The rest were using the room for quick reference while they tried to come up with the best solution for various maladies or curses.

The latter was something Rossi was particularly grateful for. While the magical folk were mostly immune to the various diseases that were bred by constant close quarter contact with others, the muggles were far from it. Magical corpses, remarkably, decomposed at a much slower rate than nonmagical, and so many times were moved only days later when the battle had become so heated that reparations were more important than dealing with the dead who didn't care so much anymore about the castle's defenses.

As a result, most of the BAU had gotten sick with one of a multitude of possible illnesses within a week, each individual having something different from another, either from the density of people around them or from whatever was festering in the dead. The fondness that the medical staff had for the BAU, sown and nurtured through the BAU's tendency to linger around the medical wing to help with shock, meant that they had been quick to deal with the issue and had begun making treatments specifically for them.

There was another, much more pressing difficulty that had been encountered. They were running dangerously low on medical supplies. In the beginning, there had only been so much already within the castle, and even with traffic somewhat opened up again, they weren't getting nearly as much as they needed. The Order members who were more aware of the situation were now refusing medical attention if they knew it would deplete the resources further, and no one bothered stopping them when a few saved potions here or there could mean a saved life later. Still, the medical staff, many of whom had come from St. Mungo's to help when they realized Madame Pomphrey was completely overwhelmed with patients, were looking for new ways to ration what they had. Some were trying to brew potions in the dungeons, but Snape's stores weren't unlimited and hadn't been anything close to prepared for supplying the amount a war needed.

"He's in here?" the wizard beside Rossi asked in confusion.

"Somewhere," Rossi said, looking around. "The major heads and deputies of each force end up overseeing just about everything that goes on, no matter if it's delegated to them or not. It helps give them a better understanding of what's happening everywhere in the castle." He finally dragged a lone stool closer and stepped up onto it, failing entirely to catch sight of Harry. "Ah, there's Hotch." Stepping back down, he pointed and said, "Back right corner, by the boils and lesions potions. Good luck."

He made to leave but the wizard called after him, "Wait, I'm looking for Potter, not Hotchner!"

"Where you find one, you find the other," he replied without turning around. "It's just easier to look for the taller one."

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For the first time in what felt like years, the DA gathered almost the entirety of its members into the Room of Requirement. Their numbers were higher than they had ever been before, and it was strange to see everyone in the same place instead of scattered around sleeping or patrolling. Still, most of them were exhausted, mentally or physically, and despite their age it didn't take long to quiet everyone down.

Harry was at the head of the group, and he swore that the Room had sloped the floor slightly so he
could better see everyone. Gideon was to his right a couple of paces off, also surveying the group, and Moody was leaning against a wall even further to his right. The former was there for bouncing ideas off of, while the latter was...

Harry wasn't quite sure what the ex-auror was doing there, but he thought that Moody was probably just watching him. He'd taken to doing that often, keeping an eye on him and making sure he was holding up well under the pressure of leadership. It was almost refreshing, if not for the part where Harry was still leading a large student army against a dark lord's forces.

"Whatever happens today," Harry announced, "nothing's set in stone. While we've got a little lull in the fighting, we want to explore some new tactics. I think a lot of us agree that it's a bit pointless to use techniques that were first developed centuries ago, and it's about time we started changing it up. Split up into groups – I don't care what size – and start playing around with spells and how you use them."

He could already see some of them were shifting towards friends and people they knew well. That worked well in fights, but wasn't going to help them much here. "Go into groups with people who you haven't trained with before. If the people you're with know how you fight, it won't be a good estimator for how any tactics you try would work in a real battle. Gideon and I are going to be walking around, and when we come near you, let us know what's worked for you and what hasn't. We might give you suggestions to try."

He glanced at Gideon, who nodded slightly and glanced over the group briefly. "We're going to be here most of the day," he said. "If your sleep shift comes up, leave and get some rest. We'll probably still be working when you wake up. Start playing around with techniques, and we'll stop you in about an hour to talk over what everyone's discovered."

The group dispersed to various corners, and the Room instantly started to adapt to what the students wanted. Gideon and Harry moved closer to Moody, who agreed to help them keep an eye on what was going on, and the three started walking around the room and observing the various teams.

It was slow going at first, as the groups had to consciously get themselves out of the routines they'd gotten into fighting the normal way. A few, however, instantly jumped into extreme and boisterous displays of odd tactics, notably the Weasley twins and other eccentrics. The groups around them started edging away to avoid getting hit by anything strange or unusual. Harry cast a couple of protection charms around himself and Gideon to make it easier to walk around the groups without serious fear of getting hurt.

"Closing the distance works well," Colin Creevey told him as he passed by, and Harry came to a stop, keeping his thoughts to himself about how Colin should definitely not be here. "It's a bit awkward at first, but once you get used to it, whoever you're fighting has a hard time fighting defensively. So if we can get close without them noticing, and then start firing spells..."

Harry nodded thoughtfully. "What if they notice you getting that close?"

"Make a couple distractions to keep them preoccupied while you narrow the distance?" Colin suggested. "It gets rid of any difficulty in aiming, too."

The Patil twins had the opposite idea, Harry noticed, as he watched the pair firebomb Seamus Finnigan and Ernie Macmillan from across the room. He observed them for a couple of minutes, dimly horrified, before approaching. "Do they even know you're attacking them?"

"Yeah, they're part of our group," Padma said. "We wanted to see how easy it would be for someone to find out where an attack is coming from at this distance. With so many people around, it's really
difficult for them."

"So as long as someone's keeping an eye on us, we'd be able to take out another group," Parvati continued.

"Or if you're not even in the middle of the fight," Harry agreed. "Huh."

"Ducks to water," Gideon muttered later as he was passing Harry. The teenager paused, and Gideon said, "About time to get them all together?"

"Sure."

They rounded everyone back up, which was a little bit more difficult now that they had energy flowing and were considerably rowdier. Still, the groups managed to tone it down enough for Harry to make himself heard. He mentioned the extremes in distances that two groups had seen, but he also made a point to talk about some of the rather obscure spells he'd seen used.

"If your opponent doesn't have a clue what's going on, it seems to be rather confusing," he said, trying to ignore the snickering from Katie and Alicia. Even from the sidelines, he had had absolutely no clue what those ducks had been for. Katie had told him it was the Duckljörs spell but he had decided to cut that conversation short before she confirmed his suspicion that the ducks were transfigured individuals from nearby groups who, flustered by their sudden state change, had charged the girls' fight in irritation and completely distracted their opponents for them.

"There was something I noticed that no one seems to have taken advantage of before," Gideon said when Harry had wrapped up everything he'd seen. "Unless certain precautions are taken, sight, sound, and smell are not protected by general shield charms. Since you're in close quarters with other groups, don't test that right now, but keep it in mind during a real fight."

"The attacks that worked the best were ones that came from other groups," Moody said just before Harry was about to send everyone out again. "Sometimes those attacks were intentional and sometimes they weren't. Keep your eyes out for everything around you, not just the people you're going after."

They sent the groups back to work, and their focus was even stronger this time. Harry asked the room for a catwalk and spent half his time on the ground and half above everyone's heads, while Moody just lurked up there and Gideon predominantly stayed near the students. Happily, he noticed that the groups seemed to be getting stronger as they worked together, even though half the group was usually unfamiliar with the other half.

"They're getting stronger," Gideon noted, standing beside him. Harry was sitting on the edge of the catwalk, arms resting on the railing in front of him and legs dangling below. "A lot stronger."

"I don't recognize some of their tactics at all," Moody said behind him. Harry was extremely thankful that the man's leg usually gave his approach away, because he just knew that the ex-auror would be one of those people who would be deadly silent otherwise. "Gideon, your work from last term?"

"Some of it."

"I think a couple of them are testing patterns," Harry said. "Remember how you had us doing drills to get used to firing spells off as quickly as possible?"

"You think they're memorizing the fastest patterns and seeing how that works."

"Yeah. Look at that group," Harry said, pointing to six people who'd split up. The two trios were
huddled up a couple of meters from each other, talking quietly amongst themselves. One trio was simply talking, not focusing at all, while the other was conversing rather urgently. "I overheard a little bit of what they were doing. They're finding the best rapid combinations for quick disarmament. One group acts normally and the other uses a combination, and they're seeing if that gives them any advantage."

The three of them went quiet as the trio who had been working on the combinations broke up and drew their wants. The other trio prepared to face them, and after an awkward pause started casting spells. Less than ten seconds later, it was over.

"Holy shit," Harry said, scrambling up to his feet. "What did they just do?"

Even Moody's eyebrows were raised. "That could be dangerous if they keep using the same patterns and someone starts predicting them, but if they have enough combinations it shouldn't be a problem."

"I'll be right back," Harry said and hurried off the catwalk to go speak with the group.

He reached them just as the half who had lost were finally restored to their original state as the various curses that had been put on them were lifted. Neville, the nearest person to him as he came to a halt, grinned at him. "This is a lot easier than pulling spells out of nowhere," he said.

"Looks like! What are you doing, exactly?"

Neville glanced at the three who had just lost and Theodore shrugged. "Looks like it's working. No need to test it again."

"There's a couple parts to it. We usually use a string of spells, a couple distractions with some sort of take-out spell in the middle and at the end," Neville explained. "So, for instance, the first four spells might shoot water or glitter or something, the fifth would be a 

\textit{stupefy}, the next three would be more distractions, and then the last one could a be a hex. The distractions make it more difficult for them to see a hex coming, and that 

\textit{stupefy} is really the one we want to use to take them out but the second round of distractions and a hex are a precaution in case it didn't work."

Harry nodded in understanding. "You were firing spells a lot faster than I thought you would have been able to, even having memorized them."

"That was Michael's idea," Neville said, gesturing at the Ravenclaw beside him. "We used the shortest spells we could think of, all of mine probably slurred words together, and I couldn't make out what you were trying to do half the time until you cast the spell!"

"Added benefit," Michael said with a grin.

"I couldn't make out any of the spells you were using," Terry admitted to Justin.

"I was testing the shortest spells we could think of," Justin explained. "All of mine probably slurred
more than Michael's did, since his combinations were more focused on connecting wand movements."

"Did you guys switch groups?" Harry asked.

Neville nodded. "It was working really well in our group, so we asked if we could switch people with their group so we could see if it would still work against people who had gotten used to fighting with us. It does, by the way."

Harry had to agree with that assessment. "Hey, do you guys know where Blaise is at?"

"With Ginny, somewhere over there," Theodore said, gesturing to a corner of the room. "I hope you guys figure out more about those patronuses."

"Yeah, that's what I was thinking," Harry agreed. "We're the only ones with patronuses large enough to have a large effect, but they only stop if the people in front of them surrender." He grimaced at the memory. "Anyway. We'll probably be splitting up for another break in half an hour, so good luck until then."

"You too!" Theodore called after him, and he went to seek out Blue's master.

Blaise didn't look surprised to be pulled away from the rest of his group. "Patronuses?"

"I'm so obvious," Harry sighed, though there was really little other reason he would have been grabbing Blaise specifically. "Yeah. We need to make these things non-lethal."

"Do you think we could just ask them not to harm anyone within certain limitations?" Blaise asked. The two moved away from everyone else, though the loud spells made it hard for anyone to overhear what they were saying.

"It's possible..." He hesitated. "I think we're going to have to test it in here, when no one else is around."

"And not tell anyone about it," Blaise said. "The BAU would flip if they heard we were experimenting with the patronuses, especially since we're going to have to test them on each other."

"Let's do it right after this. I'll send everyone else out, tell them to get food or something, and we can try to work it out as quickly as we can. We won't have as much time as I would like before someone comes back up here, but we'll have a couple of minutes."

The rest of the mass brainstorming session went remarkably well, and within the next couple of hours everyone was so exhausted that it was easy to send everyone to get dinner. Harry walked out with the group, talking to Gideon, then pulled away, saying that he had something else he wanted to see to before he ate. There was no way that Gideon would approve of learning that Blaise and he were just going to let their patronuses loose in an attempt to contain them.

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The Room did not totally clear like Blaise had hoped it would. Luna, instincts as sharp as ever, lingered behind and waited for everyone else to leave. "Do you think it's going to work?" she asked.

"The techniques we just found?" Blaise replied, purposefully misunderstanding. "I think so. We just need to practice, but we do that often enough."
She gave him a tolerating look. "Your patronuses."

"I hope. I don't want Blue to hurt anyone again, not unless it's necessary, and I know it's killing
Harry that his protection is so...violent."

"I'm not surprised," she said calmly. "He gets violent, too, when someone threatens the people
around him."

Blaise frowned slightly. "I thought he got his patronus's form from his father."

"I don't think it is. Harry is very much his own person, even if he relies a little too much on his father
right now. He's starting to find his own ground, though, and that's why his form shifted from the deer
to the elephant. He's moving past expectations of himself to what he wants to be – someone like his
father. Someone who saves people."

"So the elephant is more like Harry's perception of Hotch?"

"I think so. It's also got his own influence, too, but yes, I think the elephant is Harry's own form. But
don't tell him that. He rather likes the idea of having his father's protection through the form of his
patronus." She tilted her head at him. "What do you think Gideon's form would be?"

"A raven," he said automatically. "Definitely a raven, or something of the sort. Probably some form
of bird."

"Ravens are called heralds of death."

"They're just attracted to death," he said dismissively. "And that's his job, isn't it?"

"I suppose."

"This is an awfully depressing analysis of patronus forms," Blaise said, trying to redirect them.

"You are about to test your 'violent' patronuses," Luna reminded him and Blaise conceded the
point.

The door opened before they could take more, and Harry paused when he saw that they had
someone else who had remained behind. When he saw it was just Luna, however, he let the door
close. "Luna," he greeted.

"Harry," she replied. "You shouldn't let Moody get to you so much."

Blaise blinked, and so did Harry. Since when had Moody been bothering the DA leader?

Harry had the same question. "He's not really...that much of a problem."

"A lot of wrackspurts are attracted to him, and some of them are moving to you because he's been
around you so much," Luna said, worry in her voice. "You really should be careful not to get too
stressed out, or you'll just get more of them."

"Oh," Harry said. "Right."

"Anyway, I'll leave you to it. I'm a bit hungry after all that spellwork. Good luck!" She waved at the
pair, then left them to the otherwise empty room.

"I think the longer I'm around her, the more sense she makes," Harry commented.
Blaise paused. "You know," he said carefully, "I discounted everything she said for months. And then some of it really started to seem logical, and now I'm not sure all of what she says isn't right. There's a lot that's still not accurate, but a couple of things..."

The two of them stood there for a moment, and then Harry shook his head. "Well, at any rate," he said. "Have you tried controlling your patronus directly before?"

"Not much. I've told it to protect certain people, but that's been it," he said. "You?"

"I've just been using it as little as possible," Harry admitted. "So, the only way I think we can test this..."

"Is to unleash the patronuses on each other," Blaise finished for him. "Yeah." He tried to ignore the way his heart started stuttering at the thought of facing down the enormous elephant, but he was well practiced in keeping his face expressionless.

Harry, on the other hand, had no issue looking concerned at the notion of running from a velociraptor. "Yeah," he agreed. "Yeah, that's... Um. That's what I was thinking."

"Harry," Blaise said solemnly, "it was nice knowing you."

"Same," was the reply, a bit breathless. Some distant part of Blaise commented on how it was nice to have a leader who was actually human, as opposed to answering to the impassive Moody or the lost-in-the-clouds Dumbledore. "Should we summon them both at the same time, so if one gets out of control the other one will stop it?"

"But what if both of them get out of control?" Blaise pointed out.

"The Room will protect us," Harry said with much less certainty than Blaise would have liked. "I think you'd better start."

Blaise frowned. "What? No. If you get injured, we'll be in much more trouble than if I do. You need to be ready for another attack." Besides, he knew Harry just wanted to be the one to be at risk because he couldn't bear the thought of accidentally injuring Blaise. Nevermind the fact that the alternative meant that Blaise would possibly be injuring Harry.

"If you can't stop your patronus, he's fast, but I can hold him off with transfigured blockades a lot easier than you could hold off..."

"Atlas," Blaise said without thinking. Harry paused, tilting his head to the side. "I was just thinking, from his size, when Luna and I were talking about him," Blaise said, a bit awkwardly as he tried to cover up his thoughts about how stupidly Harry shouldered responsibility sometimes.

After a moment, it became clear Harry was taking it as a genuine name suggestion and not an unintended half-insult. "That works," he said. "Atlas, then. What have you been calling yours?"

"Blue. The muggleborns find it so amusing that I can't find it in my heart to change his name, even though Draco keeps cringing every time because I didn't come up with a more creative title."

Harry nodded, then started to back up to get to the other end of the room. "I'd rather keep stalling, but we need to do this. Blaise, summon Blue."

Blaise frowned heavily. "I really think we should do this the other way around."

"Opinion noted, considered, and ignored. Madame Pomfrey can fix a some bites and scratches easier
than she can grow back all the bones in your rib cage and spine." He finally came to a halt at a reasonable distance from Blaise, giving him enough time to run if he had to.

At that distance, Blaise couldn't read his expression well enough to tell if he was panicking internally as much as Blaise was. All he could think of was what had happened to the first two Death Eaters he'd seen Blue go after.

"Harry," he said, "maybe we shouldn't do this. It might be better if we don't use our patronuses at all in a fight anymore."

"I thought about that," Harry said, "but they've saved too many people. And anything that can end this war sooner... I think we should at least investigate the prospect."

Blaise sighed in agreement and resignation, raising his wand. "Just don't tell your dad or Gideon how we tested this, okay?" Harry nodded tensely, body rigid as he held himself still. "Expecto patronum."

The silvery form of Blue took shape in front of him, but didn't transition to the next stage automatically. It paced back and forth before Blaise, moving in jerky, reptilian motions. Harry waited impatiently, and Blaise had to take a deep breath to get himself under control as his heart started pounding. "Essearia," he managed.

Blaise coalesced in front of him, claws and sharp teeth as real as Blaise's wand. The dinosaur snorted and his tail whipped behind him as he watched Blaise, waiting for direction. Blaise took another quick breath, trying to stop himself from hyperventilating. In front of him, Blue raised his head, body at the ready as his patronus picked up on his elevated nerves.

"Harry, are you ready?" he asked, struggling to keep his voice under control. There was a strange pause, and he glanced up just in time to see Harry finish nodding.

When Blaise didn't do anything, Harry said, failing to completely hide his anxiety, "Are you ready?"

"Get prepared to stop him," was all Blaise gave in reply.

Nothing happened for a long moment.

"I think you need to be in danger from me," Harry said finally and raised his wand. Blaise nodded in agreement, lowering his own. "Expelliarmus!" Blaise let his wand fly from his grasp and winced as Blue's head snapped around to look at Harry. "Confundo!"

Blaise came out of his state a couple minutes later, but nothing had changed. "He's still not charging you?" He just wanted to get this over with now.

Harry was quiet for a moment, and then he said, "I think I'm going to have to pose a real threat to you for this to work."

"Harry, do it," he said quickly. "It's the only way we're going to work this out."

"No, Blaise, I think I'm going to have to actually try to hurt you."

"Just try," Blaise encouraged him. "Blue should theoretically get in the way of anything really harmful that you throw at me."

He didn't think he was imagining the shake in Harry's arm as he raised his wand again. "Diffindo!"

Blue swung around, intercepting the spell and letting it hit his side. The dinosaur growled at Harry.
"Oh, is that the best you can do?" Blaise taunted, though it came out dryer and less vicious than he'd been aiming for. Harry grimaced, and he realized that, yes, this probably was the worst he could do against a friend. "Try sectumsempra."

"What?"

"It's a spell my father used once against a chimera when we were on the Sinai peninsula."

"What's it do?"

"It's sort of like a worse version of diffindo. I think my father learned it from Professor Snape, actually. Give it a go."

Harry took a shaky breath. "Sectumsempra!"

Blue caught most of it, but Harry's wild wand movement caused half of it to go over Blue's back and Blaise had to duck under the rest. Blue screeched and lunged forward so suddenly that it took Blaise a moment to realize that they'd actually antagonized the dinosaur enough with a single spell. On the other end of the room, Harry only moved back one pace, breathing hard but not running.

"Blaise!" he shouted at him.

"Stop, Blue!" Blaise tried.

Blue kept running, legs pumping as he accelerated across the rapidly closing distance between him and Harry. The wizard finally raised his wand, bringing up a barrier between him and the patronus just in time.

Too late, Blaise realized that Harry hadn't let Atlas go enough times to have seen how poorly regular protego shields held up against patronuses. "No, Harry, run!"

Blue passed through the shield like it wasn't even there and Harry staggered back in surprise. Before he could do anything else, a rock wall arose in front of him, formed by Blaise's needs acting on the Room. It bought Harry a couple of seconds, and he started creating more substantial barriers around him as Blue darted around the first block.

Then, all of a sudden, Blue stopped, lifting his head and just looking at Harry curiously.

"What'd you do?" Blaise asked, stunned.

"I... I think it's because I'm not trying to attack you anymore," Harry said slowly, not taking his eyes off Blue.

"No," Blaise said, "it's because you won't even if he leaves you alone, isn't it? Try sending murderous thoughts my way again."

He didn't seem to quite manage that, but Blue did stiffen and crouch down again, though he didn't start attacking.

"Okay, so there's an option," Harry muttered. "But we still need a way to stop them if something else is going wrong and whoever they're attacking needs to be...not killed."

Before Blaise could suggest that he let Blue return to the other end of the room, Harry raised his arm and shot over the nearest barrier, "Sectumsempra!" Blaise reflexively dropped quickly enough that it hit the wall behind him.
Blue shrieked and his claws slashed through the air, narrowly avoiding Harry. The wizard stepped backwards and the barriers around him rose a little higher and expanded, creating a circle of stone around him that was creeping upwards to protect him from Blue.

"Blue, stop!" Blaise shouted as one of Blue's claws hooked along the edge of the stone as he tried to struggle into the circle. Blue ignored him, and Blaise's mind raced. Why wouldn't his own patronus listen to him?

Harry moved as far away from Blue as he could without leaving the protective circle, but Blue let go of the stone and backed up. Just as Blaise thought he was going to leave Harry alone, Blue turned around sharply, sprinted the last couple of steps until the stone, and then leaped into the air, just managing to clear the top.

"Bombarda!" Harry shouted desperately, hoping to throw the dinosaur back. The spell passed over the creature harmlessly, blowing out the stone around him instead.

"No!" Blaise screamed as Blue's claws raked towards Harry. "No, don't hurt him!" He started running, knowing it wouldn't make a difference but doing it anyway. He tried to end the spell and send Blue back to nonexistence, but nothing was happening and Harry was still holding up his thoughts well enough that Blue was attacking him.

Even with Harry's practice at hand-to-hand, he was no match for a dinosaur, and as Blaise watched, Blue's claws got hold of his friend and dragged him to the ground. Harry shouted, out of sight behind the stone he fell under, and Blue dropped his head, and even if Blaise couldn't see it he could still imagine Harry being torn into by those horrible teeth.

He had just come to the edge of the stone when Blue suddenly stood up straight, and he fully expected to see blood glistening around his maw. Instead, as Blaise skidded to a halt beside the stone, he found himself face to face with Harry dangling by the back of his shirt, which was tangled in Blue's teeth. Both of his arms were secured by Blue's claws, and his legs had been trapped awkwardly, flung halfway over Blue's shoulder and trapped against his own chest and Blue's.

Blaise blinked a couple of times.

"I think," Harry said, panting, "the 'don't hurt him' part was rather critical."

Blaise felt his shoulders sink as he let out a sigh of relief. Blue stared at him eagerly, like a dog with a stick telling its master *Look, I brought you a present!*

"You can probably stop trying to 'attack' me now," Blaise said, and Harry nodded in agreement right before Blue opened his mouth and claws, unceremoniously dropping him on the floor.

"Both at the same time, then?" Harry suggested as he got to his feet, patting himself off.

"Why not?" Blaise said warily, moving back to the other side of the room with Blue. He waited for a moment while Harry summoned Atlas. "By the way – don't you ever tell your father we did this."

"I won't so long as you don't tell Gideon," Harry agreed. "Sectumsempra!"

Blaise shouted the spell right back at him, and both hastily moved out of the way of each other's spell. Their patronuses charged immediately, dodging around one another and aiming at the threat.

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Hotch leaned back thoughtfully as Gideon finished explaining what they'd done. "Seems like all of
that should work," he said, "but they'd work for people like us. We're going to have to see if wizards and witches can adapt to using techniques like that."

"It seems that the younger they are, the easier it is for them to think like muggles," Moody said.

"They don't have decades of other experiences against them," Gideon pointed out.

"In any case, the kids aren't the ones I'm worried about. We're having some mental crises in the Order right now." He glanced at Hotch. "Have you talked to Sirius at all since he found out the truth?"

"A little."

"Is he going to come around?"

"No. He's approached me a few times, but for the most part it's just been childish fits. It hasn't been an actual conversation I could work with."

"How are you handling it?"

"Just waiting for him to simmer down."

"You might want to keep Harry nearby until he's calmed," Moody said. "It won't make him any happier, but Harry knows what happened and he'll stop any attacks Sirius might send your way."

"He's not going to go to that extreme."

"Probably not, but Sirius hasn't been known for calculated maneuvers. In his school years, he was known for hexing and cursing other students while their backs were turned or when he had the rest of his group to back him up."

Well, Hotch was almost always with Harry constantly these days anyway. It wouldn't be a huge deviation from his norm to just stick with him a little more closely, even if he didn't know how to feel about being the one who was protected for once.

"Where's Harry?" Moody asked, his false eye roaming to search for the missing teen. "You two usually meet up as soon as you can if you're forced to split up."

The three of them were all early for the afternoon meeting, but Hotch had wanted to hear what had happened while he'd been dealing with a situation involving some a couple of the families who were taking refuge behind Hogwarts's walls.

"Last I heard, he was down in the Great Hall," Hotch said. "He went with the rest of the group."

Gideon frowned. "He didn't go down to dinner with the rest of us."

Hotch paused. "Why not?"

"I don't know. He said he had something else to take care of first, and then left. I didn't see Luna or Blaise either before I came up here."

"They're probably fine," Moody said.

Hotch had to agree, but it just felt weird to not know where Harry was at after the two had spent so long practically joined at the hip, if he was going to be honest with himself. "Are you going to try implementing any of the tactics you just saw with the Order?"
Moody snorted. "They're too stuck in their ways. It wouldn't work with more than a handful of them. I don't know what you and your lot did with those kids, but they're the smartest fighters I've ever seen. They adapt when adults wouldn't."

"I think that's Blackwolf's doing. He hates rigid thinking."

"Before anyone else arrives," Gideon said, "I've got a question for you, Moody." The ex-auror glanced at him with his one good eye. "Did everyone follow Dumbledore's lead in letting Harry get sacrificed for the war because of a certain way of thinking, or was that unusual?"

Moody stared at him for a long, hard moment, before turning to Hotch. "There were two reasons. The Order had a strong hero-worship for Albus, and magical folk are highly superstitious. So when Albus said that a boy could kill Voldemort because of a prophecy, most of them believed it. The only ones who were doubtful were ones who had a close relationship with him."

"I hate to say this," Gideon continued, "but do prophecies usually come true?"

Moody didn't take his eye off Hotch. "Most I've heard of have." Finally, he shifted away. "But then, your family has a penchant for uprooting the status quo."

"Why did you say that the Order did have a hero-worship of Dumbledore?" Hotch asked. "They don't anymore?"

"Not after all of you came in and took the wizarding world by force," Moody scoffed. "Hard to worship an old, sometimes bewildering man who speaks of a better future when a younger, easily understandable batch of motivational people are creating current ripples that are changing the tide. I don't know which one of you is right, but that's what's happening." He glanced at Hotch. "Still, you might be better not being so antagonistic towards him."

Hotch's eyes narrowed, but he saw Gideon look almost amused. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You hate him – and with reason, considering how much your son went through because of some of his decisions. It shows. And while people understand why, it could cause a division in the ranks if there's a serious split between you and Albus."

Hotch grimaced, but he had to admit to the logic of that. "I would say we won't have a problem so long as he doesn't put Harry in any unnecessary danger again, but considering you put my son in charge of an army in the middle of this damn war, I don't think that's going to be possible."

Moody had the guile to smirk. "He's doing well. I've been keeping an eye on him, and he's been doing much better than I thought he would." His head tilted slightly, avid curiosity shining through. "Did you know your son's more powerful than most of the seventh years fighting?"

Hotch blinked a couple of times. "He is?"

"I'd say he's even more powerful than most of the adults in the Order, though I haven't seen him training with them since he's usually with his own lot." Moody nodded, almost to himself, and settled into his seat. "Yes, I'd definitely say he's one of the most powerful fighters on the field right now."

"Ironic, isn't it?" Gideon mused. "The purebloods think their lineage makes them the strongest, but three of the top magic users of the war have muggle parents. Riddle, Harry, and Hermione. The other four – you, McGonagall, Dumbledore, and Lestrange – are just as strong as them, taking age into consideration."

"I wouldn't say that," Moody said immediately, and Hotch expected a discourse on the finesse of
magic that he and McGonagall used. "Harry's much stronger than I was at his age." That took Hotch aback for a couple of moments. "It might be that muggleborns have more powerful magic, if the three you just mentioned are anything to go by. Ever Granger's got more clout than most of the kids she's fighting with, though it's hard to tell if it's ability or smarts that make her so strong."

Gideon's and Hotch's phones both vibrated and they answered them immediately. Moody was already gathering his wand as they stood. "Attack?" he asked as they put their phones back in their pockets and they nodded. "Hotch, tell your son he's fine to go out closer to the battlefield this time." Hotch narrowed his eyes at the idea, but Moody pushed, "He's going to go out there sooner or later and he's starting to strain at the bit. I'd prefer to know when he starts slipping away, wouldn't you?"

Moody left the two of them behind to go to the frontlines. Harry didn't answer his phone, and Gideon called Blaise as he tried another time.

"He's not answering either," Gideon said, frowning in concern.

"You think they're together?" Hotch asked.

"I hope not, or this doesn't bode well. I'll try Luna, just in case. Keep calling Harry." Luna thankfully answered immediately, but Gideon paled as she immediately explained where the two had gone without provocation. "Thank you," he said and hung up. "They were experimenting with their patronuses."

Hotch froze in the middle of redialing again. "What?"

"They were trying to find a way to make them stop killing people, so they could actually use them in combat."

"They're trying that alone with murderous creatures?" Hotch snapped, but Gideon just turned to the door and started running down the steps instead of answering. Hotch followed close behind.

The familiar sounds of battle started up as they ran towards the seventh floor, and for the umpteenth time Hotch cursed all the damn stairs this place had. His phone rang as they hurried up the fifth floor, and he answered it, trying not to drop it down the stairs as he did so.

He hung up, frustration mounting. "Damn it," he snarled.

"What happened?"

"Pucla was still regrouping and the skeleton crew they left to watch the south wasn't strong enough to completely repel the initial attack. Reid was down there with them, and Seamus said that he and a couple of students are trapped in one of the classrooms with a group of Death Eaters."

Gideon swore. "What do we do?"

"Nothing – they'll figure it out before we get there, either way it plays out. Let's just hope that Reid keeps his head and works everyone through it."

They reached the seventh floor later than Hotch would have liked, and while he knew charging into a room containing two killer patronuses was insane he was only half a second in front of Gideon in doing so. As it was, he was surprised neither he nor Gideon had a heart attack at the sight that awaited them.

Blaise was dangling from the air by one foot, Harry's elephant's trunk holding him firmly. His wand had fallen to the floor beneath him, and if he dropped from where he was and the Room didn't
accommodate him, he'd surely crack his head open. He wasn't fighting the grip, resigned to whatever was going to happen to him. Across the room, Harry was on the ground, motionless, while the velociraptor held him down with one foot and snarled over him.

"Harry!" Hotch shouted.

Before he could run forward, Harry sat up abruptly, smacking his head into the dinosaur's with an "Ow!" He rubbed his head, then blinked and looked at Hotch. Grinning, he said, "We found out how to control them!" He must have seen something in Hotch's face because his grin fluttered. "Er."

The dinosaur backed off of him, and Harry gave it a mindless pet as it passed by. He glanced at Blaise across the room, just as the elephant slowly lowered the Slytherin to the ground. Blaise looked at him in return. "I guess it's working," he said, completely unconcerned about the two adults who were close to strangling the pair.

"You deal with yours, I'll deal with mine," Hotch said in a low undertone. Gideon nodded, expression grim. Louder, letting his voice carry across the room, he said, "Harry, come with me."

Beside him, Gideon just said, "Blaise."

The two teenagers started walking towards them, meeting halfway as their patronuses met back up with their originators. Hotch saw Harry duck his head for a moment and swore he heard him mutter to Blaise, "R.I.P." The Slytherin clearly bit back a snort, but Hotch just narrowed his eyes. He didn't find this nearly so amusing.

"Did Luna tell you where we were?" Blaise asked curiously as they got closer.

"Yes, and you're lucky Gideon noticed that the two of you and her skipped out on dinner," Hotch snapped, causing both to falter at his sudden aggression.

A blast echoed through the hallways and Harry's eyes widened in understanding. "Shit, when did it start?"

"Ten minutes ago. Which you would have known if you answered your damn phones. Pucla's already got a problem."

Blaise, second in command for Pucla, straightened. "What?"

"Some of the early wave broke through and cornered a group, which includes Reid."

Blaise turned sharply to his patronus. "Do not kill anyone," he ordered, "or fatally injure. Go to the southern border of the school and protect it from Death Eaters." The velociraptor took off immediately, lowering its head until its body was almost horizontal and sprinting out of the room and down the hall to follow the given directions.

"You're sure that's going to work?" Gideon said.

Both teenagers nodded immediately. "We just have to be very specific, and we have to know that our orders can be ignored if someone's still in danger," Blaise explained. Before anyone could say anything else, he started running after the dinosaur, hurrying to get to his post as if his speed made up for lost time.

"I'll head back to the office," Gideon told him. Hotch nodded, and the older man left. Gideon would hand Blaise his disappointment and disapproval on a silver platter when the war was done and he
could get Blaise to sit still long enough to hear the lecture.

"Come with me," Hotch said, and Harry hurried the last couple of steps to catch up to him. After that stunt, he was eager to keep Harry back at the office since that was the closest he could get to grounding his son in this situation, but that just wasn't a feasible option right now. "Why didn't you tell anyone what you were doing?"

"We had to work out how to use them, and that just wasn't happening the way we were trying it," Harry said. "We couldn't let anyone else die, because of our patronuses or because we were refusing to use them. And we knew none of you were going to let us do it, not when they'd caused such damage."

"Harry, a lot of people around here know by now that you're going to do whatever the hell you want because you know there aren't a lot of people who can stop you," Hotch said, tone still just as sharp. "Almost anyone you would have asked would have been all right with supervising to make sure neither of you got hurt, since you would have done it somehow even if they weren't watching you. The whole reason for doing that was because your creatures were dangerous – it's stupid to ignore that just because you wanted to run some tests."

Making sure to watch him as he spoke to press his point, he added, "It could have gone very badly with only the two of you in there." Harry winced, and Hotch's eyes narrowed further. "And I'll bet it got close to that point, didn't it?"

Harry paused, briefly considering a lie, then said, "We had some problems at the beginning."

There were a few strained minutes of silence as they walked through the halls, both struggling to find something to say without ceding ground. Behind them, he could hear the elephant's lumbering footsteps matching pace with them. Hotch knew Harry was keeping just as careful an eye on the battles they could see through the windows as he was the conversation, and grudgingly reminded himself that this wasn't so important at the moment.

"Don't ever do something like that again without taking better precautions," he finally said, voice stern.

"Got it," Harry muttered.

"Moody said you can stay closer to the frontlines this time," he said and Harry glanced up at him. "If you've got your patronus with you, then I suppose you should be safer than he assumed. But damn it, be careful."

Harry nodded quickly. "Yeah. You too."

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"Hotch?" Morgan said over the phone four hours into the battle.

That wasn't good. Morgan always just said what was wrong. "What?" Hotch asked.

"...Harry's dueling Riddle."

Hotch resisted the urge to throw his phone at the nearest person. That would have been McGonagall, who had stopped by on her way to deal with a situation on the Astronomy Tower to tell him that the Pucla situation hadn't been resolved yet.

"Hold on." He lowered his phone briefly. "Where's Dumbledore?" he asked her.
"He was by the greenhouses, last I heard."

To Morgan, he asked, "Where are they dueling?"

"Near the main entrance."

"Is Dumbledore anywhere close by?"

"Not that I've seen, but Riddle wasn't making any headway before so I don't know if he was here earlier or not to slow him down."

Dumbledore had damn well better not be dead, or serious problems were going to arise. He glanced at McGonagall. "Harry's dueling Riddle by the main entrance. Can you get Dumbledore over there?"

"Uh, Hotch?" Morgan asked urgently. "Your son's winning."

Hotch paused. "What do you mean?"

"Harry's pushing back Riddle."

Hotch met up with Morgan just a couple of minutes later, standing with him by one of the windows that overlooked the courtyard in front of the entrance. Below, the entire area was in tatters, and that was all Hotch could make out before a curtain of flame swept across the windows. Morgan hardly flinched, and he glanced at Hotch wearily while they waited for it to pass and stop obscuring their view.

"He's been holding up pretty well, but he seems to be pissing off Riddle so badly that Riddle's fighting like this battle decides everything."

"What was he thinking?" Hotch demanded, more to himself than anything but Morgan still answered.

"It looked like Riddle was going to break through. Honestly, he might have if not for Harry's intervention." Morgan grimaced irritably. "Dumbledore was here for a little bit, but then... It was weird, Hotch. Something went wrong."

Hotch frowned. "What do you mean?"

"He wasn't fighting like usual. Not for lack of trying, but his wand just didn't seem to be cooperating anymore. He left."

Hotch stared at him for a long moment. "His wand was giving him trouble so he ditched the fight to let Harry handle Riddle?" he demanded.

Morgan grimaced and nodded. "Looked that way, though I'll bet there's more to it. Even Riddle was looking at him strangely. There was something weird going on."

Hotch muttered crossly under his breath and Morgan politely did not comment on the string of insults he let out. The fire finally passed, letting Hotch see the duel below. Harry was doing well, he had to admit, but that didn't make it any easier to watch.

"If you go down there, you'll just distract Harry," Morgan said quietly.

"I know. Doesn't make it any easier to stay away." After a moment, he asked, "Where's everyone else?"
"The Death Eaters don't want to accidentally take Harry out and piss off Riddle, and our side is staying out of the way so Harry doesn't have to worry about them. That, and I think they know they're out of their league in that fight."

Before either of them could say anything, Hotch's phone rang. He grimaced, sparing another glance to the duel, before answering it. "Yeah?"

"Hey, Hotch?" Reid asked on the other end, and he started in surprise at hearing the young profiler's voice. "I've got...uh..." Quiet counting. "Eight surrendering Death Eaters, but we're running out of space. Er, where do I take them?"

Hotch pinched the bridge of his nose. One day he'd get used to the antics of Harry and Reid, but that would not be on a day that he had to deal with both of them at the same time. "I thought you were trapped in a room with Death Eaters."

"Yeah, for the last couple of hours, but we came to a truce after the first few minutes and half of them just escaped and the other half gave up, so..."

He sighed silently. "Ask Gideon. I'm not near the control center right now."

"Ah, okay. Hey, I heard Harry's dueling Riddle."

"He is," he replied shortly.

Reid made a sound like he was going to ask something else, then reconsidered and said, "Er, I'll go call Gideon, then."

"Was that Reid?" Morgan asked when he hung up.

"We now have eight new POWs," Hotch said in response, and Morgan almost smiled.

An hour later, Harry finally pushed Riddle back far enough that the dark lord simply vanished instead of continuing the fight. If the battle was going to continue for much longer, he'd probably show up somewhere else, but if he decided that the Death Eaters' morale was just going to drop further if he continued then he would pull everyone back. They would know within the next half hour, so Hotch left Morgan and moved down to the entrance hall to try to intercept Harry.

He ran smack into another Death Eater on the way, which was sort of embarrassing for both of them, and the Death Eater immediately raised both hands as Hotch pointed his gun at him. The gesture made Hotch pause, both because no one had done that before and because any nonmagical individual would surely have tried to knock the gun from his hands at this proximity.

"I'm done fighting," the Death Eater said, so warily that Hotch felt a pang of sympathetic sleep deprivation. "Where do you want me to go?"

The ninth surrender in one day that he knew of. If they kept up this pace, they would just have to keep stealing Riddle's followers until he didn't have enough left to continue fighting.

A green light cloud puffed behind the Death Eater for a moment as a spell hit him, and he collapsed to the ground. "He surrendered," he said as Harry hurried up to him, lowering his wand as he did so.

"Yeah, but I figured you didn't feel like walking him all the way back to the rest of them," Harry said dismissively, raising his wand as an afterthought to cast a silencing charm to keep their conversation eavesdropper-free. "We've got a problem."
"Which one?" Hotch dryly responded.

"Heh." A flicker of a smile crossed his face, but he quickly grew serious again. "Which two. First, there's something wrong with Dumbledore's wand."

"I heard," he said darkly.

"No, something really wrong," Harry said urgently. "He was dueling Riddle and it suddenly started...misbehaving. I made him cede the duel to me because he was going to lose." At Hotch's look, he scowled and said, "Look, I figured if Riddle killed Dumbledore we'd be in bigger shit than if I lost a duel to Riddle. Anyway, we can argue about that later. I pushed Riddle back-

"I was here for the last hour," Hotch interrupted.

"Oh. So I came back in to start looking at the situation again, since I put Hermione in charge before I went out there, and Dumbledore caught up to me. He said his wand's core is acting up because he was disarmed recently, so it's not treating him as its true master."

Hotch frowned. "What does that mean?"

"It significantly weakens the amount of power he can channel through his wand. He had to go back to his original wand, which should work better for him but still won't be as powerful as the one he's been using."

"Is he still going to be able to duel Riddle with it?"

"Don't know. We'll see, I suppose. So there's that. Second problem – Riddle has a plan that's getting close to completion."

"How do you know that?"

"Other than him practically gloating over it, a bunch of other people said that the Death Eaters are starting to act weird. A couple of power players who should be here aren't, and Hermione and I realized that a lot of their...analysts, for lack of a better word, the people who they rely on for planning, haven't been here at all in the last couple of skirmishes."

"So Riddle's here himself while his upper echelons are trying to work out the endgame."

"Something like that. But...we haven't heard anything about what that might be," Harry said. "I just wanted to tell you, so keep an ear open until this is over." He started to turn away, then stopped.

"What?" Hotch asked.

"Just...nothing."

"Harry," Hotch called as Harry began to walk off. "What?"

"Something someone said, while I was leaving the duel site." Harry frowned thoughtfully. "One of the Death Eaters Pucla had captured, not one of the few who surrendered, kind of snapped at me and said I'd done really well against Riddle, but...They asked how I'd do against two of him."

Hotch's frown matched his. "What?"

"There's no way, even with magic, to copy someone and create a true doppelganger," Harry said. "Nothing that I've ever heard of, anyway. I wouldn't have thought twice of it, but for a Death Eater, this one actually sounded like there was still some logic left in the head."
"If Riddle could manage something like that... No, if something like that were possible, where would he look to figure that out?"


"You think the ability to do something like that could be down there?" Hotch asked, alarmed.

"I don't know," Harry said slowly. "I just know that there are some very, very unusual things hidden down there, things that even Moody said should be left untouched and unresearched. I don't know if something like that is possible, but if it were... I wouldn't be surprised to hear that Riddle found it there."

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter is going to be the inserted chapter and it's not written yet, so there might be a slight update delay. We'll see. After that, I'm really going to try to keep up with the updates because shit's going to go down and it'd just be mean to leave you in that much suspense and angst.

Speaking of which... I think you all know by now that something traumatizing is going to happen. You've got an option – do you want the slightly, slightly less traumatizing option, or the full-on trauma? There's no plot difference, but the latter is just a bit more gory and holy-shit-why. It's also got a bigger impact, and I initially wrote it like that because I am terrified of that sort of...incident, so I could write the response well, but...well, it is pretty horrifying. If I say what it is it'll spoil it, so I won't do that, but the question's still up in the air.

By the way, someone nailed it on the head, but did anyone else catch the reason why Dumbledore's wand is having issues? (To the person who figured it out immediately, nicely done!)
Blackwolf's Interlude

Chapter by AlexTheReaper (daviesroyal), daviesroyal

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"My pastor always says our lives are streams flowing into the same river towards whatever heaven lies in the mist beyond the falls. Find the joy in your life, Edward. My dear friend, close your eyes and let the waters take you home." - The Bucket List

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Blackwolf sidestepped a large rock in his path. He had a folder open in front of him while he walked, reading in what looked like a complete disregard to his surroundings. His footing was still surer than that of the students he had spent a summer training.

A stash of empathy amulets the Amazon had gone missing. Just one week prior, a group of hooded men had tried to buy the same amount. The Amazons had turned them away, citing discomfort with the group as their reason when aurors talked to them later. And now the amulets were gone.

Empathy amulets were not inherently dangerous. They were used to connect people who were long distances apart, usually partners or soul mates, platonic or not. The material they were made out of was very rare, and most of it went to the creation of these amulets.

Seven had been stolen.

Blackwolf closed the folder and opened the one behind it. A Tibetan monastery had been broken into last week. Most of the original "cycle" runes, as they were called, were held there.

He slid both folders into a bag on his waist and looked up. A moment later, Buckbeak landed beside him, feathers rustling as he closed his wings. Blackwolf ran a grateful hand over the hippogriff's neck, then climbed onto his back. Buckbeak bolted forward, opened his wings again, and sent them into the sky.

They went west. Hippogriffs had endurance the likes of which had never been fully put to the test before and were known for practically limitless flight. Blackwolf held onto Buckbeak's back as they flew to the Pacific and then just kept going. The air got colder, but a few warming charms fixed his chills.

Riddle has almost entirely focused on Europe. He shouldn't have even left Britain. The only reason why he would have would be if the rest of the world had something he needed, but none of the items or knowledge he was seeking seemed to fit together. No ritual Blackwolf had ever heard of called for what Riddle was collecting. Was he trying something new, or something so obscure and dark that its existence was kept hidden?

If Riddle was now interested in global matters, though, Blackwolf might be able to get American aid to the Hogwarts stronghold. The Americans wouldn't be pulled to war, but they could lend a hand at least through resources or people. Blackwolf just had to find out what Riddle was up to and prove it was a threat to the Americans. Even if it wasn't a threat, the Hogwarts leaders would be interested to know about any potential news of Riddle's plans.

He needed more information.
They finally reached Tibet. Buckbeak shook out his wings when he landed on the mountain ridge. Blackwolf slid off, feet landing a bit unsteadily on the ground after such a long period of immobility. He could have just used Floo powder to get to China, but then he would have had an even longer journey to get up here to the mountains where there was no access to a fireplace.

Blackwolf was certain that there were other, quick ways to make a trip to the Tibet mountains without walking like all the foreigners did, but he didn't call them out on it. If they wanted their secrecy and privacy when they were holding some of the most powerful runes, then they could hide their magical escalators or whatever it was they used.

They were a couple miles from the monastery, but Blackwolf walked the mountain instead of letting Buckbeak take him the rest of the way. He wanted to wake up his sleeping muscles a bit, for one thing, but he also wanted to avoid startling anyone with his arrival. An hour and a half walk wasn't really going to make a difference anyway.

There was a monk waiting for him when he arrived, sitting in front of the monastery with his eyes closed. Blackwolf's steps were almost silent but he approached just a little more unobtrusively to avoid interrupting the monk. Beside him, Buckbeak got the quiet memo for about five seconds before squawking loudly at a cat that was sitting on a flat stone. The cat hissed back at him.

The monk opened his eyes and looked up at them. A grin spread across his face. He got to his feet and started towards them to meet Blackwolf halfway. Behind him, Blackwolf could hear Buckbeak and the cat resolving their dispute with each other.

"An Apache visitor!" the monk cheered. "It is not often you come here."

"We assumed you wanted peace from the outside," Blackwolf said.

"Yes, but you do not bring disorder," the monk pointed out. "The natives of America do not bring disorder to anyone's lands, not after disorder was brought to theirs."

Blackwolf smiled slightly. "We're human like anyone else, but we don't go to war every weekend like the Europeans."

The monk put one arm out towards him, curving around his shoulder without touching, and used his other arm to point towards the monastery. "Come in. You are here for a reason. I would like to know when we are more comfortable."

Blackwolf glanced over his shoulder at Buckbeak. The hippogriff had dropped his head to the cat, sniffing at her. She stared at him, unblinking. His beak nudged her shoulder and she batted it aside irritably.

Inside the monastery, it was a couple of degrees cooler. Candles put shadows across the floor and walls, but nothing was hiding in the darkness. A couple of monks were sitting in various states of contemplation, and a small group towards the back was whispering spiritual theories. Blackwolf couldn't understand what they were saying, but he knew those tones and expressions well enough that the topic was clear.

His guide settled him on a rug and sat across from him. "You seem to be in a hurry, otherwise I would extend offerings to you as a guest."

"I'm not in a rush," Blackwolf said.

The monk grinned. "Maybe you just don't think you are."
Blackwolf wondered if this was why Hotch sometimes looked like he wanted to strangle him and he had a flash of understanding. Blackwolf, however, had no issue with having his emotions and actions deciphered like this. He smiled back. "Probably. I'm sorry to be so abrupt."

"Well, perhaps you will have to return another time and be a proper guest," the monk told him.

"I will," Blackwolf promised. "I am investigating a series of odd thefts around the world, some property and some intellectual. What has been taken is being transferred to a dark lord."

"There is no current dark lord," the monk said immediately. "The last dark lord's power diminished until he was no longer a lord."

"Tom Riddle," Blackwolf said, nodding. "Europe still thinks of him as one."

The monk shook his head. "If he were a true dark lord, he would not have contented himself with a single island. He would have spread his influence while he had the chance. His early defeat led to his early power decline. He is no longer a dark lord."

"I know. But the Europeans are..."

The two shared a grin.

"A bit dramatic," Blackwolf finished, more politely than anything else he could have said.

"Their concept of a dark lord is mistaken," the monk said. "Evil is not born in the simple manner they understand. It is created, with many of the same forces that create the most powerful light."

"They do not understand," Blackwolf agreed. "But something is happening right now, something they aren't preparing for. There is a boy who is going to be in the center of it. He and his father have been making every effort to end the war, but they can't fight something they don't know about."

"Ah," the monk said, smiling. "You know them?"

"Very well."

"Please send our greetings. They are good people."

Blackwolf paused. "Who's been talking about them?"

"Cassius Warrington."

The air vanished from Blackwolf's lungs. "He's..."

"Dead. Would you like to speak to him?"

It took a moment for Blackwolf's head to clear enough for him to manage a nod. He got to his feet, a bit shaky, and the monk led the way to the back of the monastery, passing by fellow monks in the midst of prayer and debate. Blackwolf, who would normally have been so interested in what he was seeing, could hardly focus on anything more than the back of the monk ahead of him.

"Cassius?"

They went into the passageways, away from the main enclosure. Blackwolf finally asked, "How do you know Cassius?"

"We have a threstral herd at the bottom of the mountains. Sometimes they bring wandering spirits up
to us.” The monk glanced over his shoulder briefly. "Though...threstrals are not common in America, so am I being too bold to assume you've met one?"

"I've had interactions with the herd by Hogwarts," Blackwolf said, "but I don't know much about them. Only the dead can see them."

"Do you know why?"

Blackwolf shook his head.

"They have a connection to the dead. Spirits often use them as steeds when they need to travel, which is why they are so hard to tame. Threstrals are responsible for the dead, not the living."

Blackwolf might have to have some words with Hagrid about taming that herd. Maybe they'd be better of performing their usual duties.

"When Cassius died, he was too slow to turn himself into a ghost, but he did not stop himself from leaving the land of the living. Unfortunately, as many find themselves, he was then stuck here without any way to assist his friends. A threstral found him on the edge of a battle and brought him here."

"Why?"

"At this monastery, we have the ability to send the dead on. The threstrals know this, so they bring lost souls here. Only...Cassius wasn't lost. He still has a purpose, and he won't let us send him on until he's accomplished it."

"He wants to help his friends."

"Yes. He has some of the answers you're here for, I believe." They reached an old wooden door. The monk pushed it in. "Cassius. You have a friend."

A ring of stones in the center of the room housed a blue fire. Whispers emanated from it, carrying snippets of words to Blackwolf's ears. Most of them were in languages he couldn't speak. He thought he could see flickers of faces in the flames. He yanked his gaze from it, looking around the room. Shelves were holding large pots and containers of liquids and items he couldn't quite make out.

And standing to his right, shoulders hunched and leaning against one of the shelves, was Cassius.

The young man was staring at him, mouth gaping. Slowly, his shoulders fell, posture relaxing in shock. "Blackwolf? What are you doing here? I didn't think anyone was coming!"

"We didn't know!" Blackwolf said. He glanced at the monk, who was frowning apologetically.

"We tried to send messages to Hogwarts but with the shut down of the government none of them got through," he said, answering the question before it was asked.

"I didn't even think to send them to you," Cassius breathed out. "I assumed everyone from Quantico was at Hogwarts."

"Garcia and JJ still aren't," Blackwolf said. "Hotch managed to keep them off the battlefield, especially after Henry was born."

A small smile crept over Cassius's lips. "Henry?" Blackwolf nodded. Cassius let out a relieved laugh, but his expression quickly sobered. "There's a lot I need to tell you."
"What about? Have you been spying on Riddle?"

Cassius grimaced. "I tried, but the threstrals didn't like me meddling like that and nothing I learned was helpful anyway." In an odd sort of thinking, it did make sense that the threstrals wouldn't want Cassius using his deathly experience to get an advantage during war. Death wasn't meant to be a continuation of a fight. It was meant to provide a conclusion. "But you need to know – Death is taking a huge interest in the war."

Blackwolf frowned. "You're not speaking metaphorically."

"No. Actual Death, like the personification or whatever it is. When I was still at Hogwarts, I saw it around all the time. Looked kind of like a dementor but worse. Kept taking souls. Wanted mine, but I wouldn't leave. It didn't seem to mind that, actually. It probably had better things to do than try to convince me. Watching it was...weird. Time didn't seem to apply to it when it was picking up the souls."

Cassius licked his lips nervously, thoughts still on what he had seen. He had moved closer to Blackwolf, but not close enough to touch. Blackwolf had a feeling that they would have passed right through one another if they had, and Cassius was certainly trying to avoid that.

"Sometimes, when it wasn't picking up souls, it would wander around the castle. It seemed to be looking for something, or...waiting. I asked it what it wanted and it drew this pattern," Cassius said, raising his finger into the air. He made a line, and then inscribed a triangle and circle around it. He glanced at the monk. "Sonam told me it was saying it wants its items back."

"There's a story, but it's so old that we doubt it's complete authenticity now," Blackwolf said. "In Europe, they call it the Tale of the Three Brothers, after one of Beedle the Bard's fables."

Cassius nodded to the monk. "Sonam told me about it. We think Death wants those items back."

"The issue is that the items are in the realm of the living now, something Death can't touch," Sonam said. "Death needs an intermediary to bring the items. People have died with the items in their possession before, but without the intent to return the items nothing would have happened."

"So...Death is looking for someone who would be willing to help," Blackwolf said. "And with so many people dying on the battlefield, it's hoping that one of those people would offer if it can make communication with one of them."

"Death's already chosen someone," Cassius said. "I don't know who and I don't know why, but it was definitely watching someone specific. It was just...waiting."

Blackwolf frowned. "Then... Why do you seem so nervous about this?"

"Well... Perhaps I'm biased against it, but I'm concerned about what's going to happen when Death gets what it wants," Cassius said.

"I believe Death will simply carry on when it's mission is accomplished," Sonam said soothingly. "Death has no aspirations past maintaining balance."

"Why would items of Death disturb the balance?" Blackwolf asked. "We have plenty of other powerful items around and those three haven't caused significant damage."

"Have you heard the Double Lord Nine-Fold theory?"

"The what?" Cassius asked at the same time Blackwolf said, "Yes."
"Do you believe it?"

Blackwolf sucked in a breath. He glanced at Cassius, then back to Sonam. "I'm one of the Gatekeepers."

Sonam smiled. "So am I."

Cassius raised a hand. "Hang on. What?" The two looked at him. "Hey, I'm dead anyway. I'm not going to tell anyone."

"The Double Lord Nine-Fold Theory refers to the concept that magic is too wild and unpredictable to be contained in one reality. It would reverberate within its container too powerfully and would destroy everything. As a result, we concluded centuries ago that there had to be more than one reality, and after a long time spent listening carefully...we found the other worlds. In total, we located nine, including our own."

"Each world is supposed to maintain its own balance," Sonam said. "Usually, this is managed easily. Someone who believes destruction is the only solution builds power, and someone who believes in creation stops the world from falling into chaos."

"A Dark Lord and a Light Lord," Cassius said. He got two nods in return. "But... Light Lords are rarely seen."

"That's a whole other topic," Blackwolf said. "It's more complicated than that. Light Lords are actually just as common as Dark Lords, but they aren't seen as often, and when they are seen, they tend to die soon after."

Cassius's eye twitched. "Okay, so... What does all that mean?"

"There is only one Death, so there can only be three true objects of Death," Sonam said. "If you are seeing Death here, searching for what it has lost, then the items must be here."

Something in Blackwolf's head clicked. "The balance has been disturbed because those objects exist here and not in any of the other worlds. We're too strong."

"And as a result, some of the gates between the worlds began to flare. We are not the only ones who heard the other worlds this time. It would seem that Tom Riddle has discovered that he is not the only Tom Riddle."

"The Gatekeepers, like you two, are supposed to keep the presence of the gates secret, right?" Cassius guessed. They nodded again. "What happens if someone finds out, or tries to go through?"

"There are only seven worlds now," Blackwolf said. "The last time someone found out, two of the worlds were destroyed."

"...Oh."

Blackwolf glanced at Sonam. "Empathy amulets went missing. Riddle could be trying to use them to connect with one of his alternate selves."

"It is possible."

Blackwolf frowned. "I can't tell the Hotchners any of this."

"What?" Cassius practically shrieked.
Blackwolf glared at him. "It's not like they would believe me! And even if they did, I still can't tell them about the other worlds! That's the whole purpose of being a Gatekeeper!"

"Oh come on, how often do secrets actually help people?" Cassius demanded. "Especially within the coalition at Hogwarts?"

"There isn't complete unity at Hogwarts anymore," Blackwolf said. "There was just a major division between the Order and the rest after Hotch admitted to being Harry's father. Dumbledore and Hotch are no longer in agreement, and you can bet that Dumbledore would do anything to take back some power. What do you think he would do if he found out that there are other worlds out there?"

Cassius blinked. "I... I don't know. But...hang on, everyone knows?"

"Some people do."

Cassius shoved that thought aside. "Isn't there a way you can tell Hotch and Harry without anyone finding out?"

"Not in that castle. It's duty is split between its students and the headmaster, and as long as most of the students accept Dumbledore as their headmaster he will remain in power. The castle would find a way to tell him anything I try to keep secret from him."

"The QDA doesn't really accept him anymore."

"But the QDA doesn't represent most of the students."

Cassius scowled.

"The chances are too great. In any case, I still need to ask the rest of the Gatekeepers if I could tell them. It shouldn't take me long."

Cassius frowned and crossed his arms, but he settled into grudging agreement. "I'd say something, but I know you'll hurry as quickly as possible." Blackwolf nodded. "So... Why is this disorder happening now? Haven't we had the Hallows for, like, centuries?"

"Yes," Blackwolf said, "but at this particular moment we happen to have had a huge build of power, so I expect we're disproportionately stronger than any other world. It means we're way out of balance, just by happenstance."

"Build of power?"

"We've got a couple people who might become Light Lords, and one is uncommon," Blackwolf said. "We've got-"

"Wait, a couple?"

"Light Lords start to show their power when they're young, and they fully develop after experiencing extreme trauma," Blackwolf said. "Multiple students have showed signs, just of the ones I've noticed." Cassius nodded in understanding. "We've also got stronger potential for the future because of the connections the QDA has made between the muggle and magical world, and potential is more powerful than people normally believe. A leopard-spirit is on the move."

"A leopard-spirit?" Sonam asked curiously.

"Yes."
"Interesting."

"We also have cooperation between magical creatures, the likes of which hasn't been seen in a long time, and now Death's disproportionate time spent in this world. We have a lot of power right now." He glanced at Sonam. "But...one of the other world's seemed to be building up too."

"You keep an eye on the other worlds?" Cassius asked.

"Yes. We never interact with them, but we do make sure that no one is ever trying to cross into this world by keeping an eye on the stability of the barriers. It seems like power is building in one of the other worlds, though."

"Which one?"

"We can't say. The barriers are all connected, and whoever's messing with it seems to be trying to hide his or her presence."

"Could I go through the barrier?" Cassius asked. Sonam and Blackwolf stared at him. "I mean, I'm dead. Couldn't I go through and see what's going on?"

"I don't think so," Blackwolf said slowly. "But..."

"Whoever is adjusting the barriers has made it all but impossible for movement to occur through them," Sonam said. "It seems like they are trying to ensure that they are the only ones who could cross. Cassius might be able to disrupt that and change the barriers back to how they should be."

"Like magical wave frequency disruption," Cassius said smugly. Sonam blinked in mild confusion.

Blackwolf smirked. "It's a QDA thing," he told Sonam.

Sonam looked at Cassius. "You do understand that changing the barriers will likely exhaust your hold on this world, don't you?"

Cassius grimaced. "I don't have anything else to do here. I suppose I might as well help in any way that I can."

"This is going to take a while," Blackwolf told both of them.

"Better get started, then," Cassius said. "By the way, can you tell someone to grab my will when the war's calmed down? I left something to the QDA that they might find helpful, once everything's been wrapped up."

Chapter End Notes

I was seriously considering not writing this chapter at all and just skipping it, but now I'm really glad I did because I made some connections that I realized hadn't been put down specifically in any chapters and Cassius wasn't supposed to return at all, so I'm glad he got a conclusion since I know some of you really liked him. (I didn't think anyone would get attached and then a bunch of you were so happy with him and I just had to quietly sit in my corner and wait for that first battle... Sorry.)
I meant to have a conversation between Hotch and Harry with Blackwolf nearby so you could really see them from a different view, but it just didn't happen because Blackwolf didn't need to go back there for any reason since he can't tell them anything yet. Sorry. But because this was short, next chapter will be up tomorrow.

Trust me, you're going to be a lot happier with the alternate realities than you would be if I just left everything the way it was. There's a couple of conflicts that definitely would have been darker without alternate realities because of who would have been required to fit certain roles.
Most civilians had been given a place to stay in the lowest portions of the castle, since they were the least likely areas to be attacked. The towers, on the other hand, were almost always completely vacant during battle, when they could be used as defenses, because they were usually the first places to be struck or entered and had a tendency to change hands multiple times throughout the battle. It wouldn't do to get sleep only to have a Death Eater come charging in the room, who was then stunned by an ally, who was then thrown out the window by another Death Eater.

Harry had opened the Chamber of Secrets again, and they'd moved the basilisk out and cleaned the entire place up so people could stay in there. The first ones to enter had been rather reluctant, but there was soon no choice as available rooms quickly filled up, and some had to be moved out of parts of the dungeons so that the dead could be housed there. They couldn't be put in the Chamber, which was connected to the plumbing, for sanitation reasons.

Most of the others shared rooms in clumps. The BAU, for instance, took a small area in Slytherin, the rest of which was devoted completely to the DA. That had happened casually, beginning with Harry claiming it because of its somewhat safe locations in the lower levels of the castle and an unspoken agreement with Moody that the older Order members were not likely to be at ease sleeping surrounded by green and silver like the DA were. No one remembered who suggested it, or even if it was someone from the DA or the BAU, but all of a sudden the BAU were taking the common room, partitioning of a small area to sleep. The castle was too full of people to care about privacy anymore.

Each house could comfortably fit about seventy people, but Ravenclaw and Gryffindor couldn't be used as they were towers and Hufflepuff was filled with the Order. Despite that, they still didn't have enough space for everyone to sleep. The Order's number steadily rose, now reaching into the hundreds, while the DA tally kept increasing as the older students who had remained behind to help almost inevitably joined. By the end, they were at a hundred and sixty, putting ten or eleven people in dorms built for five. It didn't take long to work out a three-stage cycle throughout the day, giving everyone eight hours in a bed while the rest were moving in the castle. No one needed a space for downtime that wasn't spent in some form of war effort.

"I don't get how we have a hundred and sixty-three people," Harry admitted at five in the morning to his father. He didn't even think the hour strange anymore, since both he and Hotch had the evening
sleep shift from twelve to eight. "That's about half the school, and not all the Slytherins stuck with us." It had been hard for those who had bunked with them, but quite a few had been forced to leave to accept the Mark due to familial obligations. They had appreciated those who chose to stay, inspired in part by Draco and others who refused, all the more for it. "And not every student who stayed has joined, but Hermione put a roster together and we most definitely have a hundred and sixty-three."

Hotch frowned. "How many fourth years are on there?"

While they needed everyone they could get and only first through third years had been evacuated, the fourth years had been banned from serving on the front lines. The only reason the fifth and sixth years had been allowed was because it was too difficult to stop all of them. Still, Harry knew a few fourth years had slipped through, though he turned a blind eye to the ones he was sure were excellent fighters. They were going to fight anyway, and it would be more dangerous for them to go out on their own instead of working with a unit who would watch their backs.

"Not enough to account for- Hang on." He squinted at a name. "Hang on."

"What?"

"That's Oliver Wood!"

"Who's that?"

"He was Gryffindor Quidditch captain when I first started playing, but he graduated! What's he doing on the list?"

"He could have come back."

"Yeah, but he should have joined the Order since he's an adult."

"It would appear no one told him that. Or he wanted to fight with his friends and he just didn't care."

Harry set the list aside for now, running a hand over his face with a moan. "Ugh, fine. At least we know there aren't a bunch of third years sneaking back."

"They're all still in France, right?"

"Yeah. We contacted the parents to let them know their kids were safe, but Beauxbatons and France are doing a marvelous of hiding their presence. Some parents were upset, which I completely get, but a lot were happy their kids were somewhere safer than England." He smirked. "Remember how Blackwolf got a bunch of countries to come forward to say they'd saved us when we were taken for the ritual?"

"Yeah."

"A few Death Eaters thought that maybe one of them had the kids, so there are apparently a bunch of Death Eaters in China right now trying to speak Mandarin to people who speak Cantonese to demand the students. It's apparently quite amusing, since all of them speak English and the Chinese are just trying to piss them off because they're so irritated that the Death Eaters just strolled in and started making demands."

There was the faintest trace of a smile on Hotch's face, which was about the closest he got these days. "Well, I'm sure if they go country by country they'll figure it out. Eventually."
They were in an empty classroom on the fourth floor, using desks as chairs since most of the chairs had been accidentally destroyed. A lot of the classrooms were being used for training purposes, especially when the Room of Requirement was in use or when people just wanted to work on their own, but the damages had to be repaired individually and there wasn't often time when there were more important things that needed to be fixed. Once this was all over, Harry mused, Hogwarts could fund a whole new construction industry that would just operate within its walls.

"Any ideas about the two Riddle situation?" Harry asked suddenly.

"No one's heard anything more about that," Hotch said. "I hope whoever you were speaking to was just rambling."

"I hope so," Harry murmured. "That was just...bizarre. I asked around, and no one knows anything about that. The aurors all agreed that if something like that were possible, though, he might find it in the Department of Mysteries." He paused. "Honestly, though, if there were two of them, they'd probably end up fighting each other to take over the world. They'd each need their own separate realm to be content, so I don't think we've got much of a threat. Besides, it's kind of pointless when he's got the horcruxes anyway, since he still can't die."

Hotch frowned as he shifted one foot out from under his knee, shaking blood flow back into it. "We haven't tried to do anything about those in a while, have we?"

"No... Garcia's positive there's no way to track them down using weird wavelengths or something?"

"Maybe we could do it if we could convince a group like NASA to help since they have a access to a larger scope than Garcia does, but by the time we get them introduced to the magical world and caught up on everything the war's going to be won, one way or another." He rubbed a hand on his forehead, sighing in frustration. "Okay, let's go through it again."

Harry moaned, dropping his head into his hands. "I thought you wanted to work on this."

"Not the same thing over and over! What haven't we looked at about it?"

"We've thought about what it could be. How many." He paused. "We haven't done size," he said, but from his tone he knew he was grasping at straws.

Harry went for it anyway. "Well, all of them but Nagini were pretty small, and I'm betting whatever one we're missing from Slytherin, Gryffindor, and Ravenclaw aren't going to be as big as a snake."

"Are we sure he's got one from the other houses?" Hotch asked. "We assumed so because of his obsession with lineage, but we only found one from a founder so far. Maybe that was the only item he could find, or there was another reason he used it."

Harry grimaced. "I'm kind of getting concerned there, too. But that would complete the seven we think he made."

"Remind me why seven."

"It's a number that holds a lot of power in magical rituals. If he made more than one, he probably made seven, and considering how inhuman he looks, seven looks about right. The soul inside of him is probably included in that number."

"So eight including you."
"Yeah, but I was an accident."

"No, you were planned. Jack was a surprise, though."

Harry frowned in confusion for a moment before he registered the small smile and grinned at the unexpected joke. Hotch's face lightened in response very briefly.

"Let's assume the rest are items from the founders for the sake of this conversation," Hotch continued. "What would he use?"

Harry tapped his heel against the leg of the desk for a moment thoughtfully. "Some of the Ravenclaws looked into this while we were hyped up about the thing in my brain," he said, "but then we weren't finding any more so it died down. Ravenclaw's diadem was the one they favored for their own founder, but the problem with that one is that it's been lost for centuries. They thought the mystery around it might have attracted Voldemort."

"They're probably right, but that doesn't explain how he found it or where it might be if he did."

"Yeah, which is why they discarded the idea. Still, they didn't see a better item he would look for. Gryffindor's sword is the main thing attributed to him and it's obviously not really lost, so if it was a horcrux, we've already got it. Better yet, it's already imbued with basilisk venom, which means we already destroyed the horcrux if it was ever in there."

"Do you think it's likely that was one of them?" Hotch asked.

Harry pondered the question for a moment before shaking his head. "I don't remember feeling anything like a destroyed horcrux when I stabbed the basilisk with it, but I wasn't really paying attention and I'm not sure I would remember if there had been something. I do think that he would have used the sword if he were going to make a horcrux of a Gryffindor item, though." He was loathe to bring this matter to anyone else outside of those who had already been searching, mostly because they had done most of the hard work so far and no one else had managed to do much in the way of helping except Snape, who was obviously unavailable. Still, fresh eyes wouldn't be a bad idea. "Has anyone talked to Dumbledore about this?" he reluctantly asked.

"He brought it up while you were learning to apparate, actually, since he didn't think you had been made aware." At Harry's smirk, he said, "What?"

"Remus said no one knew we were doing that except Dumbledore and us, but that the BAU of course had found out anyway. I had forgotten to ask if you had. Continue."

"He also thought that the remaining items were likely from the founders. There was something he brought up that we hadn't considered, though. When the Potters died, he was at the height of his power, so he was still very busy managing the war. He didn't have a lot of time on his hands." Harry tilted his head to show he was listening. "Riddle might not have managed to make all of the horcruxes before he was destroyed."

"Even if he didn't, he's been back long enough that he could have completed the seven," Harry pointed out.

"That's true."

The Boy Who Lived leaned back until he was looking up at the ceiling, and he blew out his breath. "Maybe we're looking at this the wrong way. Maybe we're just completely wrong. I mean, there wasn't any sort of pattern with the other horcruxes, right?"
"Out of his field of view, Hotch replied, "The diary and ring were closely connected by his past. Nagini was created because of his status as a parselmouth. Those three were personal. Perhaps you're right, and the cup wasn't made because it was connected a founder. There's still a lot we don't know about him."

"And you hate that, don't you."

"Yes," Hotch said, very much annoyed.

Harry folded his hands behind his head, grinning. "You'd have been a Ravenclaw, if you'd gone to school here."

"You think?"

"Mnhmm. You spend time around people who accumulate knowledge. You feel safer there. And whenever shit hits the fan, you start looking for more information."

"I never thought about the house placements before. There were some differences when we first met the QDA, but you were all changing over the summer so it was hard to tell."

"There's a lot of stereotypes about the houses, but you get placed based on what you value, how you think, why you react. Your instincts, your perceptions, your fears and hopes. It gets pretty complicated. I got the Sorting Hat to talk to me about it sometimes when I was staying in the headmaster's office with Jack."

"Why do you think you got placed in Gryffindor?"

"Well, I'd just met Draco, who was kind of a jerk at the time, and he had just gone into Slytherin so I didn't want that kind of ambition. I'd also just met Ron, and I admired that he stood in his ground with bullies as best as he could. I wanted to get out of the Dursleys' house so badly that the hat thought of putting me in Slytherin, but I also wanted bravery and the hat decided I'd probably be miserable for the rest of my stay at Hogwarts if Draco and I couldn't get along so it sent me to Gryffindor."

Hotch made a noise of acknowledgment. "I'll admit that I'm not really sure what the Hufflepuffs are."

Harry snorted. "No one does, I don't think. Helga Hufflepuff was the founder who said, 'Screw it, let's just take in everyone,' so they're an eclectic lot. They tend to be the most loyal and accepting, though. And they all love food, I swear. It's probably because they're right next to the kitchen."

"And the Slytherins tend to value ambition, right?"

"Yeah, but it's ambition for a lot of reasons. Like, Draco wants to distinguish himself now as being separate from his family, and Blaise wants to prove his own worth and the worth of the DA to show we're more than sacrifices." He paused. "Wow, that's depressing. Maybe I shouldn't have said that out loud."

"You're in a war zone, Harry," Hotch pointed out mildly.

"Well, yeah, but the rest of this was so light-hearted."

"Weren't we talking about a guy who was splitting up pieces of his soul earlier?"

"Point." He hummed thoughtfully, then said, "I think Gideon would be in Ravenclaw too."
"Really? I thought Gryffindor or Hufflepuff. He has a tendency to run into danger at strange times when no one else would, but he also looks out over the people around him like they're his own."

"Yeah, I leaned a bit towards Hufflepuff too, but I think that's just because he feels responsible for them since he's more experienced. As for the Gryffindor traits, those just seem to show up when he gets irritated that his profiling skills weren't enough so he vents in a weird way. I thought Ravenclaw mostly because he's pretty much got a pathological need to profile everyone around him."

"Hm, I could see it, but I'm still thinking Hufflepuff. One of the two. We could throw the Sorting Hat on him and see what it says."

"But it's so much more fun to just guess. Besides, what if it said Slytherin? We'd feel pretty stupid then."

"I'm not sure the Sorting Hat would consent to being 'thrown' anyway."

"It's a piece of cloth. What's it going to do?"

"It's got a mean glare."

"What? How do you know that?"

"Moody dropped his cane in front of it one time and blocked its view during a meeting. It spent the whole time glaring at him. Anyway. Reid?"

"Gryffindor. Definitely Gryffindor."

"Yeah."

"No argument?"

"None. He knows so much because he's got a natural talent for learning, not because he hides in libraries like the Ravenclaws. Besides, Hermione's a Gryffindor and she's usually in a book so that doesn't necessarily mean anything. And whenever Reid goes off on his own during a case it's always a wonder if he's got back-up or even a gun."

Harry's faint smile hadn't quite left his face, but it brightened a bit at the thought of that. "I don't have a problem believing that. I was thinking that he tends to act immediately and on instinct like the Gryffindors do, and he doesn't always stop to consider the situation like the Ravenclaws. Well, sometimes he does, but it's rare. Okay, Morgan. Hufflepuff."

"...Yeah," Hotch said after a moment of contemplation. "Twice now I've seen him stick with someone in danger when he couldn't do anything to help except be with them. Hufflepuff."

"Really? I didn't know that."

"Someone trapped in a car by a bomb - I think Gideon chewed him out for that, since it was pretty reckless - and then when Reid was stuck in the house with anthrax poisoning - and I had to pull him away from that so we could go get the Unsub."

"I was thinking about Elle."

"Make that three times, then. Trapped by her own mind."

"Speaking of Elle... Gryffindor."
"No argument. At all."

"She keeps tackling people she knows at random in her wolf form. It's pretty funny, especially when she gets Draco because she keeps messing up his hair. Some of the civilians don't seem to know quite what to make of her, though."

"Not many do. JJ... Hufflepuff?" he said tentatively.

"I... think so," Harry agreed. "Yeah. Well...? Ugh, she doesn't really seem to fit into any category. She comes across as a Ravenclaw or Gryffindor, but she sometimes acts like a Slytherin when she's trying to promote the BAU for a case or- You know what, she's a Hufflepuff. She rarely judges, she accepts everyone, and she spends her job trying to protect as many people as possible. Hufflepuff."

"That leaves Rossi, Garcia, and Prentiss."

"Prentiss is a Slytherin. She gets into a lot of the same crap everyone else does, but her reasoning tends to be because it was the logical thing to do, and she's ambitious."

"You should have seen her trying to convince me to let her into the BAU. Her paperwork had gone through in a strange way and I'd never seen it, but she showed up and spent months emphatically proving she belonged. I'll go with Slytherin. Garcia - Hufflepuff, for the same reason as JJ."

"Yeah. Rossi... Ravenclaw...? No, Slytherin."

"Not a Hufflepuff."

"No... I could see Gryffindor, but I'm thinking Slytherin now."

"Hmm. He left to become a writer, but he came back to deal with unfinished business. I'd knock out Ravenclaw just because he's too impulsive. So Slytherin or Gryffindor."

"Ooh, like me."

"In that case, he's more Slytherin. When he first came back, he was more brash to prove he was competent."

"Yeah, but we Gryffindors do that all the time. And he accepted a role that was lower than when he left, right?"

"BAU's unusual to get to, though. It's high praise to get there no matter the position, and in the field the distinction isn't as obvious."

"I guess the real question is why he came to Hogwarts with everyone else."

"One moment." Harry stifled a laugh with one hand when he heard a phone ringing after a bit of shuffling around. "Hey, Rossi. Why did you come with us to Hogwarts?... Nothing important, just need to know. Yes, right now. No, it's still not important. Well, it is, but not to anyone else." He said in a slightly different voice, indicating that he was talking to Harry and not the phone, "Because the team was going and it was important to keep the school safe."

Harry mulled over it for a moment. "Word for word?"

"Yeah."

"Sounds more Slytherin. They have a tendency to focus on specificities to reach goals, while the Gryffindors usually say something more general because they're more concerned with the overall
result."

"Right." To Rossi, he said, "Okay, thanks," and then promptly hung up.

Harry dissolved into giggles. "You are such a Ravenclaw," he managed to get out.

"Whatever."

"And you've been around teenagers for too long."

"At least I won't have two at the same time at home, with your age difference."

Harry let out a breath at the mention of his brother and the idea of home. "Yeah," he said, a bit more forlornly than he intended. He realized he was crashing the mood a moment to late, but Hotch took him off guard.

With a smile in his voice, he said, "Oh, I forgot to mention - JJ sent pictures."

"Of Jack?" He reached up and took the phone as Hotch bumped it against his knee. The picture on the screen was of a small wolf cub, curled up and sleeping against a larger, male wolf. "Awww. That's it, I'm pretty sure Jack is just adorable in any situation. Let's just throw him at the Death Eaters, and sure, then we'll have a new uprising as they try to put him in charge of the world, but at least we'll all be hailing His Cuteness and not the Dark Lord, right?"

"I'm still trying to picture you literally throwing Jack."

"It'd be more like sailing across the air, because 'throwing' makes it sound like he would be out of control but the adoration of everyone around him would just carry him to safety. All right, get Jack back here, and let's put this into action. We should have the war won by Wednesday."

Hotch laughed, taking the phone back as Harry offered it to him. "Sure thing."

"How's Henry doing?" he asked.

"Healthy and well. All of them are staying in lodgings Blackwolf put them up in, so they're actually living with Apache right now. Will's the only one who's liking the heat. The rest, especially when Jack and Remus are in wolf form with fur coats, aren't so enthusiastic."

"I feel bad for Will."

"He's still lovestruck, thank God, and doesn't mind too much, although they're still trying to catch him up on things. Explaining that his wife's boss's son had been kidnapped at birth, returned with serial killers on his tail, and somehow became a war general at fifteen was somehow a bit difficult."

"Oh, really?"

"Apparently."

"Hey, so while we're talking about living conditions in America..."

"Thinking about where home is?"

Harry paused. "Yeah."

"I'd like to go back to where we were before. Theoretically, once the war's over, there's no reason we couldn't since anyone who knows where we live and would wish us harm should be dead or
arrested. At the same time, everyone apparently knows where we live now, and whether they wish us well or not, I think that's kind of creepy."

"I guess we're going house shopping."

"I guess so. At least you and Jack are old enough now to give opinions. Last time I was on my own hoping I was doing it right. That's why we ended up with way more bedrooms than necessary."

"And yet we keep using them all."

"I'd like to say that was intentional, but about a month after I bought the house I realized the point of downsizing was to get a smaller house, and I had bought one almost exactly the same size."

"It took you a month?"

"How often do you think I really look at the house? The day you came home I realized I had no clue when the last time I cleaned up was."

"Meh, it wasn't bad. Didn't take me long to clean up what was dirty."

Hotch paused for such a long moment that Harry shuffled to get his elbows by his sides so he could sit up enough to see his father's expression. He was staring at a wall, frowning pensively, and Harry waited him out. Finally, instead of changing the subject, he said what was on his mind. "You scared me so badly, those first few days," he admitted. "I was genuinely worried there were some things we just weren't going to be able to fix."

"Really?" he asked.

"Oh, yes. You remember how for a week you kept cleaning the house? Even after I'd told you not to at least once a day?" Harry grinned sheepishly. "And even after Travis said you could use magic outside of the house, you'd still do it by hand."

Harry laughed, head falling back. "Oh, I didn't know any cleaning spells. I only knew how to do it by hand. You should've said something." He let his head come forward again, and he smiled wryly. "Sorry, didn't even think about that."

"You were jumpy too."

"I don't remember that." Pause. "Well, except when Sean scared the crap out of me, but I was already wired from five minutes before when I thought he was a burglar."

"You kept your back to a wall, you had a strict sleep regimen to avoid being asleep when someone else was awake, you were immediately defensive..."

"Wow, you kept a list."

"Got a related one. Let's prosecute the Dursleys when we get back."

"Right, we didn't try them for everything on that list, did we?"

"It would have taken so long to gather all the necessary information for each case that it just made more sense to hit the major ones that overlapped. We've still got plenty to choose from." Hotch shifted his legs again into a more comfortable position, one resting against Harry's foot. "Dudley sent a thank-you letter for it, by the way. It was while Umbridge had the wards up, so I didn't get to tell you about it."

"I'm not surprised. I think the whole thing with the Woodmarked Killer kinda jarred him out of his mindset." He leaned back down again as his elbows started aching. "That first week, you were so confusing."

"Damn, I was trying to prevent that. I wasn't trying to give you and Jack conflicting information, but you had everything under control and you were so mature that I didn't think it was fair for you to be restricted the same way he was."

"No, not like that." He stopped, and it was his turn to look for the right words. "Did you ever consider...that you were the first person to..." He made a frustrated noise, and Hotch evidently didn't think he wanted to continue because he nudged his knee at the same time Harry started again. "Did you ever think that you were the first person to give me unconditional love?"

"Yes, but I don't think you're thinking along the same lines I am. My assessment of that was usually surrounded by profanity aimed at the Dursleys."

"I didn't know what to do with it. Didn't know how I was supposed to respond to it, didn't know how to reciprocate. Wasn't quite sure what a regular relationship was like, really." He stopped, but Hotch didn't say anything so he continued on. "It was just... I felt like I should be doing something for you in return. I mean, at least an equal trade."

"Most relationships aren't equal," Hotch pointed out. "But you probably do give back more than you think you do in all of them. And in this case, I felt like I was getting more from you than you were from me."

Harry sat up again, surprise across his face. "Really? Why?"

"I failed you for over a decade of your life," he held up a hand to stall all the arguments, "so I didn't think I could possibly be giving you enough to make up for that." His palm pushed forward insistently as Harry made to interrupt again. The teenager scowled. "But it seemed like for every small thing I gave you, you made it into more than I ever could have given you. A meal was a feast. A house was a mansion. An odd collection of people was a family. I couldn't possibly have deserved the appreciation you gave me for what little I gave you. All I handed you was what any parent should have given their child."

Harry pondered that for a moment, searching for a logical fallacy. He knew that his time with the Dursleys had skewed his perception of what a normal family was, and by extension what an incredible father was, but he couldn't help but think that he was still right about this. "Yes, that's probably true," he finally said. "Except... You didn't start acting like that only when you knew I was your son. You took a day off work just to sit down with me and work through the legal process."

"Of course, but you were also part of a case."

"Yeah, but you spent all that time with me instead of going out with the team, and I know there was a difference because Jack's babysitter told me."

"We would have just gone to a bar, so I could hardly claim that doing that was more worthy of my time than helping you out."

"I can't picture you drunk."

"And you never have to. I never drink enough to reach that point."

"No?"
"Can't. Designated driver when the team goes out, and at home I've got kids."

"Huh. Didn't think about that. Wait, don't distract me. I was still trying to come up with a counterargument."

"Don't bother. I'm right."

"How do you know?"

"I'm always right."

Harry scoffed. "Surely not."

"You've told me yourself that I'm always right."

"Well, maybe but- Ugh, Dad, stop derailing me!"

"I'm going to win this."

"No, you won't! Hang on, hang on - I've got this. Okay, so I can't use the first few months at all, since you can just say it was the blood wards that increased your sensitivity to taking care of my problems. Of which there were many. Wait, there- No one else could have done that."

"...You lost me."

Harry started to gesture with one hand, but he had to raise his elbow to do it and he quickly overbalanced so he put his elbow back down. "So I clearly had a long list of problems to choose from when I first got home, right?" He waited for the suspicious nod. "And then there was the whole thing with Black. Then the Silent Massacre. Then all of the tasks, and the tumor at the same time. And Blackwolf was trying to get the BAU to work both magical and nonmagical cases, and you guys agreed to it because it would make it easier for you to help us."

"Yeah, but..." He searched for the right phrase, finally settling on, "We love you guys."

"Right, but my point is that you didn't have to and you did it anyway. There's the Dursleys, then parental obligation, and then there's what you did, and I'm not quite sure you get how extraordinary it was. Dad..." He blew out his breath, then resigned himself to it and pushed himself all the way up until he was sitting cross-legged in front of his father. "Dad, you had the vaguest clue in the history of vague clues that maybe I'd been assaulted by someone who was dead months ago, and you got a group of people to help smuggle two into a building with some of the highest security measures on the planet."

Hotch, as expected, stiffened at the mention of Perotta, but Harry pressed on. "I read Jack's letter. No one else would have come to the same conclusion you did without a lot of doubt, but you took the time to get to know me well enough - in two years, you knew me better than most parents know their kids after a decade - to read two letters and figure out the gist of what had happened. And if for some reason you think that doesn't count, then think of this. There are a lot of parents in this building right now who aren't fighting. A lot. You went from technically being a civilian to leading at least a quarter of the fight from Hogwarts, and don't say that it's because there's a good chance Riddle's going to win this and take over the world. If that were true, Blackwolf wouldn't still be trying to convince America to come help."

A long moment passed.

Harry smiled hopefully. "Did I win?"
"Yes."

"Yes!" Harry said, pumping both fists into the air.

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The Ministry officially fell on Easter after a month of attacks on villages and individual homes. The only ones who were surprised were shocked that it had taken so long. Now Riddle turned all of his attention back to Hogwarts, determined to take the final, significant defense of the Light's Order.

Hogwarts was quickly packed with people, as many more continue to fle to its walls to get away from the damage outside. For the most part, they just got out of the way and drained supplies, since most couldn't fight well enough to go into the front lines. Moody was heard grumbling about it often, but there just wasn't anywhere for them to send the witches and wizards seeking safety. Even Hogsmeade, right outside Hogwarts's borders, was constantly changing hands. Very few places remained truly safe.

"I think we can assume that Riddle's got a hold of the prophecy," Harry dryly said at one point. "Anything important in it?"

"He will believe that you're the only one who can defeat him," Dumbledore replied solemnly.

"Why?"

"You were born in July. He assumed you would be his enemy, since only two children – yourself and Neville Longbottom – were born to parents who had faced him and survived. I am unsure why, but he chose you as the child in the prophecy over Neville."

He saw the BAU interrogating Death Eaters over and over, pulling out every scrap of information that they could. Gideon regularly pulled him out of meetings so he could watch, though Harry was never sure if that was just for the sake of getting him out of mind-numbing meetings or so he could learn something. He also wasn't sure if the others knew, since they'd put the Room of Requirement to use as a standard FBI interrogation room with one-sided glass.

But he also saw the BAU putting their profiling skills to other purposes. They knew more about PTSD and other psychological issues the Light was beginning to encounter, and they were able to help treat problems and find solutions easier than anyone else could. When there was time, Harry often tried to tag along with one of the profilers, who always inevitably seemed to find themselves wandering the halls to happen across someone who needed assistance. It wasn't long before most of the castle recognized the BAU as a valuable asset, and no one even seemed to differentiate them from wizards or witches anymore. In battle, they were as protected as Harry, if not more, despite their posts out near the front. It wasn't uncommon for even the civilians under the protection of the castle to leave secure places to ensure the safety of a profiler.

The DA held just as strongly through battle as the Order did, quickly gaining respect as its own force and not a collection of students who needed their hands held. After Cassius, they had lost a few more to severe injuries, but their numbers steadily increased as time went on. Many of Hogwarts's students in the three oldest years had chosen to stay at the school and help with the war effort, and most ended up joining the DA after a period of training by DA members in their off time. At the same time, this encouraged adult civilians to do the same with the Order.

Harry paced around the school during battles, which helped him get a better visual of what was going on, and his elephant often strode alongside him. Atlas had the downside of making him extremely noticeable, but it hardly mattered when there was little chance of him being harmed. The
Death Eaters were slowly beginning to build up some sort of defense against Atlas and Blue, mainly using physical barriers. Not many of the other patronuses were used in battle, since most were too small to bother summoning them, but Angelina used her hawk often in the air, and a couple others sometimes found occasion for a patronus.

Riddle rarely showed up at the school anymore for battles, but they kept an eye out for him anyway. If he appeared, the fight was serious. If not, it was just part of the continuous effort to wear them down. Just about everyone in the castle, regardless of their position, had ordered Harry to never approach him, not because he was incapable of protecting himself, but because his tendency to piss Riddle off beyond rage was becoming steadily more dangerous for him and anyone unfortunate enough to be in the near vicinity. As a result, Harry usually left it to Dumbledore to track down the dark wizard so no one else would have to duel him.

They weren't winning the war, but at Hogwarts, they sure weren't losing either.

Riddle hadn't shown up yet for this battle, but Harry was still moving around the castle. It was a habit he didn't think he'd ever kick, not when it gave him a smidgen of comfort and sense of control. The north was having a bit of difficulty, and he sent Atlas to them for aid while he kept walking. Unfortunately, they'd found that it was impossible to summon more than one substantial patronus at a time, otherwise Harry would have put one at all four posts each time no matter how badly it drained him.

Padma's patronus appeared and loped alongside him as she spoke. "Bellatrix is here. She brought fifty, maybe sixty. Holding."

Harry changed his course, aiming for the east. Bellatrix was a definite cause for concern. Before he was halfway there, Ron's terrier appeared. "Gryven is getting blindsided. Bellatrix, I think, has a main force distracting them at the gate, but there's a smaller force entering through some fourth floor windows. Already told Padma."

Harry swore and picked up the pace. That was definite cause for concern. He sent a message Moody's way, then started sprinting as everything went to hell.

"Death Eaters on fourth floor."

"Repelling them, but barely stable."

"They're moving to the Great Hall."

"Gryven pushed back three corridors."

"Aero landing to help Gryven."

"Great Hall secure, but defenses there can't move to help."

Harry reached the disputed area and immediately saw the chaos splayed out in front of him. The Death Eaters were doing their best to tear down walls as they went to minimize the number of places anyone could hide, and there were several sprawled bodies on the floor behind them as they moved further and further into the castle. Harry was approaching from the back, which meant he had little trouble taking out the Death Eaters bringing up the rear, and he soon met up with Aero as they created a second front.

"What's going on?" Angelina asked as she ducked behind a cluster of rubble next to Harry. "They shouldn't be acting like this."
Harry grimaced and sent someone flying out of sight. The Death Eaters had turned on them rather abruptly, and from the number of spells that were coming their way per second, it didn't look like many were concerned about the other front they had put their backs to. He could call for more back-up, but by the time they arrived, the precarious situation was likely to have changed again.

An explosion hit the rubble Angelina was hiding behind, and both of them were flung painfully away. Harry rolled and quickly got back to his feet, but Angelina didn't. He hoped she was breathing as he scrambled behind more cover, aware that her limp form would at least appear dead from the distance the Death Eaters were at. Ahead of him, he could see Ron working with the Bloody Baron in a quick and brutal series of attacks, as the ghost distracted a Death Eater and blinded him or her long enough for Ron to knock them out. The rest of the Aero unit was holding their own, but a few gaps in the defense were conspicuous reminders that the Death Eaters had better shelter where they were at.

Harry set off a blast along one wall by the Death Eaters, knocking three of them into their neighbors and catching them off guard. Two of the Aero unit leapt on the chance and succeeded in knocking seven out in rapid succession, but the reprisal was all the more vicious and the next few minutes were spent on defense. For a period of twenty seconds, all they did was hold defensive barriers as what appeared to be almost every Death Eater in the wave barraged them with curses and hexes. Once again, Harry found himself wondering what had happened to the rest of Gryven unit that they weren't forming a front on the other side. Angelina staggered to his side, a cut on her cheek bleeding from where she'd fallen and hit her head, and she added her own wand to the defense.

There was some movement from inside the mass, followed by awkward shuffling, and then three Death Eaters came forward, dragging students behind them. The Aero unit plus Harry held the defensive barriers even as they furiously recognized the friends who'd been taken as hostages.

"Lower the barriers," Avery said, stripping off his mask with his wand hand. In the other, he had a firm grip on Katie Bell. "Now."

Ernie slammed his head backwards, catching his Death Eater off balance long enough for him to drop and pull his knife from his back pocket. At the same time that he rammed it up to hilt into the Death Eater's thigh, Theodore grabbed the wrist of his and forced him to the floor with a wrist lock. Both QDA members stayed low while a barrier dropped and a volley of spells took out the Death Eaters directly behind them. Ernie yanked out his knife and threw it at Avery, forcing him to focus on something other than Katie long enough for her to take him out.

The three in the thick of it pressed in, surprising the Death Eaters by doing the exact opposite of what was expected in normal wizardry combat. A couple tried to use their wands, but in such close range, they ended up hitting each other instead, and by the time some sort of system had been worked out, Aero surged forward and overtook them. Wands were sheathed in favor of hands and feet, and they pushed through until they came out the other side and a hallway of Death Eaters lay behind them. The sudden success after such a long period of limbo should have been elating, but Harry's stomach dropped when he saw what was ahead of him.

In the next hallway, fifteen students had been lined up facing the incoming Aero unit. Behind them by ten meters were Bellatrix and the rest of her group who had come in through the fourth floor windows.

Harry walked forward slowly, running his gaze along the hostages and the hostage takers. There were still about another fifteen of Gryven who hadn't been taken, and they were waiting with their wands pointed at their friends on the off chance they managed to drop before they were cursed to give the still-standing Gryven members a clear shot. Among the free ones were Neville, whose face...
was a cold mask of fury.

"What do you want?" Harry demanded. "You know we're not going to give up."

"Ooh, not even for your friends?" Bellatrix asked, grinning. For all Harry's duels with Riddle, he'd never once had to fight her. And for that, he counted himself lucky. "My, my, little Harry. I thought you were loyal to them."

"It's pointless to surrender to you to save them now when you'll kill them later," Harry said. His wand was still up, just waiting for an opportunity. The hostages, remarkably, didn't look concerned about potentially being caught in the crossfire. Just another day at Hogwarts, he grimly thought. "You know that. So. What do you want?"

"You. The Dark Lord wants you."

He probably should have seen that coming.

"Harry, don't," Neville hissed when he paused.

"In exchange for...?" Bellatrix raised an eyebrow at him. "Oh, come on. You know I can't do it without more."

"Fifteen of your friends are worth one of you?"

"To Riddle, I'd expect I'm worth a lot more."

"Do not speak his name!" Bellatrix hissed. "You won't show such disrespect, soon enough."

"Well, let's get on with it then. What else?"

"Harry," Neville said warningly. "I'll knock you out before you can approach."

Without bothering to keep his voice down, Harry pointed out, "If they offer enough, it might be worth it. I'm a bit tired of the standstill right now." Besides, if they took him, he might be able to cause some havoc within their headquarters. That'd be a better use of time than waiting around in the castle for danger to come to them. Even if he did get tortured...well, it was worth it if he could save people from dying in the meantime.

"Two months without attack here," Bellatrix offered.

"Is this coming from you or him?" Harry asked. "Because I really don't trust either of you to keep your word, but I trust you a hell of a lot less." She scowled. "Right. So what's he suggesting?"

Grimacing, she said, "Six months," like a tradesmen who was underselling a priceless piece of jewelry.

"Not enough."

She snarled at him. "That's half a year, Potter!"

"Yeah, and we'll be repaired and ready to go for the next bout in a fraction of that time. I'd consider two months without attack anywhere, but not just when you're limiting it to here. We're already a lot safer than everyone else, even with you popping up like bad pennies." There was movement out of the corner of his eye as someone approached, but the DA flanking him didn't turn their attention in that way and he labeled it as a friendly without looking.
"Six months here, a half month everywhere else."

"Three months everywhere."

"One."

"I'm not bartering. Three. And you release prisoners." He shrugged when she glowered at him. "Look, you need to make this worth my time so I won't have to deal with everyone's bitching when I get back."

"You won't be coming back," she snapped. "The Dark Lord's going to kill you, you wretched fool!"

"Well, I expect plenty of torture first, so I reckon there should be time for escape." Come on, where was back-up when you needed it? Oh, yeah, that would be Aero, who was behind him. Where was the second back-up?

Whether Bellatrix knew what he was up to or not, she was done arguing. "Fine. Fine. Three months. And I'll carve a piece out of you each day so you know I'm counting down until I can come after your friends."

"Looking forward to it. Okay, so like I said, I don't trust you at all, so you're going to release the hostages before I come anywhere near you."

"I don't trust you, so why don't you come forward first?" she snapped back. "Do you want them to stay alive or not?" She pointed her wand angrily at the student directly in front of her.

"Do that and I'm not going to settle at anything but six months," he snarled and she stopped, eyes narrowed at him. "You release them first. Face it - I'm more likely to come towards you after you release them than you are to release them after I come towards you."

Ironically, that probably wasn't true.

"Potter, I'm not that stupid," Bellatrix said. "Even if you do approach, one of your friends isn't going to let you reach us."

He sighed. "Guys, let it go. We could use the months." They really could. For one thing, they might be able to use the time to get the Ministry back, which would be a previously unimaginable push forward, and they could more actively recruit. Maybe Harry should actually go with them...

"Fat chance," Ron said dryly. "Those months will fly past faster than Quidditch players."

"Take me," a stern voice said, and half the group turned to see Hotch standing at the edge of Harry's right flank. "If you try to get him out of here, you're going to be dealing with any fight he puts up and everyone on your ass who's trying to get him back. And then, if you somehow manage to get back to your base, you're still going to have to stop every escape effort." Harry tried to glare him into silence, but it seemed there was some wandless magic that didn't come as easily to him as barriers did. "With me, you still get the same information and you take the head of one of our forces, but there are not as many downsides."

After a few moments of silence, Harry's gaze snapped to Bellatrix, shocked. She was really considering it.

"Fine," she finally said
"Uh, you realize we're going to stop you too, right?" Ron pointed out, raising an eyebrow at Hotch.

"No, you won't," Hotch said simply, walking forward a few steps. "You're going to be too worried about making sure Harry doesn't follow."

Harry's eyes widened.

"You're not taking either of them," Neville snapped, moving with Harry to quickly block Hotch's path. Neither student actually looked at the agent, keeping their gazes fixed on Bellatrix. "And you're an idiot if you think it's a good idea to try."

She laughed. "Well, if it isn’t Neville Longbottom, here to watch the show! Who would’ve thought?" There were a few snickers from the surrounding Death Eaters. “I remember your parents, Neville. They screamed so loudly… I can still hear what it sounded like if I think back hard enough.”

“Exactly,” Neville said in a voice of steel. “So do you think I’m bluffing?”

The amused look slowly slipped off Bellatrix’s face until revolt and hatred had morphed her features. "Let's see you try," she whispered.

Back-up arrived.

A wave of spells hit them from the other side as a group or Order members swept in from the other end of the hall, and the hostages used their temporary distraction to duck down. The Death Eaters closest to the Order went down immediately, unable to return fire quickly enough, but the ones further out sent spells in a myriad of directions. Several gunshots came behind Harry and Neville from Hotch, paused, and then started up again when he was level with the two.

One Death Eater caught Harry while he was sending a spell a different direction, and the curse hit his arm. He staggered back a step, feeling nauseous, but the rest of the effect wasn't immediate and he sent a returned curse. It hit someone behind the cloaked figure as he stepped to the side, and rapidly sent two spells Harry's way. The young wizard blocked them, unable to simply duck under the spell with two people standing rather close to him, then sent a quick barrage of spells in return.

The Death Eater ducked or stopped them all, then cast a spell at the ground directly in front of Harry. The small blast forced him and Neville both to stagger back, but to Harry's surprise, he hit something before he had the chance to fall to the ground. His father reflexively steadied him with an arm across the shoulders, turned his head as he heard something, then wrapped his other arm across Harry's front and took them both to the ground, his own back facing outwards. A green light surrounded him for a moment as the very curse he had been trying to shield them both from hit him.

He was still when they hit the ground, and Harry slid out from under his father just in time to stop a spell from Bellatrix. He scowled at her, realizing she must have sent the other curse. Neville had picked up where he'd left off dueling the other Death Eater, leaving him free to take on Bellatrix without restraint. She was grinning wildly, laughing, and he couldn't help but feel like there was something he didn't know.

"We'll come back for you later," she said, and then the rest of her group and her blew the ceiling above them to give themselves a moment of cover to escape from a three-sided front. By the time the dust cleared, they were gone, and the Order, Aero, and most of Gryven quickly followed.

Harry paused, then crouched down beside Hotch. A hand landed on his shoulder, and he looked up
to see Neville. "I've got to go, but let me know if he's okay," Neville said urgently. "We need him."

Harry nodded, lips pressed tightly together, as the statement that had been an unconscious mantra for him for over two years now was stated. "Go." Neville hurried after his group, only to be replaced by Ron. "Aero needs its communications."

Ron waved him off. "They've got Hermione." She skidded to a halt beside him. "They've got other people," he amended quickly when Harry rolled his eyes.

He shook his head at them and then ducked down, muttering a few diagnostic spells. They all came back negative, even the ones he didn't think could come back negative. His fingers sought out a pulse, but he couldn't find one on Hotch's neck or wrist, so he figured it just wasn't erratic enough for him to feel it. It was the same with his breathing.

"Harry," Hermione said, horror creeping into her voice.

"Hang on," he replied, muttering a few more spells. Yeah, nothing wrong with the heart. It wasn't fast-paced or anything, but that didn't explain why the spell wasn't even giving him a tempo. The curse must have been blocking some of his spells.

"Harry," Ron whispered beside him.

Hotch's body was completely relaxed, expression still one of intense concentration. His arms were curled and his torso twisted from his effort to get Harry out of the way. Maybe a muscular problem, then? He just couldn't move? Might explain why the heart seemed to hardly be beating, if it had to do with muscle.

A loud crashing noise came from above them, and he glanced at his friends. "Either of you going to get that?"

Hermione and Ron exchanged meaningful looks, and Ron said, "Let Hermione take care of him. She's got better medical experience, and it sounds like they could use you up there. Come on." He grabbed Harry's shoulder and tugged him upright, and the two hurried off in the direction of the noise.

They put the group on the run quickly, but that was all they did. The group didn't fight back, instead choosing to send them on a chase through the school corridors. The Order members, Aero, and Gryven had picked off the ones in the back, who made easy targets when they weren't returning fire and only had weak, temporary barriers up for protection. It was an hour before the last of the stragglers were taken down, but Harry frowned, moving rapidly up and down the hall while almost everyone else resumed original positions.

A presence at his side made him turn. Kingsley. "What's wrong?"

"Bellatrix Lestrange isn't here."

"I expected they covered her retreat early on."

"That's not it. When I got the message that there were problems here, I heard an estimate of sixty. We took down maybe forty-five. I get that they probably were covered too, but we haven't heard anything. What have they been doing?"

Kingsley frowned, uncertain. "Did they go further into the castle?"

Harry shook his head. "We would have heard by now."
"I'll tell everyone to keep an eye out."

"And I'll do the same. I really don't like this. Watch your back." Kingsley stopped as he made to leave, then shook his head and continued. "No, say it."

"I'm afraid... I'm afraid they've had an hour at most, and it's already too late," Kingsley admitted, and then he vanished into the swirling dust and scattered debris ahead.

Unnerved, Harry didn't bother trying to go back to the office when his mind was still here in the fighting. He'd been separated from Ron long ago, and his friend had certainly taken to the skies again with the rest of Aero, so Harry turned around just in case Hotch or Hermione were back where he had left them.

His father was gone, and he began to take another route that would take him to Pucla's area when he saw a bushy mane of hair spread across the stones ahead of him. He sprinted forward, using his wand to haul a large, fallen rock from the ceiling of Hermione. His knees hit the floor painfully, but he pushed the sensation away and cast a series of charms. Head wound, laceration and maybe concussion; internal bleeding, not bad; broken bone, comminuted break.

Before he could do anything, a scream pierced the air behind him. He winced, wondering who had gotten caught off guard and prepared to do some mild treatment on Hermione before going to help. Then the screaming picked up, continuing on and on, and Harry settled for a stasis spell before hiding his friend under debris, then took off in the direction of the sound.

It led him outside, and he paused to check his surroundings, including the air, before leaving the relative safety of the castle for the open courtyard. He hurried out, already anxious to get back in where he didn't make such an easy target, but of course now the screaming had come to a stop. He was already out there, though, and his curiosity and concern pushed him forward while his common sense hollered profanity at him. He cast the Person Reveal Charm, and he turned a corner to find Kingsley with a fourth year wrapped tightly in his arms. From the way he was holding her, it looked like he was shielding her from something.

Harry approached cautiously, keeping his wand out and paying special attention when Kingsley was in a difficult position and the girl was in no state to fight. As he watched, she made an awkward attempt to get free, reaching for something behind Kingsley. The two were standing at one of the places in the castle where a tower met a smaller wall or tower in an awkward configuration on the ground. The result was a U-shaped form in the wall structure, with the bases of each tower making the ends of the U. A small alcove was created in the center, and when education was still a thing at Hogwarts, he had often seen couples use the hidden area to snog without a teacher seeing.

"Harry!" the girl screamed, catching sight of him. "Harry, please, let me get to her, I- I need to talk to her, I..."

Kingsley turned sharply, eyes widening as he saw him coming closer. "Harry, don't!" He released one arm from the girl and held out his palm to Harry, the universal sign of Stop. "Please, just trust me. Go back inside!"

Harry looked past them and immediately wished he hadn't.

A line of bodies were staring at the sky blankly.

He closed his eyes before any of the faces could register, sucking in a quick breath and getting a potent lungful of death.
The girl used his momentary distraction to tear herself away, and Kingsley swore and followed her into the center of the U. Harry sprinted after them, dread seeping into his bones.

The girl was collapsed on her knees beside one of the bodies closest to the edge, crying hysterically. Kingsley crouched beside her, murmuring something. Harry stepped closer. Kingsley glanced at him and shouted again for him to go back, but Harry just frowned and shook his head with a grimace. He couldn't this off on someone else, not when he knew how hard handling all the bodies would be. Before he could look closer at them, the girl turned her face up, despair etched across it, to stare at the sky. But no, she was looking at...

He followed her gaze, and his gut twisted painfully as he saw the red letters painted across the grey stone wall of the castle.

*LIVE LIKE A MUGGLE.*

*DIE LIKE A MUGGLE.*

He walked forward, staring at the letters. Kingsley watched him approach, an expression of horror on his face mixed with an agonized resignation. He was waiting for Harry to do something more than just stare, waiting for him to figure something out. "I don't get it," Harry said when he was close enough. "Why not put this out where everyone could see it?"

"Because they wanted the right person to find it," Kingsley told him, voice raw. "It's a message."

It was rather a vague message, Harry thought. He kept his eyes up, averting his gaze from the bodies for just a little longer.

"Get her out of here," he whispered. "I'll take care of this."

"Harry-"

He cut him off before he could be told it was a waste of time, that they had other things they could be doing about the immediate battle waging in other parts of the castle. "No one needs to see this. Kingsley, keep everyone away from here, until I can..." His eyes fell, finally looking at the faces. Pieces of him fell apart, dissolving and leaving gaping wounds on the inside at each face he recognized. He knew he'd recognize more when the blood had all been wiped away. At least three were DA, including Cassius.

This was where the disappearing corpses had been going to. He was looking at the mission Bellatrix's missing forces had been tasked with. Gathering the bodies from all the battles, slicing their throats open, and using the blood to write the message. For him.

"Harry, please go," Kingsley said urgently. "Please, turn around and go."

It was too late for protection from this, Harry wanted to say, but his mouth failed him as the air remaining in his lungs seemed to leave him, constricting his lungs and making him light-headed, as he saw what Kingsley was really talking about.

There was a soft, almost imperceptible click inside him, that of a latch on a gate falling open. A whisper flickered through his mind with the passage of power. Something in him was broken, and it wasn't just his heart.

"Dad?" he whispered.
Chapter End Notes

Hate me for this now, love me for it later. (And trust me, you will love me for some of the results of what happens in this chapter.) Hands up – who guessed what was going to happen when they saw the title and quote? And for those of you who wanted to know what the gorier version was, uh... You know, in retrospect, it's probably a good thing I changed the way Harry found the bodies. He's definitely had enough trauma in his life to get a lighter piece of trauma for once.

On a positive note, next chapter answers some questions quite a few of you have had since close to the beginning about a certain character. On a negative note, well...the above part will still be going on.
The battle turned into one of their longer ones, lasting sixty-seven hours. Harry didn't sleep through a wink of it, kept awake by driving need. He sent a message to each unit, ordering them to report in immediately if they sighted Bellatrix Lestrange. They did several times, but when Harry arrived, she was either long gone or too far back in a crowd of others to be reached.

He dragged himself up to the headmaster's office, not so much out of the need to report as out of habit. The room was empty except for Gideon. Right on Harry's heels, Morgan walked in with a frown on his face, and Harry moved quietly to take a chair. His energy was gone after so much constant battle, but the last thing he wanted to do was go to the infirmary to get checked out or lie down for some sleep. The curse he'd taken right before... It was causing some problems with his stomach, but he'd cast a few spells on himself to slow the process of it.

"Harry," Morgan said hesitantly. "I was over by Firin during the battle. Atlas was... There's no good way to put it. Something happened early on, and we couldn't get a hold of you to tell you, but he went...berserk." He grimaced, trying to put it delicately without the hope of being able to do so. "Harry, something went wrong with him."

"No," he said quietly, keeping his gaze fixed on a spot on the floor. If the room had had anymore noise in it, or the distance had been any larger between him and the other two, they wouldn't have been able to hear him. "It was on my end. Sorry."

When he didn't give further explanation and his tense posture warned them from pushing, Morgan began a steady report of the last parts of the battle. There hadn't been a lot of trouble on their end, because of Atlas, and the only part they had paid more than a passing thought was the southwest. Something happened in the east, he said. Gryven seemed to suddenly go nuts, and Aero went from the characteristic brutality of cheating Quidditch players to the cruel lethality of soldiers in war for the fun of it.

"Harry, can you talk to them about it?" Morgan asked. Harry nodded mutely instead of speaking. "Okay..." He could almost hear him exchange a glance with Gideon, but he look up. "Seems like everyone else held up fine. The Death Eaters clung on as long as they did mostly because they kept calling in for relief efforts, and we kept taking them out. Something really went wrong with several of the DA groups. Harry, do you know what set them off?"

"Only Gryven and Aero?"

"Yeah."

"Yes."
They'd heard about what had happened to the bodies.

"Harry?" Gideon prompted. He stayed quiet and kept his head down, tears burning in the backs of his eyes. Gideon sighed. "Morgan, I lost contact with Elle and Hotch. I think Elle switched form without telling me and couldn't answer a phone, but I don't know what happened to Hotch and Moody said none of his people saw him either. Can you go find out what he's up to?" Any other time, Harry would have called him out on the obvious attempt to get Harry on his own.

"Probably converting more Death Eaters or something," Morgan joked lightly as Harry's breath hitched. "I'll go check it out-"

A sob escaped him from behind the hands that had moved to cover his face. Before either could say anything, his composure fell, and the overwhelming grief swept over him like a wave. Inconsolable pain wracked his body, raw and acute and agonizing, and he let his hands fall to grip his elbows in a feeble attempt to hold himself together. Warm palms and fingers touched his head, his shoulders, but he hardly noticed the sensation, ducking his head down further to curl into himself. A part of him wished he could just keep folding in until there was nothing left to feel.

Someone was crouched in front of him, but with his eyes squeezed shut and all of his perception focused on the missing hole in his chest it was impossible to tell who it was. They pulled him closer until his face was pressed against a shoulder, and Harry resisted for a moment, trying to pull back - he didn't want Morgan or Gideon, he wanted Hotch, he needed his father - but they held on until he caved and found himself grasping fabric in his hands to stop someone else from leaving him.

The door slammed open, and he distantly heard a rapid voice, breaking as it relayed news. Harry knew what it was as soon as the arms became vices, securing him tightly as the rest of the body shook with emotion against Harry's own.

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An hour later, he wasn't quite sure how he ended up in the infirmary. He knew he hadn't collapsed, but at some point someone must have led him there. He did remember Pomfrey trying to diagnose what was wrong with him, though there was little reason for it to stand out beside everything else that had gone wrong that day. *I just fucking lost my father,* he wanted to say as they tried to search for a malady, but it turned out there was something else wrong.

"Dolohov's curse," Pomphrey grimly said. So that was who had hit him. "Nasty piece of work. You managed to subdue it this long, but you're going to need a bit more medical aid to fend it off entirely."

She left after treating it as best as she could, and Morgan sat down beside him on the bed. Harry looked at his lap. "Talk to me," Morgan quietly said. "What happened?"

Harry told him, never making eye contact, from when he'd seen Lestrange's hostages to finding the bodies. More of it made sense, in retrospect, now that he had more details about what had been going on. The bodies that had been disappearing at Hogwarts since the beginning of the war had been collected, and a few had been drained to form the words that had first caught Harry's eye. And now, as he gave the story, he realized what Hermione and Ron had been trying to hide from him.

He'd left his dead father behind the moment Ron had dragged him away to go chasing after the woman who had killed the patriarch of his family. The last time he'd felt his warm body was when his father gave him a last, fatal embrace.

"I need to tell everyone," he murmured softly.
"I think almost everyone knows that some died," Morgan said, resting one hand on Harry's shoulder. "They shouldn't hear the rest of what happened."

He shook his head. "No, I mean... Family. I... I don't want them to hear about it from a phone call, or an owl."

Morgan was quiet for a moment, then he tightened his grip momentarily. "I get it. Give me a minute, and I'll grab some stuff to go with you."

Harry shook his head again. "No, I think I need to do this alone. And...in case something happens here, they'll need as many people as they can get." He bit his lip, a new thought bringing a fresh wave of emotion. "Does Garcia know?"

Morgan closed his eyes in grief and Harry turned away.

"Take me with you," he requested. "Drop me off at Quantico, and I'll tell her."

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They didn't get to leave that day. Death Eaters attacked soon after their last battle and kept up a series of persistent skirmishes that kept everyone on edge. It wouldn't have been a problem, except word of what had happened to the bodies in the last battle had leaked out when someone overheard a nurse talking to the girl who'd found her sister. To make it worse, the leader of the group so renowned and welcomed for their comfort had been among those whose bodies had been so cruelly displayed.

Harry couldn't use his patronus anymore.

Small disaster after miniature catastrophe befell them, from critical failures in defenses to slip-ups in maneuvers. It built and built, and Harry yelled at the DA, telling them someone was going to get hurt if they weren't more careful. The DA kept their heads down while he shouted, and the Order wouldn't meet his gaze when he ripped into them an hour later. Harry finally gathered his DA together and told them they didn't have an excuse if he could still do his job fine. It had been snapped in a moment of anger, and he knew it was wrong to take it out on them - it wasn't their fault Hotch had done the very thing he'd once promised Harry he would never do - but he was desperate.

Then Gideon went out to help Huther hold the front line and was hit by an unknown curse. Frantic attempts to stop the spread of the curse failed miserably, and he slowly began to fall away from them into that void they were losing everyone to. He was still in a coma in the infirmary. Blaise sat quietly beside his bed whenever there wasn't a battle going on.

Harry went person by person and talked down his DA, pulling them back from their grief and loss. There was still a war to win so the deaths weren't in vain. A part of him realized he was taking over his father's role in consolation. Another part of him tried to pretend he was listening to his father speak to the students, and that he wasn't forced to do this himself. The BAU helped when they could.

He didn't go near Blaise, understanding that nothing he could say would help. Blaise came to him instead, trying to say something but unable to vocalize it, and Harry pulled him into a hug until Blaise broke down and cried against his shoulder, holding Harry as if it would keep Gideon in their world if he refused to let go.

The next battle, the lines held as strongly as they ever had on the DA fronts, and the battle after that, the Order got its shit together, refusing to still be weaker while the DA had recovered from the devastating blow.
In the end, it was three weeks before Harry and Morgan were able to set out.

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Harry stopped dead in his tracks when he stepped off the elevator and found himself staring at the bullpen. Morgan paused beside him. It had been over a half a year since he'd last seen this place, and yet it had barely changed at all. The area appeared a bit cleaner, since no one had been working at certain desks for months, and the lights were turned off, like everyone had just left or would be returning shortly as the day began.

He had intended to stop in just for a moment to see the bullpen, though he hadn't stated his intention to Morgan. He was aware this might be his last chance to ever see it, the first place he'd ever been taken in as family. It held a lot more memories than that, and as he looked around, he knew there were plenty he was never going to be made aware of that were just as important. Things had happened here that no one knew about, that no one could understand but those who had been there to see it. Not only had Harry grown up here, in just a span of a couple of years, but the ones he had arrived with from that deadly cave had also been born anew.

"I'll be back in twenty-four hours," Harry told Morgan, who reluctantly separated himself from Harry's side and walked away to Garcia's office. They had phoned ahead, warning her that they were stopping by for some reason but not revealing to her that they were coming to bring news. She was smart, and she would have it figured it out long before they arrived in America.

Harry couldn't bring himself to leave just yet, and before he knew it, he found himself walking up the steps to reach his father's dark office. The door was locked, but he spelled it open and slipped inside, flicking on the light switch as he did so. The light blinked awkwardly for a moment, stuttering from disuse, before revealing the room just as Harry remembered it. The desk was covered in stacks of files, waiting for Hotch's return so they could be sorted through, and the furniture was just as neatly arranged as it had ever been.

Curiosity pushed him in further, and he walked over to the desk. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and slowly crouched down next to the chair. The bottom drawer slid open without protest, revealing one of Garcia's blankets, tucked out of sight for official appearance but ready to be thrown over a sleeping figure on the couch. He pushed it closed, then stood up and made his way to the center of the room.

It took him directly towards the object he had bypassed on his way in and had intended to ignore on his way out, forcing him to look directly at it. The couch sat there, innocuous and oblivious to the damage it caused through its mere presence.

"Ready to go home?" a ghost whispered.

"Harry?"

He jumped, roughly jarred out of memories, hand halfway to his wand as he turned to the door. He relaxed when he saw who it was. "Section Chief Strauss," he greeted, tone coming out far more tired than he had intended. "I'm surprised you're here this late."

"I've had more work since one of my prominent teams vanished," she pointed out, grimacing. "Since you're here, I take it everyone is returning?"

He shook his head, putting his back to her and walking to one of the narrow windows. There was no real view - it faced the blank wall opposite it, and it was dark at this hour. "No. The war's gotten worse since they left, and they're indispensable right now. We need everyone we can get, and they..."
Well, they've got special talents we're relying on."

"Hm," she said behind him. "I understand it's a precarious situation, but that isn't their job. They're not soldiers."

"Neither are we," he replied quietly. "But we're all holding up at a school right now, and over a quarter of the fighters are under eighteen."

There was a long pause, and then she asked in a softer manner, "When do you expect the war to be over?"

"I don't know," he said, eyes blankly taking in what little he could see out the window. It was dark, a new moon giving off no light. "I think we'll win. We're fighting for survival, we're desperate, and we trust each other more. But the question now is at what cost." He gave a dry laugh, hollow. It sounded how he felt. "They put me in charge of a children's division for the rest of the war. We've been under siege for months now, and we need people so badly that I've got an army of kids."

"What are you doing here, then? Did Agent Hotchner come? I need to speak to him, just to make sure they all have jobs when they come back."

He reached out, fingertips lightly pressing the cold panes of glass. "I'm delivering messages of condolences."

Past his fingers, it was dark outside.

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The unfamiliar door was hard under his knuckles as he rapped on it. There was a sleepy mutter from inside after the third knock, and it finally opened to reveal Sean. He blinked, shocked, then stepped aside and ushered Harry in.

"God, you look like shit," he said as Harry followed him, trying to scrub sleep and weariness off his face. "Seriously. Are you back for good? Please tell me you're back for good. You need a shower."

Harry came to a halt in the living room of Sean's apartment. The man moved out for a moment, saying something unintelligible with his sleep-slurred voice, then returned with a glass of water and a rag. Before Harry could stop him, the wet rag was being rubbed over his forehead, washing away some of the grime he hadn't cared to clean off from the battle he and Morgan had just left.

"Sean-"

"Oh, hush. You look like you're in need of a talking more than a showering, so we're going to do that before the other. But in the mean time, there's no need to look so shitty." He stopped suddenly, his dirty tongue catching up to his self-preservation, and whipped around, peering frantically around the corner. "Fuck, Aaron's not here, is he?" He slapped himself in the forehead, catching himself far too late to stop the swears from slipping out.

"No," Harry said.

"Damn. Is this going to be a regular thing?" he asked hopefully, taking up the rag again. "Do you guys get leave, like the military, so you can come back and see everyone? Or is that just-"

Harry reached up and grabbed his wrist gently, forcing him to lower his hand and the rag in it. "Dad's not coming back," he said.
A last, blissful moment of ignorance passed as Sean tilted his head in confusion, frowning.

Then the glass of water dropped from his hands and shattered on the floor.

"No. No, no, no-" Harry reached out to him, but Sean batted his hands away. "No!" he shouted at Harry. The younger stopped, uncertain, as Sean moved around the house. Like the eye of the storm, Harry stayed where he was at, watching nervously as Sean hollered and bellowed and finally fell to his knees with a heart-wrenching scream.

Ten minutes after, Harry found himself standing in the doorway, blocking the way of two uniformed police officers. Behind him, still kneeling on the floor, Sean had his fingers buried in his hair, painfully gripping strands as he tried to pull his whole body in as tight as he could. A loud wail emanated from him as Harry held out a hand, stopping the officers who had been summoned by calls from several concerned neighbors.

"A family member died," he said as they looked from him to the grief-stricken man behind him. "It was his brother. I'll- I'll keep an eye on him, okay?"

"Kid, are you okay?" one of them asked, eyeing his appearance.

Harry laughed brokenly and swiped his hand across an itch on his cheek. It came back wet, and he laughed a bit more. "I seem to be doing a lot of this lately," he said like it was an interesting fact he just thought they should know. "I did it the last time someone died too. I was beginning to think I was just getting used to it..."

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He stayed for hours, until he was sure Sean was okay to leave on his own. Just to be sure, he rifled through his contacts and found Aunt Jessica's number. Despite his resolution to not make any calls over the phone, he knew he didn't have time to visit everyone like this, and he didn't know if he could physically deal with the emotional drain of comforting everyone. He'd only gotten a few hours of sleep after the last battle before they had set out for America.

She broke down and sobbed over the phone, but he got her to agree to come check on Sean. He got an address he wanted out of the contact book as well, though he was surprised to find it was actually in there. Before he could consider it more, he apparated out of the apartment and went back to Quantico, where he grabbed one of the emergency portkeys they had stored there that would deposit them at the Apache wizarding base.

Harry found Blackwolf quickly enough and was soon directed to the safehouse everyone had been put up in while they waited out the werewolf treatment. He almost wished that Blackwolf hadn't been available, that someone had moved the portkey... That he didn't have to do this.

Instead, he found himself sitting in front of Jack, painfully aware of the adults listening in from the other room. Jack shook his head adamantly at the same time Harry heard a shaky inhale from JJ.

"No, stop lying!" Jack screamed at him. His eyes had turned the color of Elle's, but there was something...wrong with them that Harry couldn't quite put his finger on. "Dad said he was coming back!"

"Dad said he was coming back!" Jack hollered, and then screamed in agony, both emotional and physical, as his back bent horribly and his legs curved in on themselves.
"Remus!" he shouted, and the older werewolf hurried into the room.

"If he loses control of himself, it can put him into a forced transformation," Remus explained quickly in between coaxing Jack through it. "He'll be fine, he just... He just needs to think it through, get his head together."

Harry reached forward despite Remus's attempts to dissuade him, as Jack's mouth was beginning to distort and his teeth became sharper. He grabbed onto Jack's hands, fingers on the backs of his hands and thumbs on his wrists above the pulse. "Jack, look at me," he said urgently. The leadership he had found himself in had given him a tone of command, and it forced Jack's keens to quiet long enough for Harry to talk to him. "Breathe in... Breathe out..." His fingers and thumbs began to move in small, clear circles, giving Jack something to focus on. "Breathe in... Breathe out... That's it... Breathe in..."

Jack completed making the transformation five minutes later and curled into Harry's lap, whining pitifully. Harry pulled him close.

"I'm so sorry," he whispered. "It was my fault... I'm sorry..."

"Stay," JJ said, holding onto his hands right as he was about to go out the door an hour after Jack had cried himself into a miserable sleep. "Harry, this is ridiculous. You don't have to go back."

"I do," he said, pulling one of his hands loose to place it over her other hand. "I think you know that."

"We can't lose you too."

"I know," he said. "Trust me, I know."

She deflated, then reached out to brush some of his hair off his forehead. "I hope you do."

"JJ... What's wrong with his eyes?"

She winced. "Do you really want this added on?" she asked quietly.

"Please."

"It's from the treatment. It... His eyes are human-shaped when he's in human form, but they're focusing like a wolf's. We... We don't know what to do. I'm sorry, Harry."

"He's blind?" he whispered, horrified.

"In his human form. We should have checked the treatment more, Harry, but we didn't know..."

"You couldn't have," he said as he tried to turn away. He just needed to leave before he brought anything worse here.

JJ forced him to stay put. "Did someone come over with you?"

"Morgan. To tell Garcia."

"Are you heading back soon?"

"One more stop," he said, already dreading it.

"Send Morgan a message to say you're still moving around," she insisted, and Harry nodded. He
pulled out his phone, and Remus stared at him in shock. "What's wrong?" JJ asked.

"I didn't even think about that," he whispered, horrified. "You can't use your patronus anymore, can you?" Harry looked away. After a pause, he added, "Give it some time and I'm sure it'll work again."

Harry wasn't so sure about that.

---

The old man who opened the front door stared at him for several long moments, stunned to see Harry standing on his doorstep in Pennsylvania.

"Can I come in?" Harry asked.

"Depends on why you're here."

"This isn't something I want to tell you on the front porch. Please let me in for a few minutes."

His grandfather scowled but shoved the door open wider and stalked away, leaving Harry to close it and wander in after him. "This about Aaron, isn't it?"

"Yes."

His grandfather led him into a kitchen with tall chairs around an island. He gestured for Harry to take a seat, then said in response to Harry's brief moment of surprise, "We might have had our differences, but that was two years ago and I'm not going to be an ungracious host." Harry took the proffered seat, feeling much younger and smaller than he was as his feet dangled below him. Across from him, his grandfather leaned his forearms against the counter of the island and looked him in the eye. "Now, let's see if I can guess what brings you here. Aaron sent you for something."

"No."

"Really?" he asked. "Thought for sure... Came on your own, then?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. Aaron touch you?"

Harry scowled.

"Didn't think so. He punched out a peer's front two teeth when he was sixteen after the kid beat up his girlfriend." With a smirk, he mentioned, "He grabbed the kid's backpack when he left instead of his own, but the kid had this magical cloak inside. We kept it for a couple of years, until the magical authorities showed up to return it to him."

Finally, finally, Harry knew how his grandfather knew about magic. Just when he came to realize how little it mattered in the grand scheme of things.

His grandfather waved the matter aside. "Just wanted to see how'd you react. You're calmer now, by the way. It's not very calming for others, though – sorta gives off a I'm-carrying-a-knife-and-I'll-slit-your-throat kind of vibe."

Harry took the knife Blackwolf had given him out of his back pocket to show his grandfather, then tucked it away again. His grandfather raised both his eyebrows. "If you don't mind..."
"Right. I'm guessing you're not coming to stay with me."

"No."

"I have a feeling I'm not even close. Lay it on me."

Harry crossed his arms on the countertop. "Do you know what's going on in England?" His grandfather shook his head, interest pushing past any annoyance he still held onto regarding Harry. "War broke out. I got caught in the middle of it, so Dad came out to help. We were in the middle of a routine battle, nothing out of the ordinary by that time, and I got thrown off balance by someone and my attention was on the person I was dueling. Dad was paying better attention than me and he saw the Avada Kedavra coming my way. He intercepted it."

There was a long pause, then his grandfather said in a bland voice. "That's ridiculous." Harry remained quiet, and his grandfather snarled, "Absolutely fu- The Killing Curse? Of all unoriginal stories you could tell me, that's the one you pick?! Boy, if you want me to mend relations with my son, you damn well better try harder! You piece of shit, how dare you- You come into my house and disrespect me by claiming Aaron's dead, just to get some sort of emotional reaction out of me that you can prove I do care and I can be the happy grandfather you've wanted all along, is that it? Huh? Well, you're not going to get it!" He leaned across the table and shouted, "Show me proof! Where's the corpse, boy?"

"You don't want to see it," Harry whispered, the image flashing behind his eyelids as he closed his eyes. "They... The people we were fighting, they got a hold of it, and... They..." He couldn't bring himself to say it, ducking his head away.

A loud crashing noise made him jerk up, and he opened his eyes to see his grandfather holding the broken pieces of a beer bottle in his hand. The rest was on the counter he'd smashed it against, and beer spilled out of the cracks and the opening. Harry eyed the potential weapon, but before he considered disarming his grandfather, the old man hurled the remainder of the bottle across the room, where it threw up on a wall, liquid and solid running down the wallpaper from the point of impact.

"This is why I said I'd disown either of them if they became a soldier or a fucking police officer!" he roared. "Shoveling into your own grave, or boasting of yourself off others' accomplishments!"

He grabbed another bottle and hurled it into the refrigerator. Shards flew and liquid spilled down the front and onto the floor.

"Fucking Aaron!" he screamed, then caught sight of Harry. "You fucking- Why couldn't you keep your balance?!" He reached across the table and hauled him up by the front of his shirt, and Harry made no effort to resist him as he was pulled closer until his grandfather could punch him solidly in the face. He hit him once, twice more before Harry's shirt slipped from his grasp and he fell back down to his feet. His arm caught the chair he'd been sitting on, and he leaned on it for support as he waited for his grandfather to come around the island and slam his fists into him again and again.

Instead, with Harry out of easy reaching distance, he went back to grabbing things off the counter. His keys, a pot, a few ladles, one of the metal grids on the stove, the toaster - Harry ducked under it - , another beer bottle.

His grandfather grabbed a kitchen knife and stalked out of the room. Harry followed in alarm, turning the corner just in time to see the knife go into a picture. The glass fractured and his grandfather pulled the knife out, moving down the hall to the next one. When he reached the end of the hallway, he whipped around and began striding back, causing Harry to scramble away as his grandfather shoved through. He threw the knife on the island counter and it skidded until it fell off
onto the floor behind it, but he had already turned to the rest of the kitchen.

There was nothing left for him to throw, and he punched the cabinet door next to his head. "Asshole, wouldn't even come home after graduation!" He slammed his knuckles into it again, and Harry wasn't sure if the cracking sound was bone or wood. "If you don't care about me, then I don't care about you! I'm glad you're dead, you pathetic, ungrateful, worthless, cruel..." His fist hit the door so many times that the wood split, and his next punch went through the sturdy wood and into the box of flour behind it, spraying white powder everywhere as his fist came back out.

Harry ran forward, reaching to pull his grandfather back by the shoulder, and the man spun around, his next blow raining down on Harry instead of the wood. His grandfather grabbed him again, then released him almost automatically so he could use both fists, pummeling at him as hard and as fast as he could while Harry silently took it, staggering from side to side where the hits moved him. None of the blows landed where they were intended, too rage-driven to be remotely accurate. With each hit from his right, Harry could feel his grandfather's hand giving away just as much as Harry's body was, and he finally managed to push himself through the barrage of blows to grab both wrists. His grandfather threw his weight behind his efforts to get free, giving Harry only a couple of seconds.

"Stop! Look, your hand... You won't be able to use your hand again if you don't stop now."

His grandfather relaxed, more out of puzzlement than real consideration, and Harry lifted his right hand by the wrist, revealing the bones of the knuckle that were piercing through the skin. The gory sight didn't cause the old man to relax, but Harry held onto the wrist and put his other hand on his grandfather's shoulder, guiding him to the chair he had earlier vacated.

"Come on, sit down," he muttered. When his grandfather was settled, he pulled out his wand and waved it over the wound. "Osteos emmendo." The bones reformed themselves into their original shape, though the shards weren't connected. He couldn't do that sort of healing, not like Madame Pomphrey could. "Stay there," he said, then left the house in search of bandages. He came back a few minutes later, having located them in a bathroom. He took his grandfather's hand and began to wrap it up. "Now, tell me what he did," he said as he worked, not taking his eyes off the wound.

"It was when he was sixteen, right after he busted in Ryan Nickelson's face," his grandfather said, sounding a bit numb from the whiplash of how the situation had turned around. The pain his hand must have been putting him in didn't seem to have any effect. "He had been wiry all his life, but he hit puberty and he started developing muscle. I'd done boxing in my youth and kept some of my skills sharp, and I think he began picking up a thing or two by watching me. Never asked for help, of course. Too proud for that."

Harry could have said something about him being able to throw a kettle after the pot, but he didn't.

"I had stage four lung cancer at the time. I didn't want anyone to know, so they didn't, but Aaron... Aaron knew something was up. I think he tried to tell his mother, thought it was adultery, but she wouldn't listen. By that time, Sean just...didn't care. He didn't want anything to do with me or Aaron. You think I'm bad? Aaron was just like me. I sent him to the hospital one evening, and before they even released him, he checked himself out, drove home, and knocked me out with one punch before dinner." A small, approving nod. "Great right hook. He teach you?"

"Yeah, but I don't have quite the biceps for the same effect." Besides, his father had started putting a lot more stock in his mental abilities than his physical ones.

"It's not all about muscle. It's about where you aim and how you put your weight behind it. Aaron should have known that."
"No, that's not what I mean. I don't have enough muscle to practice long enough to get it right."

"Hm. Keep training. You'll build it up. Anyway, we were sick of each other by that point, and quite honestly, he was practically asking to get kicked out of the house. I wouldn't do it. Wouldn't give him the satisfaction. He decided that to get back at me he was going to catch me in the act with my mistress, ruin my image. Followed me to a cancer treatment center instead. So, like the reasonable people we were, we got into a fight outside the building and someone had to call the police on us."

Harry pulled out his wand and ran some cleaning spells over the hand. Even with the wound under the bandage, it would still work.

"The center told me I had five months to live. Three months later, they ran another test for insurance purposes. No cancer to speak of. Aaron was angry at me, who the hell knows for what. Surviving, maybe. He said it was because I didn't tell Mary about everything." At Harry's expression he said, "My ex-wife, Hotch's mother. She died this November."

"I'm sorry," he murmured. He could feel blood dripping off his jaw from a cut on his cheek.

His grandfather snorted. "Of course Hotch didn't tell you. He blocked my number, so I had to call Sean to tell them both."

"No, the war knocked out our phones," Harry explained calmly. "We weren't able to talk to anyone for months."

"Oh. Well, at any rate... So then we were having fights all over the house, and at some point Aaron picked up some girl and I thought it was just going to be a fling, and I told him to break it off before he hurt her because she was a good girl and she deserved more than him. Apparently I was close to accurate because it was the only time Sean got mad. Two months later, I woke up and the house was quiet. Aaron took Sean and left. Mary divorced me the year after, and Aaron got married a few years down the road. Guess who wasn't invited to the wedding. I never met Haley. I've never seen Jack. When I showed up two years ago, that was the first I'd laid eyes on Sean in eight years, and Aaron in twelve."

They sat in silence for a moment, each mulling over their thoughts. Then Harry said something that had been troubling him for a while now. "When you came to our house, you said a couple of things just to get me upset. You didn't believe they were true, and if I'd been older, I would have seen how clumsy your effort was to get me to leave. So then why-"

"If it was so clumsy, why'd it work? And I never said I didn't believe they were true," he sneered.

"Of course you didn't. If you had, you wouldn't have stood there trying to convince me, and you wouldn't have spent the first few minutes wasting time arguing with Sean. You would have just kidnapped us and told us later. And then just a few minutes ago, you brought it all back up again."

His grandfather watched him work on his hands as he said, "I really did contact the Dursleys, you know."

"I figured. What you were saying was too close to what they'd said." He lifted one hand for a moment to wipe away some of the blood running from his nose.

"I had to make it seem as accurate as possible. Whether I took you two or not, I wanted you to think there was more than one person who had the same opinion of your father. The things they said about Haley, though - she didn't deserve that. But then, she didn't deserve a lot of what happened to her."

"But why? You must have known he wouldn't let you take us. And even if you got us out of the
"Isn't it obvious?" his grandfather snapped, looking up at him. A moment passed. "Ah, you just want me to say it. Fine. No matter whether you came with me or not, I could influence how you thought about your father. And it might have been years since I last saw him, but I know how he thinks and I know what he cares about, and he's always valued his image, especially in front of the people he knows about. It would have devastated him if his kids suddenly turned against him, or if one started suspecting him of being a certain sort." Quieter, he said, "It would have killed him as much as he killed me when he left with Sean."

When Harry just kept working, his grandfather asked, "Did you ever believe me?"

"I couldn't. Not that my logic told me it was possible - I just couldn't. You don't understand what I got away from with the Dursleys, or what it was like for me to suddenly have a real family. Nothing you could have said would have turned me against him, not while I was still like that. He'd already gotten me through a lot by the time you showed up, and I knew there was still going to be more he was going to be with me for. So...no. I didn't."

Then, as if surprised by himself, his grandfather said, "I'm glad." The old man looked down at his hands as Harry finished wrapping the second one. "What are you going to do now?" he asked, taking Harry off guard.

"Go back to the war," he said. "They need me."

"Do you need them?"

"If the Death Eaters win, I'm dead automatically."

"When are you going?"

"Today."

His grandfather nodded, taking his hands from Harry as he hummed thoughtfully and stood up. "Stay a bit longer," he said, walking around the counter and Harry. He put his back to him as he rifled through a cabinet for a minute. "You'll have time enough for killing later." After a moment, he shot an appraising glance over his shoulder at Harry, then nodded to himself and turned back. "We'll stick with the basics."

"Basics of...?"

His grandfather turned around, leaned past Harry, and thunked a beer down on the counter, another still in his hand. He regained his seat and popped the caps off both, then took a swig from his. When Harry made no move toward his own, he nudged the bottle closer to him. "Come on," he said. "I can't let Aaron get the last word in."

"What?"

"He punched me in front of my grandson. The least I can do is get his son drunk underage for the first time. He'll roll in his grave."

Harry kept quiet about body storage at Hogwarts. Until they could be safely sent back to families, they were all being stored away, frozen, underground. A certain part of the dungeon had a nasty smell these days.

With a moment's hesitation, he lifted the bottle and sniffed the vapors coming from the top. It didn't
smell good. After a short swig, he determined it tasted just as bad.

His grandfather smiled briefly at his expression. "You get used to it."

"I'd rather not." Firmly, he said, "I can't get drunk. I have to assume there's going to be a battle as soon as I get back, and I can't lead with bad logic."

His grandfather gave him a look. "Kid, you've been fighting a war nonstop for, what, months now? I'll bet this is your first break. Had any downtime? No? And there's probably not a lot of alcohol available for you where you're at right now." He leaned back, surprisingly relaxed for someone who had just torn his house apart, beat on his dead son's kid, and shattered his own hand. "Take an evening off. Your father's dead. You can mourn. It's okay, it's human." His eyes flickered to the broken cabinet for a moment. "We all do it differently."

"I'm under twenty-one," he said weakly.

"You sure don't act it." He reached out and flicked the bottle, making a dull pinging noise. "Come on, you don't get this chance that often. It'll calm your emotions down for a little bit."

Harry frowned. "Are you really suggesting I drown my problems in alcohol?"

His grandfather met his eyes. "I said I wanted to get you drunk. If you become an alcoholic before you're eighteen, I'll track you down, and I'll beat the piss out of you. Now drink up, and I'll tell you some more about your father. The good, the bad, and everything in between."---

"What are you thinking of, Harry?"

He turned over on the mattress and smiled at his father. It was between two battles, and they were just waiting for the next to start. In the meantime, the two of them were attempting to get some rest and avoid talking about the ongoing war. Hotch wanted to distract his son from the horrors they were facing and Harry wanted to make his father smile a little. He was the only one who was successful these days, but that might have been because they were nearly always in each other's presence. The rare occasions they weren't usually were when the battle took them to different parts of the castle.

"Home. What do you think it'll look like when we get back?"

"Much the same as when we left. But cleaner, I think."

"Yeah? Going to get Sean to scrub it before we return?"

"Since he messed it up earlier and didn't have do anything about it, he should."

"I didn't think it was that bad when he kept an eye on us over the summer."

"You didn't see all the blood he knocked out of the Order members who went in through the back door to see if you were in the house."

"True."

"By the way, he had a message he wanted me to deliver to you."

Harry sat up, excited. "You're just now mentioning this?!"

Hotch remained where he was on his back, entirely unstimulated. "He wants to know if you've
destroyed all the castle's windows yet."

Harry groaned and rolled his eyes, flopping back down. "I break the house one time and he never
lets me forget it," he grumbled, arms splaying out to the sides of him. Hotch slipped his hand into one
of Harry's, and two of his fingers subtly sought out Harry's pulse. Harry knew what he was doing,
and Hotch knew Harry knew, but neither of them said anything.

"I heard it happened twice," Hotch said slyly, fingers moving away after a few moments to take a
more natural grasp on Harry's hand.

"He said he wouldn't tell!"

"What happened? You must have gotten it cleaned up by the time I got home."

Harry muttered, "It was Draco's fault, and I can't say any more without the prick's agreement. We
swore never to speak of it, but apparently Sean's above such promises." His fingers followed the blue
lines of Hotch's wrist.

Nothing.

Harry shifted his fingers across the skin, searching for the faintest bump that briefly raised the skin in
a rhythmic tempo. After several moments, he looked down at Hotch's wrist, wondering if he was
doing something wrong.

When he looked back up, he was staring at a different expression, one that was wistful and
mourning. The blood was gone from his face, all drained out through the large gash across his neck
that the Death Eaters had created to get liquid for their scrawled message.

Hotch lifted his hand from Harry's and rested it on the side of his son's head. "You didn't clear your
mind before you went to sleep," he reprimanded lightly.

"You're always on my mind," he whispered.

"Oh, Harry."

"Why did you do it?"

"Because I had to."

"No, you didn't."

Hotch smiled at him, his hand moving down to cover Harry's eyes. "You'll understand if you ever
have kids of your own. Now wake up and clear your mind."

"I love you."

"And I'll love you as long as my existence continues, in some form or another. I will always, always
love you."

Harry blinked his eyes open into early morning darkness. A wet streak ran down one side of his face
to the cushion. He closed his eyes and focused on his breathing. He would need all the sleep he
could get to face his waking sorrow, and maybe, just maybe, he could see his father in his dreams
once more tonight.

---
Harry woke up and wished his father had let him take the Killing Curse, once again because life was unbearable. Unlike every other morning so far, however, this one had a much more definite cause.

"I fucking hate you," he spat out into the world. He was sprawled on a couch - he thought, he wasn't quite sure where he ended up last night - and he had absolutely no clue what had happened to his grandfather, but he didn't let that stop him. "So much. And you know what? I get why my father hit you."

A laugh came from somewhere nearby. "You're such a lightweight."

Harry managed to push himself up despite every part of his body screaming at him not to do it. The kitchen light was on, and it filtered into the living room gently. At least, in some alternate universe where the rules of physics applied, that happened. In this world, the light streaked across space to assault Harry's eyes with a force and power rivaling the Death Eaters' waves. While he was still getting oriented and pretending it didn't hurt so badly, his grandfather turned on the coffee grinder, and Harry gave up, dropping back onto the sofa cushions with a moan of agony as he clamped his hands over his ears.

When the grinding stopped, he asked, "What happened last night?"

"I don't know. I only remember everything up to the chili bean story. After that, I blacked out."

"What chili bean story?"

"It would seem you blacked out a tad bit sooner."

"No, seriously, what chili bean story?"

"The one I was telling you about last night, although now that I'm hungover instead of roaring drunk and am capable of reflection, I wonder if that wasn't done to impress your mother. Instead of thinking too much, you should get your ass over here for breakfast."

"I just want to die."

"Starvation takes too long. Your hangover will be gone by then. Trust me, it's not worth it. So get over here."

"If my liver fails in the near future, I'll come after you."

"I'm very scared. Now, I just made eggs, and if I have to come over there, you're not going to enjoy picking yolk out of the places I'm going to dump them."

Harry was halfway through breakfast when he asked, "Did I call someone last night?"

"Like a drunk call?"

"No, before that."

"...Yeah. Yeah, you told them you were spending the night at Sean's. You were only slightly drunk, I think. Passable for being drunk on grief, so I think you're in the clear," his grandfather said as Harry smacked himself in the head only to immediately regret it.

"They know each other," Harry said irritably. He wasn't sure who he was irritated at. "And if Morgan calls Sean to find out how we're holding up, I'll be in so much shit." He pushed his plate away and said, "I'm going to get some more sleep so I'm at least less hungover when I get a phone
He woke up an hour later to a strange noise, but he turned over and went back to sleep. A minute later, he groaned. "Would you quiet down?" he muttered.

"Not saying anything, you shit."

Harry frowned, turning over and opening his eyes to stare at the ceiling. He was definitely hearing voices, and his hangover starting to fade - thank Merlin for magical metabolism. That didn't mean his head wasn't still pounding in time to his heart's rhythms, or that what little light there was didn't make him flinch away automatically.

"Harry, let's go, okay?" Hermione asked, as from very far away to his left. When Harry looked, there was no one there. Just the blank wall of his grandfather's house.

"What?" Harry asked, then heard himself, also from a far distance, ask, "Okay." Then, "What are you saying?" Feeling ridiculous, he sat up, swung his legs over the side of the couch, and asked himself, "Me?"

"Are you having a psychotic break in there?" his grandfather called from the kitchen. "'Cause I remember what happened last time you went nuts on me, and I don't get the feeling you'll stick around to clean up my house."

"Yeah, don't worry, I'll be heading out soon enough." A sharp pain his chest made him bend over and he grasped at his sternum, as if he could plunge his fingers through skin and bone and muscle to yank out the offending sensation. "Shit."

"Is it working, Master?" Lucius Malfoy asked on his right. It was closer than Hermione's voice, so close that Harry jumped and reached for the knife he'd gotten from Blackwolf.

"The bridge is forming..." Riddle whispered. He was also nowhere to be seen. "I can see it now..."

"Will the connection stay open?"

"Hey, are you hearing any of this?" Harry shouted, leaning back to hopefully catch a glimpse of his grandfather in the kitchen. The old man had his back to him, nursing another beer. Damn, and Harry thought his metabolism was good. Or maybe his grandfather was just still going and didn't care.

"Potter!"

"Oh, Jesus- What? God, can't I have five fucking minutes without dealing with you?"

"So it's a theological break down you're having in there, is it?" his grandfather calmly asked. "Wow, alcohol works really weirdly on you wizards."

"The only need either one of us are going to have for a Bible in the next few minutes is going to require a priest too, for an exorcism," Harry muttered crossly, getting to his feet. "What the hell is going on?"

"Potter," Riddle snapped again. "Always meddling, aren't you?"

"My lord," Bellatrix asked, and Harry's grip on his knife tightened until his knuckles were white. "Is Potter involved?"

"It would seem his...connection to me is allowing him to witness this in some way," Riddle said. "It
is of no harm. Oh, Potter, what wonders you will see. I just hope you understand what it means - the end for you and those you love."

"You know, maybe this isn't the best time to mention this, but I can't actually see you. Connection's a bit fuzzy. Maybe you'll have to get someone to narrate."

His own second voice faded away, but Harry remained standing as he heard short, random orders from Riddle to his followers. At one point, his grandfather glanced in, saw him standing there rigid and angry with a sharp blade in his hands, then shrugged and turned back around. It was impossible to decipher what exactly was going on, though he could guess it was some sort of ritual. If he called back to Hogwarts and told them to be on the look out, did he stand a better chance of warning them in time or missing something crucial?

Almost ten minutes later, there was a triumphant cry from Riddle. "There, there it is!"

This time, Harry did have a visual. In front of him, a grey curtain spread across the wall, rippling with an unseen breeze. His double voice came back, overlapping with others. He walked slowly forward, pulling out his wand and sheathing his knife, but the diagnostic charms he ran came back inconclusive. Someone better than him at charms or...whatever this was needed to take a look. Assuming it stayed that long, and Riddle didn't end the world before anyone could get here.

Well, no time like the present. It didn't sound like he had much of it left anyway.

Harry reached forward, palm out, to touch the curtain. Whispering came out of it, and he leaned in to try to hear better.

"There, now!" Riddle suddenly shouted, startling Harry and causing him to topple forward.

The curtain was frigid and boiling at the same time, and Harry tumbled head over heels through it. There was no gravity, no left or right, and his body had no physical form in the way he understood it. Despite his tumultuous, uncontrolled movements, he wasn't nauseous, and he wasn't dizzy. Whatever perception he had wasn't coming from his senses, but more of an unconscious understanding of what was going on.

Murmurs swept past him, and phantom sensations reached out to touch him, not to slow him down but to try and force him to take them with him instead. His momentum dragged him along, through their grasping, desperate hands at the same pace, regardless of whether or not he wanted to slow down or speed up. More clearly, Riddle was rambling on again, but his voice quickly grew fainter and fainter, while a new cluster of voices got stronger and stronger, until he was almost next to them, could practically reach out and touch them and feel-

Robe fabric, skin, and then stone.

Harry hit the hard ground with a grunt, earning an accidental elbow to the ribs, then rolled over onto his back. A glance to the side was the equivalent of him looking in the mirror, only not quite. It was him, but...it wasn't?

He raised an eyebrow, then tilted his head back to look at his surroundings. They were in what looked like an auditorium without any seats; a large, empty, circular room with a ceiling so far above him he couldn't see. The lighting was dim, which his head was immensely grateful for considering its hungover state, but sounds were reverberating easily. He was on a dias in the middle of the room, directly in front of a curtain that strongly resembled the one he'd seen in his grandfather's home, only with a stone arch encircling it. From it, he could hear Riddle's voice coming again, suddenly angry.
Ten Death Eaters were pointing their wands at the pair, though they all seemed rather bewildered as to what had happened. Lucius Malfoy had his mouth open like he had been in the middle of saying something, but had been forced to forget it while his mind struggled to grasp what exactly was going on.

"Oh, this bloody day just keeps getting better and better," Harry growled, getting to his feet. Beside him, his doppelganger scrambled up considerably less calmly.

Then the door flew open, and Neville Longbottom walked in with blood running from what looked like a broken nose. Some of the Death Eaters turned to him, but they were wary to completely put their backs to the extraordinary sight on the dias lest they miss something. For his part, Neville had come to a dead halt and was staring in confusion at the sight as well.

Hell, that wasn't Neville. Neville had training to stun first and ask questions later in bizarre situation.

Harry groaned loudly and held out his hand in the common gesture for stopping, then lowered all but his pointer finger. "Give me a second and I'll be right with you."

He turned back to the arch. "I just know I'm going to regret this in about fifteen minutes," he muttered crossly to himself, then held up his wand and shouted, "Finite incantatem! Ellanaeri suspendo!" The latter was a spell developed by Draco, Garcia, and Luna to interrupt the wave frequencies to stop or warp a magical flux. Personally, he thought the first bit of Latin made no sense, but there was a reason they hadn't consulted him. After a pause, he added for good measure, "Bombarda!"

The voices coming from the veil abruptly cut off as smoke billowed towards them in a gust. Well, some of them did - the ones that were probably back from wherever he'd come from. Now there was just a weird murmuring. He hoped that was a good sign, he thought as he sneezed at the smoke. Ugh, now his head hurt more, and the stupid veil wasn't even damaged.

He turned back to everyone, aware of the dramatic background he had for a moment, though it'd probably been ruined by the tickle in his nose.

"Okay. So who wants to tell me what the fuck is going on?" They stared. "No takers? Okay." And then his eyes alit on Bellatrix Lestrange, staring there just as blankly as everyone else, and-

But no, it wasn't her, just in the way the him next to him wasn't...him. There should have been a faint scar across the bridge of her nose and down one cheek, courtesy of Seamus early on. Her posture was different, too, though maybe that had something to do with the situation. The Lestrange in front of him now was stiffer, muscles tighter; the Lestrange whose heart he wanted in his hands so he could examine how black it had turned was more languid, more cocky. The one here wasn't in her element yet.

He made a disapproving noise and turned away from her. She was too distracting. "Who are you?" he asked his doppelganger curiously. The response was a stare. "I seem to have found myself in a land of mutes. Marvelous. Do you do charades?"

Doors slammed open at the top of the room. In Harry's state, and in the dim lighting, he hadn't even noticed any but the one Neville had entered through.

"Stupefy!"

"Expelliarmus!"

The incomers hadn't noticed the odd tension in the room yet, and their entrance effectively broke the
awkward standoff. Beside him, the other Harry Potter did the smart thing and jumped off the dias.

The surrealness of the situation gave everything a dream-like quality, but he was vibrating with battle instincts that had been honed for months. He sent an odd reflection spell in the middle of an incoming red beam, and it bounced back at whoever had shot it. With that done, he followed his other self's example and leapt from the dias, landing in a roll and moving to his feet in the same motion.

His eyes swept over the room quickly, then landed on the person he was looking for. He thought he saw his doppelganger struggling with Lucius Malfoy a few meters away, but he figured the other him could handle it so he took off after his quarry. A moment later, however, she was swept away by the flurry of activity, and he snarled in frustration as he realized he'd lost track of his other self too. Stupid hangover because of stupid alcohol provided by his stupid grandfather because he-

The hell is that, he wondered as he saw a silver ball go flying through the air from the hands of himself to Neville. Well, it looked like they had that under control.

"Impedimenta!" he shouted at someone running past him with a Death Eater mask on. A hand tightened on his shoulder and he reflexively turned and slugged... Alastor Moody right across the face.

"Oh. Sorry about that," he said apologetically as Moody glared at him and, out of the corner of his eye, he saw the ball break and a strange, misty figure appear and begin to speak. He had a feeling that wasn't supposed to happen.

Another door opened, and he glanced over to see Dumbledore striding in, rather late. As he moved to turn again to better evaluate the situation, he caught sight of Lestrange dueling with Sirius on the dias, and he whirled around, planting one palm on the dias wood to swing himself up onto it. He rushed forward, ducking centimeters under her arm as it swung, twisting around while keeping low to face her in the front, and sliding his feet to slip under a spell from Sirius that whizzed past her hip. Both adults paused at the bizarre maneuver, and he used their moment of bewilderment to latch onto Lestrange's leg.

Before she could do anything, he stood up, bringing the leg with him, and forcing her to fall forward and complete an inadvertent front flip. She landed heavily on her back, then shot a spell straight up at him. He stepped back to dodge it, and she scrambled to her feet, casting spells to keep him back long enough for her to get her bearings. On her side, a Death Eater with mask still firmly in place had gotten up to cover her from Sirius's attacks.

"Oh, fuck it," he muttered and threw his wand at her.

She started to throw up a shield but realized it was pointless just in time to stop. The halt and hesitation cost her, and by the time she had regained herself Harry was a meter away. She threw up her wand arm but he swung his hand, knocking her wand away and leaving them both temporarily weaponless.

"Watch out!" someone screamed at him as her customary blade flashed into her hands.

Harry's own slipped from his sheath to his palm as he dropped under the knife, then came back up and brought it in a wide arc that connected with her forearm. She dropped her knife, caught it below with her other hand, and jabbed forward. Instead of blocking the blade, he intercepted the arm, grabbing onto it with one hand so he could raise it and move under, then pulled it towards him as he threw his body weight onto her back. She toppled forward with a grunt, and he rolled off her,
snatching the knife from her grasp as he went. Her wand was lying not far from him. He grabbed it and shouted "Stupefy!" before she could get up.

He looked up. The battle around them was done. Some of the Death Eaters had vanished, others were incapacitated on the ground.

"Does anyone care to tell me exactly what the hell is going on?" he asked calmly, two knives in one hand and Bellatrix's wand in the other.

"I was hoping you would tell us," Dumbledore remarked, and Harry sighed.

"This is going to suck."

"Ah!"

They all turned sharply to see the other Harry on the floor, clutching his head tightly. Sirius jumped off the dias and sprinted towards him. "Harry! What's wrong, what is it?" he demanded.

"It's him... He's here..."

Riddle again. If it wasn't one thing, it was another.

Harry stayed right where he was, keeping his eyes on the unconscious bitch as Dumbledore rushed out of the room. The headmaster could handle Riddle, and he wasn't going to leave only to come back later and find out that someone's ineptitude had let her slip free. He did, however, sheath his own knife and pocket hers and her wand before scooping up his own.

The door Neville had first come through flew open again, and out tumbled a misfit group of students. They came to an abrupt halt and looked around the room, either staring at him in the bewilderment apparent on everyone's faces or the other Harry in concern. He stared back, unable to think about anything except how young they all looked without weariness and loss dragging at their faces.

Well, besides Ron, whose face and neck resembled someone who had just been affectionately snogged by an octopus, but he got the feeling the redhead was in a unique situation that hour.

"Q and A time," Harry said, jerking his thumb at the veil and turning to the Order members. Tonks, Moody, and Kingsley he hoped should be able to give him an answer considering they worked or had worked here. "The hell's this thing?"

"The Veil. A barrier between worlds of the living and the dead," Kingsley said.

Harry stared at it. With the battle raging on, the whispering voices had been overrun, but now he could hear them too clearly again. "How sure of that are you?" he asked.

"...As sure as we can be without taking a peek in," Tonks finally said.

"Our turn," Moody demanded gruffly. His wand was pointed at Harry. Behind him, the other Harry was shakily getting to his feet with Sirius's support. "Who are you and where are you from?"

"I think it's pretty obvious who I am. As for where I'm from..." His finger aimed at the Veil. "Well, that's the problem."

"You can't honestly expect us to believe that," Tonks scoffed.

"He is," his doppelganger said quietly. Now everyone turned to stare at him. "He fell out of it, right after I heard Voldemort say it was time."
"Time for what?" Sirius asked.

"He didn't say." He frowned, turning to Harry on the dias. "Were you arguing with him, when we were in here earlier?"

"Yeah... I heard you too."

"So...you're from an alternate world, then," Sirius said.

"Looks like."

"Did Voldemort mess with the Veil on the other side somehow?"

Harry paused, wheels turning in his head. "It's possible. He has control of the Ministry right now. If he wanted to get in here - there-, he could. He was definitely doing something. What are you thinking?"

"Is it possible that he made a connection to here?"

"We need to destroy it if that's the case," Moody said sharply. "We have one Voldemort too many already."

"No, I already destroyed the connection," Harry said with a sigh, turning back to face the Veil. Of all the voices, there was one he could here prominently now. A low, comforting, familiar murmur he could only hear in his dreams now. "I suspect it was just to direct him from one end of the Veil to the other, though, so he'll have a lot more difficulty getting here. The Veil's bridge between the worlds probably always exists. Damn, it hasn't even been five minutes and I regret it."

"What for?" Tonks asked.

"Isn't it obvious?" he replied wearily. "Now I don't know how to get back."

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**Chapter End Notes**

The scene with Harry's grandfather is probably one of my favorite if not my favorite scene in the whole story. He will show up again, but not very often.

By the way, if it settles some of your concerns, I'll say – Harry's dad has at least thirty-five more people he wants to punch in the face before this story ends. "Harry's dad" specifically, not any Hotch.
In Honor

Chapter by AlexTheReaper (daviesroyal), daviesroyal

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"You can crucify a Jesus, you can poison a Socrates, you can hang John Brown or Nathan Hale, you can kill a Che Guevara, you can jail an Eugene Debs or a Bobby Seale. You can assassinate a John F. Kennedy or a Martin Luther King, but the problem remains. The solutions are essentially made by continuing and perpetuating with every breath you have the right of men to think, the right of men to speak boldly and unafraid, to be the masters of their souls, the right to live free and die free. The hangman's rope never solved a single problem except that of one man." - William M. Kunstler in The State of Illinois v. Abbie Hoffman, et al.

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"Goddamn it," Harry swore as he stepped into the blinding light of the elevator. The Department of Mysteries had been much darker. He clapped a hand over his eyes. "Fuck, fuck, fuck..."

He felt Remus reach around him and slam the door shut, and the elevator started to move. Harry staggered back into the wall, then reached up and blindly grabbed one of the straps hanging from the ceiling.

"Fuck," he hissed again.

"What's wrong with you?" Moody demanded.

"Nothing," he snapped, rubbing his fingers against his forehead. Lestrange's unconscious body, he knew, was slumped awkwardly in a corner since her wrist was tied to Moody's. The two of them, Remus, Sirius, and both Harrys constituted the whole of the elevator's occupants. "Absolutely nothing. I'm just peachy."

"Oh my God," Sirius said.

"I can see how you would make that mistake, but I'm not a deity, and I'm definitely not yours."

"You're drunk, aren't you?"

"The term's 'hungover' by this stage in the alcohol processing," Harry grumbled, still covering his eyes. "But yes, very much so."

"You got drunk."

"I got totally wasted, and I regret every drop, and I regret getting up this morning, and I regret meeting you, and I regret letting that bastard anywhere near me with a bottle, and I regret-"

"Okay," Remus said and he scowled his way into silence. "We got it."

"You took down my cousin while drunk," Sirius cackled. "This is the best day of my life."

"I'm so glad my suffering brings you joy."

"Why haven't you gotten that wrist taken care of?" Moody asked suddenly.
Harry didn't have to look to see what he was talking about. "Because it was made by a cursed object. Those scars are about as healed as they're going to get."

The elevator ground to a halt, and Harry blindly groped for the doors. He had just touched the handle when Remus threw it open. "Thanks."

Remus sighed and took his arm. "You're too much like your father for your own good," he said, quickly leading Harry away from the elevator. After a moment he paused and said, "Wait here." Harry had no choice, since he could hear the other Harry and Sirius walking away from them quickly and talking in low murmurs. There was a grunt from Remus inside the elevator, and he opened his eyes a slit to see Remus and Moody trying to hoist Lestrange up between them.

He acknowledged the amount of pain he was going to be in was worth it, then opened his eyes a bit wider so he could gently nudge Remus to the side. "Let go," he told Moody and caught the body when he did. He got one arm under an arm and another under a leg and he hoisted her up onto his back in what would surely have been extremely uncomfortable for her if she were awake.

"I hear Fudge up ahead," Remus said suddenly. "We better not let him see you."

"His mind won't be able to cope," Harry muttered in agreement. "But I really don't trust him to take care of this bitch, especially since his government-run prison is the one she broke out of in the first place."

"We're taking her back to headquarters," Moody said. "We can keep an eye on her there."

Harry nodded, and the two led him down a series of back hallways to avoid Fudge and his cluster of wizards and witches who had shown up too late to even be remotely helpful. Frankly, though, they probably would have been more in the way if they had arrived on time. They reached a point in the Ministry that Moody evidently deemed worthy of stopping at, and he nodded to Remus. The werewolf vanished with a crack, and Harry realized they had gotten to a place in the Ministry where Apparition was possible.

"Sorry, but I can't get to my wand. You're going to have to take me," he said and Moody gave him an odd look. Or, at least, he thought he did. It was a bit hard to tell with his eyes narrowed. "What?" It came out sounding sharper than he intended. "I mean, what?" Too quiet. "What?" Fuck it. "Oh, just get us out of here."

"You can apparate?" Moody asked.

"Yes. I can also juggle poorly. Please, let's just go."

Moody grabbed onto his arm and they were whisked away with the familiar gut-wrenching feeling of being destroyed from existence in one place only to be recreated in another. The darker lights of Grimmauld Place were both a relief and a surprise. Remus was waiting for them in the kitchen, and Harry could hear Sirius and Harry still talking, voices getting dimmer as they walked up the stairs and down a hall.

"Oh," he said. "You're still here?" Things were much different.

"Of course," Remus asked, frowning. "Why wouldn't we be?"

"It was compromised in our world," Harry said, trying to wave it off but finding that hard to do so with his arms trapped the way they were in Bellatrix's limbs. "Greyback got in."

"How? The Fidelius Charm should have kept everyone out."
"Put her down in here," Moody said behind him, and he moved into the dining room to comply.

"Magic acts kind of weird with werewolves. Greyback stopped looking for the building and started following a scent he picked up that he thought was completely unrelated." Harry grimaced and he dropped Bellatrix unceremoniously onto the table. "So he got in."

Remus was quiet for a moment. "How many did he kill?"

"One. Fletcher. But he..." The vision of the bite on Jack's back flashed through his mind and he grimaced again. The alcohol definitely had taken the edge off things for a little bit, but now it was all back to somewhat-clarity as the effects wore off. "He bit..." He sighed.

"He's still a problem here, too."

Harry smiled grimly in satisfaction. "He turned the wrong boy. His father shot Greyback like a rabid dog."

"Shot?" Remus asked curiously.

"Yeah, you know, with a gun."

"You guys use guns over there?"

Harry stared at him for a long moment. Shit, maybe the BAU hadn't been involved enough over here for it to be obvious who Harry "Potter's" father was. He couldn't give that away. "One or two people do. Sometimes it's more convenient," he finally fibbed. He'd let them choose the right moment to tell everyone. "When do you think everyone's going to get back here?"

"I expect Dumbledore should be through with exchanging pleasantries with Fudge in an hour or two," Remus said. "Why?"

"I know this is going to sound ridiculous, considering my situation, but I'd really just like some sleep. I've never been hungover before." That, and he really needed to catch up. He hadn't been resting peacefully since...

Well.

Quite honestly, he hadn't had reliable rest since the summer two, almost three years ago. The only difference was that it was starting to get more acute.

"We could get you a hangover potion," Remus said, amused.

"No, I'm fine," he said, waving it off. "Someone wake me..." Nope, bad idea with his current reflexes. "I'll be up in two hours. Which room do you want me in?"

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Remus, Sirius, Moody, Dumbledore, and his other self were the only ones who ended up being gathered in the dining room for the talk that was about to unfold. Since not everyone else was present, Harry guessed that they were just using this as a preliminary look into what might have happened. Dumbledore had showed up moments after he'd gone downstairs, which unfortunately meant that Harry didn't have time to pull his doppelganger aside so they could compare notes a bit before the meeting.

"Where are you from?" Moody asked and Harry couldn't find it in himself to be surprised at the
typical, blunt Moody-style question.

"Alternate world. Next question."

"I've got one," his other self said, and the group turned to look at him. "Is everyone else okay?"

"A few, including Miss Granger, were put into the infirmary for more treatment, but all will make a full recovery," Dumbledore assured him. Harry hadn't even thought about that. He was so used to just moving on, since dwelling on it had taken up too much time when he needed to be focused on the aftermath. His other self nodded and leaned back, opening up the floor again for the interrogation.

"What's the difference in the worlds?" Sirius asked and Harry gave him a look.

"Why do you think I have the slightest idea? I just got here."

"Before we get into that, why were you hungover?" Sirius interrupted.

"Because I got drunk. Next."

"Why did you get drunk?"

"It's really a very long story that I definitely don't want to ever get into, especially right now. So, next question."

"Why did you come through the Veil?"

"Riddle was trying to get through. I got pulled through instead. We had overheard some plans about him creating another version of himself, but we thought... I don't know, cloning or something. I guess this is what he really intended."

"We need to find out what makes these alternate worlds," Moody said. "You, tell us a bit about yours. What's going on?"

"The war. I had just left Hogwarts to deliver condolence notices to the family of someone who died. And- What?" he asked, pausing at the expressions on everyone's faces. His other self just looked confused, but Remus and Lupin were exchanging glances while the other two frowned heavily.

"Does the public know that Voldemort is back?" Dumbledore asked.

"Yeah..."

"They didn't believe us here," his other self muttered crossly.

"They do now," Dumbledore said. "Cornelius will be telling the newspapers to run the story that he has returned. When did the public become aware?"

"Well, some of them believed us as soon as we announced it a few years ago, but the rest figured it out this winter."

"A few years ago?"

"Yeah. Well, when he sort of returned anyway, what with the half-performed ritual and all." Blank looks. "...The Silent Massacre?"

"What?" Sirius asked.
Harry paused. If the difference went back that far, no wonder everything seemed so odd here, and no
wonder the war hadn't yet gone into full swing if Riddle had only returned recently. There was no
use beginning an explanation now when he might have to backtrack again to explain earlier events,
so he set aside the massacre for a moment to think of what might have sparked the change.

Finally, he turned to his other self, who was sitting two seats to his left, leaving a space between
them. "Have you ever been to America?" he settled on.

More bewildered looks from everywhere around the table. "No," his other self said, completely
confused now.

Harry tilted his head slightly, frowning. He'd never met his father?

Wait.

"...Ah."

This other self didn't have Sean's eyes, or Harry's grandfather's. They were an even brighter green,
like the flash of the Killing Curse. And when Harry looked closer, his cheekbones were slightly
higher, giving him just a bit more of an elfish figure. He was more like Lily around the eyes, though
the jaw was James's.

"We'll get back to all that in a minute," he said, waving off their concerns. "It should have just
caused a different in events, but nothing else would really be important. I'm going to act on the hope
that I don't have long here, so we need to cover the more critical bits first."

"What's more important than this?" Sirius asked, frowning.

Shit, he needed them off that topic. Now that he knew the worlds were so different, he would have
to go into detail for so many parts of what had happened to him, and too much of it...far too much of
it...was affected by a thought that was agonizing to think of right now. He didn't think he could make
it through hours of describing what had happened to him, not when it would mean stumbling back
through all the bloodshed and death that had followed him for years now.

He needed something suitably distracting, but they were forming a united front against him. But
what? Wait, his other self had dropped in pain and told them that Riddle was nearby. The only way
that was possible was if... "Well, for starters - Have you gotten rid of all the Horcruxes yet?"

"No," Dumbledore said. His frown had gotten heavier.

"What?" his other self asked, and Harry stared in fake incredulity for a moment. The other three,
bizarrely, looked just as confused. He'd thought they at least would know.

Harry winced, and said, "Oops."

Dumbledore looked at him like he knew exactly what he'd done. Harry had no remorse.

"What's a Horcrux?" his other self repeated, starting to get angry. Yep, he definitely still had the
Horcrux in him.

"If you don't tell them, I'm going to," Harry warned. "This is their war, too, and he-" head jerk to
doppelganger "-definitely has the right to know."

Dumbledore sighed. "This was not information I wanted to burden him with."
"He's already burdened with it!" Harry snapped, gesturing at himself - sorta. "He's obviously already starting to have problems with it growing inside of him!" Now Remus was starting to go white with fury while Sirius was getting redder at being kept out of the loop. Moody's eyes were narrowed. "The best you can do is tell him what it is so he can fight it, before it kills him!"

"Did you get rid of the one in you?" Dumbledore asked.

"I'll tell you the answer to that when you finish explaining, since I think the answer should be pretty obvious there."

Dumbledore gave him a long look, then turned to the rest of the group. "A Horcrux is a piece of a soul, broken off to preserve life. Voldemort cannot die as long as at least one of them remains, as his soul has not entirely been killed. That is why he was able to return when his body had been destroyed."

"What's this got to do with me?" Harry's other self demanded.

"You have already destroyed one, the diary. To defeat Voldemort, you will need to destroy the rest as well."

"Now hang on, why's he got to defeat Voldemort?" Sirius snapped, and this time it was Harry who gave Dumbledore a furious look for his turnabout. By adding that tidbit, they were off on a tangent without approaching the real issue.

"It's what the prophecy said, in the Department of Mysteries. That's why Riddle wanted to get his hands on it, so he could know all the contents. That's why he's obsessed with killing Harry Potter, in both our worlds. Back to the Horcruxes. How many have you gotten rid of?"

"The diary."

"Shit. I was hoping you at least knew what the last two were."

"What were the others?"

"Wait, wouldn't breaking off pieces of his soul a bunch of times cause serious damage?" Remus interrupted.

"Why do you think he looks so inhuman?" Harry replied, then to Dumbledore, "The diary, Nagini, Hufflepuff's cup, Marvolo Gaunt's ring, and myself."

"You were a Horcrux?" Sirius asked, mortified.

"It's why I had a connection to him." He turned to his other self. "And it's why you still do, too. Part of his soul is in you, and since you've got a considerable failure in adult kindness around you, you're going to follow me and I'm going to tell you how to get the blasted thing out," he finished, pushing back his chair and getting to his feet.

Sirius stood up quickly. "Wait, I want to hear!"

"Great. He can tell you later. I'm talking to him alone for now, and then we'll be back down, because this isn't something I'm sharing with everyone." It'd been a pain in the arse to get it out of himself when he'd been in a position to do so. This Harry might have even more difficulty, especially if everyone knew. "Bye," he said, grabbing his other self's arm and pulling him up.

"We're not done!" Moody shouted at him.
"That's why we're coming back in a few minutes!" Harry hollered back, slamming the door shut behind them. "Hang on a second," he muttered when he saw that his other self was about to speak. "Where were you staying?"

"Here," his other self said and led the way. Only when the door was firmly closed behind them did he speak again. "Okay, what the hell is going on?"

Harry sighed and sank onto the bed. "A lot, and most of it... I can't tell them. Not right now."

His other self began pacing, and Harry watched him quietly. Was this what he turned into without his father's calm, or was this an effect of the growing Horcrux?

His father. Hotch had never gotten involved with him in this timeline.

"What?" his other self asked, jerking him out of his thoughts.

"It's- I-" he said. "Okay, we need to hurry this up. There's something I need to find out. All right, the Horcrux. Here's a rundown on what we know about the one in your head. It's not right behind the scar like you think it is - that's just where more nerves are, so that's what it feels like. It's an effect called referred pain, when you feel it in a different place than it actually is, like-" He'd been around Reid way too long. "...Never mind. Anyway, the Horcrux is pressing on your limbic system, and it grows as Riddle gets stronger and as time passes. Whenever it grows, it pushes on the limbic system, and-"

"Limbic system?"

"A part of your brain. Controls emotions, which is why you get angry or happy when he does. I'm telling you this because, before you can totally remove it, you can get a surgeon to pull that lump out."

His other self stared at him. "That's it?"

"No. It'll keep coming back, and really, brain surgery's pretty damn expensive, especially since you'll probably have to go see muggle doctors for it. That's what we did. And you're going to have to get rid of it entirely to be able to kill Riddle."

"So..."

"You need to die." His other self stared at him. "Here's where it gets touchy. I came back, obviously, but there were a few reasons why it was possible. We're not sure the exact reason, or if it was random chance because of everything that was happening. One of the things that might have helped me was the Horcrux itself, since it died and maybe it took the blow for me, instead of killing both of us. But...I also had someone partly in my head who was trying to keep me from dying by-"

"Don't ever do that again, even if you think I'm in danger."

He cut himself off and squeezed his eyes shut. After a moment, he tried to collect himself. This other self could die permanently if he didn't know everything. "He- He tried to pull me into his own head, to preserve myself. But he was- he..." This other self had to know.

Instead of speaking, he dropped his head into his hands.

"What?" his other self asked, tone less furious than it had been before.

"He... It was..." ...his job to protect me. "He'd taken me in," he finally choked out. "There
were...protective wards he relied on to help him keep me safe..." When he didn't just use his body like a shield.

He looked up with a shuddering breath. "We tried everything we could think of to kill that thing in my head," he finally said. "That was the only thing that worked."

"Merlin, what happened in your world?" his other self asked, staring at him. Harry wondered if he was silently crying again, a trick that had been honed during the battle so he could mourn and continue fighting. His fingers were dry when he touched his cheeks. It must have just been his expression.

"Don't make me talk about it," he pleaded. "I- I think that's all you need to know about the Horcrux."

"Snape and Dumbledore think Occlumency is going to help keep him out," his other self said with a scowl. There was obviously a story there, but Harry didn't have the time. He'd already dawdled enough.

"I don't know about that. Neither of them really knew about the horcrux until it had already been pulled out." He got to his feet shakily. "Listen, there's something I've got to do. It's... It's not important to any of this, to Riddle or...anything you care about. It was just a weird thing that happened in my world that I want to check up on, and I can't rest until I have. It was important to me there. So... I'll be back here, tomorrow at noon. That should give the Order enough time to figure out what's going on with Riddle and the Ministry and everything else."

"Need help?"

He shook his head. "Thanks, though." He pointed to his other self's scar. "Get that thing seen to as soon as possible. You don't want it in there longer than necessary."

He Apparated back to the Ministry, landing in the same corner they'd taken off from. The flurry had mostly died down, but he cast a Disillusionment Charm on himself just to be sure. He hurried out from the corner and went back to the elevators, and, after some guesswork, found himself in the Department of Transportation.

Breaking one law at a time. Yep, that was him, he thought as he grabbed a portkey, landing in a small field in Pennsylvania.

Now he just had to go see if Aaron Hotchner had survived in this time without Harry's influence.

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A few Disillusionment Charms were all it took to sneak into Quantico. The feeling was bizarre, having passed through freely so many times before, and now finding himself forced to prowl like a burglar. Halfway through the first floor, he realized he was being stupid and could Apparate to the BAU bullpen without the anti-Apparition wards in place.

The sound his appearance made turned heads, but everyone's gazes slid right over him. He walked through the glass doors, slowing as soon as he got in. The room was so...active, unlike when he'd last seen it. Empty. Dark. Neglected, in some places. All because some of its major occupants had left, and their support staff had been delegated elsewhere for the time being. What was going to happen to this place back home, if the team never returned?

He shook his head and stepped forward, but nausea overtook him and he thought if he moved again he was going to hurl. As it was, standing in the middle of the room, he just wanted to curl into a ball
and forget everything. Just being here, seeing all this should be proof that Hotch had survived in this world.

He forced a large volume of air in and out of his lungs, and then turned to look at one of the offices on the second floor, identical to the one in his own world.

The lights were on while Hotch filled out paperwork. His form was hunched over, but still, there was something different about his posture, something...not stronger, per say, but lighter. Like a piece of him hadn't yet been sucked out, as it had been in Harry's world. Maybe that piece had been taken by the dementor in Harry's third year, never to be returned. Maybe it would have been kinder if it had all been taken then, before Hotch saw the ruin of both of his sons and all his soldiers - children and adult, subordinates and psychological dependents alike - fall around him.

What wreckage must Harry had wrought on his own father, just by existing, for this to be the other life he could have led? Still working his beloved job, out of round-the-clock danger. No teenagers to worry about when they entered life and death situations daily. Able to maintain a dignified posture without struggle, without forcing himself to hide the weariness and exhaustion leaching away his strength bit by bit.

Alive.

Harry turned away, but he couldn't make himself entirely leave this version of his family behind. There was one more he had to visit, and before he could reconsider, he was apparating to the Hotchner home.

No one was there.

Of course not, it's a school day, he scolded himself, but a glance at a digital clock-calendar in the living room proved him wrong. Jack should be here, and he knew it in spite of the rational part of him pointing out that he could be staying with a friend while Hotch was at work. He just had to check, had to be sure-

Or maybe Jack wasn't here at all, he realized with horror. Harry had been taken by the Blood Relocation Program in his world. Maybe it had been Jack here.

He apparated out of the house immediately, sending himself flying to D.C. recklessly. By the time he'd gotten to the local magical government's headquarters, having had to track it down from vague descriptions he remembered from Travis, an hour had passed and he was getting furious with himself, either for overreacting or being to slow, he wasn't sure which. He got a few bizarre looks for his hurried pace, but no one tried to stop him as he searched signs and grabbed people for directions until he finally made it to the Children's Department.

A small group, it managed the affairs of children under the age of required education at eleven. It included filing a child as a squib or magical when their magic failed to show or appeared, and it made sure to keep its list updated so it could inform the American magical school about the contents of its roster. It handled obliviations if accidental magic by a youth was seen by muggles, and it handled informing muggle parents that their children were magical when it became necessary.

Most importantly, right now, it dealt with the Blood Relocation Program.

The secretary at the front stared at him as he ran in, gasping for breath, and pointed him towards an out-of-the-way office, where the man behind his desk simply did not care at all.

"It happens," he said. "No need to get out of sorts about a child being 'napped."
"What the fuck kind of human being are you?" Harry demanded. "Look, I'll take care of it if you won't. I just need to know who he was taken to. That you can track, right?"

"It'll take some digging," the man said reluctantly, like the effort of sitting up and grabbing his quill wasn't even worth it. "What's the name?"

Full aware that there wasn't a chance in hell of this doing him any good, Harry said through gritted teeth, "Jack Hotchner."

Suddenly, the man came alive, gesturing and pointing. "No, no, no, no! He is very well taken care of! I assure you, he has definitely not been taken, nope! Definitely not." Harry stared, and the man looked around quickly before leaning forward. "You're not from Blackwolf, are you?"

"What?"

"No..." he said carefully.

"Well, then what the hell are you here for? I know he hasn't been taken!"

"And why not?" Harry demanded. "He's not home."

"Which home?" the man replied immediately. "First off, his mother was in witness protection, last I heard, and he went with her. So they're off... wherever that is. And second off, his parents are divorced, and I don't really know the situation there, so maybe he trades parents once in a while."

Both pieces of information felt like they were going to take days to sink in, but he didn't have time. If they were going to sink, he needed a boat in a bathtub, not the Titanic. "Can you get me an address for where he's at now?" he said.

"Why?" the man asked suspiciously.

"I think he might be in danger. Look, if I'm right, I'll keep an eye out and say if anything goes wrong. You won't have to do anything. No extra security, nothing." The man frowned thoughtfully. "I just want to make sure he's okay."

The man didn't even ask why he thought there was a problem. "Don't let Blackwolf hear about this, all right?" the man finally said, bending down to pull open a drawer and begin rifling through files. "We were supposed to pay close attention to this case."

Harry frowned. "Why?"

"Not quite sure. Sounded like Blackwolf knew the father, or one of them was doing the other a favor or had done a favor, or... Whatever. Anyway, a Reloke-"

"What?"

An irritated huff. "A Reloke, Relocator. A kid snatcher. One got a bit too close to the kid, and Blackwolf nearly started taking heads off. Said it couldn't happen again, not this one." He shrugged as he handed the file over. "I don't know what's so special about this one. Kids get grabbed all the time, end up in homes where the parents can actually take care of magical little ones."

Harry flipped open the file and memorized the address quickly. He dropped it on the desk and left without saying thanks, then hurried into the main entrance hall to apparate out and start the long trek to New Jersey. Thankfully, while Hotch had him practicing driving, they had occasionally taken Jack out for a weekend road trip, since Hotch knew he wouldn't have any time on the road once he
got back to school. Once, they had gone up to New York to see Sean, and Harry could remember enough places in between that he could make short jumps without potentially killing himself by overreaching.

When he got closer, he had to take a bus by slipping aboard under a Disillusionment Charm so he didn't have to pay fare. He grumbled mentally about not being able to just search the address as he fingered his phone in his pocket. After a moment, he pulled it out from habit and pushed a button to turn it on. The device lit up, and he typed in his password and went to maps from habit even as he realized his phone probably wouldn't cooperate with him.

Only to discover that he did, in fact, have Internet.

In retrospect, he realized there was absolutely no reason why his phone shouldn't be working, not with general technological rules and all the magical aspects that had been included to get it working through almost every anti-tech ward on the planet.

With that, he was at the house not thirty minutes later, rather grumpy, but present all the same.

---

"What do you mean, you don't know?!!" Moody roared. "Weren't you supposed to keep an eye on him?!

"Do you really think he could have stopped Harry from leaving on his own if Harry had been determined?" Elle snapped before Morgan could respond. "Let's stop arguing about this between ourselves and figure out what happened! Morgan, how did he seem?"

"Like he just lost his best friend," Morgan caustically replied. For once, the profilers in the room had all their pretensions swept away in the panic that was taking over the room. "He wasn't acting rationally, and I doubt being around grieving Hotchiners did anything good for his nerve."

"When was the last time you heard from him?" Sirius asked. His face was haggard, and someone had convinced him to stop pacing and sit in a chair that he was gripping like it was his only connection to life.

Morgan grimaced. "Last night. He said he was going to show up at Quantico at ten. I waited an hour then came back here."

"What if he was just late?" Prentiss asked, though none of them believed that.

"Garcia's keeping an eye out. She hasn't seen anything."

"Did he tell you why he wasn't coming back that evening?" Moody demanded.

"No, he-" Morgan paused, then pulled out his phone. "He didn't, just said that he needed to stay with someone and make sure they were okay. But Garcia might be able to analyze the calls he made that day and see if they tell him anything."

Prentiss pulled out her own phone. "Where did he leave from?"

"The Apache safe house, but I already checked with them and they don't know where he was going. Harry just said that he had one last stop. Blackwolf said he's going to come help us look."

"Call Sean," Reid suggested. "Or Jessica."
Morgan started to say he'd already called Sean but Garcia answered and he turned away to explain his idea. Prentiss, not seeing what he'd been about to say, was already calling Hotch's brother.

A feminine voice answered wearily, "Yeah?"

Prentiss paused. "I'm looking for Sean," she said. "Can I talk to him?"

"This really isn't a good time right now," was the response. "Please call back in a few days."

"Wait!" Prentiss exclaimed when it sounded like the voice was about to hang up. "It's about- It's about a family member."

"We heard what happened to Aaron," she whispered. "We already know..."

"Who are you?"

"Jessica. Haley's sister."

She must already know about Harry, then. "Have either of you heard from Harry since he left Sean's?" she asked urgently.

There was a sharp intake of breath. "No," Jessica replied, voice stronger and more concerned. "Why?"

"He didn't meet up with someone like he was supposed to, and he didn't tell any of us where he was going. He said he had one more stop and that he was staying the night there, and now he's gone."

"Oh God. Hang on, let me- let me ask Sean..."

Prentiss waited while she walked around the house, bringing the phone in hearing range of the source of retching noises. "Sean, do you know all the places Harry was going to stop?"

"I know Harry's AWOL," came the choked reply. Prentiss took a deep breath and closed her eyes, steeling herself against the pain-streaked voice. "JJ already called me. Don't you think I'd be out looking for him if I had the slightest idea?"

"Any family, maybe?" Prentiss suggested. "Or...he was pretty messed up. Anywhere he would go to blow off steam?"

Jessica relayed the idea and there was a broken sob. "Anywhere he would go to feel guilty, you mean? He kept saying it was his fault..."

Jessica left as the retching started back up again. When she was presumably far enough away that Sean couldn't hear her, she said, "Harry called me and asked me to come over to watch out for Sean. By the time I got here, he was gone. He didn't tell me where he was going."

"Is Sean okay?"

"He drank and cried too much. The cops have been here twice from the noise since I arrived and they showed up once when Harry was still here. Please find him."

"We will," Prentiss said. "We will, we have to."

"I'll call you back if- Sean?!"

"What happened?"
"I don't know, he just ran out the- Sean, get back here! I'll call you back." She hung up.

Prentiss lowered the phone from her ear, bewildered. At the curious looks around her, she briefly explained what had just happened while Morgan got off the call with Garcia.

"She's got nothing," Morgan said. "He didn't tell anyone over the phone, and there weren't any distinctive noises in the background of his last call to me."

"Can we use a Patronus to track him down? Or an owl?" Reid suddenly suggested.

"I had Hermione try that as soon as I got back here," Morgan said. "They just got confused."

No one spoke for a long moment. Then Elle asked, "What would they do if Harry were dead?"

Everyone turned to Dumbledore, who had remained silent so far, and Moody. The latter said, "They wouldn't go anywhere. It wouldn't work. He must still be alive. But it's possible that he could have been taken to a place where wards would prevent either a Patronus or owl from finding him. The real question is...wherever he went last, did anyone see anything?"

"He's still alive."

Everyone turned sharply to look at Blackwolf as he closed the door behind him and moved further into the room.

"You know where he's at?" Rossi demanded.

"He's not dead," Blackwolf said, wearily. "But... I don't think he's got long." A wave of protest and arguments rose, and he shook his head to dispel them. "I was hoping I was wrong, when I first heard about Trelawney's tea leaves interpretation. Everything is telling me otherwise now."

"The tea leaves?" Prentiss asked.

"Trelawney read some odd symbols in his tea leaves, to scare the class into paying attention," McGonagall said quickly. "It was nothing."

"The Trelawneys have a natural Inner Eye," Blackwolf corrected. "Sometimes she is simply distorting what she sees. In this instance... I believe she was unaware of the implications of what she was looking at. I was hoping she was right, that it really was as simple as it looked, but there have been other signs that Harry is showing..."

McGonagall scoffed. "Harry is not being hunted by a leopard-spirit. The very idea is absurd! There is no proof that type of person exists, and even if they did, they would be so rare that even he would have difficulty making an enemy of one."

"Leopard-spirit?" Rossi interrupted.

"If they exist, they're said to be insanely difficult to kill and are renowned for violent revenge against perceived slights," McGonagall said. "They don't play well with others and they tend to obsess over tracking down their victims. That persistence and survival rate is what makes them so dangerous. They simply don't stop."

"It's not about the leopard-spirit, not directly," Blackwolf said. "But the presence of it, and a red dragon... Something's different about Harry, that he's attracting those rare and powerful signs."

He took a deep, exhausted breath.
I think Harry's a Light Lord.

McGonagall gasped sharply and Moody frowned. The profilers just paused, confused.

"So, like Riddle's counterpart for the Light?" Reid asked.

"In a sense," Blackwolf said.

"Why haven't we heard of this before?"

"Because he can't be one," McGonagall snapped, pushing back her frantic worry. Blackwolf tried to speak but she cut him off. "Harry is not a Light Lord."

"What's wrong with being a Light Lord?" Prentiss asked quickly before the two could start arguing.

"Light Lords don't often live to eighteen," Moody said. His blunt tone distanced them from Harry and focused them on the theory instead for a moment, but only a moment. "They come from the same situations Dark Lords do – the sort that create the strongest people in any type of community. The kind where the only way people survive is a steady growth of power. Dark Lords come out of that situation angry and vicious. Light Lords come out with understanding and compassion."

"Then why do Light Lords die so early?"

"Because they're too strong. Their magic reacts instantly to what they want to do, even if it's unconscious wishing. Dark Lords don't care who dies. Light Lords do." He glanced at Blackwolf, grim, then back to Prentiss. "Think of it this way. If you had all the power you could ever want, and your best friend died... Wouldn't you think you could have done something to protect them?"

"But even if a Light Lord was filled with self-loathing, it wouldn't last long enough for their magic to kill themselves," Morgan said, frowning.

"The magic acts too fast. It depends on the Light Lord, but most often it kills them."

"You can't know he's a Light Lord, not without-" Morgan started to say, then abruptly cut himself off. "You think...because he was able to handle Riddle..."

"Not only that," Blackwolf said. "Light Lords usually build their power slowly, and it becomes noticeable at a young age, but they only really become Lords when something they can't handle happens. Then their magic completely kicks in to protect them. In this case, when Hotch died..."

"His magic lashed out a few times, but he was upset," Rossi snapped.

"According to what you've told me, he completely destroyed this office and was unaware of it," Blackwolf emphasized, waving his hand at a portion of the wall that still was bearing char marks, "and was fighting off Dolohov's curse unconsciously. Not only that, but there are the social signs as well. People are naturally drawn to him. The students made him their leader, and even adults were fast to listen to him. You must have noticed that by now."

"He's charismatic," Rossi said.

"Even people who don't know," Blackwolf pointed out. "Didn't you think it was odd that Perotta would do something so drastic after only crossing Harry's path once before? Psychopaths, without regular emotions in the way, can feel a power difference much easier than most of us can. They're usually the ones who find out first that a new Lord has been born, because they look for ways to claim it."
Morgan looked ill. He and Blackwolf were the only two who knew exactly how hard Perotta had tried to put some sort of control over Harry.

"What do we do?" Elle asked.

"Make sure he's not able to focus on what happened. Get him invested in protecting something, or someone. If the war ends quickly, he needs to be sent away from the wreckage of antebellum repairs and to something that will keep him occupied. He cannot linger on how a single decision could have saved his father."

"None of this means a damn if we can't find him," Moody pointed out.

"He's in an alternate reality."

Everyone stared for a moment at Blackwolf.

"Riddle's been looking for a way to grow his strength by adding the power of another dark lord – another version of himself. He found a way to push through the barriers, which were previously locked, but those of us who had realized what he was doing were onto him." He glanced at the BAU, who looked faintly betrayed. "I wasn't allowed to tell you until I had spoken to the rest of the Gatekeepers. By the time I had, we were too busy trying to manage the situation to brief you on it." Morgan nodded in understanding. "The Harry on the other end of the barrier he was trying to push through must still be a horcrux, because he was connected to Riddle and was accidentally acting as the focus that Riddle was using to pull himself across the barrier. We managed to disrupt the signal, but...we think it might have latched onto Harry instead."

There was a long pause.

"So... What..." Prentiss rubbed her head. "How do we get him back?"

"We had intended to create a system that would allow the barriers to snap shut once we forced Riddle out. They closed again since Harry went through, so none of us can follow him, which also means Riddle is pushed to a halt right now. However, if Harry tries to get back, we'll let him." He paused. "But you have to understand... We'll have spent a lot of energy attempting to control the barriers. We won't be able to do it again. If Riddle tries another time to go through, I doubt we'll be able to keep an eye on any transport across the barrier, let alone try and stop him."

"It's worth it if it gets Harry back," McGonagall said quietly. "We can beat Riddle. But we need Harry."

---

The second time someone knocked at the door in twenty-four hours was much more frantic than the first time.

Sean pushed his way in as soon as his father opened the door. "Is he here?" he demanded.

His father glanced him over briefly, taking in his state. "So you heard too... No, he's not. He left this morning."

"Where was he going?"

"I assume back to Quantico."

"When he left, did he say anything strange, maybe, did it seem like someone was chasing him?"
Sean pressed.

"He didn't say anything. He'd just gotten up again to sleep off the hangover, and he said he was hearing voices. Kept asking me if I was hearing them. And then a moment later, he was gone."

Sean stared at him. "Hungover. You- You got him drunk?!"

"He needed to let off some steam. Oh, don't give me that look, Aaron, we can fight about this later." Sean bristled at having his actions tied to his dead brother, but his father pushed on. "Did you lose him?"

"This is the last place he was seen. He's been gone for hours, and he would have at least checked in if he were going to be gone any longer. So where did he go? And when did he leave?"

"I don't know the exact time. He was just...gone. Didn't hear the front door close or anything."

Sean frowned. "What about a cracking noise?"

"Like apparation? No, didn't hear that either. And- Wait." He went back to the front door and peered out the window. "The rental car he drove up in is still here too..."

Sean's mind was whirling, and he put both hands up to steady it. Maybe he was still hungover too. Scratch that 'maybe.' "So he didn't leave the house but he's somehow gone."

"Oh, don't give me that tone-"

"I'm not saying you're lying," Sean interrupted. "This is Harry. Weird shit happens." He pulled out his phone and put it on speakerphone.

"Who're you calling? Oh, don't tell me it's the feds."

"They're Harry's best chance right now," Sean said as Morgan answered. "Where are you?"

"I'm at my father's. He said Harry came here last night," Sean said, and there were quiet murmurings in the background behind Morgan before one louder voice broke through.

"I thought you guys didn't get along," Reid said.

"We don't," the Hotchner patriarch replied. "But he still stopped in to say what happened." Sean gestured for him to continue, and he went on to explain everything that he had already said.

"We think we know what happened," Prentiss said, exasperated. "It's a long story. Someone's going to come over there when we can spare them and fill you in."

The line went dead and Sean pocketed his phone. "How did you know he came here?" his father asked.

"Harry was in a masochistic mood and he needed to tell people Aaron was dead. He was in my apartment, so he could have gotten your address. Where else would he have gone?" Sean said bitterly. He turned away from his father, and the motion brought the kitchen into view. "Jesus."

"Haven't gotten around to repairing it."

"Is that blood?" Sean asked at the same time he turned back and glanced over his father. "The hell
did you do to your hand?"

"Broke it open. While we're waiting, get drunk with me?"

Sean thought about it. "After we find out where Harry went."

---

He showed up exactly at noon at Grimmauld Place. The Order meeting was boring, since he'd gone through most of this already. He had to explain his presence no less than three times, and he knew a lot of people were doubting him. Tough shit for them. Dumbledore and Moody did their damndest to wheedle some sort of an explanation out of him about the world he came from, and he did his damndest in return to only part with the information he was willing to give. By that time, his other self had gone back to school. Harry wondered what he was telling his friends who had seen double in the room with the Veil.

When the meeting became too boring, he slipped away and, despite his best intentions, went back to America, where he set about making an illegal portkey as he resigned himself to remaining nearby. Blackwolf was worried, he feebly told himself. There could be a real threat against Jack, and the Children's Department didn't seem to particularly care about kids so maybe he needed someone around who really was going to pay attention. Harry paid attention. Maybe not to his surroundings as well as he should have, but he paid attention to the house. More specifically, its inhabitants.

Dumbledore was positive the horcrux in Potter's head had to be gotten rid of by Riddle's own wand, which Harry thought laughably ironic but perhaps had potential, if only because he didn't have a way to disprove it. There was resistance against such a barbaric method as surgery, so Potter apparently wasn't going to have any relief from the pain anytime soon. Harry thought that was rather more barbaric than cutting into someone's head, but no one listened to him.

Molly caught up to him at the end of the meeting and forced a few healing potions down his throat because of the bruising on his face after he initially refuse to accept it. As he felt the wounds beginning to heal, he couldn't help but think of those on the war front without any help, and the ones who were getting worse treatment for graver injuries. It didn't seem right.

"You're leaving again," Moody accused.

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"I'm going home."

All he had to do was sneak back into the Department of Mysteries. Something to direct him back home, something to push him through that strange Veil and throw him out the other side, something to let him breathe. Riddle had done some ridiculously complicated procedure trying to locate this world, but Harry knew what his own world felt like. He didn't need to use his alternate self as a beacon, not when he could just go through by asking his wand to direct him.

Three spells. He could do that. And if he couldn't...

Well, he'd die trying.

---

It wasn't long before the office was practically overrun with Harry's frustrated unit leaders.
Dumbledore finally acquiesced to let them in, but if he knew something he wasn't saying. He spent most of the time they yelled at him rubbing his chin and nodding thoughtfully.

Hermione relented to leave him alone and practically had to drag out the others.

She marched the group to the Room of Requirement, which the DA had borrowed for a training day while the Order guarded the castle. The unit leaders were hissing scathing comments and muttering angry remarks to each other as she hustled them back, but they waited until they were actually in the room before anyone began shouting.

"He's gone and you just want us to sit back and do nothing?!!" Angelina bellowed at her. The rest of the room went dead silent. "You bitch, I thought you knew there was something more important than following the adults around! Haven't you learned?!!"

"Who's gone?" Seamus demanded.

"Harry," Hermione said and the room erupted.

"Where did he go?"

"What happened?"

"When?"

"What-"

"Sonorus," Hermione cast. "Quiet!" she shouted and, when everyone turned to look at her, pointed back in the direction they had come. "The adults, for some reason, are assuming Harry left on his own. They think he was too strong to be taken without a fight, maybe."

"Harry was fucked up after..." Draco began, turning away sharply before he could say Hotch's name. "He would have either killed everyone who came after him or let himself be taken so no one else would get hurt."

"And there wasn't a blast radius, so that leaves the second option," Hermione said. She glanced sharply at the unit leaders who had been threatening mutiny minutes ago. "There's no way they'll let us go on the defense if we tell them what we think. But we're supposed to be in here training for the rest of the day, and they won't thinking anything of it if they don't see us."

"You want to go attack the Death Eaters head on," Angelina said, her fury at Hermione fading into awe.

"This is optional. I can't order anyone to leave here."

"Right, so who's coming?" Ron challenged, and turned to see everyone with their hands up. "Yeah, that's what I thought."

"Wait, but they might come check," Shane said, then held up his hands when everyone turned to him for throwing a kink in the works. "Hang on. At the end of last year, Viktor Krum and Fleur Delacour both said that they would help us as much as they could. What if we get in contact with them, and whichever group gets here the fastest stays and pretends they're us?"

"That could work," Blaise agreed. "How quickly can you get a hold of them?"

"We'll need a fireplace connected to the Floo network. Draco, looks like your French is about to
"Do you think the students have been a bit...too eager to get out of our way?" Tonks muttered to Elle. The werewolf paused. "Oh, you're thinking it too."

"Well, we'd notice if they all left to go storm the Ministry, right?" Elle asked. It had been four hours since they'd seen Hermione's retreating back as she shepherded the others out the door ahead of her. Tonks stared. "...Right?"

"Let's go check."

They briefly opened the door to the Room of Requirement, but it was difficult to see with whatever training project the group had going on. A haze filled the room and obstacles blocked their way, but the pair could hear shouted spells and they quickly closed the door before a stray hex came towards them.

"Good," Tonks breathed out, relieved, just as Sirius came sprinting towards them. "What's up?"

"The kids are attacking the Ministry," he panted.

"No, they're not, they're in here," Elle said, jerking her thumb at the door.

"They are most definitely attacking the Ministry, I assure you, because Death Eaters are fleeing like the building is on fire and it's sure not us doing the raiding!"

Elle threw the door open again and Tonks cast the Sonorus Charm. "Who are you?"

Fleur Delacor poked her head out from behind an obstacle. "Ze graduated Beauxbatons group zat 'Ermione asked for!"

"Shit!"

The Order showed up after the tide of students had already mostly overwhelmed the Death Eaters. They had been helped along considerably by the efforts of the Ministry officials who had turned against the Death Eaters once they realized the students stood a good chance of winning the battle, and they quickly took up arms.

Hermione looked up as Neville came to stand by her. "We've just about got the Ministry," he said. Other students were pouring towards them in this strange room they had found themselves in, down at the Department of Mysteries. Odd whispers were coming from the arch in the center of the room. "The Order's just cleaning it up now since they know the building better."

They had fought spectacularly, but Hermione didn't say that. No one would have cared if Riddle himself had been killed.

"He's not here," Blaise said furiously. "They must have taken him back to Malfoy Manor. If they didn't already-"

Hermione knew she should have been keeping an eye on Blaise. He wasn't in the best frame of mind right now, not after everything he'd just lost. He was close to completely going mad.

She hoped he did. They needed one excuse to make a move on the fleeing Death Eaters.
"Harry's not dead," Seamus snapped. "You don't know that!" Blaise shouted at him. "We've lost everyone else, why not him?! Everyone we need dies! Hotch, Gideon- Of course Harry's dead!"

"Luna, watch out!" someone screamed a moment too late as the veil flashed. Hermione ran forward as it rippled and spit something out, causing the nearby people to back up in alarm.

A familiar groan nearly had her in tears, and she pushed through two more people to find Harry, their Harry, on the ground next to Luna, who was calmly getting to her feet after he'd knocked her over.

"Hey, Luna," he said with a small wave. "What's going on?"

"Everyone thought the Death Eaters took you so we came to rescue you. We've taken back the Ministry," she replied innocently.

He moaned and let his head hit the wood behind him. "Thank God, I'm back in this world. That alternate reality was really starting to screw with me." He got to his feet. "Who's here? The Order, BAU?"

"The Order. The BAU stayed behind since they're..." Hermione's eyes widened in horror. "Oh, you don't know..." Harry gave her a pleading look, asking her not to say anything more. She pressed her hands to her mouth.

Then he glanced to the side and saw Blaise shaking with unshed tears.

"Gideon..." Harry whispered.

"The curse kept spreading, even under the stasis charm," Hermione told him, removing her hands.

Harry's eyes shut tightly. "Okay," he said in a hard voice. "Okay. You said you've got it under control here?"

"Yeah..."

"Then stay here. You're doing great."

"Where are you going?" she demanded as he started to walk out of the room.

"To Malfoy Manor!" he shouted without turning around.

"What?!

"I'm going to kill that bitch!"

"I'm not losing anyone else," Blaise snapped then sprinted after Harry.

And then they were all running towards the nearest apparation point.

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"Huther, watch your flank!"

"Harry, no, don't go in there, stay back and-!"

"I'm going in there!"
There wasn't a point in keeping out of the fight, not even when he couldn't summon Atlas for aid anymore. If this was the last thing he did, so be it.

"The north and east entrances are blocked off – we've taken both sides, and we're on the verge of claiming the west."

"Go! We've almost got it!"

Training, practice, years and years of agony compiling until every student ran forward with five times the tenacity and strength of their average opponent.

"It's working! We're in!"

"No casualties yet, it's almost like there's no resistance!"

Energy pumping, so quickly it was painful. Victory so near, but so worthless with the sacrifice it had cost.

"They're leaving, they're leaving!"

"Damn it, if they leave now we might never find them all again- Sonorus! Surrender and you'll get a fair trial! Don't, and we'll burn this place to the ground! We are not your victims tonight, and we will never be your victims again!"

The screams of fury tearing at his throat as he watched the manor swarm with his DA - his loyal, brilliant, brave, cunning DA – and the Death Eaters panic inside. He felt so empty compared to the chaos around him.

"...What's that...?"

"White flag."

It was over.

Chapter End Notes

There are a lot of things I want to say about the sadness going on but I don't want to spoil anything on accident so I'll keep my mouth shut. But THINGS GET BETTER. Things get worse before they get better but I swear that there's a happy, positive resolution.
"This is the way the world ends.
This is the way the world ends.
This is the way the world ends.
Not with a bang but a whimper." - T.S. Eliot, "Hollow Men"

THE WAR IS OVER!

After long months of siege and battles, the combined forces of the Defense Association and the Order have triumphed over You-Know-Who and his Death Eaters. In a stunning display of tactics, the DA managed to get into the Ministry before the Death Eaters had time to prepare. Once there, Ministry officials loyal to the Light also joined in the fighting, and within six hours the government had been entirely reclaimed. Harry Potter, the brilliant tactician-leader of the DA and one of its initial founders, was curiously absent during this stage, but appeared near the end as he began the final stages of the war.

With the government taken, many would have merely stopped there. Not the DA! Instead of recovering from their losses and returning to the drawing board for their next assault, it seems that the DA had already planned the rest of this war to its completion, and decided that completion would occur before sundown. Once the Ministry was taken care of, they set out immediately to Malfoy Manor before the Death Eaters could prepare themselves for another attack. Our readers might remember that Malfoy Manor was given to You-Know-Who by the Malfoy family for this war, but as Draco Malfoy has been confirmed to be one of the predominant leaders of the DA and Narcissa Malfoy has vanished from view, the Malfoy family’s stance on the war is now divided as Lucius Malfoy had remained a Death Eater.

The surprise attack took the Death Eaters off guard, and before they could rally themselves together for a defensive line the DA had already swept through the grounds and into the manor. Within an hour, the DA had almost complete control of the building, and the Hotchner Ultimatum was issued, proclaiming a proper trial for any who surrendered immediately. Over ninety percent of the present Death Eaters took it, while the rest - including Lucius Malfoy, the Carrows, and the notorious Bellatrix Lestrange - fled with the help of You-Know-Who. Where these Death Eaters went with their leader is not yet known, but the rest were brought back to the Ministry, where they currently are waiting to stand trial as promised.

Previously, we were asked to remain silent about anything we heard about Hogwarts to protect the ones inside and perhaps give them some element of surprise. To honor this, we kept quiet about numerous rumors that were beginning to trickle in, but with the end of the war, there is no harm now in revealing some of the underlying facts. While some of these facts change from one source to another, there has been a single statement which has remained unaltered and which has become clearer as the story has progressed. Perhaps more than any other element of this tale, this one fact is easily the most startling information we have heard yet.

And this information?
"Hotchner was Harry's father," numerous voices have said. "Harry was never a Potter. He was taken through the Blood Relocation Program."

Agent Aaron Hotchner of the FBAU was one of the muggles who participated in the Battles of Hogwarts with such dedication throughout these long months. While many initially hesitated to accept them, saying muggles in the castle would only be hindrances, it was not long before the castle's inhabitants were eagerly welcoming the group in.

"We wouldn't have survived without them," one relieved parent says. "They saved my children more times than I can count."

It is known that the FBAU took in the survivors of the Silent Massacre for months until they returned to school, and it has now become clear that they also kept in touch for the last year and a half until the war broke out. When it became evident that the children were once again endangered, the FBAU arrived at the castle to offer their services, which ranged from conciliatory measures to incredible battle tactics. Despite their disadvantage, the FBAU actually had lower casualty statistics than either the Order or the DA, though it has been stated that this was because the castle was devoted to their protection.

One month ago, almost to the day, tragedy struck. Hotchner was killed shielding his son from a Killing Curse that Bellatrix Lestrange had sent towards them, leaving behind both Harry and Harry's younger brother. Their mother, Haley Hotchner, was murdered years ago by the Woodsmarked Killer in America, and both children are now on their own.

The FBAU had one other casualty, that of Jason Gideon. To the astonishment of many, it has been revealed that the muggle managed to get into Hogwarts by convincing the previous prime minister, Cornelius Fudge, to allow him to help Dolores Umbridge in her post at the school.

(It should be noted that Umbridge is now among those awaiting trial. She was held with other captured Death Eaters throughout the sieges of the school.)

While many students had feared he would continue the tortures she had inflicted on the students, Gideon - under the alias of Winston Phalarope - instead discreetly assisted the students in their defensive training. The rest of the staff remained oblivious about this until the war officially started. Gideon was killed by an unknown curse cast by Amycus Carrow, and while it is unclear if Gideon had family or not, it has been said that at Hogwarts he is survived by Blaise Zabini, a Silent Massacre survivor who suffered severe leg damage from torture. Without Gideon, many said, Zabini would never have walked again.

By this time, the FBAU has returned to America and is unavailable for comment. How they are functioning without two of their members is unknown, particularly since a third member, Elle Greenaway, is a cured werewolf. You read that right - among their various accomplishments, the FBAU assisted their coworker by combining magical and muggle techniques to come up with a treatment for lycanthropy. So far, Greenaway and Remus Lupin have both shown signs of remarkable recovery with negligible side effects, and are completely able to resist the call of the full moon whenever it comes about. There are rumors that a third werewolf is undergoing treatment but no name has been released.

The FBAU, now the first non-liaison government group in the world to overlap in both the muggle and magical worlds in its duty, will continue its work from home, although many reported that the students were as sad to see them leave as the agents were to have to leave. It can be presumed that both groups will be keeping in close contact. One particular field the group has shown some interest in tackling is the Blood Relocation Program, which took Harry Potter - or, rather, Harry Hotchner - from his home so many years ago.
At Hogwarts, the school has begun the laborious process of rebuilding. Many who stayed there, whether they were students, Order members, or citizens, have remained behind to help. Estimates suggest that the school should be reopen for classes by the summer, at which point the school is going to attempt to move on and complete the courses that were interrupted in their final semester. It has not been decided whether the DADA course will be continued or not, as Professor Gideon is gone and it is unlikely that there will be enough time to find a replacement, but many say that the students who should be taking their OWLs and NEWTs in that course are obviously well-prepared enough to take their tests now. As for potions, which was taught by Professor Severus Snape, who was among those who left with You-Know-Who, nothing has been decided either.

For one of the heroes of this story, much has changed, but little is known by the public about him. Harry Hotchner declined to comment to reporters and has not been seen outside of the castle since the end of the war, preferring to remain on the grounds and assist with the repairs. What will become of the DA is also not certain, and no one has been able to get any of the members to pause long enough to ask any questions. All of them are dutiful and determined to return the castle to its former glory, though it seems many are motivated by Hotchner - both of them. After all, the Hotchner Ultimatum was named not only for the one it was issued by, but also for the one it was issued for.

Harry set the newspaper down, resigned. "As usual, they totally mauled almost everything to do with nonmagicals," he muttered.

Hermione grimaced over the stack of papers she was looking at. Harry thought they were auror reports, but acknowledging that would mean he would have to ask how she had gotten a hold of them and why so he decided not to.

"The FBAU. At least the team's got anonymity since no one's going to be able to track them down while looking for that acronym," Ron muttered. He was lying on his back on the couch next to Harry, sprawling over the entire length of furniture. "As for us, we just need to make rebuilding as easy as that article made it sound."

Hermione shook her head irritably, not glancing up from the papers. "Ridiculous. Like this is all just going to be cleaned up over the summer."

"I'm getting mail asking me to be the Minister of Magic," Harry said and Ron sort of tried to suppress a snort of amusement.

It was the first evening that he'd seen the Gryffindor common room in months. The tower had just been renovated enough for someone to safely enter within the last week, but not all of the dorms had been repaired so the common room was really the only hospitable portion. Most of the inhabitants of the castle were sticking to their usual sleeping areas when they weren't helping patch things up, so they had something close to privacy.

"You should take a few days off to go see your parents," Harry said suddenly and, even though there were only three of them, the change in volume seemed as drastic as the roar of a waterfall to the silence of a cave.

He heard a soft inhale of breath from Hermione and then a choked, "Yes, I- I will. Soon."

"They're probably worried about you." He told himself to shut up and bit the inside of his cheek to enforce it. He could practically feel the pitying looks from the other two, even though Ron was still staring up at the ceiling and Hermione was burning holes through the pages in front of her.

After a long moment, Hermione buried her faces in her hands. "I thought I was going to be so happy
when this was over," she whispered. "I thought the hard part would be ending the war. This is so much worse."

"I don't know what to begin to do," Ron quietly agreed. "Do we rebuild? Go after the stragglers? Continue command positions?"

"The war's not completely over yet, not until Riddle's been caught," Harry quietly said. "He can still come back – he's proven that. But we have a small break for now, and we should make the most of it. We've earned that."

"What are you going to do?" Hermione asked.

"I don't know," he said, half-heartedly shrugging. He hardly had the energy for anything else.

"And..." There was a long pause. "Where are you and Jack going to live?"

He let his eyes slide closed and he inhaled slowly. "I haven't thought about that yet. I... I just don't know. He's almost at the end of the lycanthropy treatment, so I've got another week."

"You could bring him here," Ron suggested. "He knows this place and the people here will take care of him. Looks like a lot of students are going to be staying here for a while longer, so he'll have people to talk to."

A lot of those students couldn't go home either, but Ron didn't say that out loud.

"I can't. He'll be able to smell the blood."

"His nose isn't that sharp... Is it?" Ron hesitantly asked. Harry just nodded. His sense of smell aside, his hearing would let him overhear things that he definitely shouldn't know about.

"You could go live with Sean, once everything's settled down," Hermione suggested.

"I don't think I could do that," Harry quietly said. "When I last saw him, he..."

"I'm sure he was upset," Hermione said without anything else needing to be added. "It would be fine."

"But I'd wake up every morning knowing he'd taken me in after I got his brother killed for taking care of me, and he'd wake up seeing me as his orphaned nephew who he can't help. Not to mention Jack – how's he supposed to take care of one of the first cured werewolves, one who's blind? I'd be gone more than half of the year and couldn't help."

"You could live with us," Ron said. "We've got room."

"I just don't know," Harry sighed. "It's something I'm trying not to think about right now."

"I know you're busy with other things, but you can't stay here much longer, and Jack needs a place to go home to with you. If you wanted to, couldn't you go live back...home?" Hermione tentatively asked.

"I doubt it. Everyone knows where it's at, since Perotta and the Woodsmarked Killer found it," Harry said.

"What about your grandfather? Would he help?"

"Hermione," Harry said abruptly, "there was a perfect plan for after the war. But it required my dad.
And it required me not screwing things up so that Jack was blind and orphaned, and my mum still being alive, and really, it required me not ever existing in the Hotchner family so that there was never a war they had to recover from. And yeah, I do know that things would have been better for them without me, because I just saw a world in which they didn't have to deal with any of my shit. So drop it and stop reminding me every five seconds."

The instant the last words came out, he clamped his mouth shut and turned away.

"Harry," Hermione started, but he shook his head and got to his feet.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to snap at you," he said and left the common room.

He didn't know where he was going, just moved his legs to carry himself further from his worried friends. When he heard voices of someone he recognized, he turned away, hurrying in a different direction. If he had to choose between two sets of voices from different directions, he picked the set he knew the least. They were less likely to stop and try to talk to him.

"Harry!"

He came to a stop with a sigh. After a couple moments, Sirius reached him. His hand drifted up, like it was going to rest comfortingly on Harry's shoulder for a moment, then moved to rub the back of his neck instead.

"Harry, listen... I..."

"Sirius," Harry said, shaking his head. "I'm sorry, but I just really don't want to talk about any of this."

"I know," Sirius said quickly. "I know. But most of the people in this castle are relying on you to help them, almost all of the rest think you don't need help, and the few remaining don't know how to ask you for what you need. So this is me asking you to tell me what I can do to help."

Harry stared at a spot over his shoulder. Sirius was genuine. But that didn't mean he was going to be able to do anything for him.

"I know you're thinking that I'm asking you something stupid, like if you want to come live with me. I'm not. I can't excuse my actions from before, and I... I really messed up with your father. I shouldn't have blamed him for being in your life when I couldn't be. I've got no claim to you and you would have been an idiot to pick me over him. I shouldn't have ever forced the matter and I did, a lot." He swallowed. His eyes flickered uncertainly when Harry finally looked at him. "I'm scared I've done more wrong than right in my life. I don't know what to do. But I do know that what happened..."

Sirius closed his eyes. His hand came up to rub the bridge of his nose, like he was scratching an itch, but when he spoke without opening his eyes his voice splintered. "But- H-Hotch shouldn't be g-gone." He sucked in a breath, trying to steady himself, but his words came out watery. "And nothing can replace him or the relationship you two had, but you have to find a way to go on, and right now there are some things that aren't important that you have to worry about here in the castle. So... So if there's anything you need me to do, to help you clear things up so you can..."

He didn't say 'move on.' Harry wasn't ever going to be able to 'move on' from what had happened.

And Sirius's insight into that, more than anything, made Harry understand that Sirius really had learned from his mistakes.

"Okay," Harry said quietly. "I appreciate it."
"Anything you need," Sirius said. "I mean it."

For a moment, he looked like he was going to hug Harry. Then he stepped back, thankfully, and walked away without saying anything else. Harry went in the opposite direction.

Most of the castle was starting to empty as families left to rebuild homes and lives. The people who remained were mostly those helping with the clean-up, or were orphaned students. The Room of Requirement was cleared out, with most of its occupants having either moved to a different part of the castle or gone to stay somewhere else entirely. It freed up the Room for other uses, which sometimes included training for those who wanted to keep their skills sharp.

No one was using it when he entered, pushing the door open cautiously. The door locked on his unconscious command after closing behind him, and he took a few hesitant steps forward. The feeling that had been bubbling up in him since his outburst at Hermione rose higher until he fell to his knees with a sob, palms hitting the floor as he slumped over.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, voice cracking as his shoulders shook. "I'm so sorry, I just- I just wanted a home, I just wanted a family-" The air whipped around him, stirred either by the Room or his own magic.

"I should have listened to you, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I should haven't have- shouldn't have ever come to live with you, you'd still be alive, you..." He clutched at his chest. "If I'd been the son you'd wanted, if I'd been like Jack and done what you'd told me and not gotten involved in the war- You'd be here, you'd be here- I'm so sorry-"

He shouted at the Room, alternatively blaming anyone he could think of and begging for some sort of relief, sobbing and shrieking. At some point, he became aware that his hands and wrists were bleeding and he couldn't remember if he'd done the damage to himself with his own nails or if he'd hurt himself on the floor somehow. His throat was raw by the time he finally crawled over to a wall and slumped against it, curling into a ball and burying his face in his knees, arms curling protectively over the back of his head.

"I'm sorry."

He couldn't stop the trembling that wracked his body, even as it became physically painful to cry any longer. His breath caught on his parched throat with every inhale.

"I'll do anything, please just..."

Tears streaked down his cheeks, salt starting to burn against his skin.

"I need you."

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Condolences were the worst, he decided. He'd gathered up the list of names of the deceased that they had, and while the list was much shorter than it would have been in almost any other war, it was still far too long and had too many young names on it.

"You shouldn't do this," McGonagall said, blocking his way to the doors.

He sighed quietly. "I know what they're going through right now. And you don't need me here for repairs, not really. You've got enough people for that, but no one's doing this. I'll be back by the end of the day anyhow." McGonagall hesitated, and he pushed harder. "I can't be in the castle a moment longer. It's starting to drive me up a wall. And this really does need to get done."
She reluctantly stepped aside, and he walked out of the castle and to the grounds until he reached the edge of the Apparition wards. Many of the other wards were being quietly taken down for repairs, on the castle and on other wards, and they were hoping to get all of it back up by the end of the week. He didn't know if that was possible, but it wasn't his field of expertise so he left it to the people who knew what they were doing.

The first few houses went about as badly as he expected. The fourth house had a father who threw curses and hexes at him, and the fifth house was just empty. He went to the Ministry to find out what had happened, and discovered that the family had fled to France when the war got really heated. It took him a couple of hours to get to the continent mainland and track down the parents, and then to get back to the British Isles. Almost as soon as he landed in England, he discovered that the next family was Irish, so he had to take another trip off the island again.

By that time, it was past dinner and he decided to call it a day. He made one more stop for a family in London, then grabbed a room in Diagon Alley rather than spend the night in the recuperating Hogwarts again. Tom the innkeeper refused to let him pay, which was rather embarrassing but not something worth fighting over. Once in his room, he sent a message to Hermione so someone would know where he was at, then rested his head back on the pillow.

It was a couple of hours before he managed to sleep, and he cast silencing charms around the room just in case he woke up screaming.

The next morning, he set off with the rest of the list in hand and started checking off more families. After he found a second family had gone missing, he went to the Ministry and had someone go through the list to tell him which families were still alive and accounted for so he knew where he was searching. A couple family names were taken off his list, but not as many as he dreaded.

Before he could get going again, his phone rang. "Hermione?" he asked, marveling quietly to himself that the phone worked in the Ministry even though Garcia's counter-magic measures had been specifically against Hogwarts's wards.

"Get back to Hogwarts," she said quickly and he stiffened. "We're not in danger and there's been no attack- Well, there was, but we're fine."

"What happened?" he demanded.

There was a quick conversation between Hermione and someone else, and he started shifting impatiently. "Harry, where are you?"

"At the Ministry."

"All right, someone's coming to get you. Go to Arthur Weasley's office and stay there until... Ron's going with Neville. Wait for them."

"Hermione, what happened?"

"Someone came here to kill you."

He let out his breath. "I suppose we should have seen something like that coming."

He could practically hear her scowling about his lack of concern. "Maybe. They'll be there in a couple of minutes and tell you more about what happened."

It didn't take long to get to Arthur Weasley's office, and the wizard was already expecting him. He smiled a bit nervously. "Nasty business, isn't it? Assassination attempts on someone your age?"
"I've never really heard of attempted assassinations in the magical world before," Harry said, taking a seat at the desk across from his friend's father.

"They're not so common. It's sad that the castle is in such a state that someone was able to just walk in. I do hope it gets put back into good shape soon..."

Harry nodded and let the man chatter on while he worked, thoughts drifting. Hermione was probably already getting the rest of the Light leaders accounted for and letting them know what had happened, just in case there were more attempts soon. He hoped it was just him that they were after. Really, he was kind of annoyed. After all this, they thought a stupid assassination was going to take him down? Did they really think he didn't already have protection against something like that? A lot of the Order leaders had insisted on that sort of thing soon after the war started.

Ron and Neville showed up shortly, and Harry waved to Arthur as they left. "What happened?" he asked the other two while they went towards the entrance hall of the Ministry to access the floo network.

"Someone got to where you'd been sleeping. Almost no one was there since we were out working on rebuilding, but Blaise thought something was up and... Well, the guy's alive, but Pomfrey had to patch him up a bit."

Blaise was starting to get worrisome, Harry noted grimly. This wasn't the first time something like that had happened, but he was afraid that when the anger passed there wouldn't be much left but a deadly calm. That's what he'd done after the Silent Massacre. Not to mention that Harry had to admit to himself that he was also swinging between caustic sarcasm and somber quiet.

"Where is he now?" Harry asked.

"We haven't told the Ministry yet," Ron admitted, not concerned that someone might overhear them. Their faith in the government wasn't that strong, though Harry would have advised him to at least speak quietly if he'd known he was going to say that out loud. "Still at Hogwarts. Moody figured you might want to talk to him."

"I do." His phone rang again, and he frowned. Hermione again. Putting the phone to his ear, he asked, "What happened?"

"The assassin. He's dead."

Harry faltered in his next step, then regained himself and kept walking. He was already getting weird looks for using a phone which were quickly turning into awe once the observers realized who he was, and he didn't need to attract anymore attention for behaving strangely. "What happened?"

"Killed himself. I think he knew something that he didn't want to risk us finding out."

Harry grimaced. "We'll be there in a minute." He hung up, and said in an undertone to the other two, "He's dead."

Neville's hand drifted subtly to his pocket. "I figured."

"You noticed too?"

"Kinda hard not to, mate," Ron snorted. "I did better when we were first starting our ridiculous training, I think."

Harry shrugged. "Give them points for trying, though."
Ron patted him on the back, as if giving comfort, then abruptly shoved him forward. He rolled, coming up facing the opposite direction with his wand out, but Neville had already shot a stunning spell at their follower. The woman collapsed and her companion sent a curse at Neville.

"Got it?" Ron asked and Neville shot him a thumbs up while he put one of the various spell combinations to use. In a couple of seconds, it was over.

Harry moved closer with Neville while Ron kept an eye on the crowd around them. A couple of aurors were already running towards them, and Harry heard Ron talking to one while he crouched down with Neville to check the forearms. "Dark Marks on both of them," he muttered. "You know, if they keep trying to kill me, we could round up the rest of them just by using me as a beacon."

"I think that's probably an idea that Hermione's going to disagree with you on," Neville said calmly, standing up with Harry as the aurors started to cast stricter binding spells on the unconscious pair.

"Do you need anything from us?" Harry asked, trying not to sound too bored. Not much piqued his interest these days, and he still felt drained from visiting all the families. The nearest auror stared at him, stunned, then slowly shook his head, a bit bewildered at suddenly coming across the DA leader.

"Great." He glanced at his two friends, and the three of them continued on.

"Can't take you anywhere," Ron sighed.

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Harry paced irritably, fingers of one hand knotted into his head. "The damn reporters are getting bloodthirsty now, I swear," he snapped.

The living room was just how he remembered it, conjured by his memories. He'd seen it so many times, passing through to the kitchen or sitting on the couch with Jack or cleaning even after his father had told him not to, that it wouldn't surprise him if this mental replica was almost completely accurate.

Hotch was sitting on the stairs, forearms resting on his knees. "They're usually like that. It's their jobs."

"They would've been a lot more useful in getting word out about Riddle after the Silent Massacre and not after the war," he snapped, frustrated. "I think I would have rather found another assassin waiting for me at lunch than the damn reporter."

"I hope you didn't treat the reporter like an assassin."

"Tempted to, but didn't." His scowl intensified. "And the questions, so moronic. How do I feel about the end of the war? Who were my favorite leaders? What role will I be taking from here on? Is there a love interest in my life?" He glanced over just in time to see Hotch hide a small smirk at the last question. "It took me hours to shake her off!"

"Was she reporting or flirting with you?"

Harry's pacing came to a dead halt. "Oh no." She'd been surprisingly young, he thought, and her questions hadn't been so centered on the war like he would have expected. "Why did you have to bring that up?"

"You're welcome."

"Ugh." He flopped down in a chair. "This is ridiculous. And this isn't even over, is the worst thing!
We still need to track down those stupid horcruxes!

"No closer to finding either of them?"

"Not in the slightest. And to be honest, I haven't given them much thought. I just finished delivering all the condolences last night."

"You still did that, even after the assassination attempt?" Hotch asked, surprised and frowning slightly.

"I wasn't going to make someone else do it," Harry muttered. His eyes examined the corner of the table, staring at the grain of the wood and the changing shades.

"You kept that list much shorter than it would have been otherwise," Hotch said quietly. "You shouldn't punish yourself too harshly for the names that did end up on it, not when so many more people could have been lost."

"Yeah, I suppose," he agreed quietly. "Is this what it feels like when you don't get to someone fast enough in one of your cases?" A moment too late, he realized he should have been speaking in the past tense, but he didn't try to correct himself.

"It's similar, yeah," Hotch said. "You just have to remember that you're human and sometimes...you can't save everyone, no matter how hard you try."

Harry nodded, still staring at the table. "Dad..." he started. Hotch suddenly shot to his feet, hand gripping the bannister tightly. Harry looked up at him sharply, never having seen such urgency in the dream world from his father. "What?"

Hotch stared at something only he could see, practically boring a hole through the wall, and then his gaze shot to Harry. "You need to wake up," he said quickly. "Something's wrong."

"What are you-"

"Harry, wake u-"

His eyes flew open to the dark of the Slytherin dorm he still shared with some of his friends while they waited for Gryffindor Tower to be completely repaired. He let out a sharp gasp at the suddenness of the transition, and the sound coincided with a surprised jerk of shadows near the doorway. A spell hit the spot on the bed he'd just occupied as he rolled off onto the floor, landing with a loud thump. He scrambled to the side as another spell flew his way, and he snatched his wand off the bedstand.

"Lumos maxima!"

He closed his eyes as he set off the spell and he heard a surprised shout from the other side of the room. The spell faded and he sent a stupefy in the direction he'd heard the person speak from.

The room filled with the sound of his dorm mates casting milder lumos charms, and the unconscious body near the door came into view. "Damn, another one," Ron said in a voice that was probably too unconcerned. "You've really got rotten luck, Harry."
"How'd you know he was there?" Neville asked while Ron cast *incarcerous* on the body.

"Just a feeling," Harry said.

Less than a half hour later, he had the would-be assassin in the Room of Requirement, which he requested as an interrogation room. It was his first time on this side of the mirror, he dimly realized, and while he'd thought this might happen one day during the war if they captured someone who refused to speak to the BAU, he'd also thought that either Gideon or Hotch would be supervising. There wasn't even anyone watching since everyone else had gone to check the castle for more intruders and to let others know there'd been another attempt.

The assassin scowled at him, studiously ignoring the ties that bound him to the chair and floor. His wand was in Ron's hands, not even on the same floor, and Harry had given his own wand to Neville, who was waiting outside, just to make sure the man couldn't somehow get it off him and turn it against its owner. His knife was also in his fellow Gryffindor's possession.

"You've been on the run for a while now," Harry said calmly. "Want something to eat or drink?"

The assassin glared at him. "What, so you can poison it?"

"I'll ask one of the house elves. I doubt they're even capable of agreeing to lace something with veritaserum." When the assassin didn't respond to that, content to just sulk, he said, "You're the fourth person so far. Honestly, we were expecting something like this. You're all in a bad situation, and the only way you're getting out of it is if either Riddle or I goes down. For those of you still with him, it probably doesn't even make a big difference which one of us loses, does it? You get more material benefits from Riddle, but there's the torture. You get more freedom from us, but you lose when you have to compensate for what you've done."

"What's your point?"

Harry shrugged. "I'm just saying it makes sense." This guy had to be a Ravenclaw. He hadn't reacted at all to his last couple of statements about gain, and he wasn't trying to make himself bigger or anything to give off a stronger appearance so he couldn't be Gryffindor. Hufflepuff still remained the only house not to have claim to a Death Eater, so he thought it safe to assume this man didn't fall under that category.

"What happens to me now?"

"The Ministry will deal with you. I know the trials in the past have been pretty biased, but I've checked with several sources and they're really trying to do it better this time around. You'll be punished, but depending on what else you've done, you could have a chance of getting out of prison at some point."

The assassin snorted, shifting to cross his arms tighter. "Surely you've got more encouraging statements to say than that."

"Oh, my apologies. I'm sure there won't even be a trial and they'll let you off immediately." He smiled wryly. "I thought you wouldn't want me to insult your intelligence by saying something inane like that."

The assassin stared at him for a long moment. "What are you talking to me for?"

"Like I said, you're the fourth person to try to kill me. I want to know how many more."

The assassin frowned at him, then said, "We're not trying to kill you." Harry tilted his head slightly in
surprise. "The Hotchner family has given the Dark Lord more trouble than anyone else in this entire war. He sent out a group of us and said to bring him back a Hotchner or suffer the consequences."

Harry frowned, a feeling of dread seeping in. "How large was the group?"

"I don't know. He told us all at different times."

Why was the man telling him this? Unless...

He slipped his hand into his pocket and grabbed his phone. "Why did you come here? Why not somewhere else?"

The man smiled slightly at him, nodding slightly at the hand in his pocket. "Go ahead and tell your friends someone's after your brother. It's too late."

He pulled out his phone and mindlessly pretended to push a few buttons. The phone had been on a speakerphone call the entire time, with Hermione and a couple others listening on the other end. "You didn't answer my questions," he said as he looked back up.

"You were easier to find, and you would be easier to take."

"I'm easier to take than my brother?" Harry asked, unable to stop a trace of doubt from entering his voice.

"He expressly stated that you just had to be brought in alive, but he understood if you would be on death's door and had to be given medical help. You wouldn't come without a fight. Your brother, on the other hand, who's surely under even more protection than you, had to be brought in without a single scratch on him. The Dark Lord was rather stern when he said that absolutely no injury or distress could come to him. Your brother couldn't even be allowed to discover that we were kidnapping him." The not-assassin smirked. "I guess he wants a docile pet of your wolf."

That couldn't be it, but something was not right. "Why did you try to grab me here, and not anywhere else?"

The not-assassin sneered. "You think you're so protected here, in this castle of stone and magic. You took our base from us. We will leave you no safety to return to, Hotchner. Nowhere you run will be enough protection to keep us from coming after you. Not until we've forced you to kill every last one of us will you be able to sleep at night with both eyes closed, and even then... Are you sure you got all your enemies, or did you overlook one in your haste?"

"Good luck in your trial."

The instant the door closed behind him, he rushed towards Neville, who was leaning against the wall opposite the Room. Neville blinked in surprise as his calm demeanor faded, revealing the barely controlled panic. He passed over both the wand and knife. "What happened?"

"I'll explain later. Keep an eye on him." He jerked his thumb in the direction of the Room to show who he meant and then took off running for the headmaster's office.

By the time he got there, the only one remaining was McGonagall, who looked rather frustrated at being left behind. "They went to the Apache safehouse," she told him. "All of them."

"It's a trap."

"They know. They're ready for it." She looked at his haggard expression and planted a hand on his
shoulder. "They'll be back soon enough. Don't worry about them – they know what they're doing."

"That's not what I'm worried about," he said quietly. "What he said... He's right. They're going to keep coming. It's not going to be safe for Jack until this is completely over." He grimaced. "I didn't know Riddle was so keen to get a hold of him."

McGonagall frowned. "There must be more to that than we know now. More secure protections need to be taken into account for both of you."

Harry scowled. "How many more protections can I be put under until I can't even do my job anymore?"

"You don't have to do your job," she pointed out. "All of what only you could do has been accomplished. What remains can be done by any of us. You should just focus on keeping you and your brother safe for now, however much that hurts." She paused, seeing he was avidly against that idea even if he wasn't saying anything. "We need someone to find out where the horcruxes are," she said.

Harry paused, cautious. "Yeah..."

"Perhaps you could go somewhere safe and spend your time investigating the last few. It would keep you out of danger and you would still be helping us."

"I suppose... But where would I go?"

McGonagall let her hand drop from his shoulder and she sighed as she moved away from him, going to stand in front of the fire. "Harry," she said, one of the few times he'd heard her use his name. He shifted towards her, trying to get a better look at her expression. The stern countenance had faded into a deep sadness that he knew most of them were trying to hide.

"I have come to enjoy your company, your intelligence, and your fortitude, among other things, in these last couple of months, moreso than I would have thought possible considering your age. It has been a sincere pleasure to fight this war with you. However... I fear we cannot protect you here as well as we once could, and I can't help but feel a duty to your family to ensure your absolute safety."

"What are you saying?" Harry asked quietly.

"You cannot remain here, but there is nowhere in the world that you cannot hide without possibly being found. A life of hiding and waiting would surely undo you, more than anything else. You must go somewhere that allows you to walk without looking over your shoulder, and to live peacefully with your brother without fear of harm to him." She finally raised her head from the fire. "I think, until we have settled matters here, you should go back to that alternate world."

He frowned. "What? But- Leave everyone here?"

"We will come get you as soon as the situation is secured," she said. "I have just as much of a Gryffindor nature as you do, and I could hardly bear to stay out of the fight like this for any longer than necessary. Harry, this is the only option I can think of to keep you safe. While we hold the Ministry, and with it the Veil, Riddle cannot get to you or your brother if you pass through."

Harry grimaced and turned away, knowing she was using his brother against him but also acknowledging how right she was. "I suppose," he said quietly. "But...this could take a couple of months."

"Yes," she said. "Or it could be over much sooner. Harry, I don't mean to put more pressure on you,
but these last few attempts have all occurred in places where you held the advantage. If they had taken place somewhere the Death Eaters could have grabbed hostages, you would not be thinking about this so calmly. I don't want you to reach that point."

"I understand, I do, it's just...hard to accept," he said, still turned away from her. "Professor... They said any Hotchner. Snape knows I've got an uncle, but does anyone else among Riddle's forces?"

"I don't know," she said, "but we'll find out before you leave. I think it more unlikely that anyone has uncovered the existence of your grandfather, either." She watched him for a moment, and reluctantly asked, already regretting his necessary answer, "Will you do it?"

He nodded silently.

Her hand touched his shoulder again, briefly this time. "I will arrange the matter with Hermione."

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"Harry, I'm not sure this is a good idea."

Harry came to a dead stop. The duffel bag over his shoulder contained everything he and Jack had that it had been necessary to take, and it was weighing heavily on him. He could probably cast a lighten charm on it, but decided he could just carry it instead. "You're saying this after we've already crossed through?"

Draco shrugged beside him. The two were standing on the dias, waiting for Ron and Jack. Hermione had wanted to come, but reluctantly said that they need to stick to their earlier agreement that one of them always remain at Hogwarts in case something happened. Ron, on the other hand, had been practically sticking to Harry like glue, which was starting to make him a bit apprehensive because the redhead was so tense.

"Not this whole thing. I think that's a good idea. But going to America..."

"It's not for me," he said. "When I was here the first time and checking up on everything, I discovered that they were really concerned about the Blood Relocation Program coming to take Jack. The Hotchners here don't know about magic, so if I can keep an eye on him for them..."

Draco grudgingly nodded. "I suppose you'll make some argument about the Death Eaters not knowing American culture as well either, so it'll be much harder for them to come after you there as well."

"Exactly."

He let out a sigh. "I just think... If it were me, I wouldn't be able to watch..."

"It's my mother and Jack," Harry said quietly. "We'll be going to New Jersey, not Virginia. Theoretically, I'll never see him."

"And you promise not to apparate around once you're there?" Draco said.

"No reason for me too," he lied calmly. He was definitely going to have to move around to look for those horcruxes.

"Any magic will draw attention to you," Draco reminded him.

Tough luck.
Ron and Jack came through, and Draco nodded. "All right, got the Cloak?" Harry draped it over himself and Jack, and the other two cast Disillusionment Charms over themselves. "Let's blow this joint."

"You are becoming more American than Harry," Ron snickered.

It took them the better part of the day to get Harry settled down in New Jersey, since they had to forge papers for him so he could rent an apartment for him and Jack. He decided he'd start looking into the other intricacies of making a life here tomorrow, and they spent the rest of the afternoon grabbing food to stock the refrigerator and cabinets.

"You're going to have to look for the horcruxes mentally," Ron said while he, the tallest, pushed some cans of soup onto the highest shelf. "No searching through vaults or anything. If something went wrong, no one would be here to help you."

"Unless he went to the Order, which would mean he would get enlisted into their war," Draco agreed pointedly.

"I get it, no horcrux searching," Harry sighed, trying to ignore the way the two exchanged knowing glances. Honestly, it wasn't like they were going to be able to stop him or anything.

"If the situation back home drags out for too long, we'll send someone to give you an update," Draco said while he stocked the refrigerator with his wand. "And Harry, you're really going to have to completely settle down while you're here. I don't think you're going to have much time for anything else."

Harry nodded grimly. "We're going to burn through all this food quickly." None of them said it, but Jack's diet was going to eat most of this up within a couple of weeks. In a few months he could be seriously straining for food, especially since he wasn't going to be able to get a quality job without any background experience or high school diploma. "Hey, take the Cloak when you go back. You'll need it more than me."

"Sweet," Ron said.

"I'm going to go cast some charms on your utilities so you won't have to worry about those." Draco walked out of the room, muttering spells to help him locate the mentioned resources.

"Think you'll be okay?" Ron asked as the last of the food went to the shelves.

"I'd say what could go wrong, but..."

Ron snorted. "Yeah, don't say that. Something would happen before we even left to go back to England." He reached over and lightly punched Harry in the arm. "This is temporary. You'll be back before you know it."

He sighed. "I hope so... You guys better keep in touch to let me know what's going on."

"It might be a while," Ron warned. "And any unnecessary traffic back here could catch someone's attention."

Harry grimaced but nodded his head. "Yeah. I suppose that makes sense."

They went back to putting the apartment together, and Harry spared a moment to be thankful that there had already been furniture. Ron chatted aimlessly with him, conscious that they couldn't talk about anything serious while Jack was within hearing range, and Harry responded as best as he
could. It felt weird to know how close he was to being cut off from everyone.

"Ron, you've got it?" Draco asked and Ron nodded. Harry raised an eyebrow; Ron was rather obviously holding the Cloak. "Hey, Harry, check the door," Draco said oddly, then waved. "Have fun!"

"Good luck," Harry said, waving back, and then both of them were gone.

After a moment, he took a deep breath. That was it, then. They were on their own until someone came back for them. The next couple of weeks were going to be rough on a number of fronts, with him learning how to do all of this on his own while looking for horcruxes and still getting over the numerous personal issues he and Jack were going to be facing. He just knew he was going to regret all of this at some point.

The door...

A small note had been written and taped to it on the inside, facing the room. Harry frowned and walked over to it until he could read the letters, then groaned loudly and planted his face in his hands.

_Sorry, but we're taking your wand. You can't go looking for the horcruxes, not until it's safe, and this is the best way we can keep you out of trouble._

"I'd be more irritated if you weren't right," he told the note, then pulled it off the door. He sighed and turned around. Jack was on the couch, where he'd been for the last couple of hours while he'd listened to them setting up the house. "All right, think you know where everything he is?" he asked, trying to push the matter of his wand and his separation from everything he knew out of his mind. Jack nodded quickly. "How about you show me? I'm still getting used to this place, too."

It'd take a lot longer than a walk-around to associate this place with home, if that would ever happen, but it was a start.

Chapter End Notes

Remember that we're still under 2/3 of the way through the story. We've still got a lot of things to wrap up, like the leopard-spirit and the lord situation, plus a couple things that are just starting to become more obvious. I realized this chapter kind of seems like I could be wrapping things up, but it's just a lull.
"They are not made, or rather, the loss of their sanity is the lesser of their problems. It is worse than madness. They will tell you, if you let them: they are the ones who live, each day, in the wreckage of their dreams. And if the sweeper of dreams leaves you, he will never come back." – Neil Gaiman, “The Sweeper of Dreams”

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Four months after the Hotchner Ultimatum

"Wait, Jack!" Harry shouted as the boy raced towards the door. "Your contacts!"

"Harry," he whined.

"No, don't give me that tone. Come on back here."

"Harry, they itch!" he said as Harry crouched in front of him with the contact case. "Do I have to?"

"Yes, you do. Your eyes are purple and gold." He slipped the colored circles into his younger brother's eyes, then closed the case and ruffled his hair. "There you go. All right, to the bus with you!" he said and grandly gestured. Jack hefted his bag onto his shoulder and took off down the steps as the large yellow contraption shuddered to a halt by the sidewalk. After a pause at the sliding doors, his brother turned back shyly and waved at Harry, then scrambled up the steps.

Harry waved back, even though his brother couldn't see, and waited until the bus had disappeared from sight before he went back inside, closing the door. He climbed the steps of the apartment building until he reached their floor, and then set about grabbing everything he was going to need for the day.

The building wasn't really decrepit, per say, but no one in the building could have been accused of making a modest living. Harry was only able to afford it because of a job he'd snagged at a nearby bookstore-coffee shop, which thankfully paid just a bit more than minimum wage, and another as a house cleaner. Thanks to the war, he looked old enough to pass for nineteen, so no one thought twice about child labor laws, nor the laws requiring he be at school. When asked, he claimed he was taking a few years off to save up enough money for college.

Summer school was a blessing in disguise. Jack could go and get caught up on what he'd missed, and he would also have a place to stay while Harry was out working. He usually had to let himself into the apartment since Harry very rarely got back before him, but there wasn't any other option. Paying someone to watch over Jack would take away the precious money they needed to keep buying food and renting space.

They claimed that Jack had been blind since birth, because that was the only way they could explain how he knew how to get around so well. It was easier to say that then saying his hearing and smelling were more acute than the average person's because they were more attuned to a wolf's, just like his sight, though they had suffered less disastrous effects. The school was accommodating, eager to take care of the beautiful young boy, but it was hard to just put trust in them and hope their efforts
were going to be enough.

Harry set out a few minutes later, taking his normal route to the bookstore/coffee shop. It was longer than necessary, but it took him right past one critical point - Haley Hotchner's home. She and this world's Jack were still in witness protection, which set Harry on edge. It seemed like they should have caught the guy by now. He'd purposefully moved to this area to keep an eye out, even though he knew there was likely little that he could do since he was working all the time, but it was a habit that kept him calm throughout the day.

"Harry!" the owner exclaimed when he walked in. "There's a stack of books in the back that just came in. Can you get them sorted?"

"Sure!" he replied. "How's the morning been?"

"Kind of slow, but it's Tuesday. Maybe the evening will pick up." Harry nodded, then went into the back room to drop off his backpack and pick up the mentioned books. "Whatcha up to on your day off tomorrow?"

Harry laughed at the insinuation that he had anything fun planned. "Work. Cleaning six houses."

"Oh dear God. I don't know how you can stand those places. They're those rich families, right?"

"Yeah, so how much do you think they pay?"

The owner, Mr. Taymond, grinned at him and turned back to the register to count while he moved down the shelves to put the books away. Foreign language, Spanish... History, American... Fiction, young adult... History, European... He drifted around the store for a half hour, occasionally returning to the backroom to pick up more books, while Mr. Taymond hummed in the front. Two customers were wandering around, and one stopped him as he made to put the last of his two books away.

She appeared to be about his age, and she brushed red hair behind her ear as she sidled up to him. "Excuse me, could you help me look for a book?" she asked shyly. She must have been on her lunch break – two of the nearby schools let kids go out for that.

"Of course. What's the title?" he replied, fitting one more book onto its place and holding onto the last one.

"Uh, I think it was *Freakonomics.*"

"Oh, right. This way." He led her to the business and finances section, which bled into the social sciences in the next shelf over. "Should be in economics."

She laughed. "Oh, yeah, duh. I should've thought of that."

He smiled slightly, eyes skimming the shelves. "Dubner and...Levitt, I think... Ah! There it is." He pulled it out and handed it to her. "It's an interesting read. I hope you like it."

"You've read it?" He nodded. "Ooh, what'd you think of it?"

"It was interesting, but I've got a friend who I know would have appreciated it more. He was planning on studying economics in college."

"Seems like a boring field."

"He didn't even know what economics meant until recently, but then he got roped into helping a
research program and he thought all of it was fascinating." He felt his smile falter at the thought of Draco, and he tried not to let his emotion through while the patron was still standing there. "Anyway. Looking for anything else?"

"What would you suggest?"

The hell kind of open-ended question was that? "Er, well, what do you like?"

"I usually like to read fiction. This is for class. But I'm okay with looking outside my usual range."

"Hmm... Well, then, let's get you outside of your comfort zone. What do you usually like to do?"

"Er, I play soccer and football."

He smiled. "Soccer and football?" Her expression faltered. "Sorry, it's a joke. I'm British. Football means soccer to us."

"I was wondering, with your accent and all..."

"It's cool that you do both. It sucks that American football's so dominated by testosterone. I'll admit I never really got into it, but I had some friends who loved tossing a ball around." Morgan used to grab some kids and gather them in a courtyard to throw a transfigured football. Sometimes, when they got tired, Blaise would bring Blue out, and Morgan would just play fetch with the velociraptor while everyone watched.

"I don't really like sports books, though. No one agrees on the best way to train and it just gets annoying to sort through all that."

"Okay, that makes sense. What about your other interests?"

"I play percussion, I suppose."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Might got one for you, then. Do you like it?"

She nodded eagerly. "I love listening to music, and I get to play the piano sometimes."

"There's this book that I'll confess to never having read, but it's gotten good reviews from everyone I've heard about it from," he said as he led her to another part of the bookstore. "This is Your Brain on Music, there we go. It explains why we like certain kinds of music, and what we're actually hearing."

"I think I'll give it a try." She didn't move.

He waited for a moment, a bit concerned. What had he done? "Er, anything else?"

"Well... What would you recommend?"

She was still book-browsing, but hadn't she already gotten the book she was looking for? Aww, shit.

"Er..." Oh Merlin, think fast. Diffuse the situation or keep loading her down with books? Maybe if he broke her wallet she wouldn't come back. Wait, that was mean. But would it work? "Well, how about you start with those two nonfiction books, and then if you don't like them, you haven't bought a bunch of books you're not going to read?"
"Okay," she agreed. "So fiction then."

Agh.

"What kinds of fiction do you usually read?"

"Oh, the usual. Nothing extraordinary."

"Why not try some of the classics? Then if you find yourself talking to someone who's trying to sound impressive by citing literature you can throw in some tidbits of your own."

She grinned at him. "I like how you think." And, from the look she gave his butt as he walked past to show her to the classics section, that wasn't all she liked. He bit his tongue to avoid groaning out loud, but he wasn't good enough at hiding his expression while he walked past the front desk because Mr. Taymond suddenly raised his book over his face to hide his snickering.

"In school, what classics did you like?"


Harry started in surprise. "You read *Lolita* in school?!!"

"Er, no. We had to choose a book to read outside of class for a project from a list and I picked that one. I loved it. You've read it?"

"No, but I've heard a lot about it. A lot of scandal about it when it came out."

The girl scowled. "I hate how everyone sexualizes her. They miss the entire point of the book!"

"Have you read *Reading Lolita in Tehran*?"

"No, what's that about?"

"There's this professor in Tehran of American literature who's describing the life under the regime through famous novels she teaches. It also references a bunch of different books by different authors, so that might help you pick some more books to read later. It's not fiction, but I've heard it's a good read."

The girl left an hour later with sixteen books. Harry fell into a chair by Mr. Taymond, exhausted, while his boss finally put down his book and laughed. "Your *face*, Harry!" he wheezed.

"Why didn't you save me?"

"Because she bought sixteen books! I need to hire more strapping young men."

"*Oh my God.*"

"What?"

"Look out the window," he muttered, trying to make it seem subtle as he buried his face in one hand.

Mr. Taymond did and laughed harder. "Oh, she's got friends!"

"They're giggling."
"And- oh, Harry."

"Don't tell me..."

"It looks like there's a bet."

"How do you know?"

"Because another one's coming in."

"Can I say I'm gay?" Harry whispered furiously as the bell rang.

"I'll give you a raise if you get all of them to buy over five books each."

Harry looked up as a brunette approached. "Hi, how can I help you?"

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After the bookstore's hours ended, he went home for a few minutes to check on Jack and make dinner, then he set out again to go clean houses. He got through two, by which time it was getting late in the evening so he went home to put Jack to bed.

"Can I come with you?" he begged.

"Jack, you need to sleep," he said, though he was just as reluctant to leave.

"But I want to be with you!"

Harry paused.

"Please? It doesn't take you long! And, and I can do my homework while we're there, and then, and then it's the Patterson's, right?"

"Right..." he said, though he knew Jack had already finished his homework.

"Well, they've got dogs, so I could pretend to be a dog and I could walk with you! And you wouldn't have to keep an eye on me because I can see where I'm going!"

Harry closed his eyes. A toss up between Jack getting more sleep or seeing for a half hour. "Okay," he relented. "Get your jacket."

Jack cheered, then ran to grab the article of clothing. "Do I have to wear a collar?" he asked.

"No," Harry quickly said. "It's going to be dark. No one else should see. But you're going to have to stick close to us, all right?"

Jack put his hand in Harry's, and the two reached the Patterson's within a few minutes because of the speed Jack pushed them at. Finally, Jack hid around a corner for a moment, then came out in his smaller, lither form, tail wagging excitedly. Until he got bigger, he could pass as a rather wolfish husky, though the brown and grey coloring on his back would seem less normal. Thankfully, Remus had cast a spell on himself, Elle, and Jack so that their clothing would disappear when they transformed and reappear when they changed back, so they didn't destroy outfits each time.

Even better, one good thing had slowly arisen from Jack's situation. His youth allowed his body to adapt to the transformation easier, and each time became significantly less painful for him. Harry had dissuaded him from changing at all, but he'd come home each night to find that he had done so
anyway and had to be persuaded to change back. His sight just wasn't something he wanted to give up. Harry couldn't have been more relieved to be ushered into the living room by an ecstatic Jack one day, who transformed in almost complete silence without the customary breaking of bones and tearing of connective tissue. The pain that Jack had put himself through had been, in a way, worth it.

Harry cleaned up the basics of the house as quickly as he could - he would come back tomorrow anyway - then grabbed the two labradors in the back and brought all three canines out onto the street. The labradors took to Jack eagerly, who stood stiffly while they examined him, and licked at him in greeting until he responded shyly. Before long, the pair had accepted their third pack member for the night and were ready to set out, tugging at the leashes.

"Let's go, then," Harry said, and Jack loped alongside happily as they started.

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"There's not enough money, Dad," Harry said, hands on the back of his neck. "I haven't told Jack yet, but... If we don't come through on the next payment, they're going to kick us out."

Hotch touched his head and Harry looked up hopefully. "You know I wouldn't suggest this unless you were desperate, but... Why don't you go to this world's Order?"

"I can't fight again," he whispered.

"They won't make you. Just stay at Grimmauld Place."

"I can't- Dad, I can't risk it. I won't go near the fighting again. And-And I can't take Jack back to that place, not after what happened last time."

His father frowned thoughtfully. "Maybe the Burrow?"

"The Order will find me if I do, they will. I kept off their radar this long but..."

"Maybe it'll turn out all right if you do enter the fighting."

"I killed so many people last time, Dad," he said. "With Atlas, with my wand, with my knife... I can't do it again. And in the end, I saved everyone but the people who mattered. I can't stop things from happening. I... Dad, please."

"You might have to go somewhere, and you know where the other place is."

He shook his head quickly. "No, I- No."

"They won't tell the Order and they'll keep you safe. You know they will."

"I can't look up every morning and see you and Mum alive and Jack safe. I know I failed - I don't need the reminder."

"But you should go. It would be safer."

"Please don't make me," he whispered. "If you tell me to do it, you know I will. So don't... Just don't tell me. I can't live like that."

"Harry-"

"I'd drop Jack off and leave. He'd be happier."
"You can't live without Jack."

"I'm not living without you either. The difference is I'd make sure my body wasn't physically living after Jack no longer needs me."

"He'll always need you," Hotch said firmly. "And don't you ever talk like that."

He stared back down at the stone floor again, partially covered by blankets. They were back in the Room of Requirement, in the short time they had been sleeping here. "I feel like I'm dying," he whispered. "Like I'm slowly fading away. And I can laugh and I can smile, but I'm just replying to the people around me. Everything's getting number. I thought... I thought it would get better. You died months ago."

"It's because you don't have anything to do now, not like you did back then. You're not a general, and you're not constantly fighting. It happens when people return to civilian life."

"I just don't want to be here anymore," Harry said. "It feels like I'm getting torn apart from the inside."

"Being dead, I can assure you, is not everything it's hyped up to be. Stay alive." He frowned thoughtfully, then reached out and prodded Harry's ribs. His son hardly reacted. "You've lost too much weight."

"I'm not hungry, and we can't afford a higher grocery bill. Not when Jack's werewolf-metabolism is so high."

"Harry..."

"Oh, what do you know?" he snapped, getting to his feet. "You took the easy way out of this war! I had to keep fighting without you! Don't tell me how I'm supposed to survive when you didn't manage it!" He turned sharply on his heel and strode forward a few steps, then whipped around. "And if you actually cared, you would have let me take the Killing Curse!"

Hotch shot to his feet. "Don't you dare say that!"

"You think it would have been hard to watch me die?" Harry demanded, pacing back to him. "Huh? You think so?" Hotch put out a hand to touch his shoulder in an attempt to calm him down, but Harry batted his hand aside. "A patronus is supposed to be the best part of you, the animal spirit of everything that's good within. Atlas is dead, Dad. How hard do you think it was to watch you die?!"

Hotch managed to get both his hands on his shoulders, as if that could help him physically calm his son down. "Harry, stop. Lingering over this is just going to make it worse!"

"You were everything to me!" Harry screamed at him, tearing himself away. "How can it be worse?!"

"Please, just listen-"

"I told you, I told you this would happen! When we first met, I told you! Everyone around me gets hurt! Why didn't you get out, why didn't you take Jack and run, why didn't you send me away? You shouldn't have tried to save me."

"Because you were worth it, Harry!"

"But your death wasn't worth everything else to me! I would rather have spent the last few years
never knowing you if this was how it was going to end!"

Hotch froze, one hand outstretched to him. The arm slowly fell back to his side.

Harry stared in horror, never having seen such a lost or confused expression on his father's face before. He turned around and sprinted out the door, tearing his gaze away and forcing himself to look where he was going instead. But as soon as he left the Room, the hallways began to change, forcing himself to go in directions where the real Hogwarts had no corridors and in paths that had never been repaired by the time Harry left.

The school forced him down to the lowest levels of the school, where they'd begun to store the bodies in the dungeons. As he descended the stairs, he noticed flowing water beneath and saw the bodies floating with it, pushed up by buoyancy. He stopped, refusing to go any closer, but the ceiling began to shrink down and force him closer to the water.

He slipped on a step and fell into the water, flailing frantically as he hit a couple of bodies on the way down. They stayed dead, none turning to him or grabbing him, and he quickly swam on until he saw light up ahead. His head broke the surface and he gasped for air as he looked up above him. There were people strolling on catwalks overhead. He recognized all of them. Hotch had Jack on his shoulders, and Jack clung onto his head as he giggled. Cassius passed them, raising a hand to high five Jack.

Before their hands made contact, a rope shot out of the water beside Harry and wrapped around Cassius's neck. It yanked him from the catwalk, and he plummeted into the water meters away from Harry. More shot out, pulling each person from the catwalk in, and wherever they fell in, ripples of blood spread out until the red was dragging at Harry's clothes.

He saw Hotch and Jack hit the water, and he dove under after them, swimming frantically to catch up. As he reached for Jack, something animalistic and shadowy darted through the blood behind the boy and grabbed him by the leg, pulling him down and out of sight in an instant. Harry screamed, air coming out in bubbles and allowing blood to flow in, and he gagged at the taste.

One of his wrists was caught and he flailed, panicked into trying to knock away the rope. But it was just Hotch, holding onto him even as he was dragged down.

"Take me with you," he begged.

"No," Hotch said. "Stay here," he continued as Greyback swam up behind him, a mouthful of sharp teeth exposed. Then the werewolf lunged forward.

His scream jolted him awake and he shoved his pillow to his face to bury the rest of the sound, shoulders shaking as heavy sobs wracked his body. The smell of blood permeated his nostrils, and his free hand, the one not nearly suffocating himself, scrabbled uselessly at the couch cushion. His scream finally broke off and he shakily released the pillow, bringing his arms up to shield himself against the world as he shuddered violently.

"Harry?" Jack asked quietly, touching his hand gently. "Harry, are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he managed to choke out. "Please- go back to sleep."

"Harry..."

"Please, Jack." His fingers were digging into head now, possibly in the hopes of drawing blood. "Please."
He heard the door to Jack's room shut a few moments later as he turned his face back into his pillow and wept quietly.

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The price of housing in New Jersey, particularly where they were at, was expensive but Harry just couldn't find it in himself to drag them away. The blasé manner of the man in the Children's Department kept him bound here, all but waiting for the day a Reloke came up to snatch this world's Jack. There was no real danger to Harry and his world's Jack, not when no one knew who they were, and it didn't have to be permanent. As a result, he just worked longer and harder, quietly asking for a raise when it became appropriate. One of his clients whose houses he cleaned accidentally doubled his salary because he wasn't paying attention when he signed the next check, and then he just stayed at the same rate when he looked at his checkbook to see what he'd given him the last week. While writing it out, he asked, "What's your name, again?"

"Harry. And I don't have a bank account," he said for the sixth time in as many weeks. The man looked at him blankly for a moment before scratching out the check and the numbers in his checkbook, then rifled around for some paper money.

Mr. Taymond was different. He noticed something was off, and Harry suddenly found himself making a lot more food a lot more often for the coffeehouse. "I'm not sure we need this much," the bookkeeper said the first day after Harry had just made an absurd amount of danishes. "Well, how would you like to take some home?" He couldn't afford to give Harry a pay raise.

"You know," he said one day, reluctantly, "you should probably consider leaving this area. Being this close to the city, and to some of the major transportation stops to Manhattan and D.C., pricing's expensive. You could probably pay for housing much easier if you moved away."

"Can't afford it."

"Can't afford to stay, can't afford to leave. Ain't that a bitch."

The coffeehouse was on the outskirts of Trenton, and some of the houses he cleaned and took care of would force him to cross through a part of the city. It wasn't the best part of the city, and when Mr. Taymond heard about it, he began to get understandably nervous.

"You ever watch the news, Harry?" he asked.

"Don't have time."

"You know how there are always the gruesome murders they talk about to get people interested? And how they talk about rising crime rates in the cities?"

"Yeah."

"Well, that's because of areas like what you're passing through."

"I'll be careful."

"Please. I can't find another person like you."

The Pattersons were safely nearby, and Jack often came with Harry now whenever he went to walk the dogs. The family was going to be gone for most of the summer while they vacationed in the Bahamas, leaving Harry to take care of everything, and no one was the wiser that he was walking a third canine to wear down some excess energy. When he had to go to the other side of town for
those weekly house cleanings, though, he bluntly refused to let Jack follow. He caught his younger brother trying to slip after him several times, and had to send him back with a scolding.

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Sometimes his thoughts went to strange places when he cleaned houses. The worst was the Dawes home, the one that looked like a larger version of the Dursley place back in England. He tried to clean that one the quickest, or just kept his mind distracted.

It would have been so much easier with magic, but with magic, he would have also been hunting horcruxes. No matter how badly he wanted to protect Jack, and no matter how likely it would have been for someone to start coming after him once he started looking, he knew he would have. He still wanted to hurt Bellatrix Lestrange in whatever way was possible, whether it was by finding her or by taking down her master. In this world, he’d already gotten her captured, but she was out and about in his world, and they only had two horcruxes left.

His friends had known that as well as he had. At least Draco left a note so Harry didn’t freak out. That didn't mean he wasn't still pissed.

He walked back home once he finished the Dawes house, through the rough neighborhood Mr. Taymond had warned him about so much. He promised he took a longer route to stay safe, but he just didn't have time to do that if he wanted to get enough sleep at night. Maybe it would have been irresponsible to work himself to the bone until he collapsed into a dreamless rest at Hogwarts during the battle, but now when the next day wasn't a life-or-death matter he could afford it. Besides, he still had Blackwolf’s knife.

"Harry!” a voice said as he passed, and he slowed with a smile. One of the odder aspects of his job was that he now knew all the prostitutes on a street he had to take each time. "You never stop by to chat anymore."

"I've been working this week, Mathilda!"

"You work every week! Don't you ever take a break?"

"I hope that wasn't a come-on," Jenny said as she walked up behind Harry, slinging an arm around his shoulder. "Because that was just bad."

"Was it...hard to swallow?"

"...That was worse."

Harry shook his head at the two.

"Aw, we can't get you embarrassed, we can't get you interested..." Jenny nudged him and put an insulted hand to her heart. "Are we doing our jobs wrong?"

"Maybe I'm gay," he said, which seemed to be a common excuse for him now.

"Nah. Just boring."

"Ouch."

"Or broke," Mathilda pointed out.

"More accurate," Harry agreed.
"Hey, we're looking at rain soon," Jenny said. "It's bad for business anyway, so we usually get out of it and stay inside for a bit. Why don't you hang around for another minute or two, and when it starts up, I'll drive you home?"

Harry sighed gratefully. The pair, along with a couple of others on the street, had started offering when they weren't pretending to flirt with him, particularly when they noticed his clothes started to become seriously abused by the weather and were never replaced despite it. "Really?" he asked, not looking forward to another twenty minute walk home. Sometimes he ran it, just to stay in shape, but now that he wasn't getting as much food...

"Got you covered, kiddo."

"I'm not a kid."

She poked him in the nose. "You might fool everyone else, but I'm used to checking for the kids who work this area. You're not an adult, mister. Now take a seat over there and wait a bit."

As it was, she scored a few minutes later and slipped away with a patron, leaving Harry and Mathilda behind. The two struck up conversation and chatted amiably until someone walked past, at which point Mathilda would look them over and allow them to look her over. Then, when they left, the two went back to talking.

Jenny sauntered back into view with a smirk, and Harry got off the steps he had been waiting on. "Looks like rain in a few minutes," he said. "We had some droplets earlier."

She nodded in agreement, then her expression went still. He frowned in confusion as her eyes flickered behind him, and then a hand was on his hip and the rest of the connected body appeared on his other side. "Looks like, doesn't it?" the man agreed. "Let's get inside."

"I- No, I'm not- Er-" he stammered, face flushing and heart pounding.

"Oh, don't be coy."

"He's really not," Mathilda said hurriedly. "He's just waiting for a ride home."

"Well, I can be your ride home," the man said calmly, bumping his hip gently against Harry's. "Won't even take it off your payment."

"He's not one of us," Jenny insisted. "Look, uh, I can go with you."

"You're not my type," he said dismissively, fingers stroking Harry's pelvis. He could remember phantom fingers making a similar gesture a year ago, threatening what this man was offering. "I can't find my type often." He turned back to Harry. "And I'll pay a lot for it when I find it."

Jenny and Mathilda went silent. And Merlin, he needed the money. He paused.

"And since you're such a scarcity, I'll have to come to you again and again with the same amount."

He licked his lips nervously. They were seriously pushing it close this month to keep renting the apartment, and Harry wasn't sure he wasn't going to have to start dumpster-diving or stealing food from the houses he cleaned so Jack could eat. He couldn't ever lower the amount or quality of the food Jack was getting, not after what had happened to him while he was a child.

"How much?" he heard himself say quietly.
"Two hundred. With tips, depending on how well you do."

He glanced at the women. Their eyes had gone huge, but something in Mathilda's expression warned him off.

"I... I'm sorry, but I have to get going."

"It'll be fast."

"I- I know, but I really have to go."

The man didn't release him, and Harry had to step away to get out of the touch. "Well, if you ever change your mind," the man said. "Meet me here at the same time."

When he walked on, the other two turned to him. "Dude, that was not good," Jenny whispered.

"I should've taken it," he said miserably.

"No," the two said at the same time and he blinked. "No," Mathilda continued. "When someone offers that much money, it's dangerous. There's a reason they're desperate, and it's because what they're asking for not many people are willing to give. And a guy with that kind of money, in this area... Something wasn't right."

"If he's looking for boys my age, he's not going to be able to find many legally," Harry pointed out.

"Maybe," Jenny said, then touched his arm. "Come on, let's get you home."

That night, it was the Slytherin common room. The corner the BAU took had been sectioned off, showing at least one person was asleep back there, and the lights were dimmed. No one would be interrupting them, because no one ever did during these dreams. Hotch was on one of the couches, watching as Harry paced back and forth, equidistant between him and the fireplace. "You still haven't told me what's going on," he pointed out.

"Someone offered me two hundred dollars and I turned it down," he snapped. "I can't believe I was so stupid. Damn it, two hundred dollars! That would have covered the rent!"

Hotch frowned. "Why would someone offer you that much?"

"Does it matter? Two hundred!"

"There are a lot of things that much money isn't worth," Hotch said. "What did he want in return?"

Harry paused. "Well, not a whole lot, really."

"I somewhat doubt that," Hotch said, raising an eyebrow, "particularly since you won't tell me what's going on."

"H-He wanted sex."

Hotch shot to his feet. "Harry!"

"C'mon, Dad! That was it! Maybe ten minutes of work, and then two hundred! And he said that didn't include tips!"

Hotch crossed the distance between them easily. "What exactly is your body worth to you?" he demanded. "Well? How much, that you'd throw its value away for some stranger?"
"It's not for some stranger, it's for the freaking rent!"

"Your body, Harry, is incredible. And it's so damn strong, and it's still got so much left to give you. It's brought you this far, through things that man has no right to know and can't possibly consider! My body was worth your life, Harry. What's yours worth?"

"Your body," Harry whispered, "was left on the ground as a warning. No one cares about its value once you're gone. Mine's practically empty. It doesn't feel like I'm the one inside it anymore. Someone else must be moving it, because I don't have the strength."

Hotch reached down and grabbed his wrist, then put both their palms, Hotch's over Harry's, to the teenager's chest. "Can't you feel your lungs working?" he whispered, then moved their palms to Harry's neck. "Your blood flowing? Harry, you're alive, and you've still got so much to be alive for and so long to enjoy all of it."

"I don't want to without you."

"That's not up to you anymore."

Harry tore his hand from Hotch's, stalking away a few meters. "Well, there's a lot about the real world that's not up to you."

He heard his father follow him quickly. "Harry, don't- Don't do this."

"It's that or we're on the street, and you can bet I'll be sleeping somewhere nastier then. And so will Jack."

"Make ends meet another way! Get help, please, don't do this on your own! For your own sake, Harry, pick up the phone and call someone!"

"Who?" he demanded. "Who exactly is that going to be? The Order? Right, I'll just go back to war again, and I'll bring Jack with me. Sean, here? Doesn't know me. Your father, here? Would probably take us in, for a price, but I wonder what he'll do when he finds out Jack's a werewolf and we didn't say anything."

"Go find Haley and me!"

"And say what?" Harry shouted at him. "I'm your stupid son from another universe, I got you killed?!"

"It wasn't your fault, Harry."

"What exactly is the one constant with everyone around me?" Harry demanded. "They all get hurt and they all leave!" He turned away sharply. "You don't get to tell me what to do anymore."

"Don't go find that man again," Hotch said quietly behind him.

"Hmph."

"Harry, I have met hundreds of serial killers and psychopaths and murderers and kidnappers and rapists and more, sometimes all in one person. I've negotiated hostage situations and terrorist demands. And I fought most of a war for you. I have never begged before in my life, but I'm begging you now, don't go find that man. Don't take the money. And if not for you, and if not for me, for Jack. Don't be forced to lie to him about why you're home late. Don't be the reason he finds out the hard way that you don't know how to pay the rent any other way. You can't fool him, not with his
senses. Can you imagine how he would react to that?"

Harry glanced at him miserably, knowing his father would have picked up on his one weakness. "Why are you always right?" he whispered.

"Because I want what's best for you."

"I don't think it's possible for me to have that anymore."

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Blaise's heel thumped rhythmically against the stone step while his chin rested in his elbow. His other foot was folded underneath his knee. He heard the door close behind Hermione as she left after fifteen minutes of failing to get any sort of response out of him, but he ignored it. She wouldn't understand.

The only person who would was gone. Everyone had just woken up one day to find Harry vanished, Jack with him, and four people guiltily gathering everyone to say what had happened. It made sense, really, and Blaise couldn't fault them for what they had done. The assassinations had gotten too close for comfort, and McGonagall was right – if there had been an opportunity for the assassins to take hostages, things could have gone very badly. That aside, the reporters had already begun to get close to finding out more than any of them wanted the blasted reporters to know, and Blaise couldn't imagine trying to raise Jack surrounded by paparazzi.

But Harry was the only one who could possibly understand what he was feeling right now. Blaise had felt like this when his family had been murdered, but it was also a different kind of pain. He expected his parents to take care of him and love him - that's what parents did. Gideon was different. Gideon sought him out because he was a good person and he wanted to relieve the pain of others, no matter how much they didn't think they deserved it. How could he explain having that kind of person torn away from him?

Harry had been gone when Gideon left, too. For days, Blaise had sat with the comatose man, hoping that he maybe he could do something to cut off the spreading disease, until age and weariness had finally given in and the profiler had slipped away from him. He wanted to ask Harry how he had done it, how he had managed to still survive after his father had died and taken Harry's world with him. Then, sitting here, he remembered. Harry hadn't survived, that much had been obvious to everyone around him; he was just breathing and moving for his brother.

Blaise didn't have a brother.

The veil that had taken Harry away to the other world drifted in some quiet breeze, alluring and terrifying. Blaise was content to watch it and mull over his thoughts, though he knew this habit was beginning to worry the others. Instead of signing up to help with repairs, he had opted to come down here instead, day in and day out, without even bothering to say where he was going. Luna had tracked him with her hare patronus and sat with him one evening, then apologetically said she needed to go back to the castle to help fix Ravenclaw Tower. A couple of others had started to come in after that, but Blaise only quietly spoke to Luna when she came in. She knew what was wrong.

"They think you want to follow him," she said, hands resting on the stone beside her knees. "They're just worried about you."

"I do want to follow him."

"But you won't. And they're worried you will."
"I want to, so badly."

"That's okay. I felt like that for a while when my mother died, and I suspect Harry still feels like that. Why haven't you gone?"

He sighed, eyes never leaving the veil. "Because...we've lost so many, and I don't want to cause anyone else more pain. Maybe I will get over this, but... I need more time."

"Doing something might help you get your mind off it," she suggested. "You don't have to work with anyone. Don't even tell them that you're doing it."

"There's just..." He shook his head in frustration. "I just want him back, Luna! He spent so long with all of us, and then it took him a horrible week to die. He didn't deserve that... He didn't..."

Luna nodded quietly beside him, and she reached out to take his hand. "I know you think the others don't get it, but they do. And they're starting to feel a different kind of pain, too." He tightened his grip on her hand, using it as an anchor. "They're afraid and they're helpless, because they're going to lose you next."

"I don't want to go, but I don't want to stay here either," he whispered. "Not without him. It's so many different kinds of pain, too. I should've thanked him again, I should've kept a closer eye on him - maybe I should've just kept Blue with him..."

"Different pain gives people different reactions," Luna said. "You can't do anything about this kind of pain. But the others don't know what to do about their kind. And when Hotch was hurt, he knew what to do but he couldn't do it."

Blaise turned to her slightly and frowned in confusion. "What do you mean?"

"When Perotta hurt Harry."

Blaise's frown deepened. "He never hurt him."

"It wasn't physical. I don't know what happened, but the wrackspurts were attracted to him for a while and Hotch found out so he sent the others to come to the school," Luna calmly explained. Blaise paused, now realizing just how odd it was that the profilers had begun to sneak in before any of them had really expressed the danger they were in from Umbridge. "He tried everything and it wasn't enough, and that was Hotch."

"What do you mean, he tried everything?"

"I heard Morgan and Elle talking about it when they thought I was asleep," she said. "Hotch was trying to find a way to bring Perotta back to life, so he could hurt him." She leaned against Blaise, resting her head on his shoulder, and he rested his own on top of hers while his mind whirled. "I'm glad he didn't," she continued in a murmur. "I think he would have regretted it."

"How far did he get?" Blaise asked. "Finding a way to bring him back."

She shrugged slightly. "I think he found a couple of ways, but there was a problem with each one. The side effects were too hazardous, or they couldn't get the ingredients safely, or something else. He stopped looking when he redirected his energy to Harry."

Blaise nodded and forced him to lose interest. He knew Luna would probably be able to tell what he was thinking if she didn't already know. "Makes sense. It... It doesn't feel like he's dead. It feels like he's just gone again, like when we couldn't get in contact with him during first term this year."
"I don't think he and Gideon are gone."

"You don't?"

"No. I don't think death could make them leave us. They were rather stubborn people."

For the first time since the deaths of the profilers, Blaise smiled.

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That night, Ginny jumped awake to the touch on her arm, and her eyes widened when she saw who was crouching by her bed. She sat up abruptly, just managing to stay quiet when she caught his frantic gesturing, and waved her own arms in a 'What the hell?' gesture. Blaise motioned for her to follow him, and she slipped silently off the mattress.

They made it down to the Ravenclaw common room without difficulty and crept out the door, then started to hurry when they heard a quiet voice behind them. "Wait!" They both turned, and Ginny's eyebrows went up when she saw Luna following. "Okay," the Ravenclaw said when she caught up, and Blaise sighed quietly in resignation before ushering them all along until they reached Moaning Myrtle's bathroom.

It was one of the only places they could talk safely, since the Room of Requirement was being used by the DA and Order who didn't fit in the rest of the repaired upper dorms, where everyone was staying while they worked on a cycle of nothing but rising, repairing, eating, and sleeping. The bathroom was one of the few places that had gone untouched during the war, and a couple of people had used it to catch brief moments of quiet until they were interrupted by the ghost.

"You knew," Blaise said when the door shut behind them.

"Oh, Blaise, it was obvious," Luna replied calmly. "But I rather wish you would have just admitted it."

"What's going on?" Ginny demanded.

"I have a horrible idea that I hope you're going to help me with," Blaise said, and Ginny nodded, regretfully admitting to herself that she was going to go with him when this was the most active he'd been since the end of the war. " Apparently, Hotch got so pissed off at someone that he was looking into ways to resurrect that person so he could kill them again."

Ginny blinked, but she couldn't say she was overly surprised. "Well." Then she stopped, understanding where he was going. "Oh, Blaise, if he found a way, he would've brought Haley back. It's not possible."

He waved that off. "I'm not so sure about that," he said then held up his hands to stop their arguments. "No, listen, I think I've got this. What's the problem with most resurrection rituals?"

"It's dark magic," Luna said. "It corrupts whoever returns."

"Right, but they have to have magic for that."

"Everyone does," Ginny said, frowning. "Latent magic, remember?"

"Then why couldn't we bring Hotch back?" Blaise pointed out. "He broke his core."

The other two stared at him, but after a solid minute discovered they had no argument to that. "Go
"I haven't figured out how to bring Gideon back yet," he admitted. "But-But we can figure it out!"
The other two exchanged glances. "Oh come on, don't tell me it's not worth a-!" he shouted and
Ginny lunged forward to muffle his mouth with her hand.

"We didn't say that!" she hissed. "Shut up!" When it appeared that he wasn't going to start yelling
again she removed her hand. "Okay... We've still got a few hours until sun up. We could go over to
the BAU tonight and see if there are still copies of whatever he was looking at."

Blaise eagerly nodded in relief. Luna quietly said, "We can't tell anyone about this."

"But you'll both help me?" he said.

"For some reason that is beyond me, Zabini, yes," Ginny replied in exasperation. "Although this is
definitely going to end in blood and tears and so much regret. Why did you drag me into this?"

"Well, who else would I bring but the capitalist master?" he said innocently and she shook her head
with a small smile. Luna had an expression that Ginny swore was smug, but there wasn't time to
dwell on that now.

"Okay, let's go break in," Ginny said.

Chapter End Notes

This arc is really depressing but necessary, so I'm going to post quickly to get through it.
Don't worry, some of the lightness does start to return in this story, in the next chapter
and after that because it's not so focused on Harry's uber-angst situation.
Another month passed. They kept up with the rent, barely. Harry was eating once a day, pretending he ate before Jack got up and while he was at school because he was so often gone during the normal dinner time.

Then Jack started sniffing him each day, and Harry knew that the game was up.

"You smell funny," he accused. "You don't smell right. Are you showering?"

*I'm burning muscle*, Harry realized in horror. *Jack can smell it.* "Yes, sorry," he said. "It's because of the area I'm going through for work. They're doing some renovations there and they're using weird gases."

Jack gave him a skeptical look, and Harry was glad he couldn't see his older brother's face sink. He needed to eat, he knew, not just because his body was going to give out if he didn't but because he had to be strong enough to get them through this. He would have fallen apart if not for his magic a month ago.

"Don't worry about it," Harry said as he got to his feet. Blood rushed to his head and black spots danced. "Let's go catch the..."

The room turned sideways and his feet slipped out from under him, and Jack shouted as his head hit something hard.

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He opened his eyes blearily, thoughts swimming without direction through his head. His chest vibrated and he realized he was moaning, then quickly tried to stop the noise. It was giving him a headache.

A wet, cold nose pushed at his cheek, and he raised a hand to touch the furry head. "Jack..." His brother whined and licked his hand, then nosed it worriedly. "'M fine."

He tried to push himself up with one hand but almost immediately fell back down. With both arms, he shakily managed to get into a sitting position, and he slumped back against the kitchen cabinet behind him. Jack climbed into his lap, whimpering anxiously, and Harry mindlessly encircled him with his arms, fingers trailing gently through fur.

He gave himself a few minutes, then he took a deep, steadying breath. "Okay, Jack, I'm fine," he said and pushed him off carefully. "Let's get you to school." Jack had most definitely missed the bus by this point, and if they called and discovered he'd put down a fake phone number, they could be in trouble.
Jack hesitantly shifted back into his human form and Harry pulled himself up using the kitchen counter. When he had his balance back, he smiled weakly at Jack, who wasn't convinced at all, and started shakily to the door.

He walked Jack to school and apologized to the people at the front desk for being late, then walked outside to sit on the steps for a few moments and wheeze a bit. When he was done, he went to the bookstore, aware that he was going to be an hour and a half late because of his impromptu nap.

If Draco hadn't taken his wand, he didn't know what he'd do. By this point, he was genuinely considering going back home. With a quick stop he could pick up enough money to get them through this, but even as he thought that he didn't think he could mentally do it. To go to Gringotts would certainly result in him having a tail on his way back to the Ministry while he was pestered with questions, and he didn't know how he could handle that in his current state. There was probably enough money saved away by Hotch, but to access it would take a long time and he would surely have to talk to family, and...

And Harry didn't think he could face Sean again, not after the man had given him so much and Harry had taken more away from him.

He stumbled into the bookshop and gave a half-hearted greeting to Mr. Taymond, who sat up abruptly when he saw Harry. The teenager looked up, blinking in confusion, as the man hurried towards him.

"Is everything okay?" he asked, voice cracking. He coughed.

"Oh my God, Harry, are you all right?" Mr. Taymond demanded, using the back of his hand to check his temperature. "You're burning up..."

"I'm secretly a phoenix," Harry wheezed.

"Sit down, sit down," Mr. Taymond said, pulling him over to a chair by the register. "Oh, you should have just called and said you were sick..."

Harry shook his head firmly, but everything started slushing around and he stopped. "I'm not sick."

"You've got a fever of a hundred, at least. Wait here, I'm going to get some medicine."

By the time he got back, Harry was on the floor, unconscious.

---

"You really should be in the hospital," Mr. Taymond muttered, hands tight on the wheel as he drove Harry back to his apartment. "You heard what the doctor said."

Despite Harry's protestations, he had been unable to stop the bookkeeper from closing the store down and taking him to see a doctor, which he had then paid for. The result had been exactly what Harry didn't need to hear.

"And dear God in heaven, Harry, you need to eat! You wouldn't have gotten this sick if your immune system had something to work with! Though who knows what this flu is eating off of, when there's so little left of you..."

Harry drifted off, forehead resting against the cool window, while Mr. Taymond grumbled on. Not only was he not going to get paid today, from the bookstore or the houses he wasn't going to be able to make it to, but he'd also cost Mr. Taymond at least half a day's worth of sales because he'd been
taking care of Harry.

"Come on," Mr. Taymond said right next to him, and Harry opened his eyes in surprise to find that the door had been opened and his boss was trying to help him out. He held onto the car frame for support when he started to move, but Mr. Taymond readjusted his arms so Harry was holding onto him instead, and he helped get Harry to his feet. "Oh, you poor boy..."

Harry managed to stay conscious enough to tell him what apartment he was in, and Mr. Taymond practically carried him up the stairs, stopping to rest at every flight to get his breath back. Harry was only dimly aware of where they were at, but he opened his eyes again and found himself in front of his door while Mr. Taymond searched his pockets for a key. Harry's hand found it, and Mr. Taymond took it from him and unlocked the door.

"Don't come into work for at least a week, you hear?" he said firmly as he got Harry onto the couch.

Harry looked at him in horror, even in his exhausted state. He couldn't stay away from his main source of income for that long. "Mr. Taymond," he whispered, then broke into a coughing fit.

"No argument," Mr. Taymond insisted. "You're going to kill yourself if you don't get rest. Proper rest, so just lie down and get some sleep. Don't worry about me and the shop."

Harry sighed and let the bookkeeper help him lie down. "Thank you," he murmured, reaching out to try to grab Mr. Taymond's wrist to emphasize how much the gesture of today's care meant. He came short, fingers just grazing skin, and his arm slumped to the ground. Mr. Taymond tucked it back to his chest and pulled a blanket over him.

"Go to sleep," Mr. Taymond said quietly, and turned off the lights as he left.

---

The initial break-in to the BAU had been completely unsuccessful. The files weren't anywhere in plain sight, and they'd been forced to leave before they could thoroughly scan the entire office. The second break-in went just as badly.

For the third one, Ginny dropped to the couch an hour in and groaned loudly. "Why was Hotch so stupid?" she demanded. "Didn't he know he needed to put these in an easy-to-find location so we could resurrect him?"

"I think that kind of logic is rather the reason he kept it hidden so well," Luna pointed out as she sorted through another file. "These are rather gruesome murders."

The lights were on in the office, so anyone walking past might have thought it odd that the room was occupied after such a long absence by the unit chief, but there were enough notice-me-not charms on it that there wasn't much to fear. There had been a close call the first night they were here, when they'd almost run into a janitor before they made it into the room, but they'd been much more careful after that.

"Why do you think all of this is still in here anyway?" Blaise asked as he discarded another file and picked up a new one. "The FBI knows he died months ago."

"I think that kind of logic is rather the reason he kept it hidden so well," Luna pointed out as she sorted through another file. "These are rather gruesome murders."

"Why do you think all of this is still in here anyway?" Blaise asked as he discarded another file and picked up a new one. "The FBI knows he died months ago."

"Because we would have had to clean it out."

"Fuck!" Blaise swore, jumping and spilling the file in his hands. Ginny started so badly that she fell off the couch, but Luna just looked up and smiled benignly at Morgan.
The agent looked over the room with a frown on his face, taking in what they had done to the office. Two of the three waited in trepidation for judgment while the third just went back to looking through the file she was holding. Finally, he said, "I can't even begin to guess what you're doing here."

Ginny, who had picked herself up off the floor while waiting for Morgan's assessment, and Blaise exchanged glances. "You...probably don't want to know," Ginny said carefully. "Um, we just thought..."

"He might know where they're at," Luna pointed out calmly.

"Guys," Morgan said in a warning tone. "Just tell me what's going on."

Blaise reluctantly told him.

Morgan rubbed his hand over his face.

"And that's why we didn't want to say anything," Ginny muttered, shifting her weight from one foot to the other. "If we found something that could work, we were going to say something, but if we looked over all of it and nothing was useful, no harm, no foul."

"Don't you think you should have asked Harry about this first?" Morgan said, shaking his head in disappointment. "At the least, you should have asked him."

"We were going to, if we found something!" Blaise blurted. "We just... We wanted to look first, without getting anyone's hopes up."

"Don't you think that someone would have already announced it if they found a way to bring back the dead?" Morgan asked wearily. "Guys, just... Let him go. It's time."

"Like you've let him go, not even coming into his office to clean everything out?" Blaise pointed out and Morgan looked at him sharply. "We're just going to look. If it seems like anything could go wrong, we won't do it, I swear." When Morgan sighed and started to shake his head, he said, "Morgan, please, if it were ever possible, it'd be possible with him. You know it."

"I can't risk what could go wrong," he said. When Ginny and Blaise both opened their mouths to argue - Luna hadn't stopped flipping through her file - he held up a hand. "Is this what he would have wanted? And if you do bring him back, what if there are side effects you couldn't have known about? What if it's a cursed existence? Could you live with what you've forced him into, without his consent?"

Blaise looked down at the floor. Ginny bit her lip.

"Give it up." He gestured to the room. "Get all of this back together before you leave."

"That's it?" Blaise said quietly. "You're not going to tell anyone?"

"That's it. I think you know how disappointed I am in you, and I hope you understand how much of a breach of trust it would be if you tried to sneak in again."

When they were in the elevator, Blaise muttered, "I'm sorry, guys."

"So are we going to the files now, or should we do it later?" Luna asked curiously. The other two stared at her. "It's obvious, isn't it? He wasn't concerned about us looking there, so that's not where the files are. Besides, he shouldn't have left compromising information like that lying around his workplace."
"You think it's at his house?" Ginny asked.

"It might be."

"That's where Perotta took Harry from," Blaise pointed out, catching onto the idea. "That would probably be where he would have been angry enough to keep researching, and no one would have seen him doing it. Brilliant, Luna!"

She smiled at him. "Thank you. Tonight, then?"

"As soon as I come to terms with the mental pain I'm going to be in once Morgan and Hotch both find out what we've done," Ginny said with a shudder. "Oh, I think we're going to wish that we were the ones who died."

---

After twenty hours of sleep, Harry was back on his feet and walking to the houses he hadn't cleaned yesterday. The rest had done him wonders, but he had to admit to himself that he was still definitely sick. With Mr. Taymond's resolution for him to stay at home, though, he couldn't go to the bookstore and expect to be allowed to work. He was going to have to make up for it by making sure he got through all the other houses, and then...

Well, he didn't know what he was going to do then. It still wouldn't make the cut, not if they wanted to keep the apartment and let Jack keep eating.

That night, after having dragged himself through all the houses he'd missed last night, he walked back from the Dawes home with weariness haunting him. He had to force himself to remember that there wasn't a chance anyone would take him home if he collapsed, and he focused on putting one foot in front of the other.

A hand snagged his arm, and he looked up into Mathilda's worried face. "Hey, you're not looking so hot," she said. "What's up?"

"Sick," he replied wearily and didn't fight her when she maneuvered him to some steps.

"You shouldn't be working in this state," she reprimanded him.

"I can't afford not to work," he said. "We'll get kicked out if I can't pay, and even with work I don't think I'm going to make it this month."

She frowned and rubbed his shoulder. "Wait here for a little bit and Jenny can drive you home, okay? I don't want you walking back like this."

He nodded without arguing and leaned against the metal railing, focusing on his breathing. His sickly presence was probably driving off potential customers for Mathilda, but she didn't seem to mind, even moving directly in front of him to block anyone's view of him. He drifted in and out of sleep, feverish thoughts flickering through his brain, and he only gradually became aware that someone had been talking to Mathilda for the last couple of minutes without leaving, alone or with her.

He opened his eyes and blinked, eyes slowly focusing on the figure in front of Mathilda. The man saw him shift and tilted his head at him. "What's wrong with him?" he asked Mathilda. Harry recognized him as the man who had stopped next to him before.

"Just a little cold," she said quickly. "He's fine."
"He doesn't look fine," he said, stepping forward to move past her but she blocked his way. Harry got the impression that she'd already done that multiple times. "Let me take a look at him." She shook her head and he sighed. "Now really, I'm not going to ravage the boy on the steps."

Mathilda glanced at Harry over her shoulder and he gave her an apathetic look. Reluctantly, she stepped to the side and the man moved forward until he could crouch in front of Harry. The wizard hardly cared or noticed when hands touched his neck, checking temperature.

"Hmm... You need medicine," the man said. "Come back with me and I'll give you something."

"No," Mathilda said sharply.

"Already taken some," Harry wheezed quietly.

"Not enough," the man said.

"He just needs rest," Mathilda quickly said. "He'll be fine. He doesn't need your help."

"Want to risk that?" the man asked, raising an eyebrow. "Because he doesn't look like the kind of person who's going to stop for a little bit of rest. And you don't look like you've got enough money to pay for his meds, and neither does he. Not if this goes on for very long."

Mathilda's eyes flickered to Harry again, and he glanced at her in return. The man was right.

"If you're so worried about him, you can come with me and make sure I don't do anything untoward."

She crumbled, shoulders slumping. "Come on, Harry," she muttered and helped him up. "Let's go follow the creepy man."

"There's a good girl," the man said, and the two of them got Harry's arms over their shoulders so they could carry him together. "And Harry, was it?" Mathilda flinched, realizing she'd given away his name in her attempt to comfort him. "You should take better care of yourself."

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Harry stopped by Mathilda three days later, the next time he was coming back from the Dawes home. She left her spot for a minute to check him over, grimly noting that he hadn't improved as much as she had hoped. "Have you gone to the doctor?"

"He thought it was the flu, since he didn't know what else it could be," Harry replied numbly. His magic should have protected him from anything like this, but maybe it was too focused on giving him energy when he didn't have any food in his stomach.

She ran her hand over his forehead, wiping away some of the sweat. "Jenny'll come take you home," she murmured. "You just rest."

The man arrived before Jenny did, and he brightened when he saw Harry on the steps. "It's good to see you," he said, "though I'm afraid you're still not doing well. Did you take the medication?"

Harry didn't respond, just closed his eyes and focused on his breathing. Mathilda was with a potential customer behind the man, judging from the low voices. He opened his eyes to see that she kept glancing back at them, and he finally waved her off. She needed money too. After a few more moments of talking prices, the pair left, leaving Harry and the man on the steps.
"You're not looking a whole lot better," the man said. "You really should just stay home." He glanced down the street to watch Mathilda disappear with her customer, then turned back to Harry. "Let's get you taken care of," he said and got one arm under Harry's legs and the other under his shoulders. Harry struggled weakly and managed to elbow the man in the neck hard enough to force the man to drop him. Harry hit the cement sidewalk hard and he rolled to put his back to the man. "Oh, come on," the man said, frustrated. "I'm just going to get you some more medicine and food. I'll even take you home."

Harry stared at the step in front of him, mulling it over as best as he could in his fever-addled mind.

"You're not going to make it without help."

He still had to get home to Jack.

The man picked him up again, and this time he didn't fight.

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With most of the illness gone by the end of the week, he was able to return to work. Mr. Taymond kept a close eye on him, failing to do so subtly, and Harry let him, too grateful for what the man had given him to argue that he was fine. He tried to protest when the bookkeeper still sent him home early, but the man insisted he needed more rest. He was probably right.

But even without doing the math, Harry knew he had less than a week to get enough money to pay for the apartment, and he was going to be lagging behind by over a hundred dollars for the rent alone.

Mathilda wasn't there when he stopped at his usual steps, and the man thankfully showed up before she returned. "You're looking better, but still far too thin."

"I don't have any food."

"Three times a week you meet me, and I'll pay for all your meals for the day before on top of whatever I pay you regularly. Deal?"

Harry felt his heart pound in his chest. He'd just intended to do this once, get the two hundred to pay the rent so he had some leftover money for food. This would leave him more than that. He would finally be able to eat.

"Let me think about it, long term," he managed. "I've never done this before," he admitted.

"I'll show you a couple of tricks." He wrapped his hand around Harry's wrist and tugged him along. "I'm sure you'll be a fast learner."

Harry slipped closer to him, arm brushing his, and the man settled his arm across Harry's waist as they walked. As expected, it drifted down until his hand was touching something it shouldn't have. To mimic him, Harry rested his own arm on the man's waist, giving the effect of someone trying to please. His fingers hooked into the back pockets of the man's jeans, and-

Ah, there was his wallet.

"Harry!" Mathilda suddenly shouted, and Harry snatched the leather pouch as he dragged his hand away, shoving it up his sleeve at the same time. He whirled around, heart thudding in his chest. She looked, panicked, between him and the man.
"Come along," the man urged, hand still resting in the same place.

"Harry, I... Can you come help me move Jenny's things? She twisted her ankle and can't carry the heavy boxes."

"Sure," he said, relieved, hoping to give the impression of someone who'd been stripped of a difficult decision.

"Harry," the man said in annoyance.

"Some other time, it seems," Harry said apologetically and shakily, giving a small, trembling smile, before hurrying away to Mathilda. His nervousness would make more sense than confidence with the act he'd pulled, and sure enough, the man didn't follow him. "You're amazing," he muttered to her.

"I have impeccable timing, I know," she said, and they quickly walked a block until they met up with Jenny. "Okay, deal us in."

"Let's see how much he's got first," Jenny muttered as he opened the wallet. "Oh, criminey."

"I don't feel nearly as badly as I did when I first had this idea," Harry said calmly. "Not if he's carrying this much cash around. Seriously, who does that?"

"Someone just waiting to be robbed," Mathilda cackled. "All right, Jenny and I'll take the credit cards." She shot her friend a wicked look. "Challenge to see how can max them out the quickest?"

"If this were anyone but an asshole trying to solicit a kid, I'd feel terrible about this."

Harry fell asleep that night after coming home late, and then woke up into the dream world. He didn't want to be here while guilt still gnawed at his insides, but he was back at the Hotchner home, and to get out would mean going down the stairs and out the front door. Hotch was usually in the living room, and Harry didn't know if he could face him right now.

A strange sound from downstairs caught his attention, and before he knew it, he was hesitantly walking down the steps. On the couch in the living room, as expected, was Hotch, but something was wrong. His face was buried in his hands, and he was making a breathless noise that Harry had never heard before while his frame trembled.

He could have made it out the door and Hotch would have been none the wiser in his state, but Harry slowly moved closer to him once he reached the first floor. "Dad?" he whispered. "Are you okay?"

Hotch's hands fell away from his face, but he didn't look up. Harry paused a moment longer, then walked towards Hotch slowly until he had reached the couch and sat down slowly. "Dad?" he asked again. Hotch was rarely emotional before Harry came with more bad news. "What happened?"

Then his father faced him, and Harry realized in horror that he'd been silently crying. "Why did you do it?" he whispered. "I thought... I thought I'd gotten through to you."

"I needed to eat," he said quietly. "I just needed to eat..."

Hotch grabbed him and pulled him into a hug, and Harry held onto him as tightly as he could. "Don't you ever go back," he said against Harry's shoulder. "Please, Harry."

He stared at him in surprise. "I don't...think we're on the same page."
"Harry, what do you think I'm talking about?"

"I...didn't think you'd be upset about it." It was better than the alternative, right? "I'm so sorry, I... I wouldn't have..."

"No, this is my fault. This is my fault... Harry, forgive me. I never meant for this to happen, ever."

"I don't know what to do, Dad," Harry muttered against him. "I just don't know anymore, and that was all I could think to do."

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When Harry had exhausted himself, he slipped back into his dreams, no matter how hard Hotch fought to hang onto him. He knew that as soon as he left whatever location Hotch was at, he slipped into a realm of nightmares and tortures that, no matter how agonizing, he would visit again and again for the chance to see his father. And, however much Hotch desperately wanted to, he couldn't even follow Harry back into those dreams to protect him from the horrors that his sleep brought.

It was just as painful to look at the living world as it was to stay away, and he had been granted a horrible mixture of both to view the latest scene. He could never go over when he wanted to, but on rare occasions, he was dragged to the real world by a strange force to witness what was happening. It was never comforting. No, the only things he ever saw were the worst parts of Harry's life after his father's death, when he was extremely upset or in danger. And while Hotch might have built up a tenacity for persevering against awful images, there were some things he could never bear to see, and watching his son walk off to sell his body was one of them. Blissfully, the force dragged him back to the world of the dead before they made it halfway down the block.

The last impression he'd left on his world had been the destruction of his oldest son. Now there was nothing he could do to influence the world anymore, not when the only person he could communicate with didn't even know he wasn't just talking to a dream illusion. He'd never felt so useless.

He wasn't quite done crying when Harry left, but at the same time, he was too tired to cry anymore, and the result was a sort of half-hearted effort. One elbow rested on the back of the couch, his palm covering his eyes while his shoulders occasionally gave a faint tremble. At his side, Harry's warmth was long gone.

Then someone was sitting down, the cushions moving in reply, and his hand jerked away from his face as he whirled to see who it was. Instead of Harry, he was greeted by an older but not altogether different person.

"Haley," he whispered.

"What have you done?" she rasped out. From the look of her ashen face and swollen eyes, she'd been doing some crying of her own. "Aaron, what have you done?"

"He would have died if I hadn't moved in the way," he protested. "There wasn't time, I didn't think it through, but this... I never could have imagined this happening. Haley, what do I do?"

"You have to go back. Please, you have to. The only thing I can do is watch, and once he'd accepted the offer, I couldn't even do that anymore."

"I'm dead, Haley. If I could, I would. I have to settle for haunting his dreams. He thinks he's just imagining me. And sometimes... Sometimes, I can follow him throughout the day, but usually I'm too tired to stop myself from being pulled back."
"You're not too tired, he is," she corrected. "Aaron, you're not quite dead yet, but you're not alive either." He stared at her. "You can't be. Do you remember how we used to appear before Harry when he was in trouble, when he was young, with the Dursleys?" He nodded faintly. "That was because of the stretched blood wards. When he needed us most, we could appear to him. Those blood wards still exist, Aaron. You're relying on them now."

"That's not... Haley, I broke them when I was looking for Harry and Jack, when Perotta took them."

"You can't break love, Aaron, and that's what the wards are made of. You damaged yours, yes, but that doesn't mean you were able to completely destroy them. Even if they don't exist within you anymore, that doesn't mean they don't still protect Harry. As they've started to regrow, they're still in the world of the living to protect him."

"Why didn't you come earlier?" he asked.

"I couldn't. The wards are a two-way street, as you've begun to notice. Whenever Harry's weak, it's more difficult to see him until his weakness puts him in acute danger. It wasn't bad enough until now for my own wards to allow me to come this far."

"But as he's gotten thinner, I can see him more," Hotch said, then stopped, horrified.

"Aaron, he's fading."

"He said he felt like he was dying," he whispered.

"He is. His magic is starting to kill him."

"But... why?"

She turned away hesitantly. "I overheard something Blackwolf said. He would have told Harry, except... I think he's scared he's right." She swallowed. "Harry's... He's a light lord, or he's becoming one, if he's not already. And with that sort of power... When he feels like he's the one responsible for everything that went wrong, his magic is attacking the thing causing him such pain."

"Himself. But Haley... A light lord? Those don't exist."

"They do, they just don't survive long," she said quietly. "Because of situations like this. Aaron, you can talk him out of this. If you can just make him see reason, I think he can recover."

He stood abruptly, still shaking from the brief clip he had seen in the other world, and shook his head. "I can't. I've tried, so many times and in so many ways, and he's just..." He ran an exhausted hand over his face. "He doesn't want to listen. He's trying to move on and become his own person, but he just can't."

"It doesn't look like he's moving on at all," Haley disagreed.

"He's trying. If he weren't, he wouldn't have gone off the defensive in the war, and he wouldn't have refused to listen to me in his dreams. But... none of it's enough. He's too attached to me and he won't let go."

"You have to go back."

"I can't be alive again," he said irritably. "I'm dead."
"No, you're not."

He stared at her.

"There's two reasons why. The first comes from when Riddle attacked him in the graveyard. He was desperate for one last comfort, and he clung to you back. That's why he survived. But when he tried to hang on to you, what he was holding was your latent magical core, and when he was torn away by the Curse, it shredded your core. He took some of it with him. That's why it could never regrow properly, and that's why Harry suddenly became so much stronger, even though he didn't notice it, before he was definitively becoming a light lord."

"I never noticed a significant jump," Hotch said slowly, thinking it over.

"You wouldn't have. He already seemed powerful to you. Very few people noticed he was getting even stronger when he started to fully settle as a light lord, because he was always keeping himself in check because he was afraid of hurting someone. But during the Second Battle, he managed to hold a wandless defensive shield at the same time he cast his patronus in a substantial form. And throughout the battles, Atlas was constantly draining off him while he cast other spells. He's so strong, Aaron, and now it's killing him."

"What does that have to do with me not being dead?"

"Aaron, he felt you die. He didn't realize it immediately, but a part of him recognized what had happened. And the way he found your body, and what happened to everyone..."

"No," he whispered. He buried his face in his hands. "Oh, Haley. This never would have happened if you were here."

"If this world's to be understood, I think something rather different would have happened," she murmured. "With all of his magic, when you died, he tried to hold onto you again, like he'd managed to in the graveyard. Both times his magic was acting instead of him, because he didn't realize what was going on. There's a tether between the two of you. You can't be completely dead until that tether weakens, and it hasn't."

"I can go back," he slowly said.

"I think so, yes."

"How?"

"I don't know."

He sighed.

"I just know that you can. Magic...isn't something I know about, but Blackwolf seems pretty sure your death isn't the sort of thing that has to be permanent." She frowned slightly. "But in the meantime, we need to keep him alive long enough for you to go back. Aaron, I think, as long as Harry's magic is acting like this, we can interact with this world." His head snapped up. "Together, we might just be able to do something."

"What are you thinking?" he asked.

"Until we can get you back home, we need our other selves to get their shit together."
The first thing he did with the cash - and dear Merlin, was there a lot of it - was get it exchanged out of hundred dollar bills so no one assumed he'd stolen it all, which, ahem, wouldn't have really been inaccurate. Harry went straight to the grocery store on his way home and bought food. He looked so relieved to be at the checkout that he swore the woman at the register didn't swipe some of the food that wouldn't set off an alarm when he left.

Life still went on in other ways. Mr. Taymond finally admitted he was completely healthy and let him completely come back to work, while he added another house to his list to clean when one client suggested him to a friend. Soon, he hoped he'd be back on track and wouldn't need the supplementary income the man had inadvertently provided him.

If he hadn't been so relieved that he could look at two family members without guilt tearing him apart, if he hadn't been so awed at seeing his mother again, if he hadn't been so focused on spotting Relokes, if he hadn't been so hungry, if he hadn't been so divided over his theft, if he hadn't been so worried about finances once the money was gone, maybe the inevitable wouldn't have happened.

He ran into Haley Hotchner. Literally.

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Haley, in full honesty, had been looking for the teenager. She'd talked to Sam about it, and he had been understandably hedgy. It was his job as their marshal to watch out for her and Jack, not some random street boy. And it was her job to look out for Jack.

But still, this was her neighborhood now, for however long she stayed here, and this was deplorable.

She saw him sometimes at Mr. Taymond's bookstore and coffee shop, but for some peculiar reason the boy was always in the back whenever she came in. Occasionally he was at the park, sometimes with a small child of his own, probably a brother, and she got the impression he was keeping an eye on them as well. There was always a longing expression on his face when he looked at their picnic table, but then he would quickly look away if he saw any of them turn his direction.

"Excuse me," she said when she'd gotten right behind him, and he jolted so badly that he turned and practically collided with her. She steadied him with a small smile. Now that she was right next to him, his sickly thinness was evident. "Do you want some food?" she asked, and the look on his face as soon as the first words came out of her mouth was enough to make her heart sink. For him to be in that much awe after such a little thing, maybe the situation was worse than she thought.

"I- I can't," he managed to get out awkwardly, but she looped her arm in his and forced him to come back with her.

"I'm afraid we weren't paying attention and packed too much," she said cheerfully. She'd purposefully added another three or four...or maybe five or six sandwiches to the box. "I'm sure you'll be a great help." Across the park with Jack, Sam had looked up and caught sight of what she was doing. He raised his eyes to the heavens as if asking for deliverance from Haley Hotchner's occasional eccentric demands. She always made sure that she got what she wanted.

"Er, okay..." he said, and was silent until she'd gotten him sitting down.

"You're here often," she noted, and he froze up. "You keep an eye on my son."

He hesitated, then said quietly in a rather surprising accent, "Back where I'm from, it wasn't uncommon for kids to just get suddenly snatched, and there are a lot of kids out in these parks."
She blinked. "You're British."

"Family moved here."

She nodded slowly. "Where in Britain are you from?"

"Near London."

"Is it nice?"

"Would've been if I could've gotten to see more of it."

"So, where's your family at?"

"Er, working."

"Can I meet them?"

He looked at her like a deer in the headlights. "They work late."

"Really."

"Yep."

"Hmm. Take a few more sandwiches."

"I can't, surely-"

"Oh, come on, we can spare them. It's the least I can do for you watching out for Jack." She held them out to him and he had to catch them before she let them drop from her fingers. "Do you know where I'm at?" she asked.

He shook his head, and she gave him directions. "If you're ever in trouble, come find me, all right?"

He paused. "You don't know me."

"You're watching out for Jack. That's a good sign of character."

---

Most of the castle's structure had been completely repaired, and anyone still remaining in the castle turned to the inside to fix all the damages that had never been taken of during the war or offhandedly in the last few months. Since they could break away into small groups, it was all too easy for the trio to slip off grounds and get to America with the portkey that the Ministry had approved for DA use. A similar one had been made for the BAU, just in case some new calamity appeared.

Searching the Hotchner house proved to be much harder than they had expected - while the office had been professional and impersonal, this was his home. To find the files, they had to look everywhere, and they still weren't any closer to locating them even after weeks, partially because of their reluctance to dig deeper when they knew they were looking through his private life.

"Where haven't we searched?" Blaise said grumpily on the couch.

"The ventilation," Ginny suggested next to him.

"No, I checked," Luna replied, on the other side of Blaise. "Nothing there but an infestation of
grundles." When they looked at her, she calmly said, "Don't worry, I got rid of them."

Ginny sat up suddenly. "Wait, we haven't checked the most obvious place." Blaise, who had been partially leaning on her, fell to the side before he caught himself. "Why did we think it might be here in the first place?" she exclaimed as she ran from the room and up the stairs.

She was already in Harry's bedroom by the time the other two caught up to her, and she began frantically looking through all the obvious places. "Are you sure?" Blaise asked, getting on the floor with her as she searched under the bed.

"No one else would think to check here, and - ow!" She hit her head as she crawled out from under the frame. "And it would have kept him going. But at the same time, he wouldn't have wanted to invade Harry's privacy, so..."

"It has to be out in the open, then," Blaise said, frowning as he rocked back on his heels. There was a patch of dust on the top of his bed from the bed. "Nothing could be opened or closed to get to it."

The tearing of tape made both snap their heads around, and Luna waved a portfolio at them. "Here's one," she said and set it down on the dresser. She reached behind the furniture again, arm straining for a moment, before she snagged another portfolio and tore it loose. "And another."

"Did we just profile a profiler?" Ginny asked gleefully.

"Oh, we are brilliant!" Blaise shouted. "All right, let's get started."

"We're going to have to work on it here," Ginny said quickly as Luna pulled out two more portfolios. Hotch's longer reach had allowed him to easily get them into places that Luna had more trouble reaching. "Same reason why Hotch didn't take this to the BAU. Someone would flip out if they saw what we're looking into."

Luna passed each one of them a portfolio and Blaise grabbed them both in a hug. "Thank you."

Ginny leaned back first. "Gideon's next. But don't thank us yet - we still need to find out if one of these is going to work for Hotch."

---

Haley handed him a backpack in that way she had developed over the last couple of weeks that forced Harry to take it before it dropped to the ground. "Oh! Oh dear."

"Soups and sandwiches," Haley said cheerfully, then reached over and pecked him on the cheek. "For you and your brother."

"You shouldn't have."

Harry had gained fifteen pounds in two weeks. Like hell she shouldn't have. But she didn't say that. "It was no problem. I know you've got to get to work, so I'll let you go. Do you think you'll have work off tonight?"

"I might. One of the houses I clean, the owners are coming back sometime tonight and if they come in before seven they told me not to come so they can get settled."

"Seven, okay. Why don't you bring your brother over and have dinner with us?" she asked. He froze. "Seven, then," she continued before he could panic. "And you know where we're at, so that's not a problem. See you then!" she said, walking away in case he tried to give back the offer.
If not for the Boston Reaper, she would have taken that boy in long ago, maybe asked him to take care of the kids while she was at work or some other excuse.

---

"Jack," Harry said as soon as his brother came home. Jack perked up to see him already back and quickly hurried towards him, and Harry ducked down to hug him. "Welcome back."

"You're home!"

The family had called in to say they'd returned. He now had no excuse. "Yeah. Listen, I need to talk to you about something," he said and led Jack over to the couch in their small, two-room apartment. One was the bedroom, where Jack slept, and the other was the couch and kitchen, where Harry was at. He'd been reasonably afraid of his nightmares waking Jack each night, and even with the relative distance they still did sometimes.

He waited until they were both seated down before he took Jack's hand. This could work. The two worlds' Jacks looked different enough that they would appear similar but not overly, especially with the contacts and his Jack's longer hair. "So...you know we're in an alternate universe," he said. Jack nodded quickly. "Well, in this world..." Oh, he so didn't want to have this conversation. "Mom and Dad... They split up."

Jack frowned in confusion. "Like... Like Mary's parents?"

Harry breathed out slightly in relief at the mention of Jack's school friend. He'd had no idea how to explain divorce. "Yeah, like that. Some bad things happened and they decided they should separate. You know I wasn't your brother in this world, right?" Jack nodded again. "And Mom and Dad were still your parents." Another nod. "Well, you stayed with Mom, and...and some more things happened, and you and Mom were in danger."

"Okay," Jack said hesitantly.

"So you and Mom are hiding near here from a bad man," he continued. "And we can't tell them that we know that, or they'll think they're in danger because other people know they're hiding. Okay?"

"Okay... Where's Dad?"

"He's... He's away. Like... Like he was with us, when he'd gone on a case."

Jack looked down at the ground. "So... He's still alive, here?"

Harry nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

"Can I see him?"

"Jack, in this world... You're not...his. He doesn't know you."

"I know, but..." Jack swiped a hand across his nose. "I don't have to tell him who I am, I just want..."

"Maybe later," Harry said, guiltily acknowledging himself that it was more likely a maybe never. He couldn't go see Hotch again, not here. "But tonight, we're going to go see Mom and this world's Jack. Only we can't call her Mom, right? Because she can't know."

Jack frowned. "But... But Harry, what if we could stay with them?"
"Jack, we can't."

"Why not!"

"Because it's too dangerous."

Jack stood up, angry. "It's always too dangerous!" he shouted at Harry, and Harry jerked back, painfully aware of the hurt showing on his face as Jack snatched his hand away. "Why can't we just live normally?"

"Jack-"

"Why don't I get to live with Mom? Why don't we get to go home? Why did we have to come to this stupid world where I don't know anyone and no one knows us?!" Harry reached out to him but Jack pulled himself away. "No!" he shouted. "I want to go home!"

"Jack, please, please," Harry said, straining to touch him. "It'll get better. We'll go home, I swear."

"I want to go home now!" Harry managed to snag his shoulder only for Jack to smack his hand away. "I want Dad!"

"I know," he whispered. "I know." He backed away from his brother reluctantly. "Jack, here, I need to tell them we can't come tonight, but then... Why don't we sit down and talk about what happened?"

Jack was shaking with suppressed tears, and Harry carefully put his back to him to go for the door. If he ran, he could be there and back in just a few minutes, and maybe Jack would have calmed down enough without him around that they could actually have a conversation. He opened the door and stepped out-

And then a blur of grey and brown pushed past his legs, and Harry darted down to grab Jack around the middle. Jack twisted, whining, and twisted until he could push his back paws at Harry's stomach. His front paws scratched Harry's cheek, and he ducked his head down as he tried to bring Jack back into the room behind him.

Jack bit his arm.

He let go more out of shock than pain, stunned. By the time he'd recovered himself, Jack was halfway down the hall, and Harry had to sprint after him before he reached the stairwell. Jack jumped up, knocking the handle down to open it, and then ran down the stairs as best as he could. As Harry reached the top, Jack tripped and fell down the last few steps, but quickly got back to his feet and turned sharply around the corner to start down the next flight.

Each time Harry felt like he'd be able to catch up, Jack was able to pull ahead at just the right time until he had enough of a lead to open the door at the bottom with one paw and slip out, the fur of his tail passing through Harry's hand as he tried to grab it. He caught the door and made to move out, only to run directly into the owner of the building.

"Is that a dog?" she demanded.

"I-"

"I told you, no pets on the property!" He tried to dart around her, but she grabbed his arm. "I have to evict you for this, you moron!" Jack had gotten the front door open, and he tugged harder at his arm. "Was there something in the fine print that wasn't clear enough for y-"
He yanked himself loose and sprinted, dimly aware of the owner shouting and running behind him. The front door hadn't quite closed yet, and he grabbed it and ran out, already looking for where Jack might have gone. There was nothing, just the poorly maintained sidewalk and front lawn, nothing to suggest where he could have gone.

"Pack your stuff and get out!" the owner shouted behind him.

"Jack..." he whispered, staring at the empty road in front of him.

Chapter End Notes

Posting this tonight because almost nothing happened in the last chapter and why not. I haven't been replying to a lot of reviews, by the way, because I'm worried I'll give something away and spoil a part if I open my mouth.

Looking at how complex and divergent from canon this story got, maybe I should consider writing a non-fanfiction story in the future since apparently my stories are getting to the point where they're based more on my own ideas than the actual canon story...
Recovery

Chapter by AlexTheReaper (daviesroyal), daviesroyal

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"What goes around comes around. And sometimes you get what's coming around." He paused for a moment, frowning faintly, pursing his lips. "And sometimes you are what's coming around." – Jim Butcher, Grave Peril

~~~~

"Harry," Haley said, surprised. It had started downpouring hours ago, and Harry must have walked through it for more than a few minutes if the state of him was anything to go by. She glanced at the clock through tired eyes, having been woken by the sound of the doorbell. It was eleven thirty at night. "What's wrong? Is everything okay? You missed the dinner, so I thought..."

It wasn't just rain on his cheeks. He was crying.

"Come in, come in. What happened?"

"It's Jack," he choked out. "We got into a fight, and I started to come to tell you we weren't going to be able to make it so I opened the door and he got out and- And he's gone."

"When was this?" she asked, shooting a horrified glance out the window at the dumping rain.

"About four."

"How old is he?"

"Nine. But he's smart, he's-" He buried his face in his hands. "This is all my fault. If I'd just-"

"Harry, stop. You couldn't have known he'd try to run. Did you check to see if he went back home?"

"I tried, but the owner kicked us out this evening. There was- There was a misunderstanding, someone's dog ran out ahead of me and she thought it was mine, and we're not allowed to have pets... She said she didn't want me to come back there again and she yelled at me when she saw me." He rubbed his face with one hand and she grabbed his wrist.

"You're bleeding."

He glanced at his forearm. "Oh. Uh, the dog bit me. It's not bad."

She frowned at the hasty bandage job. "Have you called the police?"

He looked up with a pained expression. "We're here illegally," he whispered. "If they find out, they'll deport us, and- and we don't have anywhere to go."

She paused. "Okay. Um, okay. Wait here and I'm going to call someone to come watch Jack." Sam would probably want to know she was leaving the house in the middle of the night to go look for another Jack. "Give me five minutes and we'll take my car and we'll go look, okay?"
He nodded miserably, swiping at his wet face with one hand while she went to make the call. She grabbed her coat and ushered them both out the door a minute later. "Okay, so where would he go?"

---

That morning, after they'd been searching for hours, they had to go back to the house to pick up Haley's child. The neighbors, who had come to house sit and watch Jack while she'd been gone had to go to work, so her Jack came with them while they looked for Harry's. It was understandably confusing for the little one in the backseat whenever they tried to explain that they were looking for Jack, and often resulted in him shouting from the back where he was.

"You can't think of anywhere else?" she asked desperately.

"We just moved out here, and we never had time to go around the area," Harry said, eyes frantically searching out the window. He needed Atlas like he'd never needed him before. The elephant could have easily tracked him down in an instant, and likely been able to coax him to return home.

He needed Dad.

He dropped his head into his hands. "I shouldn't have ever brought him here," he muttered. "Stupid!

Of course he was upset..."

Haley glanced at him, and he knew she was aware there was something he wasn't saying. As the hours dragged on, a new fear was beginning to arise. Animal Control might have picked him up at this point, and there was little way for him to explain to Haley why he thought they needed to look at animal centers. Or worse, while Jack only looked a year old in his wolf form, his unexpected, lupine presence could still be enough to startle someone with a gun. Would he ever find out what happened to his brother if something terrible took place while Jack was a wolf?

He bit back a sob. If only he'd looked harder in the first few minutes, before Jack had gotten too far away...

Haley's phone rang and she glanced at the number. "Sam?" she answered. A voice came through on the other end, and Harry looked over to see that she had gone pale. "Oh no..."

Suddenly, her eyes went wide as she stared at the road, and Harry snapped forward to see-

Haley screamed and slammed on the brakes, phone flying up front onto the dashboard when she let it go. The car passed straight through the apparition, and Harry's heart thudded in his chest as he sat, frozen.

Then he whipped around and looked through the back window. "Jack, are you okay?" he asked as his eyes locked with the ghost's behind them.

"I'm fine," was the quiet reply.

Haley scrambled for the phone as a voice spoke urgently through it. "No, we're fine, we're- Is she still there?!"

"She's gone," Harry whispered.

Ignoring her phone, Haley demanded, "Did you see that?"

"Yes."
"I'm not going crazy, right?"

"If you are, so am I!"

"Because that looked like..." At her phone, she said, "I'm going to have to call you back." She pointed out the front window. "I just ran myself over!"

A hand tapped on Harry's window and both of the front passengers screamed.

"Oh, it's a police officer," Haley gasped out, sinking down in her seat while Harry rolled the window down.

"Is everything okay?" the man asked, eyeing them.

"We're fine," Harry said weakly. "Just... We're good. Thanks for asking."

"Are you sure?"


"She's right behind me, isn't she?" he asked warily. A hand touched his shoulder, warm, and he turned slowly to see Haley Hotchner standing at his window. A breeze that didn't exist was carrying away wisps of her hair, and she smiled gently at them. After a moment, his eyes widened in understanding. "Oh," he whispered. "Oh."

"Harry, who is it? What is she?" Haley demanded from the driver's seat.

"If I tried to tell you, you wouldn't believe me."

"I think there are a lot of things I'd believe right about now!"

The ghost smiled at their back-and-forth, then held up her free hand to quiet them. "He's safe," the ghost said. "But please hurry. He's getting scared."

"Where is he?" Harry demanded.

"Right now, he's by the school. Your father's with him, Harry."

His breath caught in his throat. "He... He is?"

His mother smiled again, and her hand moved from his shoulder to the side of his head. "He never left, Harry. He never left."

Then she was gone.

"Mom?" Jack asked from the backseat.

"Yes?" she faintly replied.

"Who was that?"

Haley looked at Harry. "I'll explain later," he whispered hoarsely, "but we need to get to the school."
Haley nodded and started driving, dialing with one hand while Harry kept an eye on the road for her. "Who called?" he asked off-handedly.

"Harry, I'm in witness protection," she said.

"Right," he replied, then realized belatedly he wasn't supposed to know that when she started staring at him. He groaned. "It's a long story. I'll explain later. Go on."

"That was my handler's number. Sam, he... He's been killed, but..." Whoever was on the other line answered. "I'm back."

Her face began to get paler and paler, until she finally pulled over and stared straight ahead with a white-knuckled grip on the steering wheel. "Are you sure?" she whispered, then closed her eyes and leaned her head back in grief. "Okay... Okay... Wait, there's... There are going to be two people with me." Harry tilted his head at her. "No, they have to come. It's a long story." The voice on the other end tried to talk her out of it, but she shook her head. "I'm just warning you they're coming, not putting this up for debate."

She closed the phone a moment later and pocketed it, then turned to Harry as she wiped her eyes. "What happened?" he asked and she gestured for him to lean closer so Jack wouldn't hear.

"The Reaper... He caught up to Aaron, he..." Harry closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the headrest of the seat. As soon as he'd shown up – As soon as he'd come anywhere close to his father... He couldn't help from getting him into danger, no matter where he was. "Aaron's dead, and he's coming for us next. He knows where we're at, and if he's seen Jack and I, then I'm afraid..."

"He's seen us too," Harry whispered. "Okay."

She handed him her phone. "Roll down your window and throw that into the trash next to you." He obliged. "The man who's just taken over for Sam is worried the Reaper's going to track us with that." Haley took a steadying breath, and then pulled the car back out into traffic. "We're going to get your brother and go. Is there any reason we have to go back first?"

"No." His knife was tucked into his waistband, and his wand was a world away. The Invisibility Cloak had stayed with the ones who might still need to use it back at Hogwarts. "We're ready."

It took them another five minutes to reach the school, and once they got into the parking lot, Harry slipped out of the car and began running aimlessly, hoping he'd come across his brother eventually. The school grounds couldn't be that big.

"Harry!"

He stopped and turned towards the voice. His mother was standing at the other end of the building. Now that he was really looking at her, he realized that her feet weren't quite touching the ground. One arm beckoned him closer. "This way!"

"This is insane," Haley muttered to herself as she ran after Harry. His mother waited until they were within a few meters, and then turned and began hurriedly leading them further into the school grounds. Each of her strides carried her double the distance of the living humans' strides, physical limitations having no effect on her. Haley threw her hand over her shoulder, locking the car doors. "Are you dead?" she demanded.

"Yes," Harry's mother replied. "Killing Curse. Wonderfully painless and much better for an open-casket funeral than a bullet wound, though rather anticlimactic." She came to a halt and pointed around the corner. As Harry and Haley came skidding to a halt beside her, they followed the line of
her finger to a playground. An adult in a long coat was sitting on the ground, half-hidden by a slide. "You should stay here," Harry's mother said, tapping Haley on the arm. "You don't want to see this."

"See what?" Haley asked, bewildered.

Harry's mother reluctantly turned to her son. "Harry," she said carefully, "when we appear like this, we... We appear as we did according to how you last saw us." His stomach sank as he understood what she was trying to say. "If you need it, I can tell your father to go."

He quickly shook his head. "I've already seen it," he whispered. "And I... I want to talk to him."

She smiled at him, then reached out and pulled him closer for a hug. "I wish I'd known you," she murmured into his ear. "Lucky Aaron..."

"I don't think this family has luck," he pointed out dryly and she was startled into a laugh.

His mother pulled back and pushed him gently towards the playground. "I'm going to go," she said. "I don't want us to accidentally burn you out, and risk you not getting time to talk to him."

"What?" he asked but she had already faded.

"What the hell is going on?" Haley whispered.

"I have no idea," he said, and then started running for the playground.

Despite his mother's warning, it was still a shock to come around the side of the slide. One hand steadied himself on the plastic as his father turned and looked up at him with a wistful expression. His face was pale, a stark contrast to the blood caked down his front from the open postmortem wound at his throat. In his lap, Jack was nestled in his human form, sleeping soundly.

Harry carefully let go, but his weak knees dropped him to the ground beside his father. "Dad."

His father reached out and stroked his cheek with a small smile. "I have to go," he said quietly. "But I wanted to see you before you couldn't see me anymore."

"What? No!"

"It's okay, Harry; your mother and I are still here. We're watching."

"Dad..."

Hotch nodded. "I'll see you again, I promise. I'll explain everything later. But I have to go now." Jack started to stir, and Hotch tried to pass him over to Harry. "Take him, please."

"What? No, Dad, wait! How are you even here?"

"Harry, I came here when he was asleep, but when he wakes up he's going to smell the blood," Hotch said urgently. "He can't. He'll know something's wrong."

"Don't go!" Hotch grimaced in pain at his son's pleading, and Harry pushed further. "Please, don't leave me!"

"You don't need me, Harry," Hotch told him quietly, reaching out one hand to thumb away a tear before it could properly fall. "You've shown that over and over again, no matter how much you refuse to see it. You're brilliant and brave in ways I could never be, and strong when I'm not sure I
would have made the right decision." Harry bit his lip, trying to stifle a sob. "I know it hurts, Harry, believe me. I remember what it was like when we thought you had died when you were just a baby, and I remember what it was like to lose Haley. But you're going to be okay. You don't need me."

"Yes, I do," he whispered. "Dad, please..."

"I love you."

He vanished, and Harry looked down just as Jack opened his eyes. "Harry!" he shouted, then scrambled up and grabbed him. Harry tried to get his arms around his brother, but the angle Jack had enveloped him in made it difficult. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry..."

"We all seem to be saying that a lot recently," Harry said shakily into Jack's hair. "It's okay, you're back. I've got you..."

"I won't do it again!"

"I know, I know."

Jack looked at his arm in horror. "You're not... Did I... Did I turn you...like me?"

Harry glanced at it briefly. "No, I don't think so. It should be fine." He grabbed Jack's hand and pulled him to his feet. "Jack, something happened, and we're going to have to go with Haley and Jack Hotchner in this world, all right?" Jack nodded. "Okay. What?" he asked as Jack sniffed him curiously.

"You smell like Dad," he said, confused. "More than normal."

Harry blinked as he walked back to Haley, who was watching them and nervously shifting from foot to foot. "I do?"

Jack nodded again. "But Dad smells stronger."

Harry glanced at it briefly. "No, I don't think so. It should be fine." He grabbed Jack's hand and pulled him to his feet. "Jack, something happened, and we're going to have to go with Haley and Jack Hotchner in this world, all right?" Jack nodded. "Okay. What?" he asked as Jack sniffed him curiously.

"You smell like Dad," he said, confused. "More than normal."

Harry blinked as he walked back to Haley, who was watching them and nervously shifting from foot to foot. "I do?"

Jack nodded again. "But Dad smells stronger."

Harry tuckered away for later thought as he reached Haley, and she ushered them back to the car. "Hi, Jack," she said as they hurried down the path. "I'm Haley."

"Hi," he said, and glanced back to Harry.

"My son's in the car," Haley said. "His name is Jack, too."

"Cool," Jack said quietly.

They reached the car, and Harry managed to disentangle himself from Jack to get him strapped into the back seat, then climbed into the front passenger's side to see Haley staring at the boys in the rearview mirror. "They look so much alike," she muttered, then turned to the side to see Harry giving her a rather resigned, depressed look. "Oh, you have got to be kidding me."

"Unfortunately, no."

"You owe me a big explanation." She pulled out of the parking lot. "Anything you can tell me now?"

"Not with them here," he said quietly. "Do you have another phone on you?"

"No, why?"
"I was thinking that maybe we should call the rest of the BAU. They might know more about what's going on."

She eyed him before turning back to the road. "A big explanation," she reiterated.

---

They stayed in the living room with the curtains closed while the two boys played by the table. Both naturally shy, they talked in hushed whispers the entire time, occasionally glancing at the adult and teenager. Haley, for her part, kept staring at Harry, who knew he was probably going to have to reveal a significant portion of his story to assuage her. At this point, she deserved it.

Harry's Jack sat up straighter with a sniff. "Someone's coming over?" he asked.

"What?" Haley replied at the same time there was a knock at the door. She looked at Harry curiously before going to answer it. He heard another voice, a man's, and then the door closed and they were both walking into the living room.

Haley nodded to him to follow them, and he got up as she told the boys, "We're going to be right back, okay? Just stay here."

"Okay," one of them replied, but they were both turned away and it was impossible to tell who spoke.

"They look like they could be twins," the man noted as they entered the kitchen. Haley and Harry exchanged a look behind his back. "Okay, here's how this is going to work. You two are going to sit tight in the living room, and I'm going to check everything and make sure that it's all properly secured. Once I'm done, we're going to talk about how to proceed from here."

Haley nodded quickly, and Foyet left. Harry followed her into the living room, and then pulled her into the center and said quietly, "Grab the kids and get to the car. It's him."

"How do you know?" she whispered, glancing upstairs.

"I could write a list."

"The doors are going to squeak after so long not being used," Haley said quietly.

Harry paused. "I'm going to break a window in the back at the same time you're going to open the front door and he shouldn't hear you leaving, okay?"

She shook her head. "No, let's switch. You'd be in more danger."

"I can run faster, and he doesn't care about me." He slipped quietly out of the room before she could argue further and went down the hallway until he could see a back window. While he waited for Haley to grab the boys, he picked up a small statue, probably a souvenir from a trip. It wasn't heavy enough to break the window, but he could send some magic with it to do the trick.

Haley and the boys came into view and she waited with her hand on the door until he saw her, then held up three fingers. He tightened his grip on the souvenir and pulled his arm back while she counted down, then threw it as hard as he could. The glass shattered and Haley yanked the door open, ushering the kids out. Over them, footsteps ran towards the stairs and Haley closed the door just enough that someone passing wouldn't notice while Harry ran towards the back.

The back door creaked when he opened it, but he took off sprinting towards the fence. He touched
the wood just as the back door slammed shut behind Foyet, and he jumped to grab the top of the fence to haul himself over. The moment half his weight fell on his right arm, a jolt of pain shot down his nerves to his chest from the bite wound, and he lost a split second to the pain. His feet scrabbled against the fence and he pushed and pulled himself up, one arm wrapping around the other side of the fence to pull him over.

He saw Haley in the car for a split second, and then hands grabbed his legs and he was yanked down even as he still held onto the fence. Haley screamed his name, starting to get out of the car, but he gestured for her to go. "Get them out of here!" he shouted at her, and his distraction cost him as he lost his grip.

Foyet managed to keep his balance as Harry fell on top of him, and he twisted and slammed Harry to the ground. He lifted him up and shoved him back down again, partially succeeding in disorienting him enough to stop him from fighting. Before Harry could get in a good position to strike at Foyet or get up, the killer grabbed Harry's wrists and held them to his chest, then swung his leg over Harry, straddling him. Blackwolf's knife dug into his back, useless where it was trapped.

Foyet released his injured arm to put his freed hand around Harry's throat, and Harry threw up his forearm to hold Foyet off from being able to properly lean into it. Foyet strained against him, relying on Harry to slowly crumple, so Harry suddenly dropped the forearm and punched upward, forcing Foyet to slam himself into the fist as he came down. Foyet gagged and Harry put his palm on his chest, frantically pumping magic down his arm. It tingled as it went past his wound, and it surged up into Foyet's sternum. The bone splintered under Harry's hand.

Foyet screamed in pain and Harry threw him off, scrambling up to his feet. He started backwards, but Foyet reached into the back of his waistband and pulled out a gun. His gaze flickered across the distance, but before he could move, the fence slammed open and the gun reflexively moved towards whoever it was. Harry threw himself at Haley, knocking both of them down and letting the bullet fly harmlessly over their heads, then rolled over and held his good hand up just as another bullet came flying towards them.

The bullet ricocheted off a barrier, breaking another window in the house.

Foyet stared at him, lowering the gun slightly. Harry was rather impressed he'd managed to fire off two shots when the recoil would surely have hurt his torso worse. As it was, his hand was shaking.

"What the hell are you?" Foyet breathed.

"You know, I thought that was kind of obvious," Harry snapped, and straightened his palm out again as two more bullets hit the barrier. "Oh, please, keep going and waste all your bullets."

Foyet winced in pain as he moved one hand off the gun to pat something in his pocket. "Got more rounds, you brat." He fired again and started moving forward, intent on breaking through the barrier one way or another.

"Haley, I'd appreciate if you could start running to the car about now," Harry said, scrambling to his feet.

"Can't you just keep doing whatever you're doing?" she asked.

"Never had the chance to test this against a maniac shooting at me, and I'd rather not discover my limit the hard way."

Haley kept a hand on his shoulder as he moved sideways, one hand still up to ward off bullets while
she led him. With a wince, he widened the shield as far as he dared, hoping to cover the car behind them in case a bullet went off target. It weakened the shield as a whole, and he began to seriously feel the drain.

Then they stepped off the curb and Harry stumbled, and the shield came down as Foyet fired at him.

The bullet punched into his side and he shouted in pain, grabbing at Haley to stay upright. Foyet raised his gun again, only to have his wrist grabbed by the man who had suddenly appeared beside him.

"Dad," Harry whispered.

His back was to them, but Foyet got the full gory image and shouted in surprise, yanking himself away and aiming the gun at Hotch instead. He fired, but the manifestation was gone and the bullet passed harmlessly over their heads. Seeing nothing in front of him, he shook his head with a growl and turned back to them, but he'd fired the last round in his gun and he had to reload.

The two sprinted the rest of the way to the car while Harry brought the shield up again, and he scrambled to get the door closed while his side pulsed in time to his heartbeat. Haley slammed on the accelerator and they fell backwards as the car took off, bullets still pinging off the barrier as Foyet fired after them. They took the first corner, putting Foyet behind them.

"Are you okay?" Harry asked, struggling to turn around to see the boys. Both nodded, eyes wide.

"Harry, you're bleeding," his Jack whispered, nostrils flared at the scent of blood. "You're bleeding a lot."

"No, he's not," Haley said as calmly as she could, but there was a definite shake in her voice. "He's fine."

"I can smell it."

Haley looked at Harry in confusion, but he just nodded at the road. "Foyet's got a car. He's sure to start following us," he said, looking down as he started to peel away his shirt to see the bullet wound. Cloth snagged at the edges and he bit his lip to stifle a cry of pain.

"Harry?"

"It's fine, it's fine," he hissed. "Just keep going."

"I'm going to call 911," she said. Then swore. "We threw my phone out."

Harry pulled his out of his pocket and passed it to her. "That's the guy who told you your husband was dead, right?"

"Yeah."

"I'll bet he's not," please, please, please don't be dead, "and I'll bet they're already coming here. Call him, and then you'll be updating the group who's already on their way."

She glanced at him again. "You know an awful lot about what to do in this situation." It wasn't an accusation.

"It's part of that long story," he said, then threw his head back against the headrest of the seat as they
"Harry," Jack said from the back, starting to panic.

"It's okay," Harry managed to get out. "I'll be okay."

Hotchner answered his phone almost immediately, and she put him on speakerphone so she could take the tight turns more easily. "Haley, is there a man with you?" Harry kept his gaze focused out the window, hiding how relieved he was to hear the low, albeit apprehensive tones.

"We got away from Foyet. He tried to convince us he was a marshal. We're just passing... Maple and 38th." She glanced up at the rearview mirror. "Shit, he's behind us."

"Interstate," Harry said, pointing.

"Always wanted to see how fast I could get up to speed on this thing," she muttered, crossing the lanes at the last moment without hitting her turn signal and flying up the ramp. A bullet went through the back window and both boys screamed.

Harry turned around and held up the barrier again, but he could feel it shaking. "This is getting ridiculous," he snapped. "Who shoots and drives at the same time?"

"Haley, who's with you?" Hotch asked urgently.

"Jack, and Harry and his younger brother. I'll explain later," she said as she floored it and they flew onto the interstate. A truck honked at them as she cut them off, then inadvertently blocked Foyet from following them. "Okay, now we're on the interstate doing ninety."

"Give us exit numbers. We'll try to head him off."

Harry lost sight of Foyet, but he wondered if he could drop the shield now. Just as he began to seriously consider it, a bullet slammed into the barrier and Harry felt the whole thing shatter, pulling one last surge of magic out of him as it tried and failed to stay together.

"Harry? Harry!" Haley screamed as he slumped down into his seat.

"What's..."

The next few minutes passed in and out of clarity, until he was aware of the car gradually coming to a stop as shouting surrounded them. He was slowly pulled from his fugue as Jack shook his arm, hollering at him to wake up, and Harry unconsciously reached to touch his hand. Before he could, the door was yanked open and arms slipped around him, under his legs and under his shoulders, and then he was being lifted into the air.

His eyes slid open, and he noticed with interest that he was looking up at Morgan's rather anxious face. Harry leaned into the warm body as cold began to seep in through his wounds, and he glanced back at Jack. The boy was straining between the divider of the front two seats, held back by Haley, and Harry sent him a small smile that he hoped was reassuring. As his gaze drifted away, he saw the pool of blood that had soaked from his back into the seat fabric and run down to pool at the bottom.

"Harry, right?" Morgan asked urgently. "Harry, I need you to hang on. Stay with me, okay?"

"I'm here," he said blearily as Morgan deposited him gently on a stretcher. He grimaced in pain, hand instinctively tightening around Morgan's arm, and he received a reassuring squeeze in return. Morgan glanced at someone, got an answer he wanted to hear, and then moved with Harry's stretcher as they
loaded him into an ambulance.

"Harry, what's your brother's name?"

"Jack."

"No, your brother's name."

He smiled slightly, then coughed. Something wet trickled onto his lips as the ambulance doors slammed. "They're both Jack."

"We're losing him," someone said.

"Move," a deeper voice said, and Harry looked up as everyone screamed.

"Hotch?" Morgan shouted.

"Not really," came the reply as Harry smiled up weakly. Morgan was leaning as far away from possible, along with the paramedics who were staring at the bloody sight of the new appearance. Hotch ignored all of them, resting on the edge of the stretcher and putting both hands on the sides of Harry's face. Part of Harry wondered why Hotch could still be speaking when Harry could see one split end of his trachea from this angle.

He bent closer. "Harry, do you remember the stasis spell?"

"Of course," he whispered, then coughed as the air sent more blood up his throat. For a moment, he saw panic flash over Hotch's face.

"Okay, focus on it. You need to cast it on yourself or you're going to bleed out on the way to the hospital," he said urgently.

"What the fuck is going on?" one paramedic whispered.

"Is he dead?" another asked.

Hotch turned to look over his shoulder. "You're going to be if you don't keep trying to save my son," he snapped, and everyone jerked back into action around him. Turning to Harry again, he said, "Come on, you've got this."

"I'm too tired," he murmured.

"You can sleep once you do this, I promise."

"Don't have..."

"You don't need your wand."

He bit his lip against the pain, hips bucking off the stretcher as he felt something touch the wound. One of the paramedics shied away as Hotch glanced his direction, then went back to trying to treat it. "Hist..." He winced again.

Hotch rubbed the side of his head gently. "Breath in... Breath out... Breath in..."

"Histania," Harry whispered on the exhale.

"Go to sleep."
Harry woke to hushed whispering, but he snapped awake the moment he picked out his father's voice. A painful instant later, he realized who it actually was.

"You don't know!" this world's Hotchner urgently said as quietly as he could. Harry's eyes squeezed shut tighter. For one moment in the ambulance, he'd thought what he'd seen was really his father. He'd really thought Hotch had been back.

"Isn't it obvious? They've still got him on an IV drip because he's so malnourished! Aaron, there's something wrong with his home life."

"Even if there is, you're in no position to take him in!" No, this definitely wasn't his father, and every word he spoke in Hotch's voice tore at Harry like another bullet wound.

"Thanks to you!"

Hotchner went quiet. Harry futilely hoped he wouldn't speak again so Harry wouldn't have to hear the bitter reminder of what could have been.

"He saved our lives, Aaron. I want to give him something in return. And frankly, you don't have any say in this."

"Have you asked him what he wants? Or considered what else might be going on?"

"What do you mean, 'what else'?" Haley demanded.

"His brother turned into a wolf when they were separated," Hotchner said, exasperated, and Harry winced slightly. "There are obviously things going on that you don't know about."

"Aaron, it's not like he's going to hurt us."

"No, I don't think he will. But whatever's hunting him might. We can get him protection, Haley, but putting all four of you together... That's just asking for more danger. Let alone who's trying to kill him, he almost died from who's trying to kill you."

"And again, whose fault is that?" she snapped.

"I'm not saying it's not mine. I just want all of you safe."

"And I don't want him to get stuck in some foster home situation!"

"I don't think it'll be foster care."

"No, because you abide by the rules, and the rules are going to get him booted back home. Do you really think that's going to make him any safer?"

Was this what his parents had been like when they were still alive? He'd always thought they loved each other...

"We're not going to let him get sent back to England."

"Oh, really?" she said doubtfully, not minding that her voice was rising.

"Really. We won't put him in danger."
"Like you put me in danger? Like you put Jack in danger?" she snapped, shouting now. "Is it really any wonder that I'm having a hard time believing you on this? Maybe if you had just let the case go instead of chasing after the Reaper, and broken the rules once in your life for your own sake if not ours, we wouldn't be in this mess!"

"He can't let me go back," Harry croaked out, making both fall silent immediately. He didn't think he could stand to hear them get into a full-blown shouting match.

"Harry..." Haley said, guilt in her tone over waking him up.

"Morally obligated or not, he can't." His eyes slid open and flickered over to them. Haley was standing by a chair that she had evidently risen out of at some point in the argument, and Hotchner was next to her. She had the same expression Molly got when one of her kids was trying to jump into danger, and he looked like he was in pain. "I'm under eighteen, so he can't legally send me back into a situation which he thinks might endanger me."

"Then why did you tell me you were nineteen?" Haley asked, horrified. "You're not emancipated if you're not here legally, so we could've taken you in!"

"My brother turns into a werewolf and I can shield myself from bullets. How normal do you think the people after me are?" He grimaced as he tried to sit up, and he felt something stretch painfully along his side as both adults immediately moved to stop him.

"Don't tear the stitching," Hotchner warned.

"What happened after the ambulance?" he asked. "I put a stasis spell on myself..."

The two exchanged glances, and he wondered if someone had actually explained magic to them or not yet. "The doctors spent an hour trying to figure out how to treat you when nothing was having an effect," Hotchner finally said. "It...must have worn off or something."

"It did. I'm surprised it held up as long as it did when I was so tired."

"Are you feeling okay?" Haley asked.

"Fine." It was nothing after the injuries he'd sustained during the war. "Where's Jack? Mine, I mean."

"They're both somewhere safe," Hotchner said. "I don't want to tell you until we can move you there."

Harry sighed, giving a wry smile. "Great, now I'm under witness protection now too, huh?"

"Yes, so I suppose it would be easier to put us all under one roof," Haley said and Hotchner closed his eyes with a grimace. "Harry, would you like to come stay with us?"

"Not if it puts everyone in more danger."

"I'm not sure it does," Haley pressed. "You saved us."

"And got shot for it," Hotchner pointed out and Haley scowled at him.

"Stop arguing," Harry sighed out as he rubbed his eyes with his palms. Too late, he realized he'd said that out loud, but he couldn't find it in himself to regret saying it. "Please, just... Give it a rest." They quieted rather awkwardly, glancing at each other in embarrassment before looking away. "I'm not
going to go into a separate witness protection program," he said and Haley smiled, "but I'm not going to stay with you either. Marshals aren't used to dealing with what's coming after Jack and I. We're going to go out on our own again." Both opened their mouths. "This isn't up for negotiation. We're not staying. But if it makes you feel better, we'll stop in regularly or something so you know nothing horrible has happened."

"As you pointed out a minute ago, I can't let you go into a dangerous situation," Hotchner said.

"Good luck stopping me," Harry said immediately, looking him in the eyes for the first time. He immediately looked away, unable to not notice how closely he resembled his father. "How long did the doctors give me for my invalid period?"

"Four weeks."

"Oh, that's great," Harry muttered crossly. He was leaving in a week, max. There was no way he could stay around his parents' alternate selves for that long without going mad, and he could just imagine how hard it would be for Jack. "Make it loads easier for someone to track me down."

"No one's going to be able to come after you with the marshals watching you," Hotchner said, starting to get frustrated. "Stop worrying about it."

"You make it sound like it's completely unjustified, but-" The door opened and Harry gestured at the new individual irritably. "See?! Okay, how long did it take for you to find me?"

"From the time you didn't arrive like you promised or from the time you were moronic enough to get yourself shot?" Snape sneered.

"The latter."

"It's been fifteen hours."

"I think I win this argument," Harry muttered, yanking out the IV with a wince. Haley belatedly grabbed his arm to stop him, and he gently shrugged her off so he could get out from under the blankets. "Accio clothes." A clean pair of clothes flew out of a cabinet, standard grey drawstring pants and a matching androgynous long-sleeve shirt. "This better be quick," he warned Snape as he struggled into the clothes. He knew he was going to regret this when the pain medication wore off.

"Got plans?" he said sarcastically.

"Obviously."

Hotchner intercepted him as he moved to stand, putting a hand in front of his chest to stop him from rising. "You shouldn't be moving," he warned him, then turned to Snape. "Who are you?"

"None of your business."

Harry looked between the two, and with horror, he suddenly realized that his father's friend would have heard about the violent displays of the corpses from the ones who had done it and came back to headquarters to gloat. And, last Harry had heard, Snape had still been with the Death Eaters, pretending to be one of them.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Haley watching him curiously and knew something was showing on his face. He turned away from her with a grimace, focusing on the hand in front of him.

"Considering the situation, it is."
"Right, and I suppose he's told you everything, hasn't he? No? Then it's not your concern."

"And if you knew everything, you wouldn't be here, so get out."

"Everyone, shut up," Harry ordered. "Do any of you do anything but argue?" He grabbed onto Hotchner's arm in front of him, using it as a brace to pull himself to his feet. Hotchner started in surprise but let him, unable to stop him without risking hurting him. "And while no one asked my opinion, mine is still the most important right now, so here's what's going to happen. I am going to leave with him," he said, pointing at Snape. There really wasn't a way around that, not when Snape was probably on the verge of obliviating both the Hotchners. "Then we're going to come back, he's going to leave, and we're going to work out everything else."

"You're not leaving," Hotchner said, glaring at Snape in annoyance.

"Keep telling yourself that." He released Hotchner's arm and held his hand out to Snape, who grabbed on and touched an object in his pocket to portkey them away to Grimmauld Place.

They appeared in the foyer, and Harry gave a shout of pain as they landed, grabbing his side and stumbling into the nearest wall. He bit his lip to suppress any more noise while the painting of the last Black matriarch began screaming, and he thumped his head back against the wall behind him.

A few Order members ran out to stun the paintings that had started wailing, and Snape whipped around to glare at him, then paused. "What were you in the hospital for?"

Harry took a deep breath, fighting back the pain. He probably tore one of the stitches with the portkey jump. "A bit late to be asking that," he hissed out, "don't you think?"

Snape narrowed his eyes at him, but Harry pushed himself away from the wall and stumbled past him to the kitchen and, through it, the conference room. The Order members he walked around stared at him in confusion while he used walls and tables to help himself stay standing and he saw a couple turn to Snape for an explanation.

Finally, after a painful minute, he pulled out a chair in the conference room and deposited himself lightly into it. There were only six people in the room: Sirius, Snape, Remus, Dumbledore, Moody, and Kingsley. No one else entered the room once Snape shut the door behind himself. Across the table from him, Sirius frowned. "What happened to you?"

"Long story, one I need to get back to. Now what the hell do you guys want, so I can get this over with?" As his head began to swim, he really regretted leaving the hospital.

"Tell us more about your world," Moody ordered.

"No. Anything else?" Nothing, from the looks he got. He twisted around in his chair to find Snape standing behind him by the door. "Okay, Snape, you're taking me back."

The potions master quirked an eyebrow. "You seem eager to have someone carry you back, unlike last time when you did so yourself with abundant glee." Harry scowled at him. "And you're remarkably interested in getting back to muggle company."

"They have something I need, something I promise you guys won't give a damn about." He turned back around to face the table. "I'm not telling you about my world."

"Why not?" Moody demanded.

"Because it's really not something I want to talk about," he snapped as he turned sharply to face the
man, then gasped in pain as it stretched the skin around the bullet wound. He gripped the arm of his chair tightly, clenching his jaw while he waited for the feeling to dull. "And it's not something I have time to share," he finally gritted out.

"Severus," Albus said, and the potions master left the room, only to return a minute later to slam a potions bottle down on the table in front of Harry. "Something for your injury."

"Bullshit, that's veritaserum," Harry said bluntly. Dumbledore didn't know if he'd been shot or cursed. He could hardly tell Snape to get something with a single look and know that Snape would get the right treatment. "No, thanks."

"Just drink it and then you can go back to being poked at by muggles," Snape snapped.

"I'd rather bleed out."

"You're going to if you don't start answering questions."

"Snape!" Remus exclaimed from the other end of the table.

"I can hardly force him to drink it!" Snape replied, then walked around to the other side of the room. Harry kept his gaze away from him. "No, he'd rather drag this out and die a martyr's death. Really, is it an alternate reality at all when he's so much like our own?"

"You know what, Snivellus," Sirius started.

Harry rubbed his forehead with one hand while the group bickered on. He was completely unable to get away from arguments today.

Albus stopped the fight before it got carried away. "Harry," he said quietly, and the group hushed completely. "You have a right to your privacy. That is something we understand, and that is why we want you to tell us what has happened freely. But the people here have a right to safety."

Harry scoffed. "I told you everything you need to know. My world is too different from yours to give you anymore help. We're at completely different stages. What I know just isn't going to be important to you." Besides, it would seem like Dumbledore would have wanted to tell more people than just this group. Something was weird about this situation.

"There are more differences in the worlds than I suspect you realize," Dumbledore said calmly. "Understanding those differences may help us realize our own strengths. If we can know what happened to you, we can stop some of the same horrors from happening to ourselves."

Harry frowned slightly. He sounded so certain, but the only differences he could have noticed would have been between the two Harrys. There wasn't much he could have picked up on in what little time he had been here, especially when he'd apparated away so quickly.

He tilted his head sharply. Apparation. And now wandless magic. Dumbledore knew he was using more advanced magic than this world's Harry, and that he was using it well.

Harry had forgotten how manipulative the old headmaster could be, but he just couldn't blame him. Others were meant to take care of Harry - Dumbledore's job was to win the war and keep all of them alive. Someone else, however, had a different goal, and Harry turned to him now to see if the spy had caught the meaning behind Dumbledore's words as well.

A moment too late, he realized his mistake. After years of trusting Snape, it was so easy to slip up and forget that he had spent just as much time distrusting the man, and Snape had spent even longer
pretending to be antagonistic towards him.

"Legilimens!"

Get out, get out! Harry screamed at him as he felt Snape plunge into his mind, taking them away from the Order headquarters. Snape, please, stop!

Then he lost all control and-

The chains dug into his wrist, and he thrashed and screamed with the others as Cho Chang was dragged away, fighting as the werewolves laughed...

Waking up, screaming and throwing off blankets, panicking at the restraint until- "Shh, shh," his father whispered, one knee on the bed so he could reach Harry and soothe him. "It's over. You're safe. They can't get to you here." Sobs clogged his throat...

Throwing up in the closet, feeling a painful, wretched scratching in his esophagus and in his intestines and not even caring to wonder what had been in that bread, hoping the Dursleys would kill him faster than this...

Desperate hope as he stared at adoption papers in Hotch's office, Was he wanted?, Did he get to have a family?, and soon after finding more elation in sitting in a simple house than gazing up at the magnificence of Hogwarts, and oh he had a brother, he had Jack, and Jack was clinging to him, excited to have him too, and their father was smiling at the pair he was hugging, he wasn't afraid like the Dursleys...

Tucking his wand away and steeling himself for the Cruciatus, prepared to take anything to protect Jack because this bitch wasn't going to take him...

"I'm fine," he told Gideon. "See? I'm okay," he lied, and Gideon just watched him shaking from the effects of the Cruciatus and calmly nodded, then sat him down and made him talk, got him to describe what was going on and how much he hurt...

Sprinting out of the Department of Mysteries as tears burned his eyes, they took everyone, they took everyone, he wasn't going to let them take anyone else, not after they'd taken his father and now they'd taken Gideon, and people were running after him because they had nothing else to lose, and minutes later Malfoy Manor was burning and Harry was screaming into a Sonorus Charm that they wouldn't stop until everyone surrendered...

Walking down into the dungeons after receiving a question from a concerned parent, forcing himself to move past all the bodies and look for- oh, there she was, "I regret to inform you that Annabelle has died in the Fourth Battle of Hogwarts..."

Staring out over the devastation the Death Eaters had wrought in the most recent battle and Harry was wondering how many more were going to die when an arm wrapped around his shoulders and a head leaned closer to his, "This will end," his father whispered. "This will end, and we'll go home. You and Jack and I, we'll all go home..."

The corpses sprawled on the ground, one more moment of incomprehension for Kingsley's panicked look...

"They went after their families," Morgan said quietly, following his gaze to Zabini, Greengrass, and Warrington...

Hermione's patronus, telling him Cassius was dead, and Harry later wondering where all the
children were going to go who had stayed with him, maybe Blaise could go with Gideon when this was all over, if any of them would live to see that day...

Sobbing silently in the middle of the night in the Room of Requirement, trying not to wake Ron beside him, and flinching slightly at a touch before realizing it was Hotch, "I didn't mean to kill them, I'm so sorry," and Hotch just stroked his head gently and murmured softly until he slipped away into a sleep that was as restful as he could get these days...

And then waking up at Christmas because Jack was bouncing on his bed, eyes wide and normal and seeing, and then Jack dragging him out of bed and downstairs where Sean and his father were already waiting, amused to see Jack's enthusiasm and Harry's ruffled bedhead...

Sean grabbing the pillow and playfully smacking Harry for slipping Jack the last of the cake, and then the devolution into anarchy as it was everyone for themselves and somehow Jack got a hold of the eggs and Hotch came home an hour later to complete chaos in the living room and then Sean, brave Sean, threw the last egg at Hotch and then that was the end for Sean...

Oh, Sean, screaming on the floor, arms covering his head as if it would block out the truth, and Harry couldn't move towards him no matter how hard he tried because it was his fault, this shouldn't have happened, and he could hear the same screams in himself...

A different kind of pain and he remained just as silent, thrashing on the ground under the Cruciatus, and it said something that he could now determine Umbridge's mood from how strong or erratic her curse was, but he wasn't going to give in, he had to protect Jack...

Pushing Jack behind him, glaring at Perotta but wishing Hotch were here, Hotch knew what to do against a murderer like this, Harry could just put himself in the way and hope Perotta was satisfied with him and wouldn't touch Jack, and then hands were ghosting up and down his body, taunts slipping from Perotta's lips to hurt him, and finally one last warning before Perotta backed away...

Another man, standing even closer, murmuring promises of money, then Harry walking with him and slipping away with his money moments later, wishing he didn't have to do this but oh, he was so hungry...

He felt like he was dying already, and he didn't understand why everyone was so scared of the Killing Curse when this was much, much worse, I'm sorry, Dad...

Eyes alighting on the one person Kingsley hadn't wanted him to see, as blood still ran sluggishly from the slash that ran diagonally collarbone to jaw, red dripping from his fingers and running down his front, face tilted toward the sky...

Snape pulled out of him so sharply that both of them slammed backwards, and Harry shouted in pain as he hit the chair and jolted his stitches again. He bent over, head thumping onto the table, and clutched at the injury as searing pain shot up and down his side. There were panicked voices around them, but all he could do was wait for the sensation to subside before any coherent thought could enter his brain.

Finally, he slowly, carefully sat up and looked at Snape. The potions master was leaning heavily against the wall, head held tightly in his hands like he had a headache. Dumbledore stood by him, while Remus and Sirius had gathered next to Harry in concern.

"What the hell did you do?" Sirius shouted at Snape.

"Did you get what you wanted?" Harry asked hoarsely, and Snape slowly lifted his head.
"Severus?" Albus asked.

"We're done, headmaster," Snape said quietly and the adults all looked at him in surprise. "His world is too different."

Sirius glanced in astonishment between Snape and Harry. Once more, the teenager had a moment of confusion before realizing the two must have never come to their truce in this timeline.

"In what way?" Dumbledore asked.

"In every way. It's all completely different." He walked around the table, ignoring Dumbledore and pushing past Remus to get to Harry. Harry leaned away from him, frowning slightly, but Snape reached out and touched his shoulder, and then they were gone.

He landed heavily again and hissed in pain, and Snape steadied him for a couple of moments before slowly lowering him to the ground. "Can you stop causing me more damage? I'm bleeding out fine on my own," he snapped, but Snape had already walked away so Harry just remained where he was, feeling ridiculous sitting on the floor.

The potions master returned with a vial, and he handed it to Harry. "There's no point in killing you now," Snape said when he looked suspicious. "That should restore some of your blood, but you've lost too much. What happened?"

Harry looked at him mournfully for a moment, realizing that despite being removed from the Order, he was still going to be pressed. "Get me off the floor and we'll talk," he said in resignation and downed the vial.

Snape crouched beside him and muttered a few charms around the site of the bullet wound, and Harry felt the skin go numb. Between Snape and the wall, he managed to stumble into the room Snape led him to, and was surprised to be deposited into a couch in the living room. "Where are we?" he asked.

"Spinner's End. My home."

Harry raised his eyebrows. "Oh. I never came here in my world."

"Is there a reason you would have?"

"...You and my father became good friends," he said, not quite making eye contact.

Snape nodded slowly. "Your father, who...was not James Potter."

"No," Harry agreed. "I was born to the Hotchners. You met their alternate selves a couple of minutes ago."

"Why do you trust me?" Snape asked abruptly, and Harry smiled.

"Because you always looked out for me. I can hardly believe you never cared." Snape was still standing next to the couch he had set Harry on, and Harry told him to stop lurking.

"One moment," was the response, and Snape left the room. There was some shuffling and clattering elsewhere, and then he returned and took a chair next to Harry. An unlit fireplace was on the opposite end of the room, which was done up in dark colors. It was gloomier than Harry would have guessed, having met the man on friendlier terms in the other world, but it probably wouldn't have gone well for his spy image to have more moderate decorating.
Snape handed him another vial. "It should help your body repair some of the damage."

Harry took it gratefully. "Harry has to die to completely destroy the horcrux in his head," he said and Snape stiffened. "Thought someone should know. Dumbledore suspects, I think, and I already told Harry. I doubt he'll ask for help."

"The headmaster never told me that," Snape said slowly.

"Of course not. You care about Harry. He knew you would have tried to stop it. But listen, I came back somehow. We're still not sure what happened, but I managed it. Maybe this world's Harry can too." He leaned back carefully against the couch, feeling a bit more sluggish as the effects of both potions began to sink in. "I'll tell you everything else that happened in my world," he said wearily. "Maybe it's best that someone knows."

Chapter End Notes

For those of you who were wondering how Foyet was coming back – tada! And Hotch is sort of back too!

By the way, yes, Jack's age is totally wrong with canon now. It's probably four or five years off, but whatever. A younger Jack doesn't really work otherwise.
Snape stared into his cold tea for a few long minutes once Harry was done telling his story.

"Did I miss anything?" Harry asked finally, hoping the answer was no. He felt worn out from giving the whole tale from beginning to end, and hours had passed since they had sat down. Snape had made tea three times.

"Nothing that was obvious to me," Snape said slowly. "Although I find myself curious... What happened to me?"

Harry shook his head regretfully. "I hadn't heard from you in months since you left. It got too dangerous for you to send messages, and then you had to leave with Riddle in case you were able to stop him somehow. I don't know what's happened since."

"I find it hard to believe you came here without a wand, yet... It does not seem that you need one."

"You stopped multiple bullets wandlessly. Whether you could put up a mild barrier or not instinctively, to consciously hold one so strong shows a great deal of power. I'm surprised you haven't already noticed this."

Harry's frown deepened and he turned away with a grimace. "Guess I just needed more energy to stay alive."

"Perhaps... Your magic did manage to prevent you from getting lycanthropy."

Harry started, glancing down at the bandaged wound. "Well... Maybe. But my brother had the treatment, and Elle thought she could still turn people if she bit them but we've already seen that the treatment reacted differently to someone young, like Jack. He might just not be able to pass on the disease."

"You still have had a detrimental drain on your core." He set his tea cup down without bothering to finish the contents. "I do not think you should go out on your own again as you did these last few months, but I doubt I would be able to stop you, and I can't offer you my own home while I'm still a spy."

"I didn't expect you to. Besides, this is too close to the fighting, and I can't risk Jack like that again."

"What do you hope for me to do with this information?" Snape asked.

"Nothing, really. For me, you're a back up plan in case everything goes to hell. But maybe... Maybe you'll know more about how to keep an eye on this world's Harry. He doesn't have... He doesn't
have someone like I did."

"He has Black," Snape said with a sneer. Without such disrespect, he added, "And the Weasleys."

Harry tapped his fingers against his knee for a moment. Snape had gotten him a few more potions, and he felt considerably less like he was on the brink of death. In comparison to just a few hours ago, he couldn't believe he'd been so stupid as to portkey and leave medical assistance behind so soon after waking up from getting shot. He'd just been driven by the need to get away from his father's doppelganger, immediately.

After considering it, he said, "Harry doesn't need Sirius's reckless love or the Weasleys' smothering love. Both are extremes. I suspect he needs a lot of help after the Dursleys, though I hope it was easier for him than it was for me there because he was actually related to Lily. But neither of them are my father, and he..." Harry took a shaky breath. "He was the kind of person we need."

Snape watched him curiously, and Harry didn't say anything. "I imagine so," he said, then, "What do I call you? It's...odd to think of you as Harry, but you're not Potter."

"Well... I would say Hotchner, but I think my dad went by Hotch because his father's an asshole, so that would be weird for me..." At least, he assumed so. Now he wished he'd asked - oh, there was so much he should have asked when he had the chance - but he had guessed that once while talking with Gideon. Most people in official settings didn't give out nicknames or more familiar titles unless they were like Elle, wanting to put people at ease without such a consideration for respect. Hotch certainly demanded respect, so that wasn't why he did it.

"But it is your family," Snape pointed out, "and no matter how cruel, your grandfather is still your lineage."

"I don't think he's cruel," Harry said slowly, surprising himself. "I don't think he's a good father, or a good grandfather, but I don't think he... He's not inherently a bad person."

"I believe the term you're looking for is called Stockholm Syndrome."

Harry laughed slightly. "No, it's not that. I was never around him enough. But I can't help but remember how he acted when I told him his son had died." At Snape's tilt of head, he continued, "My grandfather shattered the bones in his hand by punching a cabinet drawer. Didn't even seem to notice it later when I was patching it up."

A log in the fire snapped. It had been lit a couple of hours ago when the sun had started to set, and Snape turned to it now to see if it needed tending. The flames were beginning to get lower but he made no move towards it. Without turning to Harry, he said, "It seems you learned some tricks from your father and his coworkers."

"I'd hope so after all this time."

"Perhaps..." He frowned to himself and was quiet for a couple of seconds. Harry gave him time. "Perhaps you would have more control over your emotions."

"A little, but it's..." He breathed out against his will as he heard his father's voice murmuring a repetitive instruction to him while he tried to sleep. "I haven't been able to do it since he died. The trick I used was connected to him, so I can't focus whenever I try to do it."

"You said you can't cast your patronus either."

He shook his head. "It's him, and all my memories are connected to him, and I can't..."
"Take it from someone who knows. Don't do that to yourself, and don't do that to his memory."
Snape's words made him look up in confusion. "You have good thoughts of him. I've seen them. They're still there, no matter what happened to him afterwards. Even if you'll never see him again, you had precious time with him, and you should treasure what you had. It's all you have left of him that no one else can touch. Don't ever corrupt that by tainting every thought of him with his death. From what you've said, he doesn't deserve that. He was more to you than his murder."

Harry opened his mouth but nothing came out. Then he closed it and smiled slightly. "I like you a lot more when you're not playing at being an obnoxious shit." Snape, not yet inoculated against Harry's American-muggle insult-praises, was shocked into silence for a second. "Thank you, for listening today."

"That's not necessary, since I am about to ask you for a favor. Until the horcrux can be removed, Potter is suffering from visions the Dark Lord sends him. It saved Arthur Weasley's life, in the incident with Nagini in the Department of Mysteries that Elle evaded in your world, but it has otherwise been extremely detrimental. The Dark Lord led him into a trap this spring at the Ministry, which is why you met him there when you crossed over from the Veil. If this continues, the Dark Lord could use it to capture and kill him."

Harry frowned. "That would be a problem. What do you want me to do about it?"

"He is atrocious at Occlumency. The concept of clearing one's mind seems to be a completely foreign idea, and he is hardly going to learn under me." He scowled. "Furthermore, there is the issue of..." With a grimace, he shook his head. "Nevermind."

"You may as well tell me before I find out from him."

"He broke into some private memories of mine last term, so I cancelled our lessons."

"Ah. So you want me to talk to him?"

"It would be welcome. Do not mention me, however."

Harry nodded before he finished his sentence. "I understand. But... Do try to keep in mind that he has enough adults that he doesn't trust. You don't need to keep yourself on that list."

"Maybe when he's more like you I will inform him I am...not an 'obnoxious shit.'"

Harry smiled humorlessly. "I hope he never becomes like me, not if it means the same experiences."

He got to his feet, using the couch to help himself up. "Ugh, why did I have to get shot?"

"You want to go now?"

"No time like the present. He should be going to bed soon, so it'd be the best time. And I'm totally up for delaying my return to America."

Snape nodded in understanding and extended his arm. Harry took hold and they vanished from the house to reappear outside the Dursleys. Snape moved to walk away, then paused when he saw Harry still standing where they had arrived, watching the house curiously. "It's weird to see this place again. I never expected to return."

"I'll meet you back here in an hour," Snape said, then cast a Disillusionment Charm on himself.

"Not leaving completely?"
Snape lowered it enough for Harry to hear his voice. "I simply must see Petunia's reaction to another Harry Potter showing up on her doorstep. Then I will leave."

Harry snickered and turned to the house.

Vernon Dursley answered the door. He stared.

"Hi, I'm Harry's long lost twin brother," Harry said cheerfully. Vernon tried to slam the door in his face, and he stuck his foot in the way. "Let me in or I'm going to make a scene in your front lawn."

Vernon glared at him, but he grudgingly stepped aside.

"Good idea." Harry threw a wave towards Snape just to make Vernon look around in a panic while he climbed the stairs, hoping that image would make up for Vernon answering the door instead of Petunia. A couple seconds later, he heard a small crack from outside.

He knocked on the door he hoped was still his own in this world, and his other self flung it open irritably. "Wha- Oh."

"Can we talk?" Harry asked, and Potter nodded sharply. When the door had closed behind him, he said, "I've only got about an hour, but I figured we could get a few things worked out. Do you have any questions?"

"How's the war going?" Potter asked, and Harry blinked at the sudden display of conscientiousness.

"It's mostly over," Harry said, "but Riddle and Bellatrix are still out there with a couple of others."

"Then why are you back here?"

"Everyone's worried about an attempted assassination plot on me, and they convinced me it'd be a good idea to hide here for a while." He took a seat on the desk in lieu of a chair, and Potter slowly sat on his bed. "How's everything been going here?"

"They won't let me move to the Order," Potter muttered. "I have to stay here."

Harry turned around and grabbed a piece of parchment and a quill beside him. "Keep talking, but I'm going to write a list for you. I'll explain in a minute."

Potter paused, then continued, "The DA's been doing well - do you have them, over there?"

"They held a formidable part of the fight against Riddle's forces," Harry said with a nod, not looking up.

"It's not really necessary anymore, but a lot of us stuck together afterwards. Ron and Hermione are hoping I could stay part of the summer at one of their own houses. I don't think that's going to happen, though."

"You look like you're having trouble sleeping. Riddle nightmares still?"

"Yeah. Occlumency isn't really working for me."

"Don't worry about that right now. That's what I'm here about, actually. Anyway, continue."

"I don't really know what you want me to say..."
"I'm just trying to fill awkward silence right now. If you want, we can just wait for me to finish this."

They lapsed into silence while Harry scribbled out a few more lines, then he passed the paper to Potter. "In my world, I got to know a lawyer pretty well," he said. "He was horrified by my living conditions with the Dursleys, and he put this list together to charge the Dursleys. This is a conglomeration of everything they did against me, and the item next to it is the British law that breaks along with an estimated time in prison that amounts to. If you want, use it. Even if Dumbledore refuses to let you leave here, they don't know that, and you could use this for blackmail. Keep in mind that this is what they did against me, though, so some of this might not work for you."

"This says attempted murder."

"Yeah. Did you ever get violently sick and start throwing up blood after they fed you some weird tasting water and bread?" Potter stared at him. "No? Wow, you lucked out. They really hated me. Did they ever starve you?"

"They forgot to feed me a couple of times..."

"Hmm, that just goes under negligence if you can't prove it was intentional. Well, if you come up with anything that falls under attempted murder, keep this tidbit in mind. There's currently talk of changing how homicide is prosecuted in Britain, and they're thinking about moving to an American model with the three degrees. It might have already happened, actually, but I haven't really kept up with it."

"Did you use any of this against the Dursleys?" Potter asked, waving the list.

Harry nodded. "We successfully prosecuted with child neglect and attempted murder. We decided not to do more because it was just going to take so long to gather all the necessary evidence and we didn't really feel like it since they were already going to jail." He paused. "I take that back. I didn't feel like it. My lawyer was pissed as hell and wanted to go through the whole list but I just wanted it done."

Potter's eyes scanned the list, and he said, "Would your lawyer take me on as a client?"

"I don't know. The way I found him was complicated, and he knew about my magic. In this world, it's..." Harry grimaced, looking away. "It's different. He could really only advise since he didn't have the requirements to practice law in England. But I'm sure you could find someone else here who knows the system."

Potter set the list aside for a moment. "Is that all you came here for?"

"No, there's something else, but we have to do it last. I can come back again if I need to, though. Are you about to go to sleep?"

"I was. Why?"

"I might have a substitute for Occlumency," Harry said, slipping off the desk and coming to stand in front of his alternate self. Really, this was just the same thing but without a name, but he didn't mention that. It would make Potter automatically skeptical.

Potter shook his head anyway and Harry sighed internally. "I'm not doing anything if it's going to involve you being in my mind," he said angrily.

"No, I don't blame you for that. I won't. But this helped me sleep when I had nightmares from the
"This isn't going to work," Potter grumbled as he swung his legs onto the bed and laid down.

Harry took his wrists, unsure if touching his head would cause problems with the pain from the horcrux. "I yelled at my dad, too, the first time he tried it," he murmured softly and Potter jolted up, almost hitting him.

"You met our father?" he shouted and Harry closed his eyes.

"My parents...weren't the Potters," he said quietly. "I was taken from my parents and the Potters kept me for safety reasons. Please keep that to yourself."

"What? Why? Who were they?" Potter demanded.

"Because that's the reason I don't want to talk about what happened in my world. My mother died before I knew her and my father was killed in front of me. Please lie back down."

Potter opened his mouth to protest, but took one look at Harry's anguished expression and slowly lowered himself again.

"Close your eyes, and focus on me. Just listen to my voice." This had only worked because Hotch had Harry's undying respect. He would have done anything Hotch said, soaked in every word. Harry was literally just talking to himself in this situation. "Breathe in... Breathe out..." He started faster, knowing Potter wouldn't be able to slow down from regular breathing automatically. "Breathe in... Breathe out..."

Phantom fingertips on his temples, whispering along with him. "Breathe in... Breathe out..." Small circles on his forehead, mirrored by the ones Harry traced into Potter's skin. "Breathe in... Breathe out..." Slowing down, slowing to lull Potter into sleep without him even noticing. Lowering oxygen intake until the body relaxed enough to slip away from the conscious world. "Breathe in... Breathe out..."

He hadn't been able to use this trick since the last time Hotch had done it for him. For that matter, he'd never been able to do it alone either. He felt a tear streak down his cheek and he kept his voice steady.

"Breathe in... Breathe out..."

Even slower, even slower. Check the pulse to know when he's asleep.

"Breathe in..."

He could still feel the sensation of Hotch lowering him onto the mattress in the moments before he fell asleep, brushing ticklish hairs from his forehead when he was resting. A warm palm smoothing back dark hair, a lingering touch that reaffirmed Harry's safety as much as it gave comfort.

"Breathe out..."

He finally let go of Potter's wrists and quietly got up from the bed, then covered the list of grievances with a shirt that was lying on the floor so no one would walk in and see it. Grabbing another piece of parchment, he wrote a quick note saying Potter could tell Sirius if he needed Harry back again.

Snape and Sirius were just going to have to deal with each other if it came to that. He used the time to try to get a hold of himself, furious such a small thing got him worked up.
But it wasn’t a small thing, and that was the problem. His father had given him the ability to sleep peacefully, and he’d taken it away in the same instant he had died. What else had he handed him on a silver platter, that Harry had been so appreciative of at the time and had slowly gotten used to? A home, away from the Dursleys? Sympathy, care? Basic affection, patience? Food, shelter? A brother, an uncle, an extended BAU family? The promise of safety?

Love.

When Harry got outside, he sprinted down the road until he came to the end and passed it until he reached the cluster of trees. He ducked behind a trunk, hiding from sight of any prying eyes, and slowly slid to the ground. His side ached from moving so much, but it felt like everything else and he just didn’t care about it anymore. For the next half hour, waiting for Snape to show up, he sat on the cold ground and buried his face in his arms, and grieved.

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Snape dropped him off in the middle of the hospital room, surrounded by three people who stared at them. Harry waved. "Hi," he said smartly. "Is there a problem?"

Morgan rubbed his face with his hand, displaying the exasperation everyone else felt.

Neither Hotchner had left, and Haley quickly moved forward. "Where did you go?" she demanded.

"Long story. Part of that other very long story."

Beside him, Snape nodded to Hotchner, and the two left the room. Before Harry could think on it or move to go with them, Haley grabbed his arm and started gently patting his side as if it would somehow tell her how the injury was. "Are you all right? You shouldn't have left like that!"

"Yeah, I regretted it pretty quickly," he admitted. "But I'm fine. Got the good drugs where I was at."

Haley glanced at Morgan. "Can you watch him for a moment?" Morgan nodded, and she started to leave the room. "I'm going to go get a nurse. Harry, sit." He complied and the door shut behind her.

"Harry," Morgan said, cautiously approaching. "Mind if I ask you something before everyone else gets back?" He nodded. "When we were in the ambulance, I thought... Well, I thought I saw Hotch, the agent out in the hall. Only..."

Harry's eyes widened. "I thought I was hallucinating," he whispered. Morgan shook his head, lips pressed tightly together. "That... That wasn't him, obviously. It..." He covered his mouth with his hand for a moment. "It was my father, but he's... He died. I don't understand how he could have been there." This was the second time he'd seen him now. He looked up sharply. "Have you told anyone about this?"

"Hadn't really decided how I was going to explain it."

"Please don't mention it, not yet," Harry pleaded. "Not until I find out why he was there."

"We were briefed on magic while you were in surgery," Morgan said. "So... Was that a ghost?"

Harry frowned. "I don't think that's possible. Ghosts are attached to places, not people. And he wasn't magical, so he couldn't have become one anyway. Besides, they can't vanish and appear like that."

"I just..." Morgan shook his head again. "I swear, I thought that was Hotch."
"My father looked a lot like him," Harry agreed quietly. "But..." He paused. If this world's Hotchner knew about anything that had happened, he'd try and get even more involved. Harry couldn't handle that, but Morgan needed a damn good reason to keep quiet when his boss and friend was involved. "He just died recently, and I can't talk about what happened. It's... I can't. So, could you..."

"Not say anything?" Morgan guessed. Harry nodded. "Yes."

The door opened and both of them quieted. Snape was gone, and Hotch walked back into the room. "Strauss wants to talk to everyone," he told Morgan.

"I'll get everyone together," Morgan said, nodding in understanding.

"Once this is taken care of, I'll meet up with you. I expect she's going to want to interview everyone one by one, so it shouldn't matter if I'm not there immediately."

Morgan nodded again and left, holding the door as Haley and the nurse entered. "How do you feel?" the nurse asked, lifting his shirt to check his wound. She paused. "Okay, what the hell?"

"...I have really good metabolism."

She stared at him.

"What?" Hotch asked.

"I'm sorry, I was told he was shot yesterday at midday," the nurse said, annoyed.

"He was," Haley replied in bewilderment.

"He's been healing for at least a week," the nurse snapped. When the other two just stared at her, she sighed in frustration and gestured for Harry to lie back. "Whatever. Hold your arm out so I can reattach the IV."

The door opened again, and a woman in a doctor's coat came in, a file in hand. "Ah, so you're back with us," she said. "I've got this, Patricia." The nurse happily left, still irritated that they were trying to play a joke on her. "I heard her in the hallway, and you might like to hear that I've been brought into the know about magic to deal with you."

"Yay."

"Right. Are you going to keep healing that fast?"

"I shouldn't think so. The man I left with gave my body a little bit of a push since the transportation caused some more damage." He sighed when Haley frowned at him. "Yes, I know I shouldn't have left."

"But why did you go?"

"Can we talk about this later?"

"If it doesn't pertain to his healing, I'll have to ask you to do that," the doctor agreed. "Harry, for the rest of the time you're here, you'll be with me. I'm Dr. Hammond. It's nice to meet you."

"Cheers. I'm Harry."

"I love you Brits," she sighed. "Hey, does the security outside know about the magic?"
"No," Hotch said.

"I'll keep that in mind. How old are you?"

"Sixteen, why?"

"Wow, I thought you were closer to eighteen. That's a problem." She glanced at Hotch. "Does he have a guardian nearby?"

Hotch turned to Harry, who said, "No."

"So he's under the state, then."

"He's under my team for the moment," Hotch specified. "We're handling a case he's involved in, and we'll be turning him over to the marshals in a bit." Harry scowled at him but resolved to argue later.

"Then you can hear this. I had a whole spiel planned with this x-ray," she said as she pulled out the black and white image, "but now that you've gone and healed yourself a bit it's not as up-to-date." She plastered it onto the board and turned on the light. "The bullet caused some serious damage, hitting a floating rib and ricocheting off. It cut through the abdominal artery, which is why you had such bleeding, and lodged itself into your liver. We got it out, but because of the amount of damage it did while it was jostled around, you should be in bed for quite a while, minus some time thanks to whatever you did while you were gone."

Harry nodded. "What happened to my rib?"

"Bad fracture. I'm surprised you were able to stand on it to get out of here."

He started. "Oh, shit, I forgot to mention!" He turned quickly to the Hotchners, took a moment to regret it as pain flared up his side, then said, "Foyet's got a broken sternum."

"He does?" Haley asked.

"That's why he was having trouble shooting at us," Harry said while Hotch pulled out his phone and sent a text to the team.

"That's not an easy bone to break," Dr. Hammond said. "How'd he manage that?"

"Ran into something," Harry lied, then realized saying that was pointless. "Magic."

"I'll take your word for that. Well, that's mostly it from me, but I've got to admit I've got a question that's been puzzling me ever since I got handed this x-ray."

"Shoot."

She ran her finger down the intestinal track on the x-ray. "Can you see this well?"

"Yeah."

She pointed at his lower intestines. "And this?"

"...Yeah, but what am I looking for?"

"See how there are marks in the esophagus and stomach, but not down in the small and large intestines?"
"I see it. What are those?"

She frowned. "That's what I wanted to ask you."

"They look like scars," Haley said, concerned. "But what could cause that?"

Dr. Hammond looked even more worried. "The only case I've ever seen like this was when a drunk college student pulled a prank on his friend and put pins in a drink. College students, just remember that. In his state, he accidentally drank it himself and forgot about the pins, and they got lodged in his throat or scratched up the intestinal lining. We managed to get it out, but when it was over, this was what it looked like."

Understanding dawned on Harry, but he was a moment too slow in covering it up.

"What?" Hotchner asked.

"Nothing. It- Nothing."

"Harry?" Haley pressed.

"When I was young I ate something I shouldn't have. I was really young and really stupid."

Dr. Hammond called him on the lie immediately. "Harry, from the amount of scarring, you must have eaten a lot of something sharp, and for it to get into your stomach like that, something must have been pushing it down. Why didn't you stop eating it?"

Now Hotchner was paying close attention to him, and Harry sighed, acknowledging he wouldn't be able to put another lie past the profiler. "I hadn't eaten in days and they slipped it into the bread," he admitted. "I just thought it had a strange texture."

Haley put a hand over her mouth and turned away from him while Dr. Hammond stared at the x-ray. "Who's 'they'?" Hotchner asked.

"My aunt and uncle. That's why I took Jack and left."

He kept his eyes focused on the doctor as Hotchner's expression changed. Merlin, he looked so much like Harry's father when he was in a state to murder.

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Dr. Hammond excused herself soon after the revelation, looking distinctly ill. Haley had already gone, shaking with rage and distress, but Hotchner didn't move. He needed to talk to Harry, and he wanted to do it when there wasn't an audience. He could pull this off.

"What?" Harry wearily asked, not looking at him.

"What are the names of your aunt and uncle?" Maybe they could prosecute.

"I don't remember. It was a long time ago."

Hotchner's eyes narrowed slightly, sensing a lie. Later he could see if Haley could try to get the names out of him, but he had more immediate concerns for this kid's health. "Okay." He took the empty chair beside Harry's bed and Harry grimaced, turning away. Hotchner frowned to himself at the gesture, recognizing the attempt to put more distance between them, even if it was only mental. "I understand that you want to set out on your again. I expect it only feels natural after so long on your own."
"You're not going to change my mind."

Damn, he couldn't even get the kid to relax minutely by showing any sympathy. He was wound up tighter than a spring, constantly ready to be on the attack, but he hadn't even sounded like this on speakerphone when Hotchner had been talking and listening to both him and Haley. Really, Harry had just started acting like this once they got into the hospital.

"I don't think I will," Hotchner said and ignored Harry's eye roll. "But I'm hoping you'll change your own mind. At least stay long enough to get properly healed before you set out. If something were to happen and you couldn't protect yourself..."

"Yeah, I know," he muttered irritably. A part of Hotchner dearly hoped Jack wasn't going to ever hit this teenage phase, because he wasn't sure he had the patience for days of this, let alone a couple of years.

"Look," Hotchner said, "at least tell us when you're going to leave, all right?" That was the one concession he needed in all of this, and he could make the rest work.

"Won't that be obvious?" Sarcasm dripped from his tone.

Miraculously, driven by appreciation for Harry's protection of his family, he didn't rise to the bait. "I'd rather talk to you before you slip away."

"Always time for one last talk to guilt-trip the kid into staying."

He couldn't help but wonder how Haley had dealt with this kid for so long and gotten so attached. He was quite possibly going to start sniping back if he didn't watch himself carefully.

"Not quite." Now for the insurance to make sure he could get Harry to keep a promise. "Haley told me a bit about your situation." Another eye roll with an added slump against the pillow for dramatic effect. "Harry, you saved my family. I'd like to help out with yours."

"Great," he muttered.

"If you'll accept it, I'll give you some money."

When Harry opened his mouth, he pressed, "It's not a handout. Haley told me you were diligently working multiple jobs day and night to take care of yourself and your brother. That doesn't sound like someone who's going to spend money callously. You'll use it wisely, I know you will. Use it to get back on your feet and get settled into a new area."

The mention of money made Harry go quiet. He still wasn't looking at Hotchner, who glanced over the boy again. He'd done it often enough while he had slept off the drugs they'd given him for surgery, but now he really took care to note all the little signs he could have brushed off earlier. Haley was right - he just wasn't healthy enough, and she said she'd put over ten pounds on him since the first time they had met. He needed to be on the IV for reasons apart from the gunshot wound, and frankly, Hotchner thought it incredible that Harry had managed to get onto his feet so soon after waking up. The only explanation was his magic.

"I... I can't take your money," Harry finally said, quieter and a bit calmer than before but just as stubborn.

"I'm giving it to you." He hadn't even put a price on it, but he was planning on pushing a rather high number. It might be difficult to get Harry to accept the money. "You need it more than me."

"I'd rather work for it."
"Then stick around and earn it."

Harry gave him an exasperated look. "We'll be fine."

"Just think it over. And please, come see me when you plan on leaving."

"Why should I bother?" Harry snapped, and when Hotchner started to say something, he shouted, "I don't need your help!"

Hotchner stared at him for a long moment, before rising out of his chair. "All right," he said and turned to go, adding, "but talk to Haley before you do. It would kill her if you two just left without saying goodbye."

As the door closed behind him and he walked down the hospital hallway, all he could wonder was what the hell had just happened.

---

Haley came back in when she had composed herself and sat down on the edge of the hospital bed. Harry turned to her, unable to stop himself from wondering how she would react if she knew the truth.

As if reading his thoughts, she took a deep breath and asked, "What's going on?"

"You need some background first for this, so bear with me for a moment. The upper echelons of wizarding society are highly elitist. They prefer pure bloodlines and strong magic, and many look down on any...cross-breeding, for lack of a better word. There have been a lot of cases where children born to pureblood families don't have magic and are quietly disposed of. But they don't want to get a murder charge, and they don't want anyone to know that they had offspring without magic, so they replace the child without telling anyone."

He kept his expression turned away from Haley, not wanting to see how she reacted to this poor treatment of children. He could practically feel her horror radiating off of her as it was. "There's something called the Blood Relocation Program, or BRP, that was started up to deal with this from the pureblood side. When a child had to be replaced, they couldn't take another child from parents who were already in the wizarding world, because it was more likely that someone would figure out what had happened. But if they took a muggleborn child, one who was born to nonmagical parents, no one would know to look in the wizarding world when their parents found their child missing. Governments are supposed to keep track of that kind of activity, but a lot of times... They're just apathetic towards anyone without magic."

So far, all true. Not anymore. "My brother and I were both born to a nonmagical family. Our parents died, but our aunt and uncle didn't want...freaks, for lack of a better term. When I started showing magical signs, they tried to stop it. The best way I can think of to describe it is extreme homophobia – they tried to beat out the gay. They didn't know that Jack had magic, so I started making plans to get us out of there. Then the BRP showed up one day, and they wanted Jack. I managed to stop them, and we took off and came here, to America, since I figured they wouldn't think to follow us here."

He sighed, making sure to keep his face completely averted now. "Only... Now they needed to make sure we stayed quiet. They started looking for us, and while I was trying to keep us hidden I got in contact with some people who could help, including the man you just met a little while ago. I owed them some favors for what they did, one of which I just paid back. But there were more stirrings, and that child still needed to be replaced – they'd claimed the dead child was just very sick – and they
were very specific about who they were looking for. A Jack matching a particular description, with magic. Your Jack fit that description just as well as mine did, and I heard that the BRP was already looking at him as a potential replacement.

"So you moved closer to us, in case the BRP came to take mine," Haley guessed and Harry nodded, relieved. "You being near us wasn't a coincidence."

"I was keeping an eye on you," he said. "That's how I knew so much about your situation."

"For how long?"

"Just this last summer. Really, I wish I'd come sooner, but I didn't track you down until then."

"So then...your parents..."

"I don't really know how it works, but sometimes, when the kids are in extreme danger, parents can...not come back from the dead, no, but...influence the real world. It's very rare, but it's happened before. My mother stepped in one time when a man was trying to kill me, but her blood wards – magical familial protection – kept me safe from them. Mine were...are...outrageously strong, because of...well, it's complicated. My point is that they can appear in this world sometimes."

Though that didn't explain why neither of his parents showed up sooner, he grudgingly thought to himself, than immediately felt guilty for it. But he couldn't help but wonder why.

---

Hotch was pacing in the living room of his own house again. Sometimes his surroundings would just randomly change, which he was frustrated to say he was getting used to, but this was one of the most common places he would stay at. He tried moving things, just to see if he could, but it would either go right back to where it had been a couple of minutes later or wouldn't budge at all. This left him little to do, especially with his new situation.

"Stop. You're giving me a headache."

He sighed, coming to a halt. "You can't get headaches."

"I couldn't until now," Haley disagreed, rubbing her head. She was sitting on the edge of the couch, exhausted. Even in this false world, she was becoming more transparent and her energy was quickly draining. He'd tried to sit next to her, offering silent support, but after the third time one of them brushed the other and Haley's skin provided no resistance, he'd moved off the couch before either became more creeped out.

"It didn't work," Hotch muttered irritably, unconsciously starting to pace again. "Why didn't it work?"

"We were both drawing off him at the same time, maybe," she suggested. "And you appeared to him three times, back to back. Maybe it caused a drain off his magic and you couldn't fully return."

"This is so ridiculously theoretical."

"You're telling me. At least you had more experience with magic."

"Hm." He ran a frustrated hand through his hair. "I don't think it's ever going to be possible for me to stay there for longer than a couple of minutes. The only reason we could both appear when they weren't directly in danger was because we could rely on Jack's state as well, since they were both
panicking so badly, but I think we injured his magic when we did that." He shook his head, angry at himself. "I know we needed to talk to him about moving on, but we should have warned him he was in danger from Foyet. We wouldn't have had to drain either of their magic so badly by appearing once they'd already met that-" He made himself stop. There wasn't a use to going off on a rant about it now.

After a moment, Haley quietly asked, "We didn't cause irreparable harm to Jack, did we?"

"He's a young wizard and a werewolf on top of it," Hotch replied cautiously. "I really think he'll recover without a problem, but I don't want to risk doing this again." The sad thing was that if Harry had any more magic he knew he could draw on, he'd be back to the other realm in a heartbeat, just to be near his son.

"Why was Harry's magic so strong, though?" she asked with a frown. "Jack's magic took a hit, but Harry's hardly did. But still, we couldn't access the rest to stay longer."

There was a long pause, and then Hotch reluctantly said, "I've got a theory, but I don't know if it's right." She tilted her head at him to show she was listening. "We're pulling on the blood wards to get to that other plane of existence, so we can't use that magic. But once we're there, we're using their magical cores to actually appear and interact with them. Harry, though, is using his core and the blood wards at the same time, so his overall magic right now is the sum of both. Which is considerable since his own core is that of a light lord's."

"You think he's using the blood wards?" Haley asked curiously.

"I think that's the only explanation I can think of. It would make sense, too. His strongest magic has been defensive, by far, and he's using it without a wand. He wouldn't need one for blood wards."

She made a thoughtful noise. "That could be it."

"Or I could just be grasping at straws," Hotch sighed. "This doesn't help us get back there."

"I don't know if we can," Haley said slowly, "or if we should, until you can make it permanent." Wincing, at herself and her husband, she continued, "It hurt him so badly when we appeared..."

"He's not healing," Hotch replied quietly.

"How bad is it, when you see him at night?"

He didn't answer her.

"Aaron?"

"He was screaming at me last night. And it was obvious he still blames himself for what happened, and he hates himself for getting angry at me for it. Also...he's appearing with bruises and cuts now. He's not carrying them over from the real world. He's just tearing himself apart on the inside."

"You know, I was upset at you too," Haley started, carefully choosing her words. "You left them. But the more I think about it... Well, I would have done the same. You didn't have another option, and really, it was in the middle of a fight. What were you going to do?"

"I suppose," he said neutrally.

"He'll come to terms with it," she said. "One day, he's going to understand. He loved you too much."
"I'm scared he won't ever be able to recover, not like he should," Hotch said, turning away from her. "You haven't seen him, at night..." He shook himself. "It's all I can do to get him to try and even consider the future, let alone move on."

Her eyebrows came together as she frowned. "What are you saying?"

"I'm worried about what's going to happen when he and Jack aren't in danger anymore. I... I don't know what Harry's going to do. His light lord magic might not be the only thing we need to be worried about."

Her eyes widened. "You don't think...?"

"I don't know," he repeated. "Haley... I just don't know. But he's scaring me now."

She looked down at the carpet, sighing quietly to herself. After a long minute, she said in a tone of steel, "You find a way back, understand?" He opened his mouth to say something, but she looked up and met his eyes, firm. "If you feel so guilty about what happened, you need to change it."

"Haley-"

She swiped his words out of the way with one hand. "Maybe if there aren't two of us draining off him, you can manage it," she continued. "I'm disappearing anyway, and I don't have a chance in hell of getting back there again. So you... You need to do something about this. Keep him safe – and try and drill some self-preservation into him. Jack's got more sense than the rest of this family and he's the only one I'm not worried about. You and Harry, on the other hand, need each other if you're going to balance out each other's idiocies long enough to stay alive."

She got to her feet slowly. As she stood, he swore he could see light from the lamp beside her passing through her body. "You're bound to existence much more tightly than I am. So. Figure it out. I'll give my part of the blood wards to you so you've got a stronger tie to Harry, and maybe it'll give you enough of an advantage."

She held both hands in front of her and a warm, golden glow filled them. After a moment, once she was satisfied that enough of it had gathered, she walked towards Hotch, who was still staring at her in bewilderment.

"Advantage for what?" he asked as she handed him the light.

The instant it left her hands, he felt a shock surge through him, tingling up and down his nonexistent nerves like he'd stuck his finger in a plug outlet. He shuddered for a moment as he felt his pull towards the living realm jump, but he shook his head and opened his eyes, not even realizing he'd closed them.

Haley was gone.

"Advantage for what?" he shouted uselessly, but there was no point. He was alone once more in this place without life or death.

---

Everyone was in Rossi's office when Hotchner got there, and he quickly joined the team. "Strauss isn't here yet?" he asked.

"It was a short meeting," Rossi grimly said. "All she said was that we're all on leave."
"For what?"

"Wouldn't say," Morgan said, frowning. "Seems like something's going on with politics. She just told us we were to do nothing but go home for a while. Didn't even say when we'd be coming back."

"The trail's going to go cold if we don't keep looking for Foyet," Prentiss said. "This is our best chance at catching him. If we don't do something, he could completely get away. And Strauss didn't make it sound like someone else was picking up the case while we're gone."

"Then we're doing this off record," Rossi agreed, nodding. Hotchner thought about pointing out how illegal it would be to use FBI resources while they were off duty, but this was a smart group that was definitely aware and just pretended not to notice.

"I'll let Garcia know before I leave today," Morgan said. "No one will think anything of me stopping in there."

"Remind her to stop looking into the case until she's off her work laptop," Hotchner added.

"Won't she have to hack into the FBI database to keep searching?" Prentiss asked with a frown.

JJ shrugged with a small smile. "Well, it's not like she hasn't done that before."

"Let's regroup at my house once we're all out of here," Rossi said. "Hotch's place is too obvious."

After a pause, he said, "What's happening to Haley and Jack?"

"Witness protection was supposed to take them away immediately, but Haley's resisting until Harry's out of here."

"When will that be?" Reid asked.

"Who knows, since that kid seems intent on ditching everyone as soon as possible. I don't know what he's running from, but it must be bad to scare him like this."

"Still refusing protection?" Morgan grimaced, already knowing the answer. Hotchner nodded.

"Damn... I suppose he hasn't really seen a good example with Haley, but I would think he'd at least appreciate some sort of help keeping his brother safe."

"I'm going to try to use his brother to pressure him, but if that doesn't work, I've got another plan, assuming Haley's okay with it." He wasn't quite sure he was okay with it, but he didn't think about his own conscience so much when it meant protecting someone who was definitely in danger. Besides, better him than someone else, since Harry clearly already hated him with a passion. They didn't want to give him another adult to loathe. "Anyway, Haley and Jack are staying with me in the meantime. Foyet can't come after them in his state."

One more thing he had to thank Harry for, if he could ever manage to have a civil conversation with the kid.

---

Harry had his eyes closed and was resting on his side like the doctors told him not to. It just felt so weird to expose his stomach, and he still had the habit of making himself small while sleeping to make enough room on the mattress for Ron and sometimes Hermione when their shifts overlapped. Besides, he was almost completely healed, and Dr. Hammond said he could leave in the next few days if he wanted since his magic seemed to be taking care of everything, so he wasn't taking a big
risk.

He'd seen Jack every day since he'd been hospitalized, thanks to Haley bringing him. She should have been back under protection, and he felt guilty knowing that he was the reason she hadn't left yet. On one hand, he just wanted to grab Jack and run the next time he came, but on the other hand, he knew he was too weak to make it. A couple of days living like he had before would be the end of him. That aside, now that he had more strength, he started to really notice how much attention Jack was paying him, and he realized with horror that his brother knew a lot more about how much more badly off Harry had been. He hadn't even seen it before, too preoccupied in hoping Jack wouldn't notice.

Haley spent a lot of time with him, and he didn't see the rest of the BAU. He was extremely grateful for both parts. It allowed him to get to know his mother more, even if she wasn't really his mother, but it also meant he didn't have to fake complete ignorance about the BAU. He'd seen Reid once and had accidentally called the man by name before any introduction, but everyone had thankfully just silently assumed he'd overheard someone identify him. Haley brought both boys with her, and the two usually spent most of the visit playing in a corner. Their shyness and natural quiet made it so they were almost completely silent, which was a little odd to see in kids their age.

He drifted in and out of sleep, listening to voices passing around him. The Hotchners had come in at some point and were murmuring quietly to let him rest. They were also planning something, he just knew it; probably another attempt to get him to stay with them. Then he was listening to memories, and he could hear the shrieks of laughter from the students who had gathered around a monopoly board, and he thought he could smell the musty classrooms of Hogwarts instead of the antiseptic hospital bed. Pleasant dreams drifted through his mind, and he longed for the peaceful days in the castle, when they weren't worried about Umbridge's tortures or the battles.

A hand passed over his head, or at least he thought it did, and that one voice he wanted to badly to hear was whispering to him, "Harry, go back to sleep. You need more rest..."

He jerked awake, eyes flying open as his heart rate audibly spiked on the monitor. His breath came out in stutters, even as he forced himself to calm down. Stupid, even after months of this, and he still acted like it had just happened yesterday.

"Harry?" the same voice asked and he flinched because it wasn't quite the same. His father had never spoken his name with such worry but such disconnect.

He needed to get away from that voice. He was hearing it in his nightmares constantly - he couldn't bear to hear it while he was awake too.

Sitting up slowly, he took a moment to orient himself. "Can you get Dr. Hammond?" he asked cautiously as if he wasn't sure they'd do it, not turning around to face them in case something showed in his expression, and he heard Hotchner leave. Hah, he knew he'd take the bait. Hotchner wasn't going to argue with Harry when he was trying to make amends for some slight he wasn't aware he'd done.

And yes, Harry knew how unfair he was treating the man, but he just couldn't stop himself when Hotchner was almost an exact replica of his father, saying the same things that Harry knew his father would tell him but more impersonally because they didn't know each other and giving the same advice without knowing how dire the situation was.

He gave Hotchner a few seconds to get down the hallway, then pulled out his IV - jeez, that hurt - and got to his feet.
"Harry?" Haley asked, concerned.

"I need to go," Harry said as he went to the cabinet he'd pulled his clothes from before. He slipped into a pair of pants, steadying himself against the counter when he almost fell. "Where's Jack?" The question was timed perfectly so he was taking off his shirt and revealing curse scars from Hogwarts, surprising Haley into giving him an answer instead of evading.

"In the waiting room. We were just about to go out to get dinner..." She shook herself. "Harry, you can't just leave!"

"I'm waiting for- Ah, there," he said as Dr. Hammond and Hotchner walked back in. The latter made a frustrated sound, realizing what Harry had done by sending him for the doctor. "I can go, right?"

"If you were anyone else, I'd say you should wait, but I suppose you'll be fine," Dr. Hammond said, and Harry caught the Hotchners exchanging meaningful glances out of the corner of his eye.

Without stopping to wonder what that was about, he nodded as he shrugged on his jacket. "All right. Can you sign the release forms? I need to go."

"Sure..."

A minute later, he was walking out the door, knowing he couldn't give anyone around him more time to think of a way to make him stay because he was positive they'd come up with something. Dr. Hammond walked beside him, giving him instructions on treating his wound. There was a lapse of a few moments, and then the Hotchners came out of the hospital room behind him, and Harry picked up the pace. Now he knew they were scheming.

"You should be okay with showering, and- Hey, take the elevator!"

He sighed in exasperation as he put his hand on the bar to push in the door to the stairwell. "Shouldn't I be getting my body active again, or something like that?"

"Yes, by walking and slowly building back up strength!"

He pushed the bar in but didn't completely open the door. "But-

"I'm your doctor and I'm telling you that you're being stupid."

Haley moved to stand beside her. "You know she's right," she said, and Harry paused. That seemed like a strange thing to back someone up on, but maybe they just really were concerned about this. Or distracting him.

Speaking of strange, why hadn't Hotchner caught up to him to try to throw money at him again? He knew Hotchner wasn't going to give up after just mentioning it once, and surely he would have relied on having the backup of the doctor and his wife to encourage him to take it.

Wait. Where was Hotchner?

Harry whirled just in time for Hotchner to latch onto his arm from behind, and then there was a snik noise as the handcuff tightened on his wrist and all he could do was stare.

"What."

"Well, that's oddly effective," Dr. Hammond said, simultaneously amused and exasperated.

"Sorry, Harry," Haley said while Harry rubbed his forehead with his free hand.
"You do realize I can unlock this, right?" he growled.

Hotchner raised one eyebrow slightly. The other handcuff was attached to his own wrist, and the sound of putting it on must have been the reason for his delay in leaving the hospital room. "Consider this your invitation to try."

Harry narrowed his eyes at him, then placed a hand on the handcuffs. "Alohomora." Nothing. What the hell? "Oh, come on- Alohomora!"

"Please continue to shout Latin in the middle of the hospital hallway," Dr. Hammond said, beaming.

"You know, I didn't think you were in on this, too," Harry snapped.

"I wasn't. I just get to enjoy it." Turning to the other two, she said, "So, you'll be keeping an eye on him, I take it?" They nodded. "All right, then you'll probably need to hear the rest of what you need to do for the wound."

"I'm pretty sure this is illegal," Harry pointed out, shaking his and Hotchner's connected wrists.

"It's not," Hotchner said and Harry glared at him, "because you're under arrest for illegal immigration into the U.S."

Harry groaned.

Chapter End Notes

Months after writing this part, I'm still smug about the handcuff idea.

And yep, that was confirmation about why Harry was throwing up blood in the first chapter in that one scene.
"No man is judged rightly by his fellowmen. Some look upon him as an idol, and forget that his feet are clay, as are the feet of every man. Others look upon him as a devil and can see no good in him at all. Neither is true." - Clarence Darrow in *The State of California v. Clarence Darrow*

Of course, to make matters worse, Haley and her Jack hugged both of them goodbye one last time and then vanished into witness protection again since Harry had now been released from the hospital.

"I think I'd rather be back in bed," he said bluntly as he stood on the sidewalk with Hotchner on one side and Jack on the other.

"You're going to be going straight to bed once we get you somewhere safe," Hotchner said calmly, ignoring the sullen cloud beside him. "You really shouldn't be up and moving too much or you could slow your healing, magic or not."

Jack kept glancing at their connected hands and giggling.

"Why didn't you lock me up in the hospital?" Harry muttered.

"You could've broken off part of the bed frame and disappeared with Jack. I'm hoping you're less inclined to break off a part of me." A van pulled up in front of them, driven by Morgan, who had evidently been told what the plan was to stop Harry from escaping, or was just used to finding his boss handcuffed to teenagers.

"How long is this for?" Harry muttered as they awkwardly climbed into the middle row of seats. Jack scrambled after them and, as soon as the door was closed, turned into a wolf and jumped into the back so he had more space.

"Undetermined," Hotchner replied as Morgan started to drive forward. "Let's not make this miserable, okay?"

"I'm not the one who handcuffed myself to someone else!"

The rest of the ride passed in much of the same mood.

---

"You," Harry seethed as Snape appeared in Rossi's living room the next day.

Snape just walked over and tapped the handcuff, then nodded to Hotchner. "It should work now," he said.

"I knew you did something to them," Harry continued, shaking the cuff. To his surprise, it extended away from Hotchner's arm, giving them some distance. "Well, that's something that would have been convenient hours ago."
"Hours ago you didn't blow up the table you were attached to in the five minutes I left you alone," Hotchner pointed out.

"How did you even get a hold of each other?!" he demanded. He shouldn't have told Snape the two of them had gotten along in his own timeline. This was all of his own making.

"I set an alarm on the cuffs to let me know when they were put to use after I charmed them to stop you from being able to unlock them," Snape said simply. "I told him I would show up to cast the extension charm once I had time."

And because he knew it would hurt the most, Harry snarled, "I trusted you."

Snape looked at him silently for a moment. "Have you noticed what's happened to the people you trust too easily?" he finally said and Harry jerked backwards like he'd been slapped. Hotchner frowned at them. "There's a reason I'm not well-liked."

He apparated away, leaving the two behind.

Snape must have known he was going to try to escape the painful memories surrounding Hotchner. That was why he'd talked to him as soon as they'd gotten back from England that first day. Damn it, he should have seen this coming.

"You had this planned for weeks," he accused.

"Harry, you're going to kill yourself on the streets at the rate you're going," Hotchner said firmly. "So no, we're not going to let you got out there on your own."

"I'm not on my own!"

"Your brother isn't responsible for you, and you're too focused on him to be responsible for yourself," Hotchner said sternly, and for the first time he was beginning to look angry. Harry unconsciously leaned away from him. "So until you're not on such a self-destructive path, you're going to stay here."

Harry ground his teeth together. "Don't you have something you need to be doing besides standing next to me all day?"

"Yes, which is why Snape just cast an extension charm on the handcuffs. We have a ten meter range."

"Oh, give me a moment to celebrate."

"Harry, if we're going to make this work, you're going to need to cooperate."

"What if I don't want this to work?"

"I'm starting to get that impression."

"Attach me to someone else!" he demanded.

"I'm the only one who's out of the field. Everyone else is following up leads looking for Foyet, and you can't go with them. It's too dangerous."

"And you're the sitting duck because you're in danger if you go out there, so I get to sit here and wallow in your misery too," Harry snapped, and Hotchner narrowed his eyes as Harry hit the sore point dead on. "Please spare me."
"Harry, this isn't a punishment." He realized this was the closest he was ever going to get to being grounded by his father and his mouth tightened. "So long as you stay within a certain distance from me, you can do whatever you want."

He just wanted to go home.

"Whatever," he muttered and turned to walk away.

"Harry, wait," Hotchner said, a confused frown in his voice, and Harry paused despite himself. The agent walked closer and took his arm, and Harry stiffened as he raised the wrist in between them. "What's that?"

Harry grimaced at the scars came into view, just under where the handcuffs should have been. "Didn't notice those before?"

"I wasn't looking," Hotchner said, eyes not leaving the scars. "What caused it?"

He might not be able to guess the specifics, but Harry would bet he already guessed what had created them. There were only so many ways someone would get marks like that all the way around their wrists, and as if to prove his suspicion, he glanced at Harry's other wrist to see if there was a similar scarring pattern. Harry involuntarily tucked his wrist to the side and back, but Hotchner had already seen it if the narrowing of his eyes was anything to go by.

"Nothing." He tore his wrist away. "It happened a long time ago."

"Did your aunt and uncle do that to you?"

"What? No," he said, frustrated at the line of questioning, then immediately grimaced at himself for not taking the excuse.

"Then-"

"I'm not talking about it."

---

All of the agents came back to regroup on what they'd found, which was a grand total of nothing. Garcia was still working on searching for Foyet through the medical care he must have surely sought out, but even she wasn't having any luck.

"Nothing like this is showing up in anything nearby?" Morgan asked, frustrated. "He must have gotten treatment for it."

"And a shattered sternum is pretty bad," Rossi pointed out. They were sitting around his dining room table. Hotchner's handcuff led from his wrist and through the doorway, but he couldn't quite see where Harry was at or what he was doing. He just had to hope Snape's charms were strong enough that Harry couldn't break them. "It's not something he could just walk off or get treatment from someone other than a trained hospital staff. For one thing, it's likely that he would need surgery to set the bone pieces back in place and to bind them together so they would heal correctly."

"It's possible he left the state since he knew we would be searching for him," Prentiss said but Garcia shook her head.

"No, I'm searching the whole country, and nothing like this is showing up," she said. "Obviously there are a few similar cases, but exactly zilch for what we're looking for specifically."
Hotchner's handcuff suddenly jerked sharply and his wrist moved in the direction of the living room, but Harry settled down again and he let his hand fall back to its original position. He'd stopped getting concerned by Harry doing that, since the teenager occasionally would underestimate the length of the connection or just wasn't paying attention.

He frowned at his handcuff for a moment. "What if he's not in America?" he asked, eyes moving towards where he knew Harry was at. "Could he have used an alias to get into Canada or Mexico? We know he's made fake identities before."

Garcia paused. "It's possible, but I wouldn't be able to get access to those records, even if we were at Quantico. By the time we sorted through all the red tape and I could run a check, he'd be long gone."

"Did anything pan out for the rest of you?" Rossi asked.

Prentiss shook her head. "None of his neighbors had ever spoken to him, and the apartment was clean. That might be because the evidence team took something with them, but whatever was left wasn't any help for us."

"I convinced one of the officers who was at your house to tell me what they found, but there was nothing useful," Morgan said.

"How did Harry know Foyet wasn't a marshal?" Reid asked curiously.

From the other room, Harry called, "He didn't ask who I was, he didn't bring a partner, he left us to check the security without locking the front door behind him, and he didn't give some form of identity. And he didn't have the posture of someone used to carrying a gun."

They stared at the doorway.

"And he took us back a house which the Reaper knew about instead of somewhere random, he told Haley that Hotchner was dead instead of keeping her focused on what was going on, he didn't move us out of the house once he arrived, and he forced us to come to him instead of coming to us."

"Anything else?" Rossi asked.

"That's all that comes to mind right now."

Reid gave Hotchner an impressed look, which he silently agreed with by nodding in appreciation for the teenager's instincts. It evidently wasn't luck that had kept him alive on his own for so long.

Rossi, however, frowned slightly, and Hotchner could guess what he was thinking. That was a lot of technicalities Harry had just spewed out, ones that even Haley hadn't thought twice of after living with Hotchner for years. A fifteen-year-old shouldn't have noticed them immediately like that.

"So, anyway," JJ said. "Did we get anything else off his computer?"

Garcia sighed. "Nothing. I appear to be useless in this round."

An odd sound came from the front door, making them pause. "What's that?" Reid asked.

"Sounds like Clooney's at the door," Morgan said. "My dog," he added when Prentiss looked at him in confusion.

Harry muttered something to himself, astonished, in the other room. "Harry, don't go near the door,"
Hotchner said, sensing the boy's intentions.

There was an irritated noise in reply as Rossi got to his feet to check it out. "I know who it is," Harry said, annoyed. Rossi left the dining room and Hotchner followed him out. In the living room, Harry was on his feet, staring across the room and the foyer to see the figure on the other side of the front door through the window panes. Both agents stopped in surprise. "I just don't know how she got here."

"Is that a wolf?" Rossi asked, stunned.

"Another werewolf," Harry replied as the rest of the team came out of the dining room to look. Beside him, Jack had turned form at some point and was vibrating with excitement, nose sniffing the air, ears pricked forward, and tail wagging rapidly. "A friend."

Rossi and Hotchner exchanged glances, then Rossi slowly approached the door and opened it. The wolf tilted its head at him and for an awkward moment they stared at each other. Then Rossi opened the door wider to make the invitation clear and she padded in. Jack darted across the space and skidded to a halt in front of her, paws slipping on the wood, and she greeted him with a few affectionate nuzzles.

"Well, that's adorable," Garcia said.

"I'm still confused," Reid admitted.

"It's about to get worse," Harry sighed. "It's about to get a lot worse."

The wolf looked up at the rest of them, posture relaxed, and then her eyes landed on Hotchner. She started, moving back a step, then shook her head slightly and loped towards the other end of the room.

"Where's he going?" Morgan asked as the agents adjusted their location in the room to follow her with their eyes.

Harry held out a hand to stop them. "She's transforming back," he warned. "Since Jack's young, his body adjusted faster, but she was an adult when she got the treatment so it doesn't look quite so pretty."

There was an awful cracking noise from around the corner of breaking bones, giving no room for imagination as to what Harry had meant. The sound went on for several long seconds, followed by a muffled but resigned groan of pain, and then out stepped...

"Elle?" he demanded.

"Yep." She rubbed her neck, wincing. "Damn, that hurts."

"Is it any better?" Harry asked.

"A little bit, actually. I think my body's starting to get used to it." Hand still on her neck, she leaned her head back, trying to stretch out some kinks. "But still. Ow."

Jack jumped onto the couch and sat down, tail curling around his paws. Even if his other enhanced senses made up for it, the boy's natural reliance on sight had evidently made his wolf form more comfortable for him when he could see in it.

"...Who's she?" Rossi asked after a moment.
Elle gestured to Prentiss. "She replaced me. I think. Maybe. This is a different timeline, but I'm assuming so since I'm not part of the team here."

Harry winced badly.

"Timeline?" Hotchner said slowly and Elle mimicked the gesture Harry had just made.

"You didn't tell them," she said guiltily, glancing at Harry, who shook his head. "Oh... Sorry."

"Timeline?" JJ repeated.

"We're from an alternate one," Harry sighed. "Shit went down in ours, so I came here with Jack for safety reasons while we waited for it to blow over." He looked hopefully at Elle. "Has it?"

"Sort of. We got closer, then we lost them, then we got closer again, and now we have no idea where they're at so we're actually farther from catching them than we were before. But I came over to see if you'd given anymore thought to where the horcruxes might be, and to see if you'd managed to get into trouble since we last saw you. Considering you're handcuffed, I'd take that as a yes to the latter bit."

Harry scowled at the reminder. "I'm apparently incapable of taking care of myself so I need a handler."

Her eyes widened in understanding. "That's how you're keeping track of him?" she asked Hotchner. "Oh, we should have done that ages ago!"

"You're supposed to be on my side!" Harry exclaimed.

"Hah, that's brilliant!"

"Elle!"

"I'm still stuck on the other timeline bit," Garcia said.

"Magic," Elle replied. "If it makes you feel better, it took the rest of us a while to get used to it too. Just...magic. So, what happened here?"

"Foyet happened," Harry grumbled irritably.

"Ooh, didn't die like he did in our timeline?"

"He died in yours?" Hotchner asked sharply. "How?"

Elle smirked. "I think the coroner resigned after he got that body. He had to decide between asphyxiation, a heart attack, copperhead or timber rattlesnake venom, and exsanguination. It was quite the toss up." Her expression slipped and she frowned, concerned. "He's still loose over here?"

Harry nodded grimly. "Shit. He was bad news for the little while we had to deal with him."

"Could you track him?" Harry asked suddenly.

"How long has it been?"

"A month."

She paused, then shook her head slowly. "Werewolf senses are better than a wolf's, but he's probably crossed too much distance in a car by now for me to get you to him. Sorry."
"You're a werewolf," Garcia repeated.

"Howl at the full moon and everything, if I want."

"And you're from an alternate universe."

"Yep. Both of us. ...All three of us."

Hotchner looked sharply at Harry, who closed his eyes as he guessed the question. "Jack."

"Yes," Harry said warily. "He's your son in the other world. I lied about that."

"What happened to Haley and me?"

"Got bigger problems and have to stay there, so I took Jack." Elle glanced at Harry as he spoke, and Hotchner knew he wasn't getting the full story.

"Anyway, horcruxes?" she interrupted.

Harry grimaced. "I think one of his followers might have one or both. That's where the cup was hiding. I'm not sure if he'd give another to Bellatrix, though, since he wouldn't want all his eggs in one basket. Other than that... Did you ever hear when he started to make them?"

"No."

"Hm. I'll ask around in this world."

Elle slowly smirked. "Once you're off the leash, you mean?"

"Elle!"

She grinned wider. Her teeth looked sharp. "I'll see you around, Harry," she said, waved at the others, and then turned and transformed into a werewolf in the most gruesome bodily contortion Hotchner had ever seen. She took a moment to shake off the leftover pain, then padded to the back of the house. A moment later, they heard the door open and close.

"What the hell just happened in my living room?" Rossi calmly asked.

They'd just let answers get away was what had happened. With only Harry, they couldn't compare their reactions to see if one of them was hiding something or lying.

Hotchner kept quiet about that. The others either already knew or would realize it soon enough for themselves. "Alternate universe, huh?" he asked Harry.

"Very alternate. I found my other self and his timeline's completely different from mine. The major difference started a couple of years ago, we think, but even then most of what's happened since is completely changed. That's why I didn't say anything," Harry said warily.

"How did you meet Elle?"

"Met her after she turned into a werewolf," he lied way too quickly. Hotchner grimaced to himself. Harry was already coming up with an explanation for everything, and they weren't going to be able to get him to admit to what was actually going on.

But Elle was going to come back, he knew it, and he would bet money they could get answers out of her.
Hotchner had a furious text conversation with Rossi shortly before he had planned to leave, since he knew they couldn't appear divided in front of Harry. The teenager would find some way to make use of that, and even if he didn't succeed, it'd just make the situation worse. Instead of risking him overhearing, he snapped out his arguments in rapid-fire messages.

He lost horribly to undeniable logic, and that was how he and Harry ended up staying in Rossi’s living room. As if the protective measures around the two of them couldn't get more obvious, Morgan and Reid stuck around too, sharing the guest bed - they figured that was less likely to end in bloodshed than Harry and Hotch doing the same. In the living room, they pushed two couches together at a ninety-degree angle, keeping them close enough that Hotchner would hopefully hear any attempt to get out of the handcuff.

There was a definite time limit on this, though Harry was so far unaware of that. They hadn't told him they were all on forced leave, so he didn't know they'd also probably be forced back to work at the end, and Hotchner would have to leave Harry with someone else for that. In the meantime, he just had to hope that Harry would see reason and give in, for others if not for himself.

Morgan closed the back door as he returned, and Harry tilted his head as he heard scuffling noises behind the door. "You brought your dog," he stated, and Morgan nodded.

"Going to be here a while, and it's easier than having the neighbor take care of him," Morgan lied seamlessly.

"You're hoping he'll bark when Elle shows up again," Harry said immediately, and Hotchner looked up from the file he was reading to exchange glances with Morgan. Harry paused. "Smart."

"She is going to come back soon, isn't she?" Hotchner said. "She needs to talk to you alone."

Harry smirked but didn't say anything else, the facial expression carrying the message across.

Snape appeared with the accompanying crack of apparition and all of them jumped.

"Please tell me that Potter's dying and needs my help," Harry begged.

Snape grimaced.

"*Yes!*"

"I'm not sure you should be celebrating your doppelganger's demise," Snape said sharply.

"Well, it's obviously not that bad or you'd be more irritated. What is it?"

"He needs you to show him how to do whatever you did last time," Snape said, then glanced at Hotchner. "I can watch him for a little bit, but Potter needs him, and if you go with us it might not work."

Hotchner frowned slightly, but Snape had been insistent that someone keep an eye on Harry so it couldn't be that he planned to let him go. He released the cuff on his own wrist with the key that had been charmed by Snape for that purpose and handed the link to Snape, who paused and glanced at Harry.

"You can't go in with me," Harry said smugly.
Snape frowned, lips pinching together irritably. "Perhaps not, but I can and will ensure that you return." He connected the cuff above the one Harry was already wearing, then grabbed Harry and the two vanished.

"That seem really weird to you?" Morgan asked after a couple of moments.

"Snape has to bring him back," Hotchner said.

"Maybe-"

Snape reappeared. "He'll be occupied for at least a half hour," he said quickly. "There's something you need to know."

"That's why you came to get him?" Hotchner asked. "There are much easier ways to talk to me privately."

Snape waved it off. "Someone else really did need to see him. How much do you know about his situation?"

Hotchner narrowed his eyes slightly in suspicion. "You first." Before the wizard could argue, he said, "I'm responsible for his safety right now, literally all day. I've got more to lose if something bad happens to him."

Snape didn't look happy at giving a concession. "Almost everything, I presume. The tale he told was too elaborate to be falsified. And no, I won't tell you. We don't have time."

"So you know he's from an alternate universe?" Hotchner asked, wondering if that bit was indeed true.

Snape nodded. "Yes, which is why I came. How much do you know about magic right now?"

"Not a whole lot."

"Then you probably don't know that Harry is extraordinarily powerful." Hotchner and Morgan stared at him. "Considering you're attached to him, I didn't say anything initially. If you behave frightened of him, it could make the situation worse."

"I understand, but why say something now?"

"Because his doppelganger is strong too, but he's not close to being as strong as Harry, and I have no clue why. Harry didn't tell me anything that could explain the difference, and I don't think he's even aware of it. So whatever's causing that difference... You need to be wary of it. I've never known of a power surge that wasn't associated with dark magic."

"How can it be that he's so strong but he can't break the charms on the handcuffs?"

Snape grimaced. "You know he broke Foyet's sternum and stopped the bullets." Hotchner nodded. "I've never heard of anyone but the strongest wizards of our time being able to use wandless magic for basic spells, let alone something requiring such strength. That should have killed him. But it didn't, and I want to know why."

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Hotchner kept his eyes closed as he heard movement late that night. His cuffed arm trailed towards the floor, as if weighed down by its light burden, and the cuff shifted as Harry moved his own arm
up and back down briefly. When nothing else happened, he opened his eyes just in time to see a flash of light across the floor as the back door opened and closed, letting in a streak of yellowish white from the back lamp. Clooney woofed softly, and then there was a terrible cracking noise followed by a soft canine reply. Both moved away from the door, and Hotchner grimaced. Just a few moments too late.

Harry shifted again, and he glanced over to see the teenager smirking slightly, smug.

"Oh, hush," Hotchner muttered, frustrated, and Harry, eyes still closed, treated him to a small smile.

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It was inevitable that Hotchner began to pick up on some of Harry's bizarre characteristics over the next few days, and despite Hotchner's position as a profiler in the FBI, he couldn't make heads or tails of what Harry was up to. Coupled with the Foyet situation, it was starting to put him in a bad mood.

For one thing, Harry's spacing was just weird. He either stood absurdly close to Hotchner, hands tucked into his pockets or close to his sides but never folded across his chest, or he practically stood on the other side of the room. There was never an in between, and he usually found out Harry's location the hard way when a sudden jerk nearly took both of them off their feet.

Harry had also gone from his alternating sullen and sarcastic moods to a more somber and lethargic tone, and while the first few hours had been a relief, Hotchner was starting to get concerned at day two. He wondered if it had something to do with the kid's terrible sleeping habits, which was ironic since Snape had told him that he had gone to England to fix his doppelganger's issues. Whatever had worked for the other Harry clearly wasn't working for this one, and Hotchner could almost assuredly wake up at any time of the night and find Harry awake or only in a light sleep. When he did sleep, he tended to startle himself into consciousness, and the confusion was even worse if he saw anyone. Well, Hotchner, at least. He hadn't seen Harry wake up near anyone else yet.

Aside from the numerous oddities and paradoxes that made up Harry's behavior, there was one thing that was becoming quite clear. For some reason, Harry absolutely despised him, which would be a point that would completely confound Hotchner in trying to solve the numerous curious puzzles Harry put before him.

There still hadn't been any change to the Foyet situation besides the trail getting colder and colder. The team was now just trying to fill their spare time, if they were honest with themselves, until they could get back to work. At least they could be sure that he would be out of the game for a while, though, because of what Harry had done to him. There still wasn't word from Strauss on when they could expect to go back to work, or even what was keeping them out in the first place. If she were going to punish them, it seemed like she should at least tell them what for, especially since she hadn't done it officially through suspension.

"We almost need bait, but that would be far too dangerous for whoever we put up for it," Morgan said, and Rossi paused.

"No," Hotchner said immediately.

"You don't even know-"

"I know who you're thinking of, and no."

"I heard what Snape told you," Rossi said, and Hotchner knew that Harry was now listening in the
other room. Hotchner grimaced. "It wasn't a problem last time."

At least he was trying to avoid phrasing that could further suggest to Harry that they weren't talking about him. "We're not putting anyone in front of Foyet. Not after what happened last time."

Rossi subsided.

The rest of the team besides the three of them were out, trying to gather more information. Garcia was at Kevin's place, and the two were doing something that was likely incredibly illegal so everyone else just pretended they knew nothing about it. The trio was at the dining room table, which had been requisitioned as their conference room.

"Are there any leads we haven't fully explored yet?" Morgan asked, rubbing his forehead. "Maybe from the injuries he's sustained?"

"Is it possible Harry did more damage to him than he thought he did?" Rossi suggested. "If so, maybe we could narrow down where he must have gone, to Canada or Mexico, for more specific treatment."

They waited for a response from Harry, but he didn't give them anything. When the three went quiet to listen, though, Hotchner thought he could hear him saying something quietly.

The other two remained at the table while he went into the dining room, only to stop immediately at the sight. Exhaustion must have finally driven Harry down, because he was lying on the couch under a blanket that had been awkwardly flung over him. Jack, who had been delighted to have canine company, often spent the entire day playing with Clooney, who was equally excited to have a little pup to look after for a while. Hotchner assumed he must have been the culprit for the blanket.

He moved closer, and the whispering was definitely coming from Harry in his sleep. The cuffed wrist was lying at his side, tense, while his other hand gripped the pillow under his head tightly. "..._patronum, expecto patronum, expecto._" He gasped sharply, as if in pain. "_Pecto patronum, expecto patronum, expecto patronum,_"

He went on, barely pausing for breath and only sucking it in when he had to before continuing his mantra. Hotchner slowly approached him, uncertain what could happen if Harry was casting a spell in his sleep. Nothing seemed to be going on, but this wasn't something he knew anything about.

"_Expecto patronum, expecto patronum, expecto patronum, expec... Expecto... Expecto patro_-" He cut himself off, flinching away from something.

Hotchner hesitated for a moment, considering whether or not he needed to wake Harry. Finally, he decided to let him sleep. Even if it was a nightmare, he badly required more rest than he was getting. Instead, he settled for slipping his fingers into the palm of the hand holding onto the pillow, and he managed to loosen the grip enough to get the hand free. It tightened around his own hand instead for a couple of seconds before relaxing.

He couldn't say what made him do it, but it almost felt like he was compelled as he reached forward and stroked Harry's head. The teenager slowly settled down completely, breath evening out until he was sleeping neutrally. Hotchner frowned as he did so, not at his own action but at the result. It brought him closer to Harry, and now that he was standing there he could see a faint sheen of sweat on Harry's forehead along with a flush.

He left Harry immediately and went to the dining room. Both Morgan and Rossi, who had continued talking in his absence, looked up.
"I'm taking him to the hospital. He's got a fever."

"That requires a hospital?" Morgan asked.

"It could mean his injury became infected," Rossi pointed out, and Hotchner nodded, having been thinking along the same lines. "I'll drive you."

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"This has happened before," Harry said tiredly as Dr. Hammond took his blood pressure. "It went away last time."

"Did you take any medicine for it?" she asked.

"Yeah, but I wasn't really awake enough to pay attention. Someone else got it for me."

"Who?"

Harry stopped. "...I never really knew their name."

Hotchner frowned. Harry didn't seem the sort to be so careless, and Dr. Hammond looked like she thought so too. "Okay," she said, "well, we're going to have to do something about this. You're not completely healed and this could get dangerous if you're not careful with it."

Harry tugged at the sleeves of his long shirt. Despite the summer heat, Hotchner hadn't seen him in anything else, but Haley had mentioned scars so he attributed it to the teen being self-conscious. With the marks he had seen on his wrists, he couldn't blame the kid if there were any more half as bad. The shirts, borrowed from Reid, were long enough that they slipped halfway down his hands, yet the teenager didn't care. "It'll be fine," he muttered, and then blinked in surprise as she shined a light in his eyes.

"Your reflexes are slow," she said in concern. "Pupils are too relaxed... How long did this go the last time you had it?"

"About a week."

"What happened?"

He shrugged. "Nothing much."

Rossi took them back to his house, and Hotchner wasn't subtle about keeping an eye on Harry during the drive. The lethargy he'd started to show definitely seemed to be connected to whatever this was, which meant he must have not noticed that he was getting sick over the last few days. For what felt like the thousandth time, he wished that Harry had just caved at the beginning and gone into witness protection like they'd asked.

"Did Jack ever get sick?" Rossi asked as they walked to the door. He unlocked it and stepped in, letting Harry take it from him so he could enter behind.

Harry shook his head. "But I was working most of the time. I wouldn't have easily been able to get him ill."

Rossi glanced at Hotchner as they moved further into the living room. "You might need to attach him to something in case it's contagious."

"I'll consider it." His eye caught Harry tilt oddly out of the corner of his eye. "Harry?"
"What?"

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he said, waving it off, standing closely enough to Hotch that he almost hit him with his hand. The gesture took him off balance slightly, and Harry caught himself on Hotchner's arm before he could fall forward.

Warning bells rang.

"Let's go see if the others found anything while we were gone," Rossi said without hope. "The sooner we catch Foyet, the sooner we can unhook you two and Harry can run off irresponsibly like he wants."

That barely gained a glare, and Harry moved away from Hotch. Instead of seeking out a book like he often did, he instead went straight towards the couch. Now to top it all off, they had a sick teenager on their hands, and none of them had a clue what that meant when said kid had magic. He didn't even like them and he was going to be completely under their control if this got worse, even more so than he already was.

"Let's look over-" Rossi said just as Harry wavered slightly in taking his next step.

His knees gave way and his head rolled backwards, and Hotchner lunged forward to catch him before he collided painfully with the ground. Harry slumped awkwardly in his hold, body limp, and Rossi hurried to help Hotchner lower him to the ground.

"Harry? Harry!" Hotchner tapped his cheeks, but there was no response. Morgan came out of the dining room, hearing the concern, and Hotchner ordered, "Go get ice."

"Fever?"

"It feels like it's gone up..." He shook him. "Harry!"

The back door opened, and Hotchner gestured for Rossi to intercept Jack before he saw his unconscious brother. While the agent left, he straightened Harry out into a more comfortable position and started checking his breathing and pulse. Morgan returned with a small bag of ice and held it to Harry's head.

"He needs more than this," Morgan muttered. "I can feel his temperature and I'm not even touching him."

"This isn't good," Hotchner said. "Help me move him to the couch."

"Shouldn't we call a doctor?"

"We were just there and she said there was nothing we could do but force feed him medicine," Hotchner grimly said. "She ran all kinds of tests and nothing came back positive. Whatever he's got, it's not normal."

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There was an urgent tapping on his shoulder.

"Harry. Harry- Harry!"

Something shifted, and while he didn't open his eyes, he felt awake enough to focus on the voice.
Elsewhere, he could vaguely hear shouting, but it didn't seem important to him so he ignored it.

"You need to wake up."

But he was so comfortable...

"Harry, wake up now!"

His eyes flew open suddenly and he shot up to a sitting position. Half the BAU was surrounding him, faces anxious, but he ignored them until his gaze alit on his father, who was frowning at him and had one hand still half-outstretched to him. Unconsciously, Harry relaxed, and habit from war had him glancing over his father to make sure everything was okay. His father started to pull his hand back towards him, but Harry instinctively grabbed it, fingers curling against the scar and-

There was no scar.

He released the hand as if burned and scowled furiously at himself, turning away immediately to look over the rest of the group. "What?" he demanded, as if he could ignore that all of them had most definitely seen what just happened. "Oh."

Behind JJ and Prentiss, he could see a rug and lamp floating midair. A quick glance around the room told him that those weren't the only two airborne items.

"Can you, perhaps, put the contents of my house back on the ground instead of throwing them about?" Rossi asked calmly, with only a trace of irritation.

Harry slowly got up, surveying the room around him. Everything remained hovering right where it was at, while objects that had previously been in the air were now broken on the floor. A couple of the agents shifted away from him so he could get a better view, and his shock at his surroundings was obviously doing nothing to comfort their nerves about his unexpected display of magic.

"How long-" he began, and then something in his chest that wasn't his heart stuttered and plummeted to his stomach.

The lights went out with the shattering of glass, and a series of heavy thumps across the house foretold the destruction someone would find once they walked around. It was dark outside, and there was only a very faint stream of light coming through the window from a lamplight in the street.

"Please tell me you meant to do that," Reid said after a very long moment.

"I have no idea what just happened," Harry whispered, horrified. He'd done something similar in his fath...back home...but that had been when he'd been frightened, and it had been over in an instant.

"This isn't normal."

His knee collapsed under him and he flung out an arm to the couch to steady himself. On his other side, someone grabbed onto him and he held onto them tightly, only to realize it was Hotchner and snatch his arm back automatically. As his other knee started to shake, he lowered himself slowly back onto the couch.

"Lumos spheros," he murmured, and a small ball of light appeared in his hand. Its glow was enough to illuminate his immediate surroundings, including the BAU members who were present. He handed the ball to Reid, who took it, grateful but surprised. "Where's everyone else?"

"Does it matter?" Rossi asked.
"Let me rephrase – should I be concerned no one shouted somewhere in the house, or is it just us?"

"It's just us. Everyone else went home," Reid replied.

"I can fix all of it," Harry told Rossi, trying to ignore the way he could feel his legs shaking. Even his arm, propped on the couch, was trembling slightly. "Sorry."

"When you say you don't know what happened," Rossi said, completely ignoring the apology as he narrowed his eyes at Harry, "what do you mean?"

"Even if I were doing accidental magic, I should feel some sort of drain, or some inclination to do any of it. And I really shouldn't have been able to do this much while asleep. What happened while I was out?"

"We got back here about seven hours ago," Hotchner told him, and he involuntarily flinched at the voice. "About three hours ago, things started levitating, and about a half hour ago, things started flying around the house violently."

"So, in magical terms," Reid asked, "how unusual is that?"

"I've never even heard of something like this happening before..."

"Is it because you're sick?"

"I hope so, otherwise I don't have a clue what it could be from." He forced himself up, hoping the dim lighting covered his shaking. "Stay here. Last time this happened, there was a lot of broken glass."

"Didn't you just say this had never happened before?" Rossi asked, annoyed.

"I meant the last time I used accidental magic on this scale. It was...provoked, I guess you could say, so it blew out all the glass in the house. It sounded like something similar just happened."

Rossi sighed. "Let me come with you, at least. I know the layout of the house."

"Fine."

Hotchner transferred the handcuff from his wrist to Rossi's. Now attached to the Italian, Harry cleaned up the living room first so the others could move about freely, and then took care of the rest of the first floor. The windows were quickly fixed up before anything got too drafty, and they went outside so he could fix the second story windows from below in case any neighbors just so happened to look.

Harry hoped he could get Rossi to go up the stairs first, but Rossi knew what he was thinking and refused to go until Harry had. The teenager sighed and started the rather embarrassing struggle, feeling nauseous and weak in turns. Rossi didn't say anything, not right then, and Harry moved as quickly as he could to get to the next room.

They were halfway through cleaning the second floor when Rossi told him bluntly, "Sit down before you fall down."

"I'm fine."

"You're leaning against the wall to stay standing."

Harry glanced at his support. "I'm fine," he repeated.
"Just sit. It's not the end of the world."

He grudgingly took the nearest chair in the study while Rossi remained standing by the door, which he nudged closed with one foot. This wasn't unexpected, but Harry had been hoping to avoid it all the same.

"What's your beef with Hotch?"

"I don't have one."

Rossi laughed.

"I don't."

"Yeah, and I'm Chinese."

Harry let out a frustrated sound. "I don't. He just reminds me a lot of someone I do have problems with."

"Sure."

"Really."

"I didn't say I don't believe you."

"You don't exactly have to say anything to get that point across," Harry snapped. "Kind of obvious. Why's this important?"

"I don't believe you when you say you don't have a grudge against Hotch, and frankly, I don't believe your story about how you came to watch over Haley and Jack. So-"

"Jack," Harry suddenly said, guiltily realizing he'd totally forgotten his brother in his frantic attempt to control his panic over getting away from his father's doppelganger.

"Went with Morgan when things started flying."

He breathed out a sigh of relief.

"What's going on? Give me the truth."

"No."

"We can't help you if we don't-"

"Rossi," Harry interrupted, "you can't help me. I don't mean that in a 'I'm so broken beyond repair that it's useless to try' kind of way – you just can't help. This isn't something you can fix, so there's no point talking about it. Agent Hotchner genuinely does remind me of someone who...who I've got...who I had a problem with. But yes, I am lying about why I was looking out for Haley and Jack, because it's a long, disturbing story I don't want to get into."

"Harry, you want the truth?"

"Yeah."

"I don't trust you."
"That's a good truth. I'd be concerned if you did, because I'm sketchy as hell right now."

"If you're here to hurt any of them-

"I did not get close to Haley and Jack just to hurt Hotchner," Harry cut him off. "I know that's what you're thinking, but that was never my intention. I didn't mean to make their situation worse by getting involved, and I hope when I leave, they'll go back to how they were."

There was a long pause from Rossi's end. "I think they were always a bit like this."

"Doesn't make me feel a lot better." He sighed. "Look... I just trashed your house, and it's possible this could all happen again since we don't know what's going on. So-

"You're not getting off the leash."

"Do you want to be in danger from something I can't control?"

"Figure it out. We're not letting you go. And really, you should be very careful to not get on Hotch's bad side. He's not a fun guy usually. You don't want to see him when he's mad."

Harry stayed quiet.

"Furthermore, I want you out there less than I want you in here. Quite frankly, I'd rather we have you locked up somewhere than this. You're lucky we're investigating this on our own and not with the Bureau, or you'd definitely be counting down your days of freedom."

Despite himself, a knowing smile tugged at one corner of Harry's mouth, and he asked in a dry but amused tone, "Are you really trying to make yourself seem like a worse alternative to Hotchner so I'll quit bitching?"

There was a shocked silence from Rossi's end. Then, "Just because you're not used to getting some criticism and restriction-"

"Oh, Rossi, really," Harry interrupted.

"I really don't care enough about you to try to manipulate your opinion," Rossi snapped.

"No, but you do care enough to make your teammate's situation more reasonable," Harry said. "Nice try."

"What the hell makes you think I care?"

"Why else would you offer to take me off his hands, almost literally, for a couple of minutes? If you really didn't care, you wouldn't have minded me walking over glass, and Hotchner probably knows your house well enough that he could have avoided anything sharp."

Another pregnant pause. "Who are you?" Rossi finally asked.

"If I could tell you that," Harry said tiredly, "I would."

"You can't, or you won't?"

"A mixture of both, I suppose."

"Let up on Hotch, at least."
It was Harry's turn to hesitate before answering. "I'll...try. But it's just reflexive at this point."

"You two are going to be attached for another couple of days at least. Don't make this more miserable for yourself."

"It can't get much worse for me. You don't know where I've come from."

Rossi snorted. "Right. Let me guess. Abusive home life – mentally and physically. I'd say a good deal of neglect too, but I'd wager no sexual abuse because everyone was too busy avoiding touching you. Bet they treated you like the scum of the earth. Now that you've got Jack, you're using him as your shield to get out of a similar situation. For some reason, you think Hotch is going to be the person who puts you there again."

Harry didn't say anything and Rossi took it as an opportunity to continue.

"If you didn't live on the streets for a while, you were at least on your own, completely self-sufficient. I'll bet you were taking care of others too, not just Jack. Probably had a group of kids in bad places who you were trying to help. Recently, you started giving up your own food so others could eat. You sacrificed your own well-being for others, partially because you think they deserve it more and partially because you're just not hungry. I'll bet you weren't motivated to do much of anything, let alone eat, when you were so depressed."

"It's not nearly as impressive to watch you profile when I know what you're picking up," Harry said quietly. "So stop."

"I'm not telling you this to make an impact. I'm telling you that I know, and I just don't care." Rossi came closer a couple of steps, and Harry looked up and met his gaze. "Oddly enough, though, Hotch does care, at least a little."

He took a deep breath, ignoring the way it caught in his throat at the end. "I know."

"But you're not going to change your attitude."

He mutely shook his head.

"Why?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you." He got to his feet, and then immediately collapsed back into the chair with a scowl. "What the hell is going on?" he muttered crossly.

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Hotchner kept an eye on him for the rest of the night in case something suddenly took a severe turn for the worst, but the decline was slow. By midday, he had a fever of a hundred and was confined to bed, which he didn't argue with when he saw their determination to keep him there. On the off chance it did turn out to be contagious and to keep looking for Foyet, everyone continued searching for more evidence wherever they could, largely leaving Hotchner and Harry alone in the house. It was almost a blessing that the teen was sick.

It took more strength of will than Hotchner would have liked to admit to rouse Harry as the hours trickled by. Despite his illness, it was only a moment before Harry recognized him and glared up at him. Ignoring the look, Hotchner said, "Dinner."

"I'm not hungry."
"I doubt it. Come on."

"I'm not eating."

"If you don't eat, this is just going to get worse."

"Great."

"And I'm not dealing with that, so you're either doing this voluntarily, or it's going to get a lot less optional in a couple of minutes." Harry's mouth tightened. "Do you want help getting into the kitchen?"

As expected, there was no response, and Hotchner turned away from him sharply. The handcuff linked trailed behind him, and he made sure to stay within range as he entered the kitchen. The worst thing about this situation was that he knew the kid would run off if they removed the damn cuffs, so even with his illness they still had to keep Harry restrained.

Harry all but dragged himself into the kitchen, less out of dramatics and more out of necessity. He barely glanced at Hotchner, as if that would somehow hide the difficulty he was having, and leaned against the counter while he looked for food near him. Hotchner gestured for him to take a seat, and of course Harry remained standing despite his weakening condition so Hotchner forcibly took him by the shoulders and deposited him in one, ignoring the teen's grumblings and failed attempts to shrug him off. Without commenting on Harry's ridiculous behavior, he moved back to the counter to grab a container of rice and a container of sweet and sour chicken for Harry, dropping both in front of him.

"Thanks," Harry muttered, so roughly it was hard to tell if the comment was genuine but grudging or sarcastically deprecating. Hotchner chose not to respond.

Harry tried to clean up once he was done, but Hotchner took the empty containers from him and nodded in the direction of the couch. "I'll take care of this. Go get some more rest."

Harry froze, an odd look of horror coming over his face for a split second before he shook his head slightly and grimaced. He turned away, but Hotchner reached out and touched his shoulder, earning a startled jolt. He quickly pulled his hand back.

"What is it?" he asked.

Without turning back around, Harry said, "You sound like..."

And then he moved as quickly as he could to put space between him and Hotchner, darting from the kitchen to return to the couch. Hotchner was left to thoughtfully clean up.

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That night went poorly for Harry. The Chinese didn't stay in his stomach, and they'd hoped it was just the food but nothing else was working well either. It wasn't long before he had trouble eating anything, unable to even get it down because he was having difficulty swallowing. He stopped throwing up once there was nothing left in his stomach. His fever was going up and up, no matter what they tried, and he developed a continuous trembling that seemed to annoy him more than anything else.

They took him to the hospital three more times, but over the next forty-eight hours, Harry's situation declined until Dr. Hammond had to come to them instead.
"I don't blame you for not wanting to move him," she said, staring at his feverish form on the couch. A yellow tinge had started to come to his face and his breathing was starting to stutter and cough. "And no one else is showing any symptoms?"

"We're all fine," Hotchner said. "Could it be a virus?"

"It's too serious. I've never seen anything like this before," she said slowly. "His body, it's...

"What?"

"It's shutting down," she said quietly. He stared at her. "Everything's starting to show signs of giving out. See the jaundice? His liver isn't processing hemoglobin correctly anymore, and the bile pigments are spreading to the rest of his body. His reflexes are starting to not even work because some of his muscles won't respond, even a couple involuntary ones. That's why you can't get him to eat without him choking."

"He had this before, though. Shouldn't he be able to fight it off?"

"He only had it for a couple of days, and it can take up to ten days for the body to make memory cells to remember the illness and how to combat it. His body doesn't know how."

Hotchner grimaced. "What does this mean?"

"He's dying."

Chapter End Notes

WE DO RETURN TO HAPPINESS IN THIS STORY I SWEAR. But Hotch's death wasn't exactly something that Harry was going to brush off, so we need time to deal with the after effects.
"You could be beaten, but you must not beat yourself." - Stephen King, *The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon*

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Jack smelled the sickness on his brother, and he took to staying nearby until the smell drove him away and the others physically stopped him from returning. There was no reason for him to see the rest of his decline, and it was just getting worse. Finally, Hotchner called the witness protection marshal in charge of his family's case, and they came and took Jack to go stay with them.

Harry should have been in the hospital, but the worse he got, the more out of control his magic became. Plates in the kitchen would suddenly smash, locks on drawers would fly across the room, and the strips were torn away from the carpet. The living room slowly began to look like a warzone, and the worst place to be was around Harry.

"You need to get away from him," Rossi said, almost demanded. "He's trying to take you out. In his state, he doesn't know who you are, and to be honest, he doesn't like you when he *does* know who you are."

"He's not trying to kill me," Hotchner replied, not moving from his place beside Harry on the floor. "He's trying to kill himself."

Every time Hotchner left, the number of magical incidents rose from two or three every half hour to two or three every thirty seconds, and most of the projectiles that went flying started coming towards Harry. It quickly became obvious that the only way to stop them was to get directly in their path, and for the most part, they'd miraculously fall to the floor before they injured someone. Hotchner often sent the rest of the team out to follow fruitless leads, just to get them out of the blast zone. Each time they left, they looked at him like it was the last time they'd see him alive, and even he was beginning to consider how dangerous his position was.

Snape showed up a day later, as disconnected as ever from any emotion besides a general disdain for his surroundings. "Where is he?"

"Follow me," Hotchner said immediately, pulling him into the house and living room. "Maybe you can do something for him."

Snape came to a stop when he saw Harry's still form. In contrast to the fever that they had feared the first few days, now his body wasn't performing enough chemical reactions to give off any heat and they had dumped almost every blanket in the house over him. He was on an IV to prevent malnutrition since he couldn't eat. "What happened?"

"He got sick. The doctor we took him to couldn't do anything for him, and he's just getting worse. And very quickly, too." They had even taken off the handcuffs, since they were just in the way now and it wasn't like Harry was going to get to the front door without their help.

Snape walked closer and started muttering spells. Whatever the results were, they weren't pleasing,
and his frown steadily got deeper. "When did this start?"

"A week ago. His body and his magic...they're tearing him apart."

Snape nodded just as Harry's eyes flickered. "Harry, you need to wake up," he said sharply.

Harry looked at him wearily. "You can cast a patronus, right?" he asked and Snape nodded, confused. "They're trying to find someone. Tell your patronus to find him for them."

"That won't work."

"It will. Please, do it."

"Why don't you do it yourself?"

"My patronus is... I can't summon him anymore."

Snape sniffed in annoyance. "I suppose you're in trouble, then, because I'm not testing some ridiculous theory for you. Now, I was attempting to be subtle about this but your current position is forcing me to be more direct. How did you acquire more magic?"

"What?"

"Oh, don't play a fool. You have too much magic for your age and experience, so where did you get it from?"

"I don't know anything about that..."

"Tell me. It must be the reason your magic is backfiring on you now, for it to be severe enough to cause your body to turn on itself."

Harry glared at him. "I don't have extra magic, and if you think I do, you need to figure out why on your own. There's no reason I can think of that would cause that."

"Were you ever in contact with pure magic?" Snape asked.

While they spoke, Hotchner moved around quietly to the other couch so he could plainly see both of them, in case it would tell him more about what each one knew. Harry was too sick to lie, and he genuinely seemed concerned. Furthermore, he would have tried to use his magic to get out of the handcuff with a more determined effort if he had reason to believe he could overcome it. Snape, though, was more of an unknown factor since Hotchner just hadn't been around him long enough and didn't know enough to understand him.

"Not that I know of."

"You idiot, you must have done something to gain this much. Did you steal it from someone?"

"Of course not! Do you think I even know how to go about that?"

"Did you corrupt your own magic?"

"Again, how?"

"Did you imbibe dark magic?"

"What the hell does that even mean?"
"I don't know what you hope to achieve by hiding this from me, but you will die if you don't tell me what happened. Perhaps you have a death wish like your father, considering his activities."

Harry was off the couch in an instant, but the abrupt change in position cost him and Hotchner jumped to catch the teenager as he stumbled to the side. Harry straightened himself and, ignoring Hotchner for once out of single-mindedness rather than disrespect, snarled, "Don't you dare say that when you never even knew him!"

"I know enough about him from what you've turned into, and other tidbits I've gathered." Snape's eyes flickered to Hotchner for a moment, too fast for Hotchner to determine the purpose of the glance, and Harry stiffened in anger. "After all, only someone irresponsible enough to let their oldest child run around, practically homeless, would be irresponsible enough to run straight into death."

"He didn't- That's not what happened!"

Snape sneered. "Then you explain to me - again, might I add - how it came to be that your body has nearly been starved to death multiple times? What kind of father would leave their child to suffer that, unless he didn't care?"

"Snape-" Hotchner tried to interrupt, but Harry's fury overrode him.

"He didn't leave on purpose!" Harry snapped. "You weren't there!"

"No, but I can take an educated guess, and from what you've told me, I wouldn't be surprised if he left when he realized there was no other way to get out of the trouble you were causing. Since he met you, how often did he and others he cared about get put in danger? What happened to your brother, Harry? I'm just surprised he didn't leave sooner."

For a long moment, Harry just stood there, tense, and Hotchner forwent any remark to Snape in favor of watching out for when Harry was about to attack. Then, finally, he whispered, "I know, but he wouldn't have let me come back to him every day I could if he didn't care at least a little. I have to believe that, and I don't care what you say that might be true."

Hotchner's rather low opinion of Harry's maturity halted in its descent. "Snape, you need to go," he said firmly. "If you're not here to-"

"I am here to help," Snape said without aggression. "Harry, you don't have dark magic in you." Both Harry and Hotchner frowned at him. "If you did, it most certainly would have attempted to kill me by now, and you wouldn't have been able to calm down. However, I have one other idea as to what it may be, but I'm not sure you would prefer this option over dark magic."

"Well... What is it?"

"I hope to disprove or prove my theory before I tell you, but while I do so, would you see to your doppelganger?"

Harry nodded wearily. "Maybe I can drill into his mind how to do it. Doesn't look like he'll have me to help him for much longer."

"There might be treatment, if he can figure out what it is," Hotchner pointed out, but a glance at Snape dissuaded that idea. Grimacing, and without saying anything more, Snape vanished to get the other Harry. Beside him, Harry was starting to shake as the energy that had surged into him began to abate, and Hotchner touched his shoulder and elbow to help lower him back to the couch.

They waited for a couple of minutes, before Harry finally said, "You're not going to ask?"
"About?"

"My father."

"No." Harry looked at him curiously. "I would expect the same courtesy, so no, I won't push on your private life."

Snape reappeared without anyone else. "The werewolf will be bringing him over so Potter will remain unaware of my involvement in this," he said. "In the meantime, Hotchner, I need to borrow your head for a moment. I assure you it can and should remain connected to your body during the course of this experiment."

Hotchner stood, though he made no attempt to leave until someone else was in the room with Harry. "For what?"

"I need to discern something about someone without magic. It shouldn't take long."

Hotchner brought Morgan into the room to watch Harry, then went into the kitchen with Snape to be out of the sight of whoever would be arriving. The spells Snape performed did not take nearly as long as Hotchner had expected, even with the remark to their length, and he was soon left with nothing to do but wait for Potter to leave. He moved to the doorway of the kitchen, where he could watch, while Snape remained behind and out of sight, and found a scarred man had taken his couch while the two Harrys shared the other.

The Harry he had been taking care of had his back to him and didn't notice his scrutiny. The other Harry - Potter, for the sake of distinction - barely glanced at him, then quickly turned his gaze to Harry. "I just don't understand how you're supposed to clear your mind," Potter said with a scowl.

"You're starting to think about this in Occlumency terms," Harry said, shaking his head. "Don't. It's just going to mess you up, since you've attributed Occlumency as something you can't do. And don't think of it as clearing your mind. It's more like focusing on one very simple thing, like counting, a rhythm, even silence. It helps you slip out of consciousness easier, and it ensures that your mind isn't so cluttered while you're resting that it's weak enough for someone to easily enter."

Hotchner raised an eyebrow and glanced at Snape for an explanation. The wizard didn't give one, and he turned back to the conversation.

"Does that make sense?"

"…A bit, yeah. What do you focus on?"

Harry paused, pulling his arms in closer to himself. Potter was curled up at one end to allow Harry to stretch out, since his muscles weren't able to hold themselves in position for as long anymore. "The way I showed you, the first time, was the way I was taught to do it. If the man who taught me wasn't there, I just pretended he was and that I could still hear and feel him."

"And now?"

"...There are a lot of things I can't do anymore," Harry said with a bitter smile in his tone. "Something was taken from me, and that's just one of the many things that left with it. That doesn't mean it shouldn't still work for you. What do you usually think about, right before you go to sleep?"

"I hear Cedric dying... Did he live, in your time?"
Harry shook his head. "He died in the Silent Massacre. A group of students were supposed to be sacrificed, and the kidnappers managed to get through a portion of what they needed before we were rescued. Some families were wiped out, too, since they needed more blood to complete the ritual."

"How did you sleep after that?"

"Simply, I didn't. Over a year later, I still woke up screaming." He waved it aside. "Try to minimize stress before you go to sleep, but I know that's probably going to be hard with the Dursleys..."

Potter snorted and turned away in frustration. "More like impossible."

"Did you try threatening them?" Harry asked, and Hotchner raised an eyebrow at the calm tone he used.

"No."

"I understand if you don't want to do anything."

"No, you don't!" Potter snapped. "You had someone to help you! You're not stuck like I am! And I'm not going to just spend the whole bloody summer holding some shit over their heads!"

"Before you try anything," Harry said dryly, remarkably refusing to rise to the aggression, "get that horcrux out of your head so I can have a civil conversation with you if we ever meet again."

Potter frowned at him. "What do you mean?"

"There's a good possibility I'm not going to recover from this," Harry said off-handedly. "That's why you had to come here instead of the other way around."

Despite his snappish behavior moments ago, Potter stared at him, stricken for several long seconds. "You can't be dying."

"I rather hope I'm not. Get that horcrux out, all right?"

"Hang on, get back to the dying part."

"It's not something you need to worry about."

"I shouldn't be worried about you dying?!"

"I mean, it's not going to affect you, even though you're my doppelganger. I don't think so, at least."

"You're- You're just sitting there, waiting to die!"

"Of course I'm sitting. I can't stand up anymore. Now, go get the horcrux out and start threatening your relatives, and when you're done with that, please do come back and visit, and we'll probably be able to make more progress without all the teenage angst intensified by dark wizard angst."

When Potter had left with Lupin, Snape was the first to return to the living room. "Exactly what threats are you encouraging Potter to make?" he demanded.

Harry frowned. "Isn't it obvious?"

"Hardly."

"The Dursleys are abusive. If he threatens to take them to court, he can get them to back off. They're
very self-conscious about their image, and just the risk of word leaking out that their nephew put charges against them would be enough to make them behave, at least until he goes back to school."

Snape scoffed immediately. "The Dursleys aren't abusive. They dote on the boy, as everyone does."

"Didn't you ever wonder why Potter goes into danger all the time, and seems shocked later when everyone panics?"

Snape frowned. "How did you know that?"

"I did the same thing. The Dursleys never told us not to go into any dangerous situation, so we never learned to tread carefully. In my world at least, I think there was actually some encouragement to go into that kind of situation because they were hoping to get rid of me..."

Snape shook his head fervently, but Hotchner was frowning. The potions master snapped, "Potter's never been treated like that. Have you seen the way he seeks attention?"

"In what way? He hates publicity."

"He constantly goes after the adults around him, basking in their attention when they fawn over him, and-"

"Their attention when they're making sure he's okay?" Snape scowled at him and the interruption. "He's reassuring himself people actually are checking after his wellbeing. He didn't have that when he grew up, and it's new to him. Since he knows he won't get it at home, yeah, he goes after it whenever he's around adults who actually care. Furthermore, he'll get nervous when hemmed in to a small area, and he'll seek open spaces. If you pay attention when he's eating, I think you'll also notice that he'll get a bit edgier when someone reaches near his plate."

There was a long pause in which Snape's eyebrows furrowed irritably and his mouth pinched together, clearly recalling incidents fitting what Harry was saying. "Really."

"Yeah. I don't know how bad his situation was, since he's said mine was worse, but there was a lot of neglect. It's not surprising he goes after attention from anyone who cares about him when he's making up for lost time." He frowned slightly. "Didn't Dumbledore ever tell you any of this?"

"Why would he?"

"Wouldn't it be important for the teachers at a school to know one of their students has been abused?" He paused, then narrowed his eyes. "Ah."

"What?"

"If you'd known in his first couple of years, you would have removed him from the Dursley home and the blood ward protection."

"Let me make myself very clear – I don't believe you."

Harry's gaze sharpened, and Hotchner suddenly felt very concerned for Snape. "Did he and Ron crash the car into the Whomping Willow their second year?"

"Vandalism is not a confirmation for abuse."

"Yes, my other self has a certain lack of common sense. But he's also relatively calm in a crisis and can think on his feet. So what on earth would have compelled him to agree to steal a car from his
friend's family to get to school, rather than just waiting a couple of minutes to get help from adults?"
Snape was quiet for a long moment. "The Dursleys locked him in his room with the intention of
preventing him from returning to school that summer. The twins and Ron broke him out, but not after
he'd spent days trying to get out only to find the locks on his door and the bars on his window were
too strong. Go ask Ms. Figg if you really don't believe me; she'll remember the bars."

Snape hesitated now, keeping his thoughts to himself.

"You're thinking I was in a very different situation, considering the difference in our blood relation."

"Yes."

"The main change in my world was that they just kept trying to kill me. In this world, they almost
managed it through neglect. Snape, don't take my word for it. Ask around in the neighborhood, and
if you really need to, get Potter to agree to undergo Legilimency. But by the time he gets back to
school, someone had better have found a place for him to go for next summer that isn't the
Dursleys."

"The blood wards need to be renewed."

Harry rolled his eyes. "The Dursleys tried to turn me in, in my world. I don't doubt they won't do the
same if given the chance here. I'm not asking you to suddenly become chummy with Potter, but it is
your responsibility as a professor at a boarding school to ensure the safety of your students. Just do a
little investigating and see if anything I said was right."

There was a thoughtful pause, and then Snape vanished. Harry leaned back against the couch,
satisfied, and shuffled down until he was stretched out to go back to sleep.

"Harry," Hotchner said before the boy could slip away. Eyes flickered up to meet his. "What was
that all about?"

"Potter's in a situation that he needs to get out. If Snape finds out just how bad it is, he'll flip shit and
ensure Potter doesn't return there. Besides, Lupin's now suspicious too, so between the three of them,
I'm hoping he won't be forced to go back."

As if suddenly realizing he was actually being agreeable, Harry shuffled a bit so he was facing away
from Hotchner. The agent sat down on the other couch, ignoring the teen's attempt to stop the
conversation from continuing and contemplating what he wanted to say. "In your world," he finally
said, slowly, "who are you staying with?"

There was a pregnant pause. "What?"

"You're not staying with the Dursleys. Where was the last place you stayed, then?"

An even longer hesitation. "At- At my father's," he managed to get out.

"Your parents survived?"

"They weren't the Potters," Harry quickly said, words running together almost breathlessly.

"Then who were-"

"Don't ask me about them," he said sharply.

Carefully, he said, "I won't. But I can only assume if wasn't safe for you to continue staying with
them, if you were on the streets recently."

Harry stayed quiet.

Out of the frying pan and into the fire. The kid had just gone from one abusive home to another, from what it looked like. No wonder he was so aggressive towards authority, if that was how he'd been treated previously.

"Harry," he said gently, not sure where he was going with this but unwilling to stop now. "I won't let you go back to them."

Harry's shoulders deflated slightly. "You don't have to worry about that," he said softly.

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Harry tried to go to sleep that night, but it just wasn't coming to him. He dozed in and out, resting fitfully, until he felt a hand on his forehead, brushing back hair. The gesture was calming, reminiscent of how his father usually tried to soothe away his nightmares from the Silent Massacre and the war at Hogwarts, and he finally slipped away into mild sleep.

He woke up about an hour later, remembering blood on walls and a fresh bite on his brother's back while chains kept him from his family. Before it could make its way past his mouth, he choked off his scream, throwing his head back against the pillow behind him and clasping one hand over his lips. He squeezed his eyes shut tightly, ignoring the tears leaking out, and grabbed his wrist with his free hand, digging his nails into his skin in an attempt to ground himself in reality.

Despite his attempts at muffling any noise, a low keen escaped him, and he tried to push himself further into the couch in an unconscious effort to get away from the world. The idea of what had happened in his sleeping mind was too potent, even when conjured from old or imaginary memories, and he had to unclasp his hand from his mouth to suck in ragged breaths.

The death of his father and the infection of his brother. Unimaginable loss and profound guilt. He could hardly believe they were both real, found it impossible to reconcile either with reality when he knew he would have trouble coming to terms with one, let alone both at the same time.

And then his father was taking his hand, murmuring quietly to him, and he let out a shaky sigh. Of course, there was no way they would have let any of that happen. Hotch was still alive – he had to be, he was standing right there. Harry opened his eyes, but he couldn't make out the room he was in even if he could sense his father's presence beside him. The elder Hotchner crouched, coming closer to his head, and ran a hand across his forehead and through his hair.

"Is he okay?" he heard Elle whisper softly, and someone turned on a light near her. It cast a soft glow, revealing her features and Hotch's.

"Harry, are you hurt?" Hotch asked, concerned, and Harry quickly shook his head. "Just a nightmare, I think," he told Elle. Harry shakily pushed himself up, trying to hide any weakness. "Lie back down and try and get some more sleep."

Harry shook his head, afraid doing so would give him another nightmare like that. No, thanks. He wanted to forget about it as soon as possible. "I'm fine."

His father gave him a look but didn't call him on it, then glanced back at Elle, who had a curious, almost horrified expression on her face. "What are you here for?"

"I came with Snape for a report," she said slowly, almost cautiously, like she had an idea that she
was hoping wasn't true.

A report, Harry told himself again. A report. Elle and Snape were coming to give a report on the war. See, Hotch couldn't be dead. He glanced to the side to look at Snape, who was standing just on the edge of the light's reach, much harder to make out than Elle. A report. He tried to get the after effects of the shaking over with.

Hotch frowned, then glanced at Harry, who expected to be somewhat reluctantly let into the proceedings. Hotch had never really completely approved of Harry being so involved in the war, but he had come to terms with the necessity of it recently. Instead, Hotch said, "There's been no change." Harry paused, taken off guard. Then, "Unless Harry's fever's gotten worse..."

He felt a little strange, true, but he reflexively shook his head. "No, I'm fine," he said, and then, because he knew it would derail Hotch by getting him irritated about something else, added cheerfully, "Not much left to addle this brain after the Cruciatus." He glanced at Snape, hoping to share the joke with someone he knew had his warped sense of humor, met indifference – and a little confusion? –, and looked back to his father, hoping someone would at least smile a little.

Hotch stared at him in bewilderment. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Elle close her eyes in silent despair, realizing what Harry had done.

Hotch became Hotchner again.

Harry slowly pulled himself together, looking away and muttering, "Nevermind," like his heart wasn't breaking and like he didn't feel violently sick.

He'd really believed it for a couple of minutes. He'd really hoped it was true.

While the memory of the odd look Hotchner had just given him clawed the hope out of his chest like a bear trying to take out his heart, he shakily got to his feet, eager to just be away from everyone for a minute. Hotchner's parental instincts kicked in at the sight of the sickly teenager, and he reached up to try to steady Harry as he wavered.

The slight reminder was all it took, and Harry doubled over, retching.

Elle grabbed him when he was done, muttering something about taking him to the bathroom, and Snape cleaned up behind them. The potions master stayed in the living room to talk to Hotchner and the link between Hotchner and Harry stretched as Elle led the young wizard towards the back of the house in a lounge area.

She set him down on a couch, left for a minute, then returned with a glass of water so he could wash out his mouth. He kept his face buried in his hands, ignoring the glass as she put it on the table in front of him.

"Harry," she said quietly.

"I can't do this anymore," he whispered back. "Elle, I can't."

"It won't be for much longer," she said, but she sounded strange, like there was a lie to her words.

He caught it immediately and turned his face up at her, eyes raw from the tears that had already escaped him. He must look like a wreck, after the nightmare and the vomiting. "Because I don't have much longer to live, you mean."

"Maybe we can find a way," she pressed.
"We won't. I know that's what you and Snape came here to tell me, in the middle of the night. If you had any good news, you would have come in the morning, when the other agents would hear it."

She was quiet for a moment. "Snape wanted to tell you that the tests he ran on Hotchner to look for his latent magic prove that it's almost identical to the magic in you. The tests just confirmed it's blood magic. But that doesn't mean the situation's any worse, and we just figured you didn't want anyone here to know that. He thinks by being near Hotchner, the latent magic from the other world in you might be drawn to him, and it could fix the situation."

He shook his head, pushing away her denial. "Elle, false reassurances aren't going to do me any good right now."

"You're going to make it."

"Elle, I can feel it through the blood wards. His loss. I can feel that he's supposed to be here, and he isn't, and...and he told me he would be. He told me he'd stay, and he didn't. The blood wards are pulling me towards him."

"So fight them, Harry! This isn't over until you're done!" He flinched away from her gaze, and she straightened. "You... You're not planning on fighting, are you?"

There was no point denying it. He shook his head.

"Harry!"

"It all hurts so much," he whispered. "I didn't want to be in charge of the DA, or to be the one to take on Riddle, or- or any of this! And- And I didn't want to be my dad's son if- if this is the result, and I don't want his magic no matter how much stronger it makes me if he had to sacrifice himself for me to get it!"

"I know all that's true," she said, hands coming up to rest on his shoulders. He ducked his head and grasped his hair in his fingers. "I know. But you can't stop now just because everything's hard. This will always hurt, because you loved him, but it gets easier over time."

"Will it?" he asked, looking up in challenge. "When I've got a part of him inside me that's supposed to be dead, too?"

"Even then," she said, fingers tightening on him. "It gets better."

"I don't want to wait that long," he said hoarsely. "I don't want to fight anymore, not after everything it's led to."

"Don't say that," she said sharply.

"Please, Elle," he begged. "You already know there's no treatment, and if I give everyone hope by trying to stop it, it's just going to hurt more when this is all over. I'm satisfied. Just...let this end how I want it to end. I don't want to be in pain anymore."

"If you die, Harry, then what he did was useless. He wanted to keep you and your brother safe. How does your death help either of you?"

He tore one of her hands off of him and she pulled the other back immediately. "Then he should have thought of what he was doing before he did it!" he snapped. "Because I never wanted him to do that! And if he were so damn smart, he would've known it was a stupid thing to do!"
"Harry," she said, coaxing. "You have to understand things from his point of view."

He glanced down at the ground sharply, eyes shutting tightly. "I don't want to consider it, I don't want to think about it, I don't- I don't even want to see him! If he could leave me like that-

"Harry-" Mortification colored her tone.

"If it was that easy, then I don't want to know why. Because then he's not who I thought he was. Elle, please, get me out of here."

"Harry-"

"I can't be near him any longer. I can't watch him act so much like my father, and just...not know. About anything. What happened, or the consequences, of any of it."

"You have to stay here," she said quietly. "It's quite possibly your only chance of staying alive, if Snape's right about drawing the magic away from you."

He moaned, drawing his hands across his face. "I don't want ifs and maybes," he said harshly. "I want a concrete solution – and I just want to be done."

"Don't do this to yourself," she pleaded. "It's just going to be more painful if you do."

"Don't do what?" he snapped.

"Hate him."

"I do hate him!" His voice cracked in the middle of the sentence, and one hand came up briefly to swipe at his eyes.

"For wha-"

"For everything! For taking me in, for not being there, for...for leaving, just when I needed him..." He sniffed, hard. "Why shouldn't I hate him?"

"Because you know he didn't do any of that out of malice," she said quietly, watching him closely.

"Because he loved you very much," she murmured. He turned away from her, sucking in a huge breath that caught in his throat with a sob. "And he knew he wouldn't have been able to handle the loss of losing you and failing you again."

He shook his head, pushing back the tears and swiping his hand across his eyes again. He stood up, moving away from her abruptly and jerkily, trying to battle the growing weakness in his limbs. "Seems like I can't either," he replied, voice breaking.

---

In the dream world, he woke up in his bedroom. His head was nestled comfortably against something, and the rest of his body was sprawled on the bed and under the blankets, which had been neatly tucked around him. It was quiet; when he opened his eyes he saw that it was dark outside the window. Fingers stroked softly through his hair, and he knew who he was going to see before he turned his head slightly to look up.
"Your fever is getting worse," Hotch murmured. He stopped the motions of his fingers and laid the back of his hand against Harry's head. Against his will, Harry closed his eyes and leaned into the touch. Hotch obliged him silently, moving both hands to Harry's head to gently stroke his hair.

"Why don't you talk to my alternate self?" Hotch asked a couple of minutes later. Harry turned his face away from his father, half-hiding his expression against the thigh beside his head. "I know it's painful," he continued quietly, "but he's willing to help you."

Harry kept his eyes closed, internally reveling in the comfort of resting his head in his father's lap and of the fingers moving across his scalp. It hurt just as much to stay by him as it would to leave, to accept the warmth of someone who'd hurt him so badly rather than walk away from the person he loved above all else.

Hotch sighed against him, realizing he wasn't going to get an answer. "Of everyone, I thought you'd be the last person to give me the silent treatment," Hotch reprimanded lightly. "Isn't communication the most important thing for you?"

Harry refused to respond. Hotch's fingers never stopped their motions, refusing to deny him the small comfort no matter how he was being condemned for it.

"Let him help you," Hotch said. "I can't. So let him do it for me."

"I don't want help."

Hotch didn't even start at the sudden acknowledgement. "Because you don't want to be saved or because you don't want to accept his help?"

Harry had no answer for that.

---

Hotchner woke up for the sixth night in a row to one of Harry's nightmares. As usual, the teenager made no vocal noise, but his thrashing was more than enough to catch Hotchner's attention. He sat up and watched Harry for a moment, deciding whether to get involved or not, then left his couch to kneel next to Harry's.

The teenager startled awake once Hotch shook his shoulder, chest heaving. The moment his eyes locked onto Hotch's, he flinched away, and Hotchner removed his hand. "Damn it," Harry muttered.

"Is this normal?" Hotchner asked. "This frequency of nightmares?"

"Yeah," Harry said, the slight shake in his voice preventing him from completely dismissing it.

"Do you know what caused it?"

Harry looked taken aback, like he couldn't believe the irony of what had just been said. At Hotchner's uncomprehending expression, he shrugged it off. "A bunch of things went badly, before I brought Jack here," he finally said. "It's a long story."

Hotchner put his hand out to feel Harry's temperature, ignoring the way Harry tried to lean away from him. "Your fever probably isn't helping it."

"No shit." Harry weakly swatted his hand away, and Hotchner let him.
"Go back to sleep," Hotchner said, getting to his feet.

Harry gave a disparaging snort.

"Hey," Hotchner said, for once letting steel enter his tone. Harry flinched, without even looking at him, from his tone alone. That made Hotch pause for a moment, and then he continued, still firm but not so harsh. "Your body's got enough problems. Don't add sleep deprivation on top of everything else."

Harry didn't respond or glance at him, instead content to just stay where he was at and look straight ahead.

"What?" he demanded.

"Nothing!" Harry snapped back.

"Harry, come on," he said, engendering a weird stutter in his reaction. Harry glanced up at him, almost guiltily, once his name had been said, but the two added words caught him off guard like he hadn't been expecting them. Like he'd gotten used to a pattern of just responding to his name and nothing else.

The signs were adding up, and Hotchner just couldn't ignore them anymore, no matter how hard he tried. The differences between the two Harrys were just too great, and this one's reactions to him couldn't be denied any longer.

So he threw his theory out into the open air. "I sound like him, don't I?"

Harry might as well have been having a seizure from the way he suddenly jerked and practically threw himself into a sitting position. "What? No." Hotchner stared at him, wondering if Harry really thought that he was going to buy the excuse after watching that dramatic reaction. "I mean. Who?"

"Harry, really?" Hotchner asked, exasperated. "You knew me in the other world."

"Did Elle tell you that?" Harry demanded.

"No, you did, in just about every reaction you have towards me," Hotchner said.

"I... We met a couple times."

Hotchner raised an incredulous eyebrow at the horrible lie.

"You're the profiler, you tell me," Harry finally snapped.

"That means I can tell from your behavior that we didn't get along, not how we met," Hotchner told him, moving to sit on the other couch him so he wasn't towering over Harry anymore. The teenager's eyes followed him. "You knew my entire team."

"Yes," he replied quietly.

"Were you one of our cases?"

"In... In a sense," Harry said carefully. "I suppose you could say that."

"Did we know each other because of that case?"

There was a long silence. "Not necessarily."
This wasn't doing much to assuage Hotchner's fear, the one he'd started to develop as he slowly put together a theory about his relationship with the other world's Harry. "Why do you hate me so much?"

"I'm not going to talk about this," Harry said sharply, but he didn't lie back down, instead watching Hotch with a half-aggressive and half-panicked expression.

"Please," Hotchner said quietly, hoping to take Harry off guard enough to get an answer, or at least see if he was wary about emotional manipulation because Hotchner had done it to him in the other universe.

Instead, Harry dropped his head into his hands, fingers massaging his temple for a few moments. "Don't," he said quietly.

"Harry, please," he repeated, reluctantly admitting to himself that he was probably doing to the kid what his other self had done.

To his shock, it worked faster than he'd expected. "You broke a promise to me," Harry hoarsely whispered. "There was something I told you never to do, and you did it anyway."

"What was it?"

Harry shook his head mutely.

"Harry?"

"Never do it in this time and you don't need to know about it," Harry said roughly. "It's a promise most conscientious people keep easily."

"What I did... Is that what your nightmares are about?"

Harry looked up, almost guiltily. "Most of them."

"Is anyone in danger because of what I did?"

A sharp laugh escaped Harry, and he rubbed one hand over his forehead. "Someone was, yeah." He folded himself back down onto the couch and turned away from Hotchner. "Not anymore."

---

The magical group from before returned with only an hour's notice. The entire BAU but Morgan and Hotch were out of the house, giving them some privacy. Snape ran a couple more spells over Hotchner while Potter got settled on the couch with Harry, and Lupin took the other couch with Morgan again. Whatever the result of the spells were, they didn't make Snape particularly happy, and he scowled heavily at the table while Hotchner got up to go stand by the doorway and watch the events in the other room.

Potter was irritably frowning in response to a question of Harry's as he took up his new position. "They didn't believe me."

"That you had a case or that you'd go to the police?"

"Both, I think. Now I'm not so sure I've got the first."

"It's very likely that you do and that you just don't know it. Whether Petunia threw pots at you or not like she did to me, I can hardly believe that Vernon hasn't done anything to harm you."
"But they don't behave around me like they did to you. They've never tried to kill me, and they've never tried to starve me to the same extent." Lupin and Morgan looked just as alarmed at that statement as Hotchner felt, but before any of them could ask for clarification, Harry had moved on, and for Hotchner at least, his next few sentences were just as surprising as the preceding one.

"Okay, first, you've got two problems that most of us abuse victims have - denial and misunderstanding. You think that abuse is something that happens to other people because you don't want to admit that you're a victim, and you don't know what abuse really is. It includes a wide range of categories, not just physical abuse."

Morgan's gaze shifted to Hotchner's, one eyebrow tilting up to indicate his surprise at the sudden turnabout in Harry's attitude. Hotchner nodded, agreeing with the indication as information poured out of Harry to his doppelganger.

"Abuse is usually grouped under four main types. The most common one people think of, physical abuse, isn't just reckless and random attempts to cause pain, though that's what's dramatized by the media. It also includes excessive punishment or pain that's a poor fit for the crime, if there was one. Remus, can you get me a pad of paper and a pen?" he asked, and the man blinked in surprise at being addressed before nodding and walking off. Had Harry purposefully separated Potter from someone he respected, to make it more likely that Potter would admit to something, or had that been unintentional?

"Then there are two other types that I think you're more likely to fall under. The first is neglect, which includes the failure to provide adequate shelter, food, and other necessities like you're already thinking, but also love and care. As a result, it has a tendency to overlap with emotional abuse. I'd say this one has the widest inclusion. I'm not sure I can come up with all the bits off the top of my head, but intimidation, isolation, constant degradation, and threatening all count. So does using money, status, or power as leverage."

Harry's voice dropped suddenly, and Hotchner had to strain to hear it. "Now, we could argue all day about whether Vernon and Petunia are physically violent or not - Vernon definitely is, by the way - but I think we can definitely agree on neglect at least." Potter grimaced. "And as a result, I'm sure emotional abuse qualifies."

"But you can't prove that in court!"

"You'd be surprised, I think. Where do they tell everyone you go to school when you leave for Hogwarts?"

"St. Brutus's."

"For criminal boys. How long's your criminal record?"

"I don't have one."

"That's isolation by keeping you away from any friends at home and by putting you with a group of people you don't belong with and degradation by treating you like something you're not. It's also an abuse of their power over you, since they're using their guardianship to send you to a place that's designed to treat children like criminals and scoundrels."

"But I don't actually go to St. Brutus's. That's just what they say."

Harry's smirk was audible. "The British justice system doesn't know that. And the Dursleys can't very well explain you're going to a magical school, can they? It still applies. You'll probably be able
to use the closet, too. It should show signs that you lived there since you would have left traces over
the years. Neighbors would remember bars on the windows - did you have those?"

"Yeah."

"See? You've got a case." He took the pad and pen from Lupin as he walked back into the room,
then wrote furiously for a moment. He passed both to Potter, who read the sentence, stared, read it
again, stared again, then shook his head at Harry, who took the pad and tore the top page off. "Any
argument left?" Harry asked, crumpling the paper and putting it in his pocket as if that event hadn't
happened.

"No, I suppose not. Wouldn't it be hard to put one together when I'm gone for months?"

"You can just threaten to prosecute. Talk to law enforcement in your area, see if you can't get
someone on your side there. Or just go straight to a lawyer, and they can explain to the Dursleys that
you have legal grounds to take action."

"Okay," Potter finally relented. "I'll give it a try."

"Right. Now, I've got an idea about blanking your mind. When you're usually in danger, who comes
to help?"

"Ron. Hermione."

There was an awkward pause.

"...Anyone else?"

"Er, I suppose the Order this last time, and a couple of the DA."

"What the f-? You fought everything else on your own?" Harry demanded.

"Yeah...?"

"What happened in your third year, when Sirius got into the school?"

"Ron got pulled into the Shrieking Shack, so Hermione and I followed until Remus showed up..."

"And then with the dementors?" Harry pressed.

"I threw them off when they tried to suck out Sirius's soul at the lake."

"What about last year, with the tasks? Who helped you?"

"Moody. Well, Crouch Jr., really."

Harry turned sharply towards Hotchner, but he wasn't looking at him. "Snape! Get the hell in here!"
Lupin jumped, startled by the sudden statement, and Potter's expression flickered between horror,
shock, and betrayal.

"Snape's here?" he demanded.

"Which we were keeping quiet," Snape drawled, glaring at Harry as he came to stand by Hotchner.

"What the fuck is this bullshit?" Harry pointed at his bewildered and angry doppelganger. "You all
just let him do this without any help whatsoever?"
"What is he doing here?" Potter shouted.

Snape sneered. "If you would care to use an ounce of common sense--"

"Maybe this isn't the time," Lupin tried to say.

"Quiet!" Harry ordered and the trio hushed. "Potter, he's the reason I'm helping you, so quit the bitching. Lupin, no one's dealt with this for years, and Potter's almost gotten killed so many times you all should be embarrassed. And Snape, the reason he's almost gotten killed that often is because no one gave a damn to protect him like you all promised you would. How exactly does leaving him on his own make it easier for him to stay alive?"

"It's hardly my fault if the blasted boy never does the responsible thing and go for help before charging headfirst into danger!" Snape snarled at him.

"Who would he go to?" Harry shouted back. "He doesn't have any parental figures besides Lupin and Black, who are both incapable of coming to help him unless so much shit has hit the fan that no one cares if the two of them are seen by the public! You're the person who's most able to give him a hand when his life's on the line, and because of this stupid animosity you've fostered between yourselves, you've stripped his ability to ask for help from him!"

"You have no idea what our situation is! Just because your father was-"

"Don't bring my family into this," Harry snapped. "This is about you, not me. It is your duty as his professor to keep him safe. I've told you that before, and you either don't care or you're just not listening. He needs someone to keep an eye out for him, not because he's stupid and enjoys danger, but because he is absolutely incapable of staying out of it when so many people are trying to kill him. You have to help him, because you're his best option. And sometimes, you're his only option."

Before Snape could speak, Harry whirled on his doppelganger. "As for you! What the hell is your problem with Snape?"

"He's an arse!" He didn't even glance Snape's way as the professor glared heatedly at him.

Hotchner and Morgan slowly exchanged looks as the situation continued to devolve around them with Harry at the epicenter of the destruction.

"Oh, did you get that impression when he saved your life from falling off the broom to your death in your first year, or when he became a spy to try to help the Order?"

There was an awkward pause. "Okay, so two incidents-"

"I'm pretty sure I could find more if I knew about your time," Harry interrupted. "Don't forget that his continued existence relies on yours, since everyone thinks you're the one who's supposed to kill Riddle. Besides, did you ever consider how badly it would go for him if he revealed that he was here to protect you? You've got protection from the whole Order. He doesn't, and he's often surrounded by people who'd kill him in a heartbeat for going against Riddle."

"You're just saying that because Dumbledore trusts him!"

Harry snorted. "He's got a monopoly over defense leadership here, but not in my world. I barely give a shit about what Dumbledore thinks." He turned his glare on Snape and Potter. "Now. You two are both very lucky Potter hasn't just died yet because he's had little to no help from anyone who knew what the hell was going on, and you're even luckier that everything he's gotten involved in has been something he's been able to get out of without your help."
"You don't understand the slightest thing about what's going on," Snape immediately replied.

"If you want me to draw up a list of dangerous events in his life that would have gone better with help, I can, but Riddle will probably be dead by the time I'm done."

"Ironic you'd be the one saying he needs help," Snape sneered and Harry gave him an odd look. "If your father hadn't tried to help you-"

"My father," Harry interrupted quickly, "is not involved in this world, so you have no reason to worry about him."

Lupin whipped around. "Your father survived?!"

"He wasn't James Potter, and my mother wasn't Lily Potter."

"You said that before, but you never told me who they were," Potter interjected.

"Oh, please, let's talk about something completely unrelated to everything else important at the moment," Harry snapped irritably. Dread started creeping into Hotchner's thoughts. What he'd suspected was beginning to become undeniable.

"Why don't you want to tell us?" Potter demanded.

"Why doesn't anyone want to get that stupid horcrux out of your head?" Harry shot back. "People keep secrets."

"Do you really think surgery can get the horcrux out?" Lupin interrupted, halting the flow of conversation.

"It worked for me," Harry said after a pause. "It kept coming back, but at least I was able to think clearly and I wasn't randomly possessed by Riddle." With a jerk of his head towards Potter, he added, "By leaving him with the Dursleys, you're also going to make it easier for Riddle to take him over, since he's going to be in a worse mood there."

"So we should take him to headquarters and pamper him?" Snape had been a lot more reasonable before Harry had started throwing accusations around.

"No, you should be a human being for a couple of minutes and get him out of a house that'd be rather delighted to see him die," Harry snapped back.

"If he's still alive now, he can make it a bit longer."

"Snape, you're resisting me for the sake of it, not because you genuinely think that's true. I got out of the Dursley home when they tried to kill me and law enforcement got wind of it. If you want to wait for that, you're being idiotic. Act now while you've still got the advantage, not later when Riddle can catch wind of how bad his situation is, 'cause I'll bet he'd use that against you guys."

"What do you want?" Snape demanded, exasperated.

"You need to start telling Potter what's going on and you two," he said, gesturing to Snape and Potter, "need to stop treating each other like the enemy. You're on the same side, and you should both care that the other survives until the end. Or would you rather talk to someone in a couple of years and say, 'Yes, that guy who was so critical to winning the war, I hated him so I didn't give him a hand when Riddle decided to kill him'?"
No one spoke for a moment.


---

Harry's doppelganger left with Lupin a couple minutes later, rather awkwardly. Morgan gave the room back to Hotchner and Snape, and Hotchner watched Harry curiously as he sat down in the spot Lupin had just vacated on the couch.

"The paper," he began, and Harry turned to look at him. He was starting to show signs of weariness, but his eyes were as focused as they had ever been. "You asked him about the fourth type of abuse on it, after you confused anyone listening by counting and then not counting the abuses so no one would notice you hadn't listed all of them verbally."

Snape frowned. "What's the fourth type?"

Harry just nodded at Hotchner, who smiled slightly and said, "That was clever."

Sexual abuse. Potter probably wouldn't have answered honestly if he had been a victim, not to strangers and people he wanted desperately to appear strong in front of, so Harry had given him a nonverbal way to confirm it if he needed to.

"Thanks."

"What did you say specifically?"

"Because of his age, anything counts." Nice, concise way to let Potter determine if something qualified. Harry turned to Snape. "So?"

Resigning himself to not receiving an answer to his earlier question, Snape said, "I believe I'm right. As far as I can ascertain, you have your blood ward magic within you instead of within your parents. That's why you have such a power boost."

Harry frowned. He didn't look surprised, having maybe heard or suspected it before, but had evidently never asked about it. "But why's that killing me? And how could it be in me in the first place?"

"I would assume it got into you when your father tried to protect you from dying in the cemetery. The latent magic in him, devoted to the blood wards, would have connected to your own magic and stuck to it. As a result, most of the magic went to you, and your father's blood wards could never fully recover. You wouldn't have noticed the surge, except you were forced to give up your wand recently and had to use magic without it."

Harry nodded slowly in understanding. "Okay, I suppose I could see that, but isn't the blood magic mine, in a way? It can't be fighting me."

"I believe it must still be connected to him. It is trying to pull you in his direction so it can go to him. Furthermore..." He stopped. "It is unable to properly protect you against your own magic when it is divided between the world of the living and the dead. Your magic is trying to kill you for your perceived sins."

"That would explain why I got better once I was starving to death," Harry said in understanding, without any concern for what the sentence meant. "I couldn't focus on what I'd done wrong, so my
magic couldn't interpret my emotions to attack me anymore."

"I would assume so."

"How do I fix it?"

Snape went quiet and Hotchner turned to him sharply. "There's nothing to be done. If your situation were different, I would simply tell you to just get over it. But you just don't have the time to come to terms with what has happened."

"So he's just going to constantly swing between danger from outside forces and danger from himself?" Hotchner demanded. "We can't just put him in deadly situations all the time to distract him!"

He started to continue, but Harry sighed, cutting him off. "It's all right," he assured him, and Hotchner turned to him in shock. With a dry smile, he continued, "I'm depressed with a serious case of PTSD and survivor's guilt. I'm just alive because I've been taking care of Jack."

"So you're just resigned to die."

"I've felt like I've been dying for months now. And really, I've felt like a part of me has been dead for a while. I guess, in a sense, I've been right on both accounts, just much more literally than I expected." He looked up to Snape and nodded wearily. "Thank you, for at least giving me a reason."

"Harry. Summon your patronus," Snape said and Harry winced. The older wizard disappeared with a crack.

"Patronus?" Hotchner asked.

"Help me to the backyard."

Clooney had left when Jack had, and Hotchner got him settled on one of the back patio chairs without a problem. When it became clear they weren't going anywhere anytime soon, he took the seat next to him while Harry stared out over the grass. In this lighting, his illness was even starker, and Hotchner was amazed he had managed to move about as much as he had that day.

A couple of minutes passed without Harry moving. His eyes flickered over everything, committing it to memory. The weariness behind the gesture, the profound regret, tore at Hotchner. The boy was barely old enough to have a driver's license. He hardly had earned a fate like this. He'd even been the one to suggest Jack go to stay with Haley, and now Hotchner wondered if Harry had known how this was going to end.

"You're not going to die," Hotchner said sternly. "I don't accept that."

"Good thing I wasn't asking for your opinion on this, then."

Hotchner bit back a more vicious reply, then asked, "What's a patronus?"

"I've heard it's the spirit animal of everything that's good in the caster, but I don't think that's true anymore. I haven't quite decided what it is, but it's not that." He didn't move.

"You're not going to try to summon it?"

"I don't want to," Harry admitted. "It's not my patronus, really. It's my father's, and... I can't think of
a powerful, benevolent memory when I'm expecting his patronus to appear."

Before he could take the coward's way out, he asked, "Harry... Was I your father in the other world?"

Harry closed his eyes and took a deep breath, lips pinched together tightly.

After a pause, "When did you figure it out?"

"You're using profiler techniques, and Jack's only that close to family. I've known for a while, but I just wanted to be sure."

Harry sat in silence for a little bit, before taking a shaky breath. "I was taken through the Blood Relocation Program," he finally said. "That's why I was with the Dursleys. You met me during a case, and we found out the truth a while later." After a reluctant moment, he glanced over at Hotchner. "Well?"

"Did I leave you, in your world? Is that why you took Jack?"

Harry opened his mouth, but nothing came out. His eyes watered for a moment until Harry shut them and turned his head skyward with a grimace, clearly trying to force any tears back. For a long minute, it seemed like he was going to qualify the statement. Nothing he wanted to say was coming out. Finally, he nodded, unable to give any other reply.

"And... And Haley?"

A head shake.

"Is that why you hate me so much? Because I left?"

"You broke a promise to me," Harry croaked. "Something... Something you told me you'd never do. And you did it, without a thought for how it'd hurt me." He ran a hand over his face. "I brought Jack here instead of going back. I couldn't stand to see Sean, and... Well, your father's an arse, so we couldn't go there... And I don't know my aunt very well..."

"My father?" Hotchner asked before he could stop himself. Harry looked at him curiously. "He died decades ago."

"He's still alive in our world. What did he die from?"

"Lung cancer."

"Oh. He got that, but he recovered." He glanced at Hotchner's expression. "What?"

"You're being...oddly agreeable."

He gave him a knowing look. "You mean, why do I act like a bratty teenager whenever I'm arguing with you, which is constantly?"

"...Yes."

"Because you'll win if I'm logical."

"Don't take defeat well?"

"Can't afford to, usually. It's become a habit."
Hotchner took a deep breath. "I can understand if you don't want to be anywhere near me, considering what my other self did to you." Especially considering what Hotchner suspected his other self had done to Harry that wasn't being said. It was definitely looking like the presence of his father had somehow caused his other self to grow up into the same abusive parenting style. "But Harry, you need to go somewhere."

"Jack does."

"You both do," Hotchner corrected. "Look, go stay with Haley. You get along with her, and you won't ever see me."

The immediate denial fell away at the honest expression on Hotchner's face. "I'll think about it," Harry muttered, and Hotchner wondered if there had been a good deal of emotional manipulation that his son had just gotten used to. "Considering it's unlikely I'll make it through this, Jack can still stay with her, right?"

"Yes."

Harry turned from him, staring out over the backyard, and didn't say anything else.

Chapter End Notes

I haven't been replying to a lot of messages because I don't want to accidentally spoil something. I'm still enjoying all your reviews, though!
"I wanted you to see what real courage is, instead of getting the idea that courage is a man with a gun in his hand. It's when you know you're licked before you begin but you begin anyway and you see it through no matter what." - *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee

Hotchner woke up to a scuffing noise, and then a muffled thump followed by a soft, frustrated groan. He opened his eyes, gazing across the living room, only to shoot up in shock when he saw that Harry was off the couch. Not only that, he had managed to somehow get into the kitchen, and was currently sitting on the floor with one forearm resting on the table, which must have been his prop before he had collapsed.

Hearing him shift, Harry glanced back at Hotchner, scowling when he saw that he'd been caught. That didn't make him recalcitrant in the slightest.

"What the hell are you doing?" Hotchner demanded, walking over to him.

"I barely tried earlier, and you need the patronus."

"What for?"

"Atlas can track down Foyet."

"That'd be great - later. " He walked to Harry and tried to help him up by acting as leverage on one side, but Harry wasn't able to push himself up. Instead, Hotchner had to wrap his arms around the teenager, as if hugging him, while Harry looped his arms around Hotchner's neck to hold on, and the agent got him up and into a seat that way. "Don't worry about him until you're better. Taking him down is to protect you and the others. It doesn't make sense to kill yourself trying. Besides, why couldn't you do it in here?"

"Atlas needs space." He glanced back to the door, as if judging the distance and whether he could stumble across it or not.

Hotchner frowned at him. "Wait a moment," he said, and Harry looked at him curiously while he left the room and came back a half minute later. Harry's face immediately darkened.

"I thought we were done with those," he snapped irritably.

"We were because you couldn't go anywhere, but since that's evidently not the case I guess they're going back on." He took one of Harry's wrists and locked a cuff to it. "Come on, you're going back to bed."

"Can't sleep."

"At least try. Maybe take some of your own advice."

When he managed to get Harry lying back down, he knelt next to the couch to attach the second cuff
to the leg. It had been mildly easier to navigate around the house while they could both move, but there was no way they could do it while Harry was immobilized like this.

"Really?" Harry sighed, frustrated.

"Yes. Now get some rest."

---

Harry took his advice, unfortunately, and Hotchner woke up only an hour or so later to more strange noises.

For the second time that night, he slipped off the couch and hurried to Harry, this time to shake him awake. Harry recoiled away from him at the initial touch, hands coming up for protection, and then went straight back to clawing at his wrist and whispering, panicked, to himself.

His wrist had been scratched red, and Hotch wrapped one hand around it to stop Harry from doing anymore damage. Harry grabbed his hand and tried to pull him off, but he reached out and started to shake Harry's shoulder as he called his name. Finally, the boy jolted awake, releasing his hand, but not completely aware.

His eyes focused on him and he reached out and grabbed Hotchner's forearm in an iron grip. "Dad, they took them, they took- They're going to kill them, they'll finish it this time, they-"

"Harry," he said soothingly.

"No, Dad, please-"

"Harry, calm down-"

"Dad, Dad, you have to find- You have to find Gideon, they took him, they took his body and Blaise is dead and he- he-"

"Harry, it's just a dream."

"No-"

"Harry, it's just a dream. You're here with me, in Rossi's house. You've been sick for over a week."

Harry stared at him, eyes wide, then slowly relaxed, horrified by his own reaction. "Oh..."

"It's okay. Just calm down. It's okay." He rubbed the shoulder his hand was resting on soothingly, then squeezed lightly. "Does this happen often?"

Harry shrugged shakily, nerves still on fire. "Sometimes. Sorry." And, still trembling, he pulled away from Hotchner, pushing himself back into the couch and turning his face halfway into the pillow as he folded his arms to keep his hands close to himself. It was the only retreat he had, and Hotchner let him have it, knowing he had nothing else and there was no point in cornering Harry.

An hour later, though, and he was waking up again to similar sounds.

"Get it off, get it off," he was whispering, scrabbling at the handcuff again while Hotchner moved next to him once more. "No, Dad, Dad!"

"Harry!"
The teenager woke instantly this time, and Hotchner was alarmed to see that his face was wet. "Please take it off," he whispered hoarsely. "Please."

And of every sight that he had seen so far around Harry, that one scared him the most - to see the proud, powerful boy beg.

He unlocked the handcuffs and tucked them away in his pocket, then rubbed the abused wrist while he murmured to Harry. Someone was walking down the stairs, but Hotchner stayed focused on Harry, and whoever it was went back up when they saw that no one was in danger. "It's off, you're okay," he murmured. Harry let him have the wrist, but he buried his face into his pillow again. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

After a long moment, Hotchner asked, "How did you get these scars on your wrists?"

Harry gave a humorless smile, half-hidden. "The way you're assuming I got them."

"I can't think of anything that could have done this."

"But you know I was tied up." His free hand was tucked under his side, bringing his arm across his midsection to protect it.

"No restraints I've seen would do this."

"It sort of looked like barbed wire."

Hotchner winced. "I'm sorry. We should have considered that before, when we put the cuff on."

"I didn't have problems with it before. I thought I was completely fine." He let out a frustrated breath, still shaking slightly from the aftereffects of the dream. "Sorry, again..."

"You're not doing it on purpose. It's probably just the fever, messing with your head."

Hotchner doubted it. No, the problem had started once Harry was attached to something that was an inanimate object, something that wasn't Hotchner, something that he didn't trust. And Harry had definitely trusted Hotchner in his own timeline, if he was to be believed about that promise. Had it been hard for his other self to abuse that trust so easily, to take the most precious thing away from the teenager?

Or rather, if Hotchner was right, had it been easy for his other self to mistreat his own son like that?

---

Elle and Draco, as had become their norm, were hiding in a corner of the castle whispering and smirking at each other while they compiled information and made assessments. To everyone else, it was starting to become a bit terrifying, but they let the pair have their fun. Currently, to Hermione's knowledge, they were particularly focused on discovering just why the DA had managed to win the battles so soundly against Riddle's forces despite all their apparent disadvantages.

Ron was sitting beside her in the DADA classroom. It was empty constantly now, a solemn reminder of the tragic departure of their last professor, but Hermione couldn't help but feel calmer in the room somehow. She got the feeling that maybe, if she paid attention enough and focused, she could hear Gideon giving her advice. Her boyfriend, whatever his feelings on being in the room, had never commented on it, understanding why she choose this place to think and plan.
Harry's wand was on the desk in front of her, and she frowned thoughtfully at it. "We still can't bring him back," she said, "but maybe it's time to send him an update on the situation. A proper one, so he really knows what's going on."

"Elle can go over another time," Ron agreed. "We can't spare anyone else." He paused, then said, "Did you hear Draco's picking up classes again?"

"No, but that's good. We all need to move on from this eventually, and we need to remember this war isn't going to last forever." With an annoyed scowl, she added, "Riddle's not even a problem right now, really. He's just out there, and that's enough of a threat that we still have to devote all these resources to tracking him down."

Most of the students had all gone home by now, with the castle repaired and classes hurriedly finished over the last couple of months. They would have a bit of break, and then return soon for the next year, which was being pushed back to allow the children more time with their families. Some, however, had chosen to remain inside the school for various reasons. A couple, like Ron and the rest of the Weasley children, had parents who were still there, but others just didn't really have anywhere else to go. Cassius's bunch still hadn't decided if they were going to continue staying at his house or not. As for Hermione, she very well couldn't just leave when Harry was already gone.

"Do you think he's staying safe?" Hermione asked, without needing to explain who, and Ron just laughed.

She started to make a checklist in her mind of what needed to be accomplished before school started, then frowned thoughtfully to herself. It was strange that so much of it needed to be handled, at least in part, by the DA, but the group had become so essential to and ingrained in the functioning of the school that, in another way, it wasn't strange in the slightest. The school, after all, wouldn't be standing proudly, unconquered, if not for them. Still, now that it was safe and sound, having adults look to them for approval was starting to become unnerving.

Harry had managed it so well while he was here. If he'd ever had a problem with it, Hermione hadn't ever noticed. She had just spent meetings backing him up or giving information for everyone to think about. When he returned, she made sure to remind herself to ask how he'd managed it with such poise and confidence, even as the war visibly took its inevitable toll on him.

"We need a new DADA and potions professor," she said slowly. "Dumbledore's having trouble finding either." That was old news, but it helped to restate it out loud. "The BAU needs to get back to their own lives and jobs, so we can't call them back."

"Could we use students? That's how a lot of us were learning last year, anyway." Hermione paused and Ron waved it aside. "Nevermind. Just thinking."

"It wouldn't work permanently, but it would do until we could get rid of that stupid curse for the DADA. And I don't expect this war's going to last much longer than a year or so, not in the state we're in now, so Snape should be able to return and take the post once it's all done."

"Snape? Oh, yeah, he wanted that position forever, didn't he?"

She nodded. "And I think it's about time he got it, though that still leaves us short a potions professor."

Ron grimaced and irritably shrugged it off. "I think we need to leave that bit to Dumbledore. It's not like we know anyone particularly skilled at that, besides upper class students, and I don't think many of the recent students were really paying attention."
"All right then. As for the students themselves... We're still looking at thirty orphaned, or at least in a situation where they can't go home. I really think Hogwarts needs to have a summer program, in a sense. If they need to, students should be able to remain here if they don't have anywhere else to go. The Ministry isn't offering a legal alternative."

"But they didn't let Harry do that the summer before his second year."

"Exactly, and look at what almost happened to him," Hermione replied grimly. "We're in a different position now. There are too many students who need help and not enough places to take them in. We can't ask Quantico to host this many again, and even if older students wanted to help, they won't have enough space. The DA holds enough weight that we can probably pressure the school governors into allowing it."

Ron smiled at her. "You're terrifying. In a good way, of course."

"Thanks." She pecked him on the cheek and he beamed brighter. "Your mother seems to be doing better after Harry left."

"She had accepted him as one of us, and then she got a pretty nasty shock." With a wince, he continued, "Probably should have seen that coming..."

"There was nothing to be done about it for a while. Besides, it's okay now."

"And your parents?"

She sighed. She hadn't really had a conversation with them in a year, not since communications had broken off with the BAU. And now that... Well, now that Hotch was gone, there wasn't anyone they could go to when they didn't understand the situation and wanted clarification, because they had trusted Hotch as a credible source of information. Her expression tightened as she realized she hadn't told them what had happened at the end of the war in detail.

"They're...fine. Safe. I just... I feel so separated from them right now."

"You could probably take a few days off to go see them." As she started to argue, he shook his head. "You need a break too, or you're going to start having problems. It'll be good for them, too. We can hold everything down here. Riddle's not going to pull together a worrisome army in a week."

She smiled and nodded. "Accompany me, then?"

"Oh, I'm getting introduced as the love interest?"

"I suppose it's about time."

Hermione took Ron's hands, then got to her feet and pulled him up with her. "Let's go tell everyone they're going to need to keep the castle from falling into ruins for a little while."

---

Blaise, Luna, and Ginny had taken to sticking to each other closely, so it made it easier to tell when they had enough time to slip away to America to keep searching through Hotch's files. They had also taken the time to cast a preservation charm on the house. It just seemed like the right thing to do, to keep everything the same until Harry could get home and decide what he wanted to do with it, in case they couldn't get Hotch back.

Luna was reading a book in the small room they had found and were currently hiding in. Ginny and
Blaise were pressed against the other end playing cards so any explosions didn’t singe Luna, and the two were getting into it, swearing at each other excitedly. Luna just turned a page as another explosion set Ginny off into a sailor-worthy rant.

Blaise grinned as, a few minutes later, she took the next small explosion as well, and she jerked back instinctively, elbow colliding with a part of the wall behind her. She turned sharply, feeling it go in, and Blaise's smile faded. "What?" he asked and she prodded at the hole.

"I think this closet goes back farther," she said and pushed at it again, forcing the wall in until a small square, a meter high and a half meter long, had been created.

Luna put a bookmark on her page and closed the book. "Perhaps you shouldn't do that..."

"Wait, there's something..." Ginny suddenly threw herself away from the hole, landing half on Blaise, who started and fell backwards. "Shit!"

Luna moved to sit next to them, then bent down to get a better look. A pile of small bodies lay inside, exactly like the stack that had covered the dungeons for so long except with children. The youngest were babies. Beside her, Blaise sucked in a deep breath and yanked his wand out, holding it at the horrible sight.

"How could that be here?" he demanded in a harsh whisper. "Ginny, go get- Luna!"

She moved forward onto her stomach and crawled forward a little bit until she was right in front of the hole. The pile wavered and became less distinguished, as if it were uncertain as to whether it wanted to be one body or many.

"A boggart," Ginny murmured, pulling out her wand.

"Wait a moment," Luna said calmly to them, then turned back to it. "Excuse me, and excuse them. That was awfully rude of us. Can I help you, somehow, to make up for it?"

The image of the bodies, if at all possible, went still. Luna slowly extended her hand, palm up, in a friendly gesture. "If you come out for a little bit, perhaps I could get you some food, or whatever you would like. We have very good cooks in the kitchens below, and I don't expect you get much up here, hiding away."

Ginny and Blaise slowly turned to look at each other, sharing incredulous expressions.

When a minute passed without change, Luna said politely, "I really am sorry. You're just as scared of us as we are of you. But we're not going to hurt you, though I'm afraid you're upsetting my friend right now. If you change out of that form, she won't be so scared, and then I can get you what you want, and you won't be as scared either."

Something happened, and Luna perked up with a smile. "Yes, of course!" she said in response to something neither of the other two had heard. "I think we have the best here." Another pause, and then she laughed softly. "Oh, yes, we have quite a bit of that. The Americans brought it."

Then the bodies were gone, the edges and lines of the figure whipping backwards, down, and forwards into a small shape, between the size of a ferret and a rat, with a heavy coat of tawny fur. The ears were like a fox's, triangular and pricked, and its paws were wide and clawed. A long tail danced through the air nervously. The boggart stumbled closer, weaving as if drunk, then abruptly corrected itself and walked straight to Luna's hand, putting its paws in her palm.

"Is that...?" Ginny whispered and the boggart flinched backwards, though its paws didn't leave
"Yes," Luna replied calmly, and the boggart crept forward until its could lay its belly down on her hand and curl its claws in on top of her forearm. She slowly brought her other arm around to scoop up the hind legs and tail, and then she shifted until she was in a kneeling position and readjusted the boggart so it could comfortably lay in her arms. "Can someone get the door? Let's go to the kitchen."

"It's hungry?" Ginny asked as she started to get up. The movement startled the boggart and it hid its head in the crook of Luna's arm.

"Yes. Slowly now, if you don't mind."

"Can that thing understand what we're saying?" Blaise asked, shocked.

"Whether it can or not, it must be able to hear our thoughts and emotions," Luna pointed out as Ginny opened the door. "It can interpret what we mean to say. After all, how else would it be able to know what we fear?"

The boggart started making a noise between a churring and a small engine rumbling, and Luna smiled at the creature. "My, aren't you cute?"

---

Hermione and Ron didn't get to tell anyone they were leaving, because they were stopped by the twins running towards them in the hallway.

"Riddle tried to get into the Ministry," Fred panted.

The other two exchanged glances, and then all four of them ran to the headmaster's office. On the way, the twins said that they had been with Molly when the news had come in from her husband, and everyone else was gathering in the office to decide what to do now.

When they entered, the discussion was already getting heated, not out of argument but out of general frustration over the Ministry. Moody, in particular, was getting rather aggravated by the ineptitude of the government and had no difficulty in vocalizing his opinion. The Ministry was the only group that was never represented at any of the war meetings, rather ironically.

"Do we know what he was doing there?" Hermione asked as she took a seat, Ron beside her.

Kingsley shook his head. "He and Lestrange were seen trying to sneak in, but they fled once someone noticed them. They weren't close enough to any particular department to be sure where they were going."

"But there's one thing he wanted in the Department of Mysteries last time," Ron pointed out. "He could use that."

The door slammed open and Tonks all but fell in. "She's out," she gasped. "The bitch, they got her out! They weren't entering the Ministry, they were leaving when they were spotted!"

"Who got out?" Dumbledore demanded.

"Umbridge."

"Of everyone they would release, why her?" Remus asked by the door, frowning heavily. He had
returned when it became obvious that there would be no adverse side effects from the treatment. As far as Hermione knew, JJ and Will had taken Henry and gone back to Quantico, leaving the Apache-granted safe house empty. "She wasn't too important to the war, and she doesn't scare anyone like, say, the Carrows."

"She was in the Ministry," Moody muttered. "She might know something, especially since she had Fudge's trust. Voldemort could think that he might have told her important information."

"What's the security like on the Ministry?" Hermione asked. "Is there anything we can do to improve it?"

Dumbledore shook his head sadly. "Scrimgeour has taken the post of Minister of Magic, and he is trying to regain public trust by showing how strong his aurors are. The story is certainly being described as Voldemort stopping before he could enter the government to show how competent the Ministry is now. He won't approve assistance."

"You've already asked, haven't you?" Remus said grimly, and Dumbledore nodded.

"We need to talk to Fudge about what he might have told her," Hermione said. "Professor Dumbledore, do you think you could do it?"

"I may be able to. I already have another old associate I need to visit in the hope of convincing him out of retirement to see to the post of our potions professor."

"I don't think there's anything else we can do at this moment besides remain vigilant," Moody said. "Might as well head out now."

And then the door opened to reveal Hagrid, gasping for breath. "Jus' got..." He gulped in air for a moment. "From Olympe, she says, she says the giants are moving."

"Olympe?" Ron muttered to Hermione.

"Maxime," she whispered back.

"He's gathering the giants," McGonagall said, horrified. "That's outside of England. He's getting help from so far away?"

"He is forced to, in his current situation," Dumbledore said. "He needs an army from somewhere."

The team, the ever-dutiful team, was still hunting down Foyet, and Hotchner sent them out as often as they could. It wouldn't be as hard on them to see Harry slip away, and it wouldn't be as undignified for Harry to have them see his decline. Hotchner, however, was forced to stay near him constantly, but it was becoming harder for him to watch. Dr. Hammond had stopped by and told him quietly that all of Harry's non-vital organs had shut down, and the vital ones not controlling breathing, respiration, and neural processing were starting to follow. Harry, overhearing despite his relaxed state, said he would try to cast a stasis spell on them so any necrosis wouldn't poison him.

Snape appeared to check on the situation, but Harry reached out and grabbed Hotchner's wrist while Snape wasn't looking and whispered to him to send Snape away. Without questioning it, he did. Snape had a living Harry Potter to take care of, not a dead one to watch. There wasn't anything he could do anyway.

Three days after Harry had seen Potter, Hotchner came back from the kitchen to see him awkwardly
grasping his IV stand, as if trying to get a good hold on it. When he'd secured his grip, he dragged the stand in one direction, then shifted his balance in his torso to move himself a few inches closer to the edge of the couch.

Hotchner almost wanted to just keep standing there to see how far he'd get, but he knew Harry would keep pushing until he managed it, no matter if it killed him. There wasn't much more he could do besides speed it up at this point. "Going somewhere?" he asked.

"I want to go outside again." He shoved the IV stand out of his way on the assumption that he could get up. "One last time. After this, I don't think I'll be strong enough."

Everyone had agreed that Harry shouldn't be moved for any reason, and while Hotchner still truly hoped that Harry could make a miraculous recovery, this wasn't something he could deny him. He walked over and put Harry's arm over his shoulder, then wrapped his own around Harry's back. "Push against me."

Harry tried, and with every bit of strength left, he managed to stand, leaning heavily against Hotchner. His strength was so weak, despite his best efforts, he was grabbing onto Hotchner to use his arms just as much as he was using his legs. They weren't going to be able to keep standing like this for much longer, let alone walk.

"Okay, hang on," he said quietly and lowered Harry back down even as Harry shook his head firmly. "We're doing this, but that's not going to work. Can you pull the stand along?"

Harry nodded, and Hotchner slipped one arm under his knees and the other beneath his shoulder blades, then hefted the teen up. Harry sighed silently and succumbed to it, gripping the stand in the arm not trapped against Hotchner. He tucked his head under the doppelganger of his father, unable to support the weight of the wise but young brain inside.

Hotchner took a moment to get his balance, then started moving towards the kitchen and, past it, the backyard. The rising and falling of Harry's chest was soft, too soft, against his own, and he would have been more inclined to say he was carrying an unconscious or a de- an unresponsive body than an awake and aware one. Despite all of Harry's pride, what would once have been unacceptable by ever allowing help from the twin of his traitor, he had no choice but to submit to the assistance. The bravery that took, to put his faith once more in the person who was like his father, and the humility in admitting his body's failings surpassed anything Hotchner would have considered the teenager capable of.

Now Hotchner thought he was truly beginning to understand, through Harry's fortitude in the face of his illness and against Foyet, his wisdom in his usage of his brilliance and his acceptance of his situation, his compassion for those around him and for those in need, and his forgiveness for everything the world had thrown at him and for all the injustices he had suffered at the hands of others, just what a remarkable teenager Harry's father had been graced to have.

Harry tilted his head up to the warm sunlight when they stepped outside, but his eyes weren't as clear as they once were. His lens in his eyes were smaller than they should have been in normal light, and Dr. Hammond had quietly told him that it was because the ciliary muscles in his eyes, like the rest of his muscles, were giving out.

Hotchner carefully took him over to a bench swing and laid him out on it. Once he was sure Harry was settled, he left with a quiet murmur, then returned with blankets that had become necessary even in the warmth of the evening. He moved to sit next to Harry's head, and when there was no complaint, adjusted both of them so the teen was partially resting on his lap. Perhaps it was cruel, to remind him of his father in this way, but there was no other comfort to give him before he was gone,
and Hotchner thought that, the lack of friends and family in his last hours, was much more terrible.
"I don't actually want to die."

The whisper caught him off guard, having almost thought that Harry had drifted off to sleep. "What do you mean?"

"The way Snape said it, like I'd given up... That's not true. For a while, I hoped I would. And a couple of times, when I first started to go hungry, I just didn't care if I made it or not so long as Jack was okay. But now... I know I'd get over it if I had more time, and I'll be all right if I could just..." He trailed off and went quiet for a couple of moments. "Besides, after everyone we lost in fighting, I think they'd be disappointed if I died after we'd already won because I just gave up."

"You believe in an afterlife?"

"In a way. I died for a short time, and I went to an in-between place, so I know there's something there. Theoretically there's something beyond that, or at least, that's what the Potters thought when I met them there. They hadn't gone yet so they couldn't know for sure." He gave a faint, ironic smile. "Looks like I'll be finding out before you."

No child should go before their parent. In a way, he was glad his doppelganger hadn't stuck around to see this. It was killing him and he had known the teenager for a couple of weeks. "I hope you don't reach that point. I want you to make it."

"Well, I should hope so, otherwise you'd be a complete ass."

Hotchner was shocked into a small smile. "Others would say I already am."

"You've done bad things. It doesn't make you a bad person. What you did doesn't define you - what you wanted does." Harry's expression shook, and Hotchner knew his thoughts had drifted somewhere else. "It all happened so fast, and... But I don't think you would have hesitated, if- if you'd known anyway, and I don't know, I don't know if I should love you or hate you for that. I just... I never wanted to have to doubt anything about you, and then... And then you were just as flawed and human as me."

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His lungs were the next to crash, later that evening.

His face had gone entirely pale now, no longer able to send enough blood through his body to create a flush. The next time he sucked in a deep breath and pushed it out, it sounded like something from a ghost movie. Because his heart was slowing down, the blood wasn't pumping as quickly, and it meant it took longer for oxygen in his lungs' alveoli to diffuse into the blood stream.

They were just waiting for the end now, and it sounded like it was starting to come.

Morgan was sitting in a chair beside the couch, hands clasping Harry's. Hotchner had tried to get him to leave when it was just unnecessarily painful to watch this happening, but the agent had steadfastly refused, remaining by Harry with Hotchner once he'd gotten back from his last unfruitful mission. He looked up, expression haggard and tragic, as Harry rasped in another breath.

"Can you hear it?" Morgan whispered.

"His breathing's getting worse," Hotchner replied, just as quietly.
Harry's head moved slightly, and Hotchner realized he was too weak to even shift it back enough to suck in more air. The agent turned so he could reach up and lift Harry's head, and then he moved until he had seated himself under Harry and could lower the teen back onto him. It wouldn't do him much good, but maybe it would give him some small comfort as he left.

Harry's hand was like ice when Hotchner took it and tried to rub some warmth in. It might have been his imagination, but he thought he could feel it twitch in response. All his muscles but the ones in his torso seemed to have completely gone out, and the last ones were the only things keeping him breathing.

"Harry, stay with me," he murmured as Harry's lungs pulled in as big of a breath as they could manage. A vase broke somewhere to his left in response to his magic. "Can you still hear me?"

Remarkably, the rhetorical question, said in an attempt to fake some sort of conversation, elicited eyes to slowly shift in his direction.

"Good, good... You just need to get past this part, and you'll be fine, okay?"

His lips were blue as his chest heaved again.

Hotchner moved his hands, continuously trying to warm up parts of Harry's body that weren't covered by blankets or the winter gear they had piled onto him. He had to be careful not to jostle the IV, which they had been forced to put into his neck because the veins in his hands and elbows had become too small. Harry's breathing stopped multiple times, and after each halt Hotchner thought it was the end, only for Harry to suddenly jerk into another breathing spasm after the awkward pause.

"Why did this happen?" Morgan asked angrily. "After everything, this is just..."

Hotchner grimaced. "Not fair?"

Morgan's jaw clenched. "It seems like there should be something we could do."

And then the whispering started, and Hotchner felt his heart beginning to pound in his chest as the voice crept around them. Morgan stared at him, eyes wide, but all Hotchner could do was shake his head to express his confusion and growing horror.

"Breathe in... Breathe out... Breathe in..."

Suddenly, Harry's erratic breathing stopped.

"Breathe out... Breathe in..."

And started again, steady, regular, and in perfect time with the bodiless voice. It was as deep as Hotchner's, but there was a strange, rasping quality to it, as if its' own breathing was restricted. Still, without pause or stuttering, it continued, calming and encouraging.

"Breathe out... Breathe in... Breathe out..."

He shook himself as he realized he was starting to follow the voice's commands, and Morgan grimaced as he came to the same conclusion. He looked around again, but there was no obvious source. As he moved his head, though, it sounded like it was coming from somewhere between Hotchner and Morgan.

Something warm touched his hand that was resting on Harry's face and he jerked away involuntarily.
Harry's skin moved slightly as if someone were touching it, and all he could do was stare as the whispering continued.

"Breathe in... Breathe out..."

The hours crept on, and the whispering never stopped. Hotchner eventually gave in, so all three of them were inhaling and exhaling in unison. At one point, Morgan reached over and turned on a light, and Hotchner thought that he could see just the faintest touch of color to Harry's face. Another half hour and there was no denying that Harry's breaths had not only grown less desperate but had even become more controlled.

The backdoor clicked open quietly, and both of them whipped around sharply to see the figure coming in. She froze, not expecting to see them up, and then closed the door behind her. "Damn," Elle said unabashedly as she moved closer. "Was hoping to catch him alone. Shit hit the fan. You mind giving us some time?" Then she was near enough to see their expressions, though Morgan was blocking the view. She stopped completely, then ran forward the last few steps until she could look at Harry. "No, no... What happened?"

Hotchner quietly explained, and she knelt down next to Harry's head. The bodiless voice had ceased.

"He was supposed to live forever," she whispered, hand reaching out to lightly touch his bangs.

"Aren't we all?" Morgan murmured. "Everyone thinks we've got more time than we do..."

"Yes, but all of this was for him. That's why the BAU got involved in England - to save Harry, to protect him." She looked up at both. "Have you tried contacting Snape again?"

"He just told Harry to summon his patronus and then left."

Elle paused, frowning slightly. "That could work."

They stared at her. "What?" Morgan asked, dumbfounded.

"The patronus, it... He thinks it's his father's, and the discord with his father right now... It's part of the reason for this. If he could get over what happened, enough to summon the patronus... But to do that, he'd have to get over what happened, and... He couldn't manage that when he was healthy."

"Get over what?" Morgan asked, confused.

"What I did to him," Hotchner murmured, and both of them stared at him in shock, though for different reasons.

"What?"

"What do you know?" Elle demanded.

"Probably murdered someone, from the way he's acted around me."

"Oh, he would have forgiven you for that," Elle murmured. "What did he tell you?"

"He said I broke a promise. I couldn't get him to say more." He absently continued to try to rub warmth into the teenager, moving back to his hand.

Horror colored Elle's expression as he continued to speak, and she finally shook her head in negation. "No, that's... That's not quite what happened. I don't know what the promise was, but I can
take a good guess. He didn't trust you because of that promise..."

"He trusted me because I was his father."

Morgan flinched and looked away, and Hotchner's suspicions that the others had started to figure it out too was confirmed. Elle grimaced, closing her eyes and nodding. "Yes," she said. "He was taken from you by the Blood Relocation Program. You didn't meet until he was twelve, three years ago. Did he really not say anything?"

"No. And somehow I managed to be horrible enough by the end that he hated me worse than he hated the Dursleys."

"He could never have hated you. You loved him and you cared for him, and that was the only thing he'd ever wanted in his whole life. Within weeks of meeting each other, you were practically inseparable, and at the end of it all, you were the best of friends. By the time the war started, we'd find him by looking for you in crowds, and whenever we needed to find you we'd ask people where Harry was organizing and directing the castle. He was the only person who could make you smile during that time, and you were the only one who could make him rest. You couldn't have been a better match for each other."

"Then... Why can't he stand me? Why's he here?"

She looked at him with pain-filled eyes. "Oh, Hotch, isn't it obvious? You did the one thing he could never forgive you for - you died."

---

Elle soon hurried away without much of an explanation, once again leaving the two agents alone with Harry. It was hard to watch the teenager die, and while Hotchner understood that, he couldn't help but condemn her for turning her back on someone who needed comfort in his last hours even if he couldn't tell who was giving it.

Harry's breathing had steadied out, and he was slowly, painfully starting to return to consciousness again. Hotchner had been hoping he wouldn't, allowing himself to slip off quietly instead of putting up a last, futile and horrifying fight. But when his eyes opened, dim but focusing as well as they could, Hotchner knew he was back.

"Hey," Hotchner said quietly, and then, because it was what parents did when they watched a child dying, he said, "You're doing better. If you can just make it through tonight..."

Harry smiled slightly, so honestly that Hotchner thought he'd actually managed to convince him. "Liar," Harry whispered, but the smile didn't fade.

He was still awake ten minutes later, quietly dying, showing no signs of slipping away again. "What are you thinking about?" Hotchner asked.

"I'm glad he died quickly," Harry said. "This really sucks."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." His smile softened a bit. "You know, I thought... I thought I should apologize, when I died...for not holding on longer...but I think he'll understand."

"Anything else you think you're going to tell him?"
He shook his head minutely. "He already knows it all. And he'd probably whack me upside the head if I tried to apologize for getting him killed."

"What do you mean?"

"I... I'm not sure it was my fault anymore."

Hotchner frowned. "Why did you think it was?"

His eyes moved to meet his, and they might have been dim but the intensity of the look made him stop breathing for a moment. "Because you survived in this world." He tried to smile in a self-deprecating manner. "Why did you think I hated you so much?"

The back door opened, and all three of them glanced towards it. Elle entered after an awkward pause, and, ignoring the other two, knelt by Harry's side. He smiled slightly at her as she ruffled a hand through his bangs. A faint tremble ran through her fingers, but if Harry noticed it he didn't comment on it.

"Looks like I was right," Harry rasped.

"Looks like," she agreed quietly. "Harry... Do you think you're going to make it another day or two?" He shook his head slowly. "Is there anyone you want to talk to before you go, from your world?"

"I... No. They don't need to see this. It'll just make things worse for them," he said.

She nodded, still rubbing his head soothingly. "Okay. I thought so. But...do you want to talk to Jack?" Harry hesitated. "It's not just for you. This is the last time he'll see you."

Harry's eyes were bright just before he closed them tightly, nodding. "Yes."

"It'll take him a while to get here," Morgan said cautiously.

"I went ahead and brought him," Elle said. "I was worried about that too." She patted Harry's head one last time. "I'm going to go get him, okay?"

Morgan got up too, but he stayed in the kitchen with Elle to give the two kids some privacy. The lupine Jack padded across the floor, ears and tail solemnly low. Harry put out one hand and Jack nuzzled his snout into it for a moment.

The boy shifted form and sat on the ground next to the couch. His eyes were brighter than Harry's but just as unfocused. "Harry?"

"I'm sorry, Jack," his older brother whispered. Voice cracking, he added, "I don't have much longer."

Jack shook faintly, but he said, "What do you mean?"

"Something's wrong with my magic," he explained. "I can't control it, and it's killing me. There's nothing we can do."

"But... We fixed me and Elle and Remus," Jack said quickly. "And no one thought we could."

"We had time to fix you. We... We don't have time to fix me."

Jack stared in general direction, horrified, then swiped an arm across his face to scrub away tears.
"But you said... You said we'd both go back..."

"I'm sorry," Harry repeated, and then his composure fell apart as he said, crying, "I'm so sorry, for everything. None of this sh-should have happened, I- I..." Jack lunged forward and Harry moved one arm to hug him, holding his brother close. He could only cry weakly against him, but Jack's entire body was shaking with the force of his sobs.

"Please don't go," Jack whispered hoarsely. "I d-don't want to be alone."

"You're going to stay with...with the Hotchners here, okay?" Harry managed to get out. "They'll keep you safe."

"I want you to keep me safe, like before," Jack protested.

"I..."

"I know what you did, Harry." He was trembling so violently Harry was having a hard time holding onto him. "When you didn't want me to be hungry."

Hotchner didn't know what that meant, and from the look on Harry's face, his brother wasn't entirely sure either, and that was scarier for the wizard than knowing for certain. Harry lost the last bit of reserve he had, and he let himself helplessly weep against his brother. Hotchner thought he was trying to say something, maybe another apology or maybe a thank you, but it was too desperate and broken to make out, and finally, Harry just gave up and clung to Jack.

After what seemed like a short eternity, Harry managed to pull himself away, and he looked up at Hotchner. "Can you get me to the backyard?" he asked.

"What?"

"I think... Maybe I can leave Atlas here, for Jack. Maybe not, but... It's worth a try."

"Morgan," Hotchner called. Morgan hurried in and, at Hotchner's gesture, came close to the bed. "Help me," Hotchner said, and between the two of them, they lifted Harry up into his arms.

"Leave the IV. It'll just be in the way," Harry said, voice creaking. Jack was standing next to them, looking up with tear streaks on his cheeks.

Hotchner nodded at Morgan, tightening his hold on the teenager. There was no muscle tone under his hands. His heart wasn't keeping pace like it should have been and his body wasn't getting the nutrients delivered like it needed. He was simply going to run out of energy, but the IV wasn't going to fix it in the next hour. Morgan detached the tube.

They got him outside, Jack walking beside them. A cool wind was blowing but Harry didn't even seem to notice. He turned his head slightly towards the grass, and after a moment's hesitation, Hotchner went where he was directed. Morgan moved with them, and between him and Hotchner, they got Harry down to the ground, propped up between them. Jack immediately hurried forward, practically sitting in Harry's lap, and snuggled close to him, trying to share some of his body warmth with his brother.

After a shaky moment, Harry slumped down further, leaning heavily against Hotchner. Cautiously, wary about making him any more stressed, Hotchner put his arm around the teenager to help support him. Harry relaxed into the touch, closing his eyes briefly. Jack pushed against him again and Harry managed to open one arm to let Jack get under it to lean on his chest. The sick teenager shouldn't have been strong enough to support the weight; he made it work anyway. His arm tightened briefly
around Jack, as much as he could, and his gaze flickered to him for a moment, mournful but loving. He let out a dismal laugh. "You know, I think I could see my patronus now, even though it's Dad's." Jack looked at him, tears streaking down his cheeks silently. "But I can't remember a single..."

"Is it easier?" Jack whispered, voice cracking. "Thinking about him when..."

When Harry was about to see him again.

"I forgave him," Harry said instead of answering the question Jack had meant to ask. "Kind of have to, now that I'm in his position. I can't stop this from happening anymore."

Jack bit his lip for a moment, then asked, choking on sobs, "Do you remember... When Dad was trying to find out who your parents were? And we all thought they were probably horrible people so Dad was filling out paperwork to adopt you?" Harry closed his eyes and tightened his hold on his brother. "And then Dad came home early and told us they'd found your parents, and we both panicked?"

Harry let out a wet laugh, nodding. "Dad had to calm us down before he could tell us what he'd found out."

A long minute passed. Jack turned and buried his head into Harry's shoulder.

Shaking badly, and putting everything he had into the gesture, Harry managed to raise his right hand, palm up as if he were waiting for someone to put something in it.

"*Expecto patronum.*"

A small wisp of a silvery mist grew out of his palm, gently swirling around his hand before drifting in a current to the empty lawn in front of them. It grew slowly, steadily, without haste and without weakness, and Hotchner and Morgan watched in amazement as it began to take a form, becoming clearer with every passing moment. Jack just pressed himself closer, if possible, to his brother. Harry turned his hand until the palm faced away from him.

"*Essearia.*"

The mist solidified, an almost visible current running from the front to the back, and when the elephant knelt to its knees in front of them, the grass laid flat under its weight. The trunk stretched out until it touched Harry's hand, and then it reached to touch his hair, his cheek, his nose. Harry closed his eyes and lowered his hand to his lap, relieved.

"Atlas," he whispered, shaking against Hotchner's arm. "Stay with Jack. Please protect him when I'm gone. Don't hurt anyone if you don't have to."

The trunk dipped lower, rubbing against Jack's head. Harry closed his eyes and turned his face against Hotchner's shoulder. Hotchner instinctively reached up to rub his back.

"I didn't get to see him born," Harry whispered into his shirt, so quietly that Hotchner wasn't sure if he was supposed to hear it. "I wanted to see him grow up...!"

There was a soft sound behind them, and Hotchner turned to see Elle walking quietly in their direction. She moved around their group and came to kneel in front of Harry. He reached forward and she grabbed his hand before it could fall. "Thanks for trying," he whispered.

"It was my pleasure," she said quietly, eyes wet. "Thank you for everything, Harry."
He smiled weakly. "You don't have a lot to thank me for."

"I wouldn't have made it without you and the others," Elle disagreed, rubbing his hand. "Not after I was bitten. I'm sorry I couldn't help you."

He frowned at her. "You did. I wanted to live, by the end." He patted her hand, barely more than raising and lowering his fingers a little bit. "I'll tell everyone hi for you."

The crying and change of position had cost him. Within a couple of minutes, Hotchner felt him slump more and more until he was being held in place solely by Hotchner's body against his. Elle was clutching his hand like it was the only thing keeping her grounded, but as his weariness forced him into unconsciousness – and, soon, beyond that – she helped move Harry to put his head on Hotchner's lap. It wouldn't buy him much time, he knew, but seeing the look on Jack's face – not his Jack, but so alike – in response to seeing someone take care of his brother was too powerful to resist.

It was over. Hotchner just didn't know when Harry's heart would stop beating.

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"Do you think we could help, somehow?" Hermione asked Harry Potter, who grimly shook his head.

"I just don't know. It sounded like they'd tried everything."

"Well, from what you said, he's surrounded by muggles but - no offense to your parents, Hermione - muggles aren't really equipped to deal with magical problems," Ron pointed out. "So what do you say we don't see if we can't get him to St. Mungo's?"

---

Hotch sat quietly beside Harry. He could hear Jack crying softly and Elle breathing wetly, but he ignored everyone else as much as possible.

"Come on, Harry," he said fiercely. "Come on. You're not done yet."

There was a flicker of his eyelids.

"You were meant for so much more than sixteen years."

---

Blaise looked at the stack of files in front of them, contemplatively. "So we're down to five options, really. How do we pick?"

Luna pointed at one. "This."

Ginny sighed. "I'm going to regret asking, because I know you're going to be right somehow, but why?"

"Because it requires the blood of the family, and isn't that why we're trying to bring them back?"

---

Harry blinked and looked up at a blue morning sky. The sun had just risen an hour before.
"I feel like shit," he said calmly.

"Harry?" Elle tentatively asked.

"I don't think I'm dying anymore, though," he added.

There was a moment of (un)dead silence.

"What," Elle finally deadpanned.

"I just feel fine. Like, not fine fine, but better than before." He coughed, but it was a regular cough, not a hacking or a weak one. "I might need that IV after all."

"...What?"

Harry gave a soft laugh. For the first time since Hotch had died... "I feel alive."

Maybe he hadn't saved his father. But maybe he hadn't caused his death either. And as Jack hugged him, crying in relief, he knew something else – he'd saved this one, at least.

Chapter End Notes

A bit more explanation on why Harry's not dead later, but you might have already realized why.

Yes, Hotchner picked Harry up. So he could let him down one last time. (I'm sorry.) (No, I'm not.)

And you know that Luna would be able to charm a boggart. You know it.
"In my younger and more vulnerable years my father gave me some advice that I've been turning over in my mind ever since. "Whenever you feel like criticizing any one," he told me, "just remember that all the people in this world haven't had the advantages that you've had."" - F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

Hotch knew Harry was going to relapse. There was just no way. He couldn't go from a stage so close to death back to complete life; magic couldn't do *that* no matter how much of it he had. Even with the stasis charms, everything in him had essentially shut down already, so in a way, most of his body was already dead. There wasn't much that Harry could do, or Dr. Hammond, and holding onto false hope was just going to hurt more.

Harry, however, was determined to prove him wrong.

"I really do feel fine," he insisted, just twelve hours after what had practically been a resurrection. "I mean, I'm not going to go run a marathon anytime soon, but still."

"Get back on the couch," Hotch said so sternly, pointing, that Harry raised his hands and slowly backed out of the kitchen with a sheepish grin. His slowed pace was mostly due to the tendency of his muscles to quiver.

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Hotchner's control over the teenager was not to last long.

"If we don't catch him within a week," Prentiss pointed out almost two weeks later, "we're not going to find him at all."

On the couch, Harry huffed irritably. He'd offered to send the patronus, but no one else wanted to risk the drain on his energy while he had the potential to survive right now. He didn't tell them he'd started to slip out at night to go running, appalled at how badly his body had atrophied on bed rest. Jack had gone back to Haley and the other Jack when it became obvious that Harry was no longer on death's door.

Now that he could think clearly while he was on enforced couch duty, he'd taken the time to start thinking more about the situation back at his Hogwarts. He hadn't had any word since Elle, and he was desperate for an update that he knew could be long in coming, depending on when she had time to get back. Maybe she would return to check up on him. It sucked that he wouldn't have news to give them in return, but there wasn't anything he could say, not when he hadn't been around the magical world here and hadn't done much investigating into the horcruxes.

"Can we narrow down his location to paths he might take, somehow?" Morgan asked, though he sounded as resigned as the rest of them. They weren't going to catch Foyet until he made another move, not after this long.
"We can't trace him while he's sitting still, can't trace him where he's going... Maybe we should look at where he was?" JJ suggested.

"I looked into it before. There wasn't much. But we've looked at everything by now."

Locations...

Harry sat up suddenly, a thought suddenly flaring to life. They’d thought about locations before, but they’d never tried to match it with the importance of the objects. Were there places important to the founders that he might have hidden them at? He’d done the Chamber of Secrets for Slytherin, but Harry couldn't recall any for the others. Riddle had symbolized his entire life through the horcruxes, and now that Harry thought about it, he had gone further - the locations were related to his legacy. But where would Riddle consider his legacy? Not the Ministry, when he considered it with such disdain. Not his home, when he didn't have one.

Then the only thing left was Hogwarts, the massive castle full of all sorts of nooks and crannies. Riddle had already hidden one there, but he had repeated himself with Founder items by giving two aspects of himself, the diary and the snake, already. If there were another one in the castle, then, it would have to be special. The location would have to be a place where you could hide something, where it would be protected no matter what. The location itself would almost have to ensure its survival.

He groaned. "Oh, stupid."

When Garcia came to check on him twenty minutes later, her eyes widened. "We've got a problem!"

"What?" Hotchner asked immediately.

"Harry's on the loose!"

---

It took a laborious amount of time to get to a nearby, magical marketplace so he could pay for use of a Floo to get to Britain. He'd summoned Prongs, the smaller of his two patronuses and the more discrete by far, and had ridden him the necessary distance. Thankfully, Harry still remembered how to get to the marketplace they had used to get him across the ocean.

Once in Britain, he started apparating north and was at Hogsmeade soon enough. He created a quick portkey to this location out of a spare, small piece of wood that had broken off from a house in a storm, just in case he had to get back in a hurry, and tucked it into his pocket. The wards around Hogwarts parted reluctantly as they recognized him as a student in a strange way, and he set off into the school after hiding himself under a Disillusionment charm.

On the way, he passed a group of students heading towards Hagrid's cabin, and he realized that the school year must have already started. He hadn't really been keeping track of dates, what with everything that had been going on and the sheer meaningless of it for a while, but he'd thought school had a few more weeks at least. Wait, didn't this mean his birthday had already passed a month ago? He hadn't even been keeping track...

Harry slipped into the school easily, dodging around people to avoid running into anyone and hoping the charm would hold as long as it took for him to get to where he needed to go. Before he made it, though, he derailed himself as he started to hurry past the library. With a mental groan, he turned around and went back in, knowing this was the best place to find his alternate self. He should probably reassure him that he wasn't dead. For that matter, he might want to drop in on Snape, too...
During the war, this room had been one of the few that hadn't been completely torn to shreds. There just wasn't a strategic purpose for Riddle to try to obtain it, and the Order and DA just hadn't had any use for it. They very well couldn't use the room for anything else, what with the density of books, but they also couldn't destroy everything inside to make more space for something else without the Ravenclaws rioting. In the end, it had been securely locked up to prevent Death Eaters from hiding in it during battles, and Harry hadn't seen the inside in over half a year, despite the frequency of his visits with his friends before then.

In the back, he saw a familiar mane of bushy hair next to a shock of red, and he padded over in relief. As he approached, he saw his other self sitting opposite them, hurriedly whispering. After a pause, Granger wavered, then said something in return. Weasley muttered and she whirled on him, and Harry tilted his head curiously at the reaction. They hadn't snapped at each other since they'd started dating at the beginning of last year.

There was no purpose in eavesdropping, so he skirted around Granger and Weasley to get to the corner by Potter. None of them noticed until he had sat down and removed the charm, and then all three jumped and swore.

"Blimey!" Weasley exclaimed. "When did you get here?"

"Couple of seconds ago."

"You're looking much better," Potter said, eyebrows raised in surprise. "Much. Though you couldn't get a whole lot worse..."

He grimaced. "Oh, I did. Had a dramatic this-is-the-end scene and everything. Anyway. Did any of it help you?"

Potter blinked, surprised by the topic change. He shook his head, clearing it, and demanded, "No, go back to the dying thing. Since you've got more time, can you try to figure out what's wrong?"

Harry glanced at Granger and Weasley, hoping to have sparked either of their interests with his vague comment, but they were both watching him raptly. Damn. "I might have fixed it, but... This time was a relapse. I just need to make sure it doesn't happen again, but something else could still trigger it."

"You don't think you can find a permanent cure?" Granger pressed.

He shook his head. "No. It's... It's something that's a part of me." Though it was possible he could find a way to burn his magic out entirely, but that would also make him a sitting duck for the next time trouble snuck up on him so he'd probably die soon anyways. "So. What happened since I last saw you?"

Potter smirked. "I gave it a try."

"And?"

"They haven't bothered me since. I barely saw them the rest of the summer."

Harry smiled, nodding in approval. "Good." The other two seemed to know what he was talking about, so he didn't elaborate. "And sleep?"

"Better. Still not perfect, but much better."

"Also good. Need anything else from me before I pop out?"
"Where are you going?" Weasley asked.

"Got to check something." They stared at him. "Oh, fine." He stood up and the three hurriedly grabbed their belongings to follow him. "Follow me."

On their way out, Ernie Macmillan looked up in surprise from where he was seated talking to a bored-looking Justin Finch-Fletchley and Susan Bones. Before he could demand to know who Harry was, the four had already moved on, and Ernie craned his neck to watch them go. Harry's mouth twisted slightly. He should have remembered that Ernie would have been much more prideful without the change that had overcome him following the Silent Massacre. To accept the loss of mobility in everything below his elbow and then to be forced to slowly rebuild that ability...

They made it up to fifth floor before Harry pulled them aside behind a statue. Adrian Pucey strode past a couple of seconds later, looking around wildly for where they had gone, and easily spotted them. Harry waved, smiling benignly.

"Who are you?" Pucey demanded, folding his arms across his chest.

He knew there would have been potential for this to be troubling, seeing everyone not yet broken by death, but this was so much harder than he'd imagined. He hadn't thought it would all be this different. "Hotchner, Pucey, come on. You've seen me around."

"I bloody well haven't! Do you even go to school here?" His eyes swept down Harry's attire, narrowing in disbelief. Muggle clothing wasn't uncommon at Hogwarts during weekends or breaks, but non-British style clothing was.

Harry stared at him in astonishment, then gestured wildly. "You think I just broke into Hogwarts?"

"Who's your head of house?"

Harry sighed, leaning back slightly, shifting one foot behind the other, and turning as if to complain or mutter sarcastically to Granger, then pitched forward off his back foot, threw the subsequent energy up from his back and through his shoulder, and punched Pucey in the nose.

The Slytherin hit the ground while Harry clenched and unclenched his hand absently against the spike of pain in his knuckles. "Okay, we're good," he said when Pucey didn't rise after a few moments. He'd been worried he'd lost too much weight to put enough force into it, but he'd apparently had enough. With a glance at the other three, who were staring at him in stunned disbelief, he sighed and rolled his eyes, then moved Pucey's unconscious body behind the statue on his own.

The punch had cost him more than he dared show. The twist he had put his body through had abruptly forced muscles and organs to cooperate, and he wasn't back to complete functioning yet. The side that had stretched the furthest felt like he might have jostled something out of place, while his fist continued to throb for longer than it would have before his sickness. He was really starting to get annoyed with being so limited and debilitated.

"You- You just-" Weasley spluttered as Harry moved on.

"They call it K.O.-ing someone."

"What?"

"Knocking someone out," Granger said. "Why did you...?"
"Thought you wouldn't appreciate him knowing where we're going, but maybe that's just me."

"Where are we going?" Potter asked.

"I'll settle for showing you, in case anyone else is following. You'll see."

Weasley frowned when Harry opened the door to the Room of Requirement a couple of minutes later. "What are we in here for?"

Harry breathed out a sigh of relief. It was cluttered with thousands of items of all shapes and sizes, from statues to teacups, from armor sets to broken furniture. The piles stretched towards the high ceiling with widths large enough to create small avenues in between them so someone could walk through. This could only have accumulated over centuries, and it didn't look like no one had been unaware of it within the last couple of decades.

The door shut behind them. "I suspect there's a Horcrux here," he said. "Can one of you try to Accio it?"

"Why don't you?" Weasley asked.

"Someone stole my wand." At their alarmed looks, he quickly added, "I'll get it back - eventually - but they were concerned I'd do something like...well, this, really. They knew I'd go looking for the Horcruxes if I could."

Granger looked at him weirdly. "How did you apparate out of Grimmauld Place then?"

"I had my wand then." As for now, he just didn't want to try wandless magic in front of them. He still had no clue what it meant, that he could use it so naturally, and it was honestly starting to weird him out.


"Well, damn, it looks like we're going about this the hard way."

"What are we looking for?" Weasley asked, gazing morosely around the room. "This is going to take ages..."

"Er, not sure. We think it might have something to do with one of the Founders, though, so keep an eye out for a diadem from Ravenclaw or something from Slytherin."

"Not the other two?" Potter asked as they moved in further, beginning to search.

"Got Hufflepuff's cup, and we think the sword of Gryffindor might have been one at some point, but we're not completely sure. At any rate, if there was one in it, it's been destroyed so it's not a concern. Just seems that if Riddle was so obsessed with lineage and he had something from one of the Founders it would at least be Slytherin's, so we're hoping he's got one from the others as well."

They split up to search, and while Harry found an infinite number of interesting things, none of them looked like what he needed. To make it worse, there was the possibility that the Horcrux could be buried under one of these stacks, but he didn't want to think about that. If it were, this could literally take them days or even weeks. They just had to hope that Riddle's flair for the ostentatious had prevented him from hiding something away too well.

And then the door opened.
"Okay, who left?" Weasley asked, annoyed, from a few stacks away to Harry's right.

"Still here," Granger called somewhere up ahead. Potter gave an answer too, but Harry kept silent, slipping back towards the front and keeping his eyes and ears peeled for any sign of who had entered.

"Oh, for the love of- Did Hotchner ditch us in here as a practical joke?" Weasley snapped, but then there was furious whispering behind Harry and he suspected Granger had caught on to what he knew and was trying to hush him before he gave away where they were at.

Whoever it was had left the doorway, and Harry quietly made his way through the nearby stacks, hiding behind whatever cover was offered to prevent someone from seeing him. After a few minutes, hoping it would work, he murmured, "Hominem revelio."

Ah, there, deeper into the room and sticking to the sides. Smart.

Malfoy's blond head quickly came into view, and Harry slunk quietly behind him. The Slytherin was moving edgily, startled, and clearly hadn't expected company in here. However, if he'd been carrying anything in, he'd dropped it somewhere by now.

Harry moved to the left and walked through the rows running vaguely parallel to Malfoy's while he hurried to catch up, and then jumped back to the original path once he was right behind the Slytherin.

"Losing something or finding something?" he asked.

Malfoy shouted, whipping around, and Harry brought his forearm up and knocked Malfoy's down as it started to raise his wand.

"Sorry, did I scare you?" he continued blandly. He could hear the other three running towards them. The movement had aggravated his side again, and his upper ribs started aching too, but he hid any sign of the pain. His body must not have fully recuperated and replaced everything it had lost if it were still this weak. "My bad."

"Malfoy?" Potter demanded as he turned the corner. The trio had their wands out.

"What the bloody hell are you doing here?" Weasley snapped.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Put your wands down. Don't be stereotypical Gryffindors, come on."

"Who are you?" Malfoy glared at him, hand tightening on his wand, eyes flickering between him and the other three. They'd trapped him in, and while Harry knew he could take this world's Malfoy out, he also knew it was a bad idea to hem anyone in without giving them a possible route to escape safely through. To make it worse, the lighting was dim where they were at, casting Malfoy's face in shadows, and it made it difficult for him to decipher expressions.

"Hotchner." Merlin, it felt good to say that, and he'd been able to do it twice now. "Now, since you clearly weren't planning on finding us here, you're not here to attack us, so let's settle this without blowing each other up Weasley put your wand down."

"But it's Malfoy."

Harry stared up at the ceiling. Dad, help me find patience. Oh, yeah, his father hadn't really had an abundance of that when it came to stupidity either. Mom, give me a hand. Wait, that wasn't any better. Sean, I know you're not dead, but if you can hear this... "I am positive that Malfoy does not
spend his entire life plotting against every single thing you do. He does have a life outside of you, and if he doesn't, that's a different problem called stalking and needs to be seen to. Can everyone put their wands away?"

"You said Hotchner," Malfoy said accusingly, and Harry raised an eyebrow at him. "You hit Pucey."

"Hope he went to go see Madame Pomphrey. I suspect he's got a concussion."

"Really?" Weasley asked.

"It's unlikely I hit him hard enough to knock him out but didn't give him one."

The moment Harry's eyes left Malfoy to go to Weasley, Malfoy's wand shot up into Harry's face. Harry grabbed his wand wrist and pulled it up over his shoulder, then cupped his palm under Malfoy's chin and shoved up and back. Malfoy's head was forced backwards and his body followed, and he was surprised enough that his grip loosened so Harry could snag his wand away as his wrist was pulled away along with his arm.

While Malfoy staggered, Harry slipped the wand into his pocket subtly, then watched in amusement while Malfoy realized he'd been disarmed without any sign as to where it had gone. "Can we attempt civilized conversation now?"

Everyone else just glared at each other. The pain in Harry's side was spreading to the center of his midsection.

"I just want to point out," Potter said through gritted teeth, "that he is definitely plotting something."

"I would just like to add," Harry snapped, "so are we."

"What are you doing here?" Malfoy asked suspiciously, still looking for his wand. Something about him seemed really off to Harry, but he just couldn't place it. "And I don't care what you told Pucey and these three, but you're not a student here."

"I just told you - we're plotting. And I'm..." He paused. "Well, that's complicated, so we're just going to skip over it. He glanced over the four, then said, "All right, here's what we're going to do. You three are going to keep looking, somewhere else. I'll stay within some sort of range of him, so if he decides to stab you in the back I'll be able to at least witness it and save my own arse, and so I can keep you from him." With a look at Malfoy - wow, he looked so full of himself in this world - he said, "I don't care what you're doing, and you do have a right to your privacy. Considering I snuck up on you, and you've almost been unjustly attacked in true Gryffindor style, I'll give you the benefit of the doubt here. Sound fair?"

"You can't just-" Weasley protested.

"Okay, what do you want to do?" Harry snapped. He'd gotten way too used to people just trusting his command. "March him down to Dumbledore's or McGonagall's or Snape's, and say what? 'Yeah, we were in this room looking for something - and no, I can't tell you what we were looking for - but then Malfoy walked in and did absolutely nothing aggressive until we almost hexed him? I really think you should expel this kid or something, he looks awfully suspicious.'"

Weasley scowled at him.

"Right. So you guys go that way, and Malfoy'll...go somewhere and I'll just follow at an extended distance."
"How do I have 'privacy' if you're following me?" Malfoy sneered.

"I'll just be near you. I have something I need to do, so I'm not going to devote all my time to watching you." He finally realized what had been bothering him about Malfoy. Draco had stopped slicking his hair back after the Silent Massacre, since it helped give him a more wild look to fool the Death Eaters about his sanity and a less elitist look when he was around friends.

"Fine," Malfoy snapped and stalked away without looking back at the others. Harry shooed them off and followed the Slytherin, immediately starting to search for something green and silver or diadem-y. "I want my wand back."

"When you leave or I leave, I'll return it," Harry promised calmly, eyes not leaving the piles around them despite Malfoy's glare. "But if you've got it, they're more likely to attack you and you're more likely to attack them."

"Oh, so you're worried about me, is that it?"

"No, I just need them to help me look for something because otherwise this is going to be a real pain, and they're not doing that if they're dueling you." His gaze wandered over Malfoy curiously, horror growing inside him with every passing second. In a word, he looked haunted. "Though... What did happen to you?"

"What do you mean?" Malfoy demanded sharply, picking up the pace unconsciously to separate himself from Harry.

"You don't look well."

"Might have something to do with my father getting sent to Azkaban, might it?" Malfoy snapped at him.

"And Riddle's set up shop at the manor," Harry murmured. Damn, he was in a right fix.

"Riddle?"

"Voldemort's real name is Tom Riddle."

"How do you know about that?" Malfoy demanded.

"I just do," he said warily. "And I expect you're stressed now because Riddle's got you on a mission." Malfoy opened his mouth furiously to retort, but Harry shook his head. "Don't. It's... Look, I understand. It's your family. I expect I would do the same if I were in your shoes." He met Malfoy's eyes, for once grateful for the Silent Massacre if it had kept his Draco from this. "I truly hope you make it out of this all right."

Malfoy came to a dead stop, examining him cautiously. "Have we met before?"

"Yes, though I don't expect you would remember me."

Malfoy slowly started to walk on, and Harry let himself fall behind as promised but nowhere he looked was giving him any help in finding the horcrux. A couple of times he stopped to investigate an item that showed a little promise, glanced up to see Malfoy trying to evade him, then located the brat again and continued his search. He wasn't sure if the Slytherin could actually accomplish something with them there, but Malfoy probably didn't want to leave until he knew why they were in there too.
The sad thing was that it was really taking him longer to catch up than it should have. This would have been simple a couple of months ago, but he now found it straining and brutal on his body. Even though he had spent the last week starting to build back up, he was still a long ways from a complete recovery, and he was even starting to have problems with his lungs doing something that felt like a seizure whenever he took a deep enough breath.

"Found it!" Granger hollered an hour later.

"Hallelujah," Harry muttered. "I'll be back to give you your wand after I make sure that's the thing we're looking for." He stopped. "Or you can just follow me back like you're going to anyway."

Malfoy scowled, then walked beside him as they followed the sound of the others' voices. After a couple of minutes, they located the trio peering at an old diadem, decorated with the emblem of a raven.

"Is that...?" Malfoy gaped. Potter frowned irritably at him.

"Oh, grow up, you two," Harry muttered. Granger handed the diadem to him. "Aw, look, it's such a beautiful, ancient, priceless treasure... Let's destroy it."

"What?" Weasley and Malfoy shouted at the same time.

Harry gestured at Weasley in annoyance. "Seriously, what'd you think we were going to do with it?"

"I- Well-"

"That's the lost diadem of Rowena Ravenclaw," Malfoy hissed at him. "You don't destroy it."

"Trust me, if I didn't have to, I wouldn't."

He left the room with the four squabbling behind him, at each other and at Harry, and he left them to it. Weasley and Malfoy didn't seem to know what to do, now that they'd found themselves in agreement over something against a common enemy, which Harry found highly entertaining. The Room sealed itself behind them, once more vanishing into the wall, while he calmly walked down the hallways and a flight of stairs. More than a few people they passed by looked at all of them in bewilderment, and he waved at and addressed the ones by name who he knew would react hilariously.

They didn't actually make it to Dumbledore's office to destroy the Horcrux before staff was alerted to his presence. The next corner they rounded ran them straight into Pucey, McGonagall, and Snape, who all stared in bewilderment at Harry, the other Harry, Weasley, Granger, and Malfoy, who stared back in confusion.

"Something wrong?"

Snape glared at him. "Aren't you supposed to be dying?"

"I mixed up the dates on my calendar. That's next week. Breaking and entering was this week."

"Who are you?" McGonagall demanded.

"I knew you didn't go to this school!" Pucey exclaimed triumphantly. His nose was bleeding and his eyes were slightly out of focus.
"And I knew you needed to get that concussion seen to," Harry replied analytically, eyes flitting over him. His balance looked a little off from his posture. "Go to the infirmary wing when you've got time."

"Follow me to the headmaster's office, all of you," McGonagall said, and the whole, bizarre group continued in the direction they had been going anyway. The Transfigurations teacher glanced back to make sure they were following, then did a double take as she saw what was in Harry's hands. "Is that...?"

"Yep." Against all his childish urges, he did not put it on his head. "But let's put a hold on the explanation for a few minutes."

Dumbledore had a masterful poker face, because he didn't even blink when they walked in. "Ah," was all he said. "It would seem a rather bizarre tale has been unfolding in the last couple of minutes."

"He-" McGonagall pointed at Harry ")-broke into Hogwarts, convinced Misters Potter and Weasley and Miss Granger to accompany him, knocked out Mr. Pucey, and then..." She glanced at Malfoy.

"Kidnapped Malfoy," Harry cheerfully added. Snape looked like he was going to strangle him. It was delightful.

"I see," Dumbledore said. "Is that the diadem of Ravenclaw you are holding, perhaps?"

"Yep." He dropped it on Dumbledore's desk without much thought, making just about everyone else wince at the lack of concern he showed for it. "It was in the Room of Requirement."

"Ah, right under our noses. Aren't the most obvious things always there?" Harry beamed back at him, aware of just how much it aggravated everyone else. "Now, I am rather curious as to how you broke in, since you are not registered as a student of Hogwarts here."

"That's a long story."

"Hotchner," Snape growled, "if you do not give an explanation, I will personally escort you to the Ministry, who will send you to Azkaban immediately."

"Aw, you want to make sure I get to the Ministry safely. That's so sweet."

Snape was so going to murder him before he left the building. The students and McGonagall looked like they would be too stunned to do anything about it besides watch Snape drag his corpse out of the room so he could toss him through a window. Dumbledore, on the other hand, was smiling slightly.

Now Harry just needed to make sure that he could get away from the room before everyone else left. If he were still stuck here with Dumbledore, he just knew the old headmaster was going to try to wheedle more information out of him, and he really did need to get back to America before the BAU team completely flipped their shit. Assuming, of course, that they hadn't already, which was entirely likely.

Then he doubled over and puked blood onto the carpet.

He straightened calmly while everyone in the room stared at him.

"Are you quite all right?" McGonagall asked incredulously.
"Yes, this happens all the time. Nothing to worry about. Look, it's dried blood. Not even fresh." For some reason, no one wanted to look closely at it.

Snape's gaze flickered over him, and Harry knew they were thinking along the same lines. The parts of his body that had necrotized were now healing and trying to push out the old damaged tissue. The vomiting could be just as much a bad sign as it could be a good sign. To make it worse, now his midsection hurt even more than it had before.

"Allow one of the students to escort you to see Madame Pomfrey," Dumbledore said, gesturing to the Gryffindors, while McGonagall used her wand to wave away the blood.

Harry snorted. "Then I'll never get out of here." And yet, his abdominal area felt like it was starting to stretch. There must be internal swelling, and he was going to have to get medical help from somewhere. Maybe he could check into a magical hospital in America. After dropping in on the BAU to let them give him a resounding 'I told you so' about bed rest and how wonderful of an idea it was.

But he couldn't say anything, not around this group. No matter how much they looked it, these weren't the people he trusted back home. Those people would have already begun treating him, knowing he would push himself until they had to carry him to the infirmary when he got carried away trying to organize the war and help in the reparations.

"So, before I head out, what other questions?"

"How are you involved in this?" Pucey asked Malfoy suspiciously.

Malfoy scowled back at him. "I saw the four of them acting strangely and I followed. Hotchner spotted me."

Harry proactively kicked Weasley to keep him from saying anything, and the redhead glared at him instead of protesting Malfoy's statement. Harry shrugged slightly at him, then subtly shifted over until he could wrap his hand around Granger's forearm, line the rest of his arm up with hers, and lean on her. The pain in his abdomen was spreading.

"He is a suspicious character," Snape agreed, still eyeing Harry.

"What's with the diadem?" Pucey demanded as black dots started dancing before Harry's eyes. The dots grew in number and size, and he could only feel his equilibrium go out as he lost all sense of direction. He was vaguely aware of his grip slipping off Hermione and hitting the floor, and then he was gone.

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His mother was taking the news much better than he had expected.

"I can hardly fail to see that you do have a point," she said quietly. "Your father and I have not been your parents for quite some time as it is. However, I would rather like to know more about this woman before I give you a final say." With a soft, wistful smile, she added, "I hardly think you need my opinion to make your own choice, however; I hope you'll humor me."

"She's a tech analyst at Quantico," Draco said, then hurriedly explained, "She gathers information for the BAU. That's how I met her after the Silent Massacre. Well, during, really. She's the one who found out where we were at so the team could rescue us."
Narcissa's eyebrows went up. "So she is the one who accomplished in days what it took others over a week to do?"

Draco laughed slightly. "Minutes, really. Once we contacted her and said we were in danger, she had the BAU coming for us almost immediately." Narcissa blinked, and Draco gave her a moment to process that. "She did invite me to stay with her, too. I was with her all summer last year, and I've gone to stay with her over breaks."

"What is her purpose in taking you in?"

"If she were a British witch, she'd have been a Hufflepuff."

"Ah. How much does she know about your situation?"

"Everything. As much as there is to know. She's kept in contact since I met her."

Narcissa frowned, and asked, "They know how to owl?"

"Not quite. She's the one who found out how to use muggle technology within the school."

"I would appreciate meeting this woman. She sounds remarkable."

Draco grinned and nodded quickly. "She really is. And I think it'd be good for her to have someone staying with her, since I know she didn't like that we were all so far away and in danger for so long, and she's planning on helping me out to get a muggle education-"

Narcissa had started to raise a hand to stop him, already agreeing, but she froze now. "What?" she whispered and he panicked internally, fighting to keep a calm exterior. His instincts screamed at him to take it back instantly, and he had to force himself to remember what he'd decided months ago.

"I'm going to finish my Hogwarts schooling and then move on to muggle college," he said matter-of-factly. "It's what I want to do."

"But... Draco, why? There's so much for you here!"

"Because I'm the Malfoy heir, Mother, but I don't want to be the Malfoy heir. Not after what our family's done."

"We've shamed you."

He opened his mouth to reflexively deny it, but there was understanding in her eyes. "Yes, I suppose you could say that," he quietly agreed. "I think we should have stood and fought instead of groveling. We should have put our priority of our liberties and our lives over that of a pathological desire to imbue blood purity in everything we did. I don't want a part in that anymore."

Her eyes closed for a long moment. She can't change my life, he pointed out to himself, no matter how hard she tries. Not anymore. Finally, without opening her eyes, she asked, "Do you have a plan for your life, or is this merely rebellion against Lucius and I?"

"A bit, but the field I'm going into is still fluctuating so I can't say for certain what I'll be doing in case it changes." That, and he didn't want to tell her something that she could track him down with later if something made her change her mind. Or worse, if her husband managed to convince her to tell him what Draco had done, though he didn't want to believe she would ever cave to that.

"What field is that?"
"Economics." She stared at him, clearly appalled by his claim to such a muggle word, and he explained, "It's basically the study of how markets work. Where the goods and services go, production, distribution..." Despite his effort to tone it down by connecting it to money, he could see her slipping further away from him. But honestly, what had she expected? It wasn't like Harvard offered potions.

"Why...economics?" she asked, struggling a bit over the word.

"It's interesting."

Rather, it was interesting to compare muggle economics to magical economics and Elle had pointed out that one of them was going to have to specialize strongly in that if they were going to continue to distinguish the differences and uncover the parallels in both worlds. Now that the two were the foremost researchers in evaluating such comparisons and contrasts, a lot of questions from around the world had started coming in from various locations and communities, asking what they had already ascertained and if they could look into something particular for them. What had begun as a cursory overlook was now becoming much larger as it became evident that what little had been done to study both worlds at the same time was outdated and limited.

One major problem was that research had focused solely on the culture of muggles, which Elle was sure had happened to prove the out-group stereotypes and allow magical folk to solidify their separation from the nonmagical. In some cases, it had also been done as an excuse, such as during the world wars, when purebloods needed to explain to muggleborns why there had been no involvement during the bloodiest periods of muggle history. Even in places where an understanding was direly needed, such as in covering up a magical incident or coordinating cooperation between two agencies, little had been done to assimilate both sides.

The result was that Elle and Draco, if they so wished, had almost complete full rein to research absolutely anything and everything that they wanted to, because they could freelance and dabble in what interested them. Elle could continue working with the BAU if they had an overlapping case, and Draco could go wherever he wanted to research. With her completely muggle upbringing and his strictly pureblood childhood, they could bring both viewpoints to the table and explain something from each side. It was something that had never been attempted before, and it gave them a huge advantage in perspective and in communicating with anyone looking for answers they might be able to provide.

Their teamwork also allowed for a wider range of expertise. Elle had already gone through her education, though she said she was willing to go back for more if he couldn't cover anything else they needed, and he could enter college to take courses in fields she hadn't studied. One such case was economics, since they had early on decided that they definitely needed a proper understanding of how the markets worked in both worlds. It could also help them identify driving forces of the magical world in accordance with what they were eager to buy, and how valuable it was to them. As previously planned, he was going to continue with a minor or major in computer science, and he was thinking about getting something else but hadn't quite decided on what yet.

So he was lying by omission. Sue him.

"Is she going to take care of you?" Narcissa asked, then, "As much as you need taking care of?"

He nodded quickly. "She's had my back this entire time, and someone else has been helping too."

"That Greenaway woman. You seem particularly close to her."

"She is. I am." Taking in his mother's uncomfortable expression, he said, "You know she's a
"I am...skeptical that the treatment worked."

"What, her attitude? I've been told she's actually calmer after contracting lycanthropy, since she thought she was going to need to account for a shorter temper. She's always been like that. You should be more worried about her biting my father than me. She's quite defensive of her pack in wolf form."

Narcissa's mouth tightened, but she didn't argue further with him. "I see. Will you remain in contact with me?"

He nodded, hoping to get this over with as soon as possible. "I promise that I will. I would like to know how you are doing as well." He glanced at the time. "I'm sorry, but I need to get back to helping Hermione. We're a bit high-strung, what with the announcement this morning."

The two of them left the empty classroom and went different ways, Draco to the DADA classroom and Narcissa to the dungeons. Most of the bodies had been claimed, and the students' bodies had been recognized by those already at the school, but there were still a few anonymous ones that were waiting under stasis charms. Narcissa had already identified a few from pureblood families, leading them to believe that they were ashamed to claim a 'blood traitor' as their own, and those bodies were being sent to friends who had agreed to handle the final steps. There were some bodies that were more complicated, such as Cassius's, in which the entire family had died, which was sometimes made more difficult to manage since no one was left to identify the body. As a result, they were still searching for names, and Narcissa was coordinating most of that effort.

Draco was halfway down the hallway when he heard a horrified gasp, and he turned around to see Narcissa staring out the window beside her. He glanced to the side, out the one nearest to him, and saw dark shapes emerging from clouds in the distance. Closer to the ground, a couple were beginning to approach from the ward edges.

"Expecto patronum! Hermione. Death Eaters are coming. I see at least two hundred." He paused. "Oh shit... A huge chunk of the ones on the ground are giants."

"Draco..." Narcissa called.

"Mother, come with me. We need to alert everyone in the castle."

The two sprinted to the headmaster's office, where all convened in emergency, and sent Patroni along the way to any castle occupants they could think of. By the time they got there, Hermione was standing outside of it with Ron, just exiting.

"You already came to a conclusion?" he asked, looking at her grim disposition.

"You're not going to like it," she said. "We just don't have enough time to call everyone back for a proper defense, and we'll be massacred if we stay."

He stared in horror. "We're abandoning Hogwarts to Riddle."

"Get anything you need and get to the Ministry. Maybe we can't hold them off here, but we're damn well not going to lose both in one day."

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"Your body is in ruins," Madame Pomfrey told him when Harry woke up and was able to focus on
her. That had been about what he expected to hear. "Furthermore, I regret to inform you that there is no treatment for what ails you."

He tilted his head at her curiously. "I'm not surprised, but... Do you know what it is?"

She nodded wearily. He was sitting up in the infirmary bed, warm blankets pooled into his lap. The Gryffindor trio, Dumbledore, Snape, and McGonagall were all there. So was Malfoy, for some reason. Oh yeah, he needed his wand back.

"Your own magic is killing you."

Those who didn't already know looked entirely worn out by all the surprises this day had to offer.

"We suspected..."

"It is incredibly rare that this happens, but it can occur when certain requirements are fulfilled. One parent must be dead, and the other must be channeling the entire blood ward to protect the child at the time of their death. At that time, the ward passes from the parent to the child to ensure their protection. It can be done consciously, though it is often not, when the parent realizes they are about to die."

"If it's protection, why's it killing me?" Harry asked, confused.

"This happens when the blood wards are too active. Normally, they would diffuse within a day, leaving no lasting harm; however, they have come into contact with your own, and from the strain on your core, I would say they have completely latched on. They must have come into contact before for the attachment to be this secure."

Harry nodded. "They did."

"The blood wards are dragging you to the realm of the dead in an attempt to fully reconnect."

"There's nothing to be done?" Dumbledore asked.

"No. Possibly, if not for..." She closed her eyes. "His own magic is killing him too."

Dumbledore went quiet, and Harry's gaze sharpened on him and then the school nurse. "What?" he demanded.

"Have you been using wandless magic for a long time?" Dumbledore asked him.

"...I...suppose. But that's just accidental magic."

"Not necessarily," Pomfrey said quietly. "And not in your case. Your core... It's simply too strong for that."

Malfoy slowly stood, arms raising to point at Harry. "You're not saying that he's a..."

"I believe you are a rare light lord," Pomphrey confirmed.

Harry sat there for a moment. Then, "What?"

"Light lords are just as common as dark lords," McGonagall said quickly. "Both sides face their own issues. Dark lords are killed late in life by the Dark Curse – their inevitable defeat by a lone assailant. Sometimes they are defeated by a backstabbing ally, sometimes by a concerned citizen, sometimes by another dark lord. Light lords, however, die early from the Light Curse – their self-murder, when
they unconsciously or consciously turn their magic against themselves when they sense that they have grown too strong or that their magic has become a useless burden because it is unable to protect or defend as adequately as the lord would like."

He didn't need to guess which category he fell under. "How early?"

"None have made it to seventeen."

Pomfrey waved her wand over him again. "You seem soundly on the route to recovery. Did something occur to force you to use your magic in another manner?"

Harry stopped, thoughtful. "When this first happened... Yes. The...Curse started to take effect because I had weeks to think about things, but I was taking care of someone else and I had to get better to continue that. I recovered this time because... Well, maybe I failed one person, but I can get better and faster, and I can protect other people in the future."

They all stared at him. Dumbledore was smiling faintly, and Harry wasn't sure if he liked that or not.

"Hotchner," Pomfrey said carefully, "that is a very mature outlook. But I feel it is necessary to warn you – to my knowledge, no one has survived the Light Curse in centuries. Not since Merlin, I think."

"Hah, take that, Voldemort," Harry muttered. "I'll add that to the list of things more reliable than your world-domination plan."

While the students and two professors stared at him in shock, Madame Pomfrey snapped, "This is not a game, young man! This is not a kind, quick ending!"

Harry gave her the ghost of a smile. "I know. But trust me when I say the physical pain isn't the part that hurts." He pulled Malfoy's wand out of his pocket and tossed it to the blond, who fumbled to catch it. "Thank you, for the examination. That was very informative. If you'll all excuse me, I've got some things to do."

Now he needed to figure out what the hell being a light lord meant.

---

The Ministry was working normally, and no one cared as they hurried through the halls to the center of the auror division. Before they got to the offices there, however, Hermione slowed their pace, casting her glances around subtly as she went until she dragged Draco, Ron, and the other unit heads along with her into an empty room.

After discretely checking the room for detection spells, she whispered, "Tell everyone to get out and leave in small groups, three to five. We'll contact them when we can to discuss our next moves, but focus on staying alive right now. They'll need to go into hiding." Draco whipped out his phone without question and started sending a mass text. "It's too late."

"What?" Ron hissed.

"There have been people following us for the last few minutes, and we should have seen aurors we recognize by now. And everyone we've passed has been giving us strange looks, like they're pitying us. This is a ploy to trap us all."

Before Draco sent the message, their phones all buzzed.
"They know," Neville whispered, horrified. "The Ministry was taken before Hogwarts."

"We can't go out the front door, and the Floo networks here aren't connected to anything, are they?" Ron said quietly, urgently.

"It doesn't matter. They'll be watching for that."

"There's one more way out of here," Hermione muttered. "They won't be looking for us to go that direction either."

"Where?"

"The Department of Mysteries. Let's get going before they start to wonder why we haven't shown up yet to tell anyone Hogwarts was attacked."

---

"What the- What?" Dr. Hammond demanded the next time she stopped by. Harry waved at her, a fork sticking out of his mouth while he tried to tie his shoe with one hand. "What?"

"Nice to see you too," he said, taking the fork out then putting it back in to finish what he was doing.

"Aren't you supposed to be dead?"

He'd thought he was going to die when he had returned, oh Merlin. Hotchner was apoplectic, especially when Morgan suspiciously said that he could smell blood and Harry had to explain he'd thrown up red all over Dumbledore's office. He'd been subsequently manhandled back onto the couch and smothered in blankets.

"I feel absolutely incredible. Fantastic. Spectacular. Except I've got to go to a meeting with an asshat, and I don't like meetings ever especially not with this one because they're always so depressing - which is usually my fault, but with everyone else she's just so freaking annoying so I don't feel that bad..."

Dr. Hammond pointed at him and turned to Hotchner, who was standing near the door while they prepared to go. "What?"

"He's not dead."

"...What?"

"I did something, and then it worked and I'm not dead. Yay for elephants - support endangered species."

Dr. Hammond rubbed a hand over her face. "Can I at least check you out before you go gallivanting across the country?" He nodded, and she started running some basic checks on his breathing, temperature, and blood pressure.

"We good?"

She sighed at him. "Please come to the hospital for more testing," she urged. "I'd really like to make sure you're completely okay."
"I wouldn't mind that, since I'm only hoping my stasis charm was successful and that I totally removed it. Looks like it's working since I'm eating just fine, but I guess we'll find out in a couple of hours if I can process it or not."

"Let me know if anything goes wrong immediately."

"Will do." He glanced at Hotchner. "Ready?"

"Let's go."

A half hour on the road, and Harry asked, "How were you getting Jack between the houses without compromising the safe house?"

"It wasn't handled by us. The marshals contacted...someone from the magical government, and they handled it." He glanced at him out of the corner of his eye. "You could probably go visit them. You're doing well enough that you shouldn't scare your brother."

"I'm doing awesome, thanks." He was still eating oatmeal. The two weeks without food had taken a toll on him, and his digestive system had to be slowly reintroduced to being fed meals. "Man, I wish I had a way to tell Elle to meet us there. She spent a lot of time with Jack, to get him used to the idea of being a werewolf. Since she's gone back to the other world, my patronus won't carry a message over there."

"How are you planning on using your patronus to track Foyet, by the way?" Hotchner asked curiously. They were still expecting him to be recovering, considering the damage he had taken from the last confrontation, but they only had so much longer that they could assume safety for and it would be best to catch him while he was weakened.

"Patronuses can take commands to do something specific. It will take a while since we'll have to follow him on foot and in cars, not to mention in places where no one's going to see him, but he'll take us to Foyet."

Hotchner nodded. "Have you done this before?"

"All the time, during the battles. It took forever to find people sometimes, so it was just a lot easier. That and phones. Oh, Merlin, phones. Magical communication isn't nearly as simple, and technology doesn't usually work around magic but Garcia got it to work. Great for mass messaging, though it doesn't help with cheating on tests."

"Why not?"

"Because the obscure Latin autocorrects to obscure English and suddenly Poliario easenscortia becomes Polaroid ease scottish."

"Don't take this the wrong way, but how did you win the war? You're not very old, and from what Elle and you have said, it sounds like you were leading a good portion of it."

"Ask our world's Draco, if you ever meet him. He and Elle have gone nuts with analyzing the psychological differences with magical folk and nonmagical folk, and I'm sure they've already looked over the war to figure out what we did right and what we did wrong. I'm sure they'd be delighted to tell you."

A long moment passed, and then Hotchner said, "You never explained why you survived."

"I don't quite know," Harry responded, quietly. "But... I thought I could hear my father, right before
I was about to kick the bucket. I'm not sure if I was hallucinating or not.” He paused, debating on whether or not he should tell Hotchner, then decided there was no way around it. "Hey, so..." He closed his eyes for a moment and sighed with his mouth closed. "When I went to England, a magical nurse took a look at me. She said there's a really good chance this is going to happen again. It's a curse, and as far back as records go, all but one of the people with this kind of curse have died before they turned seventeen."

Hotchner's grip on the steering wheel tightened but he didn't give any other inclination that he'd heard Harry.

"She knew what was causing it specifically, but she said there's... There's not a treatment that they know of. Not to mention my blood wards could drag me to the place the dead go, so I'm getting hit from two fronts." He shifted uncomfortably in Hotchner's silence. "I'm going to keep trying to stay alive, but... I- I can't stay here. All of you need to be devoted to looking for Foyet, not taking care of me. And if it happens again...you'd be distracted."

"We can't just:"

"You have my brother too," he quickly said. "Foyet's after him."

"He's not going to come with you?"

"I can't make him watch this," Harry murmured. "Not if this goes wrong. And I suspect he's safer here than with me. Look, if- if I don't come back, can... Can you and Haley...?"

Hotchner nodded and he slumped in relief. It would have been unfair to simply slip away after everything they had done, but he suspected he was now going to be avoiding handcuffs again.

"When he gets older," Harry said quietly, "can you tell him that I'm sorry?"

"You can tell him yourself, though I'm not sure why you'd need to."

"Isn't it obvious? This world proves that you'd still be alive and he'd still be completely human if not for me." He leaned his head against the cold window. "I just wanted..."

A family. But his life had had a way of turning his wishes against him.

"Never mind."

"Just because you weren't involved here and we made it out okay doesn't mean you were at fault in the other world. There were other things that happened that you definitely didn't have anything to do with."

"We can't know that for sure."

"Are you totally responsible for ending the war a year before it even started in this world?"

Harry scrunched in his nose as if the idea were a repugnant smell. "No."

"If you're not the one who caused everything to go right, then you're not the one who caused everything to go wrong either." Harry stared at him for a long moment, but there was a small smile on his face and when Hotchner finally glanced at him out of the corner of his eye he knew Harry hadn't really been listening. "What?"

Harry turned away slightly. "Sorry, I should probably stop, uh, comparing... It's just... You two are a
lot alike. That sounded a lot like something he would have said. You both tried using emotions when you first met me when there was a situation you needed me to get out of, and then you switched to logic."

"Harry... This whole time, when you've been trying to get away from the house... Were you trying to get away from me?"

"Yeah," he responded immediately, honestly. "But I'm glad I didn't. I wouldn't have worked through everything if I hadn't been near you." He paused. "So... Thanks. For everything you did, even though half the time I've been acting like a brat." Another pause. "More than half the time, really."

"You're welcome. Listen, I understand you'll have to go eventually, even if you do get this fixed, but stop by every once in a while. It'll make Haley happy."

Harry smiled. "I'll stop by and visit you too, if you don't mind."

Hotchner hesitated. "I'd understand if that were too painful for you."

"It'll be fine," Harry said. "Even if you're not my father, I do enjoy your company."

"Could've fooled me," was the reply, so bland that Harry wasn't sure if he was trying to make a joke or not.

"Well, now that I'm not-" screaming in agony on the inside every time I see you "-being a complete arse, yes."

Hotchner barely acknowledged the statement, but Harry had a feeling that he knew what he'd really meant.

---

They were the first ones to show up, so Harry had the delight of watching everyone filter in. Strauss' sour expression told Harry everything he needed to know about how much she knew and just how pleased she was to know it. The rest of the team was remarkably calm just to spite her. Blackwolf and Travis, who showed up at different times, were respectively nonchalant and boisterous.

"Never got to do a magical introduction before," Travis whispered excitedly as she sat down beside him. He grinned and she suddenly jumped. "Woah, you're Harry Potter!"

"From the other world."

"That's going to take me a while to get used to," she muttered, shaking her head. On Harry's other side, Hotchner didn't say anything, instead choosing to examine the reactions of everyone else in the room to the current situation.

Blackwolf took charge when the last of the team filtered in, right on time. Before he even opened his mouth, Harry's hand shot up and he narrowed his eyes at him. "Who knows what?" Harry asked.

"Everyone knows what's happened," Travis said. "As much as we know, anyway."

"Can I begin?" Blackwolf dryly asked and Harry settled back. "Considering all of you are briefed on the case and magic, I won't mince words. The current concern is Foyet. If he has seen magic, I doubt he would try to tell anyone, but it could be possible for him to track down a magical community and get help that way. Many would give him a hand just to get back at Potter." Harry twitched at the name. "Measures have already been taken to ask local authorities to keep an eye out for him, but no
more than a few will truly take a nonmagical threat seriously."

"What happens if he gets help?" Prentiss asked.

"Theoretically, they could track down Haley and Jack. Both Jacks. If, that is, they're smart about it," Harry said, grimacing. "Thankfully, most wizards and witches don't have a lot of common sense, but given a bit of time, they could work out how to do it."

"Well, it'd take some difficult spell-casting," Travis hedged.

"Or they could just send an owl," Harry pointed out, and Travis paused. For the nonmagicals, he explained, "Trained owls can find almost anyone, so long as they're not behind wards. Someone would just have to follow the owl to its destination."

"Can't you track Foyet that way?" Strauss asked.

"We tried, but he's up in Canada and they're getting hit by bad weather right now," Blackwolf said. "The owls can get through but we can't follow them. And..." He paused, then slowly said, "We think he already found a magical community in Quebec."

"Shit," Harry muttered.

"How bad is that?" Morgan asked.

"It means he could get a ward over him to stop us from tracking him, and he could already be healed," Harry said. "Very bad."

"So we're just waiting for him to show up?" JJ frowned.

"We're going to keep looking for him from our end," Blackwolf replied. "But other than that... There is not much else we can do, not if he has already managed to ward himself from detection. However, if he waits long enough, those wards will begin to wear off, and he'll either have to risk being located or go to a community to get them replaced. Potter, what exactly did you do to him?"

Harry sighed, frustrated. "I'm not entirely sure. I think I just sent out enough magic to break his sternum."

"Well, what spell did you cast?" Travis asked.

"I don't know."

"How do you not know?" Blackwolf demanded, annoyed.

"It was just defensive magic, wandless. I wasn't thinking of a spell." Both stared at him. "It's a long story."

"What is?" Strauss asked, looking between the three rapidly, eyes sharp. He couldn't blame her for being twitchy when she was entering a world she'd never even known existed before.

"Wandless magic is incredibly rare," Travis said slowly. "Not to mention magic that strong at his age..."

"Potter," Blackwolf started, in a tone Harry had never heard him use before. "Did you-"

"No."
"Potter."

He glared at him. "No."

"What's wrong?" Strauss demanded.

"Potter used dark magic."

"I bloody well didn't!"

"Then explain-"　

"I don't really know because I haven't had time to figure it out, but I was just told it's probably because I'm a light lord," he snapped furiously. "And if it were dark magic, don't you think I would've made sure I could actually use it when I wanted to, before I end up in danger?"

Blackwolf stared at him. Travis was gaping. "Who told you that?" Blackwolf asked firmly after a moment.

"Madame Pomfrey, Albus Dumbledore... Severus Snape and Minerva McGonagall didn't comment either way, but they seemed to think the idea was credible."

Blackwolf was quiet for a moment. "How much longer do you have?"

"Less than a year."

The door opened, and Harry shot to his feet as the invisibility cloak was pulled off to reveal Hermione and Neville. A streak of blood was running from her temple, and he was keeping all his weight off his right leg. Both were covered in grime and red stains. The pair looked around the room wearily, eyes lingering regretfully on a couple faces as the room's occupants got up in surprise, before they turned completely to Harry.

"Hogwarts has fallen," Hermione said bluntly.

"And so has the Ministry," Neville added as an afterthought.

Harry sighed. "Damn it."

Chapter End Notes

And now things start to get fun again!
"Beneath the gore and smoke and loam, this book is about the evanescence of life, and why some men choose to fill their brief allotment of time engaging the impossible, others in the manufacture of sorrow. In the end it is a story of the ineluctable conflict between good and evil, daylight and darkness, the White City and the Black." - The Devil in the White City, Erik Larson

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"Of course the bloody Ministry fell," Harry muttered crossly under his breath, shoving his chair back so he could get away from the table, "it's run by the Minister of Magic and why on earth would we ever have one with a grain of common sense." Hotchner kind of had a look like he was going to tackle Harry to the floor if he moved anymore so he paused for a moment once he was free from the table. Hermione and Neville stayed right where they were at, having not moved once to explain everything that had happened. "So we've got all the unit leaders here?"

Hermione nodded.

"Damn."

"I know."

"The ones left home are a smart group - they'll be fine without official command." He paused. "Did you warn this world's Ministry that they might have an invasion coming for them in a little bit?"

"Tried. They didn't listen."

If they left matters where they were at now, Riddle would have more time to effectively take over Britain, particularly since he now had not one but two of the strongholds they had fought so hard to keep him from getting. But if they struck back now, they might not be able to organize quickly enough, and they were running straight into the lion's den the moment they struck. And yet...that was going to happen no matter when they decided to make their move. Furthermore, Harry himself only had a short time span in which he could act, before something tried killing him again.

"Who all is injured?"

"Scrapes and bruises for everyone. Draco got hit by Dolohov's curse, but Angelina fixed it."

"Excuse me-" Strauss interrupted, more as an interjection than actual manners.

"You're thinking we need to go back now," Neville said wearily, but with a small smile. "I thought so too."

"Before everyone else gets too far away," Harry nodded in agreement. "Sorry, guys, but I don't think there's time for you to rest. Meet you outside?"

Hermione tossed his wand at him in reply and he caught it, then apparated out as he saw Hotchner suddenly jerk towards him, arm outstretched to grab him before he could leave. He landed in the
parking lot, and the other two arrived across the lot from him a moment later. At least they'd ended up somewhere in the right lot, considering how much potential space there was in Quantico. He made another jump to appear next to them.

"Where's everyone else?" he asked.

"Outskirts of Hogwarts."

The two Draco Malfoys meeting could only go badly. That was enough of a reason to get them back home if nothing else was. "Right. Got a portkey?"

Hermione shook her head, and he pulled out his own illegally made one that he had created upon arriving at Hogwarts the last time. She activated the portkey after they all put their hands on it, and they were whisked away to the outskirts of Hogwarts.

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Hotch began to feel the tuggings again, and he succumbed immediately, vanishing from the imaginary Room of Requirement of Umbridge's time to the real world. Unfortunately, the transition from Harry's mental creations were becoming easier and easier the more often he was forced over by the blood wards that dragged him along.

He landed next to Harry in something that felt more painful than side-along apparition. Instead of the pull on his navel, invisible hooks dug into his palms and his chest, yanking at old injuries, mortem or postmortem, caused from his defense of his son. If he ever tried to leave early, the hooks would sink back in again, holding him in place - he'd learned that when he'd wanted to avoid seeing Harry sell himself, but he was mercifully whisked away as soon as the deal was made.

In a sense, he had hoped on feeling the first striking pains of the hook from this trip that he would be arriving in something similar, where Harry was only in danger if he made an unfortunate choice. He knew there was no chance, not when this world's Aaron Hotchner had finally discovered what the source of Harry's antipathy towards him was. Harry didn't have a chance of slipping away now, back into the painful life he'd been living. Hotchner had most assuredly taken Jack to keep Harry nearby, stopping the boy from running off without a second thought with his brother. Whatever this was, it didn't have anything to do with that.

"-choice," Harry finished, eyeing the unit leaders and their seconds in front of him. Most of the communications liaisons were present, too, on the outskirts of Hogwards. Hotchner frowned for a moment, wondering why he'd gone back, then realized that this couldn't have been his world's Hogwarts. They couldn't have repaired it that quickly. For some reason, everyone had come over here instead.

He glanced around, looking for an obvious source of danger, but they were alone in the evening light. By Hogsmeade, there was very little that could attack them without hiding in the village, and the distance between them was too great for someone to approach and not reveal themselves to Hotch. That was something that was nice about being dead - he'd discovered that he could sense everyone around his son, whether they were under something like a disillusionment charm or not. He turned back to the group, apprehension beginning to creep up.

"Why the fuck did you just waste my time with that question?" Daphne snapped. "Of course we're all going, you dimwitted asshole-"

Harry held up his hands in defeat. "Okay, okay! I just wanted to make sure!"
Where were they going? If there was a fight here, the group would have already been there without a second thought. What was so different about this that Harry had apparently asked if anyone wanted to stay behind?

"Can you make it?" Padma asked nervously. "And while we're on that topic, what happened to you?"

Harry grimaced, his emaciation making the gesture sharper than it normally would have been. "I'm going to try," he said, giving no illusions about the effort necessary. "I'll be honest when I say I don't know if I'm can make it the whole way with you guys, but," he pressed as a few made to interrupt him, "you're kidding yourselves if you don’t think you need everyone you can get, and that includes Atlas and I."

There were more than a couple of exchanged glances at the mention of the patronus, who Hotch hadn't seen ever since he'd started haunting Harry, which had been from the moment he'd died. The explanation for its disappearance was obvious enough - and quite agonizing to think about - but he hadn't heard of it returning.

For that matter, he hadn't heard of Harry getting better either. The last time he had seen him had been in Rossi's backyard with Jack, Elle, Morgan, and his other self sitting around, waiting for him to give out. That he was standing and talking with any energy was a shock, though he'd known Harry must have made it or he would have felt something.

"What's the plan?" Roger asked, ever the tactician.

"Do you know what happened to everyone else?" Harry's question did everything to increase Hotch's concern for the group, particularly those he couldn't see. The injuries those in front of him were bearing were not at all reassuring either.

Hermione shook her head quickly. "We didn't have time, but they knew what was happening before us."

"Because they were attacked or because they worked it out?"

"We don't know. They just said to get out and that was it." Get out of where?

"If anyone was caught," Harry said slowly, "this could be our closest chance to get them out. If not, we'd be wasting our time and putting ourselves at risk."

"Where's the invisibility cloak?" Neville asked. "Someone could use that to slip into some of the more protected areas."

"The other world," Harry sighed, then paused and turned to Hogwarts. "Mine is, anyway..."

"Have you met yourself here?" Draco asked.

Harry nodded, saying, "I've met quite a few of our alternate selves. Off topic, I think this is just the arsehole version of our world. Everyone's been so bitchy."

"Probably because they're around you," Angelina innocently said and he rolled his eyes.

"But I bet I can get my other self to loan it to me, so give me a minute and I'll get that, and then we can go storm the Ministry."

The group moved away, closer to the Forbidden Forest to hide on its outskirts, while Harry started
approaching the castle. Hotch faded through the wards easily, and he only had to make sure he was going slowly enough to keep up with Harry.

He didn't know what he'd do if he could actually see Harry. There was no way he could condemn Harry for trying to fight again, not when he knew he would do the same in an instant after everything they had fought for to get some sort of lead in this war or to at least hold their ground, but Harry couldn't honestly believe he was going to survive a single fight in this state. Even if he did miraculously keep up, the strain on his body could cause damage that would kill him after the battle. And yet, if he didn't fight, it was still likely that he was going to die within a couple of months if he couldn't find a solution.

A solution was possible, too, and Hotch had to believe that. He couldn't tell if Harry did or not, especially since he couldn't actually see Harry if he had ever gone out to search for a cure, but this charge into a fight was doing nothing to ease his concerns. If he hadn't found a cure already, and it looked like he hadn't, then this was going to cut down on any time he had left to look.

He shifted in the direction the hooks always pulled him, changing to stand nearer to Harry without actually moving. Doing so ground against his very self, like a hot desert wind blowing abrading flecks against him in a sandstorm, but he forced himself to stay. However painful, it felt like he was getting closer to Harry, though he could almost feel himself being worn away into nothing. Grimly, he noted that if Harry died and thereby released him with the end of the blood wards, it wasn't going to matter much longer.

"Harry," he murmured. "I'm so sorry."

It was the only way he could get near him again. Harry never seemed to hear him, though his alternate self and Morgan had on the occasion he had tried to help Harry's breathing, and he couldn't hold it for nearly as long as he wanted to before he had to let go and return to the other state.

Halfway to the castle, Harry was starting to shake with the effort of forcing himself to move so far after so long in bed. His breathing began to get labored, and his cheeks were reddening. Still, he pressed on, until he'd gotten inside the castle walls and paused to lean against the stone for a moment, out of sight of the unit leaders and seconds. His head fell back onto the wall as one hand moved up to fist itself against his chest, rubbing some sort of pain away.

Tentatively, Hotch reached out until his fingers ghosted over Harry's cheek. Harry jerked slightly, as if jolting a fly off him, and Hotch paused. A moment later, he touched the same spot, and Harry didn't react, just pressing harder on his chest. "I'll stay with you," Hotch said quietly. "I won't leave until I have to." Harry's eyes slipped closed, but he made no sign that he'd actually heard him. Hotch put one hand on Harry's shoulder, making no indication in a rustle of clothing that he was doing so even though he could feel the fabric beneath his palm. "I am so, so proud of you."

Harry's hand suddenly shot up, as if to grab onto the wrist of the hand on his shoulder, and his eyes flew open while his hand passed through open air. Hotch jumped back in surprise, letting him go. For one shocked moment, Harry just stood there, breathing quickly and eyes darting for something in front of him, and then he slumped back against the wall, hiding his face with one hand.

If he tried hard enough, he could probably get a message to Harry. This was proof he could somewhat communicate. That should have given him a sense of elation, at the least. Instead, he stepped quietly away, putting even more distance between them as Harry started to rub his head, shaking.

He couldn't be any more than a distant, vague presence, even if Harry could eventually understand him, and only in times of danger. It would be more distracting for Harry to try to decipher what he
was trying to say than it would be helpful. His life was past, and Harry needed to be able to completely move on, without him. Whatever he was doing, this strange state where he was almost there but wasn’t... It hurt Harry more than it helped either of them, bringing Hotch near enough that Harry could sense him but not enough to let him converse.

Harry looked up as he drew away, and Hotch realized, pained, that Harry had indeed sensed him. "Dad?" Harry whispered and Hotch stayed back before he did any more damage. Harry looked just as he had when it had fully sunk in that his father was gone. "Dad, please..."

The begging almost undid him, but he held his ground, closing his eyes from the sight and turning away as he let himself slip back into the more natural state, where he could still be present without any contact. As soon as he’d made the adjustment, he heard Harry suck in a ragged breath.

A minute passed, and then he heard Harry start to shift, pushing himself up off from the wall. He reluctantly opened his eyes as Harry started towards the castle and, after a couple of seconds, he followed. Ahead of him, Harry took a couple of deep breaths and regained his earlier posture, making it hard to imagine he’d been so near collapse not too long ago.

He cast a disillusionment charm over himself with his wand then made his way to the library. That, it turned out, was a big mistake.

"...What are they doing here?" Zacharias asked, pointing.

"Helping, apparently," Harry sighed, rubbing the back of his head. Behind him, a significant portion of this world’s DA was trailing behind. "Where’s everyone else?"

"Popped over to the Ministry to figure out how we can break in. Explaining the whole stupid situation is going to take too long," Ron replied. Among those gone were the Slytherins, Seamus, and the twins. Harry had high confidence in them to come up with a pretty good distraction to get them all in.

Harry nodded, then glanced to the side at Potter. "This really isn't a good idea."

"You're doing it. It's a fight against Voldemort, so you can hardly expect us to back out," Potter said, annoyed.

"Just because we're doing it doesn't make it a great plan. We're just running low on options."

"And we're running low on time and people, too," Hermione pointed out, frowning slightly as she scanned the group. "We'll have to take them. To the group, she said, "You guys know you're going to have to follow our world's Harry and not yours, right?"

"Won't be a problem," Weasley replied. "Just don't expect the same shit out of us that he pulls."

"Uh, no one expects the shit out of Harry that Harry pulls," Angelina said, causing a few laughs from the ones who weren't still looking over all the injuries Harry’s people had with discrete, worried glances.

"I briefed them on the way over," Harry said. "Let's apparate over to the Ministry in small groups. Everyone, grab a couple of people - most of this lot is underage for apparition."

They arrived at the Ministry not longer after, and they were down to the Department of Mysteries an embarrassingly short time later due to some fireworks from the twins and some pyrotechnics from
Seamus. There was a short pause while they waited for the other seven to get back, and they lounged around the Veil for a little bit.

Unsurprisingly, the DA was more than slightly curious about what was going on in the other world, and Harry's bunch answered their questions as well as they could. Harry had given them a good rundown, but he was aware there were details he just hadn't thought to mention. He left the others to it, instead focusing internally. There didn't seem to be a strain on his core and wards yet, but it would start coming once he got into the fight. He might be able to force himself to go on longer, however dangerous that would be, though he doubted anyone else would see it as necessary.

One of the entry doors opened and shut quietly, and then an instant later half the DA was on their feet and pointing wands at the ones who had entered. Harry's group just stared in bewilderment as the seven they'd been waiting for pointed their wands right back at the DA.

"Something the matter?" Harry finally asked when no one lowered their wands.

"That's Malfoy!"

"Ah! Right. In our world, Voldemort pissed everyone off, including the Slytherins. A good portion of them are on our side, including Draco, Daphne, Blaise, Adrian, and Theodore. That's our original group, but we've got at least another twenty more now." He paused at their constipated expressions. "Seriously. It's okay."

Draco sighed dramatically, stuffed his wand away, then pushed Seamus down ahead of him as a shield. "I approach the dias," he announced loudly, "so I ask you do not fire during my peaceful jaunt."

"I don't trust him," Potter said bluntly.

"He probably doesn't trust you either, but you both trust me so it's good. Draco, if Seamus trips and falls, you're taking care of his brain-damaged self for the rest of the battle." Draco let Seamus go, who swatted him immediately. The rest of the group started down the steps.

When everyone was up on the dias, Harry briefed them on how to get through according to what Voldemort and Elle had managed. "If you don't cast these spells on yourself before you go through, you'll die," he said, after explaining them. There were three - one to point them towards the other Veil, one to shove them along, and a third to keep anyone from clinging on to them as they went. "And it's really going to suck. So don't do it."

"Is this how you got through originally?" Lovegood asked curiously.

"Sort of. Voldemort opened up the path by creating a route to himself because he was in need of help to survive. I got pulled through instead." Which he suspected was from the Horcrux in Potter, but he really didn't feel like explaining that at the moment so he kept quiet about it.

Harry went through third, and the experience was as miserable as it was the first time. Ahead of him, Draco had landed with Seamus, then cast their patronuses for reconnaissance to find out if any of their DA was being held in the Ministry. Moments after Harry stepped away from the Veil, they both came with a negative.

"Small mercies," Harry muttered as Draco continued typing on his phone, sending out texts to everyone to let them know they were about to raid the Ministry. "What's everyone saying?"

"All the groups are accounted for. They answered fast - I'm guessing they were waiting for us." He hit a button and held the phone out in front of him at the level of his nose. Harry stepped closer again
as he heard more people coming through behind him. There was an audible click. "Hey, Lavender?"

"Here."

"Hang on, I'm going to merge calls with you and everyone else." The rest of Potter's DA continued falling out of the Veil one by one, and Draco and Harry moved away with the phone so they could hear better. After a minute, just when the last call merged, Hermione came to stand between the two.

"This should be everyone," Draco said.

"What happened?" Ginny demanded immediately.

"We went through the Veil to the other world," Hermione replied. "We just picked up Harry, and the other world's DA wanted to help so they're with us too."

"Are you thinking we should take back the Ministry now?" Dean asked. "We can all probably get there within ten minutes or so, then enter as a group."

"Are you all mostly divided up by units?" Harry glanced behind him as he heard confused shuffling and saw that most of the DA was staring at them in confusion, though he couldn't fathom why. "If so, could you all arrive that way instead?"

"Yes," a couple replied at the same time.

"Okay, Firin, meet up with me," Lee said. "We're at Trafalgar Square, west rooftops."

"Give us a minute," Justin replied. "We went to Blackwolf to tell him what's going on." He paused. "By the way, Elle's here, and she's giving me that look so I guess she's going to be coming with us. And Remus, she just said."

"More the merrier," Harry said. "Huther?"

"At 221B Baker Street," Katie said shamelessly. "Before anyone says anything, we decided it'd be a good idea to pretend to be tourists, okay?"

"We weren't going to say anything, we were just going to think it very loudly," Hannah said, snickering. "Pucla to me, by the Eye."

Many of the calls were rapidly disconnecting as groups apparated away for a rendezvous. The last unit, Gryven, gathered around Michael, and then they were all just waiting for the word. "Everyone take a different entrance," Harry said. "Huther, floo in. Firin, apparate."

He glanced at Hermione, unsure how else one would get in. She, in turn, looked at Draco, who said, "Pucla, do you guys know how to take the toilets?"

"I do," Theodore said.

"That, then. And Gryven, take the portkey."

"Aero, stick with your normal units for now," Harry directed. He checked the time on the phone. "Okay, it's 6:12 now. In thirty-five minutes, is everyone going to be ready?" He got a round of affirmatives. "Then at 6:47, start coming in. Surprise with patronuses, then push your way through until you get to the statue in the entrance. We're going to take back the Auror offices before you arrive." He muttered a question about where the toilets dropped people off to Draco, then said
louder, "Firin and Gryven, meet up once you're in the entrance and push through together. Huther and Pucla, you do the same. But all of you, keep pressing forward while you do it. Don't worry too much about getting hit from flanks, though you should keep an eye on it. I'll bet they're going to be caught off guard, especially with the patronuses, and I'll send Atlas up to help."

"Atlas is back?" Terry blurted.

"Yeah. All right, everyone got it?" Another chorus of acknowledgement, and then Draco ended the call. The trio turned to the DA, which Ron had been organizing with Angelina while they waited. "So?"

"Four corresponding groups to help our units," Ron said. "When are they showing up?"

"Thirty-five minutes. We need to take the Auror department, and then-" He paused. "I'll bet they've been arresting people." Beside him, Draco started to grin. "All right. Here's what we're going to do. If you're the original or new Huther and Pucla, go with Hermione and take the Auror department back. Everyone else, come with me, and we're going to check out the cells. Now, let's get real friendly with disillusionment charms."

Draco's phone rang and he quickly answered it and put it on speakerphone. "Hey, so Moody just showed up with the Order and he wants to know what you want him to do." There was angry muttering behind Lee. "Okay, maybe that's not exactly how he phrased it-"

"I'm not asking Hotchner what he wants us to do, I want to know what he's doing so we can-"

"Did you give him a rundown?" Harry asked, amused.

"I tried."

"Moody, get the Order to apparate in with Firin. Hide under disillusionment charms or any invisibility cloaks, if you've got any, and then move ahead of Firin to take out people before them."

Moody have a long-suffering sigh.

"All right, thanks." Draco hung up.

"Did you just order Mad-Eye Moody around?" Granger demanded.

"Yep. Okay, everyone, let's get going."

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Harry made it to the end without dying or anything similarly unfortunate. By the time the Death Eaters had all been driven out, with help from both DAs, the Order, and the very pissed off aurors and prisoners who had been collected before the fight truly began, he was starting to feel the struggle between his two power sources and stopped using spells except when necessary. Luckily, he was mostly needed just for direction by that point and no one really needed him in a fight anyway. He kept Atlas wandering around to help until Elle came by in her wolf form and sat on him until he relented and vanished the Patronus.

At about the same time, he tracked down Rufus Scrimgeour and had a rather pleasingly long rant at the man, which basically summed up to him insulting the Minister in every way possible for his inability to maintain basic defense around the seat of the magical government in Britain.

Moody came in soon just as Harry started to leave. "This is going to happen again," Moody said
"That's just what I was saying," Harry replied, still frustrated.

"The building is far too easy to get into, but that has to be possible for accessibility in peacetime," Moody continued. "The Ministry just isn't a solid defense during war. The government has to be moved somewhere else."

"And what, leave the Ministry here for You-Know-Who to take when he wants?" Scrimgeour demanded.

"No, we'll seal off the regular entrances and create one that only we know about and can get through. When this is all over, we'll come through that entrance and open everything back up," Moody explained, and although this was the first he'd heard of that plan, Harry had to agree with it. They couldn't come take back the Ministry every time the Death Eaters took it over, and the government still had to operate somehow.

"Fine," Scrimgeour said. "Shouldn't you two be out fighting?"

"It's over," Harry replied.

Scrimgeour stared at him for a long moment. "You entered two and a half hours ago."

"There's a good reason why Hogwarts only fell when no one was there to defend it. Now, the public. How much damage did Riddle do to them?"

"A lot of families have vanished, but it's unclear if they were killed or have fled," Moody told him. "Also unclear if any of them are going to reappear if the tides turn. Again."

"I wouldn't be surprised if they don't," Harry muttered. "Not really the thing someone wants to get involved in."

"They started taking everything they could get their hands on as quickly as they could, and no one was ready for it," Moody said, grimacing. "No one listened to us when we said to keep defenses high until Voldemort had been completely taken down. Everyone just wanted it to be over, so when the Death Eaters came back, there was almost no resistance available. Last time, they at least had a warning."

"How much have the Death Eaters taken since I've been gone?"

"Most of the south up to London and Ireland. Some of the Order stated around Hogwarts and have kept the fight going up there."

That much was gone, just within a couple of days? "How...?"

"He was planning this for a while," Moody said grimly. "We just weren't watching closely enough. We were too focused on Hogwarts."

"...Shit." Because there was nothing else that could really sum up his thoughts. "Okay, before I leave, we need to talk about something else, so remind me." Scrimgeour was looking at him curiously now, but this wasn't something Harry trusted everyone with so he ignored the gaze. He ran a hand over his face, trying to focus. "Okay, we've got government records under our feet. Let's haul out all the files we have on all the Death Eaters we know of, and let's try to figure out how exactly the group was formed."
"Why is that important?" Scrimgeour asked.

"Because then we can get as much embarrassing information as we can on the group and the individuals and publish it. People are going to be much more reluctant to join the Death Eaters if they know about that kind of thing." Scrimgeour nodded in understanding, impressed, and Harry continued, "Get the newspapers to work with you on this. I'm sure the sensational reels would be more than happy to help. Anything else you two need before I head out?"

"We need to figure out where we're going to put everyone once we catch them again," Moody said, emphasizing the last word. Harry sympathized. Doing this all over was hardly satisfying when they'd already done it once only to have all their work undone in a day.

"Are there other wizarding communities with more effective prisons?" he asked, and both adults paused. "Contact allies of the Ministry and see if they wouldn't be willing to take in some Death Eaters once we catch them. Then, even if Riddle's still on the loose, he'll have trouble releasing them all at the same time again, and it will give us some time to fix the prison situation. We can disperse them out over several prisons so we don't overburden one."

"What about getting more people to fight?" Scrimgeour asked, a strange, desperate look starting to grow in his eyes. It reminded Harry of someone looking for a way out. "Where could we get them from?"

"Beauxbatons and Durmstrang graduates helped us last time. We could probably get some help from them again, but that wouldn't get us more than a thirty people and probably not for very long. Start asking for help from the populace through newspapers and word of mouth, and make it easy for people to give aid. It could just be supplies, or they could also sign up to help fight. Target people with family members already involved in the fight, but don't contact them specifically. This is serious, but we're not in danger of losing yet and we don't want to give that impression." He glanced at Moody. "Could you tell if most of the Death Eaters were here or not?"

Moody frowned deeper. "No, not most of them. This was just a small portion controlling the government, plus the useless back up. There were more at the beginning, but we don't know where they went. I guess a significant portion turned tail and fled."

"Hm. That would be, what, a couple hundred total?"

"More like eight or nine hundred."

Harry grimaced. Riddle had been busy while Harry was gone. "And we've captured...?"

"A little over one hundred. Several hundred vanished in the middle of the fight. The rest managed to get out once it was obvious we were winning."

"Okay. At least most of his forces aren't dedicated to the cause, then."

"When are you going to take back Hogwarts?" Scrimgeour asked.

"I hate to say this, but Hogwarts is going to have to wait, at least for the DA. We're better mobile, and if we have to stay in one place again, this is just going to drag out for much longer than necessary. We'll lose fewer people if we just go after him now."

He didn't say it out loud, but he was still planning to break into Hogwarts soon. Hopefully, since he'd taken the school, Riddle hadn't thought it important to move Ravenclaw's diadem out of the Room of Requirement. Even so, Harry would have to get to it before Riddle realized he was in danger of losing and decided to hide the blasted thing elsewhere.
"Po-" Scrimgeour cut himself off, then hesitantly tried, "Hotchner." Harry tilted his head to show he was listening and, encouraged, Scrimgeour continued. "I'm very grateful for what you've done. A lot of people are."

"...Okay," Harry said, and glanced at Moody, who didn't even bother that with any sort of acknowledgment. "Anyway. I need to get a certain portion of my students home - it's past their bedtime." The other-world Snape was going to throw a fit if Harry brought those students back after curfew.

Moody walked out with him and silently led him down a few halls until he pulled Harry into the head auror office, located close to the minister's for convenience's sake.

Harry silently and wandlessly cast a muffling charm, partly just to see if he could, then said, "We have to deal with the other world too."

"You need to talk to Albus," Moody immediately said.

"Yeah, I know." He was dying to know where the damn headmaster had been this whole time. Shouldn't he have been doing something more productive than letting all of this fall?

Moody gave him a look. "No, you need to talk to him about the other worlds. He noticed a problem."

"A problem. I'm not familiar with one of those," Harry dryly said.

"Hotchner, go listen to him. You're not going to like it, and you're going to have to open your mind a bit, but he's right." His mouth twisted into a grimace as he turned to the door. "Just remember that fate is not as escapable to us as it is to muggles."

"What does the other world have to do with fate?" Harry demanded.

Moody left without answering and Harry groaned at the dramatic exit.

He walked to the door and stuck his head out into the hall. "Hey, where's he at anyway?"

"Where do you think?" Moody called back at him, not even turning around.

Harry sighed and shook his head, then summoned his patronus as he walked back into the muffled zone. "Hermione. Moody says Dumbledore knows something about the alternate world situation, so I'm going to check up on that. Let me know if you need me."

He still had one of the portkeys in his pocket that led to Hogwarts, and although it had been made for the other world's Hogwarts, it still pulled him straight to where he needed to go. That left him smug, but he quickly suppressed the feeling. There wasn't time for that now.

Dumbledore was up in his office. It wasn't really his office anymore, not when it had been used as a conference room more than an individual's workspace, but that was still what Harry thought of it as, even if it still resembled a war room and not a headmaster's alcove. The gray-haired man looked up as he entered, but for once there was no smile.

"This can't be good," Harry muttered under his breath as he let the door close. He almost jumped when he saw a figure out of the corner of his eye. "Blackwolf?"

Blackwolf nodded at him. "Harry."
"What's going on?"

"The news is more neutral than bad. What happened with the Ministry?"

"We took it back."

"Do you have a couple minutes or do you need to be somewhere else?" Blackwolf said. "This is important, but not an immediate concern if there's another crisis."

"The others have it handled. Alastor said this had to do with the other world."

Dumbledore nodded, and dread started to seep into Harry's stomach like cold water. "Harry... Have you ever considered how odd the prospect of another world seems?"

"A little. Why?"

"Doesn't it seem odd that there is another world out there?"

"Obviously. Why?" He glanced at Blackwolf, who was standing there with a grimace on his face.

"Doesn't it seem even stranger that there would only be one world out there?"

Harry stared at him. "You're not saying..."

"There are seven worlds total," Blackwolf interrupted. "Five more, besides the two you already know about. There are gates between all of them that allow passage, but they're hard to find. You located one of them already."

Harry's eyes started to widen. "Wait, does... Does Riddle know that? Is he looking for the rest?"

"Yes," Blackwolf said. "I'm one of the people charged with protecting the gates. There have been reports from the other gatekeepers that he has been spotted trying to find the locations of the remaining five."

"Great," Harry sighed.

"There's more," Dumbledore said.

Harry closed his eyes and grimaced. "Of course there is."

"According to legend, you're going to have to find the rest."

"What legend?"

"The tale of Merlin."

Harry gave him a look. "There's no such mention of seven worlds."

"Much of that legend has been lost, my dear boy. Just think of everything the world has already misinterpreted of your own tale in such a short span of time, and then consider all that Merlin's story had to lose. The seven worlds are there, when you listen closely."

This wasn't what he needed. Two worlds were bad enough to handle. "Okay, just...please get to it. I need to head back and figure out what to do with the situation we've got now, before I even get to...whatever this is."
"The tale of Merlin states that he told the lord that his castle's tremors were caused by the battling of two dragons, a white and a red. Three times, Merlin said, the white would overcome the red. But three times, he added, the red would push back and win."

"And the white dragon represented the old order and the red the new, that of Arthur's Camelot. I've heard this before."

"There is something the legend leaves out. Each battle was fought in a different world. For every world the Dark lost, Merlin's Light lost one too."

"You think we lost this world, because we lost serious ground here," Harry said slowly.

"For now. But if you win the war of the worlds, you can regain any territory you lost without opposition from the dark."

"Okay, stop. Why is there any reason to believe this is even true?"

"Because there are fractures between the gates," Blackwolf said. "Some of them are damaged from the war centuries ago and we can track the magical signature. It lends credence to the legend. Not only that, but Dumbledore has access to many of the ancient documents that have survived from that time period. They aren't completely lucid, but they also support the idea."

"Who all knows about the gates?"

"The gatekeepers, and some individuals in the governments that have land jurisdiction over where the gates are."

Harry paused. "Fudge would have had to know about the one in the Department of Mysteries. He told Umbridge, didn't he? That's how Riddle found out. She told him."

"Probably."

Harry rubbed a tired hand over his face. "Okay," he said wearily. "Okay, whatever. We've already got one world. What does all this mean?"

"Supposedly," Blackwolf said before Dumbledore could give a more dramatic version, "you will win three and he will win three. The seventh battle decides the war. Whoever wins that one wins them all."

"You don't sound like you're using a general 'you,'" Harry said suspiciously.

"It is a battle of lords. The Dark Lord against the Light. You are the Light."

"I've heard that," Harry said dryly, "but not with so much gloom and doom."

Dumbledore gave him a slight smile, hardly more than an uprising of his beard. "There is no gloom in this statement. I think you will win."

"We will," Harry said. "I doubt the Dark Lord has a posse as awesome as mine." Which he was going to be relying on for a while until he got back up to full strength, because he was nowhere near that point right then. Blackwolf smirked slightly. "I'll head back to the other world I've been staying in to make sure it's secured. Do you know how to get to the others?"

"Yes," Blackwolf said.

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow. "My dear boy, how quickly do you think you can win a war in one
world? This one took the better part of a year to be decided."

"Well, if the Light Curse is correct... It better be a few weeks at the most." He waved it off. "I'm going to tell a couple of the QDA. Tell Hermione if you find out anything else, and she'll let me know. One everything is sorted out here, I'm going back. Do you think the Order can hold what ground they have until we can return?"

"I believe we will lose the government again," Dumbledore replied frankly. "It will be fragmented, and it may be exceedingly difficult. I warn you – this world will not be the same when you return."

"But," Blackwolf agreed, almost through gritted teeth, "you don't have time to push it into shape to win."

Harry nodded reluctantly. "I believe you."

With nothing else to discuss, he made his way back to the Ministry. More worlds or not, he had other things to worry about for the immediate future, before everything got even messier.

He didn't send out messages when he landed in the entrance, giving Potter's DA a little more time to recuperate. They'd handled themselves about as well as expected, since they hadn't had the Blackwolf and BAU Summer Camp for the Traumatized experience. It was going to be quite the explanation when he got them back, though, as there was no way that their disappearance had gone entirely unnoticed after almost three hours.

Overall, there had been no fatalities between the two DAs, though he'd heard they had lost two aurors and an Order member. If there was some way to join all the groups together, the whole business would probably be much more effective, since they weren't under one single leadership, but there just wasn't the time to stop and get that all sorted out right now. Besides, with multiple worlds, it wasn't a bad idea to have one group operate solely as a home defense and another as a foreign offense. Until he had a moment, the groups were just going to have to act independently, no matter how disjointed it meant they had to operate. In a way, it was almost good that the BAU was no longer with them since it took out one more head they needed to cooperate with.

He came to a stop in the hall suddenly. His thoughts hadn't drifted to the current activities of the BAU in months. Even Elle had been focused with the war, so what news she had brought him hadn't had anything to do with the profiler team. There had been no statement about whether they were going to go back to their usual cases, or if they were going to start working magical cases as well, or what. Maybe if he had a spare moment, he'd try to find out. At the very least, he hoped to know they were all recovering from their period of wartime.

No one was in the hall with him, and he took the chance to lean against the stone for a couple of moments. His body was starting to ache, from moving around so much while his body was still recovering and from the damage it had taken because of his illness. If he went back to see the BAU, it would undoubtedly be the last time, and he knew he was going to have to make a decision about whether he wanted them to know or not. To keep his failing condition a secret would require him never seeing one of them again, but he didn't know if he wanted to do that, no matter how agonizing it would be to see their reactions when they discovered what was wrong with him. He just knew the team would try and look for a solution, as they had done for him for years, even when this wasn't something they could fight; they'd also try to keep him in one place to avoid hastening the toll on his body, when he'd be better off trying to end the war instead.

He was jolted out of his reverie before he became too entrenched in it. Ron's dog phased out of a wall and skidded to a halt in front of him. "Get to the Veil," it said, and he took off running, pushing past the growing pain.
By the time he got there, half of his DA had been gathered, but from everyone's tense faces something had gone wrong. "What happened?" he demanded. Potter's group wasn't there, so it must be serious if they didn't trust the other group.

"Bellatrix was taunting Draco during the fight," Hermione said quickly, shakily, "and she kept saying it was all his and your fault for everything that had happened, because he had convinced others to turn against Riddle and you were leading the fight." He gestured for her to hurry it up. His stomach was rolling, but he couldn't tell if it was from anxiety or his failing health. "She said she was going to take away what was most important to you two."

His eyes flickered as he tried to work it out. "Quantico?"

"That's what Draco thought so he sent a message to Blackwolf, and then Ron noticed that the group of Death Eaters had vanished and he happened to mention it to Draco, and Draco realized they'd been down in these levels-

"They went through the other world," Harry whispered. "There's another Quantico and Hogwarts there. They knew they weren't going to beat us without more help, so they went to get it."

"Draco thought the same, but he thinks Bellatrix was going to split off from everyone else. He saw Riddle talking to her, and he noticed she disappeared far before the others."

"Where does he think she went?"

"After what we all care for. Jack."

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Draco found his alternate self rather easily. Just as he thought, there were several differences in how they had developed over the last couple of years that he took note of from under a disillusionment charm. He left Hogwarts minutes later, hurrying to Virginia with apparitions and floo jumps that were a little too hastily done to be accurate. On the way, he adjusted his appearance, slicking back his hair and gathering arrogance and distress to him until he had mimicked the other world about as well as he could.

The DA half that he had brought with him were already on their way to Quantico to start throwing up wards. They wouldn't hold for long if put under a heavy assault, but they would last until American support could come. It was neglectful to just go after Jack when the alternate thing Lestrange could have meant was the building they had all come to cherish, so although it had killed them to leave him and Jack, he had forced the rest of the DA to forget about them for the time being.

He apparated to the Hotchner home, and immediately knew he'd gotten the wrong location. There was a gaudy yellow Mustang in the driveway. He vanished, arriving in the conference room of the BAU and interrupting an explanation between Hotchner - his heart wrung itself -, Rossi, Strauss, and the twins, who for once in their lives were dead serious. The group turned to him sharply, the twins' eyes widening in hope.

"I need to know where Jack is," he said firmly.

"Why?" Hotchner replied sharply. Too sharply.

"Monopoly," Fred said and Draco instinctively winced. "Sorry, needed to make sure it was you. You look weird."
"It's intentional; I'm pretending to be myself," he told Fred, and then to Hotchner, "We think someone might be going after him because of Harry. I need an address so I can get him somewhere else."

"Who's after him?"

"The same person who killed you in our time," Draco quietly said. "She's Riddle's second in command, and she's absolutely insane."

"They said Lestrange is coming here," Strauss said, pointing at the twins.

"We think it's likely she's going to send her forces here," George corrected. "But we're not sure. And she doesn't need a small army to go after one boy."

"Not until I know more of what this is about," Hotchner said, and Draco really couldn't fault him for that.

He turned to the twins, said, "Keep trying," and then apparated into Garcia's office. She wasn't in there, which was a small miracle because he didn't know if he could have done this if she had been. He took the chair and quickly typed in her password, thankfully the same one as in the other world, and then he started searching.

It took him an unfortunate amount of time, though relatively short in comparison to what it would have been if he had gone about this another way, and he apparated out the moment he had the location. From there, he took it in short jumps to get within a small range of the address, and then he used Point Me spells to get even closer after casting a levitation charm on himself. The experience was extremely nauseating and he couldn't imagine why Riddle would ever choose this form of flight over the normal broomstick way.

Finally, he found himself outside a suburban house. Along with fifteen Death Eaters.

He sneered as a couple looked his way in surprise. "Oh, what did you expect?" he demanded, surreptitiously looking at faces. "That I wouldn't get involved when this would hurt Potter?"

Lestrange wasn't here. Avery and Goyle, however, were. These people weren't from his world.

Avery smirked at him. "I suppose not. The Dark Lord just wants us to pick him up and take him back. We'll deal with him there." With a scoff, he added, "The other Bellatrix seems to think that someone should be arriving shortly to stop us."

Under his breath, Draco muttered, "Is that because she doubts her own competence? Glad we've got our Death Eaters instead."

That got a few raised eyebrows and smiles, a bit pleasantly surprised. Perhaps his other self wasn't that much of an asshole, even if he was working with the dark willingly, if his attitude was anything to go by.

"Go in with Goyle," Avery told him, and Draco moved to stand by the living version of Goyle. "Move in."

Goyle kept an eye on him for about five seconds, then they were raiding the house and he didn't care anymore about the teenager. A small group went inside, and shrieks and howls echoed out, artificially made from spells. Even so, Draco worried someone nearby would hear how loudly his heart was beating. The rest of the group just waited for the occupants to flee in fear. A minute later, the front door flew open, and a woman stumbled out, pushing two nearly identical kids out in front of her.
This was Harry's mother, Draco realized, horrified. Jack wasn't the only one at risk.

The trio looked around, wide-eyed and scared, and the woman glanced between the cluster of people in front of them and the howling house behind them. Then she turned to the group and demanded, "What do you want?"

They laughed. "What do we want, she asks," Avery snorted, and then Draco apparated to put himself next to one of the Jacks, grabbed onto all three of them, and apparated away.

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Harry left the DA behind him, hurrying to the safe house as quickly as he could. The others were going to go support Quantico, and they didn't need him for that. No, there was a group that needed him much more.

The house was empty when he got there. It was more terrifying than it would have been to find blood or even a body. Those would have made it more likely that they had fought and gotten away; with such a head start, this only meant someone had taken them, and that could give Riddle all the time he wanted to torture any of them. Despite his overall exhaustion, a new wave of adrenaline was starting to course through him, and he hurried inside.

That didn't mean someone hadn't left hints about who or where specifically they had been taken. Harry slipped quietly to the upstairs of the safe house, where he could get a better view of the yard as well. The first two rooms he checked didn't give him much to look at, and the third had a nice span of the front yard but there weren't any places for someone to easily hide and there wasn't anything suspicious. The search was painstakingly slow and, so far, extremely uninformative, but while this was costing them time, the alternative could cost them blood. Anything at all had the potential to tell him what had happened.

He stepped into the fourth room and briefly noticed that it gave him a good look at the backyard. His attention was quickly diverted to the knife buried in the table in front of him, particularly the handle and the shape of the blade. It was his own, that he'd lost in the tussle with Foyet, the one he'd gotten from Blackwolf.

He threw up his hand to the height of his head as he whirled around, instinctively blocking a strike or a choker, and slid his feet to the side to avoid any jabs to the midsection. Nothing went near his head, but a knife sliced right under his arm and centimeters from his ribs, and Harry shot out with the hand that was already up to hit Foyet's chest, right where he'd already damaged him. Foyet turned, deflecting the blow to his pectoral instead, and he grabbed Harry's wrist as he belatedly realized his attack had been too obvious right off the bat.

With his wrist, he threw Harry off-balance enough to swipe his leg out from underneath him. Harry threw his elbow back and he felt cartilage shatter, but Foyet twisted and grabbed him from behind, making it harder for Harry to reel back for a hit. He struggled, legs kicking and arms smacking, as Foyet ducked his head into Harry's back to protect it and tightened his grip with one arm so he could release the other. Using the brief moment, Harry moved more strongly, aware he wasn't going to get another chance-

Then something was pushing into his diaphragm, slicing away muscles and organ, and Harry gasped in pain as Foyet twisted the blade. Before he could get oriented, Foyet dragged the knife to the side, eliciting a moan. Foyet pulled his knife out of tissue and blood and tucked it away as Harry's legs slowly buckled underneath him.

"I'm not taking a chance with you again," Foyet murmured as Harry's head fell back against his
shoulder and he started slipping towards the ground. "Not even if you're weaker." He lowered Harry
to the floor nonchalantly, face first, then got down and straddled Harry's waist. "It's funny, in a way.
Your dad did the same thing. No screaming. Just kinda pissed."

He struggled but couldn't get himself into a good position to strike out. The fight earlier that day had
drained him too much to get any real power behind what little he could do.

"Got to wonder how you knew I was coming. Nice job getting Haley and the kids out, I have to say.
But you shouldn't have come back here on your own, no matter what magic you have."

"How long have you been here?" Harry demanded, hoping it came out furious.

"Never mind that."

That didn't do anything to tell him how long his brother had been gone for. He managed to throw an
elbow back and collected solidly with Foyet's hip, causing him to flinch to the side for an instant
before he grabbed onto Harry's arm and stopped him from lashing out again.

"Brave, aren't you?" Foyet muttered as Harry felt rope around his wrists. He tried to pull his wrists
apart; Foyet let him, tying one wrist and then yanking the other up to secure it to the first. Harry
thrashed even as the knots were tied, attempting to keep panic down and remember his training, but
instinctively he felt that so much relied on his hands that binding them was the end of his resistance.
"Fighting the big bad man all by yourself. Wouldn't Daddy be proud if he knew?"

Harry strained with his legs, managing to kick Foyet in the back even if it was only a glancing blow,
but he just adjusted to pin down Harry's thighs as well. Damn his sickness and bed rest - he'd lost too
much muscle in those weeks to have a hope of throwing Foyet off when all his weight was on him,
especially not when he was so injured and so exhausted now. "Yes, I know about that. So what are
you, a bastard son? 'Cause Haley, she doesn't know, does she, and I'm pretty sure
that mothers
usually know when their babies are born." With a smirk in his voice, he added, "Does Hotchner
even know, or did he not keep in touch after the fling?"

"What the hell are you talking about?" Harry demanded. He could feel his front getting wet, and his
vision was starting to get hazy. It would have been all right if Foyet hadn't moved the knife once it
was in him. There was too much blood coming out. Foyet had meant for this to be fatal, damn him.
Under his breath, he started to mutter, "Histania-" then broke off as wrenching pain shot through
him.

"Oh, Harry, you couldn't be anybody's son but Hotchner's. Anyone could tell, watching you two
stand side by side. So, what is it - bastard spawn? Wouldn't have taken him for that kind of person,
but sometimes work takes people places, things happen, and then nine months later a little surprise
comes along."

The pain resonated through his body in time with his heartbeat, clawing at his very being. It felt like
everything that connected him together - tissues, muscles, bones, ligaments, all of it - was being
yanked at, like someone was trying to pull him apart piece by piece. He rested his forehead against
the floor, gritting his teeth against the pain. Something else was fighting him, trying to alleviate the
strain, but it just felt like it was building pressure.

"Histania," he hissed under his breath, and the skin around the injury numbed as it froze in place.

The tension was starting to get worse, and now he could feel something else pulling at him. No,
pulling at something within him, like his magical core was being tugged at. With a horrible tearing
feeling, he felt strands of the blood magic starting to detach from his core, an octopus being dragged
from its victim. He'd been so worried about the Light Curse that he had entirely forgotten the state of the blood wards – and those didn't have to be as powerful to be just as deadly.

His eyes tightened closed. If possible, he was going to have to burn out his magic to survive the day, and to survive Foyet. It might not buy him much time, only until someone else came after him, but the Hotchners wouldn't be in danger from this man any longer at least. Not that that would help the ones who'd already been taken by Death Eaters.

"Are we just going to sit here and wait?" Harry muttered. "My legs are starting to go numb from your fat arse." Or blood loss.

Foyet leaned down on him, forearms resting on Harry's shoulder blades, so he could get his mouth closer to Harry's ear. "No, I'm going to give you the itinerary for tonight. Do you know what your father profiled me as?"

"You're going to tell me anyway with dramatic flair, so I'll let you take the spotlight." The weight shift was putting more pressure on his wound, and it took everything he had to force his words out as calmly as he could. Change to the wound was going to cause more injury, no matter what stasis spell he put on it, and would increase the number of torn blood vessels and tissues. He was trying not to focus on any of that, frantically wondering how to burn out his core, though he acknowledged that without magic he wasn't going to be able to stop himself from bleeding to death.

"He profiled me as a lot of things. Technically I count as a serial killer and a spree killer since I kill by waiting for my type and when I get angry. Isn't that fun?" His fingers danced over the nape of Harry's neck. "He also profiled me as impotent."

The lines of Foyet's body against his made him want to scrub himself clean, and the possessive hand near his head was a dangerous warning against resistance. It felt nothing like he'd experienced before, not in war when he had the strength of an army and his magic, or the hopelessness of standing on a street making a decision about theft when he was still capable of controlling his actions. Not even when he'd put himself in between Perotta and Jack, choosing to make his own stand.

This was someone claiming his body as an item for them to handle, stating that his arms were in the way, the strength in his legs was inconsequential, his wit and intelligence were useless, and everything was just a toy to play with.

He had magical power that wizards twice his age never possessed. According to all logic, he never should have found himself in this situation.

He was sixteen and scared. His blood was leaking out of him, he was permanently crippled from his father's murder, and the one person he had left to protect was now missing. His skin felt raw and exposed, and the longer Foyet sat there on him, the closer he came to feeling less like a human being and more like a tool for someone's pleasure.

Fear was power. If his strength lay in magic, then Foyet's was in control. He couldn't gather his magic quickly enough, but he could pretend he wasn't scared. He could go down without panicking, and even if Foyet went ahead and did what he'd come to do, he would never know how helpless Harry had felt with his magic depleted and his hands bound. There was a chance that he could take Foyet out; he had to focus on that.

Harry groaned and rested his head against the floor. "Oh, for the love of- I swear, if you try to threaten me with rape-"
"You'll what? Scream?"

"I'm going to be seriously pissed. You're the second mass murderer and the third person in general to try this and I'm starting to get concerned. Do I have a 'Screw me' vibe or something?" If he could throw this off the normal script, Foyet would have to waste time getting this back to where he wanted it to go so he could fulfill his fantasies. He just had to keep his head long enough to figure out how to make this work.

It was possible he could burn it out if he threw everything he had at Foyet at the same time. It would utterly destroy the man, but he could live with the murder if it meant Jack was safe.

No, he wouldn't. Between the force of all that magic leaving his body and his injury, he would assuredly die.

He wished he could've gone home one last time after the war.

"I was hoping to play with all three of you before killing you and make Haley watch and tell her dear ex what happened, but I guess that's not going to happen when most of the party's left early." He shifted his weight and Harry grimaced as something rubbed against him. "You know just as well as I do that we don't have much time, but people do speed dating with less, and I think I can get to know you pretty well, inside and out, in the next few minutes." He moved closer, breath tickling the side of Harry's neck. Harry turned his head to glare at him as he started gathering his magic together. Then he stopped, staring over Foyet's shoulder. "Can't you just imagine your father's face when he finds out what I've done?"

"Probably a lot like that," Harry breathed, eyes widening.

Foyet sat up sharply just as Hotch - permanently bruised and bloodied, fresh from war with the scars to match - grabbed Foyet by the front of his shirt and dragged him back and away from Harry. Foyet scrabbled against him for a moment, but then his gaze fell on the open wound that had split Hotch's trachea and the critical veins and arteries in his neck, and, like what any person with a hint of self-preservation would do, he froze.

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His hands were still burning, the only part of him that was warm, from dragging himself back.

Balled into fists, they slammed into Foyet over and over again, and maybe Hotch should care that his son was seeing this, watching his father brutally pound away at any part of Foyet's body that he could reach, but he was too far gone to even give it a second thought. The moment Foyet had stabbed Harry, he'd known what Foyet's endgame was, and the instant he'd gotten on top of Harry, he'd known how he planned to get there.

He would have murdered Haley, too cowardly to take out the kids before her, and Hotch would have seen her die and witnessed his own self clutching at her corpse like he had years ago. Then Foyet would have taken out one of the Jacks, followed by the other - one who had already seen psychopathy and been changed by it, and one who could have gone the rest of his life without being touched by it. Doomed to die from it because their fathers didn't get there fast enough to help.

But before that, he planned to cut open Harry, make him bleed like Foyet had through his torture and Hotch had through his departure, because Harry had dared to challenge him, just as prideful, just as arrogant as Hotch had been when he'd refused to back down from the hunt. Kill his oldest son, the one who'd been taken from him before, the one who had gone through so much with a raised head and a firm stance because he was done being a victim, was done suffering mind games, was done
being hurt offhandedly. The one who handled such terrible loss by ensuring it would never happen again, lashing out at the world only when it threatened what he had left.

There was so much Hotch should have protected him from, that Harry never should have been forced to endure. And yet, in spite of that, Harry had never hated him for it, instead greeting him each time with a smile suggesting Harry was just content to have someone who came back to him. He'd taken so little for so much, and he'd never complained. No, he'd just become wiser and stronger, but he had never understood that he shouldn't have been put in that position because Hotch should have been there to stop it from ever happening. And still, Harry had put all his faith and all his trust into Hotch, leaving himself all the more vulnerable when Hotch had cruelly snatched it away, wiped from the earth by a curse he took for Harry.

Foyet's face streamed with blood, and his hands shakily came up, no longer bothering trying to protect himself. "Okay, okay, I-" Hotch punched him in the mouth. "I surrender."

He hit him again and again and again.

Foyet might have stood a chance if he'd tried this years ago. Maybe. If family hadn't tried to take Hotch from Harry before, claiming he wasn't suited to raise the magical child. If others hadn't tried to separate them through wards at the school or by wanting to send Harry to live with someone from the magical world. If a few more hadn't tried killing one or both of them, coming back for revenge or just for the fun of it.

If the Dursleys hadn't taunted Harry by telling him his father touched his kids. If Hotch's own father hadn't showed up and made the same insinuation to try to put doubt in Harry's mind. If Perotta hadn't taken Harry and abused his position to threaten him with implications and caresses. If Harry hadn't felt like he'd had to offer himself up to that to protect his brother. If Hotch had been there to keep his kids fed and taken care of so Harry hadn't been forced to let someone else touch him and touch someone else. If Harry hadn't been so distraught by it afterwards, not because of what had happened, but because he feared he'd disappointed his father.

So no matter how badly it had hurt, even though all his logic told him it was a horrible idea, Hotch had grabbed onto that fragile link between him and his son, formed by the same blood magic that was killing Harry. And he pulled himself closer and closer, fully aware that this could very well destroy his fragile remaining self, and dragged himself from one plane of existence to the next until he saw Harry react. He knew he was finally, finally visible, and then he stepped forward once more, feeling the link quiver and shake under his pressure, and then it was all different. The world snapped back into view, and he felt life around him once more even though his body felt empty and cold.

Foyet tried to fight back, but the blow barely registered and he went back to trying to shield himself. Movement caught Hotch's eye, and he turned to Harry by the table, shaking off the rest of his bonds. He must have used the knife, which he now tucked away after wrenching it from the wood with a trembling hand.

And Foyet had tied up his son, the one with the absolute fear of restraints from when he'd been forced to watch the violent murders of his classmates while killers drained his blood from him.

Hotch turned back and punched Foyet again for good measure, then looked at Harry, who was leaning against the table heavily and clutching his wound. It had stopped bleeding under a renewed stasis charm for now, but it could easily tear in his state. Hotch pointed at the floor and said, "Stay," though no sound came out of his mouth. Harry frowned at the peculiarity, and Hotch's expression softened slightly as he more insistently gestured to the floor with his finger.

"Oh, when have I ever?" Harry pointed out, even as he was clutching at his wound, and Hotch
grimaced in acknowledgement.

Using his distraction, Foyet managed to tear himself free from Hotch and get to the door, oblivious to the steady stream of swears in Hotch's mind. The bastard was not getting away from him, not after what he'd tried to do. Hotch ran after him as the killer tumbled out into the hallway, stupidly hoping that Harry would have the good sense to stay where he was at. He heard Harry moving behind him a half second later, throwing that thought to the wind.

Foyet was going to the stairs, and from there it was unclear where he was going to go but he still had his knife. Hotch tried to grab at him at the top of the staircase, but between Foyet's disorientation over the punching and the snatch on his clothing, the serial killer lost his balance and went down to the first floor the fast way. He managed to catch the bannister at the bottom and used it to stagger to his feet, glancing fearfully back to Hotch and Harry.

And then a velociraptor came flying out of the living room, claws extended, and sailed into Foyet so hard that they both went tumbling into the dining room. Hotch blinked.

"Okay, I didn't see that coming," Harry admitted as they heard Foyet's shriek of pain. He was leaning against the bannister, bloodied hand staining the white paint while the other arm was wrapped around his midsection.

Hotch shrugged slightly, then shifted over to pull Harry against him to help his son keep standing. Blue had the matter well in hand in the other room, surely. Harry made an appreciative noise.

"Blue," Harry called, and there was a short pause, followed by the sounds of Foyet scrambling to his feet and sprinting towards the back door. "Nevermind."

The back door banged open, and a moment later they heard Blue go screeching after him, eager to be on the hunt once more.

"Should we, I don't know, help him?" Harry asked, leaning his head against Hotch's chest. There was an odd note to his voice, one of reluctance, but it wasn't aimed at Foyet. No, it was towards Hotch, and after a moment, he realized why. It must have been killing Harry to rely on Hotch, even for a little bit, when he knew he wasn't going to have that support for much longer.

Hotch shook his head, not caring what the dinosaur did to the murderer in the slightest. He tightened his grip on Harry.

"Good, 'cause we don't have time. Dad, do you know what happened to Jack and the others?"

Hotch grimaced and shook his head again. With everything he'd seen of Harry the last couple of months, he had seen almost nothing of Jack. "Portkey," he said, still soundlessly, but Harry saw his lips moving and his hand drifted to the object in his pocket. "I can get them. You need to get treated first."

"I'll go, Dad, just.-" Hotch grabbed Harry's hand and forced it into his pocket with his own. "Porti," Harry reluctantly said, and they were gone.

Chapter End Notes
Sooo, who thinks they know what just happened with Hotch?
"We are told to remember the idea and not the man, because a man can fail. He can be caught, he can be killed and forgotten. But years later, an idea can still change the world." - V for Vendetta

"I'm sorry," Hotch said ahead of time, and then lifted Harry up into his arms. Harry grabbed at him, biting his lip to stifle a scream of pain, and Hotch quickly started moving towards the castle.

When they should have hit the wards, they passed through without a problem. The wards recognized Harry, and they didn't seem to even notice that Hotch existed. Hotch looked down at Harry, whose eyelids were starting to flicker closed, then grimaced and pushed on. His son was too weak to cast a Patronus charm, so they were going to have to do this the hard way. He started moving faster, realized he wasn't tiring in the slightest, and then began sprinting as fast as he could go without risking tripping.

Startled students and staff stared at them as they ran past, leaving a trail of mixed blood from both of them behind. Harry slumped entirely in his arms, but he didn't stop to see if he was just unconscious or not, focused instead on discerning the shortest path to the infirmary from where he was at. By the time he'd reached the proper floor, he could hear two professors running behind him to see what on earth was going on, though neither tried to stop him with spells, evidently seeing the limp body he was carrying.

He shouldered open the infirmary doors, forcing them to open with a bang, and Madame Pomfrey was next to them in an instant and directing Hotch to lie Harry down on the nearest bed. When the professors finally caught up - Flitwick and Snape - Pomfrey was already spelling potions directly from the bottle into Harry's stomach for processing and starting to mend the wound by binding tissues together. She barely glanced at Hotch.

Flitwick, on the other hand, alternated who he was gaping at every few seconds, while Snape just stared at Hotch for a long moment before turning to Pomfrey. "What do you need?"

"Blood replacement, tissue growth, strengthening..." Her list continued on, and Snape began rapidly summoning and handing them to her so she could give them to Harry. Hotch stepped to the side, out of the way but still clearly able to see what was going on, and folded his arms across his chest. Harry looked far too pale, skin color slowly becoming that of the sheets he was on while the sheets turned the shade of his blood. His eyelids were flickering as if he wanted to open them but was too tired, and his breathing was gradually slowing down.

Then the potions and other treatments began to take effect, and the process reversed. Under his eyes, Harry's condition steadied and then improved until he was no longer in danger of dying, and finally, as Dumbledore and McGonagall arrived, he was solidly on the way to recovery. If the situation were different, Hotch was sure he might be leaning against something in relief by now.

"What on earth happened?" McGonagall demanded as she saw all the blood. Her eyes moved to examine those standing around the bed, searching for an answer, and she staggered back and let out
a horrified cry as she saw Hotch.

He grimaced, there being not much else that he could do, and directed his attention to Harry again. In the couple of seconds that he had looked away, he swore there was a difference.

"I would ask the same," Snape slowly added, and Hotch felt a gaze boring into his head. "This is most...unusual."

Says the potions professor of a magical school.

"Who are you, at least?" McGonagall pressed when he didn't immediately answer, and Hotch sighed.

"I can't talk," he mouthed, and the group glanced at his exposed throat muscles and tendons.

Madame Pomfrey barely looked up. "I may be able to do something about that once I'm done here," she said. "Give me a couple of minutes to work."

When she had finished doing all she could do, she turned to Hotch and started murmuring diagnostic spells. After the third, her eyes widened in shock, and she glanced between Hotch and Harry frantically. "You... You're..." She suddenly cast a couple of spells over Harry and she stopped in her tracks, dumbfounded.

"What is it?" Dumbledore asked.

"He's the source of the blood wards," she said slowly. "But he's... Well, he's dead."

"Quite obviously not." McGonagall was examining him suspiciously.

"No, Minerva, his body is quite simply dead. Nothing is functioning."

Hotch blinked in surprise while everyone stared at him. He shrugged slightly, hands up, to show that he was just as clueless as to what was going on as they were. If his body were dead, would that mean that his existence would be forced out of this state soon? It felt like he were securely anchored to the livable world again, but perhaps he was deceiving himself.

"You are his father, aren't you?" Madame Pomfrey asked and he nodded. She hesitated. "Perhaps.... No, no, that's not possible..."

"At this juncture, I would expect we will be disproving something we previously thought to be beyond the limits of magic and nature," Dumbledore pointed out calmly.

"I... I think, it may be that..." She asked Hotch, "Did you...appear...like this when he was stabbed?" Hotch nodded again. "Then, it could be that... Well, the blood wards may have pulled him back. They would have been unable to adequately protect Hotchner in his state, and they would have been forced to go to outside help if they were to save him."

"How could that be possible?" McGonagall whispered, eyes fixed on Hotch's cut throat.

"The blood wards were trying to drag Harry into the world of the dead," Dumbledore replied, instead of the head nurse. "It would stand to reason that, at the same time, they were also trying to pull his father into the world of the living. It seems the latter won out."

"Will this last?" Hotch mouthed, but no one saw him. He waved to get their attention and repeated his question.
Madame Pomfrey hesitated, then shrugged slowly. "I don't believe it could," she said carefully, "You aren't properly living. You do not belong in this world, not without a proper...container, for lack of a better word."

"Can you do something to repair the damage to his body?" Snape asked. "I refuse to play charades all day to understand what happened."

"I can't. Whatever he's in, it's just the reflection of a corpse. There's nothing to revitalize. Even if I sewed it all back up, he still wouldn't be able to use any of it. I believe he is able to move only because that is what the blood wards required of him."

"Do you know what has happened?" Dumbledore asked Hotch, who just grimaced and shook his head in annoyance. "Does your son?" Again, he shook his head. "Hm. Perhaps we should wait until he awakens, and then we may be able to piece together what has occurred. Unless your son's attacker is still chasing you?" Hotch shook his head, starting to get very frustrated with his lack of communication skills. It would almost be easier to be a proper ghost, though that wouldn't have allowed him to get Harry here.

"He should be waking within a couple of hours, but he needs rest," Madame Pomfrey insisted, "and if this matter isn't urgent, I must insist on it."

"Be that as it may~" Snape started and Hotch glared at him. After a moment, Snape's face pinched in irritation and he looked away. "A couple of hours. No more."

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He hadn't seen hide nor hair of Ginny and Luna since the fight had started, and he knew neither one had crossed over yet since both had been among those, along with him, who had stayed behind to help secure the Ministry on this side. It wasn't anymore nerve-wracking now than it was before, but that didn't mean he wasn't eager to meet back up with them so they could all head through to the other world.

Keeping the Ministry protected was obviously important, and they had done their work diligently without taking shortcuts, but it hurt to stay behind while everyone else went through to follow the Death Eaters who had escaped and to go after Jack. It took far longer than they liked to fully shut the building down to all potential trespassers, but once it was done, it was completely done, and Blaise knew no one was going to be getting in unless they had been told how. Moody had the whole group swear silence about what they had done, though he acknowledged they were going to tell the two heads of the DA.

As the sole communications liaison who had stayed behind, it had been his job to send out the messages to everyone needing direction or clarification. Thankfully, almost everyone knew what they were doing, and he could focus on just putting up wards. Compared to most of the others, with the exception of Ginny and Luna, who were also aware of what he'd done, he wasn't as concerned about what was going on in the other world. For months now, he hadn't been worried about Harry, not like the others had been, because he knew Harry wasn't going to be completely defenseless without his wand.

When it became obvious that they weren't going to be able to return it to him anytime soon, Blaise had quietly slipped over to the other world and gone to America, then summoned Blue, put him into his substantial form, and promptly left him with some simple instructions. When someone was about to potentially harm or kill Harry and/or Jack, Blue was supposed to show up and give Harry a little back up if Harry didn't already have help or was clearly not going to be able to win the fight on his own. After all, Blaise knew that having Blue reveal himself in front of a simple muggle who was
threatening Harry wasn't going to go well when Harry couldn't obliviate anyone. More importantly, he also wanted the ass kicking he was going to receive to be worth it when Harry found out what he'd done.

The major downside was that it would probably take a couple of minutes for Blue to get there, since Blaise had given him orders to keep away from all eyes as much as possible, but he figured any help was better than none. The other issue, slightly less important, was that Blaise couldn't summon the velociraptor over here in a fight when he already had it in substantial form elsewhere. At least he could still form the insubstantial ones to relay messages and provide temporary distractions in a fight.

Moody gave him the go-ahead, and he started sending insubstantial Blues out to the small group that had remained behind. With all the work done here, it was about time they went over to help reinforce the Quantico defense in the other world. A couple were staying behind in case something went wrong in this world's Quantico, though it was unlikely, but it would allow them to call everyone back as quickly as they could.

His phone rang, and he was surprised to see it was from Morgan. He hadn't even gotten around to telling them what had happened that day, he thought as he flipped it open. "Yeah?"

There was a long pause. "I told you not to touch those papers anymore," Morgan finally said, but it sounded like he was only trying to be irritated.

Blaise frowned. "The..." He looked around, and although no one was there, he still went for a euphemism. "The ones that weren't in his office anyway?"

"I know you found them."

"How?"

"The blood wards just went back up around Quantico."

Blaise froze and the phone dropped from his hand. He cursed, picked it back up, held it to his ear, and then sent another Blue ahead of him to lead him to Ginny. "What?" he demanded.

"Blaise."

"I swear, we had nothing to do with that! We were looking, sure, but we've been in a battle all day. Hogwarts fell, the Ministry fell, and we just took the Ministry back."

"Hogwarts fell?"

"Yeah, everyone was gone over the summer to actually see their families. We're still working out what to do about that."

Another pause, and then Morgan collected himself. "You really didn't do anything?"

"No." He almost ran into Ginny as she sprinted around a corner. "Shit-What?"

"Luna said she saw Riddle making his way to the Department of Mysteries," she gasped. "He tried to kill her, but Lafla got in the way and protected her." Of course the boggart had. He was starting to really like that adorable little terrifying thing. "She thinks he went through the Veil."

He swore again and started running after Ginny as she led him to the underground department. "Hey, Morgan, we're keeping Zacharias here in case someone attacks Quantico. Let him know, and he'll
get the rest of us back here, but we need to go through the Veil."

"Why do you think they're coming after Quantico?"

"Call it a hunch, but if the blood wards are back up," he said, nodding in confirmation as Ginny's eyes widened beside him, "you should have protection until we can get there. Let Blackwolf know he needs to be on alert."

"All right. And Blaise, you swear you had nothing to do with this?"

"I don't know what's going on, but I should be seeing Harry pretty soon and I'll ask him if he's heard anything. I'm going to keep this quiet until we know what's going on. Morgan, I promise that wasn't us. We literally did not have the time today, especially not in the last couple of hours."

A hesitant, "Okay. I believe you. And Blaise, be careful."

"And you." He hung up. "They have no idea why the wards are back up."

"Hotch has to be back," Ginny said urgently. They skidded to a halt by the elevators and she slapped the button to summon it. One immediately came up to them and they rushed in, closed the door, and sent the elevator down. "That's the only way they could have returned."

"I know, but how? We hadn't started on the ritual!"

Ginny shrugged, exasperated, and gave the simplest, most logical explanation - "It's Hotch. Who knows?"

"We'll deal with it later. Is Luna okay?"

"She's fine. Lafla turned into Riddle's dead body when he got close to them, so that apparently freaked him out enough that he just left them alone. Luna thought it would be a horrible idea to go after him on her own, which I commend her for - we need someone with a hint of intelligence in this group-" Blaise nodded, paused to feel insulted, then decided he rather agreed and nodded again, "and she's just waiting for us now."

The elevator doors opened into the dark, tiled tunnels of the Department of Mysteries, and they took off running again. A couple of minutes later found them by the Veil room, Luna already waiting for them, and the trio entered without further lingering. It hadn't changed, even with the fighting, and had taken no damage. The group hurried in, casting the required spells on themselves as they entered the dias, though Blaise tripped on the last step as he was going down and fumbled the third spell. It would have to work, he grudgingly decided, not bothering to try it again.

"Lafla, you might want to stay here," Luna coaxed, but the creature chirruped at her. "Oh, well then." Blaise waved Ginny through and she vanished into the Veil as Luna started casting the three spells on her boggart. Blaise jumped into the Veil next, leaving Luna to finish the spells.

Almost immediately, he knew he'd screwed up. He was passing through at a regular pace, sure, but the presences around him that had always been so benign were now snatching at him, grasping at his clothing and trying to hold him back. No, they were trying to go with him, but their efforts were starting to slow him down. Halfway there, he knew he wasn't going nearly as quickly as he should have been going, and he had no clue if that would prevent him from going all the way through. He couldn't even steer, let alone push himself into going faster.

A hand grasped his upper arm in a ferocious grip, startling him, but the presence slamming into him shoved them both forward and Blaise didn't risk trying to shake it off. Terrified, he frantically started
planning what he was going to have to do the instant he landed. The other person would probably be
taken off guard, and he could surely knock them out before they had really gotten their bearings
back.

Unfortunately, the presence seemed to have come to the same conclusion, and the hands dragged
themselves up, grasping his shoulder and then his neck. Blaise's own hands shot out, trying to at least
keep the other presence away from him, but his arms were quickly, almost thoughtlessly batted
away. The hand around his neck wasn't squeezing yet, though the presence started to pull itself
closer so Blaise couldn't kick out easily. The other hand joined its partner, and between them, he was
starting to feel just how muscled the presence was. He didn't have a hope of getting to his wand once
they landed, he realized, panicked.

Ginny was on the other side. Surely she would react quickly enough to help him, with her instincts.
Still, his hand drifted towards his waistband in the back, fingers touching the handle of the Apache
knife. Wand or not, this close he could probably get a good hit in. Even as he thought it, the presence
grabbed onto his wrist, yanking it up front without any heed for Blaise's struggling. The hand still
around his neck tightened in warning, and what felt like claws started to dig into his skin. This was
familiar, too familiar, and the backs of his scarred legs started to ache in memory of the callous, bold
disregard for human life.

More presences grabbed onto him, desperate and far too hopeful. Within seconds, he had completely
ground to a halt as hands moved over him, seeking help and reassurance from something that was
still living. Everywhere they touched, he started to feel cold, and within another minute he wasn't
breathing anymore. Above him, he felt Luna whiz by easily and saw her shoot out the other side,
safe with Lafla and Ginny while he remained stuck, cursing himself for so flippantly disregarding the
third spell.

The light at both ends was blotted out by bodies pressing on him for every angle, and the touches
reveled in the feeling of his rapidly fading warmth. The one who had its hands around his throat
started lashing out, trying to shake people off, but too many came back immediately, pushed by their
own determination and the press of bodies around him. The last of Blaise's breath went out and he
could draw no more in while he was in the vacuum within the Veils. Part of him wondered if this
wasn't for the best. Even if he had gotten out, he likely wouldn't have survived with his aggressor so
close to him, and then the presence would have tried to move onto Ginny and Luna. He hoped they
didn't waste time trying to get back to him and just moved on. Others needed them more right now.

Whispers surrounded him with the presences, begging and pleading, and he tried to shut them out,
squeezing his eyes shut tightly. By his legs, two presences rapidly departed, and a new one replaced
them. The presence steadily made its way up him, hands just as frigid as everyone else's, but the new
presence's whispers were calm, diplomatic, and reassuring, and the other presences around him
slowly began to detach until there were only a couple remaining. Some that began to depart grabbed
the ones around them and led them away, until the only two left were the first presence and the last
one.

The new presence climbed up further, then wrapped its arms around Blaise's waist, braced itself, and
then kicked out at the more offensive presence. The first one jolted in surprise and tried to lash out,
but the second's position made it difficult for him to aim properly. After a moment, the second
reached up and yanked at the arm holding Blaise's, and the Slytherin fought with him so both were
tugging to get the arm released.

Then another presence slammed into them, and the force of that sent all three tumbling to the nearest
Veil. It detached immediately and they flew unimpeded towards the light once more.
They were still locked in combat when they tumbled out the other side, and the landing was not so much uncomfortable as it was painful when knees and elbows went into guts and other soft places. The claw around his throat solidified, and Blaise threw his head downward in front of him, slamming it into the nose of whoever was in front of him. There was a snarl, and then the second presence, now formed as a human, stood up and dragged Blaise with him, pulling him off the first. Blaise heard startled gasps from the girls as he stumbled to his feet, arms waving to get his balance, and sucked in huge gasps of air.

The werewolf lunged up but the man holding Blaise moved himself in the way, protecting Blaise as one claw cut through the air. Ginny shouted a spell as the man grunted in pain, taking the blow, and the werewolf was forced to pull back. Blaise looked around the person encircling him and was unsurprised to recognize Greyback rapidly retreating, darting off the dias and running towards the exit, using pillars for cover as he sprinted from the place he was far outnumbered in. Luna was just staring at Blaise and the man next to him.

"I thought I recognized you as I went by," she said as the door slammed shut behind Greyback.

Ginny made an abortive attempt to go after him, then turned back to them. "What did you do, Blaise?" she asked curiously, stunned.

He didn't answer, instead dropping weakly to the floor as his legs gave out, suffering from an oxygen debt. The arms relaxed around him, one jerkily from the injury it had sustained, but the uninjured hand rested on his back calmly as he heaved in air. He was shaking from the cold of the Veil and the presences around him, and he couldn't help but lean in to the warm body that was now beside him. Once the black dots in his vision went away, he knew the implications of that warmth were going to sink in.

"You didn't cast the third spell correctly, did you?" Luna asked and Blaise shook his head, coughing to clear his lungs. "I would suggest taking better care next time, even though it seems the benefits have balanced the consequences this time. Unless, of course, you die in the next couple of minutes because you were there for too long."

"That's encouraging," Ginny said.

Finally, as he had enough breath back to speak, he turned to the figure behind him with the intention of thanking him for talking the rest of the souls into backing away from Blaise and into pushing them forward again. And then it was his turn to stare.

"I can't tell if this is a very good day or a very bad day," he finally said. He coughed again.

"Let's walk while you tell me what's happened. It seems there's a lot I need to catch up on," Jason Gideon replied.

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Harry jolted into consciousness after seven hours, panting. He recognized the infirmary ceiling about him and knew he was safe, but that did nothing to appease his nerves, and he turned to the side, chest heaving, to look for his wand. It was on the bedside table next to him, and he started frantically shuffling up, forcing himself halfway into a sitting position. Pain erupted across his midsection and he grimaced, fingers tightening on the sheets for a half second, then started again.

One arm went across his shoulders and the other went over his chest, both covered in blood stained material. Harry glanced to the source, surprised he hadn't noticed anyone there with him. He froze, the important matter at the forefront of his thoughts slipping away instantly.
"Dad?" he whispered. Hotch nodded. "...Prove it."

Hotch huffed gently and held out his hand. Harry took it cautiously, feeling the cold, dead skin, and automatically letting his fingers run over the scars he had practically memorized from touch alone in the aftermath of the Silent Massacre.

"Why?" His fingers continued tracing Hotch's palm even as his gaze stayed focused on Hotch. "Why now?"

"I wasn't going to fail you again," Hotch said without any sound.

"You never did that," Harry said quietly, but Hotch just looked at him sadly. "So... How long do you have?"

Hotch shrugged. "I don't know, but I hope I have enough time to help you finish this."

Harry smiled ever so slightly. "Yeah, I suppose we need to get back to our usual-" He flailed, trying to push himself up again, and Hotch tried to hold him down. "Jack!" Hotch paused, still with his hand on Harry's chest but now unsure. "Dad, they went after Jack- I have to go find him!"

"What happened?" Hotch demanded. Even without putting more weight on his son, he was easily holding him down, and Harry was forced to explain everything that he had been told. "If they weren't in the house, Draco may have already gotten to them."

"Then why weren't there any lingering Death Eaters trying to figure out where they'd gone?" Harry demanded, trying again in vain to get up. Hotch only had to make a small effort to keep him down.

"I'll go find out," he said, firmly even without a voice. "Harry, stay here."

"You can't expect me to just-"

"If you try to come with me, I'm going to lose both of you."

"If I don't, I'll lose the only close family I've got left!" Harry snapped. "You're already dead, and you just admitted you don't know how long you're here for!"

Hotch flinched and Harry instantly regretted it, but he stood his ground. Unfortunately, so did Hotch. "You can barely get up," he said. "How do you think you're going to save Jack without forcing someone else to come save both of you? It won't take me long to get him, but you have to promise me you won't leave here. I can't focus on both of you at the same time and-" he quickly added as Harry started to protest "-the longer we sit here arguing the more danger Jack is going to be in. And if you come with me, you'll slow me down."

Harry glared at him for the reminder. "You don't have magic," he countered.

"It would seem that I can't get injured in this state, so I hardly need it."

"Stupefy!"
The bolt hit Harry before Hotch could stop it and he whipped around, shielding Harry with one arm instinctively while he searched out the culprit. Snape lowered his wand and eyed him strangely. "What the hell happened to-" He paused. "I don't care. Riddle has Jack."

The look of familiarity in his eyes was far different from the look he had gotten from the other Snape an hour ago, and Hotch allowed himself to lean away from Harry so he could stand up straight. "I heard. What happened?"

"Draco tried to get them all out by pretending to be his doppelganger, but he was too aggressive and someone planted a tracking spell on him. He was followed, and he managed to get this world's Haley and Jack to safety but your Jack tried to stick with him when he left." Of course he had - Jack had lost too many people to easily allow another to separate from him, especially in a strange situation. "Riddle - our Riddle - has both of them."

Hotch glanced at Harry, who was still out cold, and debated whether he could leave him or not. Surely there was no harm to it, not when this place hadn't even officially gone to war yet. "Why are you here?" Snape gave him a look and he realized he'd still been half-turned away from him when he'd spoken, so he faced him before repeating it.

"We don't know where he hid the other two. I was hoping Harry knew, but from what I heard, it doesn't sound like it."

"Does Riddle know you're here?"

"No, but it doesn't matter." At Hotch's frown, he said, "He'll hardly believe I'm on his side when I release Jack and Draco."

Harry was going to be fine. Hotch hurried towards Snape, and the two left the infirmary, the former hoping that his son had the good sense to stay put for now until he knew more about what was going on. "Dumbledore won't be happy about that."

"Perhaps, but in the words of your Quantico students - he can suck it."

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When Harry woke up, he was frustrated before he could even remember why. Then it came back to him, and he was furious.

He could only assume that Hotch had left long ago if the *stupefy* had taken him out for as long as he suspected it had. The time that had passed apparently wasn't long enough for him to have returned - if he was going to - or for Madame Pomfrey to be watching for him to wake up, so he quietly started to rise, taking care not to hurt his midsection. It felt much better than it had when he'd first tried to throw himself to a standing position, but it still twinged painfully. When he was sitting up, he lifted his shirt to see how bad the damage was. It wasn't completely healed, but he estimated the rest he had gotten had definitely gotten things on the right course.

That didn't mean it wasn't outrageously stupid to start off on a mission to find his brother, but things like logic just didn't stop him these days. Not when the impossible regularly came true.

The cot he was on had the privacy curtains drawn around it, and he supposed that someone must have been brought into the infirmary. He stood up slowly, grabbed his wand off the stand beside the bed, then quietly slid open the curtains. Further down the row, he saw a familiar redhead lying on a cot, surrounded by Potter, an adult he didn't recognize, and Pomfrey. As he watched, the adult started to turn, and Harry ducked behind the curtain until he heard him the infirmary doors close
behind him.

"Best to just give it time, Mr. Potter," Pomfrey said. "He'll be fine. You did a stupendous job this evening."

"Thanks," Potter muttered, like he didn't really care, and despite Harry's urgings to get to Jack as quickly as possible, he had to wonder what had laid up Weasley in the infirmary and put his other self in such a foul mood.

Pomfrey walked back to her office, leaving Potter by Weasley's bed, and Harry slipped out behind the curtain to come stand by him. "What happened?" he asked quietly.

Potter, who'd looked up as he approached, now went back to staring at his friend. The whole story came spilling out, how Weasley had been so obsessed with his girlfriend that, as soon as they'd returned from the fight in the Ministry, he'd gone straight to her and promptly had the most disgusting make out session in the history of disgusting make out sessions. Realizing something was definitely up, Potter had taken him to Slughorn the next evening - "Who?" "Potions professor." "What happened to Snape?" "Defense." "Oh." - to get treated for a love potion after he spent the day moaning about how he couldn't tell her what had happened.

It had worked, but the drink Weasley had had afterward had ended the horrendous day with an almost tragic finale. The only reason he had survived was because of the bezoar Potter had forced down his friend's throat. Now they were here, with no clue who had poisoned the drink Slughorn had and no idea who the poison had been meant for in the first place.

"I mean, there's no way someone could have known Ron would have that drink," Potter said, "no one but Slughorn and I, and even then, Slughorn wouldn't have had time to prepare it, right?"

"I suppose not," Harry said, a horrible feeling creeping on him as he realized that he was going to have to leave Weasley under some sort of protection before he left. "Look, I've got to get going. Something happened, and no, please don't offer your help this time."

"I thought you got your brother taken care of," Potter said with a frown. "What else happened?"

"Still that."

"Then why are you here at all?"

"It's a long story." One he was evidently going to have to repeat no matter how badly he didn't want to, because the doors to the infirmary opened and admitted Dumbledore, McGonagall, and Snape. "Fantastic."

Snape cast his gaze around the wing, then bore down on Harry. "Where did he go?" he demanded. Harry narrowed his eyes. "You were the one who saw him last." Unless, of course...

Snape scoffed at him and Dumbledore held up a hand to stall any further complaints. "It is of the utmost importance that we understand what happened today."

There was no way he was getting past everyone in his state without taking more damage and being forced to stay in the infirmary unless he wanted to die in the middle of the rescue attempt. Between him and Potter, they gave the whole story of what had gone down in the other world and the subsequent issues of their return. Snape went curiously still when Harry mentioned Draco, and Potter's expression darkened.
"I told you that you shouldn't trust him," Potter muttered and Harry looked at him sharply. "If your brother's gone, it's not in spite of Malfoy trying to fight his father's friends off."

"You," Harry said crossly, "have no idea what Draco has survived in our world. And he knows he hasn't survived it by being a turncoat and throwing his morals to the wolves. But I don't have time for this discussion, so what do you know?" He turned to Snape.

"Why do you think I know anything?" Snape snapped.

"Because you always know something, and don't give me that look." McGonagall's eyebrows went up at the remark and Snape scowled harder. "It's extremely immature."

"Severus, have you heard anything?" Dumbledore asked.

"Why would he know anything?" Potter demanded and Snape's scowl was turned on him instead. Harry wasn't sure who he'd rather throw out the window at the moment.

"Can you two have your bitch fight later, when my brother's not in danger?" Harry snarled when it looked like one or both of them was about to press the issue. "I'd rather have someone alive in my family."

"Well, it looks like your dear old father's back," Snape sneered at him.

With a cold expression, Harry replied, "He's come and gone before. I wouldn't expect him to stick around just because he showed up this once, and it's hardly a relationship when I only get to see him when I'm so close to dying that I can hardly think, let alone talk to him. Now. Did Riddle tell you anything?"

"You're really going to trust him?" Potter hissed under his breath at him. Harry gave into the urges and smacked him upside the head, eliciting a sharp, "Ow!"

At least the gesture seemed to amuse Snape enough that he gave in. "The Dark Lord was interested in hearing whether or not Mr. Malfoy was still in the school, which he is."

"That's it?"

"It would seem that he is rather preoccupied with his new captives to give me a full discourse on the situation."

Harry's lips tightened. Dumbledore gave Snape a look for provoking him, but Harry didn't snap back. He just didn't have the time. "Is he still at Malfoy Manor?"

"He's not in your time?"

"We ransacked it when the Death Eaters pissed us off. So he is?"

"Yes."

"Great. I think I still remember the layout. Some Death Eaters came over before we could stop them - I'm assuming that they've already met up with this world's forces?"

"They have."

"Right. Well. This should be interesting. I'll be going, then."

McGonagall stared at him incredulously. "You can hardly expect to go anywhere in your
"Yeah, well, I'm supposed to die soon anyway, so it doesn't really matter," he pointed out. "And my brother's not dying before me."

"Admirable," the potions master said, and then for the second time that evening, Harry was knocked out by a _stupefy_ from a Snape when he wasn't looking.

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Jack thought the place he had been taken was rather peculiar. It smelled like house elves, for one thing, but there was also a strange odor to it from all the robes everyone wore. Unlike the ones the students at Hogwarts wore, these robes were prepared differently, pressed and cleaned by house elf magic. They smelled...elitist, upper class. It was kind of nauseating.

Those weren't the words that came to Jack's mind, of course, but he was rather fixated on the smells as he tried to block out the sounds that were drifting to his sharpened ears. The people who had grabbed him had separated him from Draco early on despite his fighting and clawing, and then they'd dragged him to this strange room and left him here. The seats were plush, at least, and there was a warm fire going nearby, but his hair was standing on end and there was a nervous tingle running under his skin. Not to mention it felt like days since they had left him here, and he was getting very hungry and thirsty.

He wanted Elle. He wanted JJ. He wanted Draco. He wanted Ron. He wanted Hermione. He wanted Harry.

He wanted Dad.

"Quantico, the Empire State Building, the White House, the Ministry, the Veil, Malfoy Manor, Buckingham Palace, the Eiffel Tower—" Draco's words, high and loud from pain, broke off as he started screaming again, and Jack scrunched up further into the chair, pushing as far back into the cushioning as he could and pulling his legs up closer to him. His arms were tight by his sides and his hands were clenched over his ears as he tried to block out the sound.

"Where did you take them?" a woman shouted again.

"Steak 'n' Shake, Hufflepuff house, the Forbidden Forest, Diagon Alley, the Hotchner home, Colorado!" His screams would have been inaudible to anyone else in the room with Jack. He heard them all too clearly, even as he started humming to himself futilely. The sound did nothing to soothe his nerves or overrun the screams.

"I told you already, stop, stop! Please!" His next scream cracked and jumped to a higher pitch. Jack stifled a sob.

A smell began to drift towards him, different from those he had been catching before, and he wanted to start screaming himself. Maybe that man didn't know where he was at, he hoped. Maybe, maybe, maybe—

Maybe someone was going to save him like last time.

But Dad was dead and Harry was gone.

The door opened and he flinched, curling tighter into a ball. Two pairs of footsteps came closer, one
heavier and the other light, until they were standing only a couple of feet away from him. Jack whimpered softly as the smell of the wolf-man hit his nostrils.

"Hm, recognize me, do you?" the wolf-man asked, and Jack's back ached in memory of the bite.

"You bit him?" the other man whispered, only distantly interested. He smelled strangely comforting, like Kiyo and Zagreus, venomous and reptilian.

The wolf-man grunted in reply. "Potter loved him. Thought I should return the favor for what he did to me." Jack heard the man move closer and he tried to hide in the chair for a moment, pressing himself back, then gave up the endeavor and started to fling himself over the arm in an attempt to get away. Hands grabbed him and forced him to stay in place, and a knee held his legs down while his arms were held to the wolf-man's chest by one of his own.

With his free hand, the wolf-man grabbed Jack's chin and forced him to look in his direction. Jack instinctively opened his eyes, but they only showed him vague colors and strange outlines, useless when he needed more clarity to make heads or tails of what was in front of him. What he could see was dark except for some light from the fire to his left. The wolf-man laughed. "Your eyes... You can't see, can you?" he asked gleefully. "Oh, that's fitting, that is. Do you know what your brother did to me?" The wolf-man let his chin go and grabbed one of his wrists instead. Jack struggled against him, whimpering louder and trying to pull his limbs towards him again, but the man forced his hand to his face. Under his shaking fingers, he could feel terrible scars where eyes should have been. "We're one of a kind, we are."

"Stop, go away, please," Jack whispered. "Go away!"

Draco started screaming again and he flinched, wrenching the arm the wolf-man wasn't focused on away and slapping his hand over his ear again, burying the other ear against his shoulder. The man breathed out in delight. "Oh, you can hear him? What a savior - can't even save himself."

"He has not yet accepted lycanthropy," the other man, so silent until now, murmured.

"No, but I think they tried to do something about it." The wolf-man sniffed. "He smells a bit odd. Can't say what they did, though, but it looks like it failed if his eyes are anything to go by. Stupid muggles. Looks like it did improve his other senses, though."

Jack turned his head towards the other man, the snake one. "Help me," he whispered in parseltongue, and he heard a faint intake of breath. "Please, please, get him away from me. Don't let him hurt me! Please!"

"Leave us," the high voice whispered.

"What?"

"You wanted a task - ensure that the other one who returned to the living with you will not be a problem."

There was a long pause as the wolf-man's heart rate increased furiously. Then he shoved Jack's limbs away, the boy quickly pulling them back in relief, and he stalked out of the room. He slammed the door behind him and his scent faded as he strode away from them.

"Thank you," Jack said quietly, hands moving back over his ears as Draco begged for people to stop hurting him.

"You can hear your friend," the man noted, his clothing rustling as he took the chair opposite Jack.
"Do you want his pain to stop?"

Jack nodded, tears pricking at his eyes behind his closed eyelids.

"I can do that for you. But if I do, you need to do something for me."

"Okay," he said immediately.

There was a soft, almost amused hum. "I haven't even told you what it is yet."

"Please, just make it stop."

"I will let Draco go, but you will stay here with me. You won't see him or anyone else ever again."

Jack nodded in understanding, though he didn't see why the snake-man felt the need to point this out when it was kind of obvious that he couldn't see anything anyway. "I'll teach you all you wish to learn, and more. You will learn to enjoy things you could have never dreamed of before."

"...Okay." He was more than a little confused, but he was sure he could get someone to explain what this man was talking about later. He flinched as Draco's location ranting cut off again, replaced by shrieks of agony. "Please, tell them to stop it! They're hurting him!"

"I will do so momentarily. But first-" The man rose, and Jack reflexively shifted away as he came closer. His robes rustled when he reached into his pocket, and then he was pressing something into Jack's hand, and a surge of emotions hit him.

How dare those people make Draco scream like that? How dare anyone cause any of his family harm? And yet, his family - where were they now, when he needed them so badly? Wasn't this his father's job, to save people like him? Why had his father died anyway - and was it Harry's fault, like he claimed? Hadn't Harry cared about their remaining parent?

"Good," the voice whispered, and a part of Jack understood that something was terribly wrong. "Now, this item I give you is very important. You must not tell anyone about it. I am entrusting you with this, and you don't want to let me down, do you?" Jack shook his head quickly, eager to please when it meant helping Draco. "Very good. Aren't you a good boy?"

"Can I go home?"

"No. Your family isn't coming for you. They don't want you back." Jack bit his lip, stifling a sob as his shoulders started to shake. "You will stay here with me from now on. I will care for you, so you will have no need for your family anymore."

"Please, I want to go home!"

"This is home now." A cold, reserved hand settled on his head and he tried to strain away from it, but he was limited by the confines of the chair. "I will see to Draco. Stay, and I will return shortly."

The man glided across the room, opened and closed the door, and then started down the hall outside. "A Parselmouth...!" Jack heard him murmur to himself, and he wondered what was so important about that. Harry was one too, so it wasn't like that was anything uncommon.

Despite the man's claims, there was nothing remotely appealing about this situation. He stuffed the hard, blocky item into his pocket just as his stomach rumbled. It wouldn't do any harm to eat while no one could see him, right? But where to get food from... The ones who had always helped him had been family, or the Bloody Baron, or-
"Dobby!" he whispered.

There was a pop beside him and he jumped. The house elf let out a surprised noise. "And who might you be, young mister?" the house elf asked, stunned.

Jack frowned disapprovingly at him. "You know me!"

"Dobby is sure that Dobby does not!"

Jack's frown increased, but at himself this time. Of course, this Dobby was a replica, like the other Jack was of himself. "Well, okay... But can I have something to eat, please?"

There was a long pause. "Dobby is most agreeable to getting young mister help," he began, "but this does not look like the place to do so. Why does young mister be here?"

"I can't get out, and the man told me to stay here so he'd release Draco."

There was a loud scream, but it didn't come from Draco this time. No, it was from an adult.

"Well, that is most odd," Dobby commented. "Most odd indeed! It almost sounds like Crabbe is being strangled by a cockatrice!" He stopped himself when Jack looked at him in shock. "Oh, Dobby does not mean to trouble young mister. Dobby is most sorry!"

"It's okay," Jack whispered. "I think."

There was another loud scream, though this one was infuriated. "What does it take to kill one of you?" she howled.

"Lestrange this time!" the elf murmured to himself. "Something strange is afoot here." He shook himself with a disgruntled humph. "Well, that can be sorted later. Perhaps we should get hungry young mister food first, hm?"

"I'd like that."

"But, ah, Dobby thinks we should not be here, so Dobby will be taking you away."

Jack froze. "I can't!" he said, horrified. "They'll keep hurting Draco if I leave!"

"Well, what they don't know, they don't care about, do they?" Dobby asked. "Dobby will leave something that looks like you behind."

Jack sank in relief. "Oh, thank you!" He could practically hear Dobby beaming at him.

Another scream.

"Hm. Most odd, indeed. If young mister does not mind, Dobby would very much like to see what is happening before young mister and Dobby leaves." Jack nodded hesitantly. "Then Dobby will be back before young mister thinks twice about it!"

A pop, and Jack was alone in the room again. Someone else screamed in horror. It didn't really sound like anyone was in pain, just very startled. At least Draco hadn't started up again. Jack shifted in the chair, legs still up next to him, and tried to get more comfortable while he waited for Dobby to return. The item in his pocket was making it difficult, digging into his thigh, but he was too afraid to take it back out again.

"Avada Kedavra!" the snake-man shouted a couple of floors below. He didn't sound very happy.
Something crashed heavily to the floor, like a large mirror, and the snake-man was quiet for a couple of moments before he repeated what he had shouted before.

There were more loud sounds from below Jack and he winced at every one of them. It was taking an absurd amount of time for Dobby to get back, compared to what Jack was used to, and he started to worry for the elf. If he'd gone anywhere near those sounds, he could be in real danger now. The sounds shook the building sometimes, and Jack would cling tightly to the chair, and then they would move farther away from him.

Just when everything seemed to calm down, the whole building trembled with a loud, extended crashing noise as a wall came down. Jack's hands gripped the chair painfully, hoping and hoping that Draco and Dobby were okay.

And then, "You idiot! You could have killed me!" It was the angry woman who had been shouting at Draco, and later demanded to know why someone wasn't dying.

"Dobby never meant to kill!" Dobby shouted back. "Dobby only meant to maim, or seriously injure!"

A pop and Jack jumped, startled. "She is an unpleasant woman," Dobby commented from across the room, but he wasn't turned towards Jack.

"What are we doing here?" Snape asked slowly. Jack hadn't met the man as often as he'd met some of the other people living at Hogwarts, but he still perked up at the sound of his voice. Apart from him and Dobby, there were two others he could smell in the room. One was Draco, whose breathing sounded painful and ragged, on the brink of tears. The other had a smell that made Jack's heart clench every time he caught it.

The fourth one hurried towards him, feet making noise on the carpet even as his body made no sound. His lungs weren't whispering with air passing in and out, his heart wasn't thumping. And yet, he was running, and an instant later he was at Jack's side as Jack turned to him, painfully hopeful in spite of everything he knew. Hands that were scarred from something he still didn't quite understand reached for his, and Jack clung on to him immediately.

Before he could stop himself, it escaped him. "Dad?"

There was a noise like the person in front of him was moving slightly, but he didn't say anything.

"Hotch," Snape said. "He's blind. He can't see you. ...He can't see what you're saying."

One of the hands released Jack's and ran over the side of his face sadly. Jack leaned into the touch, still straining to hear any words from his father. "Dad?" he asked again, pitifully. A scent on his father was becoming almost overwhelming now that he was standing so close. "You're bleeding, you're bleeding badly..."

Draco was stumbling towards them, and Jack tilted his head reluctantly away from his father, trying to hear what Draco was doing. The teenager fell, grabbing onto something with a hiss, and Snape immediately made an abortive effort to stop him. Draco pushed himself up with difficulty, practically tumbled to the floor with every step he took, and then collapsed beside Jack's chair. One hand sought out Jack's cheek, reassuring himself that the boy was alive, and a shuddering breath left him.

"Are you okay?" Draco asked, and there was a note to his voice that scared Jack. It didn't sound like Draco. The blond boy was never desperate. The trembling hand on his cheek and his tone said differently.
"Dobby would suggest we go somewhere else before the angry woman comes up here."

Jack’s father scooped Jack up into his arms, and Jack eagerly wrapped his own arms around his neck, holding on tightly. Draco managed to get to his feet and almost immediately fell against Jack's father, who supported him as best as he could with his arms filled with Jack. Draco took what he could get and kept a hand on Jack's wrist, searching out that little bit of comfort, while Snape hurried across the room to stand by them. After a moment, Draco lowered Jack’s hand to touch Dobby's shoulder, and, with all of them holding on, Dobby vanished, taking them with him.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to everyone who pointed out a word error in the last chapter! It should have read that "And the white dragon represented the old order and the red the new, that of Arthur's Camelot. I've heard this before." Which brings up something from way, way back... Anyone remember the red dragon that Trelawney saw in the tea leaves?
"The boy's plan was this: he found a little bird in the forest and captured the little bird. And he had the idea he would go to the wise man with the bird in his hands and say, "Wise old man, what have I got in my hand?" And the old man would say, "Well, you have a bird, my son." And he would say, "Wise old man, is the bird alive, or is it dead?" And the old man knew if he said, "It is dead" the little boy would open his hand and the bird would fly away. Or if he said, "It is alive," then the boy would take the bird in his hand and crunch it and crunch it, and crunch the life out of it, and then open his hand and say, "See, it is dead." And so the boy went up to the wise man and said, "Wise old man, what do I have in my hand?" The old man said, "Why it is a bird, my son." He said, "Wise old man, is it alive, or is it dead?" And the wise old man said, "The bird is in your hands, my son." " - Gerry Spence in The Estate of Karen Silkwood v. Kerr-McGee, Inc.

"I'm his girlfriend!" Brown shrieked.

"Well, I happen to be his - friend!"

Harry watched the back and forth with his eyes, entirely confused as to what was going on but not willing to miss a second. Yes, he was well aware that Weasley could be in danger. Yes, he knew that Hermione and Ron were going to drive each other crazy if they didn't get this tension worked out between them. And yes, he could tell that this issue was taking time from more important dilemmas.

But holy hell, if the constipated expression on Snape's face wasn't worth it, he didn't know what was.

He bit his bottom lip to stop himself from laughing as Slughorn glanced around again, evidently trying to discern if he should interject himself into the arguing or not. Dumbledore looked exceedingly fascinated in the events taking place, Pomfrey gave no shits about anything but the impediment of her path to the bed by all the people around Ron, and McGonagall was surreptitiously leaning away from the drama as if it were a physical force propelling her backwards.

It was glorious.

"Why was I not informed first?" Brown wailed, and Harry thanked the high heavens that she'd known better than to act like this in the DA of his own world. Then, to his surprise, he found himself being gestured to. "Even - that boy knew before I did!"

Most of the group glanced towards him briefly, except for the unconscious Weasley and the apathetic Madame Pomfrey. Slughorn's eyebrows came together, but he didn't ask the obvious question of who Harry was, saving it for later.

"That's because his life doesn't revolve around you, you narcissistic twit!" Granger snapped. "And if you weren't too busy acting like a dementor, sucking at his face so hard his soul starts to come out every time you see him, maybe you would've noticed something was wrong yesterday and it wouldn't have been so surprising this morning!"

Brown reeled back, looked futilely at the professors for support - Snape, for once, seemed rather inclined to actually give Granger house points, if only so this would end. "Why did I not hear about this until this morning? And no one's even told me what happened yesterday, where all of you
"Maybe there's a reason for that!"

"Rr...my..." Weasley muttered, and everyone looked at him.

"He's trying to say my name!" Brown cried ecstatically.

Which, unless 'Lavender' rhymed with Weasley's next utterance, "Ione," was rather unlikely. Next to her, Granger flushed triumphantly. Snape and McGonagall were eagerly awaiting a Death Eater invasion to spare them this, if their faces were any indication.

Harry, however amusing this was, just hoped that this all ended soon so everyone would get out and he could go back to trying to grab his wand, which had been placed far out of his reach, so he could undo the sticking charm someone had put on his hand and the bed frame in an attempt to keep him in place. He just knew Snape, the most likely culprit for the deed, was watching him out of the corner of his eye and waiting for him to try to escape while they were all distracted by Brown's lamentations.

Maybe he could get Dobby to help him get out. The house elf probably worked at Hogwarts in this world, right?

And then, just as he thought that, the house elf appeared a couple of meters away with a small entourage, and both the new and the old group - sans Weasley, obviously - stared at each other in shock.

"Miss Brown," Dumbledore said sharply. "Please escort yourself to my office immediately, and remain absolutely silent about what you have seen on the way there. Speak of this to no one, not even your closest friends."

Brown opened her mouth to argue, but all the teachers except the confused Slughorn gave her severe looks and she hurried off immediately when faced by the two scariest professors in the school united against her. As she passed, she gave the newcomers an odd look even as they ignored her, moving towards one of the cots.

Harry barely noticed her leaving, instead tugging at his hand uselessly. Jack was in Hotch's arms, and Draco was holding onto both of them tightly, as if they were the only thing keeping him alive. Jack was shaking just a little less than him, caught between leaning into his older friend or his father. Snape grabbed onto Draco when it looked like he was going to collapse, carefully detached the boy even as he fought to hold on, and maneuvered him over to the cot next to Harry's.

"Jack, Jack," he whispered hoarsely, so rough Harry almost had difficulty making it out.

"He's fine," Snape told him quietly. "He's alive and he's unhurt. You saved him. He's all right."

Draco looked at Jack for a few moments longer, lost and panicked and definitely not coherent, and then sunk onto the bed. His friend's face was entirely pale and he was shaking terribly, worse than Harry had when he had gotten out of detentions with Umbridge. His face twitched and his hands spasmed as he drew them closer to his chest, and without any prompting, he slumped down on the mattress and was out like a light, energy gone without its purpose anymore.

Then he started seizing.

Snape swore and started casting spells on him, and Hotch quickly set Jack down to help while Harry tore at his arm so sharply that he felt like he was going to pull it from its socket. As the two
frantically worked over him, one trying to soothe the symptoms while the other mostly just held the tortured boy down, Jack was slowly moving backward away from everyone, nose sniffing quietly at the air. After a moment, though, he rushed forward until he reached Harry's bed, and he quickly climbed in with him.

Harry stopped trying to release himself, instead moving closer to Jack so he could wrap an arm around him and pull him in. Jack buried his face against Harry's shoulder, and though he was shaking, it wasn't nearly as bad as Draco and it seemed less neurological, so he hoped it was just the stress of what had happened and not a sign of torture. Harry tightened his arms around him, shielding his younger brother from the world as best as he could, and looked up searchingly at his father.

Madame Pomfrey had finally reached the bed and pushed him and Snape aside. "What happened?" she demanded, casting a few final spells on Draco to stop the seizure.

"The Cruciatus," Snape said, crushing Harry's hopes it wasn't true. The way that Snape and Hotch were looking at Draco spoke lengths about how bad it must have looked when they picked him up.

"How long was he under?"

"We don't know."

"If it's that bad," Harry said quietly, "it must have been most of the time he's been gone."

"Mr. Hotchner, I won't take speculation."

"He has personal experience in long-term exposure to the Cruciatus," Snape replied, without irony, and Madame Pomfrey paused for a long moment, eyeing them both.

"Very well," she said. "How long has he been gone?"

"A day and a half, two days," Harry told her. He felt a vibration against his hip from Jack's stomach, and he lowered his head to Jack's ear to quietly say, "We'll get you something to eat once Draco's taken care of, okay?" Jack nodded against him. Dobby perked up suddenly and vanished before anyone could ask him anything. Meanwhile, the group around Weasley's bed had migrated across the room to stand by Draco's.

"Is the Cruciatus all they did to him?" Madame Pomphrey asked, ignoring her audience.

"We don't know," Snape repeated. "He has barely spoken since we picked him up."

"Who did this?"

"Death Eaters. Lestrange was involved specifically."

Hotch had eased back until he was equidistant from both beds, and now he glanced at Harry for the first time. He frowned at Harry's odd position, and Harry tugged on his stuck hand to show him why his arm was down at his side. One eyebrow went up but Hotch didn't comment, and then they both turned back to Draco.

"Harry, there was a Parselmouth there," Jack whispered.

Harry froze. Of course, Riddle. "I know," he murmured back. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Potter staring at them in surprise.

"He told me to stay where I was."
"I'm glad you left."

"He said you guys didn't want me anymore."

Harry buried his face into his brother's hair again, squeezing his eyes shut tightly. "That's not true. Don't ever think it is, Jack. We love you so, so much."

"He said you weren't going to try to come get me."

"Yeah, well, that man's stupid. He doesn't know us very well. Dad came back just to save you, and I would've gone with him if someone hadn't knocked me out."

"Really?"

"Mmhmm."

Dobby appeared on the side of Harry's bed that was less crowded, and he held a plate of sandwiches towards them. Harry breathed out gratefully as Jack's head turned at the smell of food, and his face lit up as he took the plate with a soft but excited, "Thank you!"

"Dobby is very displeased that young mister has not eaten recently. Young mister should have gotten more food!"

"Did they feed you?" Harry asked softly, and Jack shook his head as he bit into a sandwich. His back was turned into Harry's arm, which Harry kept wrapped around him. He didn't see Harry's frown. Jack's increased metabolism would hasten the effects of malnutrition without proper food, even if he weren't so young. Harry rubbed Jack's arm with one hand, and he shared a grimace with his father, who had started listening once their conversation continued in English.

"He's a Parselmouth?" Potter asked and Jack looked up at him in surprise.

"There's a you here too?"

Harry nodded in response to both of their questions. Dumbledore glanced over at him but didn't comment, turning back to Draco, which was where Harry's attention now went. Madame Pomfrey had already dumped several potions down his throat, and whatever they were, they had definitely relaxed him enough that he no longer looked like he had just been attacked by a swarm of boggarts. Though he was still curled on his side, the position was much more relaxed.

Hotch tapped his shoulder and Harry looked up at him. "Tell everyone we've got them," Hotch mouthed and Harry nodded quickly.

"Expecto patronum," he murmured.

Atlas appeared and promptly scared everyone who wasn't expecting an elephant.

"To Hermione," he said, ignoring the ones staring at him and Atlas. "We've got Jack and Draco." The elephant vanished. "I'm guessing your patronus didn't change form like mine did. Still a stag?"

"Uh... Yeah."

Hermione's otter jumped out of midair to land on his bed. "Did he say where Haley and the other Jack are?"

"They're still missing?" Harry muttered, then sent a negative reply, with the explanation that Draco wasn't up for talking.
Another otter appeared. "Tell him to hurry it up. Your dad's other self isn't that patient."

"Cruciatus," was all of Harry's response, and he didn't get a returned otter. "Madame Pomfrey-"

"He should be all right in a couple of hours," she said. "Don't try to wake him until then."

"Why did they torture him?" Potter asked beside him.

"He wouldn't tell them," Jack murmured quietly, and the infirmary went dead silent as they strained to listen. Jack shook against Harry's arm, and he tearfully repeated, "He wouldn't tell them...!"

"Where the others are?" Harry asked and Jack nodded.

"Could he hear it?" McGonagall asked the other world's Snape and Hotch, horrified.

"He can hear a lot of things others can't," Harry murmured. Jack avoided looking at anyone, instead staring at the empty plate in front of him. Dobby took it and vanished, returning a couple of moments later with a newly filled one.

Draco suddenly jerked upright, gasping, and Harry's Snape moved forward to try to force him back down. Madame Pomfrey shot a stunning spell at him, but the sound of an incantation caused Draco to hurl himself off the bed reflexively. Hotch put up a hand to stop anyone else from trying, and Snape grabbed onto Draco as he struggled to get away.

"Draco!" Harry shouted, and his friend turned sharply to the sound of his voice, eyes unfocused as he gulped in air. "Draco, it's okay! You're at Hogwarts!" Draco's gaze landed on Hotch and he stared, completely befuddled. "You're not going insane," Harry promised.

"Fries, fries, fries," Draco whispered, and then promptly passed out in Snape's arms.

"What the hell?" Potter muttered as Snape and Pomphrey got him back onto the bed.

"It would seem Jack is not the only one who went hungry," Snape said dryly, but Harry frowned. The message seemed a lot more urgent than that.

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After he finished eating, Jack refused to answer anyone's questions and promptly turned into a wolf and curled up on Harry's lap. He was asleep a couple of minutes later, deep breaths moving his chest against Harry's thighs. Sometimes his legs would start jerking and his ears would twitch, but it usually only took a couple of strokes from Harry to calm him down. Thankfully, someone had finally released the sticking charm on Harry's hand, letting him properly hold on to his brother.

Hotch sat on the bed beside them, keeping an eye on his kids and Draco. Snape was with the other adults, who had frustratingly decided to move the conversation away from them so Harry wouldn't hear what they were talking about. He didn't argue, aware that he could definitely get Snape to tell him what had happened later, and the adults left for Dumbledore's office, in part to also somehow convince Lavender Brown not to say anything about what she'd seen.

"His cover's blown, isn't it?" Harry asked quietly. Hotch nodded silently beside him.

Potter and Granger had gone back to sitting by Weasley's bed. Ginny Weasley had come in and joined them at some point. They would have been sent away long ago if not for the more pressing issues the adults were dealing with. The three of them whispered together, occasionally glancing down towards the Hotchners and Draco. It was good Jack was asleep, else he would have been able
to hear what they were saying.

"Fries," Harry muttered under his breath, contemplating.

"He was just tortured," Hotch pointed out.

"Maybe."

Jack stirred against him and they both watched as he shuffled until his nose was tucked against Harry's hip and one of his hind legs and his tail rested against Hotch. When it was obvious he wasn't waking up, they looked away.

"Riddle talked to him," Harry said and Hotch looked at him sharply. "He told Jack we didn't care about him so we weren't coming."

After a pause, Hotch said slowly, "It seems strange that he would have bothered."

"I know. But maybe..." He hesitated. "Maybe they didn't go after Jack just because he knew me."

That thought was equally disturbing for both of them and they frowned down at Jack again. After a couple of moments, Hotch tapped his hand and he looked up so he could lip read. "Are you feeling okay?"

Harry nodded. "It's almost completely healed. I should be fine. And, because you've got the blood wards, there's not a chance of that killing me anymore."

But that didn't take care of the matter of the Light Curse.

"Why did you use so much magic in the fight?" he reprimanded.

"Dad, I was going to die soon anyway. Since I was the only one with a termination date looming, I wasn't going to see anyone else go before me. Don't try to scold me for that," he said firmly. Hotch met his gaze for several long seconds before nodding slightly. "I was careful about what spells I did use, and I tried not to rely on the wards too much. I wasn't stupid about it."

"Okay, okay," Hotch relented, though his expression was pained. "I understand."

"Is this going to change when you leave?" He couldn't keep the sharpness from his tone.

Hotch frowned. "I really don't think I'm leaving. This feels different than before." At Harry's confused hand gesture, he explained, "If you were in danger, I appeared near you. I couldn't do anything, so my assumption is that the blood wards had to pull me back somewhat so you could actually use them. Madame Pomfrey thinks I was able to come back entirely because the blood wards weren't going to be strong enough to protect you in the state you were in."

He didn't look at his father, and his response came out sharp despite his effort to contain himself. "So I'm fine as long as you don't die again."

This wasn't a conversation he wanted to have, and part of him just wanted to keep his head down so he didn't have to see Hotch's response. But no matter how much he knew it was going to hurt, he glanced up, unable to deny his father the ability to speak when his voice had already been taken from him.

"Harry, I... If I'd known, I would've done it again." Harry grimaced, looking down briefly before forcing himself to raise his head again. "I will die again, one day, though I hope it won't be soon. I'm
not immortal. There's nothing I can do about that, and there's going to be a time when I won't be here for you anymore. It wasn't fair for you, that this happened, but you always knew it could be anyone the next time someone died. But don't you think for a moment that I ever wanted to leave you and Jack. You are the most important things in my life." With a sad smile, knowing what Harry wanted to say, he continued, "And I have age against me. I'm already going to die sooner than you, Harry. You should never do the same for me."

"So I should just deal with it?" Harry remarked bitterly. His throat felt like it was constricting in anger, making it harder to breathe.

"I'll be alive for you while I can," Hotch said while his son glared at him, and Harry got the impression it would have been soft if he were breathing. "That's all I can give you. I hope you'll understand."

"I can't do this again," Harry warned him. "Not like this. Now that I can look back on it, I suspect it was the blood wards, but I literally could not move past your death. It never felt any easier. The only reason I kept going was because of Jack. You cannot do this to me again."

Hotch didn't make a move to respond.

"Dad!" he hissed furiously at him. "You promised me, years ago! Don’t you remember that?!"

"And you made the same promise," Hotch snapped, so quickly Harry was taken aback for a moment. "And frankly, if you spare the briefest of moments to remember, you didn't even try to keep it in the cemetery."

"That's not fair! I didn't have help!"

"We were coming for you! You knew we were coming!"

"So what, I was just supposed to let all of you get killed?" he demanded.

"Okay, first of all, you're now telling me it's okay if you get sacrificed but not me-"

"That's not what I'm-!"

"Harry."

"Dad, the situation was different. There were others around us, and we had help. You didn't have to play the hero and jump in front of that curse!"

"Oh, and let you get hit instead?" Hotch crossly replied. "Yes, you had to deal with my death for months. But I had Haley taken from me years ago, and I've almost lost you and Jack multiple times. I did lose you once, and it put me in a coma. My job, above all else, is to protect the two of you. So what you're trying to do now, telling me I shouldn't have done it - honestly, I don't care. Because yes, I'll do it again. Your life is more important to me than your opinion of me."

"I see. It's perfectly okay for me to sink into a depression and starve on the streets because I can't handle losing someone but-"

"That's not what this is about! It's about you staying safe!"

"Oh, like you stayed safe when you threw yourself into danger every time it seems like someone's in need of saving?"
"It's not intentional-"

"Really? Because you find trouble more often than I do and I'm being chased by a Dark Lord. No, you literally go looking for it, and don't you tell me your job is relatively safe because I definitely remember one incident in which I thought you were dead from a stupid bomb!"

"Harry, you have to stop turning the situation around on me. You did it when we were in battle and we were exhausted, and you did it when we were both worked to the bone. Stop. The situation for me is different for you, and it always has been." Harry opened his mouth, snarling, and Hotch cut him off with a firm hand gesture. Harry frowned - Hotch had never stopped him from speaking before, especially not after Harry had confided that he was the only one Harry trusted to always listen to him. "No, I'm not taking arguments on this. If it comes down to it again, I'd move in front of the curse."

"At least give me advance warning this time, so I can drop Jack off with someone and go die in a hole while my body tears itself apart," he sneered. "Thanks for that, by the way. If not for your blood wards, I would've been fine, but no, you had to cling on."

"You're really blaming me for you using defensive magic, aren't you? Accusing me of running into danger, but if you'd stayed away from the Hotchner family here like you should have, you wouldn't have needed those blood wards."

"Kinda makes sense I'd need them anyway, doesn't it? Every time I'm starving, it's because you aren't there. Every time someone tries to kill me, you're not there." Hotch flinched but Harry pressed on, feeling the line approaching and pushing it because he knew it would hurt the most. "Where were you when the Dursleys put me in a closet for eleven years? And here's the fun bit – after I got shot by Foyet, we found out why I was throwing up blood in the closet. I was choking on metal bits the Dursleys had put into the bread, because they knew I was too hungry to care what I was eating."

A thrill of satisfaction ran through him at Hotch's horrified expression, and if he'd properly noticed how quickly Hotch was pulling out of the argument, he would've stopped. He didn't, and he kept pushing.

"And when Jack and I got taken by someone because of you, we didn't get out because you were any help. You might notice we didn't even go home once we were free, either - we went to Hogwarts instead, after I thought I was going to be raped by a man I thought I could trust because you made him the Secret Keeper. Kinda helped me later, though. It was easier to think about someone paying me for sex when I was starving - again - because I was trying to keep Jack safe. So yeah, I get into a lot of danger. But I can't help but think this all would have turned out a lot differently if someone had cared when I was a child."

He turned away sharply, preventing Hotch from telling him anything else. After everything they'd been through, and this was how they were going to treat each other in the end. Fine. In that case, he'd leave Jack with him, and they could go back to their life before they knew Harry existed, and he could just stick to being in danger in the magical world. At least he wouldn't have to deal with a harping parent anymore.

A hand fell on top of his and he shook it off irritably. It came up for a moment, then slowly moved back down until it took his hand again. Harry grimaced and was about to turn and shout at him when he felt it, the faint tremble running through Hotch's palm. Even in the light grip, Hotch's hand was forced to curl in slightly from the scarring, clutching Harry's a bit tighter than someone normally would. Self-loathing started to settle in, yet he couldn't make himself turn back and apologize.

But he squeezed the hand.
At least fifteen minutes had passed before he turned his head to the side to look at Hotch out of the corner of his eye. His father was watching Jack sleep, but the resting wolf hadn't wiped the strained expression from his face. After a moment, he caught Harry watching and he glanced up. Harry looked away, but Hotch reached over and touched his forearm. He reluctantly looked back.

"What are we fighting about?" Hotch asked, but there was a calculating expression that made Harry seriously consider it.

"I..." What the hell had his point been? "You can't die. What's your point?"

"It'll happen eventually."

Harry stared at him for a long moment. Then, "Are you thinking what I think you're thinking?"

"Something's messing with our emotions."

"You've never cut me off."

"And you've never blamed me."

Anger, anxiety, frustration, fear... His eyes widened. "This is what I felt like after the Silent Massacre, when the horcrux was still in my head."

"Check Jack - I'll get Draco."

"Jack, can you wake up for me?" Harry murmured, tapping Jack urgently, while Hotch moved to the other bed. His eyes opened blearily. "Sorry, I know you're tired, but there's something I've got to ask you. Did you bring anything back with you?"

Jack started to nod, then pushed himself up, changing into a human as he did so, until he was in a sitting position. "From the man," he said.

"Did he tell you what it was?"

"Just that it was important. And I shouldn't tell anyone else about it."

"Can I see it?"

Jack pulled a chain out of his pocket until a green locket rose from the end of it, and he put it in Harry's palm. "What is it?"

"It's... It's something we've been trying to find for a very long time," Harry whispered, exchanging a look of growing awe with his father. He kissed the top of Jack's head excitedly. "Thank you, thank you."

"One more," Hotch murmured, but Harry quickly shook his head.

"I know where it is." He tightened his grip on the locket. "We need to go destroy this."

"If you stay here with Jack, I'll take it." Harry passed it to him cautiously, feeling his emotions change even as he moved it just a little bit farther away from him. Hotch, however, suddenly went a bit stiffer. "What?" he demanded at Harry's expression, then winced and shook himself.

"Hang on." Harry turned to the side and muttered, "Expecto patronum. All right, if Atlas goes with you, it might help negate some of the effects." It was made of positive emotion, after all.
Hotch visibly took control of himself and forced a nod out. "That would make sense. I'll be back as soon as possible."

The elephant paced out with him, walking slowly to match Hotch's pace. It phased through the wall instead of taking the door, and then Hotch and Atlas were gone. The further they went away from him, the more relaxed Harry became, until he realized just how much the stupid locket had been screwing with his head.

"Is it good?" Jack asked. "That I had that?"

What kind of effect had it had on his brother? "We're glad we have it now," Harry hesitantly said. "Jack, do you feel okay?"

"I feel better. I'm kind of hungry."

Dobby appeared instantly, and Harry knew he must have set a charm around the area keyed to that word. He couldn't help smiling at the typical Dobby-esque gesture. "What is young mister wanting?"

The infirmary door opened a couple of minutes later, but to Harry's dismay, Hotch wasn't the one who entered. Harry paused, one eyebrow raising, as he saw who it was. Behind him, the other three went quiet, but he just tilted his head in acknowledgement, keeping his whirling thoughts to himself. The new presence could mean a lot of things for what was going on, and most of them weren't good.

Malfoy came to a halt at the end of Draco's bed and eyed his doppelganger skeptically. "So it's true."

Harry stayed silent. "I'm not," he spat out.

"I'm not," Harry corrected, not rising to the offensive tone. Jack had perked up at the sound of Malfoy, so similar to his own Draco, but now he was slumping back against Harry again. The plate had practically been licked clean again and was discarded on the bedside table. "The last years for both of us have been very different, and we're not the same people."

"Oh yeah?" Malfoy sneered. "Your hero complex doesn't seem to be any lesser."

"Because I sought you out?" Harry asked, then gestured to Draco. "I got along with you in my world. Of course I wanted to see if you were doing all right!"

Malfoy raised his arms to encompass all of himself. "Well?" he snapped. "Happy with what you see?"

"Leave him alone," Potter snarled as he approached and Harry rolled his eyes. "What the hell are you even doing here?"

"I just got fascinating news," Malfoy sneered, "that I am in the infirmary with severe injuries." He glared at Harry. "It would seem I got involved with the wrong sort, wouldn't it?"

Ignoring the nigging sense of guilt, Harry raised his head slightly. "No, you made a choice in our world. For better or worse, you made a choice."

"Oh, shut up." He turned away from both of them. "I don't trust any answer you have for me."

Potter made to go after him, but Harry snagged his sleeve and stopped him, shaking his head warningly. Potter made an annoyed gesture, trying to get across the importance of following, but Harry gave him a look and Potter scowled. In the corner nearest the infirmary doors, Malfoy snagged
a chair and dropped into it, glaring across the room at both of them.

"What are you doing?" Potter demanded in spite of Harry's tight grip on his arm.

"Waiting for my moronic self to wake up so I can see if there's anything left in his head or if being around your other self has vanished his brain."

"Go back to Ron," Harry ordered him quietly. Potter tried to yank his arm away. "Do it. Don't worry about this."

"He's trying to kill Dumbledore!" Potter hissed, nearly hitting Harry in his next attempt to free himself.

"Oh, who hasn't wanted to murder Dumbledore at some point in their lives?" Harry snapped. "You're certainly not going to stop him from doing something heinous by fighting with him in the middle of the infirmary, so go back. I'll deal with it."

"Like you dealt with your family?" Potter gestured sharply at his wounded midsection and Harry's eyes narrowed. "Brilliantly done there."

"Are you criticizing me for being willing to die to protect my family?" Harry asked softly.

"I think you put your faith in the wrong people," Potter quickly amended.

"Don't start on that again."

Malfoy was watching their argument with interest.

"You know he did it."

"And you don't know anything about him."

"I know him," Potter pointed at Malfoy, "and I know there's no way in hell he didn't turn your family in. Seems a bit odd that after a couple of days your family's still missing, doesn't it? If he'd moved them to safety, they would have found some way to get in contact, wouldn't they? Strange."

"He just got tortured, you shit!" He let Jack go as his brother started to wisely lean away, and he turned so he was mostly shielding Jack from the argument with his back.

"Riddle tortures everyone!"

"Not like this!"

Jack scooted back against the headboard of the bed to listen.

"He probably did something else to piss him off."

"Get back to Ron before I hex you."

"Try it."

Screaming cut them both off before anything could be done, and everyone turned to look at the doors in bewilderment. There were a couple of pairs of running footsteps, either being chased by or running with the screaming female voice. It sounded like there might have been words in the screaming, but they were indecipherable.
The doors flew open and Hermione and Ron rushed in, then quickly slammed them shut. Both looked rather bewildered and terrified, and Hermione cast a locking charm on the door as someone banged on the other side.

"My Won-Won! Please just tell me what's going on!"

"What the bloody hell happened to Lavender Brown?" Ron demanded, a bit pale. Hermione cast another charm to muffle the screaming.

"Were you just assaulted in the hall?" Harry asked, using the distraction to push down the urge to do grievous harm to his other self.

"Something like that."

"She slipped you a love potion in this world."

"Did she overwhelm him so much he fainted?" Hermione asked and pointed at Weasley a couple of beds down.

"No, they give him the antidote, and then he took a drink of something poisoned."

"Fantastic," Malfoy muttered, but in the brief quiet his voice carried. "Now there's more Weasleys and mudbloods."

"Oh, honestly, don't be such a sour pus," Hermione scolded immediately, earning her a glower. She turned away from him and froze. "Oh no..."

"Cruciatus?" Ron asked, hurrying towards Draco's bed with Hermione beside him. Harry nodded, grimacing. "Is he going to be okay?"

"We don't know. He only woke up the once, but he didn't make much sense."

"What'd he say?"

"He kept muttering about fries."

"Well, they probably didn't feed him. I expect he's hungry."

"Just because you're obsessed with your stomach doesn't mean everyone else is," Hermione muttered, raking her eyes over Draco's still, pale form. "That's all he said?"

"Just kept repeating 'fries.'" Potter opened his mouth, and Harry glared at him. "Whatever it is, don't say it."

"Maybe he's got a better idea of what it means," Hermione pointed out.

"Yeah, well, he's apparently also got a better idea of Draco's character, which means Draco turned my family in to Riddle," he snapped.

"He would have!" Potter gestured sharply at both Malfoys with one motion.

Hermione shook her head quickly. "Harry's family saved him, and he's been too critical in protecting Hogwarts in our world. He knows Riddle wouldn't ever accept him back, no matter who he gave up for it. Harry, can you tell us how you got here?"

"Sure-" He froze. "Ah... I'm going to wait until someone else gets back, or I don't think you're going
to believe me." They frowned at him. "It's... Um..."

"That person you were arguing quietly with?" Potter asked. "I thought that was your father."

"His father's dead," Ron said quietly.

Harry twitched. "...Heh." They stared at him. "Well. Technically."

"What are you saying?" Hermione asked slowly.

"Er."

"Harry."

"It's a long story. By the way, he's not looking his best right now."

"He's back?"

"...Most of him is."

Ron started moving back towards the door. "I need to see this. Where is he?"

"He'll be coming right back. He's destroying a Horcrux right now."

"Wait," Malfoy said, annoyed, raising his voice to be heard. "James Potter is dead."

"He is in our time too," Harry replied, "but he wasn't my father. That's why I told you my last name was Hotchner."

Ron beamed suddenly. "You can take that name here!" Harry nodded quickly, a smile starting to creep over his face. "That's awesome! Oh, are you going to officially take it when you get back home too?"

"Everyone knows anyway," Hermione pointed out. As it became obvious nothing extraordinary was about to happen, Jack reclaimed his earlier position, transforming back into a wolf and resting his head on Harry's lap. "Harry, how did it happen?"

"We're not quite sure..." He paused. "Um, he's not going to be able to get in if you locked the doors on him."

Ron looked at Hermione beseechingly, and she sighed and went to unlock them. She peeked outside, saw Lavender Brown, and abruptly shut them again.

"I always knew you were trying to steal him from me!" Brown howled. "You just want him because he's now so famous and handsome and-"

"Silencio," Hermione muttered again and it quieted. Jack hadn't even stirred, practically asleep already. Harry ran his hands softly through his brother's fur.

"Harry, your dad's just going to have to fight her off first," Ron said as Hermione cast the Hominem revelio on the door.

"She'll be gone when she sees him," he assured them. At their perplexed expressions, he added, "He's in an interesting situation right now."

A couple of minutes later, Hermione's second charm lit up brighter, and she went to the door to open
Hotch had his back to them, watching as Brown sprinted off, and then turned to the open doorway. He immediately staggered as Hermione squeaked then hurled herself at him, catching him in an embrace. Ron sprinted across the room and Harry laughed as Hotch stumbled back another couple of steps with the added weight, trying to keep his balance with two teenagers hugging onto him tightly.

"Woah," he saw Hotch say silently, then awkwardly patted the nearest shoulder - Hermione's - that he could reach.

"What exactly happened to your father?" Potter asked slowly beside him.

"That's not how he died," Harry assured him, though he left out the postmortem bits. Malfoy couldn't see what was going on from his spot, and he stood and moved to the side until he could. The Slytherin froze in place, eyes going wide as he stared. Harry couldn't help but smile a little at the reaction.

Finally, after at least a full minute, they both reluctantly released him so he could come into the room with them. Malfoy was still gaping, but Hotch only glanced him over briefly before joining the two Harrys and Jack by Draco's bed. Potter blinked a couple of times, just now seeing him up close, while Hotch regained his old spot beside Harry. Hermione sat down on his other side and Ron leaned against the foot of Draco's bed.

"Okay, spill," the redhead said. "How'd this happen?"

Between the two of them, they managed to explain it as best as they could. For Harry, it was the first time he'd heard Hotch's side of it, but he wasn't hearing all of it - literally and figuratively, which threw Hermione and Ron off at the beginning until they could get used to it. Hotch wouldn't have relied on Harry so much to explain if he hadn't been keeping something back, whether he had trouble speaking or not. He made a note to himself to push later, when his father didn't have an excuse.

"We need to tell everyone," Hermione said. "I can't believe you..."

"Brought yourself back to life," Ron finished. "You and Harry don't seem to understand how dying works."

"It's a genetic deficiency," Harry agreed.

"Okay, what else happened while you were here?" Hermione asked. "We haven't heard from you in months." She turned to Hotch quickly. "And what was it like? Could you see what was going on here? Did it feel weird? Do you actually feel alive right now? What was coming back like?" she pushed, then stopped. "Oh, wait, maybe it was hard-" Hotch was smiling in amusement as she came to a flustered halt, trying to think of a better way to phrase her question.

"Let him breathe, 'Mione!" Ron exclaimed, then stopped, horrified. "Wait."

"I hope you know the puns aren't ever going to end," Harry told his father. "Like, ever."

"I'm surrounded by teenagers. I should expect it," Hotch replied. "But this should wait for later. I could only see what was happening when you were in danger, so everything I saw was rather disjointed. What happened?"

"Hermione, you better give your side," Harry said quickly. He so did not want to explain his own experiences right now, and he knew Hotch was going to catch him on any lies he tried to pull in front of Hermione and Ron. Potter was still standing there quietly, too, and he and Malfoy were both intently listening in on the conversation. "If something goes wrong, it's going to be related to what
"Oh, right. Well, once Harry left, we started properly rebuilding the castle, and it's almost completely done now. Or it was the last time we saw it." She stopped when Hotch gave her a weird look.

"What?"

"Why did Harry leave?" Hotch asked.

"They didn't really need me since the siege had stopped, and Jack and I were both in danger from threats so we figured it would be better that we lay low for a little bit," Harry said, but Hotch didn't look any less confused.

"The siege stopped?"

The group paused, and dread started to seep into Harry's heart. "Oh," he whispered, then closed his eyes. He took a deep breath. "The next few battles without you were rough. Everyone was so used to having all the profilers, and all of the leaders knew you well, and... Anyway, we weren't up to our normal standards, and we made some stupid mistakes." Quiet, then, "Gideon got hit by a curse. No clue what it was. We tried everything for months, but it..."

Hotch looked away. None of them spoke for a couple of minutes.

"Blaise was...not in a good place," Hermione said quietly. "He couldn't handle losing Gideon right after you. Harry had just gotten pulled into this world and none of us had known, so when the professors didn't tell us what was going on we thought the Death Eaters had taken Harry. We stormed the Ministry and Harry came back at the same time. He found out about Gideon and he wanted to go after the Death Eaters, and we were just about to stop him and try to make him seem reason when Blaise took off after him... We hadn't caught the ones who had killed either of you, and once it started... We followed the Death Eaters back to Malfoy Manor..."

"We forced an ultimatum an hour later and most of them surrendered. No more than a couple of Death Eaters escaped with Riddle," Harry finished.

"You won in two days?" Malfoy asked suddenly, and all of them looked at him so he flushed at the sudden attention. "Seems a bit ridiculous," he muttered.

"When he wakes up," Hermione said, gesturing to Draco, "ask him why. He can tell you better than we can."

She turned back to Hotch and explained everything else that had happened, describing the efforts to rebuild Hogwarts and to get everyone caught up on testing. For once, no had complained about it, surprisingly eager to get back to something like a normal life, even though the search for Riddle was still ongoing. Hermione wisely didn't mention Snape, unsure who knew about his spy status, which Harry was thankful for. Ron jumped in a couple of times to add something, but he mostly kept quiet as they were caught up to present-day events.

"We finished the basic warding on Quantico here so the two of us thought it was safe to leave for now and see what was happening here. Blackwolf sent some people to Quantico as a precaution, in case anything does happen, but for now it looks like that's unlikely." She paused. "There is one...hiccup, but we're not sure what it means. Ginny sent us a message saying that Luna saw Riddle go through the Veil, and they tried to follow but they were too slow, so he's in this world somewhere."

The name Riddle didn't get a reaction from any but Potter, who stiffened. Harry noted dimly that he
probably would have been more concerned if Riddle would stop being a pansy about fights and actually came to try to kill Harry without sending an intermediary. "That's not the hiccup, is it?"

"Well, no. I mean, we sort of thought he was here anyway, so this just confirmed it. But the thing is, Ginny said Blaise and Luna were with her, but they needed to go check something out. They didn't say what."

"I need to have a talk with Blaise as soon as we find them," Harry said. "I don't know how his patronus got here, but he must have left it to follow me if it appeared to attack Foyet. While it worked, that was pretty dangerous."

"I wish I'd seen that," Ron muttered.

"It was glorious, let me tell you. But still, if you hear from him before I do, tell me what he's up to right now." He stopped. "Wait. *Expecto patronum.* Blaise. Are you trying to figure out where your patronus went?"

The reply came a couple of seconds later, irritable. "Yeah. You know where he is?" Potter and Malfoy stared at the dinosaur until it vanished, and then at Harry's elephant again as he summoned it for a reply.

"I think he's still chasing Foyet."

"Thanks."

"So, is Blue just running after Foyet in downtown D.C.?" Ron asked, snickering.

"I sincerely hope Blaise was smart enough to realize he needed to give it instructions to keep hidden from the general populace, however amusing that would be."

"You have...very different patronuses," Potter slowly said, the first time he'd spoken in a while.


"And let me guess - Zabini is a good guy too?"

"Unless you're trying to beat him at Monopoly, but then, no one's a good guy in Monopoly," Ron said.

"So you all know each other pretty well, it sounds like," Potter slowly said.

"Not well enough, apparently," Harry sighed, glancing at Draco. Through all of this, he hadn't roused in the slightest. He ran a frustrated hand over his face. "I still don't get it! Fries!"

"Maybe you misheard him."

Hotch shook his head at the same time Harry did. "No, he was articulate."

"You know, his speaking patterns have changed," Hermione pointed out slowly. "We all sometimes use American slang. from being around Americans so often, but he occasionally uses an American accent. Maybe Garcia would have a better idea of what he was talking about, since she's been around him often and she definitely influenced how he speaks."

Harry stared for a long moment. "Garcia."

"What?"
"He didn't mean fries - he meant Fry's!" More staring. "Ugh, Fry's, the electronics store!" Hotch's back straightened and he started nodding quickly in understanding as Harry dug his phone out of his pocket. "Draco went there with Garcia when she bought him that laptop for his birthday. It was where he told her that he was splitting from his family, and she invited him to stay with her." He glared down at his phone when it gave him no service. "Speaking of those two," he muttered, "it's a bit sad how useless we are without them and their tech."

"Expecto patronum!" Ron's dog was summoned in front of him, and it wagged its tail eagerly. "Neville. Harry thinks Draco might have taken them to Fry's, the electronics store." It vanished. Ron smiled, trying to be hopeful. "It's the best chance we've got right now."

"Fry's isn't open twenty-four seven," Hotch said beside him and Harry sighed, nodding. Hermione and Ron stuttered slightly in keeping up with the conversation, not used to watching for Hotch saying anything.

"I know, but they probably could have hidden nearby, like at a fast food restaurant or something. It seems odd that they didn't try to contact the FBI already, but knowing Draco's paranoia, he might have told them not to do anything until he got back, especially if he thought he was being followed and he didn't know how."

A badger plopped onto the bed beside Harry. "Which one?" Neville's patronus asked and Harry paused.

"The one Garcia usually goes to. Ask her."

"What now?" Ron asked after a couple of seconds.

"We wait."

"I hate waiting."

"Ron. I have been with you for six years. How well do you think I know that?"

Just as he started to grumble, a low moan came from behind them, and Potter sprinted back to Weasley's bed. After a hesitant moment, Hermione and Ron curiously followed behind him, lingering a bit as they approached. Weasley made a startled noise when he saw them, but he was quickly taken up in explanations of how he had ended up in the infirmary, and then Potter seemed to be relaying some of what he had just heard a couple of minutes later. When nothing life-shattering happened, Harry and Hotch turned their backs to the group again.

"Harry," Hotch said, head tilted so Malfoy wouldn't be able to see what he was saying.

"I know," Harry replied quietly. "I shouldn't have said any of that either."

Hotch's eyes flickered to the side of his vision, where Malfoy was starting to shift positions. "We'll talk later," he said, and Harry nodded in agreement just as a loud thumping sound made them both glance sharply behind them again.

"You idiot!" Ron was crying out, using a pillow from a neighboring bed to smack his doppelganger repeatedly in the face. Ginny Weasley seemed entirely agreeable with this, almost falling out of her chair with laughter. Granger was startled but smug. "You absolute complete buffoon!" Another smack as Weasley squawked, almost falling off the bed in his haste to get away.

"Uh, he was just, y'know, dying a couple of hours ago," Potter tried to say, although he didn't otherwise intercede.
"Serves him right!" Ron shouted back with a series of quick pillow hits. Harry hoped Pomfrey just let this happen for a little bit so he could savor the image in his head. He had a feeling he knew what Ron had just been told. "Are you out of your mind?"

"You don't know what she's like!" Weasley protested.

Ron threw the pillow on the bed before he accidentally murdered his alternate self. "Someone who poisons other people, apparently!"

"What are you angry at me for?" Weasley shouted furiously, taking the pillow and smacking Ron with it. "You don't even know what's going on here!"

"You are so stupid!"

"Perhaps I will have to reconsider some of what I said," Malfoy spoke up, voice carrying to Harry and Hotch. "It would seem, somehow, Weasley and I do have something in common - a mutual hatred of himself."

"I don't think you'd agree too much with why he's irritated," Harry said, smiling, as Ron stalked away from the bed, muttering crossly under his breath. Hermione glanced between the bed and her boyfriend, then ran after the latter to make sure he wasn't going to do something stupid when he left before she could calm him down. "Hermione, why don't you head back?" he called as she passed his bed in a hurry. "We'll be there when Draco and Jack can both leave."

She waved in acknowledgement, making sure to close the infirmary doors behind them. If he'd had money and anyone to bet with, Harry would have put a twenty down on the couple snogging as soon as they were out of sight. As it was, he had to settle for exchanging an amused look with his father.

"Aren't they dramatic?" someone muttered.

Harry whipped towards the bed. "Draco!"
"Don't let numbers tell you what to do. You are blood and earth, not theory and chalk." - Welcome to Night Vale

Draco struggled up even as Hotch moved to intercept him, then froze. "Ohh... I thought I was going insane. But you're just actually impossible to kill."

"It seems that way," Harry agreed while Hotch used Draco's surprise to push him back down onto the sheets. "How are you feeling?"

"Let's skip past that for a moment - ah, Hotch, how exactly are you not dead?"

"The blood wards," Hotch explained. "Harry and I were still connected by them, so when he was in danger I was able to pull myself back to help."

"Are you implying you literally resurrected yourself?"

"...Something of the sort."

"Well. On that note." He glanced at Harry. "Why were you endangering yourself?"

"Long story. Back to you."

"I feel like I got hugged by the Giant Squid." His eyes flickered to Jack. "How's he doing?"

"Good, thanks to you," Harry said, and Draco smiled slightly. "You hid the other two at Fry's, right?"

"I thought I told you that."

"You didn't elaborate on whether you were talking about food or a store, you dolt," he pointed out and Draco rolled his eyes. "I suppose you'll get a pass on it for today, considering you were all tortured and whatnot."

"Very kind of you, taking my poor state into account. How are they?"

"Still being located, but that should be in the next few minutes."

Harry patted Jack at his side and the wolf started to stir. When bright, multi-colored eyes looked up at him, he pointed at Draco, and Jack turned sharply before Harry could stop him, jumping off the bed and then leaping to Draco's. He only managed to get halfway up, paws scrabbling at the sheets, before Draco and Hotch took pity on him and helped him the rest of the way. Once he had both sets of legs on the bed, he rushed towards Draco, nuzzling his face and licking at him so ferociously that Draco started backing up, simultaneously petting him and holding him away slightly until the force of Jack's overbearing love pushed Draco off the bed with a startled yelp.
Harry couldn't stop the laugh that came out of him as Jack woofed irritably from the bed, looking down at Draco's sprawled form in frustration. He glanced at Hotch, who grinned back at him. "We might need to separate these two for a little bit," he pointed out, only half-joking.

One of Draco's arms flopped onto the bed and his head popped up, only to be immediately assaulted by Jack. He moaned. "I hurt everywhere now. Even my ego hurts."

"Well, if it helps, you can say you pulled one over Riddle and all the Death Eaters."

Jack finally backed off at Hotch's insistence and let his father scoop him up and deposit him back on Harry's bed, allowing Draco to climb back up and lean against the headboard. He still looked incredibly sickly, but movement had given him a faint flush. "You should've seen Bellatrix Lestrange when she caught sight of your dad, though," he said smugly. Hotch looked just as confused as Harry. "Oh, you weren't paying attention? I thought she was about to keel over."

As he started looking for his wand, Harry turned to his father. "If he's up, we can probably head back to Quantico. We're all experienced enough with medicine that he'll be fine." Hotch nodded in agreement and tapped Jack, who glanced up at him. The language barrier was still an issue, and Harry asked Jack if he could turn back into his human form, since even with sight Jack had trouble reading Hotch's lips.

"I'll get Snape to take us over," Hotch said. "Can you handle Draco?" Harry nodded, and Hotch left with Jack.

There was no way they were waiting around for something bad to happen between the two Draco Malfoys, which would definitely happen the moment one of them realized just how far the other had gone down a different road. Of course, that was already becoming evident to Malfoy, who had watched all of this so far, and Potter, who had definitely taken a keen interest in the flurry once he'd seen it.

"I hope you're feeling well enough for apparition," Harry said as Draco failed to find his wand, steadily becoming more horrified. "And you can stop looking. Snape's got it."

"Oh thank Merlin," Draco breathed out. "And yeah, I'm fine." Harry eyed him. "I can handle a trip, at least. I want to hear what's happened, and I doubt you're going to tell me here." He slid off the bed and immediately steadied himself against the bed frame. "Shit."

"Take it slowly. There's no point getting out of here if you just pass out the moment we get to Quantico."

"So," a voice drawled and Harry groaned as Draco turned, already suspicious to an attack. "Was it worth it?"

Malfoy rose from his chair, stepping around the cot blocking him into the corner and edging towards them. "The Cruciatu."

"Obviously," Draco scoffed immediately, eyes starting to narrow. "Are you saying-" Harry grabbed his forearm warmly but Draco pushed on "-that you wouldn't have?"

"For Potter's brother? Why? We've already got one too many of him, and he's not dying anytime
soon despite his own best efforts."

"Draco," Harry muttered.

"For Hotchner's brother, actually. We don't have a Potter," Draco corrected.

"Don't take offense," Potter said as Harry felt the situation unravelling around him quicker than he could stop it. "He doesn't care about anything."

"Yeah, I do," Malfoy snapped back. "I care about my family, but you wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"

Potter's face lit up in rage, reaching towards his wand at the same time Malfoy did, but Harry bolted forward, moving between the two. "Hey," he said angrily. "You're in the infirmary. Don't."

"Because he put himself here!" Malfoy shouted, pointing at Draco.

"I didn't Crucio myself, your father did!" Draco screamed back at him, and Harry's stomach went cold. "How does it feel to know you'd join a group whose leader makes his followers torture lookalikes of their children? You want to know how easily your father hurt someone who looks exactly like you?"

"You shut your mouth about my father!"

"You don't even know who he is! If you were in danger, do you really think he'd come for you? Because I can say for sure - he wouldn't."

"Shut up!"

"After some of Riddle's followers tried to kill me, he asked if I'd been turned into a werewolf before he would even see me! I had to send him blood so he could test it and make sure I wouldn't turn at the full moon because he didn't believe me! That's the kind of person you want to be associated with, you ingrate!"

"And you're hanging around with muggles! You're just a blood traitor!"

"I'd rather be a mudblood than be equal to mud like the Malfoy line!"

"Diffindo!"

"Protego!" Harry shouted, blocking the cutting curse from hitting Draco, who instinctively ducked away.

Over his outstretched arm, Potter flung, "Stupefy!"

Malfoy quickly turned, redirecting his attention as he dodged the spell. "Petrificus totalus!"

If he stayed in between the two, he was surely going to get hit. But if he moved away, his chances of stopping them without allowing the other to cause someone serious harm were nil. Damn, maybe he did have a hero complex just as bad as everyone claimed.

"Levicorpus!"

"Conjunctivia!"

Both were widely aimed and Harry slashed his wand in the direction of his doppelganger and threw
his free hand up towards Malfoy, remembering the feeling of wandless magic and forcing the spell down his arm towards the more dangerous curse aimed at him. The Conjunctivitis was absorbed into the shield while Potter's levitating curse bounced off the other shield to the ceiling.

The two paused, and Harry snagged the interlude firmly. "That's enough," he snapped, but neither agreed.

"Crucio!"

"Diffindo!"

"Harry, stop!" Granger screamed as Harry sent both spells back at their owners, only for them to duck out of the way. The wandless magic was nigh impossible now without the blood wards within him, but the severity of the situation left him no choice but to try. "Stop it!"

"Serpensortia!"

The snake darted towards Harry, giving the dueling pair a distraction to use.

"Locomotor mortis!" Malfoy shouted.

"Go!" Harry hissed at the snake as Potter waved his wand wildly, one hand outstretched to block the curse, and missed most of Potter's spell.

"-empra!"

His shield caught Malfoy's, but the one nearest Potter wasn't strong enough and he saw it cut through out of the corner of his eye. Without thinking he moved forward, intercepting it before the curse hit Malfoy, and pain erupted across his side, two parallel cuts across his upper arm and two slashes across his side. One hit the injury from Foyet. Screw defense.

Harry switched wand hands and threw his opened palm towards Potter, relying on his fury to send a pulse of energy towards him. Potter staggered back, nearly dropped his own wand, and Harry turned his attention on Malfoy, sending a wordless hex. Malfoy hastily conjured a shield. Draco was moving across the beds as quickly as he could, wise enough that he knew he couldn't get involved in his state without facing serious, perhaps permanent injury. Malfoy saw him moving, but Harry used his wand to drag a blanket off a bed and wrap it around the Slytherin's legs when he wasn't looking, bringing him to the floor. Draco sprinted the last couple of steps out the door, running for help. Or his wand, at least.

A red flash made Harry whirl, instinctively cutting his hand across the air to divert a spell as it came within a meter of him. The spell ricocheted off into a wall, and Harry knew that there was no way Pomfrey was in her office and hadn't come out yet to kick some ass. Behind Potter, Granger sent a hex towards her friend, but Potter inadvertently moved out of the way and Harry ducked under it a moment before Malfoy did the same. Potter turned to throw up a maximum protection spell behind himself while Malfoy hurled another Cruciatux at him. Harry let it come, sending a curse towards Malfoy, and the Cruciatux had no effect when it hit him because Malfoy diverted his energy to a shield spell instead.

"Pyroserpentoria!" Potter shouted as Malfoy called out, "Confringo!"

Harry switched wands quickly, blocking Malfoy's with a shield while hurling, "Aqua eructo!" at Potter, sending a torrent that engulfed the fire snake and hit Potter hard enough to make him hit the ground. "Expelliarmus!" Potter rolled just in time and the spell didn't hit him. A couple of spells came towards him from his friends, but they hit the protection he'd put up and didn't come through.
"Bombarda!"

Harry sent the spell up towards the ceiling above Potter, but the protections on the school's structure was strong enough that nothing came down on him. "Nox maxima!" Everything went black, dimming even the torches lining the walls. "Silencio!" He shot the spell in both directions, but couldn't quite tell if it actually hit his intended targets and so shifted forward in case anyone tried to aim for where he had just been. And again, "Expelliarmus!"

One wand clattered to his right, in the direction of Potter, but there was a scrambling noise and Harry sent, "Petrificus totalus!" towards him, hoping to take him out before he reached his wand.

A blue bolt flew from Malfoy and he ducked under it, then sent a hex back his way. Red shot just past his ear and he flung another blast of energy at Potter. There was a thud, and Harry suspected he'd knocked his doppelganger off his feet. "Exumai!" A moment's pause, and then Malfoy hit the ground loudly.

"Stupefy!"

Damn it, he'd stripped off the silencing charm. He ducked under the curse, okay with that one hitting Malfoy, but the gesture threw his side into sharp pain as he bent and straightened. The lights came back on at the same time, but he wasn't sure if his spell had given up or if one of the other two had countered it.

"Defodio!" Malfoy shouted, back on his feet. There was blood on the side of his face, and Harry suspected he must have hit the floor pretty hard.

He turned his back to Potter, shouting, "Aero absento!" Then he ducked under the spell he'd accurately guessed Potter would throw, and threw over his shoulder, "Deprimo minute!" Pressure slammed down on Potter as he tried to duck, but the spell took effect over him and forced him to the ground.

A huge breath came from his left, and he turned just in time to take the Crucius. He instinctively threw pure energy at Malfoy when he saw it coming and the curse ended after a moment as he staggered back to his feet, shakily deflecting a hex from his doppelganger. Malfoy was thrown to the side, but he got up quickly and Harry was right back where he'd started in between the pair.

"Incendio!" Malfoy shouted.

"Duckflorss!" Harry hollered just as the door swung open, distracting Malfoy for the briefest of moments.

"Expelli-

"Confundo!" Potter stared, blinking for a moment. "Expelliarmus!" He caught Harry's wand as he shouted, "Stupefy!"

With an irritable sound, he glanced around the infirmary. The beds around them had been thrown askew by the force of the numerous blasts they had taken, and Harry's water spells had drenched the floor around Potter. The snake had vanished once the temporary summoning charm had worn off. On one side, Potter was knocked out, lying on his side and wandless while his friends gaped; on the other side, Malfoy was quacking furiously on the floor, wings flapping excitedly.

"If you charge me," Harry started warningly, just before Malfoy face-planted, not used to the strange balance of an avian form. "Oh, whatever."
He glanced up into the startled expressions of both Snapes, Dumbledore, and Pomfrey. Considerably less startled were Draco and Hotch, who mouthed, "I left you alone for five minutes."

"Amazing, isn't it?" Harry agreed wearily, one arm pressed to his side to stem the flow of the *Sectumsempra*. The others looked between them, belatedly realizing that Hotch had spoken. "Sorry, Madame Pofrey."

"Get yourself onto a bed," she demanded, giving calculated looks to his injuries. "What on earth were you doing?"

"A summary of Harry Hotchner's life," Draco muttered. His doppelganger quacked angrily on the floor, a feather flying out as his wings beat uselessly against the floor while he tried to push himself up. One of the Snapes raised an eyebrow at the sight.

The other frowned at Harry's cuts. "Who used the *Sectumsempra*?" he asked as Pomfrey manually planted him on the edge of the bed. Harry pointed at the unconscious Potter, who Dumbledore was levitating into another bed. Snape frowned heavily, and Harry realized it was the one from this world. "Give him dittany. It should prevent scarring."

Without looking, Pomfrey pointed at Draco, who leaned away from the sudden attention. "Back into bed."

"But-"

She looked at him and he quickly found himself on the nearest mattress.

"He's bleeding," Harry suddenly said, pointing at his doppelganger.

"Let's worry about you now, dear."

"No, I mean, he's bleeding as badly as I am."

Everyone looked at Potter, who was indeed starting to be surrounded by a growing spread of crimson. Professor Snape, of this world, stepped closer to him and peered at the injury. "He's injured the same way you are."

"Malfoy and I didn't use that spell and- Would someone shut him up?" McGonagall transfigured Malfoy back to normal and then proceeded to sternly threaten him under her breath until he stopped talking out of fear for his life. "And his clothing isn't torn."

"It could be," Dumbledore said slowly, "that you take each other's injuries."

"But then Draco would be bleeding like Malfoy is."

"They did not inflict injuries on each other. Perhaps you are more closely connected than you first assumed."

They must be, if Potter's danger in this world had dragged Harry across when Riddle had been trying to pull himself over. But this was more than that. In fact, it meant, "We're the same person." And then another thought occurred to him. "Oh *shit* - no wonder he needed to get over here! He was dying!"

"Who?" Snape, his Snape, demanded.

"Riddle! We'd destroyed most of his soul! If we're all just another shade of our doppelganger's
selves, then if he became his other self, it wouldn't matter that we'd killed his original horcruxes because he'd have new ones!"

"That's not possible," McGonagall breathed, horror dictating that she deny it as quickly as she could.

"So are alternate worlds and separating one's soul, and whether it can be done or not, I'll bet he's going to try." A sharp intake of breath caught his attention. "Draco?"

"I saw him while I was at the Manor," he whispered, eyes wide. "And he was acting very, very peculiar."

"In what way?" Hotch asked.

"There were several people there who had their doppelgangers nearby, or even in the same room, but he could never tell the difference. It was almost like he didn't even notice."

"They've already joined." Harry rubbed his forehead. Pomphrey hadn't once stopped treating him, though her movements had become more hurried at the mention of danger. His side was slowly stitching back together, tingling uncomfortably, and he heard her mutter about him forgetting to take the rest of the batch of potions for the wound that had landed him in the infirmary in the first place.

"Is that going to make him more powerful?"

"It could," Snape murmured.

"Okay. Well, we need to get rid of both of them in any case, so the need to be taken out." He glanced at his father. "When you destroyed the locket, anything strange happen?"

"There were two sets of screaming," Snape said before Hotch could, understanding dawning. "We destroyed them in both worlds. Combining themselves must have combined the horcruxes as well."

"Good ol' Voldy, making it easier for us." Malfoy had a strangled expression and Professor Snape winced like he'd just smelled vinegar. "That leaves the diadem in our world, and the cup, ring, Nagini, and Potter here." He glanced at his other self. "That's going to be a problem."

"How did you destroy it in your world?" Dumbledore asked.

"He died," Snape said shortly. "The way he and his father solve every problem, apparently."

"We can't help that it works all the time," Harry responded.

"Where's the diadem?" Hotch asked.

"The Room."

"And everything else, here?" Professor Snape asked.

"The cup is in the Lestrange vault, the ring is at the Riddle family home-" He grimaced. "Damn it, Gideon knew how to get them both. I know he had trouble, but..."

"So ask him," Professor Snape sneered.

"He's dead." That response was coming up depressingly often in a short conversation. "As for the other two, those should be obvious."

"If Elle takes Remus," Hotch started.
"What about-" Dumbledore said, accidentally overlapping without seeing Hotch's mouth move, and Harry quickly cut him off, keeping his attention focused on his father, who hadn't stopped talking.

"They could get the diadem in our world without a problem, even if it's been overrun. They can take the cloak and the map."

"And then Blaise talked to Gideon the most, so he might have told him how he got the other two. Even if he didn't, he knows how Gideon thinks well enough that he could figure it out. So does Reid, so he could go with them, and Ginny and Luna since I doubt we'll get them to stay behind, and they can get the cup and ring."

"As for Potter..."

They both looked at him, ignoring the group staring at them.

"Well, we're just going to have to kill him," Harry said frankly. "I came back because of the horcrux, and if someone tries to pull him into their own mind right when we kill him off we'd replicate the situation I died under."

"We can't just kill Mr. Potter on a theory!" McGonagall snapped furiously.

"If we don't, Riddle's going to kill him anyway since he can't die until Potter does at some point," Harry sighed. "I don't see another option. Besides, he'll come back in a couple of minutes."

"Nagini," Draco said, with an expression like he'd swallowed an eyeball. "Someone needs to get back to the Manor."

Harry and Hotch looked at each other. "I think I've got an idea, if you're up for it," Harry said, expecting to be shot down immediately.

Hotch gave him a look. "At least you'll be breaking in with supervision if I go with you, as opposed to the alternative."

"Wow, it's almost like you've lived with me for a couple of years and have gotten used to my maniacal urges."

"You two fit together a little too well - has anyone told you that?" Draco said. Both nodded immediately.

"Okay, how would we kill Riddle once we're done with all that?" Harry said. "Are we assuming the prophecy's a real thing?"

Hotch sighed reluctantly. "Reid has a feeling she might actually be correct about it all."

"Really?"

"He has a long, convoluted explanation that, unfortunately, makes a lot of sense."

"Okay, so then..." He paused. There was still the matter of the other five Riddles in the other worlds, but he couldn't talk about that with a bunch of people he didn't trust standing around. "Let's get back to that. To win in this world, we need to know why the worlds are different, otherwise we could be fighting in a way that's entirely counterproductive."

"We'd need whatever was the source of divergence in the worlds."

"Why?" Draco asked.
"They joined because they were so similar. There's theoretically only one difference in the worlds that caused the split. At least, we only have to find one difference." He glanced at his father. "And that's got to come from your line, since I was born to you instead of the Potters."

"Maybe it's not from my line. Maybe something just caused you to be born in a different place."

Harry frowned. "Yeah, maybe. Or...could the lines have crossed over, somehow?"

"This could take hours, if not days to work out," McGonagall said over a clicking noise.

"Or not," Harry said. "Draco, where the hell did you pull that out of?"

Draco's fingers didn't stop typing on his laptop. "I scrunched it down so I can put it in my pocket." With the briefest glance up, he added, "Did you really think I'd go anywhere without this?"

"I should've known better, you're right," Harry said. "Should we just give you a couple of minutes, or-"

"Well, if it isn't my little padawan."

Harry rushed around to Draco's side of the laptop screen, ignoring the wizards and witches who jumped in surprise at the sudden voice. "Garcia!" he exclaimed.

"And Hotch II! Long time, no see. There better be a good excuse, and if it involves porn-"

"We're dead?" Harry guessed.

"I want in."

"Garcia, I'd like to introduce you to this world's Draco Malfoy, Ron Weasley, Hermione Granger, and Professors McGonagall, Snape, and Dumbledore, who are all in the room with us," Harry quickly said. Draco muffled his laugh with one hand while Garcia groaned.

"Every time I say something," she protested.

"One day you'll get it down," Draco teased.

"When the situation isn't so dire, remind me to tell you about the time my hot mocha god flirted with me on the phone in the middle of a fertility clinic." Both boys were shocked into a laugh. "I was told he had to flee for his life."

"What is that?" McGonagall asked, bewildered.

"It's a toplap!" Weasley exclaimed. "My dad told me about those! Muggle invention, isn't it?"

"My soul's weeping," Garcia deadpanned. "Call me Julius Caesar, because I've just been stabbed twenty-three times in the chest."

"A laptop, or computer," Draco corrected. "But yeah. I'm beginning to think it can do anything I need it to do. Hey, Garcia, we need to compare lineage charts from here and from our world."

"Whose?"

"Harry's. We think it might be easier to take down Riddle if we can figure out what the difference in the worlds is."
"We'd need access to British records, then," Garcia said slowly. "I suppose the fastest way to compare would be to hack MI5."

Draco smirked smugly. "Yes, it would be, wouldn't it?"

Hotch shook his head, giving him a look. "Lineage is public record. You could look it up on any ancestry site."

"I think they just want to hack MI5," Harry replied, and Garcia looked puzzled for a moment, having not heard Hotch's response.

"I may or may not have a hate-love relationship with one of MI5's tech analysts," she said.

"Wait," Malfoy said. "Magical records aren't going to show up for muggles."

"Aw, your ignorance is so cute. Groups like MI5 have to have access to magical records, because if a witch or wizard gets arrested and they give their real name, MI5 has to show up to get them released. Or if they show up at a hospital or something. It doesn't happen often, but sometimes shit hits the fan, someone loses their wand, and oops, burned at the stake. I mean, arrested. Draco, give me access to your computer."

"Done. Why?"

"They can't trace my hack back to me if I'm doing it through your IP address, since you're not even in the same world." Garcia turned away to send a text, then went back to her computer.

"I thought muggle technology didn't work at Hogwarts," Granger asked slowly, watching Draco work with something akin to awe. Those who were close enough were edging closer to the screen to see what he was doing, but Hotch stayed right where he was behind it, wanting to avoid startling his coworker without explanation.

"Yeah, but the stuff we're using has been blessed by the BAU tech goddess, so it works," Draco said so bluntly that Weasley looked like he wasn't sure if that should be taken seriously or not.

"I rephrase. Wouldn't it be faster to go through legal methods?" Hotch asked. He was making absolutely no effort to stop them. Harry relayed the resigned message.

"It would be, by a couple of seconds. Those sites load so slowly and- Woot, we're in! Okay, one database hacked, one to go. Draco, your world's turn. I'm not sure I can hack it from here, so you might have to."

"Ooh, looks like something evil is going on in here," Kevin said, walking in behind Garcia. Draco stopped typing as Garcia took over his computer from her desktop, hacking the MI5 database.

"What's going on?" Ron asked at the same time as Kevin's statement.

"We're hacking MI5," Draco and Garcia chorused.

"Fun, but why?" Kevin asked, then got close enough to see who was on the screen. "Ah! The little ones are back!"

"I already told the rest of the team, so they should be in here shortly."

"Wait, when did you have time to do that?" Weasley demanded.

"She sent a text. Didn't you see?"
"You are such a muggle," Harry muttered and got a good-natured elbow.

"It's like a mini-me," Garcia cooed without slowing. "He's so cute."

"I...think I'm being praised."

"Any comparison to me is a praise, obviously. Blasphemy, padawan, blasphemy."

"My apologies. And we're in. Okay, just give me a moment to do a comparison..."

The Potter branch was listed out on Draco's screen, and Harry looked at the names aimlessly for a moment before his eyes focused on one and he stopped. "Wait." Draco glanced at him. "There, Ryan Nickelson."

"What about it?" Draco asked.

"One moment," Garcia muttered. "Okay. Uh, your world's Nickelson lived in England all his life. No real muggle record, so kinda boring... Hang on... Ah hah! Okay, parents got divorced in our world."

"That's it?" Harry asked. "That's what started this whole mess?"

"That doesn't even make sense," Draco muttered. "Maybe it's a side effect, that caused Harry to be born to a different family."

"I'm still looking- oh!"

"What?" Harry demanded.

"Uh, his mother moved him to America."

Harry glanced at Hotch when he saw him shift. "A Ryan Nickelson went to my school," he said just as Garcia started speaking. Behind her, the BAU team was coming into the room, having answered her summons in response to hearing that two of the QDA were on the line.

"This one does have a police record. He beat up his girlfriend, and... Oh, hospital record too. Someone punched him pretty hard, looks like, about the same time so probably because of what happened to the poor girl... No charges filed... School record says it was-" She froze. "Ah."

"I know," Harry said, mind whirling, an epiphany starting to form. "I know. Dad, you grabbed the wrong bag."

"Hotch got so pissed at someone that he brought himself back to life just to punch said person and is now upgraded to zombie-poltergeist Hotch," Draco summarized.

There was a long pause on both ends of the video call.

"Well, you're not wrong," Harry finally said, amused by Hotch's reaction to 'zombie-poltergeist,' which was along the lines of a facial, 'That was the best you could come up with?'
"Hotch...brought himself back to life?" Garcia slowly said.

Draco turned the computer around.

"Well, I didn't expect that when I got up this morning," Rossi finally said after another long pause. "It's nice to see you again, although I must say that you've looked much better."

"I hate saying this," Morgan said, resigned, "but talk to Blaise, Luna, and Ginny when you've got a chance. I've a feeling they might have a way to fix that."

"Oh yeah," Draco said, then quickly shut his mouth.

"Draco," Morgan said flatly, without the computer having been turned back around. "Who knew?"

"Well, only those three, of course. So, ah, by extension, everyone in the original QDA."

"Really now."

"Original QDA minus me," Harry said. "What's going on?"

"Let's get back to that later," Draco announced louder. "Way later. Maybe never. Okay, why's the cloak important?"

"Nickelson was killed in an accident when flying with a friend," Dumbledore said suddenly, and everyone turned to him. "Before that, he had the invisibility cloak. It went to James Potter after his death."

"So..." Harry said slowly. "Wait. Why would the invisibility cloak have anything to do with who I was born to?"

"That cloak has very powerful magic on it," Dumbledore said thoughtfully. "Traditionally, it has been passed down through family members for centuries. If the cloak did not think it would be returning to its original family...

"You think it's possible it gave my family magic?" Somehow, Hotch made his question incredulous without actually having a voice.

"That cloak is one of the three Deathly Hallows."

"I thought those were a fairy tale," Weasley said suddenly, making everyone look at him so quickly he flushed. "That was one of the stories my mum used to read me."

"Then you are aware how powerful that cloak must be," Dumbledore replied. "Magic becomes stronger with age, particularly if it is related to blood magic. It could be possible that the cloak's magic is powerful enough to have granted its protection of bloodlines to the Hotchner family instead of the Potters."

"That," Harry said slowly, "would actually make a lot of sense."

"Why?" Hotch asked.

"Because your father died of lung cancer in this world. He didn't beat it. In our world, he had a miraculous recovery."

"The family carrying that cloak has always had bizarre luck," Dumbledore said.
Harry nodded carefully, and then all severity and dignity at the secret they'd uncovered left him as he groaned, burying his face in both hands. "Aw, shit, we have to go talk to my grandfather again!"

"I take it you don't get along," Professor Snape drawled.

"I'd rather go ask Riddle for coffee!"

"You're in Britain, Harry," Draco said snidely, turning the computer screen back around to face him. "It's tea."

"I'm American - I can ask him for coffee."

"Yeah, because you damn Americans dumped all your tea in the harbor!"

"That was hundreds of years ago! And how do you know that?"

"I took U.S. History, thank you."

"Why?" Granger interrupted suddenly.

"Guess who's getting an economics degree," Garcia sang from the screen and Harry was a bit worried that Granger was going to faint at the thought of it. Weasley just looked confused. She suddenly jumped in excitement, turning away from the laptop with the video to the other one she'd been working on. "Wait, while we're in MI5's database, we can look it up!"

"Look what up?" Draco asked, bewildered.

"Whether Princess Diane's death was really an accident or not! I tried doing this when I had CIA clearance but they cut me off, those bastards!"

"Uh, Garcia..." JJ said, hiding a laugh.

"We're already in the system, so we might as well."

JJ reached over her shoulder and closed the laptop, eliciting a short scream from the tech analyst. "No!"

"Hey, we're sending some people your way soon, so you might actually be seeing a couple of us shortly," Harry warned them. "We need to head over to this world's Quantico, though."

"My hack..." Garcia whimpered, oblivious.

"We'll tell her when she's recovered," JJ said, then grinned mischievously. "By the way, Elle said something about you getting handcuffed by that world's Hotch to keep you in place...?"

"Bye," Harry said loudly, then shut Draco's screen despite his protests. "Draco, you can call them right back once we get to Quantico," he pointed out, and the Slytherin scowled but shrunk the computer so he could put it back in his pocket. "Right. Well, we can get to that later - or as Draco said earlier, never - but we need to take out all the Horcruxes as quickly as we can." To the others, he asked, "You want to kill Harry now or wait until later, when he's more bitchy and annoying because he's got a Dark Lord in his head?"

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Draco had, apparently, run into Dumbledore's office not long after Hotch had arrived, catching all of them before they left. The four from the other world went back there to pick up Jack, who had been
talking cheerfully to the portraits. Malfoy was to be sequestered in the infirmary to prevent any word from leaking out about the conversation that had just transpired, which Malfoy hadn't argued with, and Weasley was confined back to his bed since he'd recently been poisoned.

Harry and Draco hadn't been released. They'd just made a dash for the doors when Pomfrey's back was turned.

Potter had been appropriately shocked to hear the plan, but had actually agreed to it. Harry detected quite a bit of shame for his attack, but mostly desire to get the alien contamination out of his head. The solution had almost forced him to call it off, though.

Professor Snape, having made a sworn oath to keep Potter was safe, was the only one in the room who had a relationship even remotely close to what Hotch's protective relationship over Harry was. As a result, he was the one who they deemed most likely to be able to keep Potter tied to the world by bringing him into his head, which Professor Snape called "the most inane concept an addle-minded individual could come up with." Harry had replied by pointing out that that individual had brought two people back to life and the professor had scowled at him.

Nevertheless, about five minutes later, Potter was sitting up in bed after falling down, a little disoriented but otherwise all right. With that Horcrux down, Hotch and his group had started carefully moving to the door when the others weren't watching so they could make their way back to Quantico.

"If we go back with whoever goes to our world," Harry said, "we can take Jack with us and he can stay with Sean until we're done. I think we should probably tell him you're back or he'll come after us for leaving him hanging for so long."

"Can't I stay here?" Jack quickly asked.

"It's dangerous," Harry said, "but we'll be back soon so it's not like we'll be apart for very long, okay?" Jack frowned at him. "Really. I promise."

"Hm."

"How long do you have until you die again?"

"Not long," Snape said. "We need to get him into a permanent form as soon as possible to prevent the dead world from pulling him back again."

"He's going to need to become un-corpse-ified for a bunch of other reasons too, even if scaring Death Eaters into retreat is apparently a new tactic, so we definitely need to look for Blaise and his pack if they're back yet."

"Where were they?" They were rapidly approaching the end of the wards as Snape posed the question.

"Trying to find Blue. He was chasing a serial killer. Jack, hang onto this wood tightly, okay? Same goes for the rest of you, unless you want to get left behind. All right, Porti."

With a sharp tug and a sudden drop, they were standing in the middle of the BAU conference room, which was empty. Outside, the bullpen was oddly quiet, and the wizards all drew their wands.

"Jack, stay there for a moment," Harry murmured after a glance from Hotch, and then drew closer to the window to peer out. A burst of laughter escaped him and he started towards the door with a, "Oh, Merlin."
"What is it?" Draco demanded, hurrying after him with Hotch, Snape, and Jack, who was completely ignoring what he had been told. "Oh."

A screech echoed throughout the room, and almost no one moved a muscle. Everyone who usually worked in the room was gathered by the raised platform to the offices, along with anyone who worked in the near vicinity and a few others who had evidently been close by happenstance, including Strauss. The BAU was standing near the front of the group, as were Hermione, Ron, Blaise, Luna, Neville, Ginny, and a couple others. All of them were facing with their backs to Hotchner's office, watching the running figures in the small hallway between the glass doors and the elevators.

"Are you all - just - going to - stand there?!" Foyet demanded in between pants, turning around sharply again. Blue skidded awkwardly, small arms waving to get his balance back, then managed to change his direction to go after Foyet again.

"Yes," Blaise said honestly. "Blue, if you make your turns wider, you won't slow down as badly."

"The - stupid - reptile - does not need - more help, thank you!" Foyet snapped. He was covered in numerous scratches and bruises from head to toe, revealed by the exposed skin that was showing between shredded bits of clothing. He seemed to have a slight limp that was giving him trouble running, and his head was still a mess from Hotch's violent reaction to his face.

"You should conserve your breath," Luna suggested helpfully. "Blue won't stop chasing you until your dead."

"I see - you're trying - very - hard to - stop him!"

"Blue can't be stopped by bullets, magic, or anything like that, as far as we've seen," Hermione said in her academic tone. "He'll literally continue following you until you die from exhaustion."

In the back, Harry leaned his forearms against the railing, looking out at the scene in amusement. Hotch stood beside him, arms folded, and Jack tugged at both of their jackets. "Can I go run around with Blue?" he whispered, and Harry realized he could only see the top of Blue's head because of the height difference.

A couple of heads near them turned and jolted in surprise when they saw the group standing there. "Later," Harry promised.

"That's - very - encouraging!" Foyet was shouting back at Hermione.

"How'd he get up here?" Harry asked the nearest person who had turned.

"With the dinosaur chasing after him, no one stopped him," the agent said. "They apparently made it through security, the lobby, and then up several flights of stairs. Most people just thought it was a practical joke, and then he burst into here, and they've been running around ever since."

"Today is a good day," Harry sighed, shifting one arm so he could rest his elbow on the railing and lean his chin against his palm. Then he froze, raising his head and pointing with the arm he'd just been using for support. "Gideon!"

Hotch's gaze quickly snapped in that direction, and the older agent turned at the sound of his name. "Hey, you're not dead," he greeted calmly, tossing aside the possibility that it was this world's profiler.

"Neither are you," Hotch replied silently.
The DA started one by one as they saw who the exchange was with. "Does anyone stay dead anymore?" Neville asked, bemused.

"Apparently not," Gideon replied. "When did you get here?"

"About a minute ago," Harry said. "And however amusing this is, we've got some really crappy bad news and some really awesome good news, so we kind of need to wrap all this up." Louder, he called, "Foyet, stop playing with Blue so we can get back to work, okay?"

Foyet paused long enough to glare at him.

"Ah, too out of breath to respond? Okay." Still no answer. "All right, crash course on Blue the Dinosaur. That thing is meant to protect. Literally, that is its main purpose in life. It's the main reason Blue is summoned. So. For him to stop, he needs to no longer be required for protection. Blaise, who's he protecting?"

"Any Hotchner."

"I'm not - trying - to kill - anyone - right now!"

"But if you still want to and are planning to later, he can sense that. Think of him as the Patriot Act - excessively preventative. Unless you decide to stop trying to hurt a single Hotchner ever, he'll keep chasing you."

"Fine! I'll - stop!"

Blue kept chasing him.

"Blue the Dinosaur doesn't believe you, Georgie."

"That's because - you're - the - first one - I'm - going to - kill!"

"Now let's think about this logically," Harry said calmly. Most of the room was looking between the two of them now, at least mildly amused. Except for Strauss, who he didn't think was aware of what the term 'humor' meant, and Hotchner, who was understandably displeased at the very sight of Foyet. "You tried to kill two Hotchners. You failed epically, broke a sternum and everything. You tried to kill three Hotchners. You not only broke your whole face, but you were then chased by a dinosaur across D.C. just to get into the middle of the workplace of the people hunting you, just for the thought of safety. In both events, you pissed one Hotchner off so much he manifested his dead soul in front of you, and the second time he actually brought himself back to life just to explain physically how much he disagreed with your face."

Foyet ducked suddenly, narrowly avoiding Blue's claws swiping over his head, and scrabbled back in the other direction. Harry paused until he was sure Foyet could pay attention to him.

"Not to mention that in the world I come from, you were rather brutally killed by everything living in the Hotchner house besides the actual Hotchners, which includes but is not limited to two venomous snakes and an elephant. We still have that elephant, and sometimes, when we have downtime and it's not rampaging through hordes of zealous fanatics, up to eight people can comfortably ride on it until the seventh person pushes the eight off because we're teenagers and evil incarnate. My point is that it's a rather big elephant, and it's made of the same stuff that dinosaur is made of. It's also rather fond of Jack, who you tried to kill."

"Get to it!" Foyet shouted at him.
"You should really consider stopping your attempts to kill any of us."

Unless, of course, Blaise decided to call off Blue entirely, but that hardly seemed likely until Blue was literally standing over the killer's unconscious body.

Foyet let out a loud, frustrated groan.

"Or you can continue to humiliate yourself by running around with a dinosaur in the middle of the BAU bullpen after having literally handed yourself over to the people trying to arrest you. It's your choice."

"You know, if he gets eaten by Blue," Reid said suddenly, "he'll be the first human to ever be killed by a dinosaur."

"All right, that's it," Blaise said. "Foyet, you've got to die. It's for science."

Hermione glanced back towards Harry. "How important is your news?"

"Unfortunately, rather important."

"Do you mind?"

He sighed dramatically. "Do I have to be responsible here?" At her stern nod, he sighed again and said reluctantly, "Go ahead."

"Stupefy!"

"Aww," Blaise moaned with Ginny. "Hermione!" The dinosaur came to a halt by Foyet's unconscious body, sniffing desolately at him. One scaled foot nudged him, disappointed. "You couldn't at least let Blue finish it?"

"Blaise!" Hermione scolded and he pouted silently. The rest of the room was starting to disperse, and Harry didn't bother hoping they'd all signed the State of Secrecy because there was no way anyone would believe them even if they did know about magic if they heard this story. Hermione grabbed her lot and started pushing through the crowd towards Harry and his group. Harry crouched down so he was closer to her eye level when she reached him. "What happened?"

"The two Riddles merged. That's why it was so critical for him to get over here. He's stronger now," he said quietly and her expression darkened. "We think they've already done it, so we've got to take out all the horcruxes now, from both worlds."

"How many do they have left here?" Neville asked over Hermione's right shoulder.

"Three." He glanced at Gideon, who was on the outskirts of the group. "Two are ones you destroyed. The last is Nagini. In our world, we've got the diadem, but I know where it's at."

"You took care of Potter, then?" Ron asked.

"That sounds accurately like we killed him, so I'd like to remind everyone within hearing range that the important part is that he did not stay dead long."

"I'm assuming you've already got a plan," Hermione said, a small smile on her face. This world's BAU was drifting closer to hear what was going on, along with Strauss, who was just pissed now but everyone ignored her.

"Oh, don't we always?" he teased. "But first, where's everyone else?"
"Around. We found a better way to secure the wards and make them stronger. And Ron's hiding from Lavender."

"Still traumatized?"

The redhead shuddered. "I can't get her screeching out of my head."

"Fair enough. Where's Elle at?"

"Here," she called, and Harry looked up to see her slipping into place by Gideon.

The rest of the crowd that had formed around Foyet - who was still lying on the carpeted floor, under Blue's scrutiny - had vanished back to its normal places, leaving only the twenty or so regulars in the bullpen. None were close enough to hear what was being said, but Harry saw Daphne and Anthony at the edge of the group muttering muffling and vision distorting charms so no one would be able to hear or try to discern what they were talking about.

"Good, you made it through, so you can go right back." She rolled her eyes at him. "Where's Remus?"

"Other world."

"Okay. Take- Hm. Hang on. Gideon, you being back changes my plans. You're the only one who really knows about the cup and the ring, and I'd rather you get to them before Voldy decides he needs to move them. Can you take a group - or don't, it's up to you - to get either the cup or the ring? And then pick another group to get the other one? We need to knock them out at the same time, before they get moved. I just need either Blaise, Luna, or Ginny."

"Uh oh," Ginny said, grinning.

"Yeah, you guys know what this is about. I don't, if that makes you feel any better, besides that you're going to be in deep shit with Morgan."

"I told you he knew," Ginny whispered loudly to Blaise, who looked resigned to death. Probably because the last couple to die came back a couple of months later.

"The BAU knows everything," he whispered back.

"Hey, you learned something over the last few years," Elle said. "Okay, so what am I doing?"

"Depends on who Gideon takes." Harry was still watching the old profiler, who was turning the matter over in his head.

"Blaise, take the Weasley twins and Terry to get the ring. I'll give you the address in a minute. Ginny, come with me."

"Aw, I don't get Ginny?" Blaise asked.

"So you two can - how do you put it - snog?"

It was said in such a deadpan that the group erupted into laughter, the nearest people jostling a flushing Blaise and a smug Ginny.

"You've been back less than forty-eight hours!" Blaise protested. "How do you-?"

"Were you even here when the words 'The BAU knows everything' came out of your mouth?" Ron
snickered.

Harry looked skyward, shaking his head. "Why is my army filled with teenagers?"

"Because all your options for adults were incompetent or taken," Snape reminded him.

"That's so sad and yet so true."

"So," Elle interrupted. "Who am I taking?"

"Whoever you need to break into Hogwarts and get to the Room of Requirement. Once you're there, you need to ask the Room for a place to hide things, and when you get in, you're going to see a bunch of massive piles of crap. One of them is going to have a diadem. I'll...try to remember how we found it, and I'll give you the best description I can."

"Why don't you just blow it all up?" Seamus suggested, shocking no one.

"Or that," Harry said, "so we can repair the thing again."

"Nevermind. Don't," Seamus decided.

"Who's got the map and cloak?" Elle asked, and both were pulled out by different people and were passed to her through the crowd. "Cool. I think I will have officially broken into Hogwarts more times than any other human being or creature by the time this is over."

"Who do you want?"

She frowned thoughtfully. "Might be faster on my own."

"Want a backup group in case everything goes wrong, like it always does because our luck is twisted?"

She groaned. "Fine. Seamus, come so I can keep an eye on you. Uh, Roger- no, I'm not taking a unit leader. But I'll need communications, so Adrian, you're going in with me in case they upped the wards again and my phone stops working. Michael, Ernie, Dean, Katie."

"Okay. And then they're not going to go with you to Hogwarts, but Hotch, Jack, Luna and I are going to go over with you."

"Oh, you need me for that?" Luna asked, perking up in surprise.

"Hopefully not, but I need you to explain...whatever it is that Morgan's not happy about. And I'm assuming we'll sort it all out on home ground where we're more in control."

Her eyes brightened. "Ah!" To Blaise and Ginny, she asked, "You think the one we had focused on will work?"

Blaise frowned thoughtfully. "It should. You just won't have to do the second half." Turning to Harry, he said, "You're going to need to give up some blood, though."

"How much?"

"All of it," Blaise said immediately.

"...Um."
"Like a pint."

"That's a lot better. Okay, of those going through the worlds, does anyone know how to get out of and into the Ministry?"

"Yes," Luna said.

"Good."

"What exactly are you trying to destroy?" Prentiss asked curiously.

"Parts of Riddle's soul," Harry replied.

"That's impossible," Strauss scoffed and Snape sighed.

"Don't say that," he said morosely. "The Hotchners seem to take that word as a challenge."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Harry muttered.

"It's impossible to bring dead people back to life," Ron said.

"It's impossible to cure lycanthropy," Ginny piped up.

"It's impossible to break into Hogwarts."

"It's impossible to find a good Slytherin."

"It's impossible to duel your doppelganger."

"It's impossible to survive the Killing Curse."

"It's impossible to defeat an army of Death Eaters."

"Wow, did you guys keep a list?" Harry asked dryly.

"It's impossible to use psychology on magical folk."

"It's impossible to get past magical warding."

"It's impossible to be a Parselmouth and adorable at the same time."

"Are they talking about me or Jack?" he asked Hotch. "Because I hope they're not talking about me."

"It's impossible to convince a Death Eater to spill Riddle's secrets."

"It's impossible to use wandless magic well enough at fourteen that you break your house twice damn it Harry I haven't forgotten!"

"That was not my fault!" he cried out, whirling and pointing at the culprit behind him. "And we agreed to never talk about it again, you traitor!"

"You told your dad!"

"I did not! Sean told my dad because Sean is above promises!"

"I still haven't heard what happened besides the house blew up. Again," Hotch said, nudging Harry
with his knee to get their attention so they knew to look at him.

"Might as well," Harry muttered and Draco groaned loudly.

"So Hotchner decided- oh shit there's three of you, I can't do that." Anthony sniggered beside him. "I don't even know your middle name, so I can't curse at you that way!"

"Get on with it!" Ginny shouted at him.

"Fine!" he shouted back. "So Harry decided it would be a good idea to play hide-and-seek-"

"I did not - Sean decided it would be a good idea, and since he was the only adult in the house we figured this can't go wrong!"

"Yeah, whatever. Anyway. So we all hide. And about ten minutes later, I notice my wand is missing."

"Wait, you're skipping something. About half an hour before all this, we were showing Jack and Sean magic."

"Oh, yeah, that. So. My wand's gone. But I'm still hiding. An hour goes by. Still hiding. No one else in the house is even moving so I figure they've all left me, so I go out to see what's going on. Sean, who knows how, has managed to get himself upside down in the back of Harry's closet, and is trapped by a pile of textbooks that have fallen on him and the confines of the walls. Clearly is still hiding, or trying to."

"So Draco ditches my poor uncle," Harry took over, "and comes to find me. I'm between the wall and the dryer, by the way, and I've realized my wand is missing too, and I'm on the ground trying to look under the dryer in case it rolled under there somehow and having small panic attacks about what's going to happen if the house suddenly, I don't know, gets attacked by Death Eaters because that would just be our luck, right? and then Draco he doesn't just come find me, he walks up behind me and scares the living crap out of me."

"I lightly touched you on the shoulder."

"Still."

"Whatever. So then the two of us go back to Sean, because clearly something's amiss - and Jack's supposed to be looking for us, but we haven't even seen him this whole time so now we're wondering if maybe he thought he was supposed to hide- I rephrase. That's what I'm thinking. Harry's still panicking about Death Eater attacks."

"Yes. Because it would happen, wouldn't it? And, I would like to point out, it did happen later that summer!"

"Sadly, yes. Except we had a serial killer who wanted to kill a serial killer because you guys just attract weird people. But anyway. That's neither here nor there. So we go back to Sean, who's probably starting to suffocate by that point, and we're like, well, maybe we should try to get him out, right? Wait, I rephrase again. I'm thinking that. Harry is at the window looking at the sky for Death Eater attacks."

"...I hate to say it, but he's right."

"And Sean's like, just use magic to get me out, and I'm like, we lost our wands, and he's like, you're idiots, and I'm like, we know, and then he told us to get GPS trackers on our wands but those things
would just look weird and- Whatever. So he's still stuck. But then he says, oh, hey, Harry's done wandless magic before. Can't he do it again? And this is news to me, so I turn back to Harry, who's still at the window, and Jack has somehow gotten hold of the invisibility cloak and pulls it down over his head just as I turn-"

"And Draco screams like a little girl-"

"And then Harry screams like a slightly younger girl because I scream-"

"And scared the crap out of me-"

"So then all the lights go out and all the glass blows up-"

"Again-"

"And that's the story of how Harry blew up the house the second time."

Hermione slowly turned to Harry. "The second time?"

"Look, I blow up the house two times and no one lets me forget it. Really."

"What happened to your wands?" Neville asked, bewildered.

"Jack took them when he was under the cloak," Draco grumbled. "He was curious about our wands after the magic, and he wanted to see if he could be quiet enough that we wouldn't notice him grabbing them. He's sneaky."

Hotchner tilted his head at them, doing the math quickly. "...He was nine."

"He was a sneaky nine-year-old!"

"It is impossible to get a group of boys to act more mature than Harry's brother," Hermione commented to Ginny, who nodded quickly in agreement.

Chapter End Notes

See, I told you guys that things would get happy again! Some dark things do happen later, but nothing as bad as what's already happened with Hotch's death.
"'We charge unlawful aggression but we are not trying the motives, hopes, or frustrations which may have led Germany to resort to aggressive war as an instrument of policy. The law, unlike politics, does not concern itself with the good or evil in the status quo, nor with the merits of grievances against it.'" - Robert H. Jackson in the Nuremburg Trials

"'No,' Hotch said once the group had broken up, splitting into smaller groups depending on whether they were staying or leaving. Harry was trying to slip away before he could be stopped, and they both knew it. Hotch looked at Draco, who glanced at Harry like it was the last time he was going to see him, and the Slytherin sufficiently distracted Jack by pulling him off to Garcia.

Harry sighed, shoulders slumping. 'Hermione,' he said, and the second of his oldest friends turned towards him curiously. Lower, he said, 'Draco's taking Jack to Garcia. Make sure he stays there for all of this, okay? He's faking it, but he still needs a lot of recovery time from the Cruciatitus until his nerves have settled.'

Hotch pulled him into the conference room, closing the door securely behind them. Outside, the noise level rose as people gave last-minute instructions or comments to each other, then dimmer as they left to go help with the wards or to gather the ones they needed for their appointed missions. While he waited for Hotch to talk, he focused on Gideon's low tones, unable to make out what was being said but not caring.

Whatever came next, it was a good day.

Which wasn't what people normally said within thirty-six hours of being stabbed by a mass murderer, but his family had odd perceptions about what good days were.

"'So?' he finally asked when Gideon's voice faded, taking his pack with him.

Hotch motioned for him to wait, then pointed out the window. A pair was approaching, Hotchner and Strauss, and Harry pulled himself up straighter in preparation, but didn't step closer to his father. Strauss here hadn't seen the after effects of the Silent Massacre, and he didn't want her to inaccurately think that he was doing this just because of Hotch or something.

"'What is going on?' she demanded the moment the door shut behind the two of them. Hotchner stepped away, making it clear he wasn't involved in her inquisition.

"'Preparations to take down Riddle,'" Harry said immediately. "'It's complicated and we just don't have time for me to explain it all.'"

"'Why are you running this?' she snapped. "'You're, what seventeen?'

Sure. "A variety of reasons. The main one is that I held off Riddle enough times that people trust me to do it again, so I ended up with a small group under me who wanted to help defeat him once and for all.'"
"A group of kids, who somehow became an army."

"Yes."

"What do your parents have to say about this, besides-"

When he saw her glance scathingly at Hotch, he intercepted the comment quickly with a sharp, "Which kid's parents?" She looked back to him. "Blaise's? Dead. Daphne's? Killed right before her sister. Ron's? Fighting with the Order. Draco's? Fighting with Riddle. Angelina's? Fled Britain without her. Susan's? Murdered. The Patils'? Missing. On and on. This war started at my school when a follower of Riddle's ideals started torturing kids. We started resisting before that, when a group of his followers took over thirty of us and started sacrificing us one by one to bring him back to full power."

"You can't honestly expect me to believe that you're the only ones capable of fighting."

"The war hasn't started here and they're losing people faster than we were when the war had started. We held off a siege for months without breaking a sweat. Yeah, an army of kids. Draco's staying here because he just got tortured for a couple of days under a curse that can make people go insane, so feel free to ask him about the details. He had to turn from his family's tradition of following dark wizards because some of Riddle's lackies killed his only friends, and the people who picked him up were the sort that Riddle wants to wipe from the earth."

Strauss narrowed her eyes at him. "And what do your parents have to say about this?"

"Riddle wins once I die," Harry said bluntly. "That's it. And every time someone dies, it's because he's trying to get to me. I'm the only person besides Dumbledore to face him multiple times and live. When kids started getting tortured, I organized a group to stop the professor who was doing it. And after the war started, I turned that group into an army because they were tired of getting hurt because the adults around them didn't care. The only group that helped? The BAU. Of which, you might notice, there are seven. That's not an army."

"You're not answering my question."

"But I am. With those kinds of odds, and with my background, do you think there's anyone who could stop me from leading the only capable army of defeating Riddle? When the only people who stuck with us through everything are on his hit list? When most of the kids in my army don't have a place to go when this is all over?" Strauss opened her mouth and Harry waved his arm through the air. "No. You have no power over us - over any of us - and the only reason we're still here is because we're putting up wards in case Riddle decides to strike some place that's going to hurt. If you disagree with our methods enough that you want us out, we'll leave, but we can't guarantee you that protection once we do. Considering that, the only reason you would still be here is to complain, and that's a waste of my time."

Hotchner's face was about as blank as Harry had ever seen it, which deserved a serious commendation. He couldn't see what Hotch looked like behind him.

"If this war is so bad-"

"Take a look at my father," Harry ground out, "and tell me how bad this war is. Because there were seventeen bodies with him."

Strauss slammed the door on her way out.

Hotchner waited until she was completely gone before completely ignoring Harry and turning to
Hotch. "I need to speak with you," he said frostily.

Uh oh. Maybe Harry had misinterpreted the blankness.

Hotch glanced at him. "I'll stay," Harry said, taking a seat to prove his point.

Hotch followed his doppelganger out, and they turned towards Hotchner's office. Harry waited behind, tapping his fingers on the desk for lack of something to do. With everyone else on the move already, there wasn't anything for him to be done. Hurry up and wait, as the saying went. Most frustrating, even once this was over, he was still just going to be sitting somewhere.

He pulled out his phone and sent a text to Hermione asking if she knew how Gideon had come back. In a string of messages, she replied, describing how Blaise had cast the third spell for the Veil wrong and had accidentally dragged both Gideon and Greyback into existence again. The mention of the latter dampened the remainder of Harry's good mood and he scowled, shoving his phone back into his pocket. It might not be a bad idea to bring Draco along with them and have him stay with Jack at Quantico instead of Sean's, he mused. Or, for that matter, stay here, where the wards were up.

He texted Neville next about why the wards were so strong. *We're using blood magic*, was the explanation. *Blaise realized that we could infuse blood into the wards, and they're stronger than they would be otherwise. We need blood from family members, from everyone willing to donate.* After a moment, he added, *No idea what the consequences or side effects will be.*

Fantastic. Next to Luna, *What's Morgan irritated about?*

*Your father was planning on bringing Perotta back to life.*

*I know.*

*He had a stack of possible ways to do it. Blaise thought we might be able to find a realistic way to bring him and Gideon back, so we started looking through them. Yeah, that would have irritated Morgan with all the potential ways that could go wrong. We found one way that requires us to repair the dead body using family members' blood, and we just have to get the soul into it.*

*How are we going to do that?*

*Magic.* After a moment, *Why don't you come down here and wait with the rest of us to leave?*

*Waiting up here.*

*For this world's Hotchner to stop yelling at your dad?*

Harry started at the message, wondering more than ever what was going on. *You can see them?*

*Yes. They're in Hotchner's office. Your father looks very frustrated. This world's Hotchner looks very mad.*

He slowly put his phone back into his pocket, suspecting what the whole matter was about. Considering his treatment of Hotchner while he was here, it wouldn't be hard for the profiler to somewhat accurately assume that Harry had hated his father. As his grandfather had said, Aaron Hotchner, both of them, probably all of them in whatever world they came from, were very concerned with being a good parent after his own upbringing.

Harry had not given the impression that his father had been a good parent.
There wasn't a part of him that wasn't screaming to intercede, but he held himself back, forcing himself to remember something Sean had told him when Jessica had challenged Hotch's ability to be a parent - there were battles Hotch needed to fight on his own.

Hearing that his father was getting chewed out by himself after Harry had yelled at him a couple of hours ago - albeit because of an emotion-screwing locket - was still not easy despite that.

Had he ever apologized to this world's Hotchner for what he'd done and said? He thought he had, but then, it might have been when he was almost dying, and if so, that was kind of sad he had been forced to get to that point before he could apologize. But then, he'd had to get there before he could admit to himself he'd forgiven his own father, who'd done so much for him and, in a way, given up everything for his safety.

He needed to apologize to Hotch, too, now that he thought about it, though his father was well aware he hadn't meant any of it. But saying it would still make him feel better.

The door opened probably a half hour, maybe a full hour after the two had left, and Hotch took a seat beside him. "Sorry," Harry said immediately. "I wasn't exactly...polite to your other self."

"I am...rather curious as to what you could have possibly said to him," Hotch said slowly.

"Nothing nice, you can be assured."

"Well... It must have hurt to see him," Hotch said, and Harry relaxed slightly as his father subtly expressed understanding. "He gets that."

"Still..."

"You can talk to him. While you're staying here."

Harry paused at the emphasis. "Do you think I'm going to try to run off?"

"Harry, I was serious. I'll let you go on whatever crazy mission you're planning to kill Nagini, so long as you take me with you. Considering my current status, it's not like I'm in danger of dying."

He tilted his head. "Why do you think I'm going to run off?"

Hotch frowned at him, realizing he'd misjudged the situation and very displeased about that. "You're not coming to the other world with us, and you're not going after any of the Horcruxes. But the wards here don't need strengthening, and there's nothing else for you to possibly do besides sit here and wait."

"Yes, and it's killing me. But I don't know when the Horcrux teams are getting back and I wanted to make sure this world's Haley and Jack are doing okay."

Hotch stared him down.

Harry's defenses crumbled. "Dad," he said quietly. "You... You've started to see that I did some things I'm really not proud of while you were dead. And...some of those things...I don't want to talk about." He grimaced. "You've missed a lot, especially at the beginning, and much of it is going to suck to tell you, but...you need to know anyway, since Luna says we're going to need blood from family members."

Hotch took a moment, then his eyes flashed in anger and he asked with unerring accuracy, "What happened at my father's house?" Harry sighed, rubbing his forehead with a hand whose elbow rested
on the conference table. Hotch touched his forearm, and he turned to look at him mournfully. "Remember - he is exceptional at manipulation. I don't blame you for anything that happened."

Harry couldn't imagine any universe in which he could tell his father 'I got completely smashed with your asshole father' and have it go over well. The worst part was that was only fifth on the list of things he really didn't want him to know about.

"How'd you know?" he asked wearily.

"You don't want to go to the other world to visit him."

Harry smiled briefly and humorlessly at the assessment. "We... In a sense, we got along," Harry said slowly, trying to piece his words together. After all, he knew the hangover wasn't the reason for his hatred of his grandfather. "And I don't want to do that again. My grandfather is... He's..." Harry paused. "Somewhere, he's got a good heart. He's just a shitty family member. And when I was there, I could judge him by his heart and not by his relationship skills, because I didn't care and all I needed was to hear about you, which he could give me. But I can't do that while you're there, because what he did to you, and to Sean, and to me, wasn't fair. But it's also not fair for me to get along with him, sort of, one day and then show up and give him the cold shoulder the next."

There was a long pause.

"You might be more mature than me," Hotch admitted honestly, and Harry had to take a moment to comprehend an ocean wider than the Pacific.

"I don't think that's possible."

"I think it just might be," Hotch corrected. "How did you get along with him for five minutes, let alone...however long you were there?"

"Yeah, how'd you know I went there in the first place?"

"Ryan Nickelson. The cloak. I never told you about that. What did he tell you?"

"Wait, I'll just tell you the whole story. We had a pause in the middle of the fighting, so I decided to head back to America for a little bit so I could tell Sean and Jack what had happened. I didn't want them to somehow hear about it impersonally. Sean was... Well, I suppose you can imagine, and I realized how horrible it would be for him to have to tell his father what had happened, considering their last interaction, so I decided I'd do it myself. I got there in the evening and I was there until the next morning."

"And you just...talked."

He tried to think of a way to explain the first half hour. Tried and failed. "No," he said cautiously, then eyed his father. Was there a diplomatic way to explain to him what his abusive parent had done upon hearing about his death? Would his grandfather even want Hotch to know? "Not in the beginning," he said, "and I slept there."

Hoth waited for him to continue, and he tentatively started. "He didn't believe me at first. Said I was lying and trying to get you two to make amends by showing him how much he really cared and all that. Then he realized that I was being serious, and he...kind of...blew up. All over the place."

"Did he hit you?"

This was one of those times Harry wished his father wasn't a profiler.
"Yes," he said honestly, aware of how much worse a lie would make the situation. Hotch's eyes narrowed, but he somehow resisted the urge to ask, trying not to infringe on the memory of the neutral-ish evening Harry had managed to have with his grandfather. "I don't think he was really paying attention-"

"Don't make excuses for him," Hotch said sharply, then turned away, lips pressed together in frustration. He drew his hands into his lap, futilely trying to hide the reflexive fists they'd turned into it at the thought of what had happened to his son.

"He was very upset," Harry quietly said. "I seriously don't think he was in control."

"Harry," Hotch warned.

"Dad, he, uh..." He shifted. "He broke his hand. And he didn't realize it." Hotch looked at him, frowning. "On the cabinet door. He hit it so many times he actually punched through it. I had to repair eleven of the bones in his right hand, and some more in his left." His father stayed quiet and still. "He never really seemed to feel the pain, but once I got him seated, he started talking about you. It... It was almost like..."

Should he let his father keep the idea that his own father was just a terrible human being? Honestly, the old man had hurt his brother and tried to take both of his kids, and there wasn't any way of getting around that. But it didn't mean he hadn't cared even the slightest, and knowing he had... Did Hotch want that?

"I think he wanted to hurt himself more, by talking," he finally finished.

"How badly did he hit you?" Hotch asked, the very question he'd been resisting earlier, bringing them back onto more solid footing for himself.

This had happened decades ago for his father, and it still hurt to bring up a potential alternative to what he'd always assumed had happened. Harry suspected he'd probably be like this too with the Dursleys. "Pretty badly," he admitted. "I'm not sure if he was angrier at you or himself, and I kind of reminded him of your image and his own mistakes so..." He paused. "But if I'd been in real danger, you would've seen it, remember?"

"That doesn't excuse him."

"No. But it's a reason," Harry said as steadily as he could. "After that, he explained why things were so bad between you. Sort of. It was about as unbiased as he could make it, I think. Then he started telling stories, and then we went to sleep."

And then I got so drunk I had a hangover, which I had to fight through the next day, the exact reason I hadn't wanted to drink at all.

Hotch looked at him carefully. "I took the couch," Harry said, trying to push down his annoyance at his father's overprotectiveness on this matter, telling himself his father had a very good reason for getting defensive when Harry's grandfather was mentioned in connection to Harry. "I don't know where he slept." Especially since Hotch knew his grandfather had taunted Harry about the Dursley's suspicions about his father.

"Sorry," Hotch said, taking his son off guard. "About the last question." Of course he had to specify which particular attack on his father had been out of bounds. "It's just... After..." Harry waited, and Hotch grimaced. "Harry, I... I saw what happened when you got hungry enough."

Shame washed over him and he glanced away. "Yeah," he muttered. "I hoped you hadn't. It just..."
A sigh without sound escaped Hotch. "At some point, you will need to stop looking to me for approval in what you do," Hotch said carefully, making eye contact. "You do so well on your own, and you don't need me nearly as much as you sometimes think you do. In the last few months, you did an incredible job of protecting Jack and keeping him safe, even when his werewolf diet ate up so much of your income."

"But...?"

"I..." He grimaced, eyes closing for a brief moment as he turned his face away from Harry. "I'm not upset with you for it. I couldn't ever be, not when it was my fault you were in that situation. I just... I wish..."

"I didn't see any alternative," Harry murmured. "After Perotta, I just couldn't stand the thought of him touching me, and it's not like... Well, I mean, I had absolutely no practice in something like that, so it's not like I'd be able to touch him well enough to get paid." He looked up to find Hotch staring at him. "And both options were illegal anyway, so..."

"Sorry," Hotch finally said. "I don't want to talk about this, so I think I was a little too vague. I was referring to..."

"The man who kept propositioning me?"

"...Yeah."

They both stared at each other in confusion.

"The one who's wallet I stole?"

Hotch's face lit up in shock. "You stole his-" And then his hand was covering his eyes as he started shaking, a full-body laugh that Harry hadn't seen in months, maybe even an entire year.

"Um..."

"Oh, Harry," Hotch finally said, lowering his hand. "I only saw you accept the deal."

"Oh! No, no, Mathilda - someone who worked that street - was waiting to call me away, and I used the distraction to snag it. She and Jenny took the credit cards and I took the cash." Hotch continued silently chuckling. "So... You don't care... I stole a crapton of money from someone? I mean, what I got was not a couple of twenty dollar bills."

"I don't care if you bankrupted him."

"Well, I don't think so, but I never checked back, so..." He watched, amused, as his father kept laughing. "Wow, communication. What wonders it does."

"You are truly remarkable."

"Considering the situation, I think I'm supposed to take that as a compliment."

They lapsed into silence, Hotch still smiling slightly and shaking his head once in a while as Harry's thoughts turned back to their previous discussion. "Dad," he finally said, figuring now was the best time. "Do you think it would go better if I went with you?"

"He's not getting within arm's reach of you again," Hotch said immediately, smile wiped from his face by the very thought.
"He's going to be more interested in being within arm's reach of you once he realizes you're alive," Harry pointed out. "Luna made it sound like we're going to need more than just my blood to put you in a living body, Dad, which I'm assuming means more than just a couple. Unless we're taking it from Jack-" Hotch grimaced "-it's coming from Sean and your father."

"Harry..."

"He won't hit me, though I expect he'll try to use me against you if I'm there. But he'll do that either way, and if I'm there, I can refute anything that's wrong." No response. "Look, he never did anything to me that you or I couldn't fix. That's not the same case with you. I think you've got good reason to hate him, so it'd be easier for me to coax him into this."

Hotch was quiet for a couple of minutes, staring at the far wall. Finally, when Harry thought he'd convinced him, Hotch said bluntly, "No."

"Dad."

"It's not about any of that," Hotch said, choosing his words. "If you're there, we're going to focus on you more than if you're not there, and we shouldn't. Part of our recent problems revolve around you, but the source of all this goes years back. And it's not right that we try to emotionally blackmail him into this by using you. He needs to make the decision on his own. And if you're there, I think there are going to be topics we'll skirt that we really need to discuss. But thank you for your offer."

Harry nodded cautiously, then more confidently when he realized his father was being honest. "Okay."

"Besides, it'll give you some time to work out some of your own drama."

"With?"

"My other self."

"Oh dear."

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Once his father had left with the others, Harry dragged himself to Hotch's office and knocked reluctantly on the door. Through the window, Hotchner gestured for him to come in. Even twenty minutes after the argument with...himself, the agent still had a grimace on his face. And that was the only thing it could have been caused by, because he was standing beside his desk and looking out the window, not even staring at any paperwork.

"I suppose we need to talk," Harry said slowly.

"Your father spoke with you, then."

"I think you know yourself well enough that you're aware you wouldn’t send your kid to sort out your own problems." No response. Thought so. "He did point out that we never really had a discussion since I almost died and then didn't die and then vanished. I at least owe you an explanation about...everything."

"Take a seat," Hotchner said, and Harry didn't think he was imagining the weariness in his tone. He obliged, taking the couch and folding his hands together in his lap. After a moment, Hotchner joined him by the low table, sitting in one of the chairs.
"What do you want to know?"

"How much time do you have?"

"Hours." Actually. "Maybe a full day." Hotch and Harry's grandfather might need more than a morning therapy session to work through all their problems.

"Why did you make it sound like we'd only met a couple of years ago?" Hotchner asked.

"We did. I was taken through the Blood Relocator Program from you and my mother, and you both were told I was dead. I was...misled, so I never went looking for you, and then we crossed paths a couple years back when a wizard serial killer went after magical family members of nonmagical government employees. We found out what had really happened later." He paused. "How much time do you have?"

"You might not have noticed, but we're essentially at a complete standstill until your army stops making use of our bullpen."

"Ah. Right. Strauss must be throwing a fit."

"Hermione Granger contacted a magical official who has somehow managed to fill Strauss's entire day with meetings to keep her distracted."

That had to be Blackwolf, and the very thought made Harry grin. "Well. If you want, I can tell you the whole story."

"I would appreciate that."

"But..." He debated over his wording, then settled on, "You have to remember that things are...different where we're from."

"Different enough I let you lead an army in a war."

"Yeah. Things happened beyond anyone's control, even yours. In spite of everything that went wrong, though, so many things went right, and I know people forget that when they see where we're at now. We almost won. We should have, if not for one mistake. This world hadn't even started their fight, and they were preparing for years when we wrapped up our first phase in less than a couple months."

"I'll keep an open mind."

"Tell me if I forget to explain something," Harry said, and then he began.

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When he was finally done, he watched Hotchner's face as it all slowly sank in.

"Make a bit more sense now?"

"Yes..." Hotchner wasn't looking at him, instead focusing on the floor. The room was quiet for another few minutes. "When we handcuffed you, there wasn't a problem until you were handcuffed to anything but me."

"You know why."

"You trusted me."
"Yes."

"Despite everything that had just happened to you, even though you hated me."

"I didn't hate you. I was just angry and you were an easy outlet."

Hotchner raised a slow, incredulous eyebrow. "Very few people would say that."

"Well, if I started snapping at Reid I'd just feel bad because I couldn't even pretend he was at fault, and if I yelled at Garcia I'd just be a horrible person. And you reminded me of him so much..."

"How did you do it? Be around me all that time, and not let it slip?"

"But I did. You figured it out, didn't you?"

"It wasn't easy, and I wasn't that confident I was right until I sprung the question."

"Because I knew that I had to. If you found out, you'd react like...you. And that wasn't fair. There wasn't anything you could do about what had happened in the other world, and I knew you'd throw blame on your other self, and especially after Snape tried to see if I had dark magic by accusing my father, I knew I couldn't hear anyone else say the same. So I kept quiet." When Hotch didn't have another immediate question, he asked, "What happened here? Since the time I would have met you? I mean, Elle and Gideon are gone, but Elle obviously didn't get bitten by a werewolf and I doubt Gideon had hidden designs to go after Horcruxes."

"Elle was shot by an UnSub in her home and couldn't adjust back to chasing after criminals." He paused for a fraction of a second but Harry caught it and gestured for him to go on. "It's only speculation."

"I'll consider that."

"Well..."

"Before you try to tell me I shouldn't hear this, I'd like to point out that there is no way the Elle in our world was up to anything good the whole time she was out of close contact with us."

Another pause. "We suspect she may have killed an UnSub after she acted preemptively and accidentally botched an arrest, preventing us from getting a conviction."

Harry didn't blink. "Yeah, a couple of us are pretty sure she might have gone after some of the werewolves who attacked us during the Silent Massacre, since there were quite a few who never showed up in the war..."

"Gideon left because of the same case as he did in your world, but we don't know what's happened to him since. He didn't keep in touch with anyone."

Harry let out a soft, dryly amused, "Hm." When Hotchner looked at him for elaboration, he continued, "We used to joke that the BAU were the parents of the QDA, but it seems like we were more accurate than we assumed. Divorced parents have to stick around if they want time with their kids."

"Sounds like they both did a lot of good in your world."

"A lot of people did a lot of things in our world. They weren't necessary here. So... In our world... Foyet..." Hotchner tilted his head slightly. "He found our home and broke in."
"You said he was killed."

"Yeah. But... What happened with him in this world?"

"Much the same, though I didn't have a nest of snakes. After he stabbed me, he took me to the hospital. Haley and Jack were put into witness protection before he could get to them."

"...That sucks."

"Well, it looks like he's not going to be a problem anymore, which I have your group to thank for."

"My group was trained by yours so thank yourself. I'm just eager to hear how you're going to explain all this on paperwork."

"We haven't come to a consensus on that yet."

Harry smirked slightly. "Well, when you do. Let me know." He shook his head in amazement. "I just can't believe all of you managed to do so well without each other. Both the Hogwarts students and the BAU. I'm so used to the cooperation, when you saved our lives and made us better people and we happened to accidentally help you once a year sort of."

"Your alternate self didn't have any help?"

"His adult supervision is tragically limited. I'm genuinely surprised he's still alive." Under his breath, he muttered, "No thanks to his blood wards..."

"Why would he have any?" Hotchner asked, puzzled.

"His mother died to protect him. As a result, he's got to stay at his aunt's house so he can renew the blood protection each year."

"The Dursleys." Hotchner's face darkened immediately. "He's still there?"

"Apparently they're not trying to kill him, but yes. You overheard the conversation in which I was telling him to get the hell out, but he hasn't done that yet." He paused as Hotchner's expression turned calculating. "What?"

"I don't think we can repay you for everything you've done for us. But I can probably get him out."

"Really?"

"I'm persuasive."

Harry smiled. "Yes, you are. Be warned - I've got teenage stubbornness here, and a problem with authority figures."

Hotchner stared at him for a moment. "Are you trying to say you don't in the other world, either?"

"Ouch. True, but ouch. And thanks."

"Don't worry about it." He paused. "Does your father know everything that's happened?"

"Yeah. I don't bother lying to him anymore. He always finds out."

"Everything?"
Harry sighed. "Not that. I don't know how to tell him."

"It doesn't mean it's true," Hotchner pointed out. "Just because others think you are a Light Lord doesn't make it fact."

"If I'm not a Light Lord," Harry said, thinking of all the other worlds they hadn't even started on yet, "a lot more people will die. In a bizarre way... I hope everyone's right." Just so long as he could keep everyone alive this time. "If... If I were your son..." He broke off and dropped his head into his hands, frustrated. "Ugh."

"What?"

Not raising his head, instead staring at the floor so he didn't have to look up, he said, "How would you prefer to hear that I was dying?"

Hotchner went still in front of him. "You still think the Curse is real."

Harry smiled even though Hotchner couldn't see it. "The worst things around me have tended to come true. And it almost happened not long ago."

Hotchner sighed, irritated. "You're not going to die." Before Harry could interrupt, he pushed, "But, you need to catch him up on what has happened to you since he's been gone. Fit it in to the longer explanation."

"I already told him everything."

"You told him everything you needed to know. You didn't tell him about the things that only related to you."

Harry sat up now. "Somehow, I'm not surprised you picked up on that," he said, then gave a self-deprecating smile. "It's been hours and I still haven't gotten to what I really wanted to say."

"Don't."

"I need to. After everything you did for me..."

Hotchner shook his head firmly. "You deserved help."

Harry scoffed immediately, waving the idea off. "I deserved it, after the way I treated you? You had every right to put me in a hospital and let them take care of me, magic or not. And even if you did make sure I was being properly taken care of, you had other concerns than me."

"Harry, you saved my family. Whatever qualm you had with me, I knew your aggression didn't make you a bad person."

"So you could have handed me off to someone who I got along even slightly better with, but you didn't. And if I'm right, you didn't because you knew being near me would piss me off so much I'd keep fighting to stay alive." Hotchner's expression relaxed slightly, enough of an admission that Harry turned smug. "Thought so. At any rate. Thank you." When Hotchner opened his mouth, he snapped in mock-irritation, "Oh, just accept it already!"

"You're stubborn."

"Gee, I wonder where I got that from."

Hotchner conceded that point. "There's something I should ask you before my alternate self returns.
He's gone to see you grandfather." Harry nodded. "They...get along?"

"Like gasoline and fire. I thought I mentioned that earlier."

"But he thinks he can get his father to agree to help."

"He's hoping." Grimacing, he said, "It's not like he's got another option, does he? We don't know how much longer his current state will last."

"Why didn't you go with them?"

"I'd make a tense situation worse."

A minute passed, and then Hotchner stood up. "Haley said she wanted to see you. If you'd be agreeable, I can tell her to come visit, and to bring Jack. I suspect you're not going to leave this building until everything's safe."

"That'd be nice."

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It was only fair that Sean hear about it first, so Hotch showed up at his brother's apartment. Luna was going to wait at Quantico until he'd gotten his father to agree to everything, and then the Hotchners would all drive down to D.C. They had decided it would be best for Jack to stay with Draco at the other Quantico, since it would keep the Slytherin from leaving while he was still recovering, and both needed each other after what had happened. Meanwhile, Elle's group was still in England, and they were going to meet them back at the Ministry, provided nothing went wrong.

Unfortunately, Hotch miscalculated his brother's reaction badly. So badly, in fact, that his brother's excited, raucous yelling got the cops called on both of them and they were sitting in the police station before Hotch finally managed to convince everyone that he'd been undercover for a long time and there had been a misunderstanding about whether he'd died or not. Thanks to the glamours the DA had put on him, he'd just had to pretend he'd lost his voice from illness. A call to JJ had 'confirmed' this, and they'd been released after giving Sean a warning about being a public disturbance. Sean beamed happily through the whole thing.

"Where are we off to?" he asked, practically bouncing beside Hotch.

Hotch prodded him, hard, to make sure he was watching when he started talking. "You are going back to your flat. I am going to Hell."

"Oh, really?"

"Yes."

"With what car?"

"...Mine?"

"Aaron, you've been dead for months."

He ground to a halt. "Are you serious?"

"Almost everything but the house has been redistributed. Should've thought that through before you came back." Hotch would later learn Sean was completely fibbing, since all of it had been waiting for Harry's return so his son could have a voice in what happened with his father's property and
money, but by then it would be too late.

Hotch pinched the bridge of his nose.

"I'll drive you."

"That's not something you want to do."

"Don't be ridiculous. I've always wondered where the Highway to Hell is," he said in a tone foreshadowing a road trip filled with AC/DC.

"It's on I83, towards Dad's house," Hotch said, and Sean paused. "Exactly."

"I'd rather I don't lose two family members through Mutually Assured Destruction fallout, so I'm going with you," Sean said, firmly. "And you're going to need a car." He stared as they started walking back, frowning. "What happened to your neck?"

Hotch's hand shot to it, and he felt the skin starting to separate as the glamour wore off. "We need to hurry; this is going to get worse. I'll explain on the way."

By the time they got to their father's house, the glamour had completely faded away, and Sean was making just as many bad puns as the DA had, albeit louder and less discretely. Hotch let his brother have his fun, content with the knowledge that his state was, theoretically, not permanent and should be resolved within a couple of days at the most. Instead, he spent the ride trying to brace himself for the oncoming argument - and it would be an argument, because there wasn't another option.

When they pulled up to the house, he took a moment just to take in all the changes to the old family home. It hadn't fallen into disrepair, but the nicer qualities his mother had kept up had faded into a more bland façade. The car came to a stop and he spent a brief, futile moment wishing Sean had just driven past.

"You have to do this," Sean said bluntly.

Hotch shot him a glare. "I know that," he snapped and Sean held up his hands immediately.

"Woah, no angry expressions when you look like that." He opened the driver's door and started to get out. "I keep expecting reality to turn into Poltergeist."

Hotch quickly exited the car and stood up so his brother could see his moving mouth over the roof of the car. "Why does everyone keep saying that?" he demanded.

Sean raised an eyebrow in disbelief. "Uh, because that's what you look like? Why, did someone else reference Spielberg?"

"No, but the QDA kids are calling me Hotch the Zombie-Poltergeist."

Sean rested his forehead against the car, convulsing with laughter. Hotch humphed irritably and rolled his eyes, slamming the car door shut. "Zombie-Poltergeist," Sean wheezed, more gently shutting his own as he started to follow. "Just the QDA? The DA don't have the guts?"

"Something like that."

After Sean's jibes, it was almost a relief to be able to knock on the door.

That feeling faded the instant it opened, revealing his father. In all Hotch's years, he had never been able to take the man off guard. He could officially say he had, finally, managed it without even
trying.

After a long moment spent glancing between his oldest son's violently torn throat, his youngest's hidden smile that was rapidly disintegrating, and back to his oldest's general blood-stained appearance, he finally shut his gaping mouth. Snarling, he said, "So you're not dead, then?"

"It's not like that," Sean quickly said, trying to head off the argument before it properly started.

"Sorry to disappoint," Hotch replied dryly, and the lack of sound issuing from his mouth at least made his father pause.

With a grimace, he reluctantly pushed the door open. "I guess you better come in."

Sean shut the door behind them, then followed his father and brother into the living room, glancing between the two in a manner too rapid to hide his appropriate apprehension. Neither of them took a seat, and their father stood in the very middle of the room to claim their attention. Hotch resisted the urge to glance around, despite his curiosity about how the inside of the house had changed since he'd last been here decades ago. A part of him still didn't trust his father enough to let his eyes wander.

"How's Harry?" his father asked snidely.

"Fine," Hotch bit out, grateful he'd decided against bringing him. The mention of his son brought back memories of their last conversation, and he forced himself to try to be civil. The best way to do that was to keep them away from sore topics. "We think we're in the final stages of the war, and he's happy about that."

"Ah, yes, that war. Looks like it's going to well, from the state of you."

"This was caused months ago."

"Yet you're only back now."

"That wasn't up to me."

"You should have come back sooner."

"I brought myself back to life and you're saying it wasn't up to your standards?"

"I'm sorry, I couldn't quite hear that. Can you repeat?"

"Okay!" Sean said loudly, ineffectively.

"I'll ask again, and I'd like a real answer this time. How's Harry doing?" Hotch narrowed his eyes at him. "Unless I know your son better than you, you know there's more to him than just being 'fine' at first glance."

"What are you talking about?" Sean asked despite his resolution to not get involved.

"Isn't it obvious? He visited you before me, didn't he?" When Sean didn't respond, he continued, "Harry was seriously depressed. Couldn't bear what happened." To Hotch, he added, "So. Maybe I'll rephrase, since I wasn't clear enough - is he still alive?"

"Yes," Hotch snapped. "He's tougher than you think."

"Oh, I know. He takes punches better than you did at his age. He was bleeding before I stopped."
"You hit him?" Sean demanded sharply. He glanced to the side to see if Hotch was trying to say something, then did a double take at his tense posture. "You knew?!"

"He told me." He forced his pressed lips apart. "So, yes, I knew that he came to you, grieving and upset, when he needed help the most, and you hit him."

"He didn't complain."

Hotch stepped forward and Sean made an abortive move to stop him before deciding he didn't really care if his brother ripped into his father. Hotch, however, didn't go further. "Of course he didn't complain - he wanted you to hit him! But you don't give poison to someone who's suicidal, do you?"

"Not unless they deserve it."

"Harry didn't."

"He got you killed."

"We were in the middle of a war. People died. My death wasn't his fault! It just happened!"

"If it wasn't his fault, that leaves you. Honestly, I didn't think you'd be the kind of person who'd do that kind of harm to your kids, but I guess I was wrong. You did more harm to him than any of the other people who hurt him, really."

Yeah. He probably had.

"And whether I should have hit him or not, I did give him help. More than anyone else seemed to, because I didn't coddle him and say it was all going to be okay. He needed stories about the past and rest, and that was what I gave him. Talking and alcohol."

"Oh, don't try to tell us you got him drunk just because he needed sleep!" Sean snapped.

"You got him drunk?" Hotch silently shouted.

"He went into the other world hungover the first time, right into the middle of a fight!" Sean shouted, gesturing angrily.

"Sorry," their father said dryly, "I forgot my crystal ball and I didn't look into the future to see exactly what was going to happen to him once he left my house."

"You hit Harry, you shouted abuse at him, you got him drunk... Is there any way you didn't take advantage of him when he was hurt, just so you could feel better about yourself?" Hotch demanded.

"Not the way people usually take advantage of kids," his father sneered. Hotch held himself back, glaring. "Ooh, sore spot? What happened while you were gone?"

Sean rolled his eyes dismissively, then froze when his brother's expression tightened. "Aaron? Oh my God..."

"No one touched him," Hotch said stiffly.

"But...?" his father encouraged, one eyebrow raised.

"But nothing."
"Aaron, really."

"With everything that's happened to Harry, and considering my job and the sorts of people I've seen walk away from the worst kinds of crimes," Hotch said slowly, precisely, "is it so hard to believe that there are particular threats that would piss me off enough to override conventional rules of nature to bring myself back? No one touched Harry, because I got there before he could. Now shut up about Harry, because you don't have a clue what's going on with him."

His father's face was set in an angry frown, and he stood there, completely still, for so long that Hotch expected to hear a stern order for them to get out. "Isn't it obvious why I'm asking?" he finally whispered, unable to raise his voice against the fury that was rising in his posture. "Isn't it?"

"No, so for once in your life, stop insulting me and just-"

"I care," he interrupted, "more about the brash, stupid, naïve kid you abandoned - accidentally or not - twice after I've only met him a couple of times, than I can care about the brash, stupid, naïve kid who walked out on his family over two decades ago after I'd known him for his whole life."

That stung more than he would admit. He kept his expression steady.

"So I'm asking about Harry, because I'm not going to ask after you. How are you doing? You were dead. Now you're not. I'm sure you're feeling very pleased with yourself. But I don't care unless that's going to help your son."

"I do have two of them, you know."

"Yeah, but I've only met the one, and he's made quite the impression on me. Oh, don't give me that look - I know I don't have a hope of stealing him away from you. He's rather attached to you. Now, since you've rather rudely put us off that topic, why don't you tell me why you're actually here, because it's not to do this."

He had to take a moment to unclench his jaw so he could properly enunciate with his lips to be understood. "If you care so little about me, then there's no point in me being here."

He slammed the door on his way out, stomped off the steps, and was waiting in the car before he realized Sean hadn't followed him. The loud exit might have been childish, but it was going to be the only kind of noise he could make from now on. Provided his current body lasted, that is.

He expected Sean to walk out any moment, but minute after minute passed until he finally settled for looking out the window, firmly staring at anything but the property. After everything, he was being held accountable for something that had happened, as his father had said, decades ago. It wasn't like the man even had the right to say anything - he'd gotten his sixteen-year-old grandson drunk, which Harry had definitely avoided mentioning out of chagrin. His father must have somehow gotten the idea into Harry's head that Hotch would have been more irritated at Harry for taking alcohol than at his father for offering it, and frankly, he was tired of having his name used to hurt his son in any way.

And while Hotch didn't think his father was wrong for caring about Harry - the only people who met him and didn't were people allied with Riddle, it seemed - he didn't think it was right that he could be so callously discarded. Because yes, their relationship had always been rough, but that didn't mean it had all been bad. There had been times when they'd actually...not gotten along, but they'd at least made it work. Hotch hadn't become a lawyer because his father wanted him to, after all. He'd done it because he couldn't help but admire what good his father had been able to do, and like Harry had said, his father had a sound heart even if he was a horrible parent.
Despite everything that had happened between them that year, he still remembered being sixteen and sitting in court for hitting Nickelson, listening to his father defend him fervently and passionately and getting him off all charges. That was after he'd stumbled home a couple of weeks before, embarrassed to admit in front of both of his parents that he'd not only punched a kid unconscious but also been so stunned by his own actions he'd even walked off with the wrong backpack, and both had simply sat there, confused why he was acting like he was when he had just been reacting to what Nickelson had done to his girlfriend.

That stupid, remarkable backpack. It had ended up in a closet until, evidently, someone had come to get it years later, realizing what important item had been tucked away within. Thinking back on the event, it was breathtaking how much Hotch owed to that simple incident, for better or for worse.

Before he could stop himself, he marched himself back to the door and into the living room. Sean paused in the middle of a question, facing his father whose arms were crossed over his chest. This time, Hotch stopped himself from jumping straight to argument like reflex pushed him to. No, he used his eyes this time, and he sought out what Harry had told him. In the kitchen, one of the cabinet doors was missing. On his father's hand, bandages still held the self-inflicted injury stable.

He glanced at Sean, and his brother's guilty expression confirmed that he had explained why they were there in an attempt to get their father to give in. He turned to his father, and, forcing himself to stay steady, he said, "You have the right to hate me. Honestly, I still hate you, and I don't think that's going to change. But you don't hate me enough to hate my kids. Jack can't understand what I'm saying. Harry feels responsible every time he looks at me. I don't expect you to help for my sake; believe me, I don't. But there's no one who could convince me you don't care enough to help your grandchildren right now, not after everything they've been through. Do it for them."

"Take down the restraining order."

"You only come announced or it goes back up."

"Fine."

"Deal."

Sean looked at the ceiling and shook his head in disbelief. Hotch wondered if he was empathizing with their mother. "I hate you two."

"Give me a second and we'll go," their father said, starting to move out of the room.

"We just need your blood," Hotch called after him, following him through the kitchen and then coming to a dead halt as his father vanished around the next corner. "What the hell happened to your walls?"

"I stabbed them!"

Hotch closed his eyes for a moment, decided he didn't want to know, then repeated, "We only need to take your blood back with us!"

"The hell with that! I'm going all in if I'm doing this! Besides, sounds like you might need my help with Volly-whatever."

"We don't know quite how to take him down yet!"

A closet door slammed. "You're an investigator, Aaron! Figure it out!"
"He's really coming with us," Sean whispered in horror behind Aaron. "We're all going to die."

Chapter End Notes

The Hotchner grandfather is probably one of my favorite characters to write, for the same reasons Perotta was. I have a lot of leeway with them, and I'm taking all the liberties because why not.
"The medicine, the hope, the blood, the fear, the trust, the crush, the work, the loss, the love, the test, the birth, the end, the finale; the design in the stars is the same in our hearts, the design in the stars is the same in our hearts -- in the rebuilt machinery of our hearts." - Derrick Brown, "A Finger, Two Dots, Then Me"

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"Who is she?" Hotch's father asked immediately upon meeting the girl who was peering rather intently at him inside Hotch's living room.

"You have wrackspurts in your hair," Luna said matter-of-factly and the eldest Hotchner stared for a long moment. "Just thought you should know. If you let them sit long enough, they'll start to eat your brain."

Hotchner most-senior blinked a couple of times, as if making sure he was really seeing the girl in front of him. Then, in a complete topic change for his sanity, he said, "You have a key to my son's house."

"No. I just broke in." She held up the files. "This one. Should work."

"And if it doesn't?" Sean asked and Luna looked at him without blinking for a couple of long moments.

"That would be bad," she finally said. "Let's apparate straight to the D.C. branch, okay?" She held out her hands to them, and Hotch held onto her forearm. "Are you staying behind, then?" she asked the other two when they didn't move.

"You've got to be in contact for her to apparate you," Hotch told them, and both reluctantly took her hands.

"You know," she said, "I've never made a jump this far before."

Hotch's father gave Hotch a very wary look. Hotch smirked back, and then the four of them vanished with a crack.

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Harry gathered his unit leaders and their seconds and communications liaisons at the first opportunity and had a serious discussion with himself, then decided that if he wanted them to trust him, he needed to return the favor.

"You know how there is a huge list of things under the category 'Topics We Can Never Share With The Public'?” he asked when he had everyone on the rooftop. Yes, the roof. It had almost complete assurance that no one would overhear them simply because no one would look there.

They looked at him warily.
"No more surprises," Roger pleaded.

"We found out Riddle's endgame," Harry said grimly. "First, I need complete assurance from all of you. What I'm about to say... No one, and I mean not even the rest of the QDA, can know about this until we come to sort of agreement. Is that understood?" He waited until everyone had nodded. "There are five more worlds. We have to win here and three more, or Riddle wins."

The group stared at him in stunned silence while he explained the whole situation, but the most shocking revelation probably came from the lack of reaction to his final statement: "And...Blackwolf thinks I'm the Light Lord who's supposed to face him."

"I thought you knew you were a Light Lord," Daphne said, confused. He blinked a couple of times. "It was kind of obvious."

"I've never heard of a Light Lord," Hermione said with a frown.

"It's because they usually die from the Light Curse before they turn seventeen," Harry explained. "Their magic turns against them if they think they've done something wrong, and they die."

"You have got to be the only war general in the history of war generals worried about getting grounded," Neville pointed out and the group nodded sadly.

"So we're assuming we lost our own world," Hermione said, pushing past the Light Lord matter for now. "If we act quickly, we can win here and move on to one of the other worlds Dumbledore has already found for us. The faster we move, the faster we can take worlds before Riddle."

"No one else can know about the other worlds, besides the people who go through to fight," Harry emphasized. "This can't leak out. Imagine what would happen if the public discovered a way to get through to another timeline."

"The QDA won't say anything," Blaise said firmly. "They know better. Some others could come too, those who stuck with us since the beginning and are expecting to continue fighting. We'll all have to agree on it, though."

"We need to take down Riddle in this world before anything else," Fred said. "Is there a reason we can't do that today?"

"I've got a plan for it," Harry said, "but I want to move to the next world right after, so we need to prepare for that first. I'm thinking we establish a series of items we need to check in each world as soon as we get over, and we need a reconnaissance team or two to look for all those items. Certain locations, critical people, horcruxes... That sort of thing. We need to know what state they're in."

"Locations would be the governments of the British and American wizarding communities," Hermione said, "and the normal British government. How many people are you thinking would be critical?"

"We can probably just check groups," Neville pointed out. "It sounds horrible, but really... If people are dead, the group still functions, and a war's going to be decided by an existing group rather than a bunch of existing individuals."

"Order, Death Eaters, DA, BAU," Hermione agreed. "And we need to see if any other unique groups came up. I mean, we had the QDA but this world didn't. That sort of thing."

"I'll create two reconnaissance teams out of Aero," Angelina volunteered. "We're split up the most
and we'll be more efficient about looking for something."

They talked a bit more about tactics, but a lot of their preparations from training at Hogwarts came back to them and there wasn't nearly as much to do as Harry had thought. A lot of their safety nets for emergency plans and the like were certainly coming back to help them now. Blaise confirmed that the cup and ring had been taken care of, and though Elle's group hadn't returned, there was no reason to believe her team hadn't managed to get the diadem destroyed. By the end, when there was nothing left to work out, Harry let the conversation turn to much lighter topics.

He had been rather delighted to see everyone after months of his self-imposed exile, and he'd listened to more stories than he had told to get caught up on what had happened to all of them since he'd left. Part of him wondered where all the Order members were - you know, the adults - but no one seemed to know or care, and besides, the war was going to be over soon in this world anyway.

Once they all calmed down, and everyone had shared as much as they wanted to, he'd finally gotten them to listen to a couple of general orders about the upcoming plan. He didn't share everything, assuming something was going to go to hell in a handbasket - and, to a degree, assuming that with the expansion of the DA someone had joined the group who wasn't as dedicated as everyone else was. After all, while the original group was beyond trustworthy, particularly when it was narrowed down to the QDA, most of the DA had not been through the initial event that had brought the group together in the beginning and had not learned to be so discrete when hiding secrets.

Before he left, Blaise grabbed his arm. "The Light Curse is real, you know," he said.

"I almost died from it a couple weeks ago," Harry told him quietly so no one else would overhear.

Blaise's grip on his arm tightened. "Harry, there is something...strange...with your family." Harry raised a mockingly incredulous eyebrow at him. "No, past what you understand. We joke, but nothing that happens to you is normal. And with this..." He shook his head sharply and turned away.

"Blaise, what?" Harry grabbed onto his shoulder and forced him to stop.

Blaise glanced back at him. After a pause, he said, "People who end up in situations like this are the kinds of people who legends are based off of."

He left Harry standing there, quietly thinking for a moment. Then Harry realized he had too many other things to consider that were much more important than any sort of legacy, and he left the roof to go back to the area he had been haunting for the last few hours.

"Whose idea was it?" he asked Hotchner when he walked into his office. "To get me away from everyone when they tried the 'resurrection'."

"Your father's."

"Of course."

"You're more surprised than I thought you would be."

"I didn't expect him to risk being alone with grandfather. They might both be dead by nightfall."

"It's remarkable that you can deal with your grandfather as well as you can."

Entirely unsurprised at the deduction, Harry still said, "You've only briefly heard about my interactions with him."
"He likes you." Harry laughed. "He does."

"He still blames me for my father dying."

"Yeah, well, he never liked his sons, so maybe he's actually just grateful."

Harry went quiet. Then, slowly, "That's not really true." Hotchner grimaced, unsure how to try to explain otherwise in a moderate way, but Harry continued before he could. "He broke his hand on the cabinet door when he heard my father died."

"Maybe your father had a better relationship with him than I did," Hotchner replied.

"No, I'm pretty sure it's gotten worse over the years. He..." Harry stopped, unsure if what he had been told should be shared or not. Then, looking at Hotchner's carefully masked expression, he realized something. This version of his father was never going to be able to make amends with the parent who'd caused him such pain. All he had was the guilty grief that was left after terminal lung cancer. "I know he did a lot of things to try to hurt my father when he heard he had kids."

"Like what?" Hotchner didn't seem surprised.

"He found out I had come home for the first time, so he showed up and tried to cause a row between us. No, not a row - he tried to make me scared to stay around my family any longer, and he tried to distort my opinion of my father. A couple of months ago, after I told him you were dead, he got me to drink alcohol because he said he knew it would drive my father up a wall."

"And he knew you'd agree because you were hurting."

"That, and he bribed me with stories. So...no, I don't think their relationship has been or ever will be 'good,' but I don't think he just didn't stop caring. I think he acted so badly because he did care. He's just very emotional and impulsive, and horrible about compromising."

A faint smile appeared on Hotchner's face and Harry knew he'd been caught. "Are you trying to give me therapy?"

He couldn't help but laugh slightly at the phrasing. "Maybe. It would be fitting, considering how much you gave me."

"You mean how much your father gave you."

The smile turned knowing. "I mean you." He turned towards the door. "And now, I need to finish putting this ridiculous plan into action."

"I still don't agree with you going to face him, no matter who's going with you," Hotchner said behind him.

"Neither does my dad, but he's decided it's a better idea to know what I'm doing so he can stop it all from going wrong rather than forcing me to hide it and find out later that everything's on fire."

"Harry," Hotchner said, and he paused with one hand on the door to turn around. "Stop back here once you're done. You didn't have time to talk to Haley and Jack."

"You're just going to keep using them as an excuse, aren't you?"

"I'll stop when it doesn't work anymore."

"So long as you aren't handcuffing me, it's okay."
The portkey to Hogwarts was getting more use than he had initially planned, but it dropped him off right where he needed to go even as it was starting to reach the point where he would need to renew the charms on it. He walked into the castle under a disillusionment charm and went up to the infirmary, where, as predicted, both Malfoy and Potter were still both residing. In the middle of the day, they were awake as he took the charms off of himself and walked calmly over to Potter's bed.

"How's your head?"

Potter blinked at the question, having expected some sort of confrontational statement instead. "Uh, fine. Well, actually, it's much better."

"Good."

"Are you sure it actually worked?"

"Positive. You'll be fine. Just curious, though - what did you see?"

"King's Cross."

Harry smiled. "So did I."

"I was kind of surprised...Snape was able to pull me back." After a pause and an apprehensive glance towards Malfoy, Potter lowered his voice and whispered, "He actually... He really does...care...doesn't he?"

The leftover antagonism that came through the pronouns replacing Snape's name made Harry smile. "Yes. Very, very much."

"But...why?"

"Because there are not many people in the world who are truly evil. Most who act badly have their reasons, and he's no different. Just because you don't understand why he has a tendency to treat you like crap doesn't mean that's how he actually feels." Potter grimaced, not convinced, and Harry continued, voice still pitched low so Malfoy wouldn't hear them. "This isn't quite the full answer, I'll be honest, but you can think about it this way, because it is true. If he had treated you nicely when you first met, what would have happened to him when the war started?"

"Voldemort would have come after him."

"And then where would the Order be?" Harry asked, hoping Potter got his meaning. "Knowledge is power, to an extent."

"Don't tell the Ravenclaws and Slytherins that."

"The ones in our world were quite horrified and delighted when they realized how much they could use each other," Harry admitted. "Think you two can work it out from now on?" Potter gave him a horrified look. "I'll stop in to see what happens to you, or in case you need me."

Potter scowled at him. "There's no reason we have to get along."

Snape's expression when Harry took off the invisibility cloak, revealing himself covered in grime from the graveyard and blood from himself and Greyback, flashed across his mind. The concern for his welfare, the relief he was alive, the horror as he realized Harry hadn't heard about his father yet.
And most telling, the palpable weight that was removed from his shoulders when Harry delivered Lily Potter's message.

"It's not for your benefit," Harry said so softly Potter strained to hear him. "Not everything's about you, and you're not the only one who's suffered horribly from Riddle."

Potter stared at him for a long moment. "What do you mean?"

Honestly, even Harry had never gotten confirmation about what he suspected. But it wasn't his story. "I am going to tell you something, and you're never going to mention it to anyone. Especially not him. Consider this. How much compassion do you think he's gotten since Riddle first came to power?"

"None, but he's a git."

"Because he has to be. I assure you, he has an enormous heart." Potter looked like he was about to start laughing. "I had the same reaction at the beginning, but McGonagall once told me something that I remember every time I think of him. Do you remember your first Quidditch match? When the broom was jinxed?"

Potter scowled slightly. "And he tried to counter-jinx it, yeah, I remember. So he helped me once."

"They knew Riddle was in the school. And he was well aware that Quirrell was right next to him, even when he suspected him. He still risked himself to protect you."

"I know that! But since then-"

"-he acted horribly to you. Even before that incident. Which is why I don't remember him counter-jinxing. Did you know McGonagall and Snape are good friends outside of school?" Potter stared at him. "Not many do. McGonagall said she was so ecstatic to see you'd won that she wanted to get Snape's reaction for it out of habit that she turned to look at him. He didn't notice, because he was staring at the pitch. McGonagall told me she knew from the beginning that he was a spy."

"Because he counter-jinxed the broom and she heard him," Potter grumbled.

"Because he smiled, and she'd never seen him come any closer to that than a smirk. It was a Gryffindor win. And he was smiling."

Potter was quiet.

"Think about it. I hope things can be different for you both once the war's over." Letting his voice return to a normal volume, aware it was carrying around the wing in the echoes of the infirmary, he said, "Speaking of which, we're about a couple of hours out from completely winning, but I need something from you first."

"Wait, what?"

"The Horcruxes are all gone, except for one. And Riddle himself. So we're going to get into his headquarters and take both out at the same time."

There was a snort down the wing from Malfoy, who didn't even raise himself off the bed to look at them. "You really think it's going to be that easy?" the Slytherin said with dark amusement.

"Yeah. It will be."
"You won't win."

"We will. Because we have to. Losing means the obliteration of everything we care about. My family will die. So will yours. Anyone with a muggle relative or friend - which is at least half the population - will lose someone close to them. Riddle's just fighting for an idea. A way of life, sure, but he's not defending it. Plus, he has to take over everything to win. We don't. We can drag this war out until his followers get tired, so long as we hold at least only a few places. You did a complete evaluation on this in our world, and everything you found said we're going to win."

Malfoy gave him a long look. "You actually believe the bullshit spewing out of your mouth."

"Well, think of it this way. Why are you fighting with him?"

There was silence.

"Potter, stop glaring at him. Malfoy, I'm serious."

"My family," Malfoy spat out.

"Exactly. But what happens when Riddle starts torturing them? Are they safe then?" More silence. "Or when he goes on one of his rampages and kills someone haplessly?"

"If you're trying to get me to suddenly repent and-"

Harry shook his head quickly. "No, no. I'm just saying that eventually you have to leave Riddle's side. You could become neutral and leave the country. But one day, before the end of the war, you will not be working with Riddle."

"What do you want?" Malfoy spat out.

He turned so he could face both of them. "What I want is to finish this war. Honestly? I want to go home. I spent years in a house where my guardians tried to murder me as a recreational past time and I want to actually enjoy a family now. I want to fix the damages of the war, without worrying about more cropping up when I'm not paying attention. I want to move on. I want something new. And I think both of you want all that too. So I'm asking for your help now. You two don't have to like each other. You don't even have to like me. Potter, for once you won't have to fight an underdog battle, and Malfoy, you won't risk your family or yourself."

"That's impossible," Malfoy sneered. "Sitting here, having a conversation about killing the Dark Lord..."

"Ah, but you're not having this conversation with me. You're just listening in on a conversation I'm having with my doppelganger. And this is what you're going to overhear - at three in the morning tomorrow, a small force is going to enter Riddle's headquarters."

He stared at him dubiously. "That's it? A stupid diversion?"

"It's not a diversion. Everything we need is there, so we'll try to slip in quietly without anyone noticing so we don't have to worry about being outnumbered in a battle."

"And you just want me to tell the Dark Lord that."

"Yes. If this fails, we get captured and probably die horribly, but you and your family get rewarded. If this goes well, Riddle's not a problem anymore, and you and your family get rewarded for helping the Light. You can't lose."
"...What's the catch?"

"How do you mean?"

"What else do you need me to do?"

"Nothing. If I've got fifty people all doing something different, the chances of something going wrong skyrocket. So you're just going to deliver the message and wait."

More quiet.

"And me?" Potter asked.

"I need your wand."

Potter frowned at him, puzzled. "I thought you got yours back."

"I did. But I'm about to lose it."

There was a long pause, and then Potter slowly gave him his wand. Harry raised an eyebrow, a bit surprised at the lack of resistance. "Sorry about dueling you," Potter said by way of explanation. "When do you think I'll get it back?"

"No more than a couple of days. Depends on if I get hospitalized or not, but with my luck, I'll end up in this infirmary so you can just loot it off my unconscious body if you want. Make sure it's yours and not mine, though."

"How many are going to sneak in?" Malfoy suddenly asked.

"Two."

"Two?!"

He paused. "Maybe three. Depends."

Malfoy gaped. "Three?!"

"Any more and we risk being spotted immediately. Besides, I'll be covering at least one muggle in disillusionment charms."

Malfoy started laughing. "You're breaking in with a muggle. Oh, I don't even need to warn the Dark Lord about this pathetic attempt."

"You should. Because all three of us are people he very much wants to kill. Lestrange once agreed to take him instead of me when she had the chance because the Dark came to hate him so much."

"Who?"

"The one who brought himself back to life. My father. He was responsible for a good portion of the resistance against Riddle's forces, and his team interrupted enough plans to considerably piss off Riddle. Trust me, my dad's just as hated as I am by the Death Eaters from our world."

Malfoy looked at the ceiling, too annoyed to watch Harry any longer. "So I'm telling the Dark Lord that a trio of morons - one pompous airhead, a random bystander, and an irritating muggle - are breaking into his headquarters to try to kill him. Fantastic."
"At three in the morning."

"Lovely," he sneered.

"Are you really?" Potter asked doubtfully, expecting some sort of trick.

"Oh, certainly. It would be rude to miss our appointment."

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"Don't we need the body?" Morgan asked Luna while the three Hotchners quietly made scathing comments to each other. Luna seemed completely unfazed about the family drama. Morgan was pretending not to notice. "I thought you said we need to heal it first."

"The Weasleys are bringing it. His body is missing at least three or four pints from the injury, and we need about another three for the actual revival."

"The blood needs to be fresh," Madame Pomfrey said. Her showing up had been a bit of a surprise, but she had firmly insisted on getting involved in the process once someone had asked her for some advisory help. "The blood for the ritual also needs to be that of a blood relative, and the blood going into his body for repairs needs to be usable for his... I believe muggles call it blood type."

"When we do blood drives," Morgan said, "they usually take about a pint. Is that going to be a problem?"

Snape, the final person in the room, spoke up. "It would be inadvisable to give someone more than two blood replenishing potions in an hour. The risk of Yaren's poisoning is too great."

They were all standing in the medical ward that the QDA had been brought to before the idea of forming a defense group had even crossed their minds. Luna hadn't even flinched at returning to the spot, and Morgan wondered if she had more positive than negative memories of the place. Then again, he realized, it was Luna – of course she had more positive.

Snape turned towards the three Hotchners, paused when he saw the three were still muttering crossly, and then asked, "Would it be possible for you to be adults long enough to address the issue that has pulled all of us here, away from other engagements?" His grandfather glared at him, but Sean at least looked mildly sheepish. Hotch could have been discussing a regular case for how much change there was to his expression. "What blood type do you have?" Snape asked Hotch.

"B plus."

"So anyone but AB." Sean shifted in his seat to pull out his wallet and look at his driver's license. He sighed. "Sorry, guys, that rules me out for mending the body."

"A," his grandfather monosyllabically responded, as if the answer was dull.

"Does it have to be family by blood?" Sean asked. "I mean, would Jessica count?"

"I don't know," Madame Pompfrey admitted. "There aren't a lot of records about this."

"What about the Hotchner from the other world?" Morgan asked. "Could he donate?"

"He already did," Hotch said, and Luna pulled out a magically shrunk bag of blood from her pocket. Morgan thought there were many other reasonable places to put that sort of thing but decided that would be a pointless conversation.
"I don't see why it would cause a problem," Madame Pomphrey said.

"Could Harry donate?" Morgan asked.

"He's B minus," Hotch said immediately. At Morgan's surprised look by the rapid response, he added, "He's been to the hospital enough times I should know by now."

"...Can't really argue with that. So we've got three potential donors for the actual ritual. That should be enough. The rest... Well, between the rest of us, we should have that covered. And if not, we can pull up the team's files and see who has usable blood."

"Harry isn't going to donate," Hotch said.

"I was wondering why he didn't come with us," Luna said distantly.

"Why not?" Snape asked, frowning. "It would ease the drain on the others."

"Harry's recovering from..." There was a long pause. "An unfortunate series of incidents."

That sounded like a summary of the last few years.

There were numerous questions Morgan wanted answered about that, but it wasn't the time and he knew he would find out later. With that in mind, he kept quiet for now.

"Besides, I think he's hoping to go after Riddle in the next couple of days. He needs to be at his best for that."

"You're just going to let him go after a mass murderer?" Hotchner the Grandfather said dryly and Morgan stared at the man incredulously at the inane question.

"Harry can apparate and has an army at his disposal," Hotch responded in a similar tone. "How exactly would it be possible for me to stop him?"

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Hotch's father downed another blood replenishing potion without removing the needle from his arm. The blood kept flowing from his vein, dribbling down into a small packet on the ground. The room was mostly quiet except for a few quiet conversations while they waited for all the blood to be collected from the various donors.

Hotch hadn't even thought about where his body was kept until the Weasleys arrived with it, telling them that it had actually been kept at the Burrow under stasis charms until Harry was able to come back for a funeral. He wasn't sure how he felt about that, besides a surge of gratefulness for the consideration on the Weasleys' part, so he decided to just not think about it and how badly everything could have continued to go for his oldest son. A funeral and the reminders of his father's death when he had to sort out his estate would have surely broken him further.

There had been brief talk of moving to a different location for a magical resurrection, but it was decided it was too risky so they remained at Quantico, to the ecstatic approval of his team. Strauss was considerably less pleased, but it was less out of any sort of ill feeling to Hotch's return and more of ill feeling to his disturbing appearance. No one could fault her for that. Blackwolf showed up, frustrated that someone had told him offhand that Hotch was back since everyone had kind of forgotten to tell him.

His dead body was on the bed next to him, which was slightly unnerving, while he sat and waited
for Pomfrey to finish her examination of the thing he currently inhabited. "I was right, in the other world," she said, finally lowering her wand. "This is a dead corpse you're inhabiting."

"How's that possible, if that's his corpse?" Sean asked from the bed behind Hotch, pointing past him to the other bed.

Sean was also hooked up to a blood drip, like his father. His blood would all go to the initial ritual since it couldn't be used to help repair Hotch's body. JJ, on another bed, was contributing some that would go towards that purpose, as would Bill Weasley, whose donation came as a mild surprise mostly from the emphatic nature of his insistence in helping as much as he could. Considering his mother's well-renowned determination, maybe it wasn't so shocking after all.

"I would suspect magic created a temporary form for him to host, in the image of his true body but not complete with the ability to live. Restoration of his old body should allow us to transfer his...soul, or existence for lack of a better term...to his original body." She glanced at Luna. "I have one request. You must destroy, or at least hide, the research you found for this."

"We were going to entrust it to you," Luna said simply, and for once the nurse was startled into silence. "I don't think we'll have a problem like this again, but you'll find this much more useful than we will. If anyone would need it again for a good reason, it would be you."

It took a while for Pomfrey to recover herself.

Almost all of the BAU hovered nearby, not wanting to get in the way but not wanting to miss a moment. The exception was Reid, whose bottomless well of knowledge was currently being lapped up by an awed Arthur Weasley.

The conversation had gone like this.

"Blood transfusions - fascinating! You muggles really do come up with remarkable things."

"Did you know that coconut milk can be used for blood transfusions?" Reid asked, then prepared to cut himself off. Arthur stared at him eagerly, then shook his head with wide eyes. Encouraged, Reid continued at full speed, "In the Pacific theater of World War II, both sides would use coconuts when they were on islands and had access to it. Usually they'd use blood packets, but that was dangerous if they didn't know someone's blood type. See, blood has certain antigens, depending on your type, and they can react rather horribly if you don't give blood with similar antigens. That's why someone with O can give to anyone and AB can get blood from anyone. There's also an Rh factor, which we notate by saying it's absent - negative - or present - positive."

Pause. "Oh yeah! Coconuts. Anyway, coconut milk has the same concentration as human blood, so it can act as a blood transfusion to keep blood pressure up so the body can still get nutrients from what blood is left, and it doesn't have any antigens so the body won't negatively react to it. If you give someone blood with antigens they don't have, their blood coagulates and they can die." Arthur looked like he was about to die from happiness at the long-winded explanation. "So soldiers would just take coconuts and use them when they didn't know the blood type. In this case, however, since we know everyone's types we can just use their blood."

"How does the blood transfusion work?" Arthur asked before anyone could stop him.

"The donor clenches their fist several times with a pressure cuff on so blood pressure spikes and the vein can be felt - after all, pressure is what someone feels when they're looking for a pulse. Then a needle's inserted into the vein once it's been found, and the blood comes through the needle into a connected tube, and goes down into a packet on the floor. It's pulled along by gravity. If the
transfusion's an emergency, the blood recipient can be attached to the other end of the tube and lay on the floor or a lower mattress to get the blood directly."

Rossi finally made the two go over to another corner to continue talking while everyone else worked on the resurrection plan. The last bit Hotch had caught of their conversation involved Cartoon Network, suggesting they were far off the topic of blood transfusions by that point.

"What's going to happen to all this blood?" Hotch's father asked, pointing to what was draining out of him.

"The blood not going to his body? Hotch is going to have to drink it," Luna responded.

There was a very long silence.

"Excuse me?" Hotch asked.

"Drink it."

"That's... I don't think I could drink that much water in one go."

"It's over the course of a couple of hours. Not all at once."

Despite the fact that he couldn't feel anything, he already felt nauseous. Most of the people around him reflected that sensation with facial features.

"I need the blood for his body," Pomfrey interrupted, and Luna passed her the two packets in the bag Hotchner had given them. The body was mostly repaired by this point, having been fixed up after the battle out of respect, but there had been some internal damage no one had bothered to deal with that Pomfrey had spent the last half hour working around. She spelled the blood directly into his veins, then checked the levels. "We'll need a bit more, if he's planning on running off and facing Voldemort in the next day."

Morgan handed her the pint of blood Hotch's father had already given, and she transferred some of it to the corpse. "Was that enough?" he asked.

"It'll do. Now, someone told me muggles have a way of keeping a body alive even when the soul isn't inside?"

"A brain dead body?" Prentiss clarified.

"Yes. I am going to need that process. His body hasn't been working for months, and he stands the risk of dying shortly after he returns to it if we don't clear stutters out of it now. I'm particularly worried about dried blood clotting his circulatory system. He'll also probably need nutrients and the like throughout the body so none of the organs crash."

"You okay?" Hotch asked his brother, whose face had suddenly gone pale.

"I feel dizzy."

The nurse who had been attending to both donating Hotchners walked over to him. "Your needle was jostled out of place," he said, then promptly adjusted it. Sean squeaked in pain. "There we go."

"Better?" Hotch asked.

"If this works, you so owe me." To the nurse, he asked, "How much longer is this going to stay in for?"
"A couple more minutes. You're almost done."

A wand tapped him on the side of his head, and then everything went black.

What felt like moments later, he opened his eyes. It took a surprisingly long time to do so, and with a shock, he realized it was because they felt heavy. Everything felt heavy, actually, after the weightlessness of his last form. He might as well have been four hundred pounds or five for all he knew, though - it all just felt the same. Even the weight of the air pressed down on him, a feeling he knew he wouldn't recognize before long as his senses began to dismiss it.

The immediate overstimulation of his pressure nerves slowly began to fade, and then his eyes began to focus on the infirmary ceiling above him. There was some movement around him which he began to turn to after a moment, but paused at the strange feeling of shifting his head. It really had been months since he'd felt anything like this. He started to register the scent of antiseptic in the infirmary, followed by the filtering in of voices and a persistent, steady beeping.

Someone said something, and it took him a moment to recognize the words and then the voice. "Oh, look!" Prentiss.

He squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, and when he opened them again everything seemed clearer. The next person to speak, Morgan, was more understandable. "Hotch, you back?"

"I think so," he said silently, then remembered he could actually use air. He tried to repeat it, but dry air in his lungs forced him to cough for a couple of moments instead. "Yes," he finally managed. "What happened?"

"We needed as little action from you as possible, or you could have accidentally sped up or slowed down the process," Pomfrey said. "I knocked you out of your last corpse when you weren't paying attention and secured you into this one. How do you feel?"

"Oddly normal."

"Can you sit up?"

A moment passed. And then, slowly initially but with increasing speed, his muscle memory forced him up until he was leaning back against the headboard. "This is very strange."

"Being resurrected? I imagine so," Pomfrey said dryly.

"Is this it?" he asked, only to be handed a glass of something red with more viscosity than colored water. "Oh."

"One of those every half hour," Pomfrey said.

Perhaps this would have been easier if not for all the Unsubs who had done something similar, he noted absently in his brain. "I wish my taste buds hadn't come back," he said reluctantly. Most of the team surrounding him looked like they were trying to be supporting, but Garcia was slowly backing away.

"All of it," Pomfrey replied.

A minute later, his stomach rumbled.

"I'd rather not risk an adverse reaction by adding food into the mix right now," Pomfrey said.
"We could put him on an IV drip for nutrients and the like," Reid pointed out. He and Arthur had evidently returned after Pomfrey had ambushed Hotch. Pomfrey nodded in acceptance and the FBI-paid nurse left to go get a bag and line.

"It's very nice not to see your trachea move outside of your throat when you speak," Luna said cheerfully. "You look much better, though I think Draco is going to be sad he can't refer to the two of you as Hotchner and Hotch-the-zombie-poltergeist." Garcia grinned at the name, cheered by the thought of how much she had rubbed off on her protege.

"I think he'll get over it when he realizes he doesn't have to ask me to repeat myself four times anymore. When can I head back?" Hotch asked.

"I'll knock you out if you leave this wing before your two hours are up," Pomfrey said flatly. Rossi was the only who was not bothering to hide his smirk, but Prentiss had to completely hide her mouth.

"Fine." He glanced over at the other bed, where he had originally been in the previous body, and one eyebrow went up. "Well."

His corpse had fallen back on the bed and was halfway gone, vanishing in small pieces of dust. Anything touching it seemed to erode it faster. One of the arms and both of the legs, which had been pulled into crumbly bits by gravity, were entirely gone. The top of the torso was caving in, and the face was entirely unrecognizable.

"We can't vanish it," Luna said. "I don't think it's actually in existence. Just in an in-between place."

Hotch was beginning to understand what the strange girl told him half the time, and he wasn't sure if that was a good or bad sign.

"So long as it's cleaned up before someone else comes back," the FBI nurse said as he returned with the drip. Hotch offered one arm, and the nurse slipped the needle into his hand. The pain was sharper than he remembered, but he still tried not to flinch.

"How's everything feel?" Reid asked curiously.

"A lot more intense than I remember, but I suspect that's going to fade after a while," Hotch replied honestly. "My hearing and vision don't feel as strange, since I had them a couple of minutes ago, but everything else is odd."

"Stupefy!"

Everyone looked sharply at Pomfrey, whose wand was extended, and then at her target, who was lying on the floor. "Honestly," she snapped. "You'd think he would have listened to my warning to his son."

"He's stubborn," Sean said weakly, and Hotch glanced at his brother. "It's a family trait."

"What happened to you?" Hotch asked.

"Bad reaction to the end of the blood draw. The needle kept getting moved out of place so it went longer than it was supposed to."

"Just how long was I out?"

"About an hour. We had to get your body functioning again, and used to having a soul secured in it.
If you'd been awake for it, the conflict could very well have caused you to accidentally evict yourself from your own body," Pomfrey explained as she walked over to the eldest Hotchner, then levitated him back to a bed.

"While we're waiting, can we have a rundown on what happened in the other world?" Morgan asked.

Hotch obliged, though he kept out some of the more personal details that weren't critical to the current conversation. He had no problem admitting he was unsure what Harry's plan was, although he knew it was going to be risky for him and Hotch if his reaction was anything to go by. He'd barely mentioned it before the others all volunteered to help.

"I think it's going to be easier to go in with fewer people, from how he made it sound," Hotch said. "I'll find out when I get back." He paused. "And...something else happened. Blaise cast one of the spells wrong to get through the Veil because he was in such a hurry, and Greyback grabbed onto him while he was passing to the other side. He was almost stuck in the Veil when others tried to hold on as well, but Gideon caught up to Blaise and convinced everyone to back off to let him through, even to give a little push. He was still holding on to try to knock off Greyback, but he didn't manage it before they passed through the Veil. So...Greyback and Gideon are alive, too."

Pomfrey stopped what she was doing and stared at the ceiling in exasperation. The BAU was divided between laughing and sighing.

"You know," Sean said. "someday, someone's going to die and no one's even going to be upset because they'll just assume that person's going to come right back in a little bit. And then everyone's going to feel terrible a couple of years down the line when nothing happens."

"Except, with our luck, that'd be just the moment someone comes back," JJ muttered. "Hotch, do you really feel like you're up for going with Harry?"

"I'm well enough," he said. Hoped, really. Harry wasn't much better off than him, not unless he was actually being responsible and making sure he was healing properly, and Hotch's disorientation could cause them problems unless he managed to get it settled down before they left. They just didn't have time to wait around and risk Riddle getting stronger.

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They made it back to the other Quantico without another serious incident. Hotch left his father behind somewhat awkwardly, his brother somewhat sadly, and his team somewhat reluctantly. He was just glad this was all going to be over soon.

Before he even went to go find Harry, he had two other people to check with first, before he was too focused on Riddle to handle other matters of importance. Luna went off to go be with the rest of the DA, and she cheerfully waved as she walked away from him. He caught a glimpse of Harry tossing a tennis ball between his hands in the conference room, but his son was focused on the ball and didn't see him enter.

It was peculiar to go into an exact replica of his office that he couldn't call his own. Harry must have said something to him for the mood to not be nearly as tense as last time, and that theory was confirmed the moment his other self opened his mouth.

"You should talk to Harry," Hotchner said immediately.

"He knows everything I would talk to him about," Hotch replied wearily. "He won't give up, not
until Riddle's gone."

"He doesn't deserve to go to war."

"You think I don't know that?" Hotch snapped. "You think I don't want him at home instead? You think I want him out there, in danger all the time where I can barely help him?" Hotchner glared at him but it didn't have the expected heat. "I died and it wasn't enough to keep him safe."

"What are you here for?" Hotchner asked, exasperated.

"I'm a nonmagical fighting in a magical world. I wouldn't be surprised if I got killed again. You saw what happened the last time I died. I think there's a good chance he'll try to stay in this world if something like that happened again, if something goes wrong, and hide from everyone he knows out of guilt. If that happens, you need to make sure he goes back home."

Hotchner didn't say anything for a long moment, then slowly pointed out, "I don't have any magic to force him to do anything if he really is adamant against leaving."

"Neither do I. He'll listen to you. Not about staying out of the war, but about doing what's best for himself when the safety of others isn't a factor."

"Will he?" Hotchner replied doubtfully.

"Yes. Because you listened to him. He'll respect that. Just be honest with him, no matter how painful it is for him to hear, and he'll consider what you say."

"What if he's got good reason to stay? It's safer for him here, isn't it?"

Hotch smiled wryly and humorlessly. "I've only known him for a couple of years, but at least every six months something happens that would have killed someone else. I'm not sure it's possible for him to stay safe for an extended period of time." A couple of moments passed, and then he realized what Hotchner was actually asking. "It's easy to get attached to him, isn't it?"

"Very."

"People just keep trying to kidnap my kids," Hotch sighed.

"Well, stay alive and maybe people will stop trying."

With that assurance granted, he found the next person he needed a conversation with. Unfortunately, it wasn't nearly as enlightening as he had hoped it would be.

"I haven't told Harry about this," Hotch started.

"There's your first mistake," Gideon responded before he could continue.

"I'm telling him as soon as I'm done talking with you," he added with a light but meaningless scowl.

"You've learned," Gideon approved. "What happened?"

"Riddle giving Jack a horcrux doesn't make sense."

Gideon frowned at the topic. "He's arrogant. He wanted to take the revered Hotchner child after everyone had gone to such lengths to protect him. It would be a devastating blow to our side."

"But why give him the horcrux, after meeting him for only a couple of minutes, an hour at most?"
Why? It's a sign of trust." He stopped, listening to himself. "It's a sign of trust. He wanted Jack to trust him."

Gideon's frown increased, but it wasn't confused any longer. "You're not thinking..."

Hotch nodded grimly. "There's more to this than we thought. I can't believe we didn't consider this earlier."

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Harry was waiting for him in the conference room, sitting in the chair nearest to the door. His wand was sitting on the table beside him, and the chair was turned between the doorway and window so he could see when someone was about to enter. The tennis ball was on the table in front of him.

"You," Harry said as he walked in, "ditched me." He pushed his chair back, the movement emphasizing his words. "You ditched me so I couldn't give blood."

Hotch paused at the relative absurdity of the statement, then splayed his hands and opened his arms to include all of himself. Harry stood in response, even before he started his defense, but Hotch ignored the motion and said, "I essentially just came back to life and the first thing you-oof!" He closed his arms around his son, who'd just collided into him and was embracing him warmly.

He dipped his head down, lowering it to the height of his son, and realized with no little shock just how slight of an effort he had to make for that. It wasn't hard to recall hugging him for the first time just a few years ago, sitting on the floor with him and Jack after Hotch had just announced Harry was biologically his son. Harry had been so small beside him then, still aching and injured from what had been done to him and what hadn't been done for him. It had been so easy to wrap him up in his arms and say everything was going to be okay and truly believe it.

Now, the soft lines and sharp, starved edges had grown tougher and harder. The muscle that held Hotch to Harry was toned from the recovery potions he had received for his illness, and he felt as healthy as Hotch had ever seen him. The desperation Harry had once clung to Hotch with was gone, replaced by a much more confident acceptance and inner strength. No matter how much it hurt, the independence he'd had over the last couple of months had given him much he could have never achieved without the separation from his father's protection. Instead of hugging Hotch to claim him, to remind himself his paternal parent still cared, to force Hotch into a situation to return compassion, for the first time Harry was using it for the opposite reason.

He reached out to Hotch so he could express love in the only way he could do it when words failed him. He kept Hotch close so his father knew that, despite everything that had happened and all the pain that had been caused from Hotch's fatal move, he still cared about him just as much as he had when Hotch had first hugged Harry to show he cared.

Hotch relaxed, arms shifting to get a better hold on his oldest son. If everything went well, in just a couple of hours he could have his youngest with him too. "I missed you," he breathed.

"Missed you, too." After a moment, thoughts clearly in the same place as Hotch's, he reluctantly let go and stepped back. "Dad... There's something you should know, before we leave." Hotch tilted his head slightly to show he was listening.

Harry took a deep breath. "We're not quite sure yet, but we think... We think I'm a Light Lord."
TWO IMPORTANT QUESTIONS: PLEASE READ.

ONE: It's a long story and I don't want to give details because I can talk about it in general but I cannot talk about specifics, and I don't want to say just a few things without giving you the full picture, so instead of telling you anything I'm just going to admit to this – I will be almost completely unavailable for almost a year. This starts soon, which is why I was posting everything so quickly, to make sure that the whole story got up before I couldn't. I want to have time for you to read everything because I want to see your responses to the end and everything that happens until then! That being said...if I post THE REST OF THE CHAPTERS...do you solemnly swear to review as if I had been posting them one by one? (Yes, I know that a lot of people don't review each chapter when they read the whole thing in one go. That's why I'm asking.)

(By the way, the reason why I'll be unavailable is not because I'm getting imprisoned or anything crazy. It's actually a really awesome...career opportunity...for lack of a better term... I just can't legally talk about a huge section of it.)

TWO: I'm thinking about posting a story later on with clips of domestic life and other humorous pieces after the war, or bits we just didn't get to because the story never hit them. For instance, we're not going to touch on Doyle because there's no time and he doesn't fit in, and I've also got a series of almost-but-didn't-make-it scenes, like some of the original ways the story started and an alternate way it could have ended. Who would be interested? Some of this is already done so it could get posted right after the rest of the story, and the rest I could write when I have access to the internet again.
"Look straight at the people you kill. Don't take your eyes off them for a second. And don't ever forget them, because they won't ever forget you." - Hiromu Arakawa, *Fullmetal Alchemist*

At three in the morning, the three figures slipped into Malfoy Manor through one of the lower windows. It was far too easy, which was how Harry knew Malfoy must have told Riddle they were coming. There weren't even house elves cleaning, an obvious tip-off if Harry had been genuinely giving this his best effort.

The house was far more luscious than he remembered it being in the other world, filled with elaborate paintings and intricate wallpaper, but then, he'd be running through the other one much faster with rage for everything that had been taken from him. A lot had also been in wreckage at the time, thanks to his own efforts and others'. This was the first time for Hotch, though Blaise, the third person of their team who had firmly instated himself in this 'quiet' operation, had seen the manor in the same context Harry had.

Hotch moved ahead of them, footsteps silenced by Harry's muffling spell. He put one hand on the door, shifting closer to it and listening instinctively. After a moment, he grimaced and glanced back at the other two, then held up a hand with his fingers splayed and his thumb tucked in. Four outside, at least. They must have been loud for Hotch to hear them through the door.

Harry shook his head. Not this group - it was too easy for Riddle. Hotch put his hand on the doorknob and opened the door quickly, stepping back and out of the way so Harry could silently send stunning spells towards the pack in the hallway. He took two out immediately, exchanged fire with the other two for a moment, then knocked out the remaining pair one after another in the next couple of seconds.

Hotch and Blaise hurried out into the hallway and started moving the bodies out of the hallway. Harry grabbed one of the others, and by the time he looked back the fourth had been moved in after him. He cast a couple of spells over the group to keep them asleep, and then the three of them continued on.

Despite Harry's earlier protestations, Hotch was taking the front wherever they went. That had caused about ten minutes of arguing, but Hotch had managed to win after he pointed out Harry being knocked unconscious or otherwise disabled would ground the entire operation to a halt. If something happened to Hotch, they could come back for him, but if Harry was taken out Hotch wouldn't be able to apparate them all to safety. Blaise was obviously a factor, but the Slytherin was quick to admit that Blaise wasn't going to be able to protect the group like Harry was.

Hotch suddenly held up his hand to the pair behind him. There was a long stretch of an empty hallway ahead, empty except for paintings lining the walls and a couple of small chandeliers hanging from the ceiling. It was darker towards the end as the lamps dimmed, and there were a couple of doors until an intersecting hallway near the end but all of them were closed. Nothing obvious was stopping them, but Harry came to an abrupt halt anyway. There was nothing screaming danger to
Harry, but Hotch's body had gotten even tenser than it had been a couple of minutes before, and while Harry couldn't see his expression from where he was at, he could imagine it.

Hotch's head made a couple of small turns, looking for whatever had caught his attention. Harry took a small step forward, then turned around to watch the hallway behind them in case Hotch had heard an echo that had reverberated strangely. Behind them, there was no change to anything they had passed.

Which was a bit odd, now that he thought about it. The paintings should have been leaving to tell someone they were here. Harry seriously doubted anyone had gone around reassuring all the paintings that they weren't actually going to be invaded. Then why weren't...

His attention shifted to the paintings sharply. Many of them were trying to sleep, but the couple who were awake weren't watching Harry and the two with him. Instead, their gazes were on something straight ahead of them. The paintings he was glancing between were several rows apart from each other, though, so they weren't staring at the same thing. With a horrible feeling, he slowly glanced down at the rug. There were imprints of feet starting seven meters from him and running back as far as he could distinctly make out.

He subtly tightened the grip on his wand and edged backwards a step, putting him almost level with Blaise. "Well?" he murmured quietly, as if he hadn't noticed anything.

The lights went out.

Harry grabbed Blaise's arm and dragged him down with him, trusting Hotch had also dropped. Over their heads, spells shot past from both directions, forcing the Death Eaters on either side to duck under friendly fire. Hotch hadn't pulled out their guns to shoot either way. He'd avoided doing so before with the first four out of concern for leaving injured Death Eaters for a while, but now any bullets fired blindly could be deflected back at them or could kill without giving their opponent warning, which wasn't what they wanted.

Harry let the two sides take each other out for a little bit, then threw a shield spell up on his side and made his way closer to his father, touching both him and Blaise to move himself forward without running into them. With a hushed whisper, he sent a torrent of water down towards the Death Eaters closest to them, temporarily knocking them back.

"We can either move forward or I can drop the shield on the other end," Harry whispered into his father's ear.

"There's going to be an ambush around that corner," Hotch guessed, and though he couldn't see he could feel Hotch gesturing.

At least he didn't have to use Atlas, or it could have gotten seriously bloody. No one had seen him use it in so long they probably assumed he still couldn't, and there wasn't a reason they needed to prove them wrong. If Harry dropped the shield now, they might also think he wasn't as strong as he was. After all, none but a few knew about his ability to use more wandless magic now.

The shield came down. Hotch grabbed his wrist suddenly, squeezing reassuringly, and they heard the third member of their party suddenly shout in pain. A couple of red spells shot towards them. Harry felt his wand yanked away and Hotch's gun clattered to the ground a moment later, near the Death Eaters. As it did so, the abrupt drop caused it to fire, startling a couple of the Death Eaters.

The lights came back on. Blaise's wand had been dragged away at some point, leaving all three weaponless.
"You," Bellatrix Lestrange hissed at the front of the group.

"Lestrange."

"The you from the other world caused quite a fuss before I killed him."

"I know I did," Hotch snapped, "because you didn't kill me."

She narrowed her eyes at him.

"Now, now," Lucius Malfoy murmured as he stepped into view, and a surge of hatred equal to what Harry had felt when he saw Lestrange rose. "We need to take them straight to the Dark Lord without harm." His eyes flickered to Harry. "Did you really think you could corrupt my son in both worlds? Did you think he was so weak he'd fall both times?"

"I thought he was intelligent, actually," Harry replied coldly. "I thought he'd realize you wouldn't be there to catch him."

The Malfoy patriarch tightened his grip on his wand, forcibly keeping himself back from hexing Harry. "And what," he asked, turning to the last of them, "are you doing here?"

"Stick it up your arse."

Harry was definitely expecting one of them to get Crucio-ed before they got out of the hallway, but a third, aggravated figure pushed his way forward. Avery. "Come on, let's not keep him waiting," he snapped, and gestured sharply for the three of them to get off the floor.

They did so, with varying degrees of enthusiasm. Harry popped up, brushing off imaginary dirt from his jeans; Hotch rose more slowly, making eye contact with several Death Eaters who he knew would look away immediately; Blaise stood, putting his back to the main group to observe the wreckage Harry had wrought in the other direction with an amused grunt. The other group had been swept to the other end of the hallway, and some were still getting shakily to their feet.

"Move," Bellatrix snarled, gesturing sharply with her wand.

Despite himself, Harry still felt a tight coil of his nerves in his stomach as they started a few steps forward. There were so many ways this could go wrong, and because of his father's insistence to come along, he could lose more than just his own life here. Or, worse, he could make it out alone.

Before they could make it much further, Malfoy said, "Wait."

"What?" Bellatrix snapped.

"Expelliarmus!" Harry glanced back. Malfoy was pointing his wand at Hotch, then repeated the spell towards Blaise and Harry. "Ah, so no other weapons. How foolhardy; you should have come more prepared."

The room they walked into was what must have been the Malfoy dining room. It had been mostly stripped of any elaborations, giving a severe outlook to any who sat in it. There was a spot near the door that looked like a bloodstain, from someone who must have irritated Riddle or one of his higher-ups. Riddle rose from his place of honor at the head of the table when they entered, and a cold smile crossed his lips as he saw the trio who had entered.

Behind them, a couple hurried into the room, including some of the Death Eater leaders, while a few more stayed behind them to keep their wands trained at them, bringing the Death Eater total to seven.
The heavy doors shut, blocking everyone else out and giving them some privacy from the rest of Riddle's followers. "So arrogant," he murmured. "I confess, the purpose of one of you here alludes me."


"We're so getting tortured," Harry muttered to Hotch, realizing belatedly that their high sass level and low filter in the face of idiots made any other option all but impossible. "Two generations of Hotchners, then, and an outlier." Riddle's eyes flickered away from Blaise, back to the other two. Something about the movement caught Hotch's attention, but whatever it was didn't make itself known to Harry. "But not the whole family."

Harry smiled humorlessly. "I hope you didn't really think that we were going to give him back to you." Riddle twitched slightly, gaze shooting to him immediately and narrowing. "You are the only one I want, Harry."

"He's not the one you want at all, not right now," Hotch replied easily, and Riddle looked from Harry to him. "You had a taste of something else, and you want it back."

Riddle raised an amused eyebrow. "A sentimental idea."

They hadn't said anything about emotion yet. Whether he'd heard his own mistake or not, he gestured to the door with one hand, and a masked Death Eater from behind them moved to motion for them to start heading in that direction. "Let's see how many of your peers will come save you, shall we? One by one, we'll snatch them up like the flies they are. Thank you, for handing over your entire force to us. I'm sure we have a number of people who are eager to play with children again. You might have heard – dear Fenrir is ever so eager, particularly after he missed out last time."

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The room they were sequestered in was surprisingly comfortable for a prison cell, but it wasn't like the Malfoys had dungeons under their mansion. It seemed to be a spare bedroom, with expensive and decorative furniture but nothing that one would put in their own room to feel comfortable at night. There were two doors leading from the main room, one to a bathroom and the other to the hallway, but the latter was blocked and the former useless.

None of them had been restrained in any manner, since they had all been disarmed. Blaise was sitting on the plush bed, claiming it as if it were his own, while Hotch stood in the middle of the room with his arms crossed, which would have appeared awkward if it were anyone else but somehow worked with him. Harry leaned against the back of a sturdy chair, one leg bent over the other and forearms resting on the chair behind him. They'd been waiting for an hour at least, but nothing had happened so far. The room must have been soundproofed, because they couldn't even hear their guards outside.

"I was expecting more than that," Blaise said.

"There's going to be more," Hotch replied. "He's full of sound and fury. If nothing happens soon that he wanted, he'll bring us back up anyway to tell us something good did happen for him."

"Why keep us alive anyway?"
"He's been planning for this for years and we just walked right into his headquarters," Harry replied instead of Hotch. "Since he didn't get a battle, he's got to treasure this instead."

"So the next time we go back out there, what would piss him off the most?"

At least he wasn't even hiding it.

"Just be your natural, aggravating self," Harry suggested. When Hotch didn't say anything, to denounce the idea or add to it, Harry glanced at him curiously. "What?"

"Something's going on. He shouldn't be so obsessed with Jack," Hotch said bluntly.

"So...were you wrong about that, then?" Harry asked, bewildered.

"No. But there's something we don't know."

The door opened just as he started to turn away, and Lestrange smirked at all of them. She pointed her wand at Blaise. "You."

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"I confess," Riddle said in the dining room, which was empty except for the two of them, "I didn't expect you to be the third trespasser."

"I had nothing better to do."

Riddle smiled. It wasn't a good smile. "I have a proposal for you." Blaise, who had immediately taken one of the chairs upon entering, nodded to show he was listening. "If you tell me what the difference between the timelines is-"

"Agent Hotchner took the wrong bag home one day, and it contained the Invisibility Cloak, which gave his family magic to ensure its continued use. That's why Harry was born to the Hotchner family instead of the Potters."

Riddle paused for a moment. "Are you aware of what you have just told me?"

"Yes. You can use that, probably, to figure out how to manipulate both worlds to get more power." Riddle watched him carefully. "I do not care who wins. It just looked like the Hotchner's side stood a better chance of surviving when we were in the other world."

Riddle gave a slight, appreciating smile at the statement. "I cannot let you go immediately, not until this is over, but your usefulness will be rewarded. In the meantime... Are you aware of the method used to bring Aaron Hotchner back to life?"

"I've heard a little. It's something about the blood wards. Because of an odd series of circumstances, Hotch was able to use the blood wards connecting himself to Harry to pull himself back."

Riddle frowned at the information – understandably, since he could hardly use that method if something happened to him. "Very well. Why did you come along?"

"For this," Blaise said, gesturing between them. "Like I said – I was sticking with the side that stood the best chance of winning. The Hotchners aren't doing so well anymore, and Harry doesn't have long with the Light Curse."

"One last question. Where is Jack?"
Blaise paused, considering it. "I haven't seen him," he finally said. "No one's said specifically, but... Quantico, maybe? Hogwarts? I don't know. A lot of people were willing to take him in."

The answer displeased Riddle, but he didn't say anything. "Very well."

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"Where's he going?" Harry demanded as Blaise was led away by Avery behind Malfoy, who had opened the door.

Malfoy smirked. "He provided us with more information than we could have hoped for."

"You're a dick!" Harry shouted down the hallway as best as he could.

"Harry," Hotch admonished lightly.

"Your brother's rubbing off on me."

"If you're quite done," Malfoy sneered, then pointed at Hotch. "You will be coming with me."

"Cool, I'm last," Harry loudly whispered as he turned his back on Malfoy and walked towards his father to lean against the footboard of the bed. Hotch sighed ever so slightly at him, then followed Malfoy out.

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"Your student was an obvious liar," Riddle said immediately.

"He either told you what you wanted to hear or he told you the truth. We thought he was going to spill, but there wasn't a whole lot he knew that would help you so it didn't matter," Hotch replied calmly. Instead of sitting like Blaise had, he remained standing next to the table. Riddle was across the table from him.

"Does it hurt that one of your precious students attempted to sell out your family?"

"Considering his situation and everything he's been through? I was more surprised that no one had become a turncoat sooner."

Riddle smirked. "You don't need to assure me of anything."

"I'd rather you have more knowledge going into this than less," Hotch corrected. "Taking in children, even if they're not your own – or rather, especially if they're not your own – is quite a task." Riddle didn't say anything, just watching him. "And considering my chances of getting out of here are increasingly dropping, I'm willing to answer any questions you have about it."

Riddle slowly smiled. "You truly have exceeded my expectations. You and your son." Hotch tilted his head slightly. "How did you know?"

"Jack came back with something. You gave him your Horcrux. Harry's situation, with the Dursleys, reminded you so much of your own that you couldn't help but sympathize with him. Obviously, Harry's now too old and headstrong to ever be swayed by what you say, but Jack's made of the same material he is and he's young enough to listen. He's just what you need. Though...I don't understand why the thought ever crossed your mind to take on a protege."

"Your son is unbeatable in battle," Riddle said. "Twelve to one, on a remarkable occasion, he still won easily. Even from afar, he could direct battles, and he has excelled at maneuvering against me
even with little experience. He brought the sons of my trusted Death Eaters to his side with little trouble. All of it, your influence. There is something in your blood, Aaron—" he twitched ever so slightly at the familiar use of his name "—that just rings with power. Looking at your family now, I believe more than I ever did before—muggle though you may be, your strength of will combined with the magic one of the Deathly Hallows granted you has made your offspring powerful beyond compare."

That sounded accurate, and it definitely sounded like the sort of logic Riddle would use. But there was just something off that Hotch just wasn't satisfied with. "Why now? Why go after him now and not earlier?" Riddle's head tilted sharply. Hotch had struck a nerve. "You learned something, didn't you?"

"I made some decisions."

"Someone told you something, something about Jack."

"Not about Jack," Riddle corrected. "Not specifically."

"Then...what?"

"Balance, protection. I have learned that a war is never one leader against another. There are often multiple threats to contend with."

"You want someone to even the odds against us? He's too young to change the tide."

"Not in this war."

Before they had left Quantico, Harry had filled him in on everything he'd thought his father needed to be caught up on. That included the Light Curse—the utter piece of bullshit Hotch refused to take seriously—and the adapted alternate worlds' theory Dumbledore had. His mind drifted to the latter now, but he couldn't see how a young Jack would be more influential in another world even if that world was different.

Hotch kept his eyes carefully out of Riddle's gaze, but the dark wizard didn't try to correct that at any point, content to continue on. "Harry is yours. I admit I will never take him from you. No, I suspect the two of you will die together soon. Jack, though... He will be mine once you are no more. I must thank you for what you've done, curing him of his lycanthropy. Admirable. And so perfect for my needs, with the gifts given to him as a werewolf."

"Will you hurt him?" Hotch asked, quiet voice carrying through the room.

Riddle considered the statement. "I have not yet decided, though if I come to a conclusion before your death I will tell you."

After a moment, Hotch said, "Let me tell Harry."

Riddle's smirk returned. "When you return to the room?" Hotch frowned slightly at him. "You'll find Harry already gone. I am well aware you were not planning on letting him leave to be alone in my presence. You knew what would happen." Hotch grimaced, but Riddle continued. "No, while they wait for us to finish, Lucius and Bellatrix are having a nice chat with your son. I believe it is likely rather one-sided, since their choice words can be rather...painful."

"Haven't you tortured him enough?" Hotch snapped, anger finally piercing through.

"Dear Bellatrix believes she has been slighted by him more than enough time for this to be justifiable.
I did not have it in me to deny her this."

"What do you want from me?"

"I was under the impression you already knew."

"You want more power."

"I do. And I want your power."

"Then get a law degree."

Riddle gave him a patronizing smile. "A law degree has not kept you and your son from dying."

"I don't know why we're not dying," Hotch said tightly. "We certainly never tried to revive the other. So if you're trying to ask me how we managed it, there's no answer I can give you."

"In that case, you need to figure it out. I will certainly be killing both of you, but the longer you resist telling me, the longer your murderer will have to hurt your son." His smile widened. "You will be seeing the state he is in after only a couple of hours soon enough, so there is no need to worry about concerning yourself over him for now. For a while, I suspect this will merely be child's play for him, considering his profound ability to place himself in the hands of those who would be delighted to hurt him, but Bellatrix has a way of wearing people down."

Hotch kept quiet.

"Did you know Jack could hear Draco screaming, while the two of them were here? He begged me to make it stop, even agreed to stay with me so long as his savior could get out safely. Given more time, I'm sure I could have convinced him you two weren't ever coming back for him. Remarkable, how easily he could have come to believe that after everything he had gone through. Tell me, which of your sons do you think you've hurt more?"

"More than either of them, I've hurt you the worst," Hotch ground out, and Riddle's eyes narrowed in response. "Considering your background, even compared to Harry's, you must have been beaten down by your enemies and aggressors worse than anyone else has been in this war. I'm not surprised you're taking it out on my kids, and I'm not surprised you want to hurt me through them. But even if I don't live to see it, I'll be even less surprised to hear that you suffered even more because of what you've done."

"You are so confident that others will still support you," Riddle said.

"No. I think they're just tired of having people taken from them."

"They will come to see the wisdom of following me," Riddle said dismissively. "I would not expect you to understand that people are more concerned with their own self-preservation than the ideals of others."

"Just because all the children in your orphanage behaved that way doesn't mean the rest of the world is like that."

"Do not speak of that place," Riddle hissed.

"Why not? A lot of people know about it."

Riddle's wand came out, but Hotch barely glanced at it. The wizard shifted forward a step, glaring at
him as his eyes flashed. "Who did you tell?" His voice was barely above a whisper.

"We didn't go shouting about it, but we made no attempt to hide it once someone found out. I'd expect at least forty people know."

"Crucio!" Hotch turned to the side to move out of the way, and Riddle was too furious to follow it up with a second attempt. "Tell me who!"

"So you can kill them and keep it secret?" Hotch asked, body still partially turned away from Riddle. "No."

"Tell me."

"I suppose it also depends on what information you're trying to keep hidden. I believe some are aware of the orphanage but don't know you had a muggle father, or vice versa. Others know both." Riddle's grip on his wand tightened, a shake running down his arm with the effort of it. "There are also some who heard about the rather anticlimactic demise of your mother, but not many heard about that."

The wand aimed perfectly at Hotch, vibrating with the energy travelling through it and letting out a small, green glow at the end. After a tense minute, Riddle sharply brought his wand down. "Let's go see young Harry," he snarled, throwing the doors behind Hotch open with a wave of his wand.

"Afraid an Unforgivable won't work on me?"

"I can't think of a worse way to torture you than to do this," Riddle replied with a cruel grin. "Of all the people you've ever fought against and made enemies of, I am not your worst fear. You've only encountered me a couple of times. There are two you've hated longer than me, Isn't there? The Woodsmarked Killer and Fenrir Greyback." Hotch's frown intensified.

"Congratulations – you'll soon have the opportunity to tell Fenrir how much you missed him. More importantly, Fenrir will have a similar opportunity with your son. Fenrir told me he's been ever so eager to have a talk with him."

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The moment the Cruciatus was lifted from him, Harry staggered back and threw one hand against the wall behind him, using it to stay standing. He was going to be forced to the ground sooner rather than later, his trembling legs already threatening to give out, but that wasn't going to stop him from standing as long as he could. He panted, trying to get his breath back, as the door to the lounge room he'd been brought to by Malfoy and Lestrange closed behind their visitors.

Hotch and Riddle had entered, both standing with several meters between them, though it was impossible to tell who had put the distance there and if it was out of hatred or for personal safety. Hotch's expression was tense, as emotionless as he could get it but still with flickers of concern flashing through as he took in Harry's ragged appearance. Harry avoided making eye contact, already well aware as to how badly his father must have regretted ever agreeing to this stupid idea, but as he turned his head away, he caught sight of someone else.

"Well," he panted, "I was expecting to see you sooner."

"Ooh, are we taking turns?" Lestrange asked, grinning at Greyback.
"Not for much longer." Greyback sauntered past Hotch and Riddle until he was standing in front of Harry. Behind him, almost unconsciously, Hotch had taken a step forward, gaze sharp on Greyback. "Without an army, without a wand, without anyone else, you're not a threat. And if you're not a threat, you're useless."

"The names?" Riddle asked calmly by Hotch, without even glancing at him.

"You're going to kill all of our closest allies whether he tells you specific names or not," Harry interjected before Hotch could say anything. "It's a bit pointless for him to tell you anything now."

"He didn't ask for your opinion on the matter," Lestrange snapped. "Stay silent!"

"I'm not going to take suggestions from the bitches following their master, thanks," Harry said.

The end of his last word was cut off as Greyback's palm slammed into his throat, forcing him back against the wall with a growl. His claws scraped against the back of his neck and his muscle fingers tightened over his skin, cutting off some of his air flow.

"Harry," Hotch said warningly.

"It would seem he has inherited your tact for saying the wrong thing at the wrong time," Riddle murmured. "One more trait he has to thank you for. You have no names for me?"

There was a long silence. Harry spent it glaring at Greyback, who snarled back at him, but Hotch was just watching his son. "You'll kill everyone no matter what I say," Hotch finally said.

"Starting with your son. I rather thought you would have chosen to quicken his end, but I suppose you have more important concerns to worry about. Fenrir, he's had years now to wonder what would have happened if his dear father had not been so quick to rescue him from my return." Greyback started to grin before Riddle even finished. "Show him what would have happened, and he can tell his absent mother all about it when he meets her on the other side."

"Harry," Hotch said quickly. Harry smiled tiredly, shaking his head slightly at him to try to stop him from saying anything. Greyback started slowly squeezing and releasing Harry's neck in a taunt, while Harry kept his eyes fixed on his father. "I'm sorry."

"It's all right," Harry replied just as rapidly, and then again, "It's all right."

"I love you."

Greyback sneered. "Touching-"

Riddle suddenly dropped his head into his hands, hissing in a sharp breath. His two Death Eaters and Greyback turned to look at him abruptly, bewildered, as his hands slid to the sides of his head like he was trying to stop his skull from exploding. An enraged shout issued from him, and his arms started to shake with fury.

Hotch lunged forward, crossing the distance to his son quickly. Malfoy and Lestrange both cried out in frustration at the move and directed their wands to him, even though there was little harm he posed to any of them without a weapon. A spell shot over his shoulder and he ducked lower, slipping behind Greyback as the werewolf started to turn to him. Just as Greyback raised one claw to swipe at him, a curse from Lestrange intended for Hotch hit him in the back and he staggered slightly, his lycanthropy preventing the curse from taking effect but still catching him off guard.

Hotch dropped to one knee, completely covering himself from fire by putting Greyback between him
and the Death Eaters. Greyback was still struggling to recover from the curse, muscles twitching and teeth grinding together as he growled. Behind him, Riddle was just raising his head, wand swiping through the air as he vented his anger. "What a foolish family you've raised," Riddle began, stalking forward a step as Hotch's hand moved to his ankle, "to think that a demonstration of love--"

Hotch yanked the holly wand from the strap on his leg and tossed it to Harry, who immediately slashed it at Riddle. "Stupefy!"

Though startled, experience forced Riddle to put up a shield just in time. Next to the Hotchners, Greyback blinked in surprise as he began to return to his senses. Hotch grabbed his gun from the holster on Harry's calf.

"Expelliarmus!" Harry shouted. At the same time, Hotch turned sharply and shot Fenrir Greyback in the chest. The werewolf stumbled, then snarled and pushed forward.

Hotch rose to his feet and stepped back to get out of the way of Harry's and Riddle's duel, then fired twice more. Greyback's progression forward faltered, but he wasn't down yet. Beside Hotch, Harry sent a bright array of sparkling colors to Riddle, distracting him for a moment and inadvertently blinding Greyback as well as the colors passed right in front of his face. Hotch took the chance and fired one more shot, aiming above Greyback's torso this time.

The werewolf crumpled, and a green spell from Lestrange shot through the space that had just been occupied and towards Hotch.

This time, the agent ducked, but he was up again a moment later to shoot another round at Lestrange. She glared at him. "Is your family incapable of dying?" she shouted at him.

"No," he said firmly, pointing at Malfoy before the patriarch could send a spell at him. The man paused reflexively, and Hotch sent a shot at Lestrange to force her to keep up her shield. "Malfoy, we need to talk about your son."

"Draco's a blood traitor," Lestrange hissed beside her fellow Death Eater. Spells were still whizzing back and forth between Riddle and Harry in front of Hotch, who was slowly moving backwards as the spells started to get wilder. "Leave him out of your thoughts!"

"Malfoy, she doesn't have kids. How could she possibly understand what it's like to have a son? And forget about having a son for a moment – how could she understand giving up everything to protect someone else? That's what this is about, isn't it? That's why you and your wife agreed to be Death Eaters, to protect Draco." Malfoy lowered his wand infinitesimally.

A sudden torrent of fire exploded between the two duelists, and while Hotch couldn't tell who started it, he took the chance to reload, dropping the empty clip on the ground beside him. The fire slowly trickled out and he glanced at Harry, whose wand arm held firm without trembling against the onslaught. His son's face was plastered with concentration, completely ignoring the fight between his father and the Death Eaters, entrusting Hotch to keep him safe on his exposed side just as Hotch was keeping faith that he wouldn't suddenly be swiped by Riddle.

The fire vanished suddenly and Hotch fired at Lestrange before she could finish uttering a spell. She stumbled backward with a shout and a flash of light, her shield coming up too late to stop a bullet from piercing through. She doubled over, dark curls of hair falling over her face as she clutched at her injury. The opportunity to finish her off sat there, but he couldn't just shoot her while he was trying to convince Malfoy to switch sides for moral reasons.

"Your wife managed to restart a relationship with your son," he continued. "He's smart. If you talk to
him, he'll understand why you did what you did. He had to make hard choices too, and he knows you didn't have all the options he had."

"Is it true he's been staying with muggles this whole time?" Malfoy demanded. His grip on his wand was still firm, ready to fire.

"Ask him that," Hotch said, practically shouting to be heard over Riddle and Harry. "But whether that's true or not, I do know he misses having the people from his childhood around him. After everything that's happened, he needs a reminder that there are still some good things in the bad events around him."

Malfoy hesitated, but Hotch never got the chance to find out if he'd persuaded him in that moment.

"Bombarda maxima!" Lestrange screamed at the same time Riddle shot a spell at Harry. The young wizard caught both in a slanted shield, trying to protect both of them, but his aim was off and it sent the spells careening towards the ceiling.

Hotch threw himself at Harry and tackled him under a table just as everything came crashing down, ceiling and furniture from at least two or three levels above them collapsing onto their level. The table shook with the weight in the first few seconds and Hotch put himself more securely over Harry, grabbing Harry's head with one hand and bringing it closer to his chest while his other arm swiped Harry's in under Hotch. His legs pulled Harry's as far up as he could manage to get them completely under the table and Hotch, but his longer legs still stuck out and within seconds he felt something collide with them.

Harry was shouting something at him, incomprehensible over the sounds of everything going to hell. Despite his attempt to keep Harry from doing anything rash by remaining calm, he couldn't suppress the pained noise that escaped him as his feet and calves were rapidly buried under pounds upon pounds of house material. Harry grabbed at his arm and reached past him, ignoring Hotch's attempts to try to stop him and planting his palm flat on the table above them. The groaning noises of the wood stopped immediately, but rubble was starting to push in from the exposed sides around them. Harry flung out his other arm, stopping the press from one side, and dropped his hand from the table to stop the flow at the other two sides.

Finally, everything started to get quiet as the last of the devastation settled into place.

"Are you okay?" Hotch whispered, then coughed as he sucked in dust.

"Better than you, it looks like," Harry responded. His shields were holding. He shifted, trying to see past Hotch's bicep to his legs. "How trapped are you?"

"I think I broke something," Hotch admitted through gritted teeth.

"I'd be shocked if you hadn't. Some Ravenclaw you are, pulling a Gryffindor move like that."

"You're rubbing off on me."

"I don't think that's a good thing in this case..." Harry tried to shuffle out from underneath him and Hotch let him. "Did you see what happened to the others?"

"I was too busy acting like a Gryffindor." He hissed in pain as Harry accidentally forced him to shift and jostle his legs.

"Sorry."
"Just move quickly."

"You're not going to be able to walk," Harry said, worried.

Hotch grimaced and said, "That's why we brought three people, isn't it?" He nodded at the wand. "How's that working?"

"Can hardly tell a difference from my own wand. If I hadn't known this were my doppelganger's, might not have noticed at all." He finally got into a position to see the situation of Hotch's feet. "Ah. Okay, I've got an idea that you're not going to like."

Hotch sighed, a combination of exasperation, resignation, and frustration. "I'm entirely unsurprised."

"I think I'm going to have to blow up the floor underneath us."

If they tried to go up, more could fall on them as they tried to burrow their way out, and if they went through one of the sides, Harry might tire his magical core pushing through and protecting their heads at the same time. Even if they made it out, they might not be in a state to fight if someone was alive on the other end.

Harry muttered a couple of spells at the table, forcing it to stay where it was so it wouldn't just fall on top of them when he tried to drop them to the bottom level. That done, he turned his wand towards Hotch's legs. "The second I do this, you've got to pull your feet in," he warned, and Hotch nodded, and Harry cast the vanishing spell. The rubble directly over Hotch's trapped appendages disappeared and he yanked his legs under the table before they were trapped again as more rubble came down.

Harry eyed the blood on his shoes and calves. "Why can't we get moderately injured? Why is it always horrible and gruesome?"

"At least we don't die normally either," Hotch said. "The floor?"

"Right."

Hotch shifted to one side of their small area and Harry to the other, and then Harry vanished the portion of the floor between them. Below them, there was another living room area. Harry aimed his wand at the couch and made it larger and softer in preparation for them landing on it. Before protest could be made, Hotch forcibly dragged Harry closer and pushed him through the hole. There was an undignified yelp, and then Harry fell ungracefully onto the fluffy couch.

Once he moved out of the way, Hotch dropped through after him, landing rather painfully as his injuries were jostled. Harry put the couch back to normal before the spells wore off and reached for Hotch's legs, but Hotch gently pushed him back.

"Nagini must be dead from how Riddle reacted," Hotch said. "Find Blaise."

"So you can go find Riddle?" Harry countered and Hotch narrowed his eyes at him. "I don't think so. We're doing this together."

"No, so we've got everyone together if we need to leave quickly," Hotch corrected. "Go get him."

"If it were just about anyone else, I'd be worried enough to go get him. But it's Blaise, and he's got Blue. He'll be fine for now."

He gave a muffled sigh. "Okay, you're going to have to help me up." Harry got one of his arms over his shoulder, and Hotch staggered slightly as he put weight on his feet. After a moment, he nodded
despite Harry's worried expression. "This'll work. Can you use a patronus to find him?"

Before Harry could respond, there was a strange, startled scream from somewhere on the same level as them.

"I'm not sure I want to even know what that is-" Harry started, and then there was a rabid shout followed by a series of startled shrieks that all came hurrying towards the room they were hiding in. Both pulled out their weapons and prepared for an intrusion, but the group continue running past.

"That first voice sounded an awful lot like Blaise," Harry said.

Between the two of them, they managed to get to the door so Harry could open it up and peek outside. A trail of blood on the lushly carpeted floor ran past them to the other end, where a figure was standing with his hands triumphantly planted on his hips while he watched something in front of him.

"What the hell did you do?" Harry asked, bewildered, and Blaise turned to them.

"Took a page from Hotch's book," he calmly replied, walking towards them. As he came closer, they saw blood on his shoulder from a tear in the fabric. "Apparently the whole 'zombie-poltergeist' thing even terrifies Death Eaters." He glanced over the pair's disheveled state. "What happened to you two?"

"I might've dropped a couple of floors on us," Harry admitted. "We think Greyback's dead, Malfoy might be less eager to take us down, Lestrange is injured, and Riddle is more pissed off. You?"

"Killed the stupid snake." There was no elaboration.

"How'd you get away from the guards?" After a pause, Harry added, "Actually, I don't want to know."

Blaise held up the basilisk fang Harry had grabbed from this world's Hogwarts. His other arm, the one with the torn fabric, was still at his side. "What all does this kill?"

"Can you wait until we're out of here to act like a psychopath?" Harry asked politely.

Blaise smiled briefly at him. "I was just curious in case we come across anything else strange." His eyes flickered over Hotch, who was still leaning against Harry, landing on his feet. "When you two get injured, you really get injured. You're not going to be able to go far on that."

Harry shot him a look then looked to his father for an idea, but did a double take when he saw Hotch grimacing in agreement. "Hey, we can't just leave you!"

"There's not another option, not like this," Hotch pointed out. "At worst, I'll slow you down, and you don't have time to stop and heal me."

"But-"

"We can come back for him later," Blaise interrupted quietly, reluctantly. "But none of us are going to make it out if we don't do something about Riddle."

Gesturing awkwardly with one hand to his father, Harry demanded, "Everyone wants to kill him even more than they want to kill me and you think we should just leave him somewhere?"

"Harry, it'll be fine. No one's going to be looking for me down here."
"I'm not leaving you, not after what happened the last time I left because I thought you were just injured," Harry snapped aggressively and Hotch hesitated. Blaise winced and turned away. "We practically won the war last time, and it almost wasn't worth it for me, not after everything I had to lose for that victory."

There was a long silence, and then Blaise said, "We need to pull out, then. We can't attack anyone while we're trying to protect someone else."

"You're injured, aren't you?" Hotch asked the Slytherin. "Your shoulder."

"Yes. The snake got me. I couldn't get close enough to stab it any other way."

"He needs to get treatment now," Harry said quickly. "When Arthur Weasley was bitten, they had to dump him with blood-replenishing potions for weeks to deal with the poison."

"That leaves you as the only one who can continue," Hotch summarized, "and that's not a good plan. We got in this time and got this far. We can take Riddle out another time, but we've already made significant progress today."

"Or we could finish it now...and risk losing both of you."

"Could you use the stasis spell?" Hotch asked.

"It doesn't really work well on magical injuries, especially dark magic. I can slow down your blood loss but it won't be permanent. And if you're walking around, you'll wear off the stasis charms in a couple of seconds. We should have brought potions for blood replenishing just to be safe."

"We agreed they would have taken those from us," Hotch said.

"Wait, this is a war headquarters," Harry said suddenly. "They've got to have injury treatment somewhere around here."

"But where?"

Harry paused, thinking back to his raid on Malfoy Manor in his normal world. "If I remember correctly... It's on the first floor, back by the kitchens. That was where they stored everything."

"Harry, how long does he have?" Hotch asked, nodding towards Blaise, who had just been quietly watching their dialogue for now.

"Maybe a half hour, tops," he said, glancing at Blaise with a pained expression. "After that, he's going to need a blood transfusion and he'll probably be unconscious." Harry grimaced, thoughts whirling for a moment, but he shoved it all aside. "Okay, if we stay, the best option is for the two of you to wait here while I go get treatment for both of you and bring it back. I can move faster on my own and cast a disillusionment charm over myself. Every blood replenishing potion I get buys him another half hour, and we can probably treat your feet well enough they won't be a problem."

Hotch picked up where Harry left off. "Riddle's followers are going to be on the lookout for us now and we've lost our element of surprise. Riddle will stick with others so we can't catch him alone, but I don't know how many he'll gather. Lestrange, if she survived, might take her own group to come track us down. The longer we wait, the more chance we give for them to get at us, and they'll be expecting us to be in here. If we want to leave, we can slip out with relative ease and come back another time, maybe even with more people."

"So..." Blaise said.
"If we stay, he could die from blood loss, you could die trying to protect the two of us, and I could
die once you're both down," Hotch summarized. "But, on the other hand, we could also finish this
war and stop anyone else from dying."

"Either all three of us die or we all survive," Harry agreed.

Blaise checked his watch. "The QDA should have started skirmishing the perimeter ten minutes ago.
We can't draw them from there, not while they're keeping most of the Death Eaters preoccupied. So
if we leave, we'd have a massive pull out to perform at this point."

"Let's join the skirmishers and get a look at what they're doing," Hotch said. "If we can take the
Manor without loss of life, we should try it and take Riddle down that way. If not, we try again
another day. What are you thinking?"

"We should stay. The last time we tried to take the Manor like that, Riddle and others slipped away
and we had to do this all over again. It was an utter pain in the ass and now we have to take our
home territory back."

Blaise looked back and forth between the two as they traded ideas, used to the rapid situational
evaluation by now but still entertained by it.

"Compromise. If we can't accomplish certain goals within a particular time frame or under specific
conditions, we pull back."

"Okay. I need to make it here and back with the treatment in under twenty minutes. That should give
me enough time."

"You can't get injured." At Harry's frown, he elaborated, "You're the only one not injured, so we're
relying on you to get us out if something goes very wrong."

"All right. If the skirmishers start having problems, we get out then too. Or if you two are injured
further."

"If we see something abnormal and it looks like Riddle's planning something we don't know about,
or anything else suddenly turns against our favor."

Harry nodded in agreement. "Deal. Can you two get back on your own?"

Hotch glanced at Blaise, who was still watching the go-between. "We can get along for that ten
second walk. Be careful."

"Never," Harry cheerfully replied, causing his father to roll his eyes, and then he cast a
disillusionment charm over himself and left the pair to go in search of the potion storage room.

"Did you figure out what Riddle's up to?" Blaise asked as they started back the way they had come
to the room the Hotchners had dropped into.

"I confirmed something, but I've got more questions now too."

Blaise eyed him warily. "It would be too much to hope that they're the good sort of questions,
wouldn't it?"

Hotch nodded with a heavy frown. "Riddle has a very linear mind. He doesn't diverge from his path
once he chooses it. He obsesses and he's detail-oriented. Not only that, he fantasizes, and anything to
interrupt that fantasy would disrupt the whole scene."
"So?"

"So why focus on his plan of controlling his own world for so long, and then suddenly add multiple worlds and Jack into his fantasy at the same time?"

"Well... You said he was after power."

"Power's the only reason he does anything, but he would have secured his world before moving on. He would have taken it, realized he wanted to repeat the experience of a conqueror, and then crossed through the Veil. He wouldn't work on two worlds at the same time. He couldn't properly enjoy claiming one if he was still trying to take the other."

Now Blaise looked as disconcerted as Hotch looked frustrated. "What do you think all of that means, then?"

"Something made him change. And whatever that is... I don't think we're going to like it when we find out about it."

Chapter End Notes

In case you didn't catch it, the reason why Hotch and Harry weren't totally disarmed when Malfoy cast Expelliarmus was because Hotch had the other holly wand and Harry had Hotch's second gun (the one Blackwolf mentions in canon), but since neither of them could use those weapons the Disarming Spell didn't work because they were already disarmed. However, later, they could pass the weapons to each other, which was the plan.

This is not the complete mass post. I'm just trying to distract myself from the horse race journalism as the presidential election votes are coming in.
"I am pleading for the future; I am pleading for a time when hatred and cruelty will not control the hearts of men. When we can learn by reason and judgment and understanding and faith that all life is worth saving, and that mercy is the highest attribute of man." - Clarence Darrow in The State of Illinois v. Nathan Leopold & Richard Loeb

There was no one where Harry had left his family and friend, in the hallway or in the room he and Hotch had fallen into to escape the collapsing room. He kept the disillusionment charm up, concern turning into fear the longer he went without seeing either of them. After another minute of searching, he returned to exact spot he'd departed from and found Blaise's blood trail. It led him nowhere, with not enough blood drops to show him a certain direction to take.

Finally, he cast the Person Revealing charm. There were seven people in the near area, none of whom he could see. Harry closed his eyes in frustration. Of course.

He knocked the first three out quickly, but the fourth and fifth had seen their fellow Death Eaters go down and were keeping an eye out. The sixth aimed his or her wand in the direction Harry's spell came from and he had to drop quickly to dodge it. The seventh followed suit, both firing his way, and he cast an obvious shield spell. After a moment, without moving, he shifted the spell slowly to his right, and their aiming followed it even after it was no longer covering his hidden self. Finally, he let it fall and he sent a rapid *stupefy* towards the sixth and an *expelliarmus* towards the seventh.

He closed the distance quickly, casting a charm to take off the disillusionment and reaching up to snatch the mask off Narcissa Malfoy's face. She stared at him calmly, neither resisting nor giving in, and he handed the mask back to her.

"What happened?" he asked after casting a silencing charm around the two of them. If she was here, she must be the one from this world.

"You told Draco to tell the Dark Lord you would be coming, didn't you?"

"I did."

She nodded slowly. "As far as I can tell, the Dark Lord has not discovered your deception."

"I understand if you can't be seen openly rebelling. Just tell me what happened."

"Amycus Carrow got behind them when they weren't looking. He overheard you say you were going to get medical treatment for them, but the response was too slow and you had already started back here by the time anyone arrived to head you off. Your father and Zabini were taken to the Dark Lord."

Harry grimaced to himself. Blaise was running out of time with Nagini's venom, and he doubted anyone would get him help even if they knew he was being slowly poisoned. "Where are they now?"
"At the dining hall."

That was way too easy.

"Who told you all this?" Harry asked.

"Amycus."

The Carrows were smart enough to come up with a ploy like this, if that's what it was. He could easily be walking into a trap, especially if only seven people had been left to capture him. The part of Riddle that had already fought Harry would have thought it a better idea to send more, just in case, and he would know the BAU's record with getting answers out of others would almost certainly ensure that Harry would discover what had happened.

"Anything else you think I should know?"

"The lines are stable outside the Manor. There has been little change since they started, but they're diverting some Death Eaters from inside the castle." She paused. "Your students are holding rather well."

He smiled ever so slightly. "I would expect nothing less."

"That's all I believe you will find useful."

"Is there a place besides the dining hall that Riddle usually frequented?"

"A study upstairs..."

Probably the place that Jack had been taken to, from how it had been described.

"Where?"

"Third floor, at the end of the hall on the right if you take the main staircase."

He nodded. "Do you want me to risk trying to obliviate you, just in case? I'll warn you that it'd be my first time doing it."

She hesitated, then acquiesced. "It would be better than the alternative."

"Stupefy!" He caught her before she hit the ground, then set to work trying to wipe her memory of the last couple of minutes. It was a bad idea to do a rush job his first time, but he just didn't have the option to take any longer. When he was sure he had managed it without causing damage, he started towards the main staircase, increasing the disillusionment charm on himself.

Anyone who ran past him completely missed seeing him, and he hurried as quickly as he could to get to the study without running into anyone, which would catch attention even with the charm. The Death Eaters left in the building were starting to head out, increasing the defensive line, but there were still plenty who were remaining. Harry wondered if that was just for the three intruders or if Riddle thought someone else had gotten in too.

Either way, by the time he got up to the top of the staircase, he knew he was looking at the last couple of minutes before they'd decided that Blaise needed to take a blood replenishing potion. He could go longer, but he'd surely be unconscious and they wouldn't be leaving a huge buffer period between keeping him alive and risking his life. The Death Eaters might also be keeping a bigger lookout for them leaving since they knew how badly injured Hotch and Blaise were, which could
delay their exit even longer.

The study door had a faint glow under it from a fire, and Harry put his hand a few inches from the door to feel for any magical wards. There was nothing, but that didn't mean someone wasn't watching the door. Without another option, he threw the door open, slipping to the side in case someone fired a spell his way. No such thing happened, leaving Harry staring at an empty half of the room without anyone inside. A couple of plush couches and sofas were waiting inside, unoccupied. The light was coming from a fire directly across from Harry in the middle of the room.

He stepped cautiously inside, pushing the door open further and keeping his wand up at the ready. As he walked in, just as he was starting to doubt himself, he saw Riddle standing by a desk covered in parchment, waiting in the portion of the room that the door had blocked from Harry's view. He waited until Harry had completely entered, wand drawn at his side but not raised to cast a spell.

"You figured it out rather quickly."

"I live with an analyst." His gaze flickered briefly around Riddle. "They really are down in the dining hall then, aren't they?"

"I wanted to talk to you alone, after speaking with your family." He glided closer a couple of steps, eyeing Harry curiously. "Of all of you, it is ironic that you, my greatest foe, are the one I speak with last."

Harry stayed where he was. "You know Blaise has been badly injured."

"As is your father, though Blaise much more so. Both have been treated." Harry's eyes narrowed in suspicion. "I have no need for either of them to die just yet. I admit to knowing little of Blaise's...situation, but I do hope your father will survive for a while longer."

"You want us to see you win."

A cold smile crossed Riddle's face. "I had hoped in the beginning that I could turn you from the light, but in recent years, you have grown to be much more like your father, and I suspect that option to no longer be possible."

"You'd be right. I don't think you're going to be able to take my brother, either, no matter how hard you try, even if you do kill my father and me."

"Unfortunately, you will not be around to try to stop me." Another step forward. "I have a further admittance to make. When this all began, I thought Dumbledore would be my greatest obstacle to overcome. I would never have guessed you and your muggle father's alliance would instead cause me such pain."

"Alliance? You make it sound like we're only bound by treaty."

"Ah, but you're not bound by family ties. The two of you could only lay claims to each other in recent years. He can hardly call himself your father."

"He can. Just because I didn't know him doesn't mean he wasn't ever involved in my life. Their protection has been over me since I was very young, because of the situation I was in." When Riddle tilted his head to the side, Harry paused. "I thought you knew."

"I am unaware as to what you alluding to."

"Before I met my father, I lived with the Dursleys. No one explained what really happened, so they
blamed Lily Potter's death on me and tried to take revenge. I needed the blood wards to stay alive at certain points." After a pause, he said, "If I hadn't seen my alternate self, I would have believed I would have turned out to be like you if not for my father's intervention."

Riddle smirked. "A bit fortunate, isn't it? That your blood wards happened to be so strong by fluke. Rather...coincidental." Harry watched him as he twirled his wand in his hand. "Almost like someone set it up."

"If you're going to imply anyone had something to do with this, you better not accuse my father. People don't go apeshit like that on child abusers if they knew about it beforehand."

"Not your father, but another you trusted."

"Dumbledore? Shit, man, he's sketchy as hell. I haven't trusted him since I met my father."

That made Riddle pause.

"I don't think you're right, but I'll look into it later, just in case. But we're not standing here to talk about Dumbledore, so what do you really want?"

Riddle slowly paced closer towards him. "Your power, Harry. I want you to give it to me."

"In exchange for what? You'll never let us go."

"I'll kill you and your family faster. You won't suffer."

"You still want to take my brother, don't you?"

Riddle was unsurprised at the mention of Jack. "I thought your father had told you... Yes, I will take him. I should have had him months ago, but Greyback was too eager for revenge. You should have treated the werewolf better – he gave you more time with your brother."

Harry froze. "Greyback... He was supposed to take Jack, that night he got to the Order headquarters. That's why he didn't hurt Jack, when in any other situation Jack would have already been dead." He shook his head slightly, a trace of horror slipping into his tone. "You planned this since before then. This whole time..."

"Your family is of exceptional interest to me, Harry. Every last one of you. Even your brother, despite his age."

"You think that because of the prophecy... But that's not possible. The prophecy never came true."

"Did it not? You were born in the seventh month, Harry, and the events that have followed have forced you to consider forgiving your family for all the wrongs they performed against you. Abandonment, fear, distrust, neglect..."

"That never happened," Harry snarled.

"Did your remaining family never hate you for causing the death of your father? Did they never turn their backs on you, at least for a moment, and try to force you away?" He sneered. "Be honest with yourself, Harry. Were you just too blind in your grief to notice their anger towards you?"

Oh, he'd noticed. He had just tried to pretend he hadn't.

"This was always fated to happen, Harry. But what you don't know is that this story goes on beyond this world."
"I know there are more," Harry said sharply.

Riddle smiled, and he seemed genuinely pleased. "Good. Perhaps we will have some competition in the rest of the worlds, though the events you will never live to see are the most important of all."

Keeping his voice steady and his expression firm, he demanded, "What events?"

"The ones regarding your brother, of course. The events that will transform him into what he will become." He put his palm in the air, facing Harry, and a swirl of dark magic, purposeless but visible, curled into existence between them. "Like clockwork, magic brings the world two beings every generation – a Dark Lord and a Light. Surely you must know by now that you are the Light."

Harry nodded sharply.

"I am old, Harry; old enough that my designated reign as the sole Dark Lord will soon come to pass. But with my claims to immortality... I will be the first with the potential to rule over my succeeding Dark Lords, to control them and shape them as I will. To fulfill this, I intend to control not only how my successors behave, but also who they are."

Harry shook his head slowly, eyes never leaving Riddle's face. "You're not hurting anyone else from my family. You definitely aren't hurting him, just to force his magic to become desperate enough to survive that it turns him into a Dark Lord. And if you think killing us is going to stop us from doing whatever's necessary to protect Jack, then you don't know a thing about us."

Riddle came to a halt directly in front of him, a small smile on his lips. "Ah, but that's the beauty of it, Harry." The quiet voice, so confident and sure, was starting to unsettle him. "I won't lay a hand on your brother. Everything that comes about... It'll be of your own making. All of this, Harry, just because of you. All the agony your family has endured, what it will endure... You, Harry. I had to do so little to bring it about that I can hardly take credit."

Harry started shaking his head, still standing strong against Riddle, but Riddle laughed at the gesture.

"Oh, Harry," he whispered. "You've already seen your father die for you. It was quick and painless. Bellatrix would love to drag it out if she gets a chance to try again." The hand not holding a wand drifted upwards, but Harry kept his gaze focused on Riddle. "And if either of you come back once more, after you die... Then you'll endure the same torture again. Is that kind of eternity, an endless cycle of pain, what you really want for your father? Is that the result you want after all the agony you've already been through because of the power you hold, but are too inexperienced to control?"

With a smirk as Harry felt a faint tremble starting to build within him, Riddle added, "It's the choice you'll pick, though, won't you? Your pride won't let you choose any other option, not after you've made it this far. You think you can still win against me, foolish boy. The war is over, no matter how many times you've tried to stop me, no matter how close you think you have come to halting my advances through any means possible. Even through the resources of the tainted magic of muggles."

His fingers brushed aside the fringes of Harry's hair, touching the lightning bolt scar.

Harry grabbed the hand, twisted it to put the wrist at a ninety degree angle with the palm facing Riddle and the forearm parallel to the ground, then turned his body sharply to the side. Riddle's stunned face crossed his gaze for a split second before the motion forced him to the ground, sprawling onto his back in a mess of robes.
Riddle yanked his hand back before Harry could stop him, and his wand was drawn and aimed at Harry when he rose to his feet. Harry's arm was already raised, directing his own wand at his opponent.

"Sorry," Harry spat out, "but I've decided to make it a rule not to let strangers touch me. And you're pretty strange, Riddle."

"Hotchner." His surname was practically hissed at him, though none of the syllables lent themselves to hissing. "Would you agree to revoke your earlier statement in the graveyard?"

"I would love nothing more than to duel you."

"Avada Kedavra!"

"Expelliarmus!"

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His feet had healed surprisingly quickly once they'd been seen to. He didn't know how bad the damage had been and the Death Eater who had treated them hadn't said, but he was sure that he would have been laid up in a hospital for weeks if he had only been able to rely on nonmagical care. It wasn't that much of a relief, since his gun and Blaise's basilisk fang had been taken. The pair had gotten a much more thorough pat down this time around, considering all three of them had managed to carry weapons away from the last disarming.

After the two had been rather awkwardly treated, Blaise took one of the dining hall chairs to perch on and Hotch stood with his arms crossed behind the next chair. His feet were giving him none of the pain he had felt just twenty minutes ago when the treatment had started, thanks to magical medicine. With nothing else to do, he focused on the Death Eater nearest to him, staring until he managed to make the figure shuffle away uncomfortably. He was about to start on the next one, but found he was already being watched.

"You know Spencer Reid, right?" the voice behind the mask asked. A couple of her nearby companions glanced at her in surprise at the sudden question.

"Reid? What's he got to do with this?" one of the others asked, taking Hotch off guard.

"I know him rather well," Hotch replied. "How do you know him?"

"During one of the sieges of Hogwarts we all got stuck in one of the lower level classrooms," the first voice said. She must have been one of the Death Eaters who had crossed worlds to help secure this base. The Death Eaters not near her were watching the exchange in complete bewilderment. "It was him and a few others on one side of the room and us on the other. We agreed to a quick armistice until we could all get out of the room, but we were there for a couple of hours."

"Who the hell is Spencer Reid?" Hotch thought he recognized the speaker as Goyle, though he was unsure if it was the one from this world or his.

"One of the muggle Americans," the second voice replied.

"Muggle?"

"Well, they did mostly win the war," the woman said, a bit uncomfortable with the sudden scrutiny. "And the Order only lost Hogwarts and the Ministry once they went back home." To Hotch again, she asked, "Is he doing okay?"
Trying to react calmly without outwardly showing any astonishment at the sudden topic, he said, "Yes, he's doing very well, though understandably not happy to hear the war flared back up again."

"That's good. Tell him we said hello. Er. If you get out of here. Alive, I mean." After a pause, she added, "He told very fun existential jokes."

"He's got a doctorate in philosophy," Hotch responded. "Unfortunately for him, he's one of the only people around who understands that field. We're starting to pick up on it."

"Right."

The silence that descended was rather awkward. The Death Eaters who had been watching the Reid-sympathizer group slowly turned back to not paying attention.

"He's very smart, isn't he?" the man who had backed up his female companion suddenly asked, eliciting interest from the rest of the room again even though he'd just meant to ask Hotch.

"He has an eidetic memory, so he remembers everything he reads, and he reads at several thousand words per minute."

"That's not possible," one of the Death Eaters scoffed.

"He recited one of the Beedle the Bard tales verbatim when someone asked him to," the woman recalled. "It was rather impressive."

Another lull in the conversation lasted for a couple of minutes.

"Is Harry Potter really actually your son?"

Hotch nodded slowly. "Yes. He was taken through the Blood Relocation Program when he was very young, but we found out about it later on."

"You could probably take that group down, later," the man suggested. Several of the Death Eaters were openly staring at him and the other Reid-acquaintances. "I imagine it wouldn't be very hard for you once you started. The movement is dying out."

"He's not getting out of here!" Crabbe snapped, gesturing at Hotch. Blaise didn't look pleased at being overlooked.

"Well, he shouldn't have been able to come back to life either, but he and his son both did it. And they shouldn't have been able to break into Hogwarts, or have such strong blood wards, or...anything they've done, really, so I don't see how them getting out is much of a stretch," the woman said.

One last awkward pause, but this one wasn't broken by another topic.

A rumble from somewhere above their heads made everyone look up, and the Death Eaters drew their wands and aimed them up. A couple cast preemptive shield spells. None of them moved closer to the captured pair in case they needed protection, and Blaise stood in case he and Hotch needed to dive under the table if the ceiling came down on them. The distance to the door was too great to cross if the ceiling fell all at once, but maybe if it fell in chunks they'd be able to sprint it.

"What is that?" someone finally asked.

"groan. "The youngest Hotchner in the building."

"We get it," a voice replied shortly.

"If Riddle's not distracted by anyone else dueling, and Harry's not trying to keep anyone around him alive," Blaise said, startling everyone by speaking for the first time since they'd entered the room, "then what's to stop the two of them from going full-out?"

A ripple of unease swept through the Death Eater ranks at the consideration, not inconsequential to their current situation. Before anyone could say anything, attention was diverted by the loudest rumble yet from upstairs. A moment later, they heard the collapse of something heavy, and loud objects crashed down the large staircase towards the front of the house. Two of the Death Eaters vanished, apparating somewhere safer. The rest were starting to shift uneasily.

"Don't you dare move," one of the Death Eaters hissed, and then a large chunk of the ceiling fell and hit the head of the table. Five more Death Eaters instantly popped out of the room, and with the collapse of a couple more sections over their heads, even more left.

"Incarcerous!"

Hotch ducked the shouted spell, and a distant part of his mind acknowledged he had truly been around Gryffindors for too long when his first instinct was to grab the chair behind him and throw it at the Death Eater who had sent the curse. The chair landed short but skidded into the Death Eater, surprising everyone enough that Blaise bolted for the door with Hotch right behind him. Both dodged away from spells, but they reached the hall without further injury.

They were halfway down the hall when the door burst open and two Death Eaters sprawled out behind them. Both pairs paused, and then the woman from before said, almost annoyed, "Oh, you're just going to get out anyway," and waved them on.

The ceiling completely came down on the dining hall they had left just a minute before, hidden from them by walls but entirely audible to their ears. Blaise took a couple of instinctive steps back but stopped when Hotch didn't move, staring back in the direction they had just come as his heart hammered in his chest. The cessation of the duel meant they weren't in as much danger anymore. It also meant something had stopped the duelists from continuing.

"We need to go," Blaise said urgently. Hotch nodded quickly and gestured for him to go without turning to look. "No, we need to leave now, while they're distracted."

The silence in the manor, besides the faint sound of small bits of rubble falling into place, weighed heavily in his thoughts. "Get out of here. I'm going to grab Harry."

"He can apparate out and he's a Light Lord! He'll be fine!"

"I'm not taking that chance. You're injured and you need to get out of here. Find someone and tell them what happened, so they know the situation." He pointed in the direction they had been heading. "Straight that way, out the front door. Go!"

He turned around and started running towards the dining hall again. After the barest of pauses, he heard a startled gasp, something like scuffling feet, and then a frustrated groan, followed by rapid footsteps behind him as Blaise started to catch up after handling whoever had confronted him. Without the luxury of time to argue, Hotch kept going and let Blaise follow.

The dining hall doors had been skewed in place by the blast, with one jammed into the ground by the weight of the fallen ceiling and the other at an oblique angle, making it impossible to simply walk
through them. The oblique door allowed two ways to enter, either to crawl under or climb over, with the former blocked by rubble. Over the top of the door, the dust falling down made it impossible to see the state of the rest of the room.

Hotch planted his foot in the corner between the fallen door and its partner, then pushed himself up to start clambering over rocks to get into the room. Once he was through, Blaise started trying to get in after him, and Hotch briefly turned around to make sure the venom wasn't hurting him badly enough to stop him from following. The teenager seemed fine, so he shifted his attention back to the large room. Ahead of him, the very top of the dining table was visible, but the rest of the dining hall was completely covered in the wreckage from the levels above.

He almost slipped as the piece of carpeted floor rocked under him, shifting into place, but he managed to keep his balance. From his position, he could see around himself a bit better, though not enough to definitively make out his son. Or, for that matter, Riddle. "Harry!"

No response. He cursed under his breath, pushing forward over unstable terrain as he moved towards the areas of the room he couldn't quite see. "I'll get this side!" He nodded in response to the Slytherin's words, the panic from before rising with each passing moment. Since he had completely returned, he hadn't felt the usual pangs from the blood wards when Harry had been in danger earlier in the day, and he thought it safe to assume he wouldn't know if something had happened to Harry now. He was completely blinded as to what could be going on, and he couldn't even sense a vague direction anymore.

"Harry!"

An injury they could fix. There were things they could repair, depending on the state Harry was in. The list of what they could do for him was longer than even Reid could tell them, especially when magic was taken into account.

But the one thing that it couldn't do was bring Harry back to life, not after he'd already tested his luck. He'd been saved by an incomplete death once – he would hardly get the same chance again.

"Shit!"

He turned to see Blaise falling to one knee as he stumbled. Blaise gave him a gesture to show he was fine and Hotch went back to looking around the room. The dust was slowly starting to settle, yet without a light, he could still barely make out what was in front of him.

A blast from Blaise's side of the room made him whip around sharply again, just in time to duck under a large rock that flew his way. The rest of the rubble landed in various places around the room as a figure started to get up out of the large crater it had made. Blaise was closer to him than the figure and was edging backward, intuition forcing him away.

"I should have known you would show up," Riddle said, voice carrying across the room. "Come for your son?"

Hotch didn't reply, using the brief moment before Riddle started firing spells at them to glance around for Harry again. There was still no sign of him.

"Your family has brought me nothing but trouble."

"Brought Malfoy Manor nothing but trouble, too," Blaise suddenly interrupted, looking up at the gigantic hole in the ceiling. "This is the second time it's been destroyed."

Riddle glared at Blaise, and for a moment Hotch thought he was going to hex or curse the teenager.
Then an odd look flashed across his face and Riddle just turned sharply away from him, signifying that Blaise wasn't involved in this conflict enough to even be worth his interest.

"Jack..." Hotch said slowly, startling Riddle into silence. "You'll make him immortal, won't you? Like you."

There was a pause. Blaise's head whipped around and he stared at Hotch in surprise. Then, "Yes." And, curiously, "Do you know why?"

"I believe so," Hotch said slowly. Blaise hadn't said anything. In fact, he didn't look concerned; the QDA members must have really trusted the BAU with solving every problem imaginable for him to not even flinch at the idea of Riddle claiming Jack. "I understand now."

Riddle tilted his head slightly. "Of everyone in this war, I should have known you were the one who would realize it."

"It seems so simple now..."

There was a humming noise, half in disapproval and half in appreciation. "In hindsight, yes." He glanced around the destroyed room. Still no acknowledgment of Blaise as a very real threat. "Find your son. I will win the battle outside and return shortly."

"Sectumsempra!"

Riddle threw the curse away from him with a shield just in time. Hotch followed the spell back to its source and saw Harry sprawled on top of one of the high piles of rubble. He rolled onto his side, wand arm under him as he pushed himself up. There was blood on his face, coming from some injury that had probably been inflicted by the fall, and his stagger was a bit uncoordinated as he dragged himself off the rubble and to lower ground. Behind him, some of the sheets of wall and carpet fell from their precipitous position after his departure but he didn't seem to notice.

He was scowling heavily, and Hotch couldn't help but wonder what Riddle had said to irritate him so badly that he was losing his temper in the middle of a fight, something he hadn't done in ages since the war had begun. "Come on, Riddle, we already dropped a ceiling today, let's get more original!" he shouted.

"Harry!" Hotch snapped at him, keeping one eye trained on Riddle as he did so.

For once, Harry ignored him. Hotch chose to attribute that to the likely concussion Harry had and not a complete apathy towards listening to a logical argument that Harry shouldn't antagonize a mass murderer.

"Standing on your own two feet," Riddle said. He didn't bring his wand up, having clearly seen the state Harry was in. "Impressive. As I was telling your father, I will be back shortly to deal with the two of you."

Riddle brought his wand up so quickly his arm blurred, but Harry blocked it with a swipe of his wand, moving surprisingly fast for someone who had obviously been quite beaten up by the fall he had taken. "Oh, Riddle," he snarled. "Don't test me tonight with childish spells."

Riddle sneered at him, grip on his wand tightening in preparation for a serious fight once more. "You truly think you will win against me, don't you?"

Harry stepped forward, wand still pointed at Riddle. There was no tremble to it. "I won't lose to a man who tries to kill children in the dark because he's too afraid to come out into the light. And I'm
tired of playing this game of cat and mouse, of fighting your pawns instead of you, and I'm tired of hunting after you because you won't stand your ground, you coward, so for once, stay and fight me!

Hotch would have been proud if he weren't so pissed off that Harry was throwing himself into danger.

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Riddle glared at Harry for a long moment. "If you wish so badly for death, I will not give you that reprieve," Riddle hissed. "Not until you have earned it after the pain you will endure for your insolence and arrogance. And certainly not until you have seen the suffering your family will face because of you!"

Harry's rage flared once again. He could almost sense his father's discontent with him, but he couldn't stop himself now. "I'm not responsible for someone hurting another!" he shouted back. "Don't justify your cowardice, and just admit you hurt people because you're incapable of holding power any other way!"

"Be silent!" Riddle bellowed at him.

Harry spread his arms, opening himself up to attack. "Make me!" he roared in return.

"This is why you choose Jack."

Both duelists found their fighting drive grinding to a halt at the statement, and they turned to Hotch in confusion.

He stood there, confidently, as if he weren't potentially about to be a bystander to a huge fight between two of the world's strongest wizards. His eyes were focused away from Harry, locked on Riddle. "Immortality must be incredibly lonely. That's why Nicholas Flamel made his wife, Perenelle, immortal with the Philosopher's Stone, too. You'd have to have a companion to endure it for very long. Even your loyal companions, such as Lestrange, will be dead within a couple of decades. That won't be but a blink of an eye for you after centuries in your state. You need someone to be with you through all the years."

Harry stared at him, hearing the words and understanding them but unsure how that tied back to his previous statement. He spared a glance towards Riddle, who was watching Hotch raptly with red eyes that were hardly dulled by the dust between them.

"That's why it has to be Jack. You keep talking about all the power my family wields, but it's a double-edged sword for you. Harry and I have caused you nothing but trouble ever since your return, and I couldn't believe you would think your best chance lay in my other son. But you're hoping Jack is just as powerful as his brother, because that would mean he's strong enough to take the burden of all the years with you. And even if he turns against you... Well, an enemy who's with you for the rest of time is better than an ally who ages and dies, isn't it?"

From where Harry stood, it didn't even look like Riddle was breathing. He was completely motionless, shrouded in his dark robes and watching Hotch raptly with red eyes that were hardly dulled by the dust between them.

"That's why I stuck with the BAU for so long, even though we see terrible things every day. I may not know where I'm going to be socially in the next couple of years, but the people I chase never
change. I see some of them over the years in the field, and I see others over the years behind bars. They're my consistency, even when the names and faces of the people I work with change. I imagine that, since your time, there has been very little adjustment in how people hurt each other. That kind of status quo is something you need – the infliction of the sorrow, the pain others feel but that you can't feel yourself. But more than that, you also need someone who understands."

Harry found himself lowering his wand minutely, drawn in by his father's words. A glance at Riddle showed that the dark lord had let his arm completely fall to his side, quietly listening to Hotch's one-sided conversation. After a moment, Harry dropped his own arm, slowly so as not to startle either of the others.

"Harry and I could both empathize with you, as we both came from similar situations. You're hoping Jack has picked up on what he's seen from us, how we act and behave when we see others in poor places. With what he's suffered, you think he might be able to grow to hate the ones who had any involvement in his pain, whether that involvement was accidental or not. If he despises Harry and me, you can convince him to care for someone else instead – yourself. Even if you fail, though, you can grant him power as you attempt to control him, and with that, you can create a new enemy or ally. He benefits you either way. As you think yourself incapable of love, he is just as useful as a second in command as he is a threat you push down to convince yourself you're the strongest."

The dust had mostly settled by now, giving him the opportunity for a good glance around the room, but it was just the four of them. No one else had fallen into the mess, leaving them alone for now. Blaise was just standing there, apparently as stunned into inaction as Harry.

"Harry was your first choice. You already knew he behaved in a way that you could turn to your advantage, when he was younger. But as he got older, whenever you saw him, you started to notice that he was calmer, more logical. He was thinking things through before he did them, even in a fight. He was no longer a reactionary, like had once been. But you needed someone you could mold into the shape you desired, and Harry was already creating himself and solidifying who he was going to grow up to be. When he refused to duel you in the cemetery, you knew he was out of your reach, and you had little hope of creating what you wanted."

Riddle was taken in by Hotch's words, but the distance between him and Harry was too great. If he tried to send a spell towards him, it would surely be seen in enough time for Riddle to defend himself. He needed to get closer, but doing so would also attract attention. Hotch's monologue was giving him all the time he needed to do something, but there was just nothing for him to do that wouldn't endanger them both.

"Riddle, this is why I'm concerned about you taking care of Jack – obvious reasons aside. You don't understand why Harry suddenly became who he was. It's why the Harry Potter of this world is still so unstable and brash. My son had a parent, and Potter simply didn't. Potter was largely left alone by all but a few, and even they gave him little attention and care in comparison to what he needed. Harry had the option to grow in ways that Potter never could. One of them had stability and security, while the other simply didn't. That's what you have to give Jack. A parent, not just an icon. Someone who gives love."

And in that moment, Harry remembered something, something he had started to forget as his confidence had grown and grown as he took what he had been taught and used it with growing avail. He'd started to forget the bedrock of everything that had happened to him, from the moment the Woodsmarked Killer had caught up to him until the instant he had fallen into this chamber. That no matter how skilled he'd become in negotiations, that no matter how confident he'd become with every success, that no matter how strategic his plans turned, that no matter how brilliant others lauded him for being...
He'd learned it all from his father.

And his father still outstripped his talents by far, more so as Harry let the most critical lesson slip away from him, the one that had relieved him of his pain when those with authority over him had hurt him the most - power wasn't the deciding factor in the endgame. Not until the fight was completely over, and there wasn't time for a more sly, more cunning group of individuals to slip in and steal the win.

No, the lesson he should have recalled was that there was something greater than power. It was knowledge, and how one chose to use it, that was capable of turning the fight for the better.

So despite all the power Harry fought with, from his own hearty core and the blood wards he could draw on, he calmly stepped back from the battle internally. Because, Ravenclaw that he was, Hotch had all the strength he needed, and it was with great relief that Harry acknowledged he wasn't always the hero.

"You'll kill the three of us. I understand that. But you don't have to kill Jack, and you don't want to. Let's go talk to him, together. I'll try and ease the transition, so maybe he can live a longer life than Harry and I have managed to. Whether he sides with you or not in the future is his own decision, but at least he'll have a future. So, after everything you've seen Harry and I do, as members of a family...do you still want someone to call your own?"

Riddle was silent. Then his chest moved, and he took a deep breath, preparing to answer, and he closed his eyes-

"Expecto patronum," Harry whispered, waving one hand through the air briefly. The white being ghosted into shape behind Riddle.

As the red gaze turned to Hotch once more, Harry silently urged his patronus forward. Just as he was about to tell it to startle Riddle, giving Harry the opening he needed, Riddle whirled, sixth sense telling him the elephant was beside him. The green spell that had caused so much chaos shot from his wand, arcing towards Harry.

He ducked under it. "Essearia!"

The elephant wrapped its trunk around Riddle's arm and a painful crack echoed through the room. Riddle shouted, in a mix of surprise and pain, and his wand dropped from his hand to the ground. The elephant raised him higher even as he thrashed, magic bounding from him towards the elephant to try and shove it back and away from him.

Harry moved quickly, sending spells at Riddle with both his wand and empty hand. Binding spells, entrapment hexes, curse wards and more, using everything he could think of until finally-

Riddle let out a scream of frustration.

"What did you do?" Hotch asked as Harry moved to stand beside him.

"He can't use his magic," Harry said. "Not until I take off at least half of those curses."

"Why didn't you just kill him?" Blaise asked, surprised.

"He's human, no matter what he's done. He's committed crimes so he goes on trial. Someone else will decide what to do with him, not me." He paused, then glanced at Hotch. "You're a lawyer. How do you try someone for crimes in different worlds?"

Hotch stopped to genuinely think about it. "Well... In the U.S., if someone commits crimes in
different states, the criminal serves the worst sentence first. I suppose it depends on what both worlds convict him for."

"They'll probably come to the same conclusion," Blaise pointed out. "Death."

"That's for them to sentence him to, not us," Harry quietly said. "He needs to be tried for crimes against society, not just crimes against us, and I won't make a decision for all of the wizarding world." He sighed. "Let's finish this battle and get back home to plan our next move."

Chapter End Notes

When there were originally only two worlds, not seven, this was the climax and the ending came right after. Got to say that I could have been happy with it ending here, but I do think that the plot twists that are to come later were worth continuing it.
"If you live to be 100, I want to live to be 100 minus 1 day so I would never have to live a day without you." - A. A. Milne, *Winnie the Pooh*

"I'll go tell the rest of the QDA that we've got Riddle," Blaise said and left the room.

Harry turned to his father. "Did he seem a little off to you?" Harry asked, completely ignoring Riddle, who was still struggling against Atlas. Hotch frowned slightly as he nodded. "I guess the war had a bigger strain on him than I thought. ...And you're thinking about something else entirely, because you're not offering any theories."

"I'll tell you when we get out of here," Hotch told him, then nodded towards Riddle. "Knock him out and we'll head back."

"*Stupefy!*" Riddle finally stopped struggling. He glanced at Hotch. "What are you thinking?"

His father had a speculative look on his face. "Anyone who's suffered from him will try to kill him before he makes it to trial, and there are some who would try to release him from custody. That's if anyone knows he's alive."

"You're suggesting we keep his status need-to-know?"

"Yes."

Harry nodded after a moment. "We can confirm the truth later if we need to."

Hotch waited a couple minutes while Harry transfigured bits of wood and rubble into a dead body, passable for Riddle. He told Harry that Riddle's nonexistent nose was a little too long. Harry told him that he could learn to transfigure torn tapestries into cartilage if it made such a big deal to him.

"Go back with him," Harry said when he was done, gesturing in the direction Blaise had gone. "I'm going to wait here a little longer."

"Harry, this isn't the time to search the manor."

"No one knows Riddle's caught yet. I can destroy any Dark artifacts in here without worrying about someone sneaking in and trying to take something." Hotch sighed, not convinced but still seeing his point, and he pressed, "I'm going to have to come back and do it anyway."

"Be quick about it," Hotch told him firmly.

"I'm going to get Draco to help," Harry said reluctantly. "He knows more about what I should be looking for."

"You do know that Ginny helped him sneak into the battle, don't you?"

"Yeah. I'm amazed he returned."

"He needed the closure, and to prove to himself that he was stronger than this place. Couldn't bear..."
"Who got the last word?" The voice made both of them turn, and Harry grinned as he saw the very
person they were talking about. He had some vials in one hand.

"Technically, Riddle did before we knocked him out, but that was just because he wouldn't shut up,"
Harry said, purposefully misunderstanding. Draco perked up as soon as he saw Riddle dangling
limply from Atlas's grip, and a wide smirk crossed his face. "What are you doing in here?"

Draco crossed the area as he spoke. "We heard you were injured, but I figured you were fighting and
bleeding out but not dead yet so I decided to go raid the potions storage area for blood replenishers
for you." He handed a vial to each of them.

"Are we so predictable?" Harry asked before drinking one.

"Yes," Hotch replied, then downed his.

"Anything else you need to fix before we go on?" Draco asked.

"That should be it. Let's just get this done," Harry said, pushing the three of them along. Out of the
corner of his eye, he saw Draco glancing over him, looking for the telltale signs of the Cruciatus.
He'd be hard-pressed to find them over the obvious signs of injury from his fall and the strain from
the fight.

"Where are we heading?"

"They took Harry Potter's wand, and my other gun," Hotch said. "We need those back, before
anyone like Fletcher tries to take them and sell them on the black market or whatever equivalent you
guys have as relics of the last fight with a dark lord." Draco was startled into a laugh, because he
knew that the statement, however dryly it had been said, was probably very accurate. "And then we
need to find anything the Death Eaters left that they wouldn't want us to find."

"Wand, guns, mischief stuff. I'd say we should split up, but one of us will find trouble in about five
minutes if we do that so let's not," Draco said, too cheerful. Harry and Hotch didn't comment on his
mood. "Hey, is someone going to take care of Riddle?"

Harry glanced at Hotch. "I guess that's you. Someone should come to help you once Blaise gets to
Hermione."

"Blaise?" Draco said as they awkwardly climbed out of the mess that the doors and rubble had made
of the dining hall entrance. He stumbled as he got to the floor and brushed himself off, then gestured
in the direction Blaise and Hotch had originally hurried to get away from the collapsing room. He
was pointing almost at the exact spot where Hotch had left Blaise before the Slytherin had followed
him anyway. "He was practically dead on his feet over there when I came this way. Kind of looked
like he had a concussion, or just been rejuvenated."

Hotch frowned. "He didn't have a concussion when he left us. The venom must have gotten to
him."

"Still, might take longer to get back up than you were hoping."

"Let's just wait for someone to get here, and then we'll start searching the manor," Harry said. "Then
we'll get Riddle to trial, and...we'll figure out how to get him on trial in both worlds without letting
anyone know there is more than one world."
Draco snorted. "Be realistic. You just have to say he's dead and everyone will believe you in our world."

Harry gave him a look. "I don't have that much power," he argued.

Draco's laugh faded and he stared at Harry, blankly horrified. "Oh. You haven't heard yet. I forgot we were trying to keep that from you until you could flip out appropriately without destroying anything."

"Heard what?"

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"This isn't even legal!"

"Actually, it is. We don't have age limits," Moody interrupted, even though he wasn't arguing against Harry. From what Hotch had heard in the hallway, he was just as opposed to the idea but was going along with it because he didn't have another option.

"I'm not even seventeen yet!"

"So...when you're seventeen you can take over?" Scrimgeour said hopefully.

"You're missing the point!"

"How long have you known?" Hotch asked Hermione, who was waiting beside him for the fight to calm down. It had been raging for a solid hour and a half so far. Hotch had gone and come back twice to deal with smaller catastrophes that he could handle.

That was something that was just as irksome as it was satisfying. When the Department of Magical Law Enforcement had an issue with where they were holding criminals when the Ministry building had been shut down, they shouldn't be listening to an American muggle who had no power in their legal system whatsoever. Still, it was nice to snap orders and not have anyone even remotely question him because they were still puzzling over how he wasn't dead and were just struck by sheer awe over receiving commands from one of the major heads of the resistance.

"We heard about it while Harry went to go borrow Potter's wand," Hermione said, "but we figured there was no point in telling him about it when he couldn't do anything until after the fight anyway."

They had gone back to the other world as soon as Riddle had been secured at Quantico – which was another sad thing, that the QDA trusted FBI agents to handle a Dark Lord more than they trusted their own magical government – to deal with this crisis. Hotch had two alternate feelings about that. On one hand, what had happened was not even remotely all right, for a list of reasons longer than Santa's list of naughty children. On the other hand, they really did have more pressing concerns, which was really sad when someone genuinely had more important matters than-

"You put a teenager in charge of a nation without even telling him!" Harry all but shrieked. "Why do you think this is a good idea?!"

"Because you're an excellent leader and you know more about controlling a lot of people in a war than anyone else?" Scrimgeour weakly said.

"Is there really no other better option?" Hotch asked Hermione wearily, but he could see the answer in her eyes.
"Moody tried to put Kingsley in power, but once someone leaked the idea of making Harry the Minister of Magic no one would accept anyone else. The Order tried to resist on Harry's behalf but it was too late."

Hotch sighed.

Then another auror all but appeared right in front of him. "Ah, excuse me," the man said. "Where should we put anyone who was Imperiosed?"

Hotch stared at the auror. The auror leaned back surreptitiously. Hermione sighed.

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Finally, over thirty-six hours after the last battle, the entire QDA regrouped at Quantico – their Quantico, in the world that they had been born in. The first ones there swept the entire building for any sort of magical charms that hadn't been there when they left, but there had been no tampering so they were satisfied enough to all gather in the BAU’s bullpen. Considering it was one of the last spots they had, it was extremely relieving to hear that they could use the space as an area to recharge and regroup.

Any FBI agent beside the BAU was sent home early, and the QDA filled their spots. A couple representatives from the Order, including Snape, Moody, and Lupin joined them. Dumbledore was notably absent, but Harry feeling that was because he knew the head-butting that would inevitably occur between him and Hotch was something to be avoided. Blackwolf had shown up at some point, eager to hear what had happened.

Almost everyone had gotten a bit of rest by the time of the meeting, but it was still a weary group of students that were sprawled around the room when Harry finally got the meeting started. He was leaning against the short staircase on one side, and although he wasn't standing, everyone could see him since most of the students were sitting and anyone else standing was on the perimeter of the bullpen, leaning against a wall or divider. Hotch had taken a chair near him, as had Hermione.

The first two hours were spent catching everyone up on what had happened. Prior to the meeting, there had been some discussion about what should be left out, but in the end there wasn't a whole lot that they decided not to mention. Everything about Jack was kept quiet – there just wasn't a reason to share it, not when everyone was rabid about keeping him safe anyway. Harry being a Light Lord wasn't something they could hide, and most of the room didn't even seem surprised when it was brought up.

"Taking all of that into consideration," Harry finally said, "we're going to try to move onto another world and claim it as quickly as we can. We've got a lot of unknown factors that we need to work with, and prolonged battles mean there's a greater chance we could be taken off guard by one of them."

"There's something I don't get," Morgan spoke up. "If Riddle's gone, why haven't the Death Eaters surrendered in this world? Did someone else take his place?"

Harry glanced at Hotch, who got to his feet to address the group. "We have reason to believe," he said carefully, "that Riddle isn't the Dark Lord who Harry's supposed to face."

The room went dead silent.

Then, "Fuck," someone said, and it didn't really matter who it was because everyone was thinking the same thing.
"Why?" Snape demanded.

"He doesn't have enough power."

"Not enough power?" Sirius said, frowning. "How would he have more? He had as much power as Dumbledore did-" He stopped himself. "Oh."

Hotch nodded. "Exactly. He only has as much power as Dumbledore has, but Dumbledore's not a Light Lord. Since lords supposedly have about the same magical weight, Riddle can't be a Dark Lord if he's just as strong as someone who isn't a Light Lord. Furthermore, he's completely in control of his magic. Lords aren't. If he was a Dark Lord before, his power has diminished over time to the point where he isn't one anymore."

"What do you mean?" Lupin asked, frowning. "Isn't that why they're so strong? They have complete control?"

"No, it's because a greater portion of their magic reacts instinctively to their wishes. It cuts down on their response time in a fight, and more of their magic goes to one purpose. For most witches and wizards, they have a greater portion of dormant magic that only reacts when pushed to. Several times, Harry's magic has reacted without his consent." Particularly when he was dying, but Hotch didn't say that, which Harry was grateful for. That wasn't a part of his life he was especially proud of, considering what had happened. "When Blaise killed Nagini, Riddle should have lost control if he was a Dark Lord. He didn't. He got angry, but his magic was still in check."

"Then who's the Dark Lord?" Ernie demanded, almost panicking. "Who are we actually fighting?"

"It's probably someone from one of the other worlds, then," Prentiss suddenly said and Hotch nodded in agreement. "After all, what are the chances that both the Light Lord and Dark Lord came from the same world?"

"Wait, every world's Harry isn't a Light Lord?" Neville asked.

"No," Harry said. "The Harry from the world we were just in wasn't."

"So whoever the Dark Lord is, he must know about this world if he's controlling the Death Eaters here," Prentiss said.

"His hold isn't strong enough that we can't break it," Harry said, "but it would cost us time we don't have, time we could spend making sure he doesn't get any other worlds while we're focused here. I hate to say it, but... I think our best option is to leave this world alone for now and make sure we don't lose anywhere else. Once we take down the real Dark Lord, we can come back and fix it, so long as we keep the ground we've got here."

"You want the Order to stay behind and secure the gains we have," Moody interpreted and Harry nodded. "We can do that."

"We can try to give you some support," Blackwolf said, speaking for America's magical community, "but likely not as much as you really need."

"Anything's useful."

"Who's going to the other world?" Fred asked.

"If possible," Harry said slowly, "I'd like to keep it to just the QDA. That's why I didn't invite everyone else. We need to keep the existence of multiple worlds as quiet as possible. If we need
more people, we can pull in the rest of the DA, but for now..."

"That's fewer than thirty people," Reid protested.

"Yeah, but not every world is going to require a war. I'm hoping there are only a few worlds we're really going to need to fight in, so for the rest we can just solidify the Light's presence there enough to stop the Death Eaters from getting a strong foothold. We don't need an army for that."

"What do you need us doing?" Blackwolf asked.

Harry opened his mouth to say something, then stopped. He was used to that kind of question, but something about that particular question from Blackwolf took him off guard. After a moment, he realized what it was, just as Blackwolf realized the reason for his hesitance.

"You're the Light Lord," Blackwolf told him. "That's recognized across international borders."

"I don't have any power outside of Britain," Harry protested.

"You have power everywhere," Blackwolf corrected. "Not on paper, but there's not a witch or wizard alive who won't listen to what you have to say."

A part of Harry's brain shut down for self-preservation.

"Er."

"So. Assistance?"

Harry paused a moment longer, then, "Until we can figure out how to get Riddle on trial in both worlds, we need to make sure people know he's been secured. Can America claim we're keeping him in custody here while Britain's in turmoil?"

Blackwolf nodded. "We can fake that."

"And then we need an excuse for the QDA suddenly vanishing. Tracking down Death Eaters?"

"We'll make up fake claims that you've been spotted here and there locating Death Eaters," Moody agreed. "Just come back here when you can to appear in front of someone important."

"Do you think Riddle's the Dark Lord, just from another world?" Morgan asked Hotch, and it was honestly more than a little relieving for Harry that one of the heavy questions wasn't being asked of him.

"It's a possibility, but... I don't think so. From what little I can tell is the Dark Lord's influence, it doesn't match with Riddle's behavior at all. Furthermore, the Dark Lord seems to be treating Riddle like a dog. He's keeping him on the leash in his own world, but he's giving him specific requirements to fulfill. He's even trying to build some form of competition by creating new major players for the dark, potentially to discover which ones are the strongest so he can get rid of threats or build a powerful council. Riddle wouldn't want to share his rule with anyone like that."

"So we have someone entirely new," Snape said quietly, but his voice carried when no one else dared stir. "Is there anything else?"

Hotch grimaced, and Harry's eyes sharpened on him. That was all Hotch had told him, but he was preparing to say something new.

"Yes," Hotch finally said. "This Dark Lord's meticulous and plans for the long run. He's been
involved in almost every step of the wars in both worlds so far and he hasn't liked having to delegate
the most important work."

"What does that mean?" Moody asked, frowning, and Harry felt his stomach sink with
understanding.

"It means that, to understand enough about each world to manage that much so accurately, to realize
that he would lose both worlds if he didn't merge the Riddles in an attempt to make them stronger, to
act proficiently enough in two wars that he almost won both at the same time – all of that, let alone
what he's done in other worlds that we don't even know about... He's been here. Not only has he
been here, he's been very close to the action, and he's seen what's going on."

"Oh shit," Harry saw more than heard Morgan quietly say, and he knew he wasn't alone in picking
up on what Hotch was getting at.

"The Dark Lord has managed to get Riddles from at least two worlds on his side, which shows that
he's a typical lord – charismatic, draws people to him, powerful in ways beyond magic. People trust
him, because he's shown himself capable of anything he sets his mind to and because he seems to
care about making the world better, even if the definition of a better world is his own. He's genuine
and that makes people listen to him."

"There can't be that many people as noticeable as that," Tonks pointed out eagerly. "I mean, Harry
fits under the same description and ever since he's really settled into his power it's been hard not to
notice when he's nearby."

"Really?" Harry asked and got a roomful of nods in return.

"Exactly," Hotch agreed, looking at Tonks, "and that's the problem. He has to be someone who
would stand out if others are going to follow him so avidly. But because of what we've seen from his
planning, he also has to see the situation up close to evaluate it. That means he must have been here,
and he must have been close enough that we've already missed him. We've met him before, and we
didn't know."

Horror filled the room, tense and restricting. No one argued with him, and somehow that denial was
worse than the alternative.

"Why are you so sure?" Snape demanded, but it wasn't a protest to his logic.

"He would have wanted to see what he was up against. The leadership, the strategies, the
organizations. We must have crossed paths, because he would have wanted to meet us personally."

Their enemy for the last couple of years hadn't been Riddle, and they hadn't even known until now.
Everything they'd attributed to Riddle was probably something he hadn't been part of the planning
for. Worse yet, while they'd been so ignorant and confident about their opponent... He'd known
about them.

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"Tell me each time you leave and come back," Hotch told Harry while the younger continued
packing up his bag. It was small enough to fit into his palm, thanks to a charm Hermione had shown
him. "A text message doesn't count. I want to see you in person."

"Right."

"And don't only come back when you're done with that world. Check in regularly so we know
what's going on. If the situation's going well, we want to know so we don't worry, and if the situation's going badly, we want to know in case you suddenly break off contact."

"Okay, Dad."

"Keep an eye on the ones you think might act brashly. You've got a good group, but sometimes some of you feed off each other's energy and you can get a bit out of control. Your pride in the short term isn't as important as you winning the whole war so you can come home."

Harry made an understanding noise as he shoved another pair of pants into the bag. Hermione had done something to it, as well as the other bags she had handed out to the QDA, and it never changed size no matter how much was stuffed into it.

"You can always try to take another world back again. You don't have to get it right the first time. It's better to be cautious and figure it out in a couple of months than be brash and lose someone in the first few days. No matter how strong you think you are, power doesn't matter if you're caught off guard or-"

"Dad," Harry finally said, turning to face him. "I've got it."

Hotch looked at him for a moment, eyes flickering over his expression. "You do," he said quietly. "I know you do. Just...come back."

Harry smiled hesitantly. "Afraid I won't?" he said, trying to make it into a joke but failing.

"Don't get caught off guard," Hotch continued, "and think things through before you act."

It should just been a couple of amendments to his earlier list. But Harry was thinking of a specific event and he knew Hotch was too.

"It won't happen again." With a small smile, he reminded him, "We don't stay dead anyway."

"Dying isn't the part that hurts. It's watching, afterwards."

The fake smile Harry had been plastering on fell off.

"Are you sure?" Hotch asked.

Harry sighed, not needing any further explanation. "A group of teenagers can fit in much easier than a group of teenagers plus one adult. The two of us stick out together. And...well, you'll slow us down if we have to leave quickly but make sure someone apparated you out with them. It's too dangerous, for us and you. Besides, field work isn't where you'll help us the most. In the endgame, like last time, sure, but not for what we're going to do, and while the people here are used to working with people who don't have magic, we would have to convince every person we meet all over again."

"It would be easier for me to evaluate someone's behavior when I've seen them act."

"We have Pensieves, Dad," Harry reminded him gently. "I'll be back soon. I promise. We all will."

He fooled everyone else when he arrived at Quantico. They were going to get rested up before going to the destination Dumbledore had located as being another Veil, and it felt odd to be sleeping back in the rooms that they had once used years ago the first time they had been at the FBI headquarters. With that feeling, most of them overlooked their leader. Hermione didn't.
"What happened?" she asked. The two of them and Ron were sitting in one corner, nestled away from everyone. It almost hurt to think of it, but Harry knew that staying away from the rest gave the others more peace because a portion of their attention wasn't attracted by Harry.

He was already tired of being a Light Lord.

"He's worried," Harry said. "I don't think he was thinking seriously about everything Trelawney was saying, about me dying, but then Riddle killed me – even if it was temporarily – in the cemetery, and signs keep showing up that say I'm not going to make it... I think he's worried."


"Unless..." Hermione said, then stopped herself.

"Unless the Dark Lord's a leopard-spirit, and I'll die when I face him," Harry finished for her.

"But you can't honestly expect something like that to be true," Hermione quickly said. "Not everything else she's said happened. She predicted the Grim, remember?"

"And it turned out she interpreted it wrong," Ron pointed out, clearly regretting the words even as he spoke them. "Sirius."

"So maybe she interpreted this one wrong too!" Hermione snapped at him. "Magic does not hold power over fate!"

"Actually," Harry said, "it might. I heard that fate tends to react with more...certainty around people with more magic." After a moment of hesitation, he continued, "Back when- when I thought Riddle was going to kill me, because I was still freaking out from the Silent Massacre... I made my dad promise he wouldn't die. It sounded stupid to me, even at the time, but I was...not thinking. I was just talking. And he said he wouldn't, so long as I never did."

"But you're a Light Lord," Ron breathed.

"So?" Hermione demanded.

"Hermione, he walks into the bloody bathroom and everyone's heads pop up."

There was a pause.

"You could have phrased that better," Harry slowly said, wincing.

"Sorry, mate," Ron said sheepishly. "But you get my meaning. He can't go anywhere without getting attention. His magic just...does stuff. So if he were upset and made a promise... His magic probably would have enforced it."

Hermione stared at him for a long moment, horrified. "You don't mean..."

"I didn't think of it exactly like that, but yeah," Harry said quietly, dropping his head into his hands so he could run his fingers through his hair. "I got my father killed."

Hermione stared at him for a long moment, horrified. "You don't mean..."

People across the room stared at them in bewilderment for a couple of moments while Harry futilely tried to defend himself and Ron just leaned away from them. Then they turned away, shrugging, from the squawking Light Lord and his infuriated second in command.
Hermione finally threw the pillow down beside them. "Don't be ridiculous!" she hissed.

"I'm just saying..." Harry said weakly.

"Not everything is caused by what you do!" she snapped. "Just because you've got a bunch of fancy powers doesn't mean that the world turns around you."

"He might have a point in this case..." Ron said slowly but quickly held up his hands when Hermione snatched up the pillow again. "But I think you've got an excellent point too, much more credible, really!"

She dropped the pillow again. "Just because some old hag with dustballs in her head instead of brains said you've got some murderous creature after you doesn't mean it's going to kill you before you're seventeen!"

"Okay," Harry relented, holding his hands up. "Okay."

"Just as I thought you were starting to use your intelligence," she grumbled, "and now you've got your father in on it too!"

"I'll have you know I was completely dismissive of the plausibility of the idea when I mentioned it to him!" Harry protested. "He just..." His voice faltered. "I think he changed, after he died."

"Dying kind of does that to people," Ron pointed out sagely and Hermione gave him a look like she was resisting the urge to hit him.

"Does he talk about it?" she asked when she turned back to Harry.

He shook his head. "Never, just the one time when he had to tell me what had happened. I don't think it's the kind of thing you can talk about. To be honest, we've never even really talked about why he had to come back in the first place, and that was the sort of thing he usually would have jumped on to make sure I was okay. It freaked him out to know he came so close to failing, so many times when he could still see what was going on but couldn't do anything."

"But he wasn't in any pain, right?" Ron said.

"That doesn't really matter," Hermione immediately argued. "Imagine what it would feel like to be trapped in someone else's existence for months, with what little interaction you had spent pretending to be a figment of that person's imagination, and you knew they were in danger and hurting but you couldn't help them."

"Lonely," Harry murmured. "That was the word he used, the one time he talked about it."

None of them looked at each other.

"I'm just glad he's back," Ron finally said. "It didn't feel the same, without him or Gideon."

"Yeah, tell me about it," Harry muttered.

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"The oldest world, and the one we presume to be the original, is the world you have already encountered," Blackwolf told Harry as he led the group further into the cave. The echoing of the rock allowed his voice to carry back to the rest of the DA as they walked deeper. "The one we are currently in is what we believe to be the third world."
"Where are we going now?" Hermione asked, right behind Harry.

The New Zealand government, as far as Harry was aware, didn't even know there was an elite team of teenagers walking through one of their caves, but he didn't feel the pressing civic duty to inform them. It was going to be a pain to get everyone home with a limited number of portkeys, but that was something Harry felt like they should worry about later.

"The sixth world. I do not believe that the Dark Lord will pay particular attention to going in order," Blackwolf said. "Based off of what Hotch believes, Harry, I rather think he will try to be as unpredictable as possible." Blackwolf grimaced. "I hope your father can learn enough about him in time."

"You know," Roger said from somewhere in the middle of the pack, "we might have the opportunity to be the first to name all these worlds, to differentiate them."

"We'd also be the first to forget all the names," Daphne dryly pointed out, gaining a few laughs. "Let's keep it simple, shall we?"

"But a code only we know," Neville said. "I mean, if we run past a bunch of Death Eaters shouting, 'Get back to W3,' it's not going to take a lot of guesswork to figure out that we mean the third world."

"The square of each number minus seven," Anthony said quickly. "A square would be obvious, and most people would count up, not down."

"Let's go back to world Negative Six," Daphne said, shooting down that idea too. "Subtle."

"Now wait a moment," Luna said, and Harry swore he could hear the tunnel get quieter as everyone hushed to listen to her. Maybe it was just his imagination, but he definitely thought people were paying her more attention. "If someone thought we were doing something like what Anthony suggested, then they would expect a negative number, but we could just not say the negative. We'd have worlds Six... Three... Two... Nine... Eighteen... Twenty-nine... Forty-two."

"That could be enough to make them guess a bit," Daphne slowly agreed.

"You can tell who took Arithmancy in here," Ron said, snickering.

"Ah, the good old days, when students under seventeen actually went to school," Fred said.

"I don't miss those days," George snorted.

"Whyever shouldn't you? They were the best testing grounds we'll ever have for our products," Fred pointed out and George groaned at the loss.

"There," Blackwolf said, pointing ahead, and Harry had to squint to see the flickering ahead of them on one of the cave walls. "Harry, remember what I said; for each world you win, they too will win one."

"According to the original legend, it went back and forth. Win, loss, win, loss. Are we really bound by that?"

"I suspect so," Blackwolf said. "You could try to fight it, if you want..."

"Or we could play it smart and leave once we know we're going to lose," Harry said. He sighed. "You're saying we just need to minimize the damage in this upcoming fight, then, instead of actually
trying to beat back the Death Eaters."

"I think you would be safer that way, rather than trying to beat back fate. It would also be wise to consider that fate does not appreciate being meddled with, and a win in a world you should have lost could have worse consequences for you later."

None of the options settled well with Harry, but it wasn't up to him. He needed to get everyone home, and honestly, his duty was first and foremost to his QDA and family, not to the other worlds. If they won the war, they could come back and rescue the worlds they lost. That wouldn't work if they all died.

"So in the other world, if we went to the Ministry of Magic to that Veil, where would we end up?" Hermione asked.

"One of the four worlds you have not yet been to, but I cannot tell you which with certainty," he said, and Hermione accepted the answer with a nod. "Good luck."

"We'll probably need it," Harry muttered, then rapidly but carefully cast the three necessary spells over himself before plunging through the barrier.

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"There is a group of Death Eaters devoted solely to attempting to kill you," Snape told Hotch calmly a week after the students had left. Hotch gave him a flat look. "Bellatrix Lestrange, from this world, is leading them."

The witch had escaped capture at the end of the last battle. Hotch sighed, rubbing a hand over his forehead. "Great."

"Do you have enough protections or do you want some more put up?"

If it were just him, he'd shoot down the idea. But he had Jack now. "I'll consider it. I'm not sure how many more can go up." For now, they'd been forced to move out of their house to an apartment Hotch had located closer to Quantico. It was a major pain, but it didn't make sense to remain where they had been when almost everyone of importance knew where they had been living.

"Send a message my way when you have reached a decision." He gave a smirk and, with gallows humor, continued, "Minerva says she will refuse to accept your death until after the passage of seven years."

"She was always an intelligent woman," Hotch commented. "How is the rest of the staff holding up?"

"Fine, as a whole. Gideon has been surprisingly useful, despite his lack of magic. We appreciate you loaning him to us."

"Jason doesn't work for the BAU anymore. He does what he wants – as he did when he worked for the BAU, actually."

"The staff's found the extra pair of hands for managing the children necessary. Of course, some of them aren't so helpful..." He broke off with a scowl.

"Among the staff or students?"

"Both, but Sybil Trelawney's constant reminders of death are starting to become aggravating."
Hotch sighed. "Whose is she predicting now?"

"Still your family's. Considering two have already come to pass, it's now just unnecessary."

That should have assuaged Hotch's fears. It didn't.

"To make it worse, Albus considers her words worth listening to, considering her prophecy about Harry came true. He did defeat our world's Riddle, after all."

That especially did nothing to help. "What was the power that the prophecy mentioned?"

"It seems to simply have been his relationship with his family. Albus was right about that, at least, even if he was thinking of the wrong family." His black eyes didn't portray any sympathy as he asked his next question, but something in his posture told Hotch about his shared feelings about the matter. "You miss him."

"I wonder if this was what it was like for Haley, when I was gone," Hotch murmured. "The constant waiting for news." It wasn't the same, though, not by a long shot. "But I signed up for this, and he didn't. Is he even going to be able to finish school?"

"He might be graduating at twenty-five, but I'm sure Hogwarts will accept him and the rest of his merry band of renegades back," Snape assured him. "Of course, I'm not sure what the point is, as whoever proctors his O.W.L.s will surely give him an O, since no sane individual would give anything less to a Light Lord whether he deserved it or not."

"How many know he's a Light Lord now?"

"All but the senile, I expect," Snape said. "News like that travels fast." He paused. "However... None expect him to make it to seventeen."

"There must be cases of Light Lords surviving past that age," Hotch said, frustration clearly leaking through. "He can't be the only one."

"In England, the last case was Merlin," Snape said slowly. "However, there have been a couple of instances outside of the British Isles, but it's difficult to tell how many because all cultures document their most powerful wizards and witches differently. Comparing them is not a simple task, and it makes it hard to understand just how many lords there have been. Some early cultures even killed children who started showing signs of power at young ages, so hundreds of years of potential names are potentially lost."

"Is there a way to beat the Curse somehow?" Hotch asked.

"None. Nothing but Harry can stop it." He went quiet, then, "But if Merlin can, I believe so can Harry." His eyes narrowed fiercely and he ordered, "Do not tell him I said that."

Hotch's mood almost lightened. "Of course."

"He will return," Snape said, turning away from him to look out towards the bullpen. "You can hold faith in that."

"What makes you so certain?"

"He would be too afraid of your disappointment to do otherwise."

"Harry's grown, since..." He hesitated and he hated himself for it, but he forced the words out rather
than letting them get the better of him. "Since I died. He doesn't rely on my approval like he used to. If he did, he wouldn't have let the DA go on the offense, and he certainly wouldn't have made the rash decisions he's made recently. He's thinking more quickly on his feet, yes, but he's not considering everything like he used to. The difference between how he acted at the beginning of the war and now is enormous. He made decisions based on how Moody and I thought he should react; now he relies on instincts and intuition."

"He's becoming his own person. That doesn't mean you're not still important to him. You're still one of the biggest influences in his life, if not the biggest."

"I know." He sighed. "Doesn't make it that much easier to let him go like this. I met him when he was twelve. He's not even seventeen, and... He's already leaving. I should have been able to protect him from this."

"I thought I could protect Lily from a prophecy," Snape said quietly, and Hotch's gaze shot to him. It was the first time he'd heard him speak her name. Snape wasn't looking at him. "I was wrong too."

That was definitely not encouraging.

"But I've realized something since meeting you. Fate is not written because it is a predicted course of events by some hallucinogenic-addled woman covered in the smell of chamomile. It is, in many ways, a manifestation of the very job you do."

"What are you talking about?" Hotch asked, frowning at the very idea.

"You were always meant to die for someone, Aaron. You never sit idly when someone is in danger, least of all your family. It would not take a true Seer to predict how your death would have occurred, just as it would not take a true Seer to predict that Lily would never have stood aside to allow anyone to kill a child, even one that wasn't her own. Your very natures determine your fate, not the prophecies. The prophecies just tell you the inevitable outcome."

"Harry's fate can't be death simply because he can't stay out of danger," Hotch protested.

Snape was silent for so long that Hotch didn't think he was going to respond. "Whenever he dies, the world will weep," he said in a low whisper. "But whenever he dies, the world will also be forever changed because of the sacrifice he will have chosen to make. Try and tell me what I'm saying isn't true."

And Hotch couldn't.

---

It was not a happy bunch that regrouped at Quantico two weeks later.

They'd lost. They'd minimized damages and had gotten the American wizarding government to hold ground, but there hadn't been enough reason to hope for a turn of the tides significant enough to let them win. So they had come home and decided to recuperate before going somewhere they stood a better chance of making an impact.

Harry was particularly irked. Hotch was just happy to have him back.

Right up until he opened his mouth and said the very thing Hotch didn't want to hear.

"We're leaving tomorrow."
"No."

Harry blinked at the rapid response, and with the barest glance around at anyone who could possibly be close enough to overhear, the pair went into Hotch's office, where Hotch closed the door firmly behind them.

"Dad," Harry said firmly, and it was the first time Hotch had ever heard Harry use that tone against him. He finally understood why parents got so irritated when their teenagers challenged their authority. The only problem was that Harry had enough authority in this instance that his challenge was more than posturing.

"No," Hotch insisted when there was no forthcoming argument. "You need to rest a bit longer."

"We have no significant injuries that we can't heal overnight, and we need to get going before the Dark Lord gets any more ahead of us. This world was practically taken before we even got there, and who knows how many worlds he's already gotten to. That might have even been the last world."

"You know the situation in three of the seven worlds," Hotch said, "but that's not enough to hypothesize about the rest of them. Maybe he already does have a couple more worlds; a couple days isn't going to change that."

"This is war, Dad! It could!" Harry argued, and Hotch knew he was right but he couldn't admit that.

"Stay. Just a little longer."

"I don't have a good enough reason to," Harry said, arms crossed over his chest. "Yeah, I see your point. It probably won't make a big difference. But there's no impending reason why we can't head out tomorrow, so we should. The QDA'll just get antsy if we have to wait around without doing anything, and the longer we hesitate, the more likely it is that someone's going to get it into their heads that they should try taking back this world."

_Damn it._

"Wait another a week," Hotch said. "Just wait that long."

"No," Harry replied.

Hotch's eyes narrowed. Harry met his gaze evenly.

"It's seven days."

"It's not. You only care about the fifth day but you're not admitting it."

_Damn it again._

"You want to make sure I'm within arm's reach until my seventeenth birthday passes. If I make it past that day, you think I'll survive."

Hotch's mouth pressed into a thin line but he didn't argue. There wasn't anything he could say that would persuade Harry he wasn't right.

"If the curse is really true, it's going to catch up to me no matter where I'm at."

"I don't believe in the curse," Hotch said and Harry couldn't suppress an astonished laugh.
"So that's why you never lie to me," Harry said. "You can't fake it well enough."

"Harry," Hotch growled.

"If I've only got five days left, I'm going to spend all my hours fighting," Harry snapped. "Don't you dare take that from me."

"I don't give a damn about your seventeenth birthday," Hotch said in a low voice, "because I want you to make it to your eighteenth."

"I can't sit around waiting for an anvil to fall from the sky and kill me!" Hotch started to interrupt him but Harry cut him off before he could. "I can't wait for my seventeenth if it means ensuring someone else never makes it to their own birthday because we weren't there to protect them."

Hotch went quiet.

In a softer voice, Harry continued, "The reason why I don't want to stay is because the Curse attacked last time because you were dead. Guilt – that's what caused it. If it's going to be guilt again, then I'd rather it be a stranger than you or Jack." His voice cracked in the middle of the last sentence.

There were assassins after him. He couldn't honestly tell Harry he was safe, and Jack could never be protected enough until the war was entirely over.

"We'll make sure we're both protected," Hotch told him.

"I won't risk anyone else," Harry said, then took a deep breath. "Besides, we have an advantage this way. We know my birthday's in the middle of the month, but everyone else thinks it's July 31st. They think I have more time than I really have, and they won't expect us to push a harsh attack right now."

"You're not running out of time," Hotch said automatically. He didn't know if he believed that or not.

"Everyone's running out of time," Harry said with such certainty and empathy that a part of Hotch just wanted to grab him and Jack and take them to a place where war didn't exist.

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The assassins broke in that night.

Honestly, Hotch was just pissed.

He and the rest of the BAU had stayed late, with the excuse of doing homework but really just to be in the building while the students were resting up for their start into the new world the next morning. Hotch doubted the assassins even knew the kids were there.

Kids. The twins were nineteen, and they weren't the oldest. Still, they were his kids no matter what age they were.

The students were alerted instantly, not by any planned means, but rather by Morgan throwing all caution and subtlety to the wind and firing his gun at the nearest assassin. It made him the center of attention, but it did the job. Hotch, who hadn't known someone malevolent was there, was instantly aware, and the students were light enough sleepers that they were going to figure it out soon.
"Run," Rossi told him when both hurried out of their offices and almost collided with each other on the walkway. They quickly ducked as a spell flew over their heads. "If you stay, we'll have a clump of them here, but if you're moving they'll have to spread out."

"Rossi-"

"Everyone in this area knows the drill," Rossi dryly said. "They've cleared out as soon as they heard the sounds of a fight. No one will be in danger."

Hotch made an aggravated sound – no one liked being bait, but he loathed it with a burning passion deeper than just about anything except his loathing for prophecies, Umbridge, Foyet, and Dumbledore's twinkling eyes – right before he took the next chance his team gave him and moved out of the bullpen to the nearest hallway.

He had an idea. It was probably a horrible idea and there was no way it would work, but it was a plan and that was better than nothing. He couldn't die, not before Harry's seventeenth birthday.

Well. He couldn't die again, anyway, but technicalities.

The sounds of a fight dimmed for a couple of minutes, and he used the break to pull out his phone and call Garcia.

"Is there a fight going on?" she demanded.

"Yes. Where are you?"

"With-" She stopped, listening to someone. "Uh... Sorry, but, er, when did you call Blackwolf to get him involved in all of this?"

He was going to find out later who had suggested checking it was him and was going to get them...something. He didn't usually think up the best thank-you presents while on the run from assassins, so he set aside that concern for now.

"I never did. He called me out of the blue one night."

"Okay. I'm in the room where everyone was sleeping."

"Stay there," he ordered and, just in case anyone could hear him, he added, "And if you feel like going in the direction you would usually go to help, don't. The fight might be in that area by the time you get there."

"Oh dear. Please be careful."

He hung up, still hurrying on. The idea was absolutely insane and preposterous and could never in a million years work. Therefore, it was going to, because nothing normal was ever right.

A curse shot over his head and he threw himself to the side just quickly enough to avoid getting hit. Then he picked up the pace, dodging around a corner and through another team's break room. Whoever was in charge of making sure the FBI employees working in the areas surrounding the BAU remained oblivious had a job that Hotch was never going to envy if they had to explain messes like this all the time.

He picked up the pace, sprinting when he reached hallways and dodging around as many obstacles as he could as he took the most convoluted path. He regretted having to lead them to Garcia's office, but it was the only thing he could think to do. If they hadn't been closing in on Harry's birthday, he
wouldn't have risked it. But right now... Well, there weren't many options left open to him.

By the time he reached his tech analyst's office, he knew there were definitely more than a couple Death Eaters behind him, but he couldn't waste time wondering how so many had managed to evade the students for so long. The Curse, and all that. Instead, he just set his mind on one goal, and he barely suppressed his relief as he reached the desk.

His hand closed on his target, and he turned around just as the first Death Eater entered the doorway.

Hotch got three rapid shots off, hitting the Death Eater and one behind him. The third bullet was only a glancing blow, but Hotch hardly noticed. As the first two dropped, others moved to fill their places, and Hotch tried to empty the rest of the clip.

He still had one bullet to go when he heard "Avada kedavra!"

That green light that blinded him for the briefest of instances was starting to give him more feelings of déjà vu then walking through his old high school was, and he considered that was probably the sign of a couple of bad life choices.
"Forbid us something, and that thing we desire; but press it on us hard, and we will flee." - Geoffrey Chaucer, The Canterbury Tales

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When the cloaked figure appeared in front of Hotch, all bony hands and shaded edges, he would have laughed at the absurdity of it if not for how dire his situation was.

Death held out his hand to him.

Hotch did not move closer.

Death shifted towards him, lower body never moving but definitely nearer. His hand – bone-white, stereotypically so – reached for him again.

“I won’t go with you,” Hotch told him.

Death’s head gave an exaggerated tilt in a sardonic gesture. His fingers opened and closed, waiting.

“No,” Hotch said firmly. “I’m going back.”

Hotch swore he could hear an exasperated sigh. Death shifted closer yet. Behind him, Hotch could see the remaining Death Eaters trying to figure out what had happened between their dead comrades and the collapsed body behind Hotch. He knew that if he turned to look at it he would see himself. That was why he kept his gaze fixed on Death instead.

“I can’t die yet,” Hotch said again, and he held out his own hand, mirroring Death accidentally. He opened his own fingers, but there was a smooth stone there instead of an empty palm. One day he would wonder how the Resurrection Stone could cross between the realm of the living and the metaphysical. Not today.

Death retracted his own hand sharply and spread both of his arms wide in shock, cloak billowing with the overdramatized gesture. Hotch refused to shift back, kept his hand still and open.

Then Death leaned forward, so far that Hotch had to lean back in return if he didn’t want to get hit, clawed hands coming to surround Hotch’s without touching. The feeling – not the sound, the feeling – of a purr reverberated through his mind.

Hotch closed his hand and a hiss replaced the purr.

“In return for the Stone, you send me back to my body. No tricks. I live again.”

Death stopped. His back was arched in a curve that would have meant scoliosis for any human, and his neck contorted to peer up at Hotch. He remained like that, body completely motionless.

“Aaron…”

Hotch’s next breath was a sharp intake as he heard Haley’s voice. It would be so easy to step over into the other world, just let Death guide him to see her again.
Then he closed his eyes and forced himself to move past the automatic emotions that were stirred up. “I can’t,” he told Death.

The Death Eaters behind Death suddenly moved away from the doorway, darting back the way they had come. They were too slow, and Hotch caught sight of a few of them dropping from spells or bullets as they tried to flee. Anti-apparation wards prevented them from taking the fastest route away from Quantico, trapping them where they were.

“Take the Stone,” Hotch said.

Death twitched without moving, if that was possible.

“Aaron,” Haley said again, and Hotch knew the voice was fabricated because Haley would never have tried to draw him away like that.

Someone let out a furious shout, and he caught sight of Prentiss sprinting down the corridor towards Garcia’s office.

“I won’t make my children orphans,” he snarled as Death refused to budge. “Take the Stone, but you won’t get me today.”

Death straightened, cloak fabric falling into place belatedly, and gave him a satisfied hum in his mind. He’d passed the test. Then Death darted forward again, one hand freezing over his like an eagle’s claw over a fish, until he was only an inch away from Hotch’s face.

“The deal is made,” Death murmured aloud. It was a very feminine voice.

Icy bone made contact with Hotch’s palm for the briefest of moments as Death snatched the Stone from his palm. With an extravagant gesture, she threw herself back again to give herself enough space to pull her arm across her body and backhand him so hard that he-

Blinked, and found himself staring up at Prentiss. His back was on the floor, stiffer than he remembered it being less than two minutes ago, but even as the moments passed he felt his pumping heart easing the kinks out of his blood vessels and forcing his body into activity again.

“You were right,” he said as the shock on Prentiss’s face started to seem permanent.

She recovered remarkably quickly once he spoke. “About what in particular?”

“I don’t trust women in the field as much as I trust men.”

Prentiss stared at him, but this time there was exasperation in her eyes. “You’re…just now realizing this?”

“I didn’t realize the extent.”

“What do you mean?”

“Death’s a woman. I had her pegged as a man. Male. As a masculine creature.”

He pushed himself up onto his elbows just as Rossi, Hermione, and Morgan rushed into the room. A couple others were coming in behind them, but Hotch couldn’t see past everyone from his position on the floor. “What happened?” Morgan demanded, running forward. “Did you get hexed?”

“Technically, he got cursed,” Prentiss said, moving back from Hotch so she was no longer awkwardly leaning over him.
Snape appeared on Rossi’s side, the one not occupied by Hermione. He was scowling. “Did you get killed again?”

“At least he’s shortening his revival time,” Rossi pointed out. “What’d you do?”

“I gave Death the Resurrection Stone.” Hotch rubbed a hand across the back of his neck. It felt like he must have smacked it when he’d fallen.


“The Stone. It was on the Gaunt ring, and it fell off when the Horcrux was destroyed. Garcia put it on her desk, but she didn’t know what it was.” He rubbed his neck a bit harder. He hoped it had just been a bad fall and not his age catching up to him, because that would just be embarrassing after everything that had happened. “Harry told me he and Draco were in here one day and they accidentally activated it.”

“They knew it was here?” Prentiss asked.

“They didn’t know what it was. They told Garcia there was something magical about it, but when Blackwolf took a look at it he didn’t know what it was but there was nothing malevolent about it so Garcia just left it in here.”

“And so you… No, I’m not following,” Rossi admitted.

“He traded the Stone in return for Death leaving him alone,” Snape snapped irritably. “I refuse to be concerned about your wellbeing from now on, I’ll have you know.”

Morgan scratched his head in a bemused manner while Prentiss sat back and stared at the ceiling in exasperation. Hermione sighed, just as frustrated at getting worried over nothing, and turned to the smirking Rossi to mutter something about going to make sure everyone else was okay. For a moment, it looked like the situation could be slipped completely under the rug, never to be spoken of against except in offhanded stories about the rare, amusing tale from the job.

Then Hermione moved aside to check on the others, letting Hotch see who else had hurried in to check on him.

Harry wasn’t nearly as amused as the rest of the room.

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Morgan watched the heated arguing in Hotch’s office for a moment before turning back to his paperwork. He’d drawn the short straw this time and was assigned the fun job of explaining in nonmagical terms what exactly had caused the damage to the BAU bullpen this time. JJ was tucked away in her own office trying to figure out how to finagle the PR side of it, and Morgan knew he had no right to complain about his stack in comparison.

“How long have they been arguing?” Prentiss asked as she took her seat, gesturing with her coffee cup to the office behind her without making what she was doing too obvious. She didn’t even look up from her desk.

“How long have they been arguing?” Prentiss asked as she took her seat, gesturing with her coffee cup to the office behind her without making what she was doing too obvious. She didn’t even look up from her desk.

“About an hour and a half,” Reid calmly replied, also without glancing up. “Snape cast a muffling charm on the room at minute seven.”

“Looks like Harry finally hit his teenage rebellion phase,” Prentiss snickered.
“In the Hotchner family, you go big or you go home,” Morgan muttered. He paused. “Well, actually, you go big and you go away from home and then you go back home but that’s not how the idiom goes.”

The elevator doors opened and the three of them turned as Elle sprinted closer. She came to a halt beside Reid’s desk, gaze flickering around the room rapidly. “Something happened. What’d I miss?” Her tone was rapid, clipped, and not altogether expressed with the usual human concern one would expect. There was something calculating and ferocious in its place.

Morgan had heard that tone even before Elle had been bitten. Sometimes, he heard it in Prentiss when they captured a particularly horrible Unsub, or in Rossi when a case raised the man’s ire. Hotch rarely got to the point of using that tone – usually, the one responsible was already dead.

Hunters just had a certain, inhuman quality about them that expressed itself in different ways when their dark sides were revealed.

“Someone killed Hotch,” Reid said. “Again.”

Elle’s gaze locked onto Hotch’s pacing form in his office. She frowned. “What the hell did he do this time?”

“Deal with Death.” Prentiss smirked. “It’s a woman, by the way.”

The tension sank out of Elle and she returned the fist bump Prentiss offered her. “Damn straight it is.”

Morgan sighed.

Elle jerked her head in the direction of Hotch’s office. “Well, since they’re going to be arguing forever, and I’m late… Anything I can do?”

“Not really, unless you want to stalk the kids while they head over to the next world,” Reid suggested, chipper.

“Thought about it, but I can’t apparate. I’d lose them in a heartbeat,” Elle told him. She glanced back at the office. “Is it weird that I don’t know who’s going to win between the two of them?”

“No, but you can sure join the betting pool,” Reid said and pulled a hat out from under his desk. A small army of folded pieces of paper filled it. “Just write your name and your prophesized winner. I can’t say who the current favorite to win is, but it’s a close race.” Morgan’s expression froze, and that was all the warning Reid had before Rossi walked past him, obviously close enough to have heard most of what he’d said. “Ah. Um. I mean, we were just-“

Rossi dropped a folded slip on the top of the paper pile. “Harry. Hotch can’t apparate.” He walked away before anyone could say anything.

Elle grinned and snatched a Post-It and a pen off Reid’s desk.

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Harry stood, rigid, against the onslaught of his father’s infuriated determination. “I literally have no other way to show you how dangerous it is for me to stay,” he finally said, cutting his father off mid-rant. “You’ve died multiple times now, and this instance was hardly more than a complete accident in comparison to everything else that’s happened! The Curse is real, and I can’t just sit around waiting for it to hurt you or Jack again!”
“If you stay, I die; if you go, you die. You’re telling me those are the only two options. I don’t accept that,” Hotch snapped, “and you’re not leaving until you can prove we can’t protect everyone here.”

“I can’t risk you again!” Harry shouted at him. Something on Hotch’s desk rattled and Harry waved his hand sharply at it, forcing the magic affecting the item to stop abruptly. “This has happened too many times, and I’m not testing fate again!”

“You’re letting your emotions get the better of you, and you’re not thinking things through,” Hotch told him. “It doesn’t have to be me who dies. What if you go into a fight and you react a second too late? You’ll feel a lot worse if it’s one of the kids under you, Harry; don’t do that to yourself.”

“I can’t just choose that you’re the one who’s going to die by staying,” Harry said sharply. “And it sucks, but I clearly can’t protect you.”

The last sentence made Hotch’s eyes narrow, and Harry realized in retrospect that suggesting his father was helpless was probably not the best tactic he could have used. Especially after his father had just died. Again.

“You are not leaving this world until your birthday has passed,” Hotch enunciated slowly and clearly, quite obviously forcing himself to stay calm.

“You can’t stop me,” Harry replied in much the same manner.

Logically, he knew that was true. But even as he said it, he somehow knew he was going to get outmaneuvered if he really pushed the matter.

“I’m leaving, and I won’t check in until we’ve gone through two more worlds.” That was a bad idea he was surely going to regret in about forty-eight hours when he realized how nice it would be to let someone know if they were in deep shit or not, but the argument didn’t lend itself to letting that admittance slide. “If I don’t know you died, the Curse can’t affect me, so it wouldn’t have a reason to go after you. I can’t be worried about the Curse killing me through you while others are in danger.”

“If I let you out of my sight, you die,” Hotch said. “That’s not a theory. That’s a fact.”

“What can I say?” Harry said dryly. “My luck is absolute shit.”

Harry took his merry band of child-warriors and left in the middle of the next night. Hotch was furious. Reid told everyone in an undertone that he’d get the money to them when he could do so without risking his life, and when the QDA had returned since several of them owed money to the pool.

“Hotch probably would have died again if Harry had stayed,” Rossi quietly told Morgan as they walked up the stairs to meet the very man they were talking about for an early session to try to figure out who the Dark Lord was. It had become a pattern ever since Hotch had announced his certainty that they’d already met him. “I wouldn’t put much stock in curses except…”

“Except this one’s clearly not far from wrong,” Morgan muttered. “I get why Harry wanted to leave, but I just…can’t help but think we should have made him stay.”

“I know. But… We would have regretted it, when Hotch died and the Curse took Harry.”

He pushed open the door.
And promptly came to an abrupt halt.

Snape was standing in the middle of the room, arms crossed irritably over his chest. Hotch was slumped in a sitting position on the ground, back against his desk and blood leaking from numerous injuries.

“What…” Morgan breathed.

"Is he dead again?” Rossi demanded.

“No one tells Harry,” Snape said through gritted teeth, “until at least three months have passed. Understood?”

Rossi gave a defeated sigh while Morgan rubbed the bridge of his nose.

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Gideon was back while they were waiting for Hotch to resurrect himself again. And yes, they were waiting now. Snape had left and buried himself in a library or two or twelve, trying to figure out how his friend had managed to return multiple times. Just because she knew it would irritate him more, Prentiss told him that the paramedics who had shown up at Hotch’s house after Foyet had attacked him had said they were shocked Hotch had responded to CPR because they estimated his heart hadn’t been beating for several minutes.

Harry should have contacted them by now. He hadn’t, and that was making several fully grown adults internally freak out but they all did their best not to show it. Harry probably had it under control.

“We’re no closer,” Prentiss groaned, staring down at the papers in front of her. “Not at all.”

“Can we at least rule people out?” Morgan asked.

“We can rule out people we’ve already met,” Gideon said, “but we couldn’t rule out someone we haven’t met.”

“The people across the worlds have been generally the same, though,” Prentiss pointed out.

“Not as much as you’d think,” Elle argued. Like Gideon, she probably should have been elsewhere working on what was now actually her job, but she’d deferred all her other problems in favor of helping out her old team while they were down one profiler. “The two Harrys were really similar, but ours was definitely more level-headed and calmer.” She paused. “Actually, if the other Harry had been just a bit more temperamental, I could have made an argument for him being the Dark Lord.”

“But that Harry wasn’t a Light Lord too, right?” Reid asked.

“Yes. So the differences can be pretty potent. Most people were about the same, though. No one in the BAU seemed as strikingly different to me, and the few others I met were about what I expected.”

“This whole thing seems like on big cosmic joke that no one’s told the punchline for yet,” Morgan said grimly. “But I think we won’t like it when we hear it.”

Reid suddenly jolted in a short flail of arms as he realized something. “Gideon,” he said abruptly, whipping around in his seat to look at the older profiler. “Do you remember all the students who weren’t associated with the DA?”
Morgan frowned. “You don’t think one of them could be a Dark Lord.”

“They would have to be! Hotch pretty effectively ruled out Riddle as being the Dark Lord, in any world – if we met him, we definitely would have recognized him, probably even if he were polyjuiced. But Riddle was a Dark Lord. We agree on that bit, right?”

“There’s a Lord, a Dark and a Light, born roughly each generation, according to everything we’ve heard,” Rossi said carefully, nodding.

“Riddle’s old. That means his time as a Dark Lord is passing, which explains why he isn’t strong enough anymore to defeat a sixteen-year-old, but then a new Dark Lord has to have already been born. And that Dark Lord would also have to be old enough to beat us in two worlds, including our home territory, as well as manipulate the previous Riddle into doing what he wanted. Ergo, the Dark Lord would have to be at least as old as Harry.”

“And if it were a student, they could have stayed at the school and—” Prentiss froze. “Hang on. What if the student were younger than Harry? Not all of them were allowed to fight because they were too young! We would have completely overlooked them!”

“Stop,” Gideon said, mellow tone stopping the flurry of activity that had kicked up. “We don’t even know if the Dark Lord came from our world. It’s a possibility, but let’s not jump to conclusions. I’ll look into it, but I don’t think the student was one of ours. Supposedly, the Lords are charismatic that people around them immediately notice, but no student’s name stands out to me who wasn’t part of the DA.”

“But,” Rossi pointed out, “if the Dark Lord did have a counterpart in our world who was at the sight of the battle but wasn’t a DA member, he could have switched with himself to watch what was going on without any of us knowing.”

Prentiss spoke up when no one else said anything. “We keep calling this person a lord, but do we know for sure it’s not a lady? Magic hasn’t had a gender preference from what I’ve seen so far.”

“I had the same thought so I checked it out already,” Elle quickly said. “Light and Dark Lords match each other almost perfectly. If you looked at their backgrounds, they would be almost identical. The major difference between them is usually a single choice they made that took them opposite routes. Almost always, it’s either two Lords or two Ladies. For some reason, the last four generations have all had Lords, so habit has society calling those with that kind of level of power Lords; it’s not a gender preference in this case. And as for whether or not it could be a girl, it could be a Lady but since Harry’s not it’s highly unlikely.”

Morgan grinned at her. “Spent that time away from us doing some heavy research, didn’t you?”

“I couldn’t let you guys learn all the interesting stuff without me, now could I?”

“We’ve got an age range now,” JJ said before they could get too far off topic. “And a gender. We can probably assume it’s not a Hufflepuff either, since none here even became a Death Eater.”

“Is it possible,” Reid started to say and then immediately shut up.

“What?” Morgan asked.

“…Could a Harry in the other world be a Dark Lord? One who went through the same experiences with the Dursleys, but didn’t have a father to get him out of there?”

The room went dead silent.
"We’ll deal with that if we come to it," Gideon said quietly.

"Shouldn’t we warn Harry about the possibility?” Prentiss asked.

"If I know Harry half as well as I think I do,” Rossi replied, “he’s already considered it.”

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In the other world, Forty-Two, Harry had known as soon as he’d stepped onto solid ground that they weren’t going to make it. For one thing, they had almost immediately been attacked by a wave of Death Eaters they had just barely managed to push back. The pack had clearly been waiting for them, and it had taken everything they’d had to secure the New Zealand cave so that they had a way back home. After a couple of weeks, they had determined it wasn’t worth the fight to continue pressing longer and they had returned without ever learning how the rest of the world was doing.

Harry regretted that more than he could say. But he knew it was the best choice he could’ve made when the alternative was not saving another world.

There was nothing immediately wrong with Twenty-Nine, the current world they were standing on. Something just set Harry’s nerves on end, and he couldn’t for the life of him say what. Still, they checked out their usual haunts in America and England. The American wizarding government was entirely uninterested, as expected, in the war in Britain so the QDA went straight to Britain. The war had started over there, but it hadn’t started in full swing and it was hard to tell who was winning.

"We need to win in the next couple of days," Harry said and got quick nods in response. "And I know everyone’s disappointed about the last world, but think of it this way – even if we'd brought the rest of the DA in, we wouldn’t have had enough people to turn the tides. We can go back. We just need to make sure we can still go forward."

They were waiting in a small park in London for the rest of their spotters to return. So far, most of them had come back saying the world seemed to be on the same track as Six, which was nice because then they knew what generally was going on, but it also meant they weren't prepared for what was different.

Fred shifted his weight for what was probably the fifth time in half a minute. Harry sighed internally. A great team they might be, but patient they were not.

"Okay, clearly this world isn't that different from what we learned in Six," Harry said grudgingly, "so it probably won't be harmful to take out some small Death Eater groups while we're waiting for everyone else to get back."

Hermione gave him a level look that told him just what she thought of that idea. He tried to pretend he didn't see it.

"We can't be seen looking like ourselves, so if you're going to go, you'll need to grab some pre-made polyjuice and you'll have to pretend to be someone else during the attack." There, that should keep them occupied long enough for the rest of the spotters to get back. Hermione looked marginally satisfied.

Fred perked up immediately. "I can take my unit," he offered.

"Be back here within an hour and let us know where you're at in half that time," Harry told him, and Fred and George took Firin and left for their miniature mission.

"I don't like splitting up," Hermione muttered to him.
"They need a win, even if it's a small one," he responded just as quietly. "And it gives them a chance to burn off some energy so they don't enter a big fight in the wrong state of mind." He glanced at Draco and said, louder, "Anything?"

The Slytherin's laptop was out on his lap, but he shook his head. "No major differences that I'm seeing from the other world, but I could just be missing something. I'm not that well-versed in what happened over there so I can only really look for something that directly contradicts what I know."

"Could you contact that world's Garcia, like you did when you connected with our Garcia at Hogwarts?" Harry asked.

"Not really. I would have had to set up the channel while I was over there."

"Harry," Neville said quietly, and he turned just in time to see a boy Jack's age hurry up to him.

The boy stuck his arm out, offering him an opened flip phone. "It's for you," he said. He could have been the British twin of Jack.

Harry took it, alarms ringing in his head. "Thank you." The boy smiled and ran back off again. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Daphne quietly push herself off the tree she had been leaning against and start to follow. Harry raised the phone to his ear. "Hello?" Nothing. "...Hello?"

"What is it?" Ron asked beside him. Most of the group had been sitting on the ground or on one of the two park benches they had conglomerated around, but now several were starting to stand up.

"No one's on the line," he said. "It's-"

"This is SSA Hotchner."

What the hell.

Harry stood there for a moment, phone gripped tightly in his hands.

Annoyed, his not-father said, "Hello?"

Harry resisted the urge to shout an expletive. It was hard, but he managed. "Sorry, I think I had the wrong number," Harry said, trying not to make it sound like he was speaking through gritted teeth.

Before he could hang up, Hotchner snarled, "I sincerely doubt it."

Now resisting the urge to bang his head against the nearest metal object, Harry asked, "Why's that?"

"Because someone just sprinted up to me saying you had news for me about Foyet." Now the fury in his tone made more sense.

Harry turned around in a complete circle, making sure no one was watching, then held out his hand to Hermione with his palm facing her. She frowned at the display of magic as he forced blue words onto his palm, but she frowned harder when she read the message. "I don't know who that is."

Hermione pulled out her phone and started calling Blackwolf like Harry had asked. How she was going to explain they needed help, he had no clue, but it was a start.

"Don't play games with me," Hotchner snapped, and for a split second Harry was almost afraid as uncensored anger poured out through his words.

Then he recovered himself. "I'm not. Who told you I knew something?"
It was way too coincidental that this call came just as Firin left while spotters were still out. Someone was trying to split them up.

And yet...no one even knew they were there.

There was a short pause, and Harry could picture Hotchner looking for the person who'd given him the phone.

"They're gone, aren't they?" Harry asked. He grimaced, eyes scanning futilely for the boy and Daphne. Both had vanished. "So's the kid who just gave me this phone."

"You're saying someone did the same thing to you?" Hotchner asked doubtfully.

"Harry." Hermione jerked her head slightly over Ron's shoulder. Harry's gaze flickered in that direction, and he saw two police officers walking towards them far too casually. Seeing the large group, they stopped and turned the other way.

"Wow, you tracked this call fast," Harry said, impressed. He stopped. "Wait. Please tell me you're the one who sent for the police and not someone else." He really didn't need another unknown variable.

"Go with them peacefully. They won't hurt you."

"Yeah, they're sure not the German police," Harry agreed, hand moving to his pocket to reach for his wand. "Sorry, but that's not an option right now. If I can, I'll come by Quantico and explain what's going on."

He flipped the phone closed without explaining anything else. "Neville, get Daphne and meet us at the second rendezvous point." Neville apparated away, theoretically in the direction she had gone. "Everyone else..."

They nodded and someone cast a Notice-Me-Not spell on the site they were at. Within one breath and the next, they all appeared at an abandoned warehouse they had found that suited their purposes.

"Contact the spotters," Harry told his communications liaisons.

"What the hell is going on?" Roger demanded.

"Someone's threatening us."

"It's got to be the Dark Lord," Ron said, saying what everyone was thinking. "No one else would have even been looking for us here, let alone thinking to call this world's Hotch to distract you."

Harry grimaced. "You're probably right. I hope you're not, but you probably are." To Hermione, he asked, "What'd you tell Blackwolf?"

He stopped as he realized she was still on the phone with him. She moved the speaker away from her mouth. "Just that the Hotchners are in danger. He wants an explanation of why we think that." When Harry paused, she moved the mouthpiece back into place. "It's a really long story and we need to make sure a bunch of other people are safe so we don't have time to tell it, but someone just made an obvious attempt to distract us from the Death Eaters and him from a killer he's been going after. We're worried there might be someone magical threatening him when he's not been told about magic."
After a couple of moments, she nodded. "Thank you." She brought the phone down. "He said he'll take care of it."

"They wanted us to split up," Theodore said, "but why weren't they more subtle about it?"

"Maybe they didn't want us to do that," Hermione said slowly. "Maybe they just wanted us to reconvene and..."

"Do what? Sit around and talk? Or did they know about this place and we're about to get raided?" Ron pointed out.

"Well, then let's do the opposite of all that," Harry said, resigning himself to the very thing he hadn't wanted to do. "Let's go knock out some Death Eaters while they're not expecting us."

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"What?" he asked innocently while Twenty-Nine's Moody stared at him irritably. Something blew up behind him and, with Seamus back home, he could hold the twins responsible.

"This isn't funny," Moody growled.

"Sorry, we just grabbed the first hair samples we could find," Harry insincerely apologized. "Just happened to be a bunch of your students."

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Ginny leaning backward out of a window while she goo-bombed a group of Death Eaters who were frantically trying to shake off the mutating green stuff they were repeatedly finding themselves covered with. He thought he saw Luna trying to hold her in place, and he decided he didn't want to know what Blaise was doing if his other two friends were hanging out windows.

"Really."

"Well, something like that, but the truth is a lot more complicated and you really don't want to know."

Someone screamed. George – or maybe it was Fred – snickered. Harry kept himself firmly facing Moody.

"By the way, we've got at least twenty captive already. We don't have a place to put them, so do you want to hang onto them for now?"

Moody's real eye narrowed at him. The other watched something careening through the sky. There was no collision that Harry heard with the ground or any sort of object, and he wasn't sure if that was good news or not.

"You're from the other world, aren't you?"

Harry stared at him. "How did you know?" he demanded.

"Other than all the Seers having complete breakdowns because of the arrival of a new Light Lord?"

There was a crashing noise, but Harry didn't know if it was the Huther unit destroying more public property or their element of surprise committing suicide.

"...So you know about that."
"Just about anyone who's anyone knows about that," Moody told him.

"Well...damn. Okay." He thought about it for a moment. "You've got control any Death Eaters we catch, right? We can go do something else?"

He jerked reflexively as someone appeared beside Moody, but it was an unmasked, open face, and he didn't blast them backwards like he would have if he'd seen a Death Eater mask. For a moment, long red hair hid her expression from view as the wind tossed it around, and then her features came into view.

He blinked. "You're Lily Potter."

She threw her hair out her face in a somewhat violent gesture, and Harry smiled slightly at the irritated motion. "Yeah. And you're the Light Lord. Glad to be introduced."

She didn't sound glad, and it took Harry a moment to realize why. "Oh. Yeah, uh... I don't know what to ask you to call me."

"Is that your patronus?" Lily asked, nodding behind him. He turned slightly. Down the street, Angelina was flying alongside the charging monolith as it knocked through a line of Death Eaters. The young witch was hexing Death Eaters as they passed, using their distraction from the elephant to her advantage.

"Yeah."

"What do you call it?"

"Atlas."

She frowned for a moment, then shrugged. "I suppose it'll do for now."

"I don't really like it."

"Suck it up."

Despite himself, he couldn't help but laugh. "We'll sort it out later," he compromised.

Hermione apparated into existence beside him. "Looks like the Order's got it from here," she said, only briefly glancing at Lily. "You want to...?"

Harry nodded before she finished the sentence. She didn't want to flat out state that he was going to be leaving, no matter how trustworthy the people who were listening probably were.

"You aren't under polyjuice," Moody stated.

"No," Harry admitted. "We'll get back to all that later, though."

He apparated away quickly, reappearing in the park they had left a couple of hours later. He probably should have been worried about leaving a group of mostly-teenagers unsupervised; their talent and ability aside, they were probably safer in Hermione's hands than his.

Thanking the universe once again for allowing portkeys to work across the Veils, he vanished and appeared in Virginia in the next breath. From there, it was a quick matter of rapid apparations until he was standing in the Quantico training grounds, in the area that in his world had been fenced off so Elle could use it during her transformations.
He picked up his phone and called Blackwolf. The Apache wasn't slow to answer.

"John Blackwolf."

"This is..." Shit. "...You wouldn't believe me if I told you. My friend just called you a while ago about the BAU’s situation. We wrapped up most of what was going on and I'm in America right now, in case you need anything from me."

"I'm sending a representative to Quantico. She should be there in the next ten minutes. Meet here at the front doors and she can get you through. Their methods might seem unorthodox, but the BAU knows what they're doing. If anyone can figure out what's going on, they can."

Harry smiled. "You don't have to convince me. I've seen enough of their work to have faith."

"The witch meeting you is named Travis. She's going to talk to you before you both go up there. Answer all her questions honestly and fully."

"I'll try, but the story's long and complicated. We probably won't have enough time." Then he paused, remembering what Moody said. "Well... Actually... Have you noticed odd behavior with your Seers?"

"What about it?" Blackwolf asked immediately.

"I'm part of the group that's causing problems," Harry admitted.

"It's only an individual we're hearing about."

"...That individual brought a group."

"How old are you?"

Harry closed his eyes. "I'm seventeen within the month," he said quietly.

"Do you know how it's going to happen?"

That wasn't even something he'd considered. "...No." He stopped. "Wait. Wait, I...maybe. Professor Trelawney... You know her?"

"She comes from a line of some of the most respected Seers in British history."

"She once said she saw the Grim and leopard in my tea leaves. But I... Well, I died before, and I don't think I've met a...leopard."

"You may not have physically met them to cross their path," Blackwolf warned him. "If a Trelawney predicted your fate, there is nothing you can do to avoid the event. I'm sorry to hear that she saw a leopard in your leaves."

Blackwolf in his time hadn't thought he was in any danger. He'd specifically told Hotch that-

He'd told Hotch that, and Harry when he was thirteen. Blackwolf must have known Harry would probably live a few more years at the most, and he'd decided to give him respite by hiding his future from him. Telling him that there was nothing to worry about when he was their main authority on magical fortune had ensured they wouldn't think of his death until it was too late.

Maybe he'd done the right thing, but all Harry could feel was his stomach getting heavier and his head getting lighter. He had honestly believed he was going to make it.
Harry nodded. "Is..." He broke off. "I know this is weird, but... I knew you, in the other world." He tried to gather his words, but they weren't coming. Blackwolf waited. "I'm running out of time."

"Do you know where I'm headquartered?"

"Yes."

"Once you're done at Quantico, come over and we'll talk."

"All right. Thank you."

"You don't need to thank me," Blackwolf said right before he hung up.

Harry didn't want to think he was dying. He'd certainly managed to avoid giving his father that impression. But it was getting harder to dismiss.

For now, there were other things to worry about.

He met Travis at the front entrance. She stared at him and immediately blurted, "You're the Light Lord."

Harry sighed, tired and resigned. "Does anyone not know?"

"You just... feel like it. To be honest, I thought all the Seers were just collaborating on one big joke, since no Light Lord lives past-" She quickly shut her mouth, face flushing furiously. "Oh. Sorry."

The question was burning on her face as hard as her embarrassment was. "I don't have much longer," he answered.

"Sorry," she repeated.

"Let's just figure this out."

The two of them made their way up to the BAU's bullpen and found it in a complete flurry of motion. Most of the team was gathered in the conference room, and Travis immediately started in that direction. Harry held her back. Instead, he directed her to JJ's office, where the blond woman was standing on the opposite side of her desk and rapidly answering a phone call. She was just putting it down when the two of them reached the door.

"Excuse me," she said, starting to move past them, "but we're not taking on any other cases right now."

"I'm the one who got put on the prank call with Agent Hotchner," Harry said.

JJ stopped immediately. "Follow me," she ordered.

More accurately, Travis followed Harry and Harry followed JJ. The feeling of someone trailing in his footsteps like a loyal dog because of his growing power had never felt so literal. She was practically bouncing in his tread, but he had no clue how to remind her they were about to enter a room of people tracking a mass murderer.

He frowned to himself just as JJ was about to open the door. How had the difference in the worlds led to the Potters and Foyet still living?

"Hotch," JJ called and the room temporarily quieted as a couple heads turned towards her. Then the room went almost silent as they realized she wasn't alone. She gestured to Harry. "He says he's the
kid."

Despite being almost seventeen and a war general, that wasn't nearly as insulting as it should have been coming from JJ. She probably thought of anyone old enough to take care of as a 'kid.' She was a lot like Molly, now that he thought about it. Except she had a gun. And could keep her calm long enough to work in PR. And handled gruesome murders with a team. And only had one kid. And could be called an adrenaline junkie if only because of her association with the BAU. So, really, nothing at all like Molly.

Garcia, who had a laptop set up on the table, frowned and glanced up at Hotch. "The phone call was traced back to London," she said quietly even though her voice still carried in the silent room.

Shit. And he'd positively identified himself as having been in London since he'd told Hotch he could see the police coming towards him.

He saw Travis glance at him out of the corner of his eye but he kept a blank face. They couldn't prove anything.

He pulled his hand out of his pocket and held up a plane ticket, transfigured moments before. It wouldn't hold up to scrutiny unless he could make a few more changes, but he thought McGonagall would still probably be impressed by how quickly he had managed it. "Grabbed the first flight."

Travis was definitely not hiding how impressed she was. At least she wasn't openly gaping.

"It takes nine hours to get from London to New York," Reid said slowly. "It's been three."

"I know," Harry sighed.

"We can arrest you for obstruction of justice," Rossi sternly told him.

"I just need to drop off information and go," Harry said honestly. "We think someone's trying to muddle two operations at the same time, this one and an British insurrection, to counteract both. I'm here to make sure the operations stay separate."

"English?" Morgan asked, frowning. "I think they have other problems besides criminal investigations right now."

Harry had no clue how much the rest of the world knew about what was going on in Britain, but he could bet there had been a lot of lying and misrepresentation of the facts. "London's about to have even more," he admitted.

"What happened in London?" Travis asked, confused.

"Turn on the news and you'll find out."

"I'll find out what the British government is saying," Travis qualified and Harry grimaced sharply at her, trying to remind her wordlessly that they didn't have time to go into that with the BAU.

"What do you mean?" Reid asked and Harry rubbed the bridge of his nose.

"How do you even know about that?" Harry glanced at Garcia as she spoke, not even glancing up from her laptop. "London just hit the news. But this says it's a terrorist attack."

"They took the Ministry?" Harry muttered to Travis, who nodded. "Damn. I guess that's next."

"What?" Rossi demanded.
"Let's just say the news is going to be changing its tune in twenty-four hours. If I can point you in Foyet's direction, can you promise to stay out of anything weird like this? We're already handling more fronts than we should and I don't want to spend half a day explaining everything again to you guys..."

"You know where Foyet is?" Hotchner wasn't far from Harry now, and Harry had about five panicked seconds of reconsidering his life choices in the last three hours before remembering that he was a wizard and could in fact apparate if he was endangered because Hotchner decided to shoot the irritating teenager in the conference room.

"No, but I can find him."

"Er," Travis interrupted.

He frowned at her. "I can't do that?"

"...Kind of illegal."

"...How illegal?"

"I think its fifteen years minimum."

"Well, I've got fifteen days maximum, so I guess that's not a problem," Harry pointed out with a morbid laugh. Travis opened and closed her mouth before tilting her head to concede. He turned back to the BAU. "So, I find Foyet, you guys stop searching?"

"We aren't negotiating," Hotchner said, and maybe if someone else had spoken Harry would have overlooked the statement. But there was a promise in Hotchner's glare, assurance that he would be tracking the roots of this mystery down.

"No, I guess we're not," Harry said regretfully. To Travis, he said, "No obliviating."

"What? Are you sure?" She paused. "Wait, do you want me to break the Statute?"

"I don't give a damn what you do, but don't obliviate them. If shit keeps going down, you don't want to explain the same thing to them seven different times, do you?"

Before she could respond, he turned and strode quickly out of the room before anyone could stop him. The moment he was out of sight of the room's occupants and the two people he heard trying to follow him, he apparated away to a nearby field.

A half hour later, Harry called Hotchner again – and he knew this would do nothing to satisfy the man's curiosity but he didn't have time to explain – and left the phone open in a tree. He leaned against the trunk, watching calmly as Foyet crossed the green to take a shortcut to the other side of the park, and then he stepped out when Foyet was close enough.

"Pardon me," he said, and with some degree of surprise he realized he was shifting a mild American accent to a strong London one. "Would it be too intrusive for me to ask if you could tell me how to get to the subway?"

"It's a couple blocks that way," Foyet said, pointing. "Take a left on Maybury." He tilted his head at Harry. "You don't want directions."

Harry stared at him, dumbfounded. "You know, I was excellent at hiding in plain sight for years," Harry said, annoyed beyond belief, "and the last twenty-four hours, I've had five people identify me
all but by name. You know how infuriating that is?"

"I can imagine it's a real pain."

"That's putting it lightly. Have a good night."

"What?"

Harry raised his hand. "Morpheosi."

Foyet dropped like a rock.

Belatedly, Harry looked around to make sure no one had seen that. There was a couple who had been strolling past on a nearby sidewalk but who were now stopped and gaping at him.

"He had too much to drink," Harry told them entirely unconvincingly. They hurried away, and Harry really couldn't blame them.

He moved Foyet over to a park bench and had just transfigured handcuffs out of a branch when he looked up and saw the tabby cat sitting on the bench right in front of his face. He froze immediately, panicked thoughts starting to run through his mind.

Then the cat meowed, stretched, and jumped off the bench. Harry's heart slowly returned to normal and he scolded himself internally for being so superstitiously gullible as he attached the handcuffs to Foyet's wrist and the bench.

He could hear police sirens in the distance, and he stepped away from the scene as far as he could go while still remaining within sight of Foyet. A couple of minutes later, two cars pulled up on the street in the direction Foyet had been heading and started walking towards the unconscious man. Only when Harry saw them pulling him to his feet and leading him to the cars did he vanish with a crack.

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Hotch looked supremely irked when he revived himself again.

"Who broke into your office?" JJ asked curiously when he was awake.

"More assassins. Snape's assured me that they've added more protections." He didn't look overly satisfied by that, but perhaps that was simply because he was so irritated about dying again.

"I'm surprised they even had time to learn you weren't dead anymore," she said.

"They were working separately."

"Ah. Hey, how'd you come back this time?"

"I told Death I'd get her the other two Deathly Hallows the next two times I died."

JJ's eyebrows shot up. "Date with death, huh?" He gave her a look. "Uh oh."

"Death apparently doesn't date enough," he said through gritted teeth and she barely managed to stop herself from snorting in amusement.

"Did she try to grope you?" she asked, intending it as a joke. Hotch's expression darkened further and this time she had to bite the inside of her cheek. "Oh, Hotch. I bet she's just surprised you returned multiple times."
"Now I've got to somehow get both Hallows and keep them on me in case I die," he muttered, frustrated.

"Well, you know where one is."

"I know where the second is, too, but I doubt its owner will give it to me." He frowned. "I don't know if Death will accept that excuse."

"It's going to have to work." She was still fighting a smile and he gave her a last, half-heartedly irritated look as he left the room, letting her bury her face in her hands and laugh to her heart's delight.

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"When did she see the leopard?" Blackwolf asked.

The two were sitting in his office, both studiously ignoring the panicked phone call Blackwolf had just received from Travis about the number of agencies who were now trying to track down Harry for breaking a list of laws banning involvement in muggle agency operations, not to mention his breaches of the Statute of Secrecy. Blackwolf didn't seem to care that he was supposed to be in the middle of arresting Harry.

"In my third year. Four years ago, almost exactly," Harry said quietly. "Look, if I'm going to get killed...fine, but... Is anyone else around me in danger?"

Blackwolf sighed. "That's not an answer I have for you. The leopard is a sign of an event, but only one factor of that event. Anything could help when you encounter it."

"Would you think that it'd be a good idea to stay away from other people?" Harry pressed. "Even if I don't know what's going to happen, why would it be a good idea to risk it?"

Blackwolf watched him for a long moment. "Why are you asking me this?"

"Because...you knew what to do, in the other world." And then added, "Or at least, you were good at pretending you knew."

"I think you'll find that a lot of wise men are like that," Blackwolf agreed with mild amusement. "But while are you asking me these particular questions? They're not provoking the answers you want to hear."

Harry opened his mouth but nothing came out.

"You don't want me to tell you it's not going to hurt. The symbol's a leopard - that doesn't suggest a painless end. You don't want me to tell you to run off on your own to defeat the Dark Lord – you don't have time to find him. And you don't want me to give you a solution – you don't think there's any hope. So what are you actually looking for?"

"Can I..." He swallowed. A memory of lying on a couch, arm weakly wrapped around Jack, danced through his mind. "Can I go home to say goodbye to everyone? Or... If I do that, am I risking them?"

Blackwolf tapped his fingers on the arm of his chair. "That depends. How close are you to your family?"

"About as close as I can get."
"Then no."

Harry stared at him in surprise, having expected the opposite. "What?"

"If you're really as close as you think you are, then they should already know everything you would tell them. There's no reason for you to go back besides comfort, and to be honest, you seem like you'll be more stressed by potentially endangering them then you will be comforted by their presences. So no, I don't think you should go back." He shrugged, pushing his chair back and getting to his feet. "But I don't really know you or your family."

"Perhaps not, but I think you're right," Harry said slowly.

Blackwolf opened a filing cabinet as he spoke. "Don't just listen to me because you want someone else to take the decision out of your hands. Make an honest choice. If you're really a Light Lord, you damn well better have the ability to do that at least."

"I've been making worse choices, about how other people might die, for almost two years now," Harry told him without turning to look at him. "I don't want to deal with my own. It's stupid, but... I don't."

There was a short pause, and then a ruffle of papers and Blackwolf handing him a file over his shoulder. He took it, opened it, and found a listing of names. "A list of people who knew where to find the other Veils," Blackwolf said. "Even if you don't make it, you're probably going to send a group over to try to handle the rest of the worlds."

Harry smiled slightly. "I've got a good group." He paused. "How do you know I'm really the Light Lord?"

"I can feel it."

He sighed. "The sixth person today, including a mass murderer."

"You give off an energy." He tilted his head. "I can't tell if it's from your natural power or the incoming Light Curse."

"I don't want either one," Harry said.

"That's not a choice you get." His eyes examined Harry critically for a moment. "When you meet the leopard," he started slowly, "what are you going to do?"

Harry frowned. "What do you mean?"

"What do you think you'll do to him?"

Harry hesitated, but the question didn't take a lot of effort to come to a conclusion. "Well, leopards are threats to people who hurt them or something they own, right? So...if it was someone following one of the Dark Lords because they believe in that kind of superior-race ideology, then I'll fight back. But if the leopard's got a legitimate point... I probably won't do anything." Blackwolf stared at him for a little while longer. "What?"

"I don't mean this to offend, but I wish I could see how you die," Blackwolf told him.

A curious statement to make. "Why?"

"I imagine it will be something people will make legends of." Harry looked away, and after a
moment, Blackwolf put a comforting hand on his shoulder. "Harry, death isn't the end."

He thought of the look on his father's face when he remembered his time in limbo. "You don't need to tell me that twice."
Still a Teenager

Chapter by AlexTheReaper (daviesroyal), daviesroyal

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"I don't know half of you half as well as I should like, and I like less than half of you half as well as you deserve." - J.R.R. Tolkien, The Fellowship of the Ring

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Hotch didn't sleep in the days leading up to Harry's birthday. His actions were steadily bordering on manic and he knew it, but he couldn't stop himself and no one made an effort to. He even appealed to Dumbledore to try to get someone to tell him what world Harry had gone to and how he could get through; the headmaster wouldn't tell him.

If he'd been objective about it, Hotch would admit that it had probably been a bad idea to burn all his bridges with Dumbledore, but he'd crossed the Rubicon and there was no point crying over spilt milk now.

Their efforts to deduce the identity of the Dark Lord couldn't go fast enough within just a few days with so little information, but it was all he had to work on while he was waiting for information back on where Harry had gone. The lack of progress in that field as entirely unsatisfactory. All they had was a general age, gender, and nothing else. No progress had since been made.

Then Harry was seventeen, and Hotch was trapped in his damned office with no way of knowing if Harry was all right.

Blackwolf sat down across from him. He hadn't been called, and Hotch wasn't even quite sure how he knew what had been going on. Despite being their new unit chief and having completely taken over Strauss's role since the BAU was currently working predominantly with magical cases, he hardly kept in contact with them, preferring to trust their better judgment and only coming in when they had a question or needed something.

"I heard," was how he started the conversation.

"Why am I not dead?" Hotch demanded. "Three times now, and I'm not dead."

"It could be a curse," Blackwolf hedged, "but I can't say for sure. Hotch, strange things happen in the magical world. Maybe your luck just hasn't run out yet."

"You know what's going on."

His stern look made Blackwolf pause before answering. "I have my suspicions," he said slowly, "but telling them to you could...prevent future events that would be rather beneficial. You're...doing something, for lack of a better term, on accident, and that's why you keep coming back. If you know you're doing it, I don't know if you'll be able to save yourself again."

Hotch glared slightly at the response but Blackwolf didn't budge. "Is Harry affected by it too?"

"He won't come back to life like a boomerang, if that's what you're asking," Blackwolf replied, grim. "His revival in the cemetery was purely accidental."
Hotch felt his shoulders slump in relief and he leaned back minutely.

Blackwolf tilted his head, eyes narrowing at the reaction. "What?"

If he had been talking with Strauss, she wouldn't have even noticed how he took the information. It was nice to finally work under someone who could pick up on the same behavioral patterns his team could. "I expect I'm dying often because I have to come back often." Blackwolf didn't respond and that was enough to count as an affirmative. "That means Harry's not cursed the same way."

"You'd rather he not come back?"

"Of course I want him to return if he dies," Hotch snapped, then glanced away as he more reluctantly admitted, "I'd just rather he not bounce back and forth, like I've done."

He didn't want him stuck in limbo, not like what Hotch had had to endure. Months of isolation and solitude, communicating only with someone who thought he wasn't real. That was something Hotch wouldn't wish on any but some of the worst criminals he'd seen.

"I don't know which world he went to," Blackwolf told him quietly, "and I don't know where all the Veils are." He paused. "Hotch... What's going to happen? If he dies?"

"Hermione will take his post and continue through the other worlds. I don't know if they'll manage to make it, but they've had devastating blows before and pushed through."

"When will she contact us?"

Hotch grimaced, rubbing his forehead with one hand. "I don't know. She'll probably come back and do it in person, but after they finish handling the world they're in. She knows it would be wasteful to let him die and not save the world he was trying to protect."

"Hotch..." He paused. "What if... What if he makes it?"

"He swore he wouldn't come back for a couple of months at least, in case the Curse catches up to him belatedly. We won't know for sure if he's dead or not for a while."

Blackwolf winced. "He has a point," he said. "No matter how painful it would be for you to hear of him dying, it would be the second time he had reason to feel responsibility for your death."

"We're both going to get hurt." Hotch shook his head. "We just can't agree on who's going to take the brunt of it."

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The rest of the day passed in flurries of motion and tense periods of silence. The entire BAU team remained right where they were in the office, waiting for news from someone about what had happened. A couple of others had joined them, including Blackwolf, who had never left, Travis, Sirius, and Remus. The last two had been unexpected but Hotch had no trouble letting them stay.

Midnight passed with no word, but no one took it as a good sign. There were a few whispers that maybe Harry hadn't died alone and no one was left to report his death, and the idea of losing all the children at once was almost too much to bear.

The early morning hours crept past. Some of the gathered group split off to try to get something done, whether it was profiling the Dark Lord again or analyzing the current battle situation in Britain, but most silently admitted it to be a lost cause and simply remained where they were.
Finally, Ron appeared. He wasn't smiling. The gathered group通过 him off for a moment, but he plowed through, looking at Hotch. "Sorry – I know you guys have been busy, but do you have more for the Dark Lord's profile?"

Everyone stared at him.

"A little bit," Reid finally said. "Nothing more you can use until we put it all together, though."

Ron nodded. "Okay." He pulled a small notebook out from nowhere and handed it to JJ, who was the closest BAU member to him. "Hermione put that together. Some things she noticed about the Dark Lord's recent actions. She thought you might find it useful." He waved at the group in farewell. "All right, my time's up. Thanks!" He made a movement to leave and half the room practically jumped towards him to stop. "Oh, oh, right, sorry! We think we might be winning this world within the next few days, or at least making enough headway that it would be hard to lose, so we should be fine."

More staring. "And?" Travis pressed when he didn't say anything more.

"Er. Harry's still stubborn and refusing to come over in case something catastrophic happens?" He shrugged. "Sorry. We couldn't persuade him. Okay, seriously though, I've got to go. We were about to head out to check on the Ministry. We think we took it back but we're not totally sure. Bye!"

And then he was gone.

"So," Rossi said slowly, "I think we can state with certainty that it's unlikely that Harry's dead."

"Ron was acting very weird, though," Prentiss said. "He should have been much more relieved."

"No." Everyone looked at Hotch. "No, Ron wouldn't be worried yet. When Harry was given to the Potters, they changed his birthdate. Everyone in the wizarding world thinks he was born at the end of July, not the middle."

"That's true," Sirius abruptly agreed, nodding quickly. "Remus and I just heard by happenstance that that wasn't the case. And knowing Harry, I'll bet he didn't think anything of it and didn't tell anyone."

"What does this mean?" Prentiss asked Blackwolf, and the room practically turned as one.

"It means," Blackwolf said slowly, "that Trelawney was right."

No one spoke. Then Sirius snickered and Remus smacked him.

"About what?" Reid asked.

"She predicted that Harry would become a red dragon. If he's survived to seventeen, I think it's unlikely that he won't become one if he isn't already, especially since he's going from world to world and fulfilling that prophecy as well. I doubt Harry will die from anything less than a Dark Lord. Or eventual old age."

Morgan broke the strained silence with a sigh. "Pass over Hermione's notebook," he said. "Let's get something figured out tonight."

"And de-stress by profiling a Dark Lord," Reid agreed, moving closer to Morgan's desk so the two of them and JJ could all look at the notebook at the same time.
"You're head's going to be grey in the next five years," Rossi said beside Hotch.

He had to agree with that.

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The team moved to the conference room. Even without sleep, they were eager enough to see what Hermione had to tell them that they didn't bother going home to get some rest first.

"Before we start analyzing, let's just look at what we know we've got," Gideon said.

"The Seers know that there's been a change in the world," Prentiss said. "Not only that, but they actually managed to convince people this time."

"The other world had a difference that allowed both Foyet and the Potters to still be alive," Reid added.

"The QDA won quicker there than they did last time," JJ pointed out. "But they're not working with the locals as well. They're cutting them out of the process. It lets them win quickly, but they don't know if the locals are prepared to hold the gains they've made."

"The Dark Lord has to be trying to get the other worlds' Hotchners involved for some reason," Rossi said.

"Let's focus on that for a moment," Hotch suggested. "It seems too obvious, after everything else that's happened. That might not even be him."

"Or it could still be him, but there's a deeper, ulterior motive that he's hoping we don't notice," Morgan said. "What else is accomplished by making them aware of each other, besides distraction from both sides?"

"Divided resources," JJ said slowly, knowing that wasn't the answer but saying it anyway.

"Trying to get Harry attached to others?" Reid winced at the end of his own statement. "But they didn't meet under good circumstances this time..."

"That's true," Hotch said. "Actually, my other self would have been even more suspicious of him. My attention would be more divided than Harry's, so the attack wouldn't actually be aimed at Harry."

"But it couldn't be an attempt to get you distracted from Foyet, because that was obviously the first person Harry was going to take care of once he got involved in your life," Prentiss said. "At the same time, once Harry apparated away, there's nothing you could do."

When the room had been quiet for longer than two minutes, Hotch said, "We'll come back to that. Why did the Seers believe everyone?"

"I'm already blaming it on the Dark Lord but I don't have the faintest real idea why," Reid admitted. Gideon gestured for him to elaborate. "Well, it seems entirely too coincidental that one of the worlds Harry's supposedly going to win is one of the worlds where everyone is suddenly expecting him. The Dark Lord's already put more effort into the ones where Harry's likelier to come out on top, so maybe telling everyone he was coming was another distraction. The people he's met have been more focused in talking to him than actually winning the war."

"So while Harry's focused, they're not," JJ summarized.
"Yeah."

"Anything else jump out at someone?" Rossi asked.

"I don't think Foyet was alive because of a change in the worlds," Morgan said. "I'd say that we had a pretty drastic change from the original world but it didn't have a huge impact for twelve more years. It doesn't seem like a change could have caused two separate events, and of the two, I think the Potters were more likely to be affected by something from over a decade ago than Foyet. Besides, Foyet should have been dead within the last couple of months, really. It would have been easy for the Dark Lord to ensure he survived."

"But why make sure Foyet lived?"

"It's a threat," Hotch said. "He's one of the people Harry hates above all else. If the Dark Lord could save-" He gave an irritable sigh. "Unsub. He's an Unsub, not a Dark Lord."

"Damn, I didn't even realized we'd picked up on their language," Morgan muttered.

"Let's not give him preferential treatment," Hotch reminded everyone, then continued, "If the Unsub could save Foyet, he's telling Harry that some of his other enemies could survive too." He pulled some papers towards him and picked up a pen. "All right, let's get a suggested plan of action together for them. Whoever stops by next can pick it up."

"Better relationship with the locals," Reid said.

"JJ, can you handle that?" JJ nodded at Hotch's request and started writing.

"Find out what happened with Foyet," Morgan said, than added, "if they haven't already."

"Look into Greyback's situation. If we're right about why he pulled Foyet in, Greyback would be next," Rossi pointed out. "And if there's any sign that the Unsub could be trying to repeat what happened here, then the BAU – or at least the Hotchners – need to be told about magic so they can be ready for anything."

"Prentiss," Hotch said.

"I'll take both of those."

"Check the Ministry's relationship with the nonmagical government. They can move faster if they're cooperating," JJ said, not looking up from what she was writing. "They also need to find out what's going with the muggleborns. I'll bet the government's putting their situation on the backburner for now, but they could get more help from the nonmagical government if they show that they're making an active effort to protect everyone."

"Wait," Reid said abruptly. "Does the Unsub know about the Woodsmarked Killer?"

In the wake of the insane, dangerous, threat-filled year, Hotch had completely forgotten about how worried they had once been about him.

"He might not have even thought about it," Rossi said. "Why would he? It's an American serial killer and the Unsub would be more focused with attacks he could make that he knew more about."

"Not a bad thing to mention," Hotch pointed out. After a pause, he added, "It's strange that the Woodsmarked Killer has only made an appearance in our world."
"Maybe we only noticed him in our world," Elle said. She hadn't spoken much that day and looked a little ill. Hotch wondered if, despite the cure, her body still had reactions to the full moon even if they weren't nearly as severe as they had once been.

He practically did a doubletake as he looked at her again, and she gave him a weird look for his sudden scrutiny. "The QDA also needs to make sure you and Gideon are accounted for," he said. "Did you ever find out where both of you went in the other world?"

"They had no clue where Gideon was, but I never asked about myself," she said regretfully. "Didn't want to know. I'll see if I can get someone to take me over and I can find out more."

"I'd like to go with you," Gideon said. "I might be able to track myself down."

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The resolution in Twenty-Nine came surprisingly quickly, wrapped up within a couple of days, but they had to stick around to make sure they were going to keep their gains. The assessment Harry had gotten from Ginny, who had gotten it from the BAU when she had gone over there, had been extremely helpful as an objective view on what they needed to accomplish before they leave. Thankfully, Harry didn't feel nearly as pressed for time as he had when his seventeenth birthday had been approaching.

The BAU had been right, as usual. Their quick gains had led to them overlooking some Death Eater pockets, as well as some lower-level followers who were still able to lead independently. It also meant that the Ministry hadn't been able to keep up with them, and they soon found themselves fighting against scattered groupings of Death Eaters. Each time Harry thought they might be able to move on, a new pack seemed to rise up, and Harry was forced to keep the QDA in Twenty-Nine to combat it. Finally, though, the last of the major Death Eater groups had been rounded up, and Twenty-Nine was deemed safe enough to leave, months after they had first arrived.

He'd debated with himself on whether or not he should have a conversation with Hermione about sending people back home like he'd specifically told her he didn't want to do. He decided that Hermione was probably a lot wiser than him and he wasn't really unbiased enough in this matter to make the best choices, so in the end he didn't say anything.

Before they left, Twenty-Nine's Blackwolf told him that it was likely that the reason he had survived was because he was a red dragon. Harry wasn't sure if he hated prophecies or not anymore, but this was definitely something he would have wanted to know before he had a small freak out over whether or not he was going to die and how it was going to happen. Still, he decided to wait a little longer before going home, just in case the Curse acted belatedly.

Loose ends were surprisingly fun to clean up. It started with them tracking down Gideon and Elle and planting someone to keep track of them both, and then handling all the loose murderers they were worried about, including the Woodsmarked Killer and Greyback.

Harry wasn't quite sure he would ever forget the look on the American auror's face when they dropped off the Woodsmarked Killer at his feet, but they were gone too quickly to properly enjoy it.

After that, they moved to cutting off any efforts to meddle with the BAU before the Dark Lord could do anything. It proved to be much more entertaining than they had thought.

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"Hotch," Morgan said urgently. He looked up from his desk. It had been a slow day so far, and not
much had been happening besides wrapping up paperwork. "There's some sort of situation with Strauss. They need you there."

Hotchner frowned as he stood up. "Who's 'they'?"

"It's... I'm not really sure. It sounds like some kid is trying to tell the two of you something and an organization is trying to ban him from doing it on legal grounds."

Hotchner's frown deepened, and he followed Morgan to Strauss's office. The other agent probably wasn't supposed to come with him, and he wondered at the breach of etiquette until they reached the office and he realized that all etiquette had gone out the window.

"I refuse to bend the laws for some blasted, upstart, wet-behind-the-ears Brit!" a fully grown male was shrieking at someone who probably shouldn't have been called 'kid' so much as 'young adult'. Strauss's deadpan was firmly in place despite the screeching, and Hotchner couldn't help but be a little impressed at how well she maintained her cool.

The youngest in the room was taking the aggression well, calmly staring as the man vented his fury. He looked...oddly familiar, though Hotchner swore he'd never met him before. His dark hair was ruffled and he had a couple of fresh injuries, scratches and scrapes on his face and hands, and spots of dried blood on his suggested that bleeding was a regular pattern for him. Two people were standing with him, a redhead and a brunette. The former looked amused by the man yelling at his associate, and the latter had her eyes narrowed in exasperation.

The yelling man was accompanied by three others. None of them were government officials. Hotchner didn't need to know about a lack of a badge to tell that; they were too unrefined and unprofessional for it. Something was odd about their clothing, too, though he couldn't quite put his finger on it. The texture just wasn't right. It was like they had been given a description of regular clothing and had been trying to emulate it.

"I don't give a damn if the Goddamned Minister himself sent you, but you can bet your ass you'll be back in your rainy lagoon before you can think twice about breaking the Statute!"

"First, I'm not British," the not-kid said. "I'm American."

The man sneered. "You have an accent."

"I've spent a lot of time in Britain lately is all."

"Prove it."

"That I'm not British?" He got a sharp nod in return. "I have a tan."

Remarkably, that shut up the man. The redhead beside the other boy smirked slightly.

"Excuse me," Strauss interjected. "Considering this argument is taking place in my office, I'd like to be informed about what's going on."

The man angrily opened his mouth, but before he could say anything, the young man said, "Now don't be rude; she has a valid point."

"I won't stand for this kind of preposterous-"

Hotchner and Morgan were still standing near the door, and someone pushed past them to get in. The new woman was slightly out of breath, but she immediately looked at the three youngest people in
the room. "Which one of you is in charge?"

"I am," the one who'd been speaking the whole time said.

"Is it true?" she demanded.

"Is what true?"

"Are you a Light Lord?"

"Oh, that. Yeah."

There was a long pause and the fury fell away from the man's expression. Behind him, the rest of his companions stared with sudden, rapturous interest at the young man.

"What does that mean?" Strauss asked slowly.

"What does that-" the man repeated, blustering.

"Oh, calm down," the younger one snapped. "How would she know?" To Strauss, he explained, "We're part of a rather secluded community. We usually rule ourselves and our local governments cooperate with the nearest large government. It's sort of like a state within a state. Our leaders are usually elected, like yours, but sometimes we have a couple who are born naturally into unelected leadership positions. They're called Light and Dark Lords." He turned to the man who had been yelling at him. "We need to get going, so can you handle this?"

"Er."

"We can't just...let them know," the woman who'd just entered said hesitantly. "That breaks at least fifty laws." She paused. "Not to mention everything you've already done."

"Look...we've really got to get going..."

The conversation was still going in circles an hour later, when Strauss, Morgan, and Hotchner still had no clue what was going on despite their repeated attempts to get someone to explain. One of the three younger adults regularly tried to stop the arguing to tell them something, only to be immediately interrupted. At least the shouting had stopped, although there was now a lot of hero-worship that Hotchner was starting to detect from the adults towards the boy who had been speaking the most. He had no clue what to make of that.

The kid, though, did, and when he finally had enough of the dawdling he made use of it.

"Okay," he said. "If I explain the situation, will you tell them?" The other adults brightened immediately. The black-haired boy pointed to the wall, and the group he'd been talking to turned to look at it. "See how the upper shading of the wall creates a hexagonal triplanar pattern with an ellipsoidal emphasis?"

Hotchner hadn't the faintest clue what that meant, but the group turned to look more firmly at the wall.

After a moment, one of them said, "Yeah," in a confident voice, but Hotchner could see her expression; she had no clue what she was looking at.

"If you follow it with your eyes to the opposite point of the Gordinian knot, you'll notice that it makes a lunar node, which you'll recognize from your studies of interdimensional research with a
focus in spacial conflicts."

The other two backed up until they were near Strauss and quietly started explaining the whole situation to her while their friend had the rest of the group distracted. Hotchner and Morgan moved closer to listen in.

About half an hour later, even after the displays of magic, he was pretty sure that the absolute bullshit spewing from the other not-kid's mouth made about as much sense as what he had just heard.

"With that analysis," he was continuing, "you can discern the patterns that we're talking about, with the prediction of cooperation and mingling. If you follow the line of Merlin's beard down the fourth quadrant, you can also see that this is likely a predetermined fate dating back to the eighth century."

Hotchner might not have known a lot about magic, but he knew his own skills well enough to tell that the young man who was still stalling was starting to reach the end of his creativity.

"I find all this hard to believe," Strauss said, and quite frankly, Hotchner agreed no matter how many stacks of paper Granger turned into potted plants.

Granger offered her hand. "I can apparate you somewhere," she said. "It's going to be uncomfortable side-along, but I think you'll believe us then."

Strauss hesitantly took her hand, and a moment later, the two of them appeared a couple of yards away. Strauss jerked in surprise, yanking her hand back in shock.

"Ah!" Harry exclaimed, trying to cover up the noise. "And with so many of us focusing on it, I'm sure you can almost hear the Logorian connection being made!"

"Yeah!" one of the men – wizards – said, relieved as if something finally made itself known to his senses.

"By the way," Hermione said when she and Strauss had moved closer to the others. "The magical community's really superstitious and doesn't have a lot of common sense."

Morgan raised an eyebrow at the group across the room. "No kidding," he said dryly.

---

After weeks of sparse information from the QDA in the other world, the BAU received news that the group was forgoing a stop in their home world and instead going straight to the world they were calling Three.

Hotch was not happy about that. Neither were, he expected, the families of the QDA. It wasn't helped by the fact that Harry had definitely not made the decision alone, because there was no way he would have prevented the QDA from going home without their express approval.

Despite his frustration, he and the rest of the BAU kept up with editing the profile when they could. Since they were now working with magical cases about half the time, it was becoming easier to detect patterns of variation from nonmagical behavior, which made both their job and the Dark Lord Unsub profiling easier. By all accounts there should have been more resistance from the magical authorities they found themselves working with, but their new status as something like celebrities made them almost always welcome.

Still, they needed breaks. He knew they weren't going to take them, but Blackwolf and Strauss – who was their unit chief on paper when they took a nonmagical case – both pressured him to get the
team to take a few days during the winter holiday. He told the team they would not be coming into
the office under threat of pain.

So they spent the winter gathering at Elle's or Rossi's house instead.

Order members sometimes stopped by to ask for their advice on the Death Eaters still running
around. By that point, the BAU had done most of the profiling they could for the ones they knew
about, so it was mostly a matter of telling them the best course of action to take. It rarely took up a lot
of their time, but it happened frequently enough that they could still definitively say that they were
involved with the resistance effort. The drop-bys only increased over the winter when the Order
knew they were free, which kept them occupied to an adequate degree.

Hotch pulled into his driveway, returning from one of their unofficial meetings. It was earlier than he
would have gotten back from the office, but he still regretted being away from Jack even longer.
Sean had come by for a few days around Christmas and New Year's while his restaurant was closed,
and he was watching Jack. Jessica had been keeping an eye on him while Hotch was at work before
the holidays, but she was using the break to visit with her own family.

Sean was not watching Jack when Hotch entered. Instead, he was sleeping on the couch, head fallen
back on the arm behind him and legs sprawled across the cushions. The house was quiet, as it often
was. Jack wasn't a loud child.

A hoot caught his attention, and Hedwig swooped towards him from the kitchen, batting her wings
quickly enough to slow down and avoid running into him. She landed on his arm when he raised it
and fluffed her feathers.

"What's got you excited?" he asked.

Yes, he talked to the animals in the house. It wouldn't have been nearly as weird if he hadn't known
they could actually understand him.

She trilled, then took off, flying back to sit on the back of one of the dining room chairs. She looked
incredibly smug, and Hotch just hoped he wasn't going to find a nasty surprise in the kitchen. At
least magical owls weren't like cats who brought dead animals as gifts.

The snakes, on the other hand, had an unfortunate tendency to just leave the dead animals in the
backyard wherever they killed them. That had been a pain to clean up after, and Hotch knew the
damn reptiles were fully aware that he didn't like it but they were using his inability to speak
parseltongue as an excuse since Hotch didn't want to explain the situation to Jack so he could ask
him to tell the snakes to cut it out.

While Hedwig often greeted him each afternoon, the snakes were more reclusive and tended to pop
out at different times. Some of them he wouldn't see for weeks. Zagreus he saw almost daily, mostly
because of the copperhead's size and distinctive color, but Seokga was often spotted around his
larger red friend. As it had gotten colder, all five had moved aside and he was starting to see them
more often as they hid in the warm house. That also meant they sometimes popped up in unexpected
places. Hotch wasn't going to soon forget Sean's scream when he found Xiuhcoatl behind the toaster
one morning.

Hotch moved up the stairs quietly, conscientious of his sleeping brother, and went to his room to
drop off his briefcase, gun, and badge, and then to get changed into regular wear. The house was still
silent when he emerged, and he went to check on Jack.

The door was open, which wasn't unusual.
The room was empty, which was.

Hotch froze, hand on the door, and quietly panicked. He'd just left his gun in the other room, and if someone were still in the house listening to him moving around, they'd know he knew something was up if he went back. And he'd also left Sean alone so-

Sean almost never slept in the day. Had he actually been sleeping?

Hotch forced himself to keep his head, and one hand moved to the phone on his belt as he slowly entered Jack's room, scanning everything just in case he'd overlooked him somehow. However ridiculous, he even checked under the bed. No Jack.

He sent a text to Garcia. Jack's gone. Someone might have attacked Sean. Send backup.

Back in the hallway, as he took a second look, nothing struck him as being wrong. In fact, after so much exposure to the magical world, he'd say his instincts had gotten sharper, but even they weren't warning him. His fear was rooted in the oddity of the situation. Maybe Jack was just somewhere unusual...

Harry's door was open. Harry's door was never open.

He should have gone back to get his gun. He didn't; any time lost was too long when Jack was involved. His footsteps were almost silent as he crept down the hall and put one palm on the door. The hinges, though not oiled recently, were blissfully quiet as they opened.

Jack was on the bed in wolf form, curled around up in a relaxed ball. That dropped Hotch's blood pressure, but not nearly as much as the sight of the second figure on the bed did.

Harry had one arm across his brother, hugging him close, while the other supported his head. His face was hidden by his arm and hair, but his posture was relaxed. His breaths were even and deep, slower than Jack's more rapid lupine breaths. He was fully clothed and hadn't made a move to get under the covers, too exhausted to make the effort. Jack must have snuggled into bed with him.

Hotch smiled to himself and sent a mass text to the whole unit, who all had surely been alerted by Garcia now about impending danger. It's all right. Harry came home and Jack was sleeping in his room with him.

Garcia's response was immediate. Send photos.

JJ was just as fast in replying to Garcia and Hotch. Do not give her blackmail against the leader of the free magical world.

Wait, when did Harry get back? Morgan asked, focusing on the actual issue.

I'll ask when they wake up, Hotch said and put his phone away.

He was glad Harry was back. He was still going to lecture him for being gone for so long with no news, but he was content for this moment.

---

Hotch rarely acted immaturely. And by rarely, Sean meant that he had never seen his brother do something childish since he was about twelve.

Excluding, of course, that one time Sean had thrown an egg at him and then Hotch had chased him
around the backyard, but even Sean had to admit it wasn't childish when it had a legitimate purpose.

So when he woke up, spluttering, and his first sight through water-dripping eyelashes was his older brother standing over him with an empty bowl of water, he knew he was in deep shit.

"Were you planning on informing me that my son came home?" Hotch asked calmly, too calmly, like he hadn't just dunked his fully grown sleeping brother on the couch.

Ah. That.

"Harry asked me not to," Sean said weakly, voice dropping off significantly by the end of the short sentence.

"Your nephew."

"My ridiculously powerful wizard nephew."

"Your child nephew."

"He's not really a child," Sean hedged.

"He's not eighteen. He's a child under our legal system."

"He's a wizard, though."

"He's still subject to our laws, and he's living under the roof of someone who follows nonmagical law, so he's still a child." Sean opened his mouth again but Hotch pressed, "And he's still your nephew. You should have called me."

"...Well, what's a eight hour difference make? I mean, really?" Sean said. "He's slept the whole time anyway."

"Eight hours-" Hotch broke off, pinching the bridge of his nose, then dropped his hand. "I haven't seen him in months and he's leaving soon, Sean! I won't see him again for what'll probably be another couple of months before he can come home again, and he's not going to be sticking around for longer than a couple of days! And I'll add that it seems you slept the entire time too, so no one was watching the house while there are still active assassination attempts after him."

The rest of Sean's protest died a brutal death in his throat and he didn't say anything else. His brother wasn't satisfied by the lack of response, glaring sternly at him even when he was clearly chastised, and only turned away after Sean had definitively been embarrassed into silence. He walked into the kitchen, disappeared for a moment, and then returned without the bowl.

He'd forgone a cup and just dropped an entire bowl-full of water on him. That was just bad.

"So." Hotch said. He was standing in front of Sean, arms crossed. "What happened?"

"He showed up about an hour after you left," Sean muttered, looking down at the ground. "He went to sleep right after, and I spent the entire day trying to wear Jack out so he wouldn't pester his brother. When I put Jack down for a nap he refused to sleep anywhere but in Harry's room, but he was worn out so he was asleep almost immediately."

"And you were so tired that you took an afternoon nap too."

"...Yeah..."
After a long moment of severe glaring, Hotch walked away, back into the kitchen, presumably so he wouldn't murder his brother. Sean thought he was in the clear.

And then, from the kitchen, "How quickly did he go to sleep?"

"...Immediately?"

"But he had enough time to clean the house?"

"...I think it was habit?"

About an hour later, Sean was about in the same position, though he was mostly dry by then even if his shirt was still damp. Hotch had been distracting himself in the kitchen to avoid a manslaughter charge. There hadn't been any sounds from upstairs, but now Sean saw Harry descending, moving a little unsteadily as he readjusted to being awake. Jack was in his arms, lupine paws and muzzle resting on one shoulder while Harry carried his hind legs in his arms. The tail swung down in front of them, swishing ever so slightly.

Harry paused at the bottom of the stairs when he saw Sean and the water spots all over him and parts of the couch. One eyebrow went up.

Sean started a frantic monologue of gestures, entirely silent, trying to warn Harry that his father was home. It was too fast and Harry just stared at him with even more bewilderment, looking like he was wondering where the nearest insane asylum was and if he should check to see if Sean had ever been institutionalized there.

Hotch heard something and emerged from the kitchen and Sean quickly lowered both arms, one moving so he could rub his face with one hand in dismayed resignation. He'd tried.

"Hey," Harry said, shooting a quick smile at Hotch. Sean saw Jack's nose sniffing the air and his ears prick up. His tail wagged when he recognized his father's presence and though he wiggled he stayed clamped to his brother.

"Hey," Hotch sent his words back at him emotionlessly.

Harry paused, sensing the disapproval of the short, almost meaningless word he'd used after not seeing his father for months. "We're back until the end of New Year's," he said. With a small attempt at a laugh, he added, "Figured the Weasleys parents would kill me if I didn't return their kids."

"The Weasleys would," Hotch repeated again.

Harry must have picked up on the irritation by now. Even Jack's tail had gone still and his ears were up in alertness, not excitement. "Er. Yeah," Harry said awkwardly, in no way fixing the problem.

"I see."

"Right... We, uh, got Three started, so we won't lose any ground while we're back here. We think we can probably push for a stalemate, though it's still going to be a loss."

"That's good."

Harry slowly crouched, letting his brother down carefully. Jack darted away from him and jumped onto the couch with Sean, sitting up straight next to him and curling his tail around his legs. "Okay," he said as he stood, cautious, "what happened?"
"Harry." Sean felt himself sinking lower into the couch and he wasn't even the one that tone was directed at. "You left for six months. I understood the first – hell, I could see where an argument could be made for the second, and maybe a third. Six. We weren't expecting you to take a vacation here for three weeks. We wanted a visit for a couple of hours once a week at most. And don't tell me you weren't sure if it would be safe or not; you had people coming back here all the time, so you knew I was alive and you weren't having any problems with the Curse."

"I didn't intend for anyone to be coming back," Harry said.

"You didn't intend to send anyone to give us updates, or so we could give you information about the profile?"

Harry grimaced furiously. "No, I mean I didn't intend for anyone to be coming back as often as they were. We didn't have time for it, but people over there also knew we weren't from their world and we had to make sure no one was following us to our Veil."

"Doesn't seem like you had any problems with that."

"I had responsibilities over there, Dad! You can't expect me to just drop them!"

"You have responsibilities here! People in this world still look up to you, and most of them don't know you've left! They think the Ministry is being operated by you and the rest of your team!"

"I can't just leave the other worlds!" Harry protested, then added somewhat awkwardly, "And this world making me Minister of Magic was not my idea nor was it my fault!"

Sean raised both eyebrows. He hadn't heard about that.

"I'm not asking you to leave the other worlds, I'm asking that you don't completely disregard this one!"

"I haven't disregarded it! I think about it all the time!"

"In passing, evidently."

"That's not completely true!"

"It's just mostly true."

"I spend most of my time negotiating between morons, most of the rest of my time actually doing my job, and what little time is left babysitting young adults who are actually several years older than me! I barely have time to eat breakfast!"

"You can eat breakfast over here," Hotch dryly pointed out, "and Hermione and Ginny must be certified babysitters by now."

"There still wouldn't be enough time!"

"There wouldn't be enough time, or you'd have to curb your pride and return after you made your dramatic exit?"

"Dramatic ex- How many times have you tragically died since I've left?"

Hotch paused a heartbeat too long.

"You must be joking."
"It only happened once," Hotch snapped.

"Well, I only took down an aging Dark Lord once and I've still got five to go!"

"Yes, Harry, and we're all very happy for you. But your death, unlike mine, wasn't part of a pattern, so excuse me for being concerned when you go missing for months."

"I'm a Light Lord!"

"And the last Dark Lord who merged himself with another was still taken down by a kid less than half his age, so perhaps you should be a little less arrogant and a little more cautious."

Harry said the exact thing Sean had been thinking. The only difference was that he would have never dared to say it.

"Arrogant? I haven't even placed in that contest since you, your ego, and thou booted me out of the top three spots after a dementor sucked away the remains of your modesty in my third year!"

Hotch stared at him, entirely unimpressed.

Sean bit his cheek to stop himself from laughing.

Harry stared back at Hotch blankly. Sean was no profiler, but he knew his nephew well enough to tell that his life was flashing before his eyes.

---

Harry (8:49 pm): Change of plans. We will be remaining in this world until the middle of January at least

Angelina (8:50 pm): Good?

Padma (8:50 pm): Why?

Seamus (8:51 pm): Prob bc the Weasley parents are threatening to turn him inside out bc they want to harass the twins

Ginny (8:51 pm): How did you get on the QDA group text???

Dean (8:52 pm): He got Neville to invite him in

Theodore (8:52 pm): How did you get in?!

Parvati (8:52 pm): seamus let him in obviously

Daphne (8:52 pm): You're not in the group either!

Padma (8:53 pm): she's got a twin who in the QDA tho remember?

Padma (8:53 pm): besides Angelina's in and she's not QDA

Hermione (8:53 pm): Angelina is unofficially now because she's leading Aero

Hermione (8:53 pm): Harry, why are we staying longer?

Harry (8:55 pm): We might not be back for a long while and we're holding ground in Three. We should take the chance to rest up and get to full strength before returning, and then we can hit Three
harder than the Dark Lord is expecting and we can make more grounds. It will probably still be a loss, but we might be able to at least lessen the impact of it. Just relax for now.

Blaise (8:56 pm): cool

Theodore (8:56 pm): yur just enjoying uninterrupted snogging w/ ur girlfriend

Blaise (8:56 pm): shut up

Ginny (8:56 pm): yep

Draco (8:57 pm): I call bullshit

George (8:57 pm): I would bet all my life savings that Blaise is in fact making use of this time to snog

Draco (8:57 pm): I wouldn't take that bet

Draco (8:57 pm): I meant Harry

Draco (8:57 pm): I call bullshit on why we're staying

Harry (8:58 pm): Draco no

Padma (8:58 pm): wut

Harry (8:58 pm): Draco don't

Draco (8:58 pm): *troll face emoticon*

Fred (8:58 pm): Draco, I have a galleon with your name on it

Harry (8:59 pm): Draco please no

Harry (8:59 pm): I need some dignity after tonight

Fred (8:59 pm): Two galleons

George (9:00 pm): I found a third

Fred (9:00 pm): Three

Ginny (9:00 pm): Draco, you can literally shit money if you want. You don't need three galleons

Fred (9:00 pm): You don't want to know???

Ginny (9:01 pm): Of course I do, but your incentives are stupid!

Ron (9:01 pm): id really like to know y im stuck w/ my family

Draco (9:01 pm): Five galleons?

Fred (9:02 pm): You shit

Fred (9:02 pm): In general

George (9:02 pm): Four?
Draco (9:02 pm): Fine
Harry (9:02 pm): Please no
Draco (9:03 pm): Hang on
Harry (9:03 pm): Please reconsider
Draco (9:04 pm): Got to savor the moment
Fred (9:04 pm): Get on with it
Draco (9:05 pm): Still savoring
Harry (9:05 pm): Please savor it forever and never mention it
Blaise (9:08 pm): Well?
Daphne (9:12 pm): Draco, come on
Draco (9:15 pm): Still savoring
Padma (9:15 pm): DRACO
Ginny (9:15 pm): You better hope the delay is actually because Harry's strangling you into silence or I'm going to come over there
Draco (9:16 pm): Spoilsport
Draco (9:16 pm): Harry's grounded
Fred (9:17 pm): Dude
Fred (9:17 pm): Be realistic
Draco (9:17 pm): I would like to remind you who I live with. Do you doubt my sources?
Parvati (9:18 pm): Why would Harry be grounded?
Draco (9:18 pm): I am not privy to the exact words because Garcia won't stop laughing long enough to tell me, but apparently his sass caught up to him
Hermione (9:18 pm): Harry!
Harry (9:18 pm): IT WAS AN ACCIDENT
Ron (9:19 pm): but ur only grounded until next month?
Luna (9:19 pm): That's just when he goes on parole. I expect his father is going to make him regularly check in after that
Ginny (9:20 pm): Harry, we're waiting
Harry (9:22 pm): Yeah, she's right
Harry (9:22 pm): I hear you laughing
Fred (9:22 pm): Which one of us?

Harry (9:23 pm): All of you

Chapter End Notes

Ending this short mass post for tonight to get homework done, but the rest of the mass post will probably be up in the next two days to finish the story. Finished on a happy note rather than a cliffhanger!
"Of course, at the precise moment of terror, bereavement or physical pain, you may catch your man when his reason is temporarily suspended." - C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*

---

*We are very happy to see you back,* Kiyo told him. She was sprawled across the back of the chair next to him, raising her head to be level with his.

"*It's good to be back, for a while,*" Harry told her. "*I'll be leaving soon again, though.*"

*We will miss you.* She frowned at him as well as a snake could. The disapproval wasn't ambiguous. *I still believe you are wrong to leave. You make your father sad.*

"*It's important that I go,*" Harry said softly. "*Maybe he's not happy when I'm gone, but we'd both regret it more if I just did nothing.*"

Kiyo was often abrupt, but it still took Harry off guard when she darted off the chair and slid onto the floor. A moment later, without a farewell, she had vanished into a small hole in the kitchen wall that Harry was positive hadn't been there months ago. He wondered if Hotch knew of the hole.

"*It's three in the morning.*"

Harry turned and saw Hotch standing in the doorway. "*Oh, really?*

Hotch raised an eyebrow at the sass, silently asking if he really wanted to go down that road, but his irritation didn't last long when Harry wasn't being a pain about it.

"*I didn't talk to any of the snakes when I got home,*" he said. After a moment, he added, "*I really did go straight to sleep.*"

"*Sean told you he's in trouble for that too?*

"*It wasn't hard to pick up on...*" A smile tugged at his lips. "*You dumped water on him.*"

"*Older brother privileges. I suggest you wait until your brother's older before doing the same.*"

"*Now hang on, if I'm ever going to do it, it has to be now before he's big enough to topple me in wolf form.*"

Hotch smiled faintly, then crossed the room to take the seat Kiyo had just vacated. "*Harry, you do understand why I grounded you, right?*

Harry's smile was sheepish. "*Yeah.*"

"*It wasn't to embarrass you, though you doing that in front of Sean and Jack was your own fault. But that's the problem – sometimes you act impulsively, and you just don't think before you do or say something. If you were normal, this wouldn't be such a big deal. As it is, whenever you say something sarcastic in a public forum, there's going to be someone who believes you. Or forget about the public: what about the people in your private life who expect you not to bring work home with you? Sean sympathizes, but he doesn't really want to know what we saw in the war. Jack knows, but*"
"I get that your mouth runs away with you sometimes. I'm quite used to it by now. You just have to remember that there are a lot of people who aren't used to it." He stopped when Harry seemed contrite enough. "But for the record, what you said probably wasn't far from accurate."

Harry tilted his head up slightly to grin at him. "Family trait."

"Sean yelled at me in the middle of the BAU bullpen one time."

"Hey, at least I didn't do that. Even if all of them know about it anyway."

Hotch frowned. "How do you know they heard?"

"I know everything. Super Special Light Lord powers."

Hotch gave him a look.

"Draco said Garcia told her so I figured you warned everyone not to give me the updated profile since I wouldn't leave without it."

Hotch paused, then carefully said, "I didn't mean for others in the QDA to find out."

"Actually... I like being treated human." There was a light pattering of rain outside, tempo starting slow at first then starting to pick up. "I'm not going to argue with being grounded, but... I do need to get over to Britain to see what's going on."

"You should have done that months ago," Hotch told him, a more severe tone to his voice. Harry nodded, but it was too quick and submissive. "You-" Harry winced as he caught on. "You've been coming over regularly to check up on them."

Harry took a shaky breath, the kind one might take before stepping up to the executioner's block. "I had to. There was no one I could leave behind who could fake being me for an extended period of time."

Hotch pushed back his chair and walked away from him. Harry leaned one elbow on the table and pushed back the fringes of his hair with one hand, simultaneously blowing out an exhausted breath. Hotch steamed for a couple of seconds, pacing behind him in the short range of the kitchen, then came to a stop. One hand clenched the countertop's edge like the grip was holding him back from a furious attack on the unfair world. "You stopped by to visit a scattered government in Britain, something that must have taken hours to visit everyone necessary, and you couldn't come home for five minutes?!"

"If I came home," Harry said, not looking at him, "I wasn't going to leave. So once I was certain I was in the clear from the Curse, I made sure you were safe, and then I stayed away. I know it wasn't the best thing for everyone here, but it was the best thing I could do for everyone else."

The back of his chair was jerked back so abruptly that he almost toppled out of his seat and his elbow was painfully jarred off the table. He was stopped from falling by the arms that trapped him on either side, one reaching to the back of his chair on his left and the other planting a hand on the table. For a moment, his breath stopped.

"I thought you were dead. I thought, if you were still alive, you would have told me so. You
wouldn't have made me worry, after *everything else we've been through*. I thought I knew that you wouldn't do that to me and you wouldn't do that to Jack. I was wrong.” Hotch watched him for a moment, waiting for that to sink in, then leaned back and released the chair and table. "You couldn't even send a note?"

Harry jumped to his feet furiously at the insinuation of a casual disregard for his family. "I knew you knew I was alive!"

"Because Ron mentioned it offhandedly! He didn't even know you were in danger!"

"If I told everyone every time I was in danger I wouldn't get anything done!"

"How would you know? You never tell anyone *anytime* you're in danger!"

And then Sean's voice came hollering down the hall from the guest bedroom. "Aaron, you do the exact same bullshit, you hypocritical ass! Harry, you're still a goddamn minor, so listen to your dad even if he's being a hissy alpha male! Both of you, unless my alarm clock is shitting me, it's three in the morning, so go the fuck back to sleep!"

"Is everything okay?" Jack called from the top of the stairs.

Hotch and Harry exchanged winces. "Go back to sleep," they replied at the same time.

"Everything's fine," Harry added.

"And don't repeat anything your uncle just said," Hotch finished.

---

Sean slowly entered Hotch's office the next day. Hotch waited for him to formulate his words.

"Harry's a Light Lord."

"Yes."

"So... He's got as much power as Riddle did."

"That's about what that means, though it's different kind of power."

"Okay." Pause. "Harry's cleaning the garage."

"I told him to."

"By hand."

"Yes."

"...Why?"

"Because I have work to do and he's got nothing better to be doing while he's grounded."

"...Doesn't he have a government to run?" Before Hotch could answer, he interrupted. "Never mind – I don't want to know. Why isn't he using magic, is my question?"

"I need to keep him busy for a couple of weeks, until he leaves, or he will find trouble."

"So you're having him clean the whole house the normal way." Another pause. "Yeah, that'll keep
him occupied."

Hotch shook his head grimly. "He'll be done within a couple of days. He's always been fast at	housework."

"Make him do it again? Say it wasn't good enough?"

"He'll see through that immediately. I might have to get Jack get muddy in his wolf form and then
run through the house."

Sean opened his mouth, closed it, and then just walked out of the room.

"Maybe I can lend him to JJ," he heard Hotch mutter to himself as he started down the hall.

---

"Hey, Dad?" Harry asked, poking his head into Hotch's office about two hours later. Hotch turned
around to look at him. "Er, I need to...you know...run a government...sometime this break..."

"Your uncle was just asking about that, and I think he traumatized himself with the very notion of it
so I'd advise you don't bring it up to him."

"...So...can I go?"

"What do you need to do?"

"Mostly meet with some people. Check on a few situations. Try to get out of this post, again."

"Any luck on that?"

He grimaced. "I'm trying to install Kingsley as the Minister. It would work if people were willing to
let me go."

"Once the war's over, people might be more considerate."

"Yeah, I hope. So...can I?"

"Is the garage done?"

"...Mostly?"

"Finish that first."

---

The next day, Harry had moved onto the living room. There wasn't much Hotch could elaborate on
there, but while Harry had been in England Hotch had looked around the kitchen and realized he
could probably tack on some additional chores in that room to clean it up. Sean had suggested
looking for areas inside the house that might need repainting. It was a shame it was winter, or there
would have been more outside work Hotch could have gotten done.

He really needed Harry's help for spring cleaning this year. The house had been all but abandoned
last year because they'd all been at Hogwarts, and the year before had been a wreck because they'd
been more focused on things that were actually important. Of course, that wasn't to say nothing
important was happening now, but he knew Harry needed enforced breaks.
A case came up. Missing persons, in Oregon.

Within five minutes of receiving the text, the rest of the team sent him messages demanding that he stay home. About half an hour later, JJ told them that Sirius Black was willing to give them a hand with his animagi's nose if they could give the Order some assistance with a Death Eater they were trying to track down.

"I shouldn't be gone long," Hotch told Sean in his office while he packed up files. "Really, if Black helps as much this time as he did in Florida when he tracked down some bodies, we might be back within two days."

"Is this legal, to overlap the magical and nonmagical worlds like this?" Sean asked, amused.

"Legal interpretation always changes in war. People don't care right now. The only issue will be forging documents to come up with a normal explanation for how we found the boy so quickly."

He leaned out the door and shouted downstairs, "No magic!"

There was a muffled curse and the sound of a mop dropping from a different part of the room.

Hotch moved back into his office, ignoring his snickering brother. "Make sure he does things the muggle way," he sighed.

"Why?"

"It's good stress relief. And he needs to do something with his hands or he'll get antsy. Just...no magic. Besides, it'll give him a sense of accomplishment, more than doing it all with magic will." He packed up a couple more files, then leaned out the door again. "Harry!"

"Not doing magic!" Harry called back immediately.

"Where's your brother?"

"In the backyard!"

Hotch went to the window. Jack was romping around in the snow in his wolf form. "I guess he'll get the house dirty enough when he comes in that I won't have to even ask him to muddy it up."

"Just get back before the holidays really start, would you?" Sean asked.

"We will. If Harry says he needs to go to England, contact me first. If there's some sort of emergency...contact me when you can."

"I won't know if there's actually an emergency."

"I don't think he'll fake one. You'd get suspicious if there were emergencies three times a day."

"Is there anything he can use magic for?"

"Not that I can think of, but if it seems like there's an exception ask me before you let him do anything. He can bring friends over, but over half of their meetings need to be about this world's England and not one of the other worlds."

"Why?"

"They've planned about the other worlds enough. They need to make sure that they've got a solid
base here, and there are probably a few things they need to do before they leave."

"Not worried about wild parties?"

"They'll just have excessive planning, and if something could go really wrong... Honestly, Hermione will make sure the house is back to normal by the time I get back."

"Anything else?"

"No. I trust the house will be standing when I get back in two days."

---

Hotch half-expected to hear about an emergency as soon as they landed in Oregon, but nothing happened.

The team was anxious to wrap up the case quickly, considering the upcoming holidays and the little time they had with the QDA kids while they were home, but they still had to do the case right. Black mostly wandered the area they were in curiously while the BAU decided what they would need him for, and then that night they launched a search of the area "on the off chance that they might find something" with the police dogs and regular searchers. One of the police officers happened upon the missing boy when he heard a dog's bark and followed the sound in case it was a police dog. Black quietly slipped away in the ensuing fuss over finding the boy.

Just as they were wrapping up the paperwork and preparing to head out, they got the dreaded call.

"Attack on Order headquarters."

---

It was over by the time they landed back at Quantico. Several of the QDA were waiting for them in the bullpen area, murmuring quietly between themselves. It was late, and they were practically the only people left in the open room.

"What happened?" Rossi asked as the team approached.

"They got someone in under polyjuice," Hermione said. She was standing beside the chair Harry was sitting in, elbows resting on his knees. "They... They blew up the building."

"Is anyone hurt?" Prentiss asked.

"Dumbledore, Moody, Reese, Mendels, and Westwood are dead," Harry said quietly, eyes on the ground.

Dumbledore and Moody. Dumbledore and Moody.

"No one else was inside at the time. There had been a false alarm about an attack in east Westminster and most of them were there instead. Those five had stayed behind to wait for what they thought would be a simultaneous counterattack."

"It doesn’t look like the attack was purposefully faked," Hermione continued. "A report was written badly and misinterpreted, and they thought there was a serious threat when there wasn’t."

It wasn't uncommon knowledge that Hotch and Dumbledore had barely been able to stay in the same room without something going wrong or tense between them. Hotch had never been able to forgive Dumbledore for what had happened with Harry's living situation and the disregard shown to giving
him more protection, and Dumbledore had been displeased with the power Hotch had taken from him by somewhat accidentally bringing two game-changing groups into the war.

But Dumbledore had had knowledge they could have used, and with him gone...

Then there was Moody. Hotch couldn't say he approved of the leadership the man had forced on Harry, but he also couldn't deny that Harry would have ended up in the exact same position anyway because he wouldn't have stayed out of the fight. Moody just helped set up a system to make it easier for him, and then he'd shown Harry how to lead as a wizard, something Hotch could never have accomplished.

To be honest, Hotch felt like he could have run the war effort at Hogwarts. He didn’t know if he could have done it without Moody.

He couldn't even be grudgingly grateful about Dumbledore finding the other worlds, not really. If he hadn't ever brought that up, Harry would have probably finished the war here and would no longer be forced to lead a child army into battle. There was plenty of good that Dumbledore had done, Hotch had to admit that, but he just couldn't see past what damage had been done to his own family.

Moody, though...

"What happens now?" JJ whispered.

Harry rested his head in his hands for a moment, then sighed deeply. "I think I have to take control of the entirety of the Light forces."

"They accepted Moody and Dumbledore because they were leaders before the war, but they won't accept anyone else now, not with a known Light Lord alive," Draco explained to the BAU.

Harry glanced at Hermione. "Can you take the QDA and handle the next world on your own? It looks like I'm going to have to stay here, at least until I can be sure the situation's stable." Hermione gave a tight nod. "In the meantime, I'll see if the rest of the DA here is still up to fighting."

"We'll need to leave sooner, in case the Dark Lord tries to use this to his advantage," Hermione said worriedly.

"Don't," Hotch warned. "You need this break. If you can enter the next fight fresh and ready, you'll do more good. Your strength has always been that you think differently and act more effectively than your opponents do. While you've got time, build that up. When the Siege of Hogwarts was still going on, you spent one day creating most of the techniques you use now. If you're impatient to do something, try that instead of running back to battle. Taking a break doesn't mean you're giving up."

Hermione nodded in understanding, grateful for the advice.

Most of the QDA left, off to spread the news. Harry and Draco stayed where they were, since they were going home with two BAU members. Soon after that, the rest of the BAU departed as well, Garcia taking Draco with her.

Hotch tugged Harry aside as the others were starting to leave, taking him up to his office. Harry sat down wearily on the couch and Hotch took a chair near him.

"What are you going to do?" Hotch asked quietly.

Harry rubbed his eyes with one hand. "I don't know. I just don't..." He moved his hand so he could
look at Hotch. "I didn't realize how much I relied on Moody...until..."

No matter how much help he had given Hotch, he must have meant so much more to Harry. After all, even before Hotch had supported him, Moody had said without hesitation that he was confident in Harry's abilities to lead a full quarter of the fight against Riddle's army.

"I don't know what to do. I can't lead regular people. I just know how to lead my friends, the people I've been with for years now. Moody could lead anyone."

"But Harry, you can't lead all your friends. That's why-

"-Moody told me to get unit leaders," Harry finished in a mutter.

"Exactly. It's about delegation, and having people directly under you who you can lead."

Harry nodded slowly. "Yeah." He closed his eyes and dropped his head into his hands, shoulders slumping with a deep exhale. "Doesn't make it that much easier."

Hotch moved from the chair to the couch to sit beside Harry. He wrapped an arm across Harry's shoulders and pulled him close. Harry immediately leaned into him; Hotch had to wonder just when the last time he'd been able to let his guard down had been.

"I miss him," Harry said, voice cracking.

"I know," Hotch murmured, wrapping his other arm across Harry's front as he started to shake with suppressed sobs. "I know."

---

Blackwolf met Harry as soon as he arrived in England to take up his new post.

"I thought you had your own country to run," Harry said as the Apache walked with him to the new Order headquarters.

"Despite what you and your father seem to think, I actually have relatively little power in my government," Blackwolf said.

"You have enough weight. Close enough."

"Hm."

"What are you here for?"

"I need to know what's happening here with the transfer of control, and I have a request to make of you."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "All right, if I can fit it in and if I can even do it. What is it?"

"It's something you can quite easily do. I'll tell you after you're done with more important matters. Where are we going?"

"I'm checking up on some scattered groups the Order has around England to keep an eye on things, but then I'm heading to the new HQ."

Blackwolf frowned thoughtfully. "I knew the last two had been rendered unusable, but I haven't heard where the new one is."
"I'm not quite sure myself. That's one of the things I need to find out before I go there."

Four hours of checking up on Order members later, Harry and Blackwolf were finally heading to the new building. To both of their surprise, it turned out to be a rather obvious place.

"It's only temporary," Bill Weasley explained while his mother bustled around the Burrow's kitchen behind him. "But we've got a lot of rooms, because of all the kids, and it's one of the only places available right now. We put it under a Fidelius charm for the time being, but we're expecting to move it later."

"If possible, we could move the HQ to Hogwarts..." Harry said slowly. They both heard Bill's father call his name from somewhere else in the house. "I'm worried it would be too far away from most of the fighting, though."

Bill clapped him on the shoulder as he passed. "I'm sure you'll work it out."

As he left to find out what Arthur Weasley wanted, Harry moved further into the kitchen. "Mrs. Weasley, thanks so much for hosting for now."

She flashed a smile at him over one shoulder. "It's the least we could do. We could hardly turn everyone away."

"Are there enough protections on the house?" Blackwolf asked.

"I dearly hope so, though I doubt there ever could be in the case of a real attack."

"I have to wait for Harry to finish business here, so until then, would you mind if I tried to strengthen the wards a bit?"

"Oh, Merlin praise you," Molly sighed. "Would you?"

The situation wasn't as bad as Harry had feared, from what he heard from all the reports he was given and all the people he talked to. A couple more that he hadn't spoken to on his rounds earlier in the day filtered through the Weasley house when they heard he was there, mostly to fill him in on anything else he needed to know. By the time the sun set, Harry felt like his head was going to explode with everything he was frantically trying to cram into it.

In the end, he sent an apologetic message home to his father explaining the situation, and since he was going to have to be back in England early the next morning Hotch agreed to let him spend the night at the Burrow. Blackwolf stayed as well, not wanting to apparate back and forth constantly and announcing he would be willing to spend the rest of tomorrow adding to the wards some more.

The morning came too quickly after Harry's late night, and it was back to doing much of what he had done yesterday. Blackwolf stopped shadowing him, understanding it would be awhile until he was free, and Harry regularly apparated in and out of the Burrow to analyze different areas or to speak to someone new. By midday, he was sending out announcements and formally running the Order. He dedicated the afternoon to gathering up the DA members willing to fight, but that proved to be easier than expected because one group text got a positive response, and the DA started organizing itself within a couple more minutes.

Two days later, Harry felt completely braindead but he thought he'd not only stopped a backwards slide in their situation against the Dark but possibly also gained some ground. It seemed like the Death Eaters hadn't been expecting such a rapid response after the murder of two of their prominent leaders, though to be fair, the response probably wouldn't have been so immediate if Harry hadn't already been in this world.
"I've got time," Harry said to Blackwolf, who had stayed at the Burrow since arriving there days ago.

"Come with me," Blackwolf responded.

In a few minutes, Harry found himself staring at Hogwarts in confusion. "Not that I don't miss the place," Harry said, "but is this really where I need to be right now?"

"Nothing's wrong with it," Blackwolf said before he could get concerned. "There's someone I need you to speak with."

"Gideon's back here, isn't he?" Harry asked as they walked up to the castle.

"Yes. They needed his help more than the BAU did in managing the students."

Harry had a bad feeling when they entered the castle and started going up stairs, but he had an even worse feeling when they approached one of the towers.

He groaned. "Please don't tell me we're going to see who I think we're going to see."

"You're probably right in your assumptions."

"Blackwolf...! I don't have time for prophecies and predictions!"

"That's why I asked you to do this for me and not for yourself, though I think you should pay more attention to the analysis of your future."

"Blackwolf..."

"If you don't like it, hurry up and get it over with."

So Harry found himself sitting in the Divinations classroom a couple of minutes later, entirely against his will. The tea cup in front of him had been drained, and on either side of him, Blackwolf and Trelawney were examining the contents quite strictly.

"The red dragon again," Trelawney murmured.

"No surprise there," Blackwolf replied without any of the drama in his voice that hers held.

Harry leaned up to look at the cup's contents. Annoyed, he saw two drops of blood staining a portion of the leaves, just as had happened the first time Trelawney had claimed to see the dragon.

"No Grim this time," Trelawney said.


"Oh dear..."

"Can you tell from what?" Harry asked despite himself.

"Fate's too general for that," Blackwolf told him, not even looking up. "It tells you what will happen because of your nature, not because of specific events. Because you are so involved in the safety of others, it is inevitable that great misfortune will come because of the number of things that could possibly go wrong."
"That's encouraging."

"Fate is pragmatic, not comforting."

"The leopard," Trelawney said abruptly. "It's still here."

Blackwolf frowned, leaning forward to check. "So it is."

"Again with the leopard," Harry sighed. "I thought you said you doubted it was going to come true."

"I told your father that at the beginning because I was worried he would discount any warning if the first couple were too ominous," Blackwolf explained. "I knew he wouldn't believe everything that had been predicted, and I knew we had time to convince him because red dragons and leopards are not signs of your immediate future."

Trelawney looked up in concern. "Harry should soon be accomplishing his goal as a red dragon."

"So?" Harry asked, even though she was looking at Blackwolf.

"That means you'll be open to attack from the leopard," he interpreted.

"Does the leopard have to hate me?" Harry sighed.

"The alternative is unlikely, especially considering your prominent position and how many toes you've trodden on." Blackwolf frowned heavily. "Does anyone strike you as being the leopard?"

"No. Why?"

"Because that means you don't know who the Dark Lord or the leopard are."

Harry gave him a flat look. "Thanks for pointing that out."

"Just want you to be prepared."

"My boy," Trelawney said, eyes enormous behind her glasses, "it has been a pleasure knowing you, and I thank you for all the work you have done."

"I'm not dead yet," Harry argued.

"But soon, you will be."

He looked at Blackwolf, exasperated. The Apache had the nerve to shrug at him. Harry decided he officially hated Seers.

---

Harry arrived home with half a week left of his grounding. He promptly dropped into bed and slept through the next day, which Hotch let him do.

When he woke up, Hotch sat down with him at the kitchen and helped him work through everything that had happened. Mostly, he just had to help organize everything in Harry's head into some sort of coherence he could work with.

"Feel somewhat better?" Hotch asked when Harry had sorted through what had happened.
"Yeah. Looks like it won't be as bad as I thought it would be." Quietly, he added, "Moody did a good job showing me how to manage large groups of people."

"Just...don't be so paranoid," Hotch asked him, and Harry cracked a small smile.

"You should have seen him, when he first started teaching. He practically cackled when he thought about what the Hufflepuffs had done to his predecessor."

The two of them sat in silence for a couple of minutes.

"Trelawney and Blackwolf have decided that I definitely have a leopard after me," he said with a scowl.

"What?"

"They were hoping it might have faded, and that maybe I'd just crossed paths with it before now and hadn't known, but... Still there."

Hotch was quiet.

"What?" Harry asked, frowning.

"I had a suspicion," Hotch said slowly, "about who the leopard would be if it did exist. I thought about it right before your seventeenth birthday, when we were worried that the Light Curse would take effect."

Harry's frown grew. "Who did you think it was?"

"The leopard is supposedly someone who is unable to stop hunting, who holds grudges and never lets go, and returns after its 'bones' have been tampered with. The only person I can think of you would aggravate...who fits those characteristics..." His mouth pinched into a firm line, fighting against the idea of even speaking the name. "Greyback."

Harry closed his eyes. "Shit. He does."

"I wouldn't have put any stock into the theory except... He returned from the dead because he was angry enough to hold onto Blaise when he was passing through the Veils."

"But didn't ours die in Six?"

"We never saw him die," Hotch pointed out. "I shot him multiple times and he just didn't go down. When he finally fell, I could still see him moving once or twice, and they weren't spasms from involuntary muscle twitching."

"You think...he's still alive?"

"I think we don't have proof he's not."

Harry paused. "Well... Why don't we go back and look?"

Hotch nodded slowly. "You're too busy right now, but there's no reason I couldn't return. I know where his body should be, if it's still there."

"I don't like even entertaining the idea of this," Harry grumbled.

"I know...but we discarded other, more ridiculous concepts and they turned out to be true." He
grimaced. "There's six other worlds; I don't know if we can afford to just ignore this because it's uncomfortable."

Harry sighed. "I suppose. When are you going to go back?"

"Probably within the next couple of days. The sooner, the better. I'll return before Christmas dinner."

"Just Christmas dinner?" Harry asked, amused.

"JJ's gathering everyone to her house."

"Who's 'everyone'?" Harry asked.

"Last I heard, it included the BAU, QDA, and family of all of the above."

"Uh. Is her house big enough?"

"No. I'm not quite sure how she's planning to manage it but she seems too confident to not have a plan."

---

Harry was seven, young and small enough to almost completely hide himself behind Hotch. In front of Hotch, the Dursleys were standing in the hospital room, still mentally recovering from the Woodsmarked Killer's attack. And, as Hotch knew he would later find out, the pain of having to wait a little longer for the killer to take out their 'nephew' even after they had tried to sell him out.

"You bloody freak!" Vernon howled. "How dare you leave England?"

"Dumbledore told me to," Harry mumbled even as he hid further behind Hotch.

Dursley reached around Hotch and grabbed the boy, yanking him out from behind shelter. "Dumbledore doesn't know everything," he hissed, one hand reaching towards his belt. "And he certainly doesn't know about this!"

Hotch didn't move, even as Dursley started whipping the quietly sobbing boy. He felt rooted to the spot, and when he tried to lift his arm it was like a hundred tons were attached.

Harry was on the floor, crying, with his arms up in a feeble attempt to protect his head from the blows. When it didn't seem like he had been hurt enough, Dursley threw his belt at him in anger and dropped beside him, yanking furiously at his clothing. Harry frantically smacked at his hands, but Dursley used his larger mass to force his shirt off. He snatched back up at the belt and Harry turned away from him, arms moving in a panic to try to protect every inch of his skin from attack and utterly failing.

Dursley kicked him onto his back and planted his foot on the boy's chest. Harry raised his arms to protect his face, but before Dursley could strike again, a hand grabbed at his upper arm and Dursley paused. He stepped off Harry and let the new presence take over.

The Woodsmarked Killer pointed his wand at Harry. "Crucio."

The screams rang in Hotch's ears until they stopped, and that was more terrifying than when they had begun.

"Avada ke-"
He, too, stopped after hours of torture when a woman moved between him and Harry. "I've got this from here, love," Lestrange said, pulling out a knife.

She carved into skin and muscle, alternatively seeking to induce pain and damage. Harry weakly struggled, trying to get away from her, but she threw one knife through the palm of his hand, pinning him in place, while she worked on him with her other knife.

And so it went. Umbridge stopped Lestrange, Riddle replaced Umbridge, Foyet took over for Riddle.

The Dark Lord came after Foyet. The moment Hotch saw his face, he knew that it was the only possible identity for the Lord, and he felt like throwing up.

In the morning, he wouldn't be able to recall a single feature of the Lord, only that feeling of utter horror.

Harry didn't care who was hurting him. He screamed through it all until his voice was hoarse.

Greyback stepped around the Dark Lord until he was standing in front of Hotch. He grinned, showing teeth, and Hotch knew the blood was Jack's.

"Happy Halloween," Greyback whispered.

It was almost Christmas, and that was what finally jerked Hotch into clarity, more than his inability to move or the impossibility of several of the individuals in the room.

The room vanished, along with most of its occupants. An endless white space filled Hotch's vision. Harry was right where he had been before, curled on the ground, but now he shifted up, trying to get into a kneeling position. The wounds that tore at him made it almost a miracle that he could even move.

Hotch was finally released from his invisible bindings, and he all but collapsed to get to the same level as his son. Harry looked at him, eyes tired and betrayed.

"Harry," Hotch whispered, one arm stretching out towards him.

Harry shied away, flinching and turning his head so he wouldn't have to look at Hotch. It was the same reaction he'd had to his abusers.

Darkness swept around him, and he looked up as Death peered at him. Her cloak should have settled into place, but invisible currents kept it moving, constantly pirouetting around them. One bony hand reached towards him, then jerked back abruptly and flew out in a wide motion. The arm pushed back her cloak, and one thin finger pointed at the bloody figure of his son.

She waited until Hotch had had another moment to get a good look, and then held out her other hand, palm up, in between them. A stick materialized in front of it.

"The Elder Wand..."

Shit. He had promised to get her the rest of the Hallows, but Dumbledore had just died.

"I'll get it," he told her. "I told you, I'll get it."

She nodded slowly, mockingly, and then pointed to Harry again. The boy jerked away from them when he saw their attention.
She was promising to hurt him if Hotch didn't come through on his promise.

"You'll get them both," he said. "I promise." His eyes were dragged back to Harry. "Don't hurt him."

She drew a large circle in the air with one finger. A dark line remained in the air, keeping the shape, and she put her arm in the circle, elbow at the epicenter and fingers aimed towards the edge. Her arm jerked in brief jumps down the circle.

A clock. Time. "I haven't had time to look for them," he said. "Elle's got the one, but she hasn't been back, and Dumbledore had the other, but I don't know what he did with it. The wand stopped working for him in the siege and he wasn't using it anymore."

She didn't give him any sympathy, and her head cocked in further disdain for his excuse.

One hand reached out, touching his cheek lightly, and Hotch could almost hear...

You're cute...

Then she let him go and pointed back to Harry with her other hand...

But not that cute...

Harry's injuries were gone. Hotch got to his feet, hesitated for a moment and looked at Death, then sprinted the short distance to get to Harry. He fell beside him, arms immediately pulling Harry close to him. The boy flinched automatically, then shuddered and leaned into the touch of kindness. Hotch tightened his hold, murmuring soft reassurances to him.

Movement made him look up. Death held up both hands. In one was the Elder Wand. In the other was the Invisibility Cloak.

She snapped her hands closed and both burned with a bright flash, instantly turning to dust. In the same moment, Harry shrieked in agony, pushing his face into Hotch's shoulder and spasming against the pain.

"No, no, no- Harry!" Hotch shouted, clutching at him as the boy slumped down in his arms. He was dimly aware of Death vanishing in front of him. Harry slid, boneless, until his head was resting in Hotch's lap. His entire body shook with frantic breaths.

The world vanished around them, and they were back in Harry's cupboard, in the first place Hotch had ever seen his son before. Just like then, he turned his head from Hotch and weakly spat out blood.

"No..."

There was nothing to be done. For hours, Hotch alternated between hoping Harry would make it and hoping it would just be over. Harry remained between life and death, wheezing and bleeding. Hotch's arms became slick with blood.

And then Harry's breaths slowly stilled, and Hotch couldn't even tell when he had actually died, only realizing at least ten minutes later that he was holding a corpse.

He woke up, his own agonized scream still ringing in his head.

He felt like going to the bathroom to throw up a lot, but forced himself out of bed and down the hall
instead. Harry's door was open, and no one was inside.

He went halfway down the stairs, just enough to see into the living room, and found his house taken over by Harry's 'minions', as Sean affectionately called them. They must have cast a silencing charm on the room because he'd had no clue they were there. No spells were being cast, but they were quite obviously planning on different techniques and spellwork. Harry was sitting on the couch, encouraging Hermione and Ron in a duel against each other in which neither actually used spells.

Ginny said something and the room paused, then burst into laughter. Harry was shaking so hard from it that he fell off the couch, despite the attempts of George beside him to grab him before he could topple over.

Hotch went back to his room and sat on his bed.

He needed the other two Hallows. The Invisibility Cloak wouldn't be a problem. The Elder Wand was.

One step at a time, he told himself, and grabbed his phone to call Elle. Maybe he couldn't grab the Elder Wand yet, but he could get the one closest to him.

Elle didn't answer her phone. When Hotch asked Garcia if she knew where the ex-BAU member had gone, Garcia didn't have a clue.

---

Hotch set out the next day to Six. Snape went with him. Now that his spy days had assuredly ended, the list of potential activities he could partake in had greatly widened, and he almost seemed to be having the opposite of a midlife crisis in response to his new freedoms.

"The body would be gone by now, if there was one," Snape pointed out as they landed outside Malfoy Manor. It was still a wreckage; no one had come to clean it up after the battle. Hotch hadn't had the chance to tell him that Riddle was actually in custody right now, and he wasn't about to do it here without some sort of muffling charm around them as a precaution.

"Maybe." He started walking towards the enormous house. "But I'm hoping this world's wizarding community was too suspicious to enter."

Snape walked in silence with him for a little bit. Just as they reached the front door, he said, "Harry's doing well at taking over."

"He's been ready for it for a while now. He just didn't know."

"No matter how much you disliked Dumbledore, he likely did help as much as Moody did."

"It's probable."

Their funerals a week ago had been appropriate. Hundreds had come to Dumbledore's, and there had been free food. Maybe thirty had come to Moody's, and there had been a security check.

"The will reading for Albus is today."

Hotch snorted lightly. "I won't be getting anything."

"Harry might."

"I don't know if he's going," Hotch said. "He's been busy."
"They'll let him know if he was left anything."

Something broke upstairs. Both of them halted.

"Hominem revelio," Snape muttered.

Twelve lights lit up above them.

"Still think this community is too superstitious to enter?" Snape asked him. Hotch glared at the ceiling where the lights were dancing, taunting him.

"Something's strange about this."

"We're in an alternate world where Malfoy Manor was also destroyed, and we're looking for a dead body that we were hoping is still here after months."

Hotch turned his glare on his friend. Snape raised an eyebrow at him, unimpressed.

"Leave or stay?" Snape asked.

The lights suddenly darted away from them, towards where Hotch remembered the staircase being.

"I don't think we're going to have a choice," Hotch said, drawing his gun. Snape's wand was already out and he raised it in the direction of the stairs.

An explosion rocked the ceiling above them and Snape cursed. He grabbed Hotch's arm and pointed his wand away from them. A jerk sent them sailing in that direction, away from the crumbling ceiling behind them, and they landed roughly, hitting the ground and rolling, just as the ceiling came down.

Hotch staggered to his feet as Snape coughed from the dust. "Why didn't you just stop the ceiling from falling?" Hotch asked, then let out his own cough.

Snape shot him an irritated look. "Just because your son's a Light Lord doesn't mean the rest of us are capable of that kind of magic," he pointed out.

A flash of movement in the corner of Hotch's eye made him look up, and he fired as the growling figure darted towards him. Behind him, he heard Snape shoot a curse in the opposite direction.

This was the exact kind of situation FBI training had taught him not to get into. These odds, an unfamiliar terrain, ambiguous enemies, no backup. Exactly what he didn't want to see, and exactly what he had taught people not to do.

"Werewolves," Snape called behind him.

Hotch grimaced as he saw a new familiar one swaggering towards him. There was a grin, one that Hotch had seen not too long ago in a nightmare. "I think we've answered our question," he said, stepping back until he felt his ankle touch Snape's.

"The manor's anti-apparation wards are still up," Snape told him in response to his unspoken prompt to get them out of there.

Hotch fired three times at Greyback. One of them passed over his shoulder harmlessly, and the other two collided with his upper arm. Greyback jerked, but he kept coming.

Hotch abruptly turned his aim away from Greyback, rapidly taking out two much closer werewolves before they could attack, and then moved his gun back to the pack leader. In that short time,
Greyback had halved the distance, breaking into a run when he saw the brief distraction.

Snape's presence behind him was suddenly gone, but Hotch didn't have time to look to see what happened.

He was a profiler. There was a reason he hadn't ever joined SWAT; logical deduction was his prowess, not instinctive shooting.

Greyback sneered and he fired again. The werewolf was pushed back a step by the impact but he didn't come close to going down.

And then something fell beside Hotch, and he couldn't stop himself quickly enough to avoid looking down. Snape had been thrown, and his still body was lying next to Hotch. He looked alive, but the momentary glance had cost him, and then-

Piercing pain shot up his back.

Everything went dark for the briefest of moments, like he'd closed his eyes, and then he was standing still and there was no pain.

Death was in front of him.

Hotch gave her a look. "I've had no time to get a hold of either one." He glanced at Greyback, who was frozen in front of him. "I need to get back to this. Can we talk later?"

Death bowed in an overdramatized manner and time restarted.

Hotch staggered from the pain, but Greyback paused in surprise, having expected him to go down from the blow. Hotch used the moment to shoot, almost at point blank range, and the bullet went through his neck. Greyback finally went down, and Hotch turned sharply on his heel, smacking the werewolf right behind him across the face with his gun.

Snape stirred.

"Snape!" Hotch shouted. He was out of bullets, and there were four werewolves left right on top of them. "Snape!" He crouched swiftly, grabbing one of the hefty rocks off the ground and flinging it at the nearest werewolf. She jerked back, snarling, and he threw another rock at the next nearest.

"Throwing rocks," the werewolf growled, stalking a step closer. "Is that the best you can do?"

"What are you doing here?" he asked. "Hiding in a destroyed pureblood manor?"

The werewolf's lips pulled back. "What's it to you?" she snapped.

Bingo.

"It seems ridiculous that Greyback would lead the strongest werewolf pack to hide out at the Malfoy place," he said. He could hear the pack leader shifting behind him, but he couldn't turn to face both the female werewolf and Greyback without moving too far away from Snape. "Why don't you go somewhere better?"

"Because your son destroyed all our havens by killing the Dark Lord!" the werewolf shouted at him. "We don't have anywhere left to go, you fool!" With an animalistic growl, she added, "There's no better place to start an infection of the purebloods from the very seat of their power."

"An infection won't work, not anymore," he told her. "A cure's been made for lycanthropy."
All four had been advancing on him slowly, but now one of them came to a dead halt. "Since when?" he demanded.

"It was created in the other world. The first three attempts have been completely successful."

"Don't listen to him," the woman hissed.

Snape lifted his head slightly. He was less than a yard from the nearest Death Eater, hardly giving him enough time to start sending spells towards them. Behind Hotch, he could hear Greyback starting to try to get to his feet.

"It's true. It's a series of treatments intended to counteract the effects of lycanthropy. With it, you can still turn into a wolf, but it becomes less painful over time, and you can only do it when you intend to. There aren't any more forced lunar transformations."

One of the others paused now at the idea of planned shifts.

"Sectumsempra!"

The curse hit the woman and she howled, stepping back and flailing her arms against the pain of the lacerations. The two who Hotch had managed to stop with words now backed up in surprise, and the last one made a move forwards. Hotch stepped away from Greyback, who he could hear standing up, and quickly reloaded. Snape took out the last werewolf and Hotch raised his gun to fire at Greyback.

The werewolf charged towards him-

And then darted behind the rubble, putting a barrier between them. Everything went silent.

Snape cast a locating charm, but it fizzled for a moment before fading. "The wolf-enhancing potion some of the werewolf enthusiasts takes messes with spells on the werewolf," he explained when Hotch frowned at him. Snape nodded in the direction Greyback had gone. "Are we following him?"

The werewolf had been around for too long. "He has at most eight lives left," Hotch said firmly, "if not seven or six. Let's see if we can't take him down further tonight."

---

JJ frowned in confusion as Arthur Weasley stepped into her office, small box in hand. "It's nice to see you again," she said, "but I still don't understand why he would have left me something."

"Not many of us understand why Albus did a lot of things," Arthur pointed out with a small, sad laugh. He handed her the box. "But he was very strict in his will about getting this to you."

JJ took it. She opened it up, hoping its own presence would explain Dumbledore's action, but she only found herself more confused. "A wand?"

Arthur shrugged. "He said in his will that it was rightfully yours."

"But... I'm not even a witch." Her frown increased as she examined it. "Wasn't this the original wand he used?"

Arthur leaned closer. "It looks like it, though I can't be sure." He shrugged again and patted her arm. "I'm sure you'll find out what he wanted you to use it for."

She closed the lid on the box and set it on her desk. "He was a strange man," she muttered to herself.
"A wand to a muggle."
"No man chooses evil because it is evil; he only mistakes it for happiness, the good he seeks." - Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*

"Am I still grounded?" Harry asked, walking into the kitchen. His light tone and expression darkened the moment he saw the scratched and bruised pair waiting for him. "What happened?"

"Greyback's alive," Hotch said.

"Okay, 'Greyback's alive' is not a complete answer to why you took like you got hit by the Hogwarts Express."

Hotch gave him a stern look. "Do you want to be grounded longer?"

"...Not really." He frowned. "But still!"

Hotch gave him the rest of the story while Harry moved further into the kitchen. His frown intensified as he saw the state they were in.

"Why aren't you in a hospital?" he demanded. "And what happened to your back?"

Heavy swathes of bandages under his shirt were clearly poking out at the back of his neck and created ruffles. "I got hit from behind."

Harry glanced at Snape.

"We're not in the hospital because we don't want anyone to ask questions about how we got so injured," Snape said and Hotch glared at him for selling them out.

Harry gave an exasperated sigh. "Let me go ask Madame Pomfrey if she can come get a look at you two."

After the head nurse had come and gone, ranting profusely at both injured men for not immediately seeking professional medical care – especially since Hotch's spinal cord had been less than a half centimeter from being severed, which could have been fatal considering the curse potency of lycanthropy. She sent Snape to the Burrow with strict orders for taking things slow, and demanded Harry keep Hotch on bed rest.

Harry steamed through the whole debacle, furious but keeping it to himself until the nurse was gone.

"Your spine," he said through gritted teeth, "was almost sliced in two, and you immediately started profiling Greyback once you got back instead of doing the sane thing and getting bed rest."
"Watch your tone," Hotch warned severely. "And yes, because it's not going to make much of a
difference to me if I'm paralyzed when my whole family's been murdered because I wasn't preparing
for Greyback to come back."

Sean walked into the room, paused, said, "You're both idiots," then turned around and walked back
out.

Harry glared after him and called, "You don't even know what's going on!"

"One of you is irritated about the other putting themselves in unnecessary danger," Sean shouted
back.

In lieu of his uncle, who a glare would have no impact on now that he was out of the room, Harry
narrowed his eyes at Hotch instead, frustrated by the accuracy of the statement.

"Bed rest," Harry said. "You heard Pomfrey."

"You can't honestly believe that you can force me."

"No, but I think Pomfrey can if I tell her you're not following her orders." He forced himself to drop
some of the antagonism in his tone. "It won't be for long. You're going to heal faster with magical
medicine, and you'll probably be back on your feet within a week."

Hotch didn't look anymore inclined to go upstairs, even if he was leaning against the table and chair
to keep his balance as it was.

"What?" Harry asked, quietly.

"He must be the leopard-spirit," Hotch replied. "We know he died once before. I don't see how he
could have survived our first encounter with him at Malfoy Manor, let alone this second time. He still
managed to walk away even after taking a bullet through the neck. He has at least eight lives left,
maybe six, but he only needs one to finish what he started."

Harry was quiet for a moment. Then, "We can have this conversation upstairs. Wait a moment."

He left the room. A minute later, he returned, but Hotch gave him a defensive glare.

"I will magically carry you," Harry warned him. "I'll do it."

"And I'll ground you until your brother is out of school. Graduate school."

"What if he decides not to go to graduate school?"

"Then you'll be living here for a long time, won't you?"

Harry smiled slightly. "I think I'll be doing that anyway." He moved closer until he was directly in
front of Hotch. "Come on. You won't be able to pull the same excuses over me the next time I get
injured if you don't follow Pomfrey's orders this time."

Hotch gave a resigned sigh. "Don't use magic."

Harry frowned but didn't say anything, instead turning his attention to getting his father to his feet.
Hotch winced as all of his injuries strained, but Harry did a good job of helping him stand without
tearing anything open. The flat plane of the kitchen and living room was comparatively easy to cross,
but the stairs were a fiasco that almost made Hotch go back on what he'd said.
"Just because you don't have magic doesn't mean you're not allowed to use it," Harry pointed out when they were still only a third of the way up the stairs.

"But I don't have to use it," Hotch said. "I won't become reliant on it."

"I'm not sure using it to get upstairs when you've just been badly injured counts as reliance."

"When all of this is over, I'll be back in the field without any sort of magical assistance. We can't get used to magic when we're tracking down a serial killer in Idaho." He grimaced. "I'm not happy as it is about using Black to find the boy in Oregon, but there was a time constraint in that case."

He put his arm out to steady himself before he almost toppled backward. His teeth gritted together. "Where's Jack?" he managed to get out.

"I told Sean to keep him occupied for a couple of minutes," Harry said, then disapprovingly, "but I expect he can smell the blood and he knows something's wrong." With a wry smile, he added, "We've practically assured he's never going to want to go into law enforcement or the military by this point."

"Probably." He moved up another step. His jaw clenched. "How soon was that medicine Pomfrey gave me supposed to kick in?"

"Immediately," Harry said, trying to hide a flash of amusement. "And combined with what Snape gave both of you when you got back, it's the reason you're not in so much pain that you can't even move."

It was a painful trek up the stairs to his bed, and Harry had no issue pointing out to him that just taking the downstairs guest bedroom would have been a lot simpler. Hotch ignored him. When he was finally settled in his bed, on the covers because he didn't want to feel anymore like an invalid, Harry dropped down onto the bed by his feet.

"After you're healed," Harry said slowly, staring at the wall opposite him instead of Hotch, "you're going back there, aren't you?"

"I have to," Hotch said. "He's been loose for too long."

Harry swallowed. "Dad... Leopards don't just attack the people who they've been foreshadowed to attack. They attack anyone who's done them harm. Just because we know I'm in danger from a leopard doesn't mean you're safe from him."

"I can't risk him coming after you two again," Hotch murmured. "Not again."

Harry closed his eyes for a moment. "I know the feeling." He took a deep breath. "Okay. We can't have both of us in danger at the same time. We could both die, obviously, but we won't be able to help the other if we're dealing with our own problems. I think we need to ensure that one of us is always safe."

"Harry, I'm not an idiot. You're going to be almost constantly leading the Light in England."

"But I won't always be in danger," Harry pointed out. "Only during a raid or something like that. For the most part, I'll just be leading. I promise to let you know when I'm planning on getting into danger." Pause. "Yes, those words just exited my mouth."

"I might be able to work with the BAU over in Six, since they already know us."
"Won't be able to work with yourself, since he kind of hates you."

"Yeah. I appreciate that, Harry, really."

"You're welcome."

"When you tell me you're safe, you can't just be saying it to appease me," Hotch warned. "That doesn't help either of us."

Harry sighed. "Dad, I'm a Light Lord. I don't think normal rules of safety really apply to me."

"I still worry."

"Hello, Light Lord."

"You're still my son, Harry. I still worry."

Harry gave him a smile, the open sort that Hotch rarely ever saw anymore. The sort that he only gave when he had a bone-deep contentment. "I worry about you too. We both need to come back home."

"You should get some rest," Hotch told him. "You'll need it before you head back to England."

"I'm not grounded anymore?"

"You're still grounded, but I know you were worried about Arthur's post and wanted to check on it."

Harry grinned at him. "Thanks." As he started to get up to leave, he asked, "Do you think you're ever going to get back to your actual job?"

"At this rate? Maybe in another ten years. Please don't find any more wars after this one's over."

---

JJ's Christmas celebration was held a couple of days before Christmas actually happened, since the QDA leadership was positive the Death Eaters were going to try something on the actual day. It was too much of an obvious target for nothing to happen.

It turned out that JJ had enlisted the help of a couple of the Order members to enlarge her house, and her decision to host everyone had been prompted by Dobby. The house elf had told her that a lot of Hogwarts' elves missed the BAU and QDA, most of whom hadn't made it back to Hogwarts since the siege ended, and wanted to help the group another time. Their request to feed the large, conglomerated organizations had been filled by JJ's suggestion for a massive Christmas party.

"Something's going to go wrong," Hotch heard Ron mutter to Hermione, terrified. "Something has to go wrong."

Hotch thought the same thing.

Apparently, the Death Eaters were too petrified of JJ to even think of doing something, if they had even heard of the party at all, so the event passed without incidence. For many, it was a chance to get caught up with friends and family on a personal level instead, and it was the first time Hotch had seen many of them relaxed in what felt like years.

At the end, after almost everyone had gone home, the BAU team remained at JJ's house. Hotch had Harry take his family home – driving the car under Sean's supervision, not apparition even though
that probably would have been safer considering Harry's competency with magic. Gideon had returned for the party, but his ride to America had been McGonagall and his ride home was Snape, so he'd had to leave before the party was over.

"Does anyone have the faintest idea where Elle is?" Hotch asked.

"No," Reid said, frowning. "Why are you looking for her?"

Hotch told them the whole story.

JJ sat up abruptly when he reached the part about the Hallows, but she didn't say anything until he'd finished. "Dumbledore left his original wand to me."

"But that wasn't the Elder Wand..." Morgan said, then paused when he saw Hotch jolt slightly. "...Right?"

"If it were, its owner would have become JJ when she grabbed it from him, the day she went into labor," Hotch said.

"What?" Reid demanded. "You grabbed his wand?"

"He startled me," JJ quickly said. "I don't know if it's the Elder Wand, but..."

"It would make a lot of sense," Rossi agreed. "It's a step in the right direction."

JJ got up from her chair and left to go get the Wand.

"I don't think anything bad would have happened to her from the Death Eaters, or they would have tried to use that against us," Rossi pointed out. "It's more likely she went to one of the other worlds to try to help the QDA."

"I'll ask Hermione," Hotch said. "She would know." But she wouldn't tell Harry, since Harry hadn't wanted any help from the BAU that had required them to be on the frontlines.

"I still can't believe you made a deal with Death," Reid laughed.

"I don't know about you, but I can believe it," Prentiss scoffed in reply. "Have you seen half the crap his family pulls?"

JJ returned with the box and handed it to Hotch. "How do you get that to her?" JJ asked curiously.

"She always just came to me," he replied.

"Why does she need someone to get the Hallows for her anyway?" Morgan asked. "She's Death. She can go anywhere she wants."

"Or...can she?" Rossi said. "Maybe she can only go where someone has died or is dying. That's why Hotch has to have the Hallows in his hands when he dies."

The team was reluctant to disperse, having not even touched the Dark Lord profile that night, but it was getting late and they could get back to it later. JJ led them out, and they milled back to their cars under the street lamps. Hotch heard Morgan ribbing Reid about something before the young genius got into his car, receiving an indignant squawk in reply.

Hotch glanced up as he saw Rossi pause on the other side of his car. "You don't like the deal with Death," Rossi said calmly, leaning against the car so Hotch couldn't leave without potentially
knocking his friend down.

"No," Hotch said, shutting the door he'd opened. "Why would I?"

"You've survived things no one else has. In fact, I'll bet that attack from Greyback did more harm than you thought."

Hotch grimaced. "Probably. She's making exceptions whenever she feels like it, whenever it suits her."

"It's random, and to a degree, it's undeserved."

"There are a lot more people who have earned this second and third chance, more than me."

Rossi nodded slowly. "We could all say that, no matter who she chose to return to bring her the rest of the Hallows. But Hotch... Did you really deserve it? Or did you earn it?"

Hotch frowned at him. "What do you mean?"

"You aren't returning because you're a better person than everyone else who's died. You're returning because you had the resources to make a bargain and you chose to. But I don't think Death would have granted you a return if that were it. Have you read the original tale of the Hallows?"

"No."

"Three brothers cheat Death. The first two acted selfishly and irresponsibly, and both died soon after. The third lived a long life because he chose to act wisely and in the best interest for his son."

Rossi smiled faintly. "The gift he had received for Death was the Invisibility Cloak. Hotch, I think Death has her own strange way of rewarding positive behavior."

"So I just need to stay on her good side long enough to get all these Hallows back to her."

"It would be a great idea for all of us to stay on her good side, forever, but yes, I would suggest that." He smiled wryly. "Just think of it this way – it's not all about who you are. A lot of times, it's about why you do what you do."

---

Hermione took the QDA back to Three. Within a couple of days, they were making gains that comforted Harry enough for him to focus more on problems in their world. He was spending much more time managing diplomacy than he wanted to, and Hotch finally released him from his grounding since he was often leaving the house to do something he absolutely hated.

But Hotch got most of the house clean before he left, so he was satisfied with the arrangement.

In the meantime, he focused on Greyback. It was a grueling process with so little to go on, and Greyback's erratic behavior made it more difficult for him to try to track the werewolf down. He was soon spending weeks in Six, hoping to find something that could get him on the scent. The Order from that world was more than willing to accommodate him, considering his help in taking down their Death Eaters, but as the days slipped into February, he still didn't have a solid lead on the werewolf.

Hermione had strong improvements in Three, a world they had originally discounted as a complete loss. She reported that she didn't think they could win, but she thought they could force a loss that at least protected a significant portion of the rebels, keeping them safe until the QDA could completely
win the war and return to help. She also told Hotch that she knew where Elle was generally, that the
cured werewolf had been helping them in Three this whole time without Harry's knowledge. She
was undercover at the moment, however, and wouldn't be able to contact Hotch about the cloak for a
while.

The BAU was mostly back to what their actual job was, and had been for months now. Still, in their
spare time, they often tried to either help Hotch with Greyback or add to the Dark Lord profile.
Hotch once asked Blackwolf if he should submit a request for extended leave, considering how
seldom he was in the office these days. Blackwolf told him that he thought the FBI would much
rather Hotch worry about a couple of criminals who had the potential to kill their only hope for
bringing peace to Britain, so Hotch could consider himself doing paid profiling.

March came. Harry had managed to stabilize the situation in Britain, making the battle evenly
matched. The Death Eaters hadn't weakened, but the Light had grown stronger. Harry admitted he
was worried about completely dismantling the structure once the war was over, to prevent a huge
superpower controlling all of Britain after the fighting was done. As promised, he was mostly out of
the fighting in comparison to what he had been doing during the Battles of Hogwarts, but he still
went into conflicts at least three or four times a week, and was usually fighting at least five or six. He
came home all the nights he wasn't so exhausted that he just crashed at the Burrow.

Hotch shouldn't have been surprised when Death once again chose the worst time to come visit him.
Once more, it was in the middle of a fight with werewolves who Hotch had hoped he might be able
to get information from. It turned out that Greyback had already spoken to them about killing him on
sight, which had completely ruined his element of surprise since they already knew who he was.
Death paused the world just as Hotch was about to dive out of the way of a claw in front of him, and
demanded he hand her the wand that he'd been keeping in his pockets since he'd been given it. She
wasn't happy that he didn't have the Cloak yet, but the wand had bought him more time.

The beginning of April arrived with good news. Hermione thought that the situation in Three was
solid enough to leave and start on the next world. Harry had pushed the conflict in Two, their home,
practically in their favor, and was able to at least help them get started in the next word. According to
the prophecy, this one would be a win, and they wanted to hit the ground with their feet running.

Hotch was really starting to hate prophecies. They weren't so much predicting the future as they were
self-fulfilling.

He was staying in his home world for the next two weeks. While it pained him to give up his search
even for a little while, he and Harry had decided that it was a bad idea to have both of them gone at
the same time, especially while Harry was entering an unknown world. The rest of the BAU, upon
hearing this, immediately insisted he get to their conference room.

"How was Six?" Rossi asked quickly, asking out of habit and not any real interest.

"Practically no change." He glanced around the buzzing room. This wasn't an excited energy. Elle,
however, was seated in one of the chairs at the end of the table by Morgan and Reid, which brought
some relief. "What happened?"

"Reid, you worked it out," Rossi said, and the room went quiet when it realized Reid was going to
explain the situation.

"Forty-two bothered me," Reid said. "The Unsub went out of his way to get the BAU involved, but
he never made any real efforts to attack them. Not only that, but he ensured that Harry would meet
that BAU in a situation in which they would immediately dislike him."
"That could have just been to mess with his head or to slow him down," Hotch pointed out.

"Yeah, we were thinking that too. But then I started thinking about how we would have reacted in the same position. The first thing we would do is create a profile. And the second thing we would do is put that profile in the FBI database in case anyone ran across someone we suspected to be a terrorist."

"He got into the database. The Unsub's using us to profile Harry for him," Hotch summarized, stunned. "He's getting to us to predict the QDA's actions by looking at its leader."

"So then the Unsub had its forces in Three apply that profile, but there were a couple of errors with it."

Elle started nodding rapidly, and Reid gestured for her to take over. "While I was there, I couldn't help but notice that the Death Eaters just weren't behaving like they should have. They weren't using tactics they had used anywhere else, but the tactics they were using weren't the kind that they could have developed specifically to combat the QDA or Order. It was just bizarre, and the only reason they didn't completely lose was because the Unsub started sending his forces from another world to help. Even then, Hermione was still able to push them back."

"Forty-two's BAU would have been profiling Harry based on inaccurate information, and then it wasn't even him leading the QDA when they tried to predict movements," Hotch said.

"Exactly. It completely fell apart. He probably would have tried to get more of a profile in Three, but the first thing the QDA did was ensure that their homeground was protected and the BAU was warned."

"Who knows this?" Hotch asked.

"Just us, but Hermione told me they were going to send someone back soon to tell us the situation in Nine," Elle said. "One of the first things they were going to do was check on the BAU, so I think they'll be okay if they just act quickly enough."

"We've said the Unsub has to be a pureblood, or something close to pureblood," Hotch said slowly, thoughts starting to whirl.

"From the behavior we've seen, yes," Morgan replied. "He supports core pureblood values, but he's fit into their society more than Riddle was able to because he's not trying to be what he thinks purebloods represent when he already is what they represent."

"But pureblood Death Eaters don't adopt any muggle techniques. That would defeat their ideal of pureblood supremacy if they have to win through our methods. The only reason they would change that would be if they were losing so badly because of one thing that they had to make an adjustment."

"It wasn't obvious in the other worlds that our profiling was helping," Elle said, frowning. "Almost no one even found out that there were profilers involved."

"No, wait," Morgan said quickly. From his horrified look, he'd realized what Hotch had figured out. "The only place people knew about us was here. The Dark Lord... He's from this world."

"Not necessarily," Prentiss said, but she looked nauseous. "I've been wondering this whole time... If he knew how to combine souls from alternate worlds, like he did with Riddle... Why didn't he do that himself? He could be from a different world, and when he merged he had all of his doppelganger's memories."
"But he would have still had to make sure that the technique would work, so he would have had to get close to watch profiling in action," Elle said.

"Not only that," Reid added, "he would have had to know how it works."

"Adding that to the profile we've got now... Age, power level, intelligence..." Rossi took a deep breath. "He merged with someone in the DA."

"No," Morgan disagreed, eyes widening. "The DA hasn't been involved in the other worlds. Merging with someone in the DA would have been useless for him. It's someone from the QDA."

"I know who it is," Hotch said hoarsely.

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There was a feeling of panic as Harry landed in Nine. They had gone as quickly as they could in the other worlds, but he still felt like they just hadn't gone fast enough. Too much damage could have occurred before they arrived, and that thought had him quickly dividing everyone into groups for reconnaissance. Hermione took the biggest group to Europe and Harry went with a couple to America.

Almost immediately, he realized something was really weird.

"People should be more concerned," he murmured to the group he was standing in D.C. with. "In all the other worlds, they were worried about London's problems spreading here. These people just don't seem to care."

The streets ahead of them were packed with a regular Saturday crowd, but nothing particularly stood out as different. That was the issue.

He grimaced and turned his head to one side. There were only three others with him, Ginny's trio. "Go find Gideon and Elle. Make sure they're okay. I'll check on the main group."

The three apparated away, presumably to find a way to start tracking the two ex-BAU members down. Harry took a deep breath, trying to calm himself, and left for Quantico.

It was an anticlimactic visit. Everyone was out of the office.

He tried the Hotchner home next. No one was there. With an internal groan, he went to the magical village in D.C., rented a broom with a Notice-Me-Not charm on it, and started flying back in the direction he needed to search. Once he was airborne above the clouds, he summoned Atlas in his insubstantial but corporeal form, and he sent the elephant after this world's Hotchner.

As he flew, he sent messages to the others to check on them. Ginny and Luna had gone to find Elle and Blaise had gone after Gideon. In Britain, Hermione's group had split in two, one to take a look at Hogwarts and the other to check out London. No one knew anything for certain yet, but they were all reporting that something was definitely off.

Atlas started to dip down below the clouds, and Harry made to follow. Before he could, a giant blue form collided with him, knocking him from his broom. Someone else swore and fumbled, and Harry turned his head.

For a moment, he made eye contact with himself, who was equally as surprised.

Then they were both falling, and there was a startled squawk somewhere above Harry's head.
White cloud flashed in front of his eyes as he started to free fall, but before he could even attempt to summon his magic to slow himself or pull the broom closer, talons snatched him up and yanked him from the cloud. He shook his head, trying to regain his bearings, and looked at his savior.

Buckbeak was holding onto him, wide blue wings flapping to keep his position above the clouds. On his back was Potter, from this world.

"Didn't expect to find you here, to be honest," Harry told him.

"I have to agree," Potter said wryly. "Mind telling me who you are?"

"Er. That's a long story. Can we do it at ground level?"

"No," Potter immediately said. "I have the upper hand here and I don't trust you."

Despite how awkward his position was, Harry couldn't help but grin at the display of logic. "Fair enough. I'm you from an alternate universe."

He would be lying if he said he weren't worried about Potter telling Buckbeak to just drop him for saying something that idiotic.

"Prove it," Potter said instead.

As best as he could, Harry reached up and pushed back the fringe of his hair to show the lightning bolt scar. "Since it's an alternate world, everything will be the same only up until whatever caused the difference, but you can still ask me anything and I can tell you what happened in my world."

"Did you ever hide something huge from Dumbledore?" Potter asked. Harry blinked at him, a bit confused. "Well, if your world is different, you should still react similarly to me, in theory."

"I've been to five worlds beside my own so far and you are definitely my favorite doppelganger. I want you to know that, so maybe you won't decide to drop me later."

"Is that a yes?"

"A resounding yes. I stopped living with the Dursleys and we hid it from everyone."

"Have the other worlds done that?"

"For the most part, yeah. Some of them feel too trapped." He grimaced. "Emotional abuse isn't something anyone's as eager to admit to suffering from as they are to admit to physical abuse. A couple think leaving puts the Dursleys in too much danger."

Potter opened his mouth, then stopped. "Hang on, I've got veritaserum in the house."

"I'm not complaining but...why?"

"My dad was curious about it. Hold on."

There wasn't much for Harry to hold on to, but Buckbeak didn't let him drop as they started back down towards the ground. Neither of them spoke, the rushing air making it too difficult to hear. Buckbeak brought them the ground in gradual, wide, descending circles, occasionally diving a short distance when he got bored of the slow drop. It would have been a lot more fun if Harry hadn't been in such a precipitous position.

They came down in someone's backyard. There must have been wards around the yard to prevent
anyone from noticing, because there were neighbors in their own backyard who didn't even look up. Buckbeak dumped Harry unceremoniously in a bush, then landed in a run, wings batting to slow his pace before he ran into the fence. Potter jumped off gracefully and pointed his wand at Harry as he climbed out of the bush.

"Stop." Harry raised his hands to show he meant no harm. Potter gave him a small smile. "Sorry, but I think you'll understand that I've got little reason to trust you."

"Truer words have hardly been spoken."

Potter glanced at Buckbeak. "Keep an eye on him," he said, and Buckbeak trotted back over to Harry. The latter leaned away, but Buckbeak ignored his discomfort and stared him down, inches from his face. "I'll be right back."

Harry kept his gaze fixed on the hippogriff, but he heard a sliding door open and close. A couple of minutes later, it opened and closed again, and Potter came over out of his periphery and pressed a bottle into his hand.

Harry put a few drops on his tongue and blinked when he felt it take effect. "That stuff is so weird."

"Yeah. Okay, so who are you?"

"Your doppelganger."

"Why are you here?"

"Each world is under threat from Riddle, so we've come to help get rid of him. We wouldn't be interfering, but we know that a Dark Lord, a new one from one of the worlds, is getting involved and trying to ensure the Dark wins everywhere. You're the second to last world we've visited."

"Oh. Well, that's nice of you, but we won about a half month ago."

Harry finally turned away from Buckbeak to look at him. "Seriously?"

"Yeah."

"I love this world more and more every second."

Potter smirked. "What's not to like?" Less jokingly, he added, "Do you guys need any help with anything?"

"Just hold the win. That's the best thing you can do."

"Who's 'we', by the way?"

"The QDA. It was created the summer after our third year, when a bunch of students were attacked and we bonded together through psychological pain. It's like the DA, but crazier and better trained."

"Huh."

"So, what are you doing in America?"

Potter's expression became more wary, defensive. Still, without hesitation, he said, "I'm here because I was adopted by the Hotchners. They're muggles."

It was like the day had broken through the clouds. Harry grinned. "This is definitely my favorite
world. Adopted? When?"

Potter visibly relaxed. "I started coming here when I was five, and they officially took me in a couple of years later." He frowned in confusion. "Do you know who I'm talking about?"

"They were my biological parents, in my world."

Potter stared at him. "No way," he whispered.

"But if it makes you feel better, we only found out about that when I was almost thirteen, so you've had more time with them."

"That...does help, actually." He gestured indoors. "I'm going to go tell everyone you're here, so if you want to come in..."

"In a moment. I need to make sure the rest of the QDA knows what's going on. We knew something weird had happened but we didn't think anyone else had won their war so quickly."

"You guys won too?"

Harry grimaced. "We had, but they blindsided us at the last minute. We've made steady gains and we're back to where we started, and we're hoping to win soon."

A couple of patronuses later, Harry was sitting in the kitchen getting caught up on this world's activities with Haley Hotchner and Potter. Hotchner had been almost home from getting groceries, and after another strange introduction between Harry and a member of the family, Hotchner was also sitting at the table while they pieced together differences and similarities in the world.

The hours flew past, and then Hermione sent a message asking what they were supposed to do when everything seemed to be secure.

Harry paused. "Uh. We've got to get going, but once we're done in the final world and everyone else has calmed down, I'll try to come back."

"You better," Potter told him. "I can't believe you're a Light Lord."

"I can't believe you have a pet hippogriff and you actually managed to stay out of life-or-death situations once in a while. I'm really quite impressed."

The QDA gathered back up in London.

"Easiest world ever," Fred said immediately.

"Anyone got a complaint against going straight to the last world?" Harry asked. No one spoke up. "All right. I guess we're going."

"What about the BAU?" Ron asked. "Weren't they expecting a report?"

"We'll do reconnaissance on the other world first, and then we'll send back one big message. There's nothing really important to tell them right now, and our recon has never taken too long."

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"Where are they?" Morgan muttered, impatiently shifting from one foot to the other. On the opposite end of the room, Hotch was pacing back and forth.
The QDA hadn't checked in for the last two days. No one had left the room for days, except for Elle, who had gone to get the Cloak for Hotch since it was the only thing anyone could do that was even remotely helpful while they waited for news.

"Let's grab Snape and go over," Elle said. "Just two people. The rest of us will stay here in case someone shows. We can't afford to wait any longer."

For once, no one had a solid reason to disagree with Elle's rather brash and abrupt methodology, and all of them looked at Hotch.

"I'll call Snape, then."

The trip over to Nine took longer than finding out what had happened. None of the QDA could be located, so Snape brought them immediately to the Order, who said that Hermione had stopped by with her group. Since the war was over, they had left, but the QDA hadn't said where they were going.

"They must have gone to the next world," Hotch said, but before he could say anything else, his phone rang.

The two of them reappeared in their own Quantico not long after. "Nine won the war on their own so they moved on to Eighteen. The Dark Lord left us a message. He's sending Greyback there, and he's telling Greyback how to find the QDA."

He should have used the Dark Lord's real name. It was just too painful, and the rest of the team couldn't fault him for that human moment.

"Why didn't he do that before?" Rossi asked, bewildered and angry.

"He was hoping to use the previous battles to wear the group down as a whole, because he knows removing Harry doesn't weaken the group enough since they fought the last world almost entirely without him," Hotch said quickly. "Now he's getting desperate. I'll bet this final world is his home and he's preparing to defend it. His best option is to start picking off people one by one."

"The Order can't spare anyone else," Snape said, "and I can only apparate two."

"I'll go with you," Elle said. "I don't have magic, but I've got magical abilities that might help."

"We'll get Blackwolf and we'll get ready to follow you if you need us," Morgan quickly said.

"Does this scream 'Trap' to anyone else?" Reid pointed out.

"It's one we can't afford to not run into," Elle replied. "What else are we supposed to do?"

"The Dark Lord's arrogant," Prentiss added. "Whether he has a specific trap or not, he's going to want someone from the BAU there to see him win."

"Is there anything else you need to profile or can we go now?" Snape asked.

Elle came to stand beside him and grabbed the arm opposite Hotch. A moment later, the colors that outlined them swirled like a drain until they vanished into nothing as the three were transported away.

"How are we going to tell Garcia and Gideon?" JJ whispered, horrified. "They don’t know yet."

"I haven't given up on him," Morgan said firmly. "The Dark Lord merged with him, not the other
way around. I doubt he's doing this voluntarily." Still staring at the spot the trio had just vanished from, he said, "I just hope they can pull him out of this."

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Eighteen was Nine's opposite.

London burned. They tried for two days to find the Order in the rubble, and the only thing they could uncover was that most of the Light had been murdered, either by the Dark or by the scared muggle population. The Dark's grip on Britain was solid and had started to spread through Europe, starting in France and crossing south and east to eat up more influence.

There wasn't a hope for them in Europe. They went to America immediately, again splitting up. Hermione took most of the group to Blackwolf to find out what the situation was here while Harry went on his own to Virginia. If the Dark Lord was going after the BAU in previous worlds, there was a chance he would do it here too.

He landed in a neighborhood near where his home had been in his own world, and alarms blared.

He jolted as the siren screamed in the quiet town, then whipped around, looking for the source or reason for the alarm. Nothing stood out to him, but window blinds immediately shut. A few kids had been on the street, and they ran inside immediately, a couple screaming in alarm. Almost blocked out by the sound of the alarm, Harry could hear police sirens wailing a couple of streets away.

There was a Disillusionment Charm over himself, and since he didn't see any threat he stayed where he was. If the alarm was in response to a Death Eater attack, it would be easier to remain in one place until he could figure out where it was happening. He pulled out his wand, planning on contacting the rest of the QDA to let them know something was wrong, but one of the police cars turned down his street and came to a stop at the end. He couldn't summon Atlas, who wouldn't be under the charm, until they left.

The car sat there for a full two minutes. Both officers stayed inside, checking something between them and looking apprehensively down the street. Harry frowned, wondering if he should just go somewhere else to cast Atlas or if he should wait to see if they needed help with whatever was going on.

Tires skidded to a halt on the pavement from the other end of the road, and Harry turned as the driver's door on his Dad's SUV opened. The alarm must have alerted all law enforcement in the area, whether they were local police or not.

A bad feeling in the pit of Harry's stomach grew. If the two law enforcement vehicles were carrying people to one crisis, they shouldn't have parked so far away from each other.

Hotchner said something into a mic, and then started walking towards the police car. His gait was measured, careful. He didn't look towards the officers, even when another police car pulled up behind theirs. Instead, he kept going towards the middle of the road.

To where Harry was.

"Come out where we can see you," he said, neither hostile nor amiable. His eyes were scanning the region Harry was standing in. "We know you're there."

His gun wasn't drawn, even though his hand had unconsciously come to rest near it. Few people would have noticed, but his posture was far too tense. Harry hadn't seen him like this since he'd faced off against some of the Death Eaters at Hogwarts.
"You'll be able to cast a spell-cancelling charm," Hotchner warned him. "Nothing else. Don't try anything that might make us panic."

What the hell was going on?

Harry tried to apparate. Nothing happened.

"You're not in a neighborhood, alone, for no reason," Hotchner said. "Let's talk about why you're here. But I can't communicate with you if you don't stop hiding."

Despite all his screaming instincts, he cancelled the spell. No matter what world, it would seem his habit of trusting his father outweighed logic more often than not. Hotchner's gaze sharpened onto him the moment he appeared, and Harry slowly raised both hands to show he meant no harm. The hand with his wand held the wood between his index and middle finger, rendering it impossible to use in its position.

"Throw the wand towards me," Hotchner instructed him. Harry paused. "We won't break it or damage it in any way. We just need to make sure you can't harm us."

Harry lowered the hand with his wand and made to toss it towards his father's doppelganger. As he started to, he heard a voice coming through Hotchner's earpiece despite the distance between them. Still, he threw the wand underhand, and it clattered to the ground equidistant from both of them.

Whatever the voice was saying, Hotchner wasn't pleased to hear it, and Harry didn't think he was imagining the touch of disdain and distrust that entered his gaze. Still, he kept to procedure. "Put your hands above your head and interlock your fingers." The voice screamed louder at him.

Down the street, Harry heard the police car doors open and close. He glanced in that direction, and the four officers who had gotten out of the two cars jolted in surprise, immediately drawing their weapons. Sharp movement made him turn the opposite way. Hotchner had raised his hand towards the officers, palm out to tell them to stop, but Harry's quick head gesture made him jump.

They knew Harry had magic, and it terrified them.

"It's okay," Hotchner said, trying to calm everyone down at the same time. To Harry, he said, "We're not going to hurt you."

He tried to quell his inner panic. His father or not, he knew Hotchner wasn't going to let someone shoot a kid just for committing a crime, if that's what magic was here.

Instead of reacting, he put his hands on his head like he'd been told to, hoping that would assuage someone. Without apparating, he was completely stuck, and without his wand, he couldn't hope to send a message to someone to tell them anything was wrong. Even if he could use some magic, summoning Atlas probably wouldn't help the situation in the slightest.

He could try running, but he had a feeling there were more police alerted to his presence, and he didn't think he could outrun five grown adults behind him and whatever backup came at him.

"What's your name?" Hotchner asked.

"Harry." He wasn't faking the touch of fear that made him quickly state his name. Without his magic, the guns the police officers were holding on him were suddenly a much bigger threat.

Maybe his magic wasn't quite bound. Maybe it was similar to what Garcia had done in his own world to combat the wards at Hogwarts. If he could gather enough magic to him, perhaps he could
get around the barrier and apparate to safety. It wouldn't give him a clearer picture of what was going
on, but he could give it a try.

He could hear them coming closer, and Hotchner shot them a warning look to stay where they were. They entirely ignored it; Harry could tell from the sounds of scuffing shoes and radio cracklings. Harry stayed focused on Hotchner, not wanting to look at someone wrong and startle them into firing. When Hotchner realized he didn't have a chance of stopping the officers, he turned his gaze back to Harry, using a sympathetic gaze to encourage Harry's undivided attention on him.

He was alone, not such a big threat. The rest of the QDA was probably going to land as one huge group, and if they didn't land in an area protected by the magical government...

He just hoped they were quick enough to get away before law enforcement could dampen their magic. A group of over twenty witches and wizards was sure to scare someone into shooting if Harry's individual presence was making them panic.

Something cracked near an officer and there was a curse of surprise just as Harry glanced over instinctively. Hotchner winced as he lost Harry's attention to the officers, who reacted as they had before to him looking at them – raising their guns more pointedly at him and clearly leaning towards pulling the trigger. One of them was holding their gun with one hand, the other hand occupied with a device. A shard of glass fell out of it as Harry watched.

"What's that?" he asked before he could stop himself.

"Don't say anything!" the nearest officer jerked his gun towards him before he even finished the question. "Don't say anything!"

"He's not casting, he's just asking a question," Hotchner said, one hand towards the officer in a 'calm down' motion. He glanced at Harry, clearly sending him a warning not to do anything like that again. Harry grimaced in apology.

One of the officers looked over the shoulder of the one holding the device. His eyes widened and he stepped forward, gun prodding the air in front of him. "He's gathering magic," the officer accused.

Was that device reading his magic?

If so, what did it breaking mean?

"I- Sorry."

"Don't speak!" the officer shouted at him.

"Look at me," Hotchner said, and Harry immediately did so. "Stop using your magic. You're making it difficult for us to trust you enough to do this without harming you."

"I can't," he said honestly. "It's defensive magic. I can't stop it." Not when he was starting to freak out like this. It had been years since he'd been so unable to protect himself from something, and he'd gotten far too used to the security his magic had given him. "It just happens."

"Bullshit," one of the officers snarled.

He almost had enough magic. Almost there.

"I'm serious," he said and three officers immediately shouted at him for talking again.
He kind of wanted to say something about him being able to cast magic without words, but he thought that probably wouldn't do anything to calm anyone.

"If you don't stop it, we will shoot," one of the officers snapped.

"I can't," Harry protested at the same time Hotchner said, "Don't. Not yet."

That last part made Harry stop, and he looked at Hotchner, betrayed. Not yet? Did he really think they were probably going to have to shoot a seventeen-year-old kid for appearing in a street?

He had enough magic. He knew it, and so did the officer holding the device.

"He's starting to-" the officer warned, dropping the device and raising the gun.

And just as Harry was about to apparate, he realized something.

He was standing almost directly between Hotchner and the officers. If he apparated out just as the officers fired, Hotchner was surely going to get killed by friendly fire.

Halfway through directing his magic to apparation, even as he saw fingers moving to triggers, he forced his magic a different route instead.

The moment of indecision cost him and the barrier flashed up a millisecond after the first three bullets were released.

The shield flickered but stayed up to absorb the rest of the bullets as Harry dropped to his knees, arms wrapped around his chest as the pain grew. The firing stopped, and he let the shield fall. The officers had moved their guns' aims to account for his new position. One of them looked sick, but Harry let his gaze slide away towards Hotchner.

The agent was staring at him, horrified, but he wasn't injured.

Harry allowed himself to slump over, and he didn't remember hitting the pavement.

Chapter End Notes

Yep, the second to last world was Rebuilt Machinery of Our Hearts. Enough time had passed since the wars had started in each world that they were able to win the war on their own, which would have happened in the canon world too if Harry and company hadn't gotten involved sooner.

This last world is probably my favorite because it's so different from the others, and I would have written more for it but...the story is just so long and I thought pushing it out longer would be more harmful than not.
"Life is a storm, my young friend. You will bask in the sunlight one moment, be shattered on the rocks the next. What makes you a man is what you do when that storm comes. You must look into the storm and shout as you did in Rome: 'Do your worst, for I will do mine!'" - Alexandre Dumas, *The Count of Monte Cristo*

Shooting pain woke him up. There was a faint beeping beside him, and an irritating throb in the crook of his elbow. He started to lift his other arm to try to rub away the throb, but his wrist was caught in something and halted as soon as it lifted more than an inch off the bed.

Harry opened his eyes. Blurry shapes slowly came into focus around him, slowly from disorientation and pain. A couple of times, it felt like the pain was about to subside, but it came back stronger each time. Finally, even though it was something Pomfrey had told them over and over again not to do because it risked causing more damage, he muttered, "Aisthesisnon." The pain subsided after a couple of seconds, giving him enough breathing room to finally take stock of his surroundings.

This world's Rossi was staring at him, eyes narrowed. "What did you just do?"

"Blocked some of the pain," Harry said hoarsely, then winced at the scratchiness of his throat. "How long was I out?"

"You've been in surgery and then in an induced coma. You were shot two weeks ago."

Harry jerked up in shock, and them immediately regretted it as the change to his injuries brought back a surge of pain, his IV was jerked out of place, and the handcuffs dug into his wrists. He groaned, gritted his teeth, and spat out two spells to readjust the IV and then dull the pain again.

There was no telling what had happened to the QDA in that time. Any number of things could have gone wrong, especially if they had tried to track down Harry. He needed to find out if they had arrived on Blackwolf's doorstep safely.

"Why an induced coma?" Harry finally asked when he had his breath back.

Rossi held up a square device with readings on it, similar to what the officer had been holding. "Know what this is?"

"It reads magic levels, I'm guessing."

"From the lowest traces to the highest we know of. Your magic levels broke a perfectly functioning magometer because they were so high, and even with the magic dampener, you managed to still use magic."

Harry snorted. "You're not using magic dampeners. You're interfering with how the magic coalesces through frequencies and wavelengths, and that stops the magic from occurring."

Rossi stared at him, and Harry knew he'd said the wrong thing.
"I mean... Right, dampeners."

"How did you know that?" Rossi demanded.

"I'm muggleborn," Harry said. "Nonmagical parents. I know what frequency is."

"How did you know that's what the dampener does?" Rossi corrected.

"You can't suppress magic without using another form of magic," Harry said, scrambling for an excuse. "But interrupting the frequency works. I figured you'd be more likely to do that and just call it a dampener so wizards and witches think you have some way to control them that they don't know about."

"How did you find out that frequency tampering interrupts magic?"

"A nonmagical friend of mine messed around with it."

"You have nonmagical friends?"

"Muggleborn, remember?"

Another thought hit him. If no one had crossed back through the Veil to get back home, the BAU wasn't going to know what had happened to them. Even if they had, if the QDA hadn't managed to figure out where Harry had gone...

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Your heart rate spiked."

Harry glanced out of the corner of his eye at the monitor, but muddling with it now would be awfully suspicious. Maybe he shouldn't say anything, but he needed to know. "I was with some friends," he said. "We got separated, and I ended up in that neighborhood. I don't know what happened to them."

"Friends... Magical or not?"

So no one had contacted the BAU to try to get him back. He wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not yet.

"Magical."

"What were you doing, right before we caught up to you?"

"Running. The Death Eaters aren't too happy with several of us."

"Why not?"

"We're some of the remnants of the Light families. There aren't many left of us."

Rossi frowned. "Light?"

"Yeah. The Death Eater is primarily run by Dark families, or people who support their ideals. Historically, groups like that were opposed by the Light families, but they've been mostly wiped out in this war in Britain. That's why the Death Eaters got out of control, when there hasn't been
anything like this for centuries."

"How many Light are left?"

Harry grimaced. "Not nearly enough. Scatters, from what I can tell."

"Why isn't anyone else stopping it, then, if Britain's community is gone?"

"Because nothing like this happens. Magical governments don't have standing armies – hell, they
don't have armies at all. The best thing they have is a sort of police force, and maybe an intelligence
organization. No one's got authority under their own constitutions or international agreements to get
involved."

"So you're expecting...what to stop this?"

"The same thing that caused the Death Eaters to rise."

"A strong dictator."

Harry winced. "Not a dictator. Just someone who can mobilize the Light." He touched the handcuff
on his wrist with his fingers and the link unlocked. "Sorry, but I need to go find that person."

Someone should have already been trying. And really, as the prophesized child, it should have been
this world's Potter.

Which begged the question - Where the hell was the brat?

And Dumbledore, he supposed. It made him apprehensive to not have heard anything about the old
man this whole time.

"You can't expect to find someone while you're on the brink of bleeding out," Rossi said.

Harry pulled out the IV and regretted it instantly. "I don't have much of an option since I lost two
weeks." He frowned at the IV line. "Were you even giving me morphine?"

"No," Rossi said honestly.

"Wow. You guys really hate wizards." In a mutter, he added, "Not like I can blame you for that or
anything, but still. Ouch."

He stepped off the bed and his legs collapsed underneath him.

For a moment, he just lay there, a bit stunned by how loudly his gunshot injuries were screaming at
him.

"Still think you're going somewhere?" Rossi asked. He hadn't moved closer to try to help him up.

"Give me a minute," he said, voice muffled by the floor.

Five minutes later, he finally and painfully pushed himself up to lean against the bed. "Okay," he
panted. "That sucked. Anymore questions you have to ask, while I wait a bit?"

Rossi nodded calmly. "Why did you land in that particular neighborhood?"

"I'd been there before, and it was the closest place I could apparate to." That didn't clear up Rossi's
expression. "Er, you do know that we can only apparate to places we've been to before, right?"
Both of the agent's eyebrows shot up at the information.

"Otherwise we'd risk landing halfway in cement or something. There's a distance limit on it too. We can't apparate insane distances, or we'd risk splinching ourselves."

"Splinching?"

"It's when we leave something behind, like, y'know, a leg. Sometimes it's just a bad injury, though."

Rossi tilted his head cautiously. "You're being very open about all of this."

Harry shrugged. "I told you – I'm muggleborn. I don't have the distrust for the FBI that most wizards would probably have, Agent Rossi."

"I never said my name, or that I was with the FBI."

Harry stared at him. "I should shut up, shouldn't I?"

"On the contrary, I'd prefer it if you would keep talking, starting with how you knew that."

Harry grinned lightly. "I don't suppose you'd believe me if I said that I can read minds?"

"If that were true, you wouldn't have been nearly so taken off guard when you were shot."

"...Point."

"So...?"

After a few long moments, Harry admitted, "I don't have an understandable excuse. If I told you, you just wouldn't believe me."

"Try it."

"I've answered your other questions," Harry pointed out. "I think I've got the right to keep a few things to myself."

"You have the right to privacy, but not when that privacy violates the safety of others."

"You're not in any danger from me," Harry said. He tried to push himself off the floor and then decided he was rather fine where he was at. Rossi was still standing where he had been since Harry had woken up, which was kind of odd since it would be hard to see Harry's body language from the angle he was at. "It's just something strange."

"Strange that you would know my name right after you apparated into the neighborhood of one of my coworkers, yes."

"...Right." He tried getting up again. It still didn't work.

"Do you know who you're looking for?" Rossi asked and Harry blinked in surprise when Rossi changed the subject. "The leader you mentioned."

"Yeah, but I think I'm going to have to track him down. He should have shown up on his own by now, and I don't like that he hasn't. So if you wouldn't mind, I'm going to-" He stopped. "Hang on. If you're nervous about my magic levels, why did you wake me up after my injuries had time to heal? And why were you willing to be in the room alone with me?"
"I'm not afraid of you," Rossi said.

Harry glanced at his feet, the ones that hadn't moved since Harry had been paying attention. "There's something where you're standing that protects you from magical attack in that spot, isn't there?"

A flash of an expression crossed Rossi's face, and he knew he was spot on. The look passed too quickly for Harry to tell if it was fear or not, but it certainly wasn't a sense of security.

That hurt much more than he wanted to think about. He wasn't a scary person, was he?

But that was how other people probably saw him. Maybe he didn't mean to incite fear, but he couldn't claim he hadn't caused a significant portion of it. How many Death Eaters had fled at the sight of him after seeing what Atlas had done to previous enemies, or what Harry had accomplished in hand-to-hand combat? Just because he hadn't always scared his own people didn't mean others never found him frightening. After all, that was why his own country had put him in charge.

And shit, he had to get back there too before anything could go wrong. Hopefully someone had taken command when it was clear something had happened to him.

Harry grabbed the edge of the bed, clenched his jaw in determination, and hauled himself up with an enormous effort. He leaned against the bed, panting and trying to fight against the radiating pain. "I'll help you," he said. "Whatever you need to know, I'll give it to you. But I need to find this guy, and I need to check on some people who were counting on me."

"We can probably come to some sort of agreement," Rossi said. That was vague enough that Harry knew they'd never let him go anywhere unsupervised.

"Before I go...why'd you wake me up?" he asked again.

"We can track magic, as you've seen," Rossi told him. "We can also track magic lines; specifically, bloodlines."

Harry closed his eyes. They'd run a test on his to find out who his parents were. "That test won't be accurate for me," he said.

"Have you got proof of that? Because Agent Hotchner was just arrested for spreading the magical contamination."

There was a strong annoyance in Rossi's voice, and Harry didn't want to know if it was only because his coworker had been arrested or because of his disdain towards that 'contamination.' "Yes, but... I don't know how to show it without endangering anyone."

"You're endangering all three of you by not showing that proof," Rossi warned him.

Harry frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Once convicted of involvement with magic, the government's been supporting two main sentences – life imprisonment and execution. The latter has been the most popular in Virginia."

Harry felt himself pale. "W-what? How long do I have?"

"Less than a week, I'll bet. They haven't been keen on appeals. Agent Hotchner's court date is two days earlier than his wife's."

Something clicked into place, the reason why Rossi was here alone. "You weren't supposed to wake
me up, were you? You're doing this to see if I can get him released. No one knows I'm conscious right now but you." Rossi was all but glaring until the last sentence, in which he looked more accepting of the statement. "No... Others know too, but it's just not official."

Rossi didn't say anything. Harry sat down on the bed carefully, dropping his head into his hands. He couldn't give them proof that there were alternate worlds; that would be too dangerous. But maybe...

"If you have them run the test again, I can change the result so that they can't be sure who my parents are," Harry said.

"You want to get another family in trouble."

"No, I'll connect it to a family that's dead," he said. "Or-

The door slammed open. Rossi closed his eyes, grimacing harshly, as a stream of heavily armed men without any sort of identifying clothing entered. The agent was immediately blocked from view, and Harry remained right where he was. All of the guns were aimed at him, except for that in the hands of one individual who turned towards Rossi at the back.

"Agent Rossi, you're under arrest for obstruction of justice and tampering with evidence."

The ones raising their guns did not look like they were raising them for preventative measures only. Harry raised his hands, pointedly showing how little of a threat he was.

"Wait," Rossi said, and Harry could hear him even if he couldn't see him. "The only magic he used was to handle the pain. He didn't do anything else."

They must have known he'd woken up when an alarm had gone off, similar to the one from the neighborhood. That thing must have been triggered by the use of magic, now that he was thinking about it. But if Rossi hadn't expected to get arrested, then Garcia must have been sticking her fingers into pies to prevent that alarm from ringing, which meant she was implicated too.

"You allowed him to use magic?"

"No, but-

Someone must have been signaling the strike team to act randomly, because as one their fingers shifted to their triggers.

Nothing came out of the guns.

"If you'll not shoot me," Harry said slowly, trying not to sound too condescending. "you'll get a lot more answers."

"What did you just do?" the closest demanded.

"Your clips are in your pockets."

Two of them immediately searched their pockets, found the clips, and put them right back into their guns.

"And people say I'm a little shit. Listen, I have information I'm willing to share with you. I want to cooperate. I can't do that if you keep shooting me." One of them shifted towards a different weapon. "If you tase me, I swear I'll leave."
Harry was in handcuffs when they took him to Quantico. He wasn't quite sure why they had bothered with them after he had taken the first one off, and then he realized they hadn't actually seen him do that. Why Rossi had kept that a secret, he wasn't sure.

He did know that the magic situation seemed to be even worse than he'd originally thought. Agents in the halls saw the black clothing of the ones escorting Harry and immediately shied away from the group, uncomfortable at even being within sight. Harry kept his gaze from any passersby, not wanting to make anyone more fearful.

He recognized the BAU floor when they arrived there, but they quickly passed through the area he knew well and went onto a different region. Harry had been here before, but not often, since it was another BAU team's work space. Before he could recall whose it might have been, they were pulling him out of the main area to the interrogation room nearby.

He wasn't surprised that they immediately left him alone to simmer after the last half hour of intense scrutiny. The room wasn't big enough to fit the entire anti-magic team comfortably, and they could keep an eye on him from behind the one-way mirror, as well as post agents outside the room. Putting anyone in the room alone could potentially give him hostages to try to negotiate with.

It was a full two hours before he was bored enough to think about doing something with his magic. There wasn't anything else to do, and this was starting to get annoying. Not to mention he still had the very pressing matter of multiple gunshot wounds to take care of, even if he had kept blocking the pain. Still, he didn't want to use any magic and then freak someone into doing something that would end badly for him.

At the five hour mark, he knew he had to throw caution to the wind. Two weeks wasn't long enough to heal his injuries and he had jostled them enough that he had certainly caused them more damage. As quickly as he could, he summoned magic and tried to clot a couple of the wounds as best as he could. No one came in. He clotted the rest of them. Still nothing. After a hesitant pause, he did what he could to fix any extra harm he had created by moving around, and then he settled back. There was nothing more he could do with his healing knowledge.

Time dragged on, and he took a nap on the floor when it became clear no one was going to be coming in soon. When he woke up and still there was no interruption, he tended his injuries again and then settled down to wait some more.

He was positive he had been in the room for at least twenty-four hours, judging by how hungry he was and his circadian rhythm. The situation was getting duller and duller, and he was running out of time.

Finally, he sighed. "Priori morpbus. Expecto patronum." The stag appeared, since the elephant definitely would not have fit. "Tell Hermione I am most certainly not dead." He paused. "And to please let my dad know that too before I get grounded until I am dead."

The stag turned and walked into the wall, vanishing. Harry sat back to wait some more, but the door opened immediately. He tried to control his surprise as he recognized Agent Harris, the woman who had helped him with self-defense just after he had arrived in America.

"Hungry?" she asked.

"Uh. Teenage boy. Always."

"Sorry, but we've got to get through this first."
Dangling a carrot in front of him and pulling it away, showing control.

"What, national security is more important than my stomach? Bizarre."

Harris raised an eyebrow slightly at the second display of humor. "Tell me what you're doing here."

"...Being interrogated?"

"In America."

"Trying to figure out who's left. Most of the Light families were murdered in Britain, but the issue is that America never made the clear divide between Light and Dark so they're harder to label." He paused. "Which is ironic because American society labels everything else."

"Why were you looking for the families?"

"It's kind of hard to fight a war when you don't know who your allies are."

"So you're planning on joining a counterrevolution to the current regime in Britain."

"No counterrevolution exists at the time, not that I've heard of. I'm going to start one."

Harris tilted her head at him, not-so-subtly glancing him up and down. "You can't be older than twenty. Do magical revolutions tend to start with the young?"

"I'm a few months from eighteen, actually, and...sort of. Almost all revolutions are fought by the young, but no, the leaders in the magical community aren't usually as young as me."

"But you think you've got a chance."

"The reason the Light lost so badly was because it didn't have someone who could match the Dark Lord's power. The Dark made sure that it quickly took out anyone who would have been able to, and I don't know what the hell happened to the kid who was supposed to prevent him from doing that years ago." He paused. "The magical community is big on prophecies. There was a specific kid who was supposed to prevent this most recent rise in the Dark. Sorry. If I don't explain something, let me know."

"Are you saying you think you can win because you're powerful enough?"

"Yeah."

"If you're so powerful, why haven't you left the room? Why haven't you gotten yourself medical treatment, or at least something to eat?"

Harry shrugged. "You're already suspicious of magic. Me flinging it all over the place is hardly convincing of anything besides weird activity. Besides, I need to stick around. When things start happening, I'd rather your government doesn't get involved against the wrong people. I don't want to fight a two front war, especially when one of the fronts would be against a people we don't have anything against. The majority of the Light is usually either muggleborn or has muggleborn connections." He paused again. "Er, muggleborns are people born to nonmagical parents."

"I know."

"Oh. Sorry, I don't know what you've already heard."

"You said you're muggleborn," Harris said. "Who are your parents?"
"Dead. They were killed by the Dark."

Harris tilted her head slightly. "That's interesting, because we have reason to believe they're both alive."

"The bloodline test, right. There's a problem with that test in my case. When I was young, I was taken through something called the Blood Relocation Program, which is essentially a bunch of elitist pricks who replace any squib offspring they have with muggleborns. The theory was that nonmagical parents wouldn't look in the right places to get their kids back, and the pureblood families could hide from the 'shame' of having a squib.

"The problem was that all parents, magical or nonmagical, have natural magic that creates blood wards to protect their kids. Nonmagicals actually tend to have stronger wards because all their magic goes into it. Because I didn't grow up with my parents, those blood wards never formed, and the blood wards of random people around me tend to pick up on the absence of any blood wards and so react to me. Basically, whenever you run the test, you're probably going to get the name of the last parent whose blood wards unconsciously responded to me."

Hopefully that bullshit seemed legitimate enough to get a stay in the Hotchner's cases until further investigation could be made. It made Harris pause, which gave Harry some hope.

"We haven't had this problem before."

"The BRP program isn't common. I don't know exact numbers, but I don't think there could be more than a hundred of us alive at one time. Squibs aren't born that often and not many families would use the BRP program; just the pureblood elitists, mostly."

Harris leaned back in her chair, fingertips of one hand resting on the table in front of her. "You're being awfully more helpful than most of the wizards we talk to."

"Most of the wizards who would have given you the time of day have been murdered or are in deep hiding. Statistically speaking, you won't find us."

Harris made a small humming noise. "In that case, would you mind telling me what kind of spell you cast right before I came in here?"

Oh shit. He'd told that patronus to tell Hermione to talk to his father.

He wasn't five minutes in to the interrogation and he'd already made a huge mistake. Of course, that was probably why they had put him in a room for over a day without food or medical treatment. His head just wasn't working like it should have been.

He kept calm. He could fix it. "It creates a patronus. They can fend off certain Dark creatures, like dementors, but they can also deliver messages or perform simple tasks, like finding someone. By the way, not everyone can create them, and we've noticed that for some reason Dark people can't manage them. There are theories that patronuses are supposed to be the animal spirit of someone, but we're not sure."

"Who's Hermione?"

"A close friend."

"Why did you tell her to get in contact with your father?"

He let himself wince briefly, then said, "You must have heard that wrong." She raised her eyebrow
slightly at him. "My adoptive parents are dead. Because if they weren't, people would start looking for them once the counterrevolution starts."

Harris nodded briefly. "I see."

A pop on either side of Harry made both him and Harris jump, and Harry whipped around in his chair. "You two-!"

"Hey," Fred said.

"Hermione wants to know where you've been at."

"So she can, you know, murder you."

"Got shot and then arrested. What happened to you guys?"

"A lot of nothing because we couldn't find anyone."

George waved cheerfully at Harris.

"By the way, Hermione's got an idea. What if, instead of spending the next decade looking for people, we make them come to us?"

Harry grinned. "I know exactly what she means."

"You need to be here any longer?"

Harry glanced back to Harris. "I'll be back within a day."

He grabbed onto the nearest twin, and a portkey yanked them all away. They reappeared in Colorado, where the rest of the group was waiting for them. "Does anyone have blood replenishers?" he asked.

"What did you do?" Hermione asked, exasperated.

He explained the whole situation. Seamus handed him a blood replenisher halfway through. Harry frowned at him when he was done. "How did you-" He stopped. "The rest of the DA is here."

"Figured this situation was too big to handle on our own," Hermione said. "Besides, everyone kind of noticed something was weird anyway. We didn't grab the whole DA, just the ones who were probably going to figure it out soon because they had close friends in the QDA."

Harry nodded slowly, looking over the group. "I think we can make this work."

---

"You know we're not supposed to talk to you," Harris chided when Morgan came to stand in front of her desk.

That not-Hotchener kid had given her a complete headache, and she was almost grateful that he had left just so she could find out that the rest of her team had had a similar reaction. Her unit chief hadn't been running the interrogation simply because they were worried about the kid's knowledge of the leaders of the other BAU team, and because he wanted to evaluate the situation from behind the mirror instead. Usually she liked interrogating the unsub. This was not one of those times.

The worst thing was that the kid was scoring all the marks for definitely lying to them, but she still
couldn't help but trust him. There was just something appealing about the boy's charisma and charm. She knew she was being pulled in, and if she couldn't work it out in her head, she was going to have to get someone else to take over the interrogation if they could ever find the kid again.

No, she didn't think he was coming back, even if she did like him. He wasn't that stupid.

"Our tech analyst found something. I think you should take a look at it."

She should have said no, but Morgan looked like he was suppressing a laugh. That caught her curiosity.

She glanced around. The rest of her team was still reviewing the tapes of the interrogation while she worked through paperwork, her unit chief's punishment for letting their suspect escape. She could leave and come back before anyone realized she was missing.

"Fine."

A five minute walk later led her to Garcia's office, where the rest of the BAU team – sans Hotchner, who had been in prison since his arrest two weeks ago, and Rossi, who was still in holding – were standing around the tech analyst's desk. Prentiss had one hand clasped to her mouth, trying to keep a laugh in.

"Can you start it from the beginning?" Morgan asked as they entered.

The group parted to let Harris see the screen they were looking at. Garcia went to the start of the clip and, without glancing up from her keyboard, said, "I was searching for signs of a counterrevolution. Police in London, Cardiff, and New York City were all warned to get emergency services ready within half an hour at three thirty-two."

Harris frowned. That would have been about fifteen minutes ago. "Okay..."

"I couldn't get into security cameras in England fast enough, but I got access to a couple in New York. I found this in Times Square."

She flipped a couple of the screens to the cameras she had gotten into. New York hadn't been quite the same, not for years, since the witches and wizards had grabbed the city early on in the war. No one was sure what the importance had been for them, since they hadn't used it as a launching point for an invasion of the rest of the continent, but they had thankfully allowed the nonmagical population to live, for the most part. Efforts had been made to reclaim the city, but none had been successful so far.

The city had lost much of its cantankerous attitude after the Dark had grabbed it. That made the chipper group who suddenly appeared from the outskirts of the square stand out.

And then the music started. Harris dimly recognized "Centuries" by Fall Out Boy in the back of her head.

"They created a flash mob," Harris said, gaping, a couple of seconds later.

"They got attention is what they did," Morgan said. "Before they hit the second chord, the Death Eaters arrive."

"Don't tell me they stuck around..."

"Just watch."
A couple of minutes later, Harris felt like banging her head against a wall. "They're winning."

"Yeah."

"It must be at least five to one."

"They're talented, apparently."

Prentiss pointed suddenly at one corner of the screen. "There!"

"What is it?" JJ asked, frowning.

"It's a witch, fighting with them! But she's at least fifteen years older than the kids!"

Harris's eyes widened. "The two redheads who appeared in the interrogation room. They said they were going to bring the Light to them. They're starting the counterrevolution to get support."

Garcia's laptop dinged. "They started another one in London," she said. "OneRepublic's "Counting Stars" this time."

"I need to call my team," Harris muttered, stepping back so she could hear clearly. Her phone rang for a minute before her unit chief picked up. "Get to Westworth's office," she said, naming their own tech analyst. "You've got to see this..."

In the time it took for her to explain the situation, the mob skipped Cardiff and went to Ireland, playing the High King's "Rocky Road to Dublin" in Dublin.

"They've got at least five hundred people between the three locations," Garcia reported. "I've got a program counting faces." Her computer beeped again. "Cardiff now. "I Will Wait" by Mumford & Sons."

A couple of minutes later, she continued, "Over seven hundred total."

And then, "They've added Edinburgh. Of Monsters and Men's "Little Talks.""

Harris's unit chief called her. "This is insane," she said in lieu of a greeting.

"Put me on speakerphone."

She did. Garcia turned down the sound a bit so they could hear him better.

"Unit Chief Braxton," JJ said. "I know we're not supposed to be working on this..."

"The case is beyond the kid now," Braxton replied. "I don't think anyone's going to care you got involved in a half hour if this keeps going. Do you know anything else?"

"Nothing that we haven't gained from the video," JJ said. She glanced at Garcia, and the tech analyst leaned closer to the phone.

"I've got a program running facial recognition software. So far, I've got over...over eight hundred people now involved. It's the same process each time, but it's getting faster as the Death Eaters are realizing what's happening. A flash mob starts, the Death Eaters attack and try to stop them, and this group is pushing them back."

"Why are they managing it when no one else could before?"
"It's hard to tell, but so far it just looks like they're better coordinated and have better techniques," Morgan said. "It also seems like they have more heavy hitters than their opposition does, and on average their spellcasters seem more talented."

"What's the purpose of this? Are they trying to take multiple locations at once, dividing the Death Eaters?"

Prentiss shook her head even though Braxton couldn't see her. "The first couple were just to get attention. After those, people started hearing that something was happening, so by the time the group started arriving in major areas the Light was ready. The rate at which new, older faces are showing up is steadily growing. People are spreading the news."

"They're a bunch of kids," Braxton protested. "Do they really think they're going to win?"

"They seem to be managing it," Prentiss pointed out.

"Dover's got riots," Garcia interrupted. "No flash mob. It's a sympathetic reaction." She paused, then her eyes widened. "Oh my God."

"What happened?" Morgan demanded.

"It's not just Dover," she said as her laptop beeped at her again and again. "It's everywhere. The whole countryside is erupting and there are marches in major cities."

JJ peered over her shoulder, then leaned back slowly. "I think Harry might have underestimated how many Light families were left."

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"We're going to have to knock down Big Ben," Hermione said, worried. "There's a nonmagical group trapped under there by Death Eaters."

"So knock it down. We can rebuild, but we can't resurrect."

Hermione bit her lip.

"Hermione!"

"Big Ben's a national monument with a lot of historical importance!" she protested.

"Hermione!" Harry said again.

"I'll take a group that way," she muttered, leaving him.

The plot was working better than expected. A little too well, actually. Aero had been completely redirected from air support to disaster containment after a few fires had gotten out of control and other damages had to be managed before they started causing civilian casualties. More people had started showing up than Harry had expected, so now he also had to manage all those groups too.

He had no clue if he should even try controlling the groups that had sparked up in areas the DA wasn't even fighting in. He couldn't spread himself too thin.

They'd pulled a nifty little trick at the beginning to make it seem like they had more people than they really had. In New York, no one was going to recognize any of the British kids of Light families, so they hadn't bothered hiding themselves. However, whoever moved to Britain had taken polyjuice, creating a new set of rebels. And then, when the potions wore off in an hour, they shifted to their
next location as an entirely fresh-looking bunch. By the time they left each location, they made sure they had been more than adequately replaced by the Light residents of the area.

"Get back inside!" he heard an irate father scream at their teenager below the rooftop Harry was standing on.

"There's a Light Lord out there!" the kid hollered back.

The air got cold. Harry's breath formed in front of him, and he instinctively reached for his wand. He rolled his eyes at himself even as he turned his head up to look for the dementors. There was a swarm coming from the west.

"Expecto patronum!"

Atlas thundered into view, crossing the air quicker than any bird could and slamming into the line of dementors across the city even as patronuses from nearby witches and wizards rose to meet it. Harry watched for a moment, ensuring the dementors had been completely driven back, then summoned Atlas to him.

"Take a message to Hermione. I'm going to go get my wand, then I'll be right back."

He created a portkey out of the shingle next to him. He activated it a moment later and landed in one of the hallways he had just left at Quantico. Everyone around him jumped, and a couple screamed. "Oh, my apologies," he said and apparated before anyone could shoot him.

He landed in Garcia's office, figuring she would hopefully know where he could get a hold of his wand. The presence of most of the team and Harris caught him off guard. His appearance, to be fair, startled them even more. "Ah. Hello? I need my wand back."

"What the hell?" Harris blurted.

"I'm a bit limited with magic use without it," Harry said. His gaze caught the screens behind them. "Hey... Now there's an idea..."

"Wait, your magic's limited?" Reid demanded. "You're the strongest wizard we've seen yet."

"Usually I can use magic with both hands, if I've got my wand," Harry murmured thoughtfully, still looking at the screens. "If I give you my phone number, can you guys update me on what's going on? I'm only getting reports from my group, and I don't have a clue what's happening outside of the cities we're involved in besides very general news."

The group stared at him for a moment. Hesitantly, Harris looked at the phone that was open on the desk beside her.

"What are you going to use the information for?" Braxton asked.

"Who is this?" Harry replied.

"Unit Chief Braxton with the BAU."

Must be from another team. "If a situation in another area gets out of hand, I need to know if I need to send people to help. We've already had issues where we're at with fire. Also, I'm hoping there are some other groups that still exist from the first war with Voldemort, and if so, I need to know when they appear so I can get in touch with them."
"Where would they show up?" Garcia asked. "We've seen that there seems to be some sort of organization among a couple witches and wizards in the south and west."

"Can you show me some pictures?"

Garcia nodded, and when no one else thought it was a bad idea, she turned back to her computer and started pulling up images from a couple video clips. Harry couldn't stop a grin when he saw the redheads in one frame.

"That's them." He paused. "Moody!" he exclaimed. "He's still out there!"

"Who?"

"He was a... Nevermind. I'll have to explain later." He grabbed a pen and paper off Garcia's desk and scribbled down his number. "Okay, if anything else happens like that, please let me know. And can you text me a list of places that have stirred up outside of what we've created? I don't have a clue how far it's gotten."

"It's basically everywhere by now," Garcia said.

Harry paused. The Death Eaters hadn't put much focus on the countryside. If the Light could grab most of the rural areas, they would still have control over a large portion of the population even if they didn't have the densest zones. Since they'd already started to unsettle the balance in the cities, they would have a strong foothold when they turned all their attention to the major spots.

"You look like you just had an epiphany," Morgan said slowly.

"I think I did. Send me that list with specific areas, if you could."

In his excitement, he took the portkey straight back to London and immediately sent messages to his unit leaders with the new plan. This could work.

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About an hour later, he reappeared in the office, sheepish. "I forgot to grab my wand."

JJ handed it to him, kindly not saying anything.

"Thanks."

He went back to the fighting.

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Harry had meant to go back to Quantico soon. Really, he had. But the counterrevolution took off faster than he had expected, and even though they were making significant gains, he just wasn't comfortable leaving.

He hadn't seen the Dark Lord make any sort of appearance, and he hadn't seen the werewolves. That put him on edge more than anything else could have.

Besides, they still had a long way to go. What they had done looked dramatic because any resistance was a stark contrast to the submission of last month, but the situation was still dire. Even though the rioting had gotten the ball rolling, they could still lose everything if they didn't manage to keep their current pace up. His main concern was the lack of coordination, especially in the rural areas, since most people weren't working with a group outside of their neighbors.
As a result, Harry had been forced to split Aero up, and the group was now managing damage control and communications to get in touch with small areas and ask them to work with the bigger groups.

That now included the DA, Order, and a few more underground groups who had developed in response to the oppressive regime. Thankfully, the groups had agreed to synchronize within the first couple of days, which had made the situation infinitely easier to handle. They had also divided up the country into portions, giving each group a section to focus on so none of them were so spread out and they could manage themselves easier. If there had been more time, they probably would have been stronger overall to fight as one group, but they couldn't mesh the chains of command while they were in the middle of intensive battles without something going wrong.

On a bizarre note, someone had grabbed Hogwarts at some point. Harry didn't even know who it had been, but the students were cheerfully rioting within their castle walls to keep the Death Eaters out. The Death Eaters would have pressed closer, but they had so many issues elsewhere in the country that they gave up and started putting their efforts to more important regions.

They had been going for almost two weeks straight. Harry had gotten his gunshot injuries healed in the first couple of days, but they were quickly replaced by other issues. Sleep was a thing of the past, like eating. Most of the DA were starting to get worn down, which was becoming a more important issue because the Death Eaters' greater numbers allowed them to rotate their forces to let fresher front lines take the field. Still, they were pushing on, and Harry couldn't ask for more than that.

The BAU team had been keeping him updated, which had been nothing short of fantastic. He had been worried about sending anyone out for reconnaissance when they were already short-staffed, but the BAU's information had supplemented that, allowing him to keep everyone where he really needed them.

He was checking on the situation in Dover, which had been a back-and-forth spot the entire time, when Blackwolf appeared next to him. Since the Americans had been taking Death Eater POWs, it didn't take him off guard. "Please tell me we don't have a transport issue."

"I'm from your world."

Harry blinked and threw up a shield behind him as one of Seamus's explosions threw some shrapnel their way. "I should have seen this coming. Uh, so I'm guessing you've learned by now that the other world didn't need any help..."

"Harry-"

"And we were going to go over but there was this incident-"

"Harry," Blackwolf almost shouted and he stopped. "Have you seen your father?"

"From this world? Yeah, why?"

"No, your father. From ours." Horror was creeping onto his expression that Harry hadn't immediately responded. Harry frowned. "Or Snape?"

"No..." he said slowly.

"They came to look for you a month ago. We haven't seen them since."

Harry felt his heart stop. "Did... Did they go to the other world, Nine?"
"They found out the world was secure over there and realized you'd come here. That was the last we saw of them."

He shook his head, numb panic starting to build. "You're the first one I've seen from our world."

Another explosion went off, and Harry turned to see black and purple flames. He swallowed. "I... Blackwolf, I don't know what to do about that, but..." It killed him to say it. "I can still help here. Can you keep looking?"

"I will," Blackwolf promised and then reached out to grab his arm as Harry started to leave. "Harry, they were also coming over to tell you something. Reid realized that the Dark Lord was trying to get the BAU teams in other worlds worried that you were a threat so they would profile you and put that profile in the database. The Dark Lord could then access that information to try and predict your movements. It didn't work before because you presented yourself inaccurately, and then you weren't leading the QDA when the Dark Lord tried to apply it."

"Two BAU teams here have tried to profile me, and I'll bet they were more accurate," Harry said quickly.

"I wiped the profile already," Blackwolf told him. "But we think he might have it anyway."

"What? Why?"

"Because our BAU profiled you too. They've been trying to keep an eye on your mental state so they could intercede if anything went wrong."

"But they wouldn't put that in the database."

"No, but they would tell one of your teammates if one of them were worried about you."

Harry backed away, and Blackwolf let go of his arm. He shook his head firmly. "The Dark Lord's not on my team. We would have noticed by now, and Lords usually don't come from the same world."

"Harry," Blackwolf said, stepping forward, "we think he did the same thing that he forced Riddle to do. He joined up with his doppelganger from our world. He's infected him. It's why he's been acting different ever since Six. You must have noticed by now."

Harry had. He still shook his head. "He's been under a lot of pressure, and he's just nervous after-

"Harry, he's being controlled. You can't run from this."

"The Dark Lord hasn't even appeared here!" Harry protested. "How could that be if he's been fighting with us this whole time?"

"Because we think he's fighting for control," Blackwolf said. "No matter how much magic he has, he won't be able to win a mental fight so easily, not when the person he's trying to claim became so determined after the Silent Massacre."

His fingers gripped his hair and he turned away from Blackwolf.

He'd trusted him for years, and even if he hadn't been against them the whole time, he had been getting information for most of the war directly from them. This was someone Harry had trusted.

"I'll find him," he said, choked. He turned back around. "But I won't kill him."
"We don't know if there's a way to separate them," Blackwolf said quietly.

"But we don't know that there's not, and I won't kill him until we know!" He gripped his wand tightly, holding onto some sense of security. "Tell your alternate self to start looking for options. Maybe he can pull something up." He paused. "And if there's anything I can do to help to find Dad... Let me know."

"Greyback was sent here to find you and the rest of the QDA. Have you seen him?"

Harry frowned and shook his head. "We haven't seen any of the werewolves."

Blackwolf grimaced. "Harry..."

"Don't wish me good luck," he said, just loudly enough for Blackwolf to hear him. "Not for this."

He apparated back to London and used Atlas to track down who he was looking for. Huther's three officers were camped out in what had been a small café when he arrived, and the trio looked up curiously.

Daphne grinned at him. "We took the eastern part of the river."

"That's great."

"We were thinking about trying to push south and meet up with Pucla, but we weren't sure if that would overextend us right now," Anthony added in.

"Find out where they're at and plan from there," he said. "I... Sorry, I need to deal with something else right now." He tilted his head towards their communications liaison. "Mind if I borrow him?"

Daphne frowned, detecting something wrong with the situation, but she nodded. "Sure..."

The pair stepped out of the main café and into the kitchen in the back. It had been last used months ago, by the looks of it, but Harry turned his back on the sight and looked at Draco.

"Harry, what's going on?" he whispered.

"The BAU... They figured out who the Dark Lord is."

Draco's eyes flickered over his expression. "That's good news, right?"

Harry shook his head quickly. "I'm going to go talk to him, but I need you to send out a message explaining the situation. If something goes wrong, the rest of you need to know that he's not on our side like he used to be."

A couple of minutes later, he was standing in another unit's impromptu headquarters, this time empty except for the second in command. It was in one of the upper offices of what had probably been a very expensive building before the Dark took over. Pucla had claimed it as theirs, making use of all the available desks since they had provided good cover to sleep under. At this time of day, no one was using the area to sleep.

Harry came to a stop in front of Pucla's second, who was standing quietly by one of the windows, looking at the destruction below. "When did you take him?"

"Take who?"

"My friend."
There was the faintest amused quirking of lips. "So you finally worked it out. No – the BAU did. Your father, I presume."

"I don't know who did specifically," Harry admitted. Conversation would drag this out, but he just couldn't fight right now. Not until he'd gathered his wits about himself.

"Whoever did would have been one of the first ones over. Guilt. Such a ridiculous notion when you had nothing to do with the consequences of someone else's actions."

"It's not guilt," Harry corrected. "It's compassion. For you, and for us."

"Oh yes, because all of you are going to feel so nasty when you realize what's going on."

"You're our friend. Of course we will."

He got a sardonic smile for that. "But am I really? You wouldn't be friends with a murderer like me, would you?" The grin widened, losing its withering touch and turning genuinely amused. "Ah, you think your real friend is still in here, don't you?"

"If you're a murderer, then so am I. Just because you, as the doppelganger, are a complete ass about it doesn't mean that my friend is too. And yes, I know he's somewhere in there, because the Riddles hadn't completely merged and they wanted the merge. He's going to fight you until the end."

A smirk. "The Riddles didn't try to wipe the other out because they were weaker if it were only one of them in that head. I'm stronger if my doppelganger's dead." He beamed at Harry. "So I murdered him, right after I told his dear friend Gideon that I was sending Greyback to kill his friend's family. I would have killed Gideon too, but I needed him to relay the message. Perhaps later, yeah?"

"Blaise..."

"I'm not your 'Blaise'," the Dark Lord scoffed. "I'm Zabini, at the worst. Your Majesty would be nicer."

"Is there a deal we can make?" Harry asked.

"Sure. Give this world up and I return Blaise to you." Harry froze. "Aw, come on, you must have expected that. Do you really think I'll accept anything less?"

"I... I can't do that."

Zabini sneered at him. "Where did all that talk of friendship go to?"

"If he woke up and found out he was responsible for our abandonment of this world, he'd kill himself. You know that."

Zabini grinned. "Oh, I know. That's the beauty of it. You won't get him back no matter what you do. Of course, he didn't want you to."

"What do you mean?"

"Before I killed him, he was trying to get control of this body just for a little while. He wanted to ask you to kill us both while he was overpowering me." He shook his head. "Daft moron. He didn't stand a chance against me."

"You never answered my question. When did you merge?"
"When you killed the combined Riddles, I was watching you. He had a serious concussion and was passed out in the hallway outside. Your dad was so focused on getting back to you that he didn't notice the switch. My doppelganger got medical help but he was still weak, and I used the chance to get in." He laughed. "And you didn't even notice."

"Oh, we knew something was wrong," Harry said quietly. "We just didn't know how wrong." He glanced briefly at Blaise's wand. "I thought you were upset by all the murder, which was why you stopped using your patronus. But you just can't use it anymore, can you?"

Zabini smirked. "Obviously." He turned from Harry to face the window again. "By now, I expect you've told everyone else what I am."

"Yes."

"Thanks. Now I can fight freely." Without turning his head, he glanced at Harry out of the corner of his eye. "How many of your precious DA do you think will get themselves killed because they'll refuse to fight me? His beautiful girlfriend won't last a minute."

Not pragmatic Ginny. Harry was worried about the opposite, that she would kill her boyfriend's doppelganger to protect Blaise even if it meant the end of them both.

But Harry didn't say that out loud, because he knew that there was the possibility that this might come down to someone having to kill Blaise. He didn't think he could do it.

"You're too late for him. Maybe if you'd noticed sooner and done something..."

"What are you going to do now?"

Zabini shrugged. "Haven't decided if I'll kill the rest of the BAU or DA first."

"You haven't killed someone from either group yet."

"Your father's dead, Harry. He and Greyback took each other four weeks ago and you just didn't hear about it until now."

He shook his head slowly, staring at Zabini even though the Slytherin was still watching the scene below them with interest. "That's not possible."

Zabini shifted his weight, moving to lean against the window pane. "I saw your father talk Riddle down. I knew I had to get rid of him." The small smile that hadn't left his face this entire time widened slightly. "I just didn't think it would be that easy. He's usually so calm and collected... But there are a few factors that make him lose his head like nothing else, aren't there? Hurt you or Jack, throw in someone who has... It's easy."

"You would have made sure I'd heard about this a lot sooner, if this were true," Harry said firmly.

"No, I didn't have to. Besides, I wanted to tell you myself." He finally turned his head to look at Harry. "But don't worry. You'll be dead by the end of the day. I just need you to see something first."

"See what?"

A flaming broom and rider shot past the window. Both of them ignored it.

"Greyback's a leopard-spirit. Your BAU worked that one out for me. Your father might have killed
him, but he came back, and your father wasn't the one who Greyback has really wanted to sink his teeth into."

Harry's eyes widened.

"He went back to the other world to find him. I wouldn't be surprised if he already has him."

"Tell me where they were going," Harry whispered.

"Hotchner, don't be an idiot. I won't tell you a th-"

Harry slammed a wave of magic at him, and Zabini went through the glass out into the open air beyond. "Yeah," Harry muttered, "I think you will."

Then he went after him.
The Ninth Life

Chapter by AlexTheReaper (daviesroyal), daviesroyal

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Half gods are worshipped in wine and flowers. Real gods require blood." - Zora Neal Hurston, Their Eyes Were Watching God

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London was gone.

The surrounding Westminster still stood, but London had been completely wiped to the ground. Harry stood there, surveying the damage and shaking, trying to find his opponent. Everyone else but the two of them had cleared the area after the first building had gone down in a matter of moments.

"Zabini!" he screamed, and he felt his magic throw the remains of a bench somewhere behind him.

He heard Blaise's familiar laugh to his left. He grabbed a section of a sidewalk from in front of him and hurled it towards the sound. A shield blocked the rubble, and Zabini stepped out from behind the remains of what had been a glass complex.

"A little feisty this evening, are we?"

Harry stalked across the distance between them. "Where are they?" he demanded.

Zabini didn't move. "You're such an idiot. Greyback's going to kill him as soon as he finds him."

"No, he's not," Harry snarled, "because he wants an audience. So when and where were you planning on sending me to find me?"

Zabini smirked. "You'll find out when I want you to. That's not right now. But please, keep wasting your energy trying to make me tell you."

Harry threw a burst of energy at him. Zabini batted it aside.

"You only have so much power, Light Lord," Zabini murmured, and Harry could only hear because of his proximity to him. "But I have mine and your dear Blaise's. You don't stand a chance against me anymore, especially when you're not willing to make the fatal blow."

"I won't kill Blaise just to make you feel better about your own murders!"

"But you won't kill him to save your brother either. Do you think you'll feel better about yourself when both Blaise and Jack are dead? I'll bet your father will be really pleased with what you've done when you wake up in the afterlife."

The foundations of the building beside them creaked and Harry put up a shield as Zabini threw it at him. Most of the rubble went over his head, but the rest rebounded back where it had come from. Zabini was gone, and Harry threw out a slice of fire around him in case the Slytherin had landed nearby. He heard a grunt from behind him and whipped around, flinging magic once again.

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“What the hell is going on?” Morgan demanded when Hermione appeared in the BAU’s bullpen.

“I need what video footage you have of what’s going on,” she said immediately. Her hair had been yanked behind her by a tie, but bits of it had flown out from the fighting. She completely ignored the agents who had jumped to their feet and pointed their guns at her.

Morgan quickly motioned for all of them to lower their weapons. "Why?"

"Harry's destroying everything and we're not sure what he's after," Hermione quickly summarized. "He's not trying to kill Blaise, but if he's just trying to wear him down, we can help. We just don't know for sure what he's doing."

JJ was standing by the railing right outside her office. "From what we've been able to pick up from the video," she said, "he's trying to get Zabini to tell him where his brother is. Someone named Greyback went after him."

Hermione's eyes widened. "No..." She apparated away and sent a message to the unit leaders the instant she landed. By the time she had gotten to the Veil that would take her back to her home, Ron was waiting for her.

"We can't spare more than one person," she protested.

"Then let's make this fast," he said grimly and plunged through. She followed right behind him.

The Hotchner home, when they arrived, was just as it had been the last time they'd seen it. Except that no one was inside.

The two went from there to Quantico, startling the BAU when they showed up.

"What's happened?" Reid asked when they hurried in. "Blackwolf hasn't been back to tell us anything."

"We think Zabini sent Greyback after Jack," Ron said. "But we can't find Jack."

"I'll tell Garcia to start looking for him," Morgan said quickly. "Someone call Sean."

Sean had been grocery shopping with Jack and was panicked when Prentiss called him. "He was with me, and he just- He was gone when I turned around. But I didn't hear him leave or anything like that, and the staff here can't find him."

"Greyback probably took him back to Eighteen," Prentiss said.

Hermione bit her lip and nodded. "Where do you think, from there?"

"They couldn't go to the battlefield. Too many people there could have seen Greyback and stopped him, especially if they saw Jack."

"Zabini would have chosen a random location," Reid said. "Complete unpredictability has been the best tactic for both sides so far, and Zabini's done his best to stay in the shadows until the very end. As well as he can, he's going to ensure Harry couldn't possibly guess where they went."

"It's probably not in Britain, though," Rossi pointed out. "The situation there has too many variables, and there aren't many places where Zabini could know for sure that Greyback would be left alone until the last minute."
"He'd go to America," Ron said abruptly. "It's Harry's home, but it's broad enough that it would be too hard to search."

Prentiss grimaced. "That doesn't narrow it down for you at all."

"Actually," Hermione said slowly. "I think we might be able to find them. Werewolves have strange magical abilities, and the America over there has created a way of detecting magic."

"They might be able to track down magical signatures," Reid summarized. "You're going to probably want Elle with you, then, so they can use her werewolf magic to look for a similar reading."

Ron exchanged a glance with Hermione. "This is going to get interesting trying to keep everyone from finding out about the alternate universes."

"Should we take Gideon too?" Hermione asked the BAU, turning back to them. "Could he help Blaise?"

"He probably knows how to the best," Rossi agreed, "but if Blaise is having problems taking over now, it might distract him more to have Gideon nearby."

"I think we all need to go over to Eighteen," Morgan said. "We're the only ones who have the complete profiles on everyone we need to analyze, and making the DA jump back and forth all the time is going to take too long."

"Elle's in Garcia's office," Prentiss quickly said. "I'll go get her."

"And we'll start taking people over," Hermione said, hefting the portkey she had made earlier to get back to the Veil. "Does anyone know what happened to Snape?"

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Hotch was not happy.

He was stuck in the goddamn in-between again.

Worst of all, he had company this time.

Death leered at him pointedly. He ignored the look, pacing his trapped confinement once again.

"Don't you have somewhere else to be?" he asked. "Reaping or something?"

With a nearly silent shifting of cloth, she ghosted out of the corner of his eye to float directly in front of him within an instant. He stopped, narrowing his eyes at her and refusing to be taken off guard by the dramatic display of magic. Her head did that odd tilt thing again, where he was positive her spine would have broken if she were human.

One bony hand pointed to the object tucked under his arm, and the other made a 'give me' gesture.

"Not until you let me back," he growled. "You get a Hallow, I get to go back once more. That was the deal."

He could still feel the open wounds on his stomach from Greyback's claws. A part of him didn't want to return to life if he was just going to bleed out again from unhealed injuries. The rest of him knew that he didn't have a choice.
He and Snape had landed in the other world and tracked the group to America. Just as they had gotten close, alarms had blared, and the two had made a quick escape to the Appalachian Mountains, figuring no alarms would be set there. While they had been coming up with a new plan, Greyback had struck, leaping out from behind the nearest tree.

Snape had been blindsided right in front of him, swept from his feet and knocked off the edge of a crevice. His wand had fallen to the ground, and Hotch had lunged for him, trying to stop him from what would have been a fatal fall. Too late, he had realized the gesture had put his back to Greyback.

Claws had pierced his side and stomach, and Snape had slipped from his grip.

Greyback hadn't given him a final blow. He'd just waited for Hotch to bleed out.

The Invisibility Cloak had been tucked into a pouch at his side, shrunk for the sake of convenience, in case Death had decided to randomly grab it from him like she'd been doing before. When he'd shown up in the white world, though, he'd been wise enough to make a simple check before handing over the Cloak.

"If I give this to you, do you let me back to the world of the living or do you send me to the world of the dead?"

Her limbs had stilled, halfway reaching for the Cloak, and he had his answer.

Now he shook the Cloak at her again. "I don't care if you get this or not. But I'll only hand it over if you let me back."

She wagged her finger at him in response.

"You've done it before," he snapped, exasperated. "We had a deal."

She made a motion of writing something very tiny. Small print and all that.

He tucked it back under his arm. "Fine. I guess I'm holding onto this for longer."

He turned away from her and she moved in front of him. Her palm touched his forehead before he could stop her and he flinched as images shot through his head of both of his sons bleeding.

"You've shown me that before," he said through gritted teeth, "but that's going to happen whether you get involved or not! Greyback's already after them!"

The white world vanished around them and they reappeared in a place rather similar to where Hotch knew his body was decomposing. Greyback was running after a figure darting ahead through trees in front of him. His larger bulk was making it more difficult for him to maneuver the obstacles, but he was faster, and his prey didn't have much time unless he could get into a spot Greyback couldn't reach.

"Jack..." Hotch whispered. He turned sharply to look at Death, who was floating midair beside him. "He didn't make a deal with you! I did!" he shouted at her. "Let him go!"

She shook her head, slowly, mockingly, and pointed to the Cloak again.

"If I don't get back there, they both die," he snapped. "I'm not picking one of them over the other."
They had debated using polyjuice on Elle for about five seconds, then had decided the risks of magical properties from the potion interfering with the signature outweighed the benefits of hiding her identity.

That did, of course, mean that they lost time when they appeared in Eighteen's BAU bullpen and led to everyone having a million and one questions.

"We can figure everything out later," Hermione said, "but we need to work this out right now. How long will it take you to match her signature to someone else's?"

"A couple of hours," Reid said.

"That's better than what we had before. We'll have to manage."

"Is there anything else we can do?" Morgan asked while Elle went with Reid to Garcia's office so they could start the search.

Ron muttered that he was returning to the battlefield and vanished. The two of them had brought over the entire BAU team, who were now running analyses in Colorado to try and help. A couple of the DA members had already gotten in touch with them.

"We need to find someone. He hasn't shown up at all and we don't know why. His name's Harry Potter."

Morgan frowned even as he turned to the computer. "Like...?"

"Yeah. Like Harry, just...not. The whole thing's complicated."

"Middle name?"

"James."

A minute passed. "Dead."

Hermione moved forward, leaning over his shoulder. He shifted slightly from the invasion of privacy, but she ignored him, staring at the screen. "What? How? When?"

"Died at home, at six. Looks like he ate something he shouldn't have. Whatever it was caused intestinal injuries."

Hermione frowned heavier. "That's not possible. Magic protects children at a young age. If he'd eaten something bad, his magic should have stopped him, or eased the injury, or something. Is there anything else?"

"Local police looked into it and said they noticed something was odd... They were thinking the same thing you are. They checked for child abuse, and they couldn't quite find proof but they had enough that the trial dragged out for years while the Dursleys tried to protest their case and the police tried to get them prosecuted. The whole thing was finally dropped three years later, but new evidence came up two years after that and it went back to court." He paused. "The terrorist attacks started at about the same time and the Dursleys admitted to everything. They said they'd been trying to kill him because he'd been using magic and they'd been scared for their lives."

Hermione slowly let go of his chair and leaned back. Morgan closed his eyes and exhaled, while Hermione buried her face in her hands and turned away from the computer screen.
"What does this mean?" Morgan asked quietly after a moment.

"It means the Dursleys destroyed their chance of keeping themselves safe from harm," she replied, voice cracking. "Idiots..."

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Three hours later, the results from Garcia's search came back.

"Nothing. I'm sorry."

"There should be something," Hermione protested. She had returned from the fight when JJ had texted her about the end of the search. "There are plenty of other werewolves here!"

"But not plenty like me," Elle said slowly. "My signature will probably be different because of the cure." She turned to Garcia. "Can you adjust it, to accommodate for that?"

"Not unless I know how it's different," Garcia replied. "I'd have to try numerous signatures, and that could take days."

"Can't you track Greyback using a patronus?" Elle asked Hermione.

"We've tried that before, but either someone put a charm on him to prevent us from doing that or his magic is stopping it." She frowned. "Wait, shouldn't you have a similar signature to Harry's brother?"

"No. Remus and I had similar reactions to the cure, but he had almost completely different results."

"Does Harry's brother have enough magic that he would be able to get away?" Morgan asked. "You said their magic can protect them..."

Hermione shook her head. "Not from something this drastic. And... Harry's brother's blind. He won't be able to get away, even if he turns into a wolf. Not when Greyback's stronger and has all his senses."

"How long does he have?" JJ asked.

"Just until Harry appears." Hermione paused. "I need to warn Harry about some of this."

She didn't use her portkey to London. She the one that would take her to Colorado instead.

It took her less than a minute to quickly explain the whole situation to the BAU, who had gathered at the camp site the students had used in their own world. "Why isn't Zabini sending Harry over immediately?" she asked. "Greyback's ready."

"Greyback can't fight Harry at his full power," Rossi said. "If Zabini doesn't wear Harry's magic down first, Harry will wipe the floor with him."

"I'll warn Harry," she said, then used the other portkey to take herself to London.

And immediately realized she was probably going to get killed if she tried to enter the violence surrounding Zabini and Harry. With a small, frustrated growl, she summoned her otter. "To Harry. Quietly, so only he can hear. Zabini's trying to wear you down so you'll have problems facing Greyback when you get there."

The otter vanished, leaving Hermione to stand alone, watching the destruction and biting her lip in
worry.

She forced herself to turn from the sight. There was nothing more she could do here, but she could do her best to help others elsewhere in the city.

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Harry had only the briefest of moments to listen to the otter's message, and then he sent more magic at Zabini. He didn't have a hope of draining Zabini's magic before he could drain his own. With two reserves, it just wasn't possible. Harry was throwing everything he had at him and it just wasn't enough. To a degree, he could sense when he was about to get attacked, but Zabini's power seemed to go beyond that, telling him how he was going to get attacked and what defense would be the best.

Harry wondered if that was his actual magic or if it was the knowledge he had stolen from Blaise.

Zabini stood in front of him, arms spread out. "Go ahead, Hotchner," he mocked. "I'm all yours."

He sent a silent *stupefy* towards him, and Zabini blocked it with a laugh. Behind him, cable cords reached up from where they'd fallen with the building they had been installed in, grabbing his wrists and ankles. Zabini blasted them all backwards with a burst of power.

"You're not going to be able to hold me," Zabini said. "I'll die before I stop."

"I won't kill you," Harry growled.

"A shame. Your brother looks so cute, you know. I wonder what he would have looked like when he grew up." Zabini apparated closer to him. "Did you like my idea with Riddle? Keeping Jack alive, raising him under a different wing? You should have taken that chance. He would have survived that, even if he wouldn't have been the perfect child you expected."

Harry silently cast the *incendio* spell, but Zabini vanished and reappeared beside him just as the fire would have passed through him. "But then, you're not the perfect child your parents wanted either. They wanted someone who would have stayed home, who would have been part of the family. You can't stay home for longer than a day without having to go run your own little country." He made a humming noise, apparating to Harry's other side as he sent a blast of energy towards where he had just been. "Maybe it's best Jack's not going to grow up in that house. It would have been rather empty, with everyone constantly focused on more important things than him."

Harry turned sharply, putting one side forward and hurling a bolt of magic. He yanked his knife from his belt with his freed hand, and when Zabini reappeared behind him, he whipped around and flung the knife.

It slammed into Zabini's shoulder, and a flash of surprise crossed his face as the pain bit into him. He touched the handle, as if assuring himself that it was actually real.

"Well," Zabini said as Harry stalked closer. "I didn't expect that."

Harry yanked the blade out and Zabini grunted. "You should be used to that feeling by now."

"You've managed to take me off guard more often than not," Zabini admitted, one hand over the injury. His palm was glowing slightly, directing magic to the wound. "The flash mobs took the cake, though."

Harry slashed upward with the knife, just nicking the wrist of the hand on his shoulder, and Zabini
stepped back. Harry pushed forward, driving the advantage, and Zabini made the best effort he could to stagger backwards without seeing where his feet were going over the rubble. He was dodging and feinting, following moves that Blackwolf had taught Blaise, and Harry used the surge of fury at the thought of that to make another drive.

He planned a fake punch, followed by a blow to the ribs and then a stab upwards. Blaise's memories would show Zabini what to do to avoid all three, but he could follow it up with a magical push from behind. Zabini had been better at blocking that sort of attack, and he would redirect some of his energy to that instead of the physical fight.

Zabini avoided the punch, but not the second two, and within seconds of scoring his first hit with the knife he'd solidly planted his second under Zabini's ribs.

Zabini was almost as surprised as he was, and that told Harry everything he needed to know.

Blaise was manipulating his own memories to throw Zabini off. He was trying to help Harry win.

Harry pushed forward, alternating between magical and physical attacks. It was something that came naturally to him after fighting for so long, but Zabini just didn't have a background in both. He could easily protect himself from the magical onslaught, but he had to rely on Blaise for defense against the knife and the blows and it was becoming more obvious that Blaise was throwing Blaise off.

Harry never stopped to try to appeal to Blaise in the hope that he was listening. The teenager had never been one for what he called 'sappy displays of affection', and he had a feeling the attempts to communicate would have done more to distract the Slytherin than to encourage him. Blaise needed all the focus he could muster to outwit his doppelganger.

And he was doing it brilliantly. Zabini's lapses in judgment were unpredictable, sometimes happening one after another and sometimes spaced out over ten minutes. Each time, Zabini had to rapidly adjust, trying to recover from a mistake before he got hurt.

His offense was entirely magical, and Harry threw everything he had into maintaining a solid defense and offense. The result was draining – he was forced to keep up a continuous defense so he didn't have to alternate between protecting himself and attacking, which meant he was using more magic. He was landing more hits than Zabini was because he could coordinate himself better, but he could feel his magical reserves dropping and he knew he wasn't going to have long to make a significant difference.

Zabini should have apparated away. The only reason Harry could think of for why he wouldn't was because Zabini was trying to force control over Blaise by putting them both in danger. It was a moronic move. Zabini had no clue how far Blaise would go to protect the people around him after the QDA, and that included self-sacrifice if it meant throwing himself on Harry's knife.

Then Zabini did apparate, and Harry knew that his time was up.

He was shaking, covered in sweat and filth, and his magic was startlingly low. Zabini was looking better, but not by much.

"Take this portkey," Zabini said, flashing the scrap of cloth at him. "I'll get you to Jack."

His smile had faded ten minutes into the fight. He didn't look so smug anymore. Now he just looked infuriated.

The cloth was shoved by a current of magic to Harry, and he snatched it out of the air. "If you survive this," Harry spat, "I'm making you rebuild London."
He activated the portkey.

"He's going right into a trap!" Hotch shouted, gesturing as his son disappeared. "You can't honestly expect me to just leave him like this!"

Death shrugged nonchalantly.

"Send – me – back!"

Death shook her head at him. She pointed at the Cloak again. He tightened his grip on it and stepped back.

The gesture shifted him past some rubble, and he saw a bland, grey rug burning from some of the cursed fire Harry and Zabini had been hurling. He paused.

Death hissed at him, but he'd already raised the Cloak, letting the end drop until it was inches from the fire. "Send me back."

She shook her head again, but it was abrupt, like a bird's jerking wings. The black, torn fabric of her robe was rising around her in agitation, no longer the flowing clothing it had once been.

"Take me back to my repaired body, alive, and I'll give you the Cloak."

Another head shake. One of her hands motioned frantically for him to hand over the Cloak.

He dipped the fringe down just enough that it was almost brushing the fire.

Death screeched, and although it made no sound outside of his head, he winced painfully but didn't drop the Cloak.

"My life for the Cloak!" he shouted over her.

She shot across the distance between them until she was towering over him, black fabric wrapping around both of them until he could see nothing of the city. Death was no longer the friend she had depicted herself as. He couldn't fight the feeling that there were enemies at his back in the folds of her robe.

Her hands opened for the Cloak once more.

He steeled himself and looked her in the place where her eyes should be behind her hood. "The Cloak...for my children."

She grabbed his arm, the one not holding the Cloak, and her bony fingers pierced the skin. He shouted, out of surprise and pain, as her fingers raked at the blood. Then, with a gesture so quick he almost missed it, she yanked her hand from him, droplets of blood flinging into the air after her fingers.

He tried to step back, but the fabric behind him was made of firmer material than it appeared. Death pressed closer to him, face uncomfortably close, and her bloodied, claw-like hand came towards his face. Her other arm was splayed perpendicular to her, as if keeping her balance.

Wet bone touched his forehead, drawing three lines – one down the center, two slanting from the top of his forehead to his eyes. Death slashed her hand through the air, and the blood splattered to the ground, leaving her fingers clean again. Without releasing him or turning around, she threw her other
arm out, palm opened behind her. A disgusting, damp slapping noise emanated from it a moment later, and when she pulled her arm back in, he saw someone's blood on it.

She clapped her hands together, smearing red on both, and lunged towards him, grabbing his ears and then pulling back immediately. He felt the blood left behind and moved to rub it off, but she smacked both of his hands away, and the sound was louder than it should have been.

The ground vanished beneath their feet, turning to small twigs and patches of grass. As if he were right beside him, Hotch could hear Jack breathing, but Death's robe stopped him from seeing him. He shoved at the robe futilely as Death sent out one torn piece of fabric. It returned with a painfully familiar red glimmer to it, and she wiped her hands free of the previous blood before touching the new.

Hotch jerked back as she reached for him again and she smacked him upside the head like he was a small child. He glared at her, but the movement cost him the instant he needed to properly react and she grabbed both of his hands, wiping his son's blood off on them.

Then they were gone again, reappearing on a carpet that looked an awful lot like his. A room away, someone was chopping up something on a cutting board, the same action Sean did when he got antsy. Then Hotch heard the knife slip and Sean swore.

Death opened her hand, revealing more stolen blood, and she dabbed her other fingers into her palm. She wiped off her palm on her robe and abruptly darted forward to flick Hotch in the forehead.

"Hey!" he snapped at the purposeless gesture, accidentally opening his mouth wide enough for her to shove her bloodied fingers in. He gagged at the taste as she pulled her fingers back out, and he could feel some of the blood on his teeth. The rest was sticking to his tongue.

The carpet was replaced by another, one Hotch didn't recognize immediately. The room was quiet, and Death threw one arm upward. For a brief moment, he could see the ceiling and a thin trail of blood dripping down from a crack in the plaster, pulled down to pool in her palm. The crack looked the faintest bit familiar, but he couldn't place it.

She dipped her cleaned fingers into it, just two this time, and swiped them down either side of his nose. Her fingers curved up, painting the edges of his nostrils with blood before he could jerk his head away. The overpowering scent of blood was nauseating, but it didn't block out the sudden whiff of his father's house.

Then they were gone, and the carpet was replaced by grass. Death bent double, lower half maintaining the exact same position while her front half elongated to allow her to shove her hand through dirt to reach for whatever she was searching for. After a moment, she pulled herself back up to a regular pose, hand covered in something black and not blood. It was rotten, something from a decayed corpse.

Death touched it with one finger, and half of it sludged off her hand while the other half turned red. She clasped her hand, smearing her fingers with it, and then turned it towards him, planting her palm on his chest over his heart.

Suddenly, he felt a thump in his chest.

They vanished once more as the blood all over his face began to dry. This time, Death stepped back immediately, opening her robe. They were in the place he had died, with his corpse lying on the ground next to them. She gestured and her robe floated over it, and when he could see it again the damage from Greyback had been entirely repaired.
She pointed at the Cloak. This time, Hotch handed it over.

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Zabini was not happy.

Blaise was supposed to be under control. Damn it, he'd thought the boy was dead, and instead he was messing with memories in the middle of a fight! The kid was more clever than he had thought, hiding in plain sight and biding his time until he could make a move.

I'll kill all of them, he thought to himself, feeling rather stupid but hoping Blaise could hear him. You shouldn't have done that. Greyback is going to tear Jack apart no matter what.

There was no response. Previously, Zabini had thought that Blaise wasn't talking to him out of spite, weakness, fear, or his demise. Now he suspected it had a lot more to do with scheming and keeping as much from Zabini as he could.

I'll find Jason Gideon. I'll make him think you won, and then I'll use that knowledge to tear him apart. I'll do everything you ever wanted to do with Ginny Weasley, but she won't want you by the time I'm done. I'll find everyone you started to think of as your siblings, and I'll give you back control just in time for you to earn their hate. I'll go after everyone you started to think of as surrogate aunts and uncles, and I'll make them think of you as nothing less than an Unsub.

He thought he could hear laughing. Not the kind of fake chuckle that people give to humor others, or a forced exhalation of air to feign humor. Genuine, unadulterated laughing.

Zabini came to a sudden halt as Harry Hotchner reappeared in front of him. There was blood on his hands.

"Oh, so you found your brother," Zabini said.

Before he could react, Hotchner screamed, throwing everything he had at him. It was a much more terrifying wave than anything he had conjured before, and for the first time, Zabini wondered if it had really been a good idea to test the middle Hotchner's limits.

The magic went past him harmlessly, and when he opened his eyes, there was no one there.

"Fuck you, Blaise," Zabini whispered.

There was another laugh, and he knew he wasn't imagining it.

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As soon as Harry's feet touched American soil, he called Hermione.

"He gave me a portkey," he said. "I just got here, but there's no one."

There was muttering behind Hermione, and then she said, "We can't trace your call."

Zabini had been expecting them to try that. "I don't have time to wait for anyone else to show up. You'll just have to catch up when you can."

"Can you use Atlas?"

"No. The trees are too dense." He tried peering through them, but there was no sign of anyone.
"What about Prongs?"

"Expecto patronum!" The drop in magic was much more significant than it should have been. "Shit..."

"What?"

"I think Zabini wore me down further than I thought he had."

"Harry, Greyback won't do anything to him until you're there to see it," Hermione said. "At least find out where you are first so we can come to you."

"Zabini wouldn't give me time for that. I'm sending up sparks."

"Don't you dare enter without anyone!"

He started walking. "No choice. I'll stay on the phone with you for a little while, though."

She paused, and then, "Ron and I are coming to get you. We'll be there as quickly as we can."

The line was silent for a while. Harry started running, knowing he was racing the clock to get there but too aware of how badly the fight with Zabini had drained him. Prongs loped ahead, leading him to Jack. The terrain wasn't rougher than Colorado, but he just didn't feel like he had the energy for this.

And then Prongs stopped running, turned around in a puzzled manner, and vanished.

"Prongs just ditched," Harry told his phone.

"There must be wards up to stop you from getting closer," Hermione said. He could hear the wind whipping past her and Ron, who had joined the call.

"What happens now?" Ron asked.

"He comes to me," Harry replied grimly.

"Harry..."

"I promise to hold off until you get here," he said, having no clue how he could keep that promise longer than a couple of minutes.

"Harry!" Ron suddenly shouted. "Turn back now!"

"What?"

"There's- Shit- We can see them!"

"Where?" Harry looked up, hoping to catch sight of them. He sent up sparks, too aware of how much his magic dropped from the simple spell.

"We're less than two miles from you," Hermione said, judging from his sparks. "We're flying above a sharp drop in the mountain. It looks like Jack got to the bottom somehow, because we can see him running there, but Greyback got stuck at the top."

"I'm still coming."
"Harry, no!"

"I'll get Jack and you two can handle Greyback if you're really that worried."

"Harry, Zabini did something to him," Ron said urgently even as Harry continued climbing up the side of the mountain. "He's..."

"What?"

"He's using his animagus form."

"He doesn't need to, not with the werewolf enhancement potion."

"Looks like that form wasn't fast enough for him," Ron replied. "He's... He's using his leopard form."

Harry paused in the middle of grabbing a branch to haul himself up another step. "I guess we confirmed that theory, then."

"Harry, he's going to kill you! Even Blackwolf said the leopard was going to murder you!" Ron shouted at him.

Harry hung up on him, shoved his phone into his pocket, and kept moving.

If Jack had gotten away from Greyback, even for a short period of time, Harry didn't have long to catch up to him and get them both away.

He reached the top of the steep part of the mountain he had been climbing. Past it, he could see the part where the mountain split in two, one portion sharply rising and the other remaining level. And on the upper portion, he could see a lithe form moving rapidly towards him.

Harry bolted, sprinting as hard as he could down the lower portion. There wasn't any point in hiding when Greyback could probably smell and hear him, if not see him already. As he passed the area where the higher land connected to the lower, he threw his wand warm out towards the ground beside him and shouted, "Bombarda maxima!"

Earth erupted behind him, and he glanced up quickly to see the leopard's reaction. It skidded to a halt, tail whipping in the air to let him keep his balance, and then took off running when the earth had stabilized enough. Harry almost cursed himself for accidentally giving the leopard a shorter way down by creating a rubble pile that the leopard could jump on, but he pushed on, hoping he could find Jack before the leopard could catch up to him.

There was a dip in the ground in front of him, and as he rounded the top, his quarry came into view. Jack, in wolf form, was sprinting towards him from the bottom, and he started running faster as soon as he saw his brother.

Harry nearly tripped over himself trying to get to Jack, and he almost broke his neck when he heard rocks sliding behind him and whipped his head around to see the leopard using the rocks he had thrown around to get down faster. He felt like smacking his head against something for his stupidity, but instead turned back around and dropped low, using one arm to scoop up Jack in his arms as he ran past. Jack yelped at the sudden change in position but nestled close to him, nose burrowing into his neck and tail flying through the air under Harry's arm.

He tightened his grip on his wand and tried to apparate.
A trickle of magic responded to him, not nearly enough to get them out of there. And if he did it wrong, the first thing to splinch would be Jack.

He gave a frustrated snarl and wrapped his arm more securely around Jack. His heart wasn’t pumping fast enough and his air wasn’t coming quickly enough. The only hope now was that Hermione and Ron could get to him first.

Then there was a replying snarl, and Harry barely had time to turn his head before a furry body collided with him, throwing him to the ground. Greyback knelt over him, back in human form with his half-werewolf body. Harry released Jack, throwing his arm up in the same movement to distract Greyback. Jack skittered away from him, and Harry grabbed a handful of dirt with his free hand, then flung it up at the werewolf.

Greyback backed up, swatting at his face to clear his airways and vision, and Harry scrambled up and towards Jack. A furious roar from behind him warned him about what was coming, and he grabbed Jack, pulling him close enough that he could completely shield his brother as Greyback moved to cut open his exposed back.

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"There!" Ron shouted, pointing, as Greyback brought one arm back. Without thinking, he grabbed Hermione’s broom next to him and held it steady so she could pull her wand out, but Greyback was already bringing his claw down and Harry's usual reactive, impulsive magic was doing nothing.

Then the leopard shot out of the underbrush, leaping for Harry as if in a race with Greyback to cause harm first. Greyback paused, shocked at seeing another predator lunging towards the Light Lord directly across from him. The leopard leaped, colliding solidly with Harry's back. Harry flinched, tightening around his brother, but the leopard was only using him as a springboard, and an instant later he was slamming up into Greyback.

"Woah, what," Ron said, unconsciously coming to a halt.

Claws sank into Greyback, ripping into his shoulders and sides. Only Greyback's bent arm saved him, letting him hold off the leopard from his neck. The leopard tore his teeth into Greyback’s forearm, forcing him to pull it away, and the leopard swiped up with one claw, cutting across Greyback's neck and torso.

Greyback threw them both to the ground, using his weight to get on top. The leopard shot out from underneath him, then grabbed his neck and dragged him, closer to the treeline and further from the kids. Harry had turned his head, bewildered as to what was going on, and now picked up Jack and moved him away from the fight. Jack turned back into his human form and said something, surprising Harry enough to come to a complete halt.

Greyback jumped at the leopard, claws aiming to rake across his sides, but the leopard jumped backward too quickly, one claw smacking Greyback straight in the face. Greyback snarled and recoiled for an instant, then lashed out again. The leopard snatched the claw midair, pinned it to the ground with one paw and cut upward with his other limb. Greyback screamed in fury.

Hermione yanked her broom from Ron and plunged down, skimming the treetops until they ended and the short, open area to the rocky edge began. Ron joined her and the two landed beside Harry.

"What the bloody hell is going on?" Ron asked, keeping his back to the rock instead of the fighting pair.
"It's Dad," Jack said in an 'obviously' tone. Hermione and Ron exchanged a wince – no one would have been able to tell Jack yet that his father had been killed, or that his brother was being hunted by a leopard. "I can smell him."

That changed things.

"Um," Ron said intelligently. He turned to Harry after a moment. "I thought you were supposed to be killed by a leopard."

"I think we need to talk to Blackwolf again," Harry responded. "But now that I'm thinking about it, all the tea leaves said was that there was a leopard in my future."

"I can't hit Greyback without risking hitting your father too," Hermione said, tracking the struggle with her eyes. "They keep switching position too quickly."

"Hotch has got this," Ron said, putting a gently restraining hand on her wand arm. Ahead of them, Hotch growled again just before jumping, throwing both of them backwards into the trees. "It's a good time for him to work off that stress."

Greyback suddenly popped up again, but he scrambled to climb the nearest tree as quickly as he could. Hotch's head appeared over the edge of a bush, eyes tracking Greyback's movements. The tip of his tail whispered through the air and froze, and then Hotch surged upward, leaping half the tree in one bound and clawing his way up the rest of it before Greyback could turn around. Hotch sank one claw into Greyback's calf, let go of the tree with his other front claw to secure his grip, and dropped from the tree, dragging Greyback down with him. They fell out of sight again.

"I am so not getting in the middle of that," Ron said. He glanced at Harry. "Your dad just developed the ability to turn into a leopard and you're just standing there."

"I'm still processing. And I'm really tired."

"How's your magic?" Hermione asked, concerned.

"Not up to where it should be," Harry replied. "I couldn't even apparate earlier."

"I've got a portkey to Colorado," Hermione said. "When your dad stops...killing Greyback, we'll all go." She paused. "Or... Rather, Ron and you three will go. One of us needs to get back to London."

"That would be the purpose of having two people running an organization," Harry agreed. Jack was leaning back against his shoulder, peering out to the trees even though he couldn't see anything in his human shape. He was getting too big to be held like this, even when Harry wasn't exhausted, but there was security in holding him.

Greyback roared suddenly in something like excitement, and then the sound cut off abruptly and everything was silent.

After a long moment, the leopard slowly padded into view, body moving with precision and stealth. Harry couldn't even hear him approaching until he was right next to him. Hotch looked up at him, analyzing him, and then back to the trees pointedly.

Harry put Jack down, and his younger brother wrapped his arms around the feline's neck without hesitation. Hotch tilted his head up, eyes closed and leaning against him. Harry thought he could hear a soft purr. Then the eyes opened, yellow and slanted, and Harry got down to his knees.

"Great timing," he said, and he got a rumbling noise in response.
"On the other hand," Hermione said after a pause, "I'll go with you to Colorado. I've got to hear what happened."

Chapter End Notes

I CAN’T BELIEVE I HID HIS IDENTITY THIS WHOLE TIME. I swear, I thought someone was going to realize that he was dying often enough that he'd hit the nine-death mark, but it looks like I was able to play it off as almost a joke enough times to hide it. Whew.

Greyback was never the leopard spirit. He was just really hard to kill because he was a werewolf, but he is most assuredly dead now.

The blood that was used to resurrect Hotch was what he was leaving behind, his "bones" as Trelawney called them. He thought of his family, so it pulled from five family members and connected each of them to a different sense and the reason he had to return (his own blood tied to his sight, Harry to his hearing, Sean to taste, his father to smell, Jack to touch, and Haley to his heart). I'm going to put a more in-depth explanation up on Tumblr because otherwise this will go on for a while here.
"And I asked myself about the present: how wide it was, how deep it was, and how much was mine to keep." - Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five*

The first thing Harry did when he arrived in Colorado was collapse in one of the cabin beds for a long overdue nap. None of the BAU had been around, and Hermione and Ron had both left when Hotch had made no move to shift to his other form. Just before Harry had slipped off, he felt Jack climb into bed with him, curling up in his human shape.

Harry woke up half a day later, feeling marginally more like himself. A quick check showed his magic had significantly recovered, and while it wasn't halfway where he wanted it to be, it wouldn't put him in danger.

He opened his eyes. Jack was lying on his arm, trapping him and preventing him from getting up. There was a pressure at the end of the bed, and Harry raised his head to see a spotted back pointed in his direction. The motion made the ears twitch towards him, and after a moment, Hotch turned his neck to look at him.

Harry grinned at him. Hotch's tail swiped across his leg, and he carefully got to his feet, trying not to wake Jack as he carefully stepped towards Harry, nose sniffing.

"I'm fine," Harry assured him quietly.

"You smell weird," Jack said immediately, clearly not sleeping, and Harry groaned.

"I liked this family a lot better when I could get away with saying stuff like that," Harry said.

Jack grinned, opening his eyes and looking up at him. "You sure?"

Harry blinked, then whipped around to look at Hotch. "He's picking up on my sass!"

Hotch didn't look impressed, and if he had been speaking, Harry got the impression that he would have said something about payback.

Jack sat up. "The BAU's here," he said, then slipped off the bed. "Come on!"

He hurried to the cabin door and opened it up, hurrying out to greet the team. Harry got to his feet more slowly, and Hotch dropped down beside him. "Why didn't you go out earlier?" he asked curiously.

Hotch gave him a look before glancing down at himself.

"You could just change back."

The look was so dry it could have been a martini.

"You- You can't change back, can you?" Harry asked, biting his cheek to fight a snicker.

Hotch leaned his weight against Harry's knee, almost making him topple over. There was a faint
growl, but Harry was laughing too hard to care.

"You can't turn back!"

Hotch snarled at him, lips pulling back to reveal teeth.

"Oh come on, you can just ask Sirius how to later," Harry pointed out, still chuckling. He started towards the open door, through which the BAU’s greeting of Jack was audible. "I don't think you're completely stuck. Hey, should we place bets on whether or not this form is going to get more screams than the time you were a zombie-poltergeist?"

Jack must have told the team something of what had happened, because no one reached for their guns when a leopard followed Harry out of the cabin. They were sitting around the unlit campfire that the QDA had used so often when they had been here in their own world, waiting for the pair to approach. Jack was on a log between JJ and Prentiss.

"So," Prentiss said. "It sounds like you guys had quite the day."

"Yeah. Where were you guys at, when we got here?"

"The Apache came to ask for information, so we had to leave to brief them on what we knew. It sounds like we just missed you, from what Jack's saying," Rossi told him. "Your turn."

Harry glanced briefly at Jack, who, though older and more mature than he had any right to be, should definitely not be hearing most of the story. JJ nodded at him and, murmuring softly, lead Jack away into one of the cabins, shutting the door firmly behind them.

Harry gave them his side of it, and the mention of Zabini immediately crashed the light-hearted mood. "I don't think Blaise is dead," he said. "That doesn't line up with what I saw."

"Can we get him out somehow?" Prentiss asked, frowning.

"When Harry had a piece of Riddle in him, we could never fully remove it," Reid pointed out. "I don't think we'd be able to manage the opposite now, especially when Zabini's not going to willingly let us pick at his brain."

"We don't even know if there'd be something in his brain to pick at," Morgan said. "They even merged their bodies."

Everyone paused.

"...Right?" Morgan slowly said.

No one spoke.

"Well, that's something to look into immediately," Prentiss muttered.

"What if we split them up by making them so different that they can't remain as the same person any longer?" Reid suggested. "Once one of them is rejected, we could theoretically put them in a different body if they don't split naturally. If there's still another body left, we could just use that one, or we could put him in an entirely different container."

"But they're the same person," Rossi said. "We've seen that."

Gideon shook his head. "They're just as similar as we are to our doppelgangers, but something clearly happened to make them so different that they willingly took completely different sides. The
Riddles had some difficulty becoming one person, but after weeks they seemed to have it under control. It's been months and Zabini is still having issues."

"Even if we could force something like that, Zabini's not going to let him go easily," Morgan said. "Blaise needs a way to get out."

"We can't weaken his magic," Prentiss said. "Not even Harry could do that."

"Hotch, got anything to add?" Morgan asked.

Harry had taken an empty log and Hotch had come to sit by him. Harry coughed, trying to hide a grin and utterly failing. "He's stuck like that for now." Prentiss raised an eyebrow, also attempting to control her expression. Harry glanced back down at his father, anticipating the glare and beaming in response.

Now that he thought about it, though, where had his father been when he hadn't been a leopard? The smile slipped from Harry's face, and one of Hotch's ears twitched in confusion at the sudden expression change. Hotch had had serious problems from the experience before, and Harry knew he had become more protective of his kids after the event simply because he didn't want either of them to go through that. Had he been stuck, alone, this whole time?

"Wait..." Harry said slowly. "There's something Seokga told me, back at Hogwarts. He said that people were ill whenever they were unwell, whether it was physical or not."

"You're thinking we could weaken Zabini another way, besides magical attacks," Reid said immediately.

"I'm thinking we can't weaken him one way, but maybe we can hit from a couple angles. I could drain him magically, and that kind of hit usually makes wizards lethargic. Blaise seems to be going after him mentally already."

"We can hit emotions," Rossi said. "We'll find out where the split was, and we'll see if we can get to Zabini that way."

"I'll ask Hermione if she knows anything about the world differences," Harry said, and he got up to make the call. He could have sent a patronus, which would have been more reliable, but he was reluctant to test his magic any further.

A couple of minutes later, both Hermione and Ron appeared. He blinked, tilting his head slightly. They grabbed his arms and pulled him to the sides of one of the cabins, away from the BAU. Only when none of the team had made a move to follow them did Hermione say anything. "We figured it out yesterday," she said. "You died when you were six."

Harry paused. "What from?"

"The Dursleys killed you. The police had the coroner do an autopsy, and he found a serious overdose on sleeping pills in your system, as well as what looked like pieces of rusted wire from a chicken wire fence in your stomach."

Harry slowly said, "When I was little, I kept seeing my parents when I was in serious danger. My mother warned me not to drink a glass of water when I was five or six because it was poisoned." Hermione and Ron exchanged worried glances. "I didn't, but later, I hadn't had food in days so I was eating anything they gave me. I later found out that they'd put metal bits in the bread because I wouldn't notice when I was so hungry."
"You just kept eating it?" Ron asked, face turning a nauseous green.

"No. Dad showed up that time and told me not to."

"So...you survived because someone stopped the Dursleys," Hermione said slowly. She paused. "That... That would make sense, why you're a Light Lord. Magic builds gradually from an increase in external threats, but if the threat was too great, magic can't protect you. Your danger was lower by just enough that your magic could save you."

"Er. How are we explaining this to your father?" Ron asked nervously. "We kind of took a vote and everyone unanimously decided we were never mentioning this. Except for Neville, but then we told him he was going to have to tell Hotch."

"Ron," Hermione said calmly, "you do realize that cat's ears are much more sensitive than human ears, don't you?"

"What's that got to do with- Oh."

His face slowly turned bright red while the other two looked at him sadly.

"So," Harry said, deciding to delay going back to see the BAU and his father, "now that that's taken care of... Are you heading back to Quantico?"

"I was thinking about asking them to look into Zabini," Hermione said. "Maybe they can find out what happened."

"I'll go with you," Harry volunteered immediately.

"Stay here for another day and get your strength back," Hermione scolded him. "You'll do better after you get more rest. There's no point in you returning at once when you'd do us more good overall by recovering as quickly as you can."

Harry sighed. "Fine. One more day." He paused. "Is anyone heading back to the alternate world?"

"I don't think so... Why?"

"Er, we need to talk to an Animagus about how to get Dad to turn back into a human..."

He sat around the cold campfire with the BAU for another two hours before his head started to nod. Before he could even think about charms that would keep him awake, Hotch snagged his leg with one claw and started forcibly pulling him back to the cabin he had first slept in. Harry rather ungracefully reclaimed his leg but followed his father, unwilling to be man-leopard-handled anymore.

"I'm fine," he grumbled as they reached the steps. There was no way he was going to whine in front of the rest of the team, but he felt completely comfortable doing it in front of the one person who definitely wasn't going to yield.

Hotch gave him a look, pushed the door open, and shoved him inside by pushing on the back of his legs with his head.

"I can't just sit around and do nothing," Harry protested while Hotch nudged the door closed with one hind leg.

Hotch completely ignored that statement, nodding with his head towards the bed.
"Come on, let me put wards around the place or something," he pleaded.

Hotch stepped closer, forcing him back a pace towards the bed.

Harry glared weakly at him. "Can I at least try to figure out how to get in touch with someone who can help you get turned back from an oversized house cat?"

Hotch gave up on subtlety and tackled him to the bed.

Five minutes of bizarre wrestling later, Hotch had Harry all but strapped to the bed through the use of blankets and sheets that had been tucked a little too tightly. Harry scowled. Hotch sat on his legs triumphantly.

"You don't even have thumbs," Harry protested, like that would somehow make the situation illogical enough to get him out of his predicament.

Hotch made a scoffing, dismissive noise.

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Harry woke up that night when Hotch kicked him in the thigh once, and then again, harder. Harry opened his eyes, but Hotch wasn't sitting up and there was no obvious cause for alarm. Hotch's leg jerked again and he gave a faint growl that led into an even quieter whine.

Harry managed to get one arm out from under the sheets and pulled the fabric down enough that he could slip out from his bindings. "Dad," he said softly. He reached out and touched Hotch's leg, the nearest thing he could reach. "Dad, wake up."

The leg yanked up sharply, pulling away from him. Claws sank into the mattress and ears flickered anxiously.

Harry reached out and touched his back, fingers threading through fur. "Dad!"

Hotch woke with a full-body flinch, instinctively whipping around towards Harry with a growl, ears lying flat on his skull and teeth bared in warning. In the same motion, he pushed himself up into a half-sitting position, one claw held at the ready. Seeing who it was, he immediately switched tunes, shying away from Harry in apology for almost attacking him.

"You okay?" Harry asked.

Hotch gave an irritable noise, but it was too instinctive. He sat up completely, looking as in-control and regal as he ever had when human.

Harry discarded the answer. "Were... Were you alone again, this time?"

Hotch stared at him, yellow eyes unblinking and showing nothing. Finally, he lowered himself back down on the bed, resting his head on his paws again but this time touching one of Harry's legs.

If their situations had been reversed, Hotch would have known exactly what to tell him. He would have had some comforting way of telling him that he wouldn't ever be alone again, or of saying that he'd come through this time, like he always had. Harry would have felt safe.

But their situations weren't reversed, and Harry couldn't talk to him like he was someone to be protected. If anything, it gave Hotch more security in knowing that he could still protect his kids, even if one of them barely needed protection anymore. That was a strange thing for Harry to accept
or even admit after everything, after so long of ensuring that he wouldn't have to worry about help coming too late or never. Even with everything he'd had, he had only arrived just in time to get to Jack, and what had been left in his reserves wasn't nearly enough to fight off Greyback.

He'd known the leopard was Hotch even before Jack had said anything. He had sensed the roiling, furious bundle of emotion passing over him, thoughtlessly getting so close to Harry and even using him as a launching point so as to throw as much energy into Greyback as he could. There weren't many people who would put themselves directly between a werewolf and his prey, and there were fewer who would do so with such a personal vengeance.

Harry pulled his legs up. Hotch barely twitched, either thinking Harry was too warm for the extra heat or hadn't noticed Hotch was leaning on him. He still didn't move when Harry kept shifting, but he finally opened his eyes when Harry laid back down, head resting against Hotch's side. Harry kept his eyes shut, but he heard Hotch raise his head briefly and he felt hot breath on his hair. After a moment, he adjusted his position, curling himself around Harry, and settled back down.

"You'll get back to normal," Harry said, speaking in hardly more than a whisper. Hotch didn't move. "You've done it before. And even if you can't... You've got us, and we won't let you stay like this."

Hotch's body had been relaxed, deceptively so, and now Harry felt him shift, covering Harry's vulnerable parts with his own; Harry's ankles with his tail, his neck with his head. Faint breaths warmed Harry's jaw.

"We'll let you give it a go first, if it makes you feel better," Harry murmured.

---

Harry tried to leave the next day, as had been the agreement.

However, that agreement had not been one that Hotch had verbally agreed to, so Harry found himself confined to rest. JJ had opened the door at the sound of a battle, and then wisely left when she found Hotch standing with his front paws planted on Harry's torso and growling a warning at his son. Harry had shouted pleas for help after her, but the only response he got was a muffled laugh.

When forced back to sleep, Harry's body almost completely shut him down. Hotch could smell his magic, the potency that was almost overwhelming, and he wondered how far Harry had to go to recover if this wasn't close to his standard. It wafted around him, repairing itself as it forced Harry to devote all of his spare energy to his magic. If Hotch couldn't hear how strongly his heart was beating, even if it was at a slow pace, or how steady his lungs were moving, he would have been much more concerned.

The BAU team checked in with them briefly and then left to help the Apache again. JJ passed Jack off to Hotch, and the nine-year-old immediately switched form and curled up in between Harry and Hotch. The father had to shuffle aside to make a room. Once in place, Jack turned his face towards him, nose sniffing for a moment, picking up all the strange scents that Hotch now had in a new form. Bizarrely but understandably enough, Hotch could smell Jack's human scent on the wolf as well, along with a canine aroma.

Finally, Jack snorted, tail thumping against Hotch's leg briefly in contentment before he dropped his head back down to watch his brother. Hotch had seen the behavior before, when Jack would sit for hours observing Harry, but he had attributed it to an unhealthy attachment from the dependency he had developed over the last couple of years. As a leopard, Hotch could hear and see the slightly quicker inhales and exhales, and he knew Jack was paying attention to the fascinating magical signature like he was.
A leopard. He was the leopard. In retrospect, as with everything, it made much more sense for it to be him than Greyback. The werewolf had been much more inclined to being directed and given a purpose, whereas Hotch matched the strong alpha figure that Blackwolf had suggested. Of the people who had attacked his family – the Woodsmarked Killer, Foyet, Riddle, and now Greyback – none were living, with the single exception being Zabini, whose death he was actively trying to avoid until they had ascertained for sure whether they could rescue Blaise. As for Greyback, he hadn't killed Jack and he hadn't destroyed Hotch permanently, and he'd never managed to severely hurt Harry.

Furthermore, Hotch's frequent brushes with death, while leaving him unsettled at first, had led him to believe that he had just been more protected by magic than he had thought. The bomb in New York, for one, that had killed Joyner but only damaged his hearing. Paramedics had been shocked that had been able to resuscitate him after they arrived what should have been too late for effectual CPR, and that wasn't even taking into account the damage Foyet had done with his knife. In both instances, he had attributed his survival to sheer luck.

But then Lestrange hit him with the Killing Curse, and he couldn't say he had managed to do anything less than drag himself back to life through force of will and blood wards. His two assassinations had also hardly been subtle, with Hotch avoiding death through bargains: once with the stone and once with the agreement to find the rest of the Hallows. Then he came dangerously close to taking severe damage from a werewolf, and Death had appeared to him but he had just thought she had malicious timing. Of course, she could hardly have shown herself if he were still living. He had handed over the wand after he had been cornered by werewolves again. Finally, Greyback had cut his lifeline, and Hotch had delivered the Cloak in return for his revival.

Blackwolf had known this whole time. Oh, he must have known. He had been the only one entirely unsurprised that Hotch had been able to repeatedly return, and he had tried to warn Hotch at the very beginning that the omen of a leopard did not always mean harm. Hotch wanted to be angry at the withholding of information, but he couldn't help the relief that shouldered that emotion aside. Had he not been so infuriated by his sons' attackers and so unsure of his own victory over them without as much power as he could muster, he might not have been able to return.

A hunter's form. Fitting.

At least he could communicate this time. Jack could understand him, and although he had no human speech and couldn't even mouth words this time, he was warm and his body was alive, and Jack was obviously excited to finally have someone else in the family on four legs. If he were going to take a form that forced him out of his job and most of his relationships, and likely his home and everything he had known as his life, he could accept a form that would let him protect his children to the fullest extent and to enjoy their company.

He wouldn't have ever admitted it, but his...'zombie-poltergeist' state had hardly been less than torture. He'd returned from a place of little communication and interaction to a life of only slightly more communication and the knowledge that he was probably going to be rejected from his corpse soon. This could be permanent, but at least it was manageable, and at least it guaranteed safety.

It was something he could handle. That didn't mean he was just going to leave it alone.

He inhaled. Exhaled.

And then he pushed himself up to all fours, remembering what it felt like to be human, and breathed in air through a rapidly shrinking nasal cavity as his arms extended in front of him.

Jack was staring up at him curiously. "I just had to make sure I could switch back," Hotch said,
giving him a small smile. Words. He was never taking verbal words for granted again, not after two extended stints spent not being able to use them.

Jack gave him a look, telling him exactly how idiotic he thought that was when he could obviously have switched back whenever, and then put his head back down on his paws.

Hotch probably should have spent more time reveling in his accomplishment, but all he could think was, *He is picking up on Harry's sass!*

---

Hotch was awake when Harry woke. He was sitting up, legs over the edge of the bed. Human. Jack was asleep on his other side, head in Hotch's lap and under Hotch's hands.

Harry hadn't moved, but Hotch moved one of his hands without thinking to Harry's head, fingers gently working through his hair to massage his scalp. "You figured out how to switch?" Harry whispered quietly.

"I'm not dependent on magic users for *everything,*" Hotch murmured in reply and Harry grinned. "You should take another day to recover your magic, though."

Harry closed his eyes for a moment, gently testing his magic. "I think it's over halfway recovered," he said, relieved. "I thought it was almost all the way gone when I couldn't do any magic right before you showed up."

Hotch frowned, but not at the admission of weakness. "You did. I could smell the shield you'd put over yourself and Jack – that's why I was willing to jump off you instead of coming from another direction, because I knew the shield was going to push me up and give me more momentum."

Harry blinked at him. "Really?"

"Must have been more unconscious magic."

"Well. I'm glad I couldn't apparate, since otherwise I suppose you would still be stuck there. You weren't injured, though, were you?"

"Greyback was used to a brawn fight, and I was small enough that he couldn't get a good grip on me. No injuries." There was a satisfaction that Hotch couldn't hide in being able to put Greyback in the past tense.

Harry glanced reluctantly at Jack, then said, "I think we should go ahead and go back today."

"If you can stay awake for more than three hours, we will," Hotch compromised. At Harry's curious look, he explained, "Hermione said that your magic is going to make you sleep a lot while it's still recovering to a manageable level. You might have enough magic for a fight, but you're going to be exhausted for a while."

Harry sighed, closing his eyes. "Fine."

He was asleep five minutes later, breathing deeply as fingers stroked his head.

---

"I thought you were both dead," Draco said slowly when Harry and Hotch appeared in the office room that the DA had requisitioned as their main HQ.
Hermione grinned at them. "Feeling better?"

"Much," Harry said.

"The BAU's got a plan for you," Hotch said, brushing past pleasantries.

"Happy birthday," Harry said cheekily. "We couldn't find you any books."

Draco raised a hand. "Once again – what?"

"Harry was resting after his fight with Jack and Hotch brought himself back." She paused. "Again."

"Zombie-poltergeist again?" Draco asked with a laugh.

"Animagus form," Harry replied. "He's a cat, apparently."

Hotch looked seconds away from rolling his eyes, which was a clear sign that he'd spent too long around teenagers. He didn't correct Harry, but turned to Hermione and explained the outlines of the plan. A small smile slowly spread across her face as he laid it out.

"We can do that," she said. "We can definitely do that. And we just let Blaise take care of the rest of it?"

"The rest of it? Sounds like we'll be doing all the hard work," Draco grumbled. "You know how much coordination that's going to take so we don't get hit by friendly fire?"

"You're a talented lot," Hotch said.

"It makes me insanely happy that you guys are picking up on wizarding slang as much as we're picking up on yours," Draco sighed.

"'Lot' is more of a British than a wizarding term," Hermione corrected, then turned to the Hotchners. "Are you heading back to the battlefield?"

"We need someone to head back through the worlds to see if they can find a second body of Riddle's, or Blaise's," Harry corrected.

Hotch paused. "When we went to see if Greyback had died, he was there with a group of werewolves. The pack thought they were there because they had nowhere else to go, but there must have been better spots for them to hide. Greyback wouldn't want to be in a conspicuous place; he prefers to hide until the last minute."

"So... You think they were there to protect the body?" Harry asked.

"It wouldn't surprise me. I don't know if it would still be there or not."

"Only one way to find out," Hermione said. "I'll send Ron. His dog patronus should be able to sniff anything out. I'd say you should go, but I think you'll do more good here, especially now that Snape's probably not going to be able to make it. We should have some parental supervision, right?"

"What about Snape?" Harry asked, frowning.

She blinked, perking up. "Oh! You didn't hear. This world's BAU picked him up. They were still looking for magical signatures in the area, and they found that he'd been arrested in Charlottesville for loitering and aggressive panhandling."
"...I have a feeling he's got an interesting story behind that," Harry said.

"When the BAU brought him in, he said he'd been trying to ask people if they'd seen Greyback, but apparently he'd hit his head really hard when he'd fallen and no one could understand him. He'd looked like such a wreck and he'd been so incoherent that the police thought he was homeless and on drugs."

"Finally, I'm not the only one with the embarrassing stories," Harry said gratefully.

"I've got his wand," Hotch said. "Can Ron drop it off before he heads through the Veil?"

"I'll tell him to," Hermione replied, nodding. "What are you two going to do?"

"Avoid Zabini. We don't want to provoke a fight that could prematurely push out Blaise," Hotch said. "Once you find the body, though, we need to act as rapidly and as potently as possible. Blaise is going to need all the help he can get. Just remember: he needs us to distract Zabini, not him."

"Get Ginny," Draco immediately said. "She's flaming mad at Zabini right now, and if anything can scare Blaise out of him, the sight of her can manage it in half a heartbeat."

"...Help, not distract."

An explosion made him frown, and he turned his head to look out the window behind Hermione.

"What was that?" she asked.

"Seamus set something off. No one's hurt." A park bench, a tree, and the surrounding foliage were on fire, and a group of Death Eaters looked appropriately started, but the DA was pressing their advantage and none of them were hanging back with an injury.

"I don't see it," Draco said, frowning, as he craned his neck to try to spot what Hotch could see.

Hotch frowned, pointing down the road. "Thirteen blocks down."

Draco stopped looking and stared at him instead. "You can see that far?"

Hotch paused. "Yes," he said after a moment of surprised speculation. "I can now."

"I'm going to take Atlas and go help Huther unless I'm needed somewhere else," Harry said, impatience from the last couple of hours finally starting to reach the tipping point. His shifting practically dared someone to try to argue with his statement.

Hermione did so anyway, because she was Hermione. "How far has your magic recovered?"

"Back to normal."

She turned to Hotch.

"He's over four-fifths of the way there." She raised an eyebrow at the precise statement and he added, "I can smell it."

"That is simultaneously weird and awesome," Draco said.

"Am I free to go?" Harry asked, a touch too sarcastically.

"Fine," Hermione said dismissively, waving him off. "Hotch, we've had a couple of hostage
situations in London. Our issue is that we haven't been able to get in without being spotted and none of us can negotiate. Could you...?"

"Of course."

"Thanks. We haven't had such an issue with Westminster because it's not as populated."

He wanted to ask what exactly the difference was between the two cities, but there were more important things to discuss, and he grabbed onto her arm when she extended it. She latched onto Draco, nodded at Harry, and vanished the three of them with a crack. They reappeared on a city street, near enough to a fight that Hotch could pick out the breathing patterns of the aggressors with somewhat disturbing accuracy.

"Westminster surrounds London," Hermione said calmly. "In case you were wondering."

There were a lot of things that Hotch could have said in that moment about know-it-all teenagers and all would have been entirely accurate, but she would have taken every comment as a compliment, and rightfully so. Instead of saying anything, he focused on turning back into a leopard like he had done it a hundred times.

"That's not a cat," Draco protested indignantly behind him as he shot away.

"Big cats are cats too, Draco," Hermione told him patiently.

Hotch hit the fight, colliding with a Death Eater and knocking him to the ground. Hermione stunned the man as he moved on, not even bothering to move from her position. Hotch worked his way around the outskirts of the fight, picking out the ones who were causing the DA at the center the most trouble, and managing to keep his presence almost entirely hidden until one Death Eater screeched particularly loudly at the sight of him.

The rest of the Death Eaters were at least surprised enough that the DA was able to take them out relatively quickly.

Hotch moved on as soon as the last Death Eater hit the ground, paws darting across the ground beneath him. Tails weren't for dramatics; he quickly realized as he instinctively threw it to the side to keep his balance as he took a tight turn. He might have lost some visibility with the drop to his height, but his senses helped to make up for the loss, even giving him exposure to more details he wouldn't have noticed.

That, unfortunately, included the rather loud shouting behind him, and Hermione had to quickly but irritably explain the situation. Before she could take off after him, she demanded Draco send out a message to everyone so she wouldn't have to "stop every half-second like a minimum-wage newspaper boy."

Hotch almost smiled at the simile. Instead, he pushed on, leaving the group behind and slipping through the shadows cast by fire and flashing spells. He had hostages to find.

There were more than he had expected, but it was much easier for him to silently slip in through the upper parts of buildings than it was for the DA to come busting in through the front door. Most of the time, he could get something close to a fourth or third of the hostages out before anyone realized he was there. By that time, he had usually also managed to drag away a significant portion of the hostage-takers.

He'd always thought it was ridiculous how leopards would pull their meals up to trees to feast. The ground was as good a plate as bark.
But a body on the ground was a lot less subtle than a body above one's head, and the rest of his prey wasn't so quick to notice a corpse that wasn't right in front of them. Or an unconscious body, if a Death Eater got lucky.

There was also the added benefit of the rare but occasional Death Eater who caught sight of him dragging a body almost twice his weight up a flat wall with nothing but his claws and then immediately surrendered when Hotch got back to ground level. Apparently, some sights were too horrifyingly unexpected to mess with.

He hadn't freed everyone by nightfall but Hermione caught up to him to let him know he had at least severely dented it. She suggested he take the night off to get some rest, but it wasn't hard to notice how easily he could move about in the dark in comparison to everyone else. Freeing hostages became a cinch after daylight, and the sun hadn't made his task very difficult to begin with.

The next morning, though, he was forced to take a break, but he made it worth his while by tracking down Harry and sitting on him until Harry acquiesced to grabbing a nap as well. Hermione was smugly satisfied by how that worked out.

By the afternoon, both of them were up and moving again. Hotch caught a ride on Atlas to a new hostage site, though that one lasted no longer than a couple of minutes when the Death Eaters saw a leopard atop an elephant come charging towards them. Atlas went on his way when he wasn't needed, gleefully chasing a few straggling Death Eaters from the freed hostages while Hotch directed the group to safety. He paused for a moment to stretch a sore muscle in his arm, then leaped back into the fray of the city.

While the height difference had been disorienting at the beginning and he could never quite get used to it, he did find a way around it. Getting up above the situation, usually through upper levels or rooftops, not only fixed the problem but also gave him more options from which he could drop on enemies. The amount of movement in the city meant few Death Eaters actually noticed a relatively smaller figure running overhead, and his silent approach all but assured their notice of him would be too late.

Most of his Death Eaters ended up unconscious or surrendering, and the latter was increasing in number. Somehow, it had gotten out that he was the Light Lord's father, and that combined with a wild, snarling cat form was unsurprisingly a good motivation to abandon the fight. However, it did mean that Hotch could go off on his own less often because he had to walk a group of Death Eaters all the way back to the nearest DA member.

He silently crept along a low brick wall, just tall enough to get him over heads but not enough to get him out of the line of sight. Most of the Death Eaters he was approaching now were facing the group of schoolchildren they had rounded up, completely ignoring him. The wall was part of the perimeter of the schoolyard the kids had been huddled into, and behind it was the school dumpsters. On the other end was the school itself, a four-story building that Hotch could hear movement inside from.

A Death Eater was leaning against the wall directly beneath him, and Hotch glanced up to make sure none of the others were watching before he struck, swiping down with one claw to grab the man's throat and yank him up far enough for Hotch to get his jaw latched in the place his paw had just been. There were three types of grips he had discovered – ineffective, asphyxiating, and jugular tearing. He opted for the second type the most often, as he did now, and he dragged the man up the wall with his mouth and one claw snagged onto his clothing, backing up until he could slowly step down onto a dumpster behind the wall. By the time the man had been pulled over the wall, carefully swung so his body wouldn't loudly bang against the dumpster, brought to the ground, and then
stashed inside the dumpster, he was unconscious from lack of oxygen.

One down.

By the time there were eight left of the original fifteen Death Eaters, they finally noticed something a little strange was going on. They moved closer to the children, too close, and Hotch turned into his usual form after he leapt over to their side of the wall.

"We can fight all you want," he said, "but it's in your best interest to let the children go first."

A Death Eater in the middle of the pack, fooled by a sense of security, sneered. "Is that so?"

Hotch nodded and looked at one of the boys closest to him. The child raised his chin defiantly, and it was an insane gesture to make in a war zone but Hotch couldn't help but acknowledge it. "What's your name?" Hotch asked.

"James," the boy said, and Hotch would be damned if that wasn't fitting.

"James, can you tell me about your classes?"

The boy blinked, but seeing nothing extremely odd about an academic question in the middle of a fight, he started talking. And, in the thread of a child who has the sudden and undivided attention of all the adults around him when he had likely never managed to hold more than a couple at a time, he kept talking, describing in explicit detail all his classes, the teachers, and the workings of the school.

Through it all, the Death Eaters started shifting uncomfortably, glancing at each other more.

"Thanks, James," Hotch said when James finally started to come to a close. "What about your friends?"

James grinned and was off again. A couple of the kids behind him smiled faintly when their names came up in the beginning, but some of them burst in and told their own stories when one led into James's. For the most part, though, they just let him talk.

"Anyone you don't particularly get along with?"

James frowned, but it wasn't so intimidating on his young face. "There's a girl who doesn't get along with *me* but that's because she's too stubborn and doesn't know when I'm right."

The girl right behind him reached up and snatched at his hair, pulling out a few strands. He yelped and two of his friends had to cover their mouths to hide their laughs.

Hotch looked back to the Death Eaters. "Let your kids go," he said.

One of the Death Eaters just broke into tears and collapsed on the ground. The child nearest to him backed away slowly like the man was having a neurotic fit.

Two others apparated away before anything else could be said. Another gauged the distance between him and Hotch, calculated his chances when their numbers were rapidly depleting, and left. The remaining four looked at each other, him, the kids, then back to each other. They turned sharply on their heels and left.

"Why did they bother taking us in the first place?" James asked, irritable.

"Because not everyone who does bad things is a bad person," Hotch said as he approached the group. "I'm going to get all of you inside the building, and then you need to stay there. Don't come
out until the teachers tell you it's safe."

Really, the kids needed to get out of the city, but all the resources that could have been put to that were trying to stop a group of Death Eaters from flooding a part of the city with water from the Thames.

"The doors to the school are jammed," the girl said. "That's why we didn't go back in earlier."

Hotch turned his gaze to the school building. Teachers had been watching from the third floor almost the entire time. The second floor window had been boarded up.

"Here, come with me for a minute." He led the group over to the side of the building, until he was close enough to call up to the teachers once they opened the window. "I'm going to get them up there, but close everything once the last one's in."

"What about you?"

"I'll be fine." He turned back down to the kids. "I'm going to have to carry you, okay? I can only do one at a time, so the rest of you are going to have to stay quiet while I'm gone."

The girl huffed and crossed her arms. She couldn't be older than seven. "You can't climb up the side of a wall."

"Not like this, I can't. I'm going to turn into a cat, so don't be afraid."

They weren't, because they were all in elementary school and thought cats were the most adorable thing ever. He probably should have expected the petting, as well as the muffled attempts of the teachers above as they tried to stop themselves from audibly laughing at him.

Finally, he managed to get the children to back away enough that he could grab one by their jacket and start the ascent up the wall. It was slow going when he was taking care not to hurt the child, as opposed to dragging unconscious Death Eater bodies behind him, and by the end he was getting tired. Perhaps he should have grabbed a DA member to levitate them up instead.

Maybe, but it was with satisfaction that he paused while climbing over the brick wall again and saw James waving at him from the window.

He met up with Gryven that night when he collided with a werewolf on top of Padma. The werewolf growled at him when it got to its feet but Hotch jumped forward, snarling and raising himself up with a slight hop to get a height advantage. The werewolf shifted to match the gesture, forgot about the ledge behind him, and promptly fell off the side of the bank into the river.

There was a whole pack of werewolves who had been devoted to trying to help the Death Eaters here, which wouldn't have been much of a problem for the DA if not for the full moon out above their heads. Hotch snarled at a werewolf who got too close to Padma, but before he could do anything else, the werewolf was thrown back with a furious bark by another werewolf. Elle snapped her jaws at the pack member, tearing at whatever she could bite at until the canine fled from her.

Hotch left Elle to it, easily moving back to his more natural tactic of waiting until a werewolf was distracted by finding new prey so he could sneak up beside or above it and grab its neck. So far, the tactic hadn't let him down yet.

The fight was over in half an hour, with Elle and he mostly stuck doing the work since the DA couldn't get close without risking getting bitten. Hotch turned back to his human form for the first time since the schoolyard. "Why did the werewolves arrive?" he asked.
Elle shifted back, then finished walking towards him. "Their numbers were worn down, so they were waiting until full moons to come out and try to repopulate their ranks. The attempt's backfiring on them badly so far."

"How many are left?"

"Probably fewer than you think. The DA's been taking the high ground and picking them off like snipers. Their total has dropped by half since I've been counting." She smirked lightly. "Not to say you're not holding your own, but I think you'd be better off focused on something else you're better at."

"I don't like combat."

Elle actually laughed. "And here you had us all fooled," she teased. "I'll catch up with you later?"

"Yeah. Good luck."

---

"Ron's got the body," Harry said when Hotch came to meet up with him that morning.

Hotch nodded. "Let's get some rest so we're ready. Tell the others they should consider doing the same."

The office was almost empty, only the two of them with Angelina talking to Theodore at the other end of the room. Harry looked away from Hotch, an unsettled expression on his face.

"What?" Hotch asked quietly.

"I don't want to kill him," Harry whispered. "He's still in there, no matter what Zabini said, and even if we can't get him out and he's trapped..."

Hotch put a hand on Harry's shoulder. Harry wouldn't look up at him. "If it comes to it," Hotch said, "you won't do it."

"I might not have a choice if I want to save him."

"Harry," Hotch said, firmer, "you won't. If you do, you won't ever stop regretting it and thinking of what you could have done differently. Don't do that to yourself."

"I can't let you do it either."

Hotch frowned. "What do you mean?"

Harry kept his eyes fixed on a point near where the edge of the floor met the wall. "I saw your face when you came back and you saw Hermione and Ron. Draco. Theodore. Padma. Angelina. Fred and George. And all the others, until you were back in the thick of it."

"Harry..."

"It was the same look... It was the same as when I woke up in the cabin and you were watching Jack sleep." He licked his lips, paused, then kept going before his nerve failed. "Almost half the original group is orphaned or abandoned by now. The rest of the BAU doesn't look any different when they're reunited with us. You guys are everyone's surrogate parents, and a part of you knows it whether you acknowledge it or not, and acts the part because you believe it. In a way, you don't just have two kids anymore."
Hotch's grip had tightened severely on Harry's shoulder, unconsciously telling him to stop. He tried to unclench his hand but it was locked in place.

Finally, Harry looked up and met his gaze. "You can't kill Blaise, because you can't kill Jack or me. He might be Gideon's, but he's yours too, just like the rest of them are. You can't kill him."

Hotch wanted to argue that. He wanted to say that he cared about the rest of the group but they weren't his children, not like Harry and Jack were. And that was true, he knew it was, but he couldn't say it was completely true. He'd spent years taking care of some of them by now – yeah, they were his.

"Can you kill Jack, then?" Hotch asked and Harry closed his eyes with a sharp wince. "If he's like my son, he's like your brother. Can you kill Blaise?"

"I don't know," Harry said honestly. "I'd like to think I can't. I don't want to have a part of me that could. But I think, if it comes down to it and the choice is to let him suffer inside Zabini while Zabini destroys everything he cares for or..." He took a deep, shaky breath, and opened his eyes. "I'd hope someone would do the same for me."

Hotch's hand squeezed his shoulder. "Let me do it," he said quietly. "You've done enough. I'll make sure it's fast. He won't even know."

Harry put his hand over Hotch's and didn't say anything.
"Who suffers by his ill whims? Himself always." - Charles Dickens, "A Christmas Carol"

Zabini was not an idiot.

He knew something was up. The QDA did not just vanish from the battlefield, leaving the rest of the DA to fight on their own. It might have been just over twenty people, but when those twenty were the strongest of the DA, it made a huge difference.

"Where are they?" he calmly asked, hiding his exasperation at whatever little game the group was playing. The city below him, filled with fire and rubble, did little to answer him.

Neither did the young woman behind him. "They're around."

"Granger, don't patronize me."

"It's just so hard not to, Zabini."

"What are you here for, Granger?"

"I wanted to ask who your second in command was."

He turned slightly, quirking an eyebrow at her. "Why?"

"I want to know who my equivalent is."

He shifted his gaze back to the city. "I won't have anyone who could possibly rival me. I don't need a second anyway."

He watched a fire a block away while she gathered her thoughts. Finally, reluctantly, "That must be lonely."

He frowned and completely turned around. "What?"

"To be completely on your own, without anyone else. That sounds lonely. You can't talk to any of your subordinates about anything because you can't seem human. What if you wanted advice on something you knew nothing about, like taking care of a baby you knew would be important later? Or what if you had something ridiculous happen to you that day, and you wanted to rant to someone about the nerve of whoever had done you wrong? You've probably already had problems with that."

Zabini sighed and rolled his eyes. "Your group is absurd. You think I need someone like that?"

"Everyone does. It's companionship. It's necessary. Even if you just had a pawn following you around, you'd want someone to snipe to. I'm not saying you want a friend; I'm saying you need someone there."

Yeah. He knew what she was talking about. But betrayal hurt worse than loneliness, and he wouldn't risk that again.
"Sure, whatever."

"It's your choice," Hermione said offhandedly. "I was just wondering."

"Do you think I'm going to let you leave, now that you've come here?" Zabini asked, amused, when she started away from him. Hotchner's arrogance he could understand – the other man was a Light Lord. Granger had more juice than the average witch, but she still wasn't close to his level.

"Let me? No. But I'm going to anyway."

Ah, the pride of Gryffindors.

Zabini sneered. The air in front of Granger shimmered slightly as he willed a shield into existence. "You're a fool."

"You should have had a second," Granger said, almost sympathetically. "You would have noticed something off about twenty seconds ago if you had."

Zabini cast a look around the roof despite himself. It was just the two of them there, and behind him was the edge. Nowhere for anyone to hide, even in the shadows created by the recently risen sun. The sky was clear above them except for storm clouds.

"Granger, making me paranoid is not going to make me more willing to overlook any plan you make later," he pointed out, eyes still flickering across the roof as he now applied magic to test for any traps. Just because he was confident in his abilities didn't mean he was going to be an idiot about it.

Sharp pain pierced his hamstring and he lashed out with magic, sending a curse directly behind him. The spell shot into the air without making impact, and by the time Zabini had completely turned around, nothing was to be seen behind him. A flash of intuition struck him and he looked down. A small window below him had small nicks on the top of its frame, like someone had been holding on.

He put up a shield across his back instinctively, in case Granger attacked him, and he whipped back to look at her. Whatever had hit him was gone. His injured leg wasn't supporting his weight. "You-"

Weight from an animal, large and solid, hit the backs of his knees suddenly, and he waved his arms in the air, trying to keep his balance. The creature slipped out from behind him before he could, and he went toppling over the edge of the roof.

He stopped his fall ten meters from the ground. It would have been easy to make an escape, but there was the matter of the pests back on the roof, so he used the ascendio spell to send himself shooting back up. When he arrived, both the unknown animal and Granger were gone. The Hotchner kid was waiting for him.

"How's Dad?" Zabini asked, leaning on his good leg calmly. It was a moronic idea to pretend like his other leg hadn't just been mauled, but he did it anyway. He was hardly going to hop around, swearing in pain like he wanted to with his enemy there.

There was no response, but a wave of energy collided with Zabini's instinctive shield almost as soon as the question left Zabini's mouth. He returned the attack, but Hotchner had his game up, even more so than he had in their last fight.

The roof was quickly turning to unstable footing beneath their feet with the frequency and devastation of the attacks. A couple of corners were knocked off, shrinking the area in which they could safely move. Leaving was a possibility, but their last fight had shown that hemming themselves
on a street with buildings on either side risked accidentally hurting themselves when a building that had been hit minutes ago started dropping bricks on them from above. Zabini stumbled a couple of times over usurped cement, unused to a fight in which he couldn't win easily and leave for a new battlefield. Hotchner, the shit, hardly seemed to notice.

Zabini had to give the DA credit for that – their training was phenomenal.

Hotchner's magic was off somehow. It should have been more wild, more instinctive; like Zabini's. His magic had never been quite as fluid as Zabini's had been, probably because he had only come into his powers more recently than Zabini had. Today, what he lacked in the practice of natural skill he made up for with fantastic analysis. The fury of a couple of days ago was gone, replaced with hardened and honed logic. It wasn't the kind of fighting Zabini had anticipated from him.

"What's got you so cold?" he called. "You'd think your father had just died or something!"

Getting Hotchner out of control was his best bet. It made him more likely to make mistakes. The downside of trying that, as last time had shown, was that it was often a waste of time because Hotchner was surprisingly dominant over his emotions.

That, and a battle like theirs was often so loud that Zabini had to practically scream to be heard.

Hotchner sent out two attacks rapidfire, and Zabini intercepted the first. The second, however, was unseen, and he hesitated a brief moment, trying to determine where it had gone. Then the roof crunched under him, and an instant later he was tumbling down with the rubble into the upper floor of the building below. He put up a shield, protecting himself from falling, heavy blocks of building material.

Hotchner had been safe on his side of the roof and was still up there. Zabini used his magic to throw several of the chunks on top of him up in Hotchner's direction, and though he couldn't see his opponent, he could hear the sound of the chunks being blasted away. He got to his feet irritably, the one leg still sending up spikes of pain. While Hotchner was away from him, he quickly put one hand on a wall and checked out the injury. Whatever that creature was, it had completely severed the hamstring. That wasn't something he could heal on the fly.

Zabini made a noise of frustration and looked back up at the ceiling. If he sent a blast in the area Hotchner had been standing, it would bring Hotchner down to him, and he wouldn't risk rising back to the roof to whatever trap Hotchner may have planted.

A flash of light engulfed him from behind. Bat Bogey Hex. As he slapped a few of the bat bogies away from his face, he whipped around, glaring at whoever had cast it.

"Why would you do that to me?" Zabini demanded, managing to sound hurt. He added in an extra wince as he lifted his injured leg to take weight off it.

"Oh, shut up. You're not my boyfriend," Ginny Weasley said caustically, wand pointed at him. She waved it again, not uttering the spell out loud, and a red bolt came flying towards him.

He intercepted it, but lost control as something hit him from behind and knocking him forwards. The bolt slammed into his chest, and he just barely managed to counteract the effects of both curses before more spells were being sent at him. He turned, stumbling over his bad leg, so he could see both Weasley and Hotchner and more adequately protect himself from either side.

Hotchner was fine on his own, and Weasley would have been easy to take down, but together they were causing him more problems than this fight was worth. That, and he really needed to fix his leg
before it made him make some ridiculous mistake.

Even as he thought that, something heavy slammed into his head, and he looked up just in time to see something spotted moving back from the hole in the ceiling. The glance cost him a split second and two spells hit his chest, throwing him back into the wall behind him. The wall had taken so much abuse from the extended fight, both above it and now next to it, that the whole thing simply gave up, dumping him out into the open air.

He barely managed to soften his landing when he hit the road outside. He glanced back at where he had come from and saw movement as both opponents started towards the hole.

Staying to fight could let him take out one of them. But it could also weaken him too much for a later fight, and he needed all the strength he could get when Hotchner was back and not nearly as out of sorts as Zabini had intended. Plus, there was whatever mischief the DA was up to that he had to contend with. Snarling angrily, he turned on his heel, apparating away.

His head was pounding when he landed by the London Eye. Blood was leaking onto the back of his neck, and he furiously rubbed at the injury. This was just not his day.

A second in command would have been fantastic right about now, just so he could pass over control and go blow up a small town. This wasn't debilitating; it was just miserable. He hoped no one had seen him flee from a fight of two DA members who weren't powerful enough to take him down, even combined. They hadn't sent him off through talent, he told himself as he stalked down the bank of the river, just sheer luck. He wasn't used to fighting on uneven terrain and the close confines of the upper floor had thrown him off. Next time he would just blast off the roof when they tried to trap him and he could open up the area to level the playing field.

Four of his Death Eaters were waiting for him by one of the boat docks. Riddle had used them well, but Zabini was better. He didn't let the Death Eaters fight with their children. Instead, he had their kids working in other parts of the country, ensuring that an AWOL Death Eater would never be able to get to their child in time before Zabini sent someone to punish the child for their parents' mistakes.

The four did not look happy or excited to be delivering news. "What happened?" he asked, exasperated.

"My lord," Avery said, head bowed, "Malfoy's group strayed from their territory into Clark's, and before they realized their mistake Clark's took over thirty casualties."

"Malfoy. I thought we had some intelligence left in my upper command, but it would appear I am failed once again by incompetent worms. Where is he now?"

"Back at his base, awaiting word from you."

Zabini growled furiously. "Is his group now fighting where they're supposed to be, or are they waiting around for me to tell them how to tie their shoes too?"

There was a pause that was far too long.

"Don't tell me..."

"Not all of them," Avery muttered. "Just the ones who took out some of their comrades."

Zabini swiped a hand over his face. "Thank the DA for being the only useful ones today by not doing anything," he muttered. "I'll tell them to send their appreciation to any gains they make today.
to our side for doing everything for them."

He turned to leave, and Amicus Carrow stepped forward. "My lord, there is more."

He sighed irritably and gestured for him to go on.

"Odeira destroyed the CityPoint building." He was cringing even as he spoke.

"Why?"

"He said...you told him to?"

"We were using that building as cover! Why would I want it destroyed?!"

Carrow made a tiny shrugging motion accompanied by a weak mutter about brooms.

"Dear Merlin. Is there anything else?"

The third Death Eater looked straight at the ground and mumbled, "Eustace set London Bridge on fire, Houston told the trolls we didn't need them so they should just go back to Europe, and Joyce let the hostages by St. Paul's Cathedral go."

He felt like screaming. With the DA pulling back, probably to support some other position in another city, this should have been a day of easy wins. They were going to start losing ground without an opponent if this kept up.

He turned to the fourth.

"Er, I suppose it's not that important," she said.

"Sanchez."

"Lyons moved his entire group to the east instead of holding ground because they thought they saw the DA."

He closed his eyes. "What did they see?"

"...An angry mob of muggles."

Someone was going to die. He hadn't decided who, but there was going to be blood tonight.

"Tell Lyons, Eustace, Joyce, Houston, and Odeira to meet me at Malfoy's base," he said sharply. "Is there anything more I need to know?" All of them quickly shook their heads. "Keep it that way. No more foolishness. Let's take London while it's been handed to us on a silver platter."

Malfoy's base had been an Underground station, recently decked in magical furnishings. Zabini ignored the few stragglers, who rapidly fled the scene, and stalked towards the blond patriarch who was speaking quietly with a brunette in the back. The brunette was facing Zabini, and her eyes widened as she saw him coming towards them. Without even letting Malfoy finish the sentence he was in the middle of, she turned tail and fled. Malfoy straightened, senses warning him something was the matter.

"What were you thinking?" Zabini asked calmly, coming to a stop near him. A table was rattling near him, but he didn't pay it any attention.

Malfoy whipped around. "I- I'm sorry, my lord. Proper precautions were not taken when we moved
"Why were you moving your front line in the first place?"

Malfoy stared at him, opened his mouth, paused some more, then slowly said, "Because... You had indicated Clark needed assistance."

"I never said that, you fool," Zabini snarled.

Malfoy blinked a couple of times, mouth open slightly as words failed him for what was probably the first time in his life. After a long moment of silence, his gaze flickered over Zabini's shoulder.

"So the rest of today's heroes arrive," Zabini said as he turned. "What do the rest of you have to say for yourselves?"

"My sincerest apologies," Houston said to the ground, doubled over in a deep bow. "I must have interpreted what you said."

"How do you misinterpret 'Greet the trolls' as 'Laugh in their faces and insult them'?" Zabini demanded.

Houston didn't look up from the ground.

Everyone was getting Crucioed tonight.

No one else spoke up, so Zabini glanced at Lyons. "And you. Fleeing from muggles?"

"I- We were disheartened and a loss could crush us, so I thought a retreat would-"

"No, you didn't, you coward," Zabini snapped. "Why did you do it?"

"You said that we should avoid confrontation, my lord, to save numbers," Lyons said. "I assumed you would not want to risk the casualties."

"When did I say we should avoid confrontation?" Zabini roared.

Malfoy, Odeira, and Eustace exchanged looks. Zabini's gaze sharpened on them, and a prickle of unease crept up his spine.

"Eustace!" he barked. The Death Eater jumped. "What did London Bridge do to offend you so much that you disobeyed my direct orders about defending it?"

Eustace looked like he might cry for being singled out. "You told me to destroy it before the DA could use it as a launching point."

He could have questioned the rest of them, but he was tired of being used as an excuse. "You moronic, absurd, foolish ingrates," he hissed. "I never gave any such commands! When do you believe to have heard these orders?"

"Last night," Odeira said, almost whispering in fear. "At eleven, in the conference chamber."

"I never-"

He had been asleep by eight thirty to wake up at two. His sleep had been restless because of the sounds of war above his head, but he hadn't stirred from his position. He hadn't even been in the same building as the conference chamber. There was simply no way they could have seen him.
And yet there were five loyal and intelligent subjects standing before him, wide-eyed and confused about their oncoming punishment when they had simply been following his orders.

He snarled. "Fix it all. Now."

He vanished with an angry crack of apparition, landing on the top of a parking lot. His head fell back and he howled angrily, simultaneously screaming internally, *What did you do?!*

Breathless laughter met him.

Zabini growled. His doppelganger had to be destroyed.

"My lord-

"Oh, *what is it now?*" Zabini shouted, throwing his hands up in the hair. Rubble collapsed behind him.

There was a long pause as the messenger regretted his life choices that had led him to this point. "My lord, Hotchner is unleashing destruction upon the Carrows' forces with a team of the DA behind him. He says he'll stop when you arrive."

Zabini hadn't had time to fix his head or his leg. He shut his eyes and let out a frustrated sigh through his clamped mouth. "Go do something useful," he dismissed the messenger, who fled immediately.

Could he afford to fight Hotchner again? With Blaise manipulating him from the inside and his injuries taking a toll, he might not be able to control what he was doing. His doppelganger would take control as soon as he could.

But he had to take Hotchner out soon, and Hotchner would do as much damage as he possibly could until Zabini faced him. Maybe Hotchner's end would cripple the insolent boy whose magic Zabini had captured enough that he would stop fighting. Perhaps he could kill both at once. After all, with Hotchner gone, the Light could hardly hope to summon someone else powerful enough to even hold off Zabini.

Hotchner had destroyed a city block when Zabini found him. Death Eaters were running, but they were the only fleeing individuals he could make out so Hotchner must have known all the civilians had already been evacuated. Zabini landed in his way.

"Come on, Hotchner," he leered. "Why don't you pick on someone your own size?"

"So you're done sulking, then?" Hotchner asked and strode forward to meet him.

"*Blaise!*"

Zabini raised an eyebrow as the profiler approached from behind him. "Well, if it isn't Jason Gideon-"

Gideon glanced away from him briefly and motioned to Hotchner with a scowl – one that was threatening to turn into a smile. "Your dad's not happy with you."

Hotchner winced. "Uh oh."

"You two were not supposed to be messing around with your patronuses without anyone else keeping an eye on you," Gideon said sharply, but not nearly as sharply as he once had.

Hotchner gestured irritably but futilely. "*We're fine!* We know what we're doing! Besides, the Room
will keep us safe."

"We're not in the-" Zabini started to say.

No sound came out.

And then the city was gone, replaced by a room in Hogwarts he had previously only heard of.

"Gideon," his voice said without him opening his mouth, "you know we're not going to let each other get hurt."

"I know, but Harry's dad is...well. And he's looking for both of you right now, so-"

Zabini snapped. He sent out a pulse of magic that swept across the floor towards Hotchner and Gideon, one that would cripple if not kill if neither moved out of the way. It passed straight through both of them, leaving him standing there, horrified as absolutely nothing happened.

"-you'd better make it look you like you were doing something else."

"Thanks for covering for us," Hotchner said, relieved.

Gideon waved it off. "Don't expect me to do it again. I might not make it here in time, and I'm sure your dad will figure things out if you keep testing your luck."

"Come on, let's go look at the fortifications," Hotchner told Zabini.

Everything vanished again, and it was all white. Any sound he made, any effort to send out magic, any movement he made, none of it had an effect on his surroundings or on himself. Minutes passed, turning into hours. He screamed spells as he felt magic coursing out through him.

He couldn't be going insane. His power was too strong. He couldn't have lost control of himself like this. He was the master of himself, not Blaise or a mental instability. This couldn't be happening to him.

And yet he could feel his magic draining as he frantically tried to free himself, and there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it besides try to keep fighting to get himself out of the whiteness.  

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"When?"

"Soon."

"Be a little more specific."

Harry sighed quietly. "Ginny, too early and we'll risk losing Blaise."

She scowled down at Zabini below instead of Harry. "He's wasting himself magically. Can't you just force him to cooperate once he's drained?"

"I'm not good at mind magic."

"Then let's get Snape here!"

"He's coming! We just want to make sure we give him the best opportunity."
Ginny opened her mouth to snap at him, but stopped at the same time Harry felt something ghost to a halt at his side. When he looked down, Hotch was staring at Zabini, eyes unblinking and body entirely still. Harry turned back to Ginny.

"We need to wear him down in every way we can before we move in. Maybe it's overkill; maybe we don't stand a chance at all. But we should know better by now than to underestimate someone. Blaise just has to wait a little longer."

"He's waited long enough," she hissed.

"It's Blaise. He'd be angrier at us for putting ourselves in danger prematurely than not getting him out immediately."

Ginny gritted her teeth, then turned away from him, crossing her arms and glaring at Zabini again.

Zabini was crouched in the middle of what had been an open square, fists pressed to the side of his head and body clenched as tightly as it could go. Raw magic tore the air around him, confined only by a spherical shield around the square. The shield had been rippling dangerously at the beginning, but it only occasionally gave any signs of caving now. It was made of two layers: the innermost acted as a block, powered by Harry's magic as well as several others', to keep in Zabini's magic; the outermost intensified the light that filtered through it, making Zabini see only white. The ground he was on had been charmed to act as a sort of treadmill, moving with him when he tried to get out so he never left the center of his trap.

It was mental torture. Harry wouldn't have done it if he weren't so desperate to save his friend.

"What if he figures out that most of his lieutenants were taken and replaced with polyjuiced substitutes?" Ginny demanded.

That had been tricky. His Slytherins had taken polyjuice potion to fake a couple of the topmost Death Eater leaders and had given false commands to wreck Zabini's plans. Their absence would have been suspicious, which was why Harry had decided to make it look like the DA was halting their attacks for the day. The Slytherins were still in their polyjuiced state, as far as he knew, but a longer duration as someone they weren't increased the chances of them being caught in their ruse.

"He's in pain from his leg and he's panicking. Right now, he's more focused on escaping than anything else. And when someone gets trapped like that..." The scars on his wrist prickled. "Well, they'll do just about whatever's necessary to get out, and they'll lose their heads to do it. He's not thinking clearly."

Zabini was exhausted physically, magically, and psychologically. They just had to make sure he was mentally exhausted as well, or he could still stop Blaise from leaving him.

"How much longer?" Ginny asked.

"Until his magic runs out."

"And then?"

"And then we're going to send profilers at him again to confuse him as much as possible." With a glance at Hotch to receive a confirming nod, he continued, "We've got Blaise's body nearby, so we should be able to put him back into it if he can get out."

"Should..." Ginny muttered.
"It's not like anyone has done this before," Harry pointed out.

Hotch snarled.

Harry turned from Ginny to Zabini again. The dark lord's palms were pressed to the ground in front of him, exhaustion bearing down. The defensive shield around him had stopped pulsating.

"He's worn down," Ginny whispered. "Harry..."

Hotch lunged from the roof before either of them could say anything more. Harry barely reacted in time, sending magic out to slow his descent halfway. Hotch hit the ground and sprinted to the edge of the defensive barrier, skidding to a halt mere feet from it. Ears pricked forward, muscles rigid, and tail twitching, he was ready for something.

"What is it? Should we go down there?"

Harry shook his head to both questions, eyes scanning the enclosure Zabini was trapped in. What had Hotch noticed?

And then he saw it. A scuffle of dirt rising from a spot shortly behind where Zabini was positioned, motionless. The treadmill spell on the ground was keeping whoever it was in place, but they were closer to getting out than they had been before.

"He's trying to get out," Ginny murmured. "But-"

A blast of color exploded from the spot Zabini was at, pushing through the defensive layer and outward. Two moments before it hit Harry, the wave hit Hotch; he wasn't harmed by it, but his head snapped away and his ears flattened, and with a snarl he had to turn and sprint away. Then the wave knocked into Harry and Ginny, despite the protective spells both had put him.

They doubled over immediately, coughing and sneezing. Harry's eyes ran as the pepper hit him. He couldn't blame Hotch below for running when his senses were so much stronger than theirs, but it did make him hate Zabini more for using one of the QDA's tricks against them by applying sensory spells that would pass through most magically defensive shields.

He forced a couple of spells out to shove away the scent of pepper from them. When he was able, he cast a Bubble-Head Charm on himself. Ginny had already done the same.

"Get Hotch," Ginny said, and then apparated away.

Harry swore quietly to himself. She was moving to keep a closer eye on Zabini, but she wouldn't have a chance of holding him off if he got loose.

Still. He needed Hotch if Zabini got out anyway.

He apparated to the first floor of the building they were on, the vestiges of a wrecked office building. He was standing next to the ruins of what had probably been a receptionist's desk. "Dad!"

Nothing. He frowned to himself, then started walking, scanning the ground for any sign of a disturbance. A shuffling noise caught his attention and he took off, scrambling over rubble and slipping under a fallen support beam. He almost ran past Hotch, but the tail he nearly tripped on made him stop.

Hotch's breathing was labored, and his chest stuttered as air was forced in and out. His eyes were closed and his limbs were motionless in the sprawled position they had assumed when he had fallen.
There was no sign of consciousness.

Harry cast the Bubble-Head Charm again, clearing the air around Hotch. His proximity to the pepper blast must have nearly suffocated him, along with the mustiness of the office building he had run into.

Ginny screamed outside.

He pointed his wand at Hotch. "*Renervate!*" His father jerked awake, sucking in a huge breath and coughing it out immediately. He glanced at Harry, nodded once when Harry jerked his head back in the direction he had come, then went back to hacking up his lungs. Harry left him to it, apparating to the front of the building.

Ginny was on the ground in front of Zabini, red hair sprayed around her head. The defensive ward had been destroyed, as had the sensory adapter that had turned everything white.

Zabini pointed his wand down at the still Ginny and aimed his palm towards Harry. His weight was entirely on his uninjured leg, the other trailing down pathetically and uselessly. Both eyes were full of a furious fire. "I am not a child to play games with, Hotchner," he whispered. It carried to Harry easily through the still air. "And I am no fool."

"Zabini, if you were, I would not have been forced to go to the lengths I've gone to in an attempt to stop you," Harry said. "But this is between us. Let Ginny leave."

A blast shot from Zabini's wand, hitting the cracked pavement next to Ginny's head and sending shards flying. One grazed her shoulder and she barely flinched. "You've gotten farther than I thought you would. Take your forces and pull back or I'll kill her."

"Blaise, I can't leave without her. Just-"

"Hotchner, keep your mouth shut! I know what you're doing – I tried to use profiler methods against you, remember?"

Harry's heart was stuttering in his chest. His eyes flickered between Zabini and Ginny. If he took Ginny, Zabini would take his retreat as a reaffirmation that he was in control. That confidence could keep him from ever faltering enough to let Blaise out. But the only way to unstable Zabini enough and to give Blaise enough raw power would be to allow Zabini to kill Ginny. That would show him that he had to go to resort to desperate measures to control the leader of the DA, that he wasn't strong enough to push back Harry any other way.

And Zabini knew it.

Harry closed his eyes in despair.

"Blaise," he said and Zabini's hand tightened on his wand, pointing it steadily at Ginny, "I'm so sorry, so sorry."

"For what? Failing him again? Harry," Zabini said in a tone far too close to Blaise's, "I knew you were never going to win. If he didn't notice after all this time, that's his problem, not yours."

"Don't you blame this on him," Harry snarled.

"Would you rather I blame it on you?"

"This wasn't our fault! We didn't start this war!"
"I would have left your world alone if you hadn't interfered elsewhere, Hotchner. I didn't see the point in going after you. This is your fault. Everyone would still be alive if you had just kept away. But your family has a history of saving people, and you could hardly keep yourself from the fight, could you?"

"You were going to come after us if we didn't come from you first! Don't you dare blame it on us!"

"Hotchner, you're the one fighting this war. A war needs two sides. You can't put all the blame on me either."

"It would just be a massacre and a dictatorship if we weren't here!"

"You're making excuses for leading children into battle. How many have died under your-" He froze, eyes fixed over Harry's shoulder.

"Seeing things, Zabini?" Harry said harshly.

Zabini let out a furious huff. "I should have known. You just don't die."

Harry turned his head to the side, making eye contact with his father. There was a terrible understanding in Hotch's eyes, and Harry knew he'd come to the same conclusion.

"I'll tell you the same thing I told your son. Try any profiler tricks on me, and I'll kill the girl."

Hotch came to a stop beside Harry. His hand wrapped around Harry's wrist as he turned, murmured, "I'm sorry," into Harry's ear, and then pulled his gun out from his holster.

"That's not going to work on me, you dimwitted-"

Hotch fired. Ginny's body jerked once.

Blaise screamed, a terrified, agonized, helpless wail of guilt and loss. Zabini was gone, pushed back in that moment in the face of the unadulterated grief of his doppelganger. The wand fell from his hand and his arms clutched futilely at his chest, as if uselessly trying to hold his heart in as it was ripped out.

Harry closed his eyes, flinching away as his breath caught in his throat. He tried to stifle a sob.

"Zabini," Hotch said, and even his father's voice couldn't push past the emotion rising in Harry this time. Only Hotch could stay objective while blood spilled in an ever-growing circle around Ginny. "You should have known that we take everything into consideration." Harry opened his eyes as he saw grief starting to battle with rage on Blaise's face.

"Hotch... Hotch..." Blaise whispered, voice cracking and trembling. "Hotch..."

Hotch shoved past everything that made him human and said coldly, "Zabini, don't beg to me about the life of someone you didn't even know."

"It's me, Hotch!" Blaise screamed, doubling over and stumbling backward. His fingernails were digging into his neck and chest, unconsciously tearing at himself in his agony. "I'm not Zabini!" Tears streaked down his cheeks. "Ginny..."

"And don't mourn for someone who wasn't yours to mourn over!" Hotch roared. "You've taken enough from us without mocking our loss!"

"She was mine too!"
"Zabini, if you wouldn't just block it, I'd shoot you in the mouth too."

Blaise looked up at him, eyes red and broken. "You killed her," he whispered.

"And I'll kill you if it's the last thing I do."

The rage started to push past the horror, and Blaise's teeth bared. "I'll fucking kill you..." Hotch's hand wavered and he stepped back ever so slightly, inadvertently putting Harry in front of him. Blaise's eyes shot to him. "And you- You knew, you arse, you knew he'd kill her, you knew all along that if she came with you she'd end up dead from Hotch or the Dark Lord!"

He lunged at Harry, forgoing his forgotten wand on the ground entirely, and Hotch grabbed Harry, throwing him back and putting his body between them as a shield.

"No!" Harry screamed, another memory like this one rising with a green light outlining his father's figure. He shoved forward, throwing his hand out to stop Blaise. His palm slammed into Blaise's shoulder. "Sectumspirare!"

Blaise's voice cracked as it was ripped out of him. His entire body shook, but he couldn't move from his position. One hand reached out, reflexively grabbing onto Harry to hold himself on his feet. Harry gripped him back.

Hotch turned sharply, and when he was facing around again he was covered in fur. He pointed his muzzle towards the sky and let out a roar.

"Blaise!" Harry shouted.

Snape appeared with a crack next to Harry and all but shoved him out of the way. He crouched slightly, making eye contact with Blaise, and Harry kept channeling magic into Blaise's shoulder, shoving the spell through as Snape had told him to. Like cracks spiderwebbing across a fractured windshield, he could feel the consolidation of the Blaise Zabinis beginning to give away.

"Legilimens!" Snape snarled before he had time to consider anything else, and he felt a new set of cracks slamming into his friend and enemy.

Hotch had backed away silently behind Harry, but Harry could still feel his presence, solid and supportive, against his legs even though he was out of sight. He heard another reverberating crack from behind him. Harry shifted, spreading out his legs to give himself better balance and to rest one against Hotch's side.

He felt the lines in Blaise Zabinis' psyche grow larger, creating a more powerful distinction between the two. "Come on, come on," he whispered. Snape hadn't blinked once, pupils blown and face tense. A low growl was rumbling through Hotch's chest cavity and up Harry's leg.

The mind Harry was shoving against splintered. He shoved his leg into Hotch, who whipped around and let out a sharp bark towards the pair who had apparated into the decimated square near them.

"Blaise, open your eyes!" Gideon shouted behind Harry. "Come on! Get out of there, and get into here!"

The psyche split further, and the resistance Harry was pushing against crumbled. One half split off, darting away so fast it left shards behind.

Snape snarled but didn't otherwise react.
"Blaise left part of himself behind!" Harry shouted, trying to shove at the shards with his magic. For the briefest of moments, he remembered seeing the wind toss scraps around in the parking lot he had learned to drive in, moving them slowly but steadily in one direction. Then Snape was there, beating at the shards with an imaginary broom and flinging them the way the rest of Blaise had gone.

A low moan echoed to Harry from Gideon's position.

"Gideon, tell him to gather everything else up!"

"Blaise!" Gideon shouted. "You didn't bring all of you! You've got to get the rest!"

Harry felt what remained in the body he was holding start to slip away, following the path he'd just seen his doppelganger take to get to his real body. "Snape!"

The Potions Master went on the attack, forgetting about the pieces of Blaise's mind for a moment. He slashed and stabbed at Zabini, covering his student's retreat, while Harry pumped more magic into the spell he had cast, trying to make the divide between the two Blaise Zabinis clearer so his could gather himself up more easily. He felt a couple of the shards get snatched out of his wind and yanked safely back to where Blaise was, but there were still a couple remaining behind.

Then Snape let out a shout of pain and fell to his knees, breaking off the Legilimens contact. Harry felt his magic get slammed from behind as Zabini rushed towards the exit Blaise had made, but without a proper mental connection there was nothing he could do about it. Zabini was stretching himself out, leaving his core behind in his main body while he reached towards Blaise.

"Make him work faster!" Harry hollered.

"Blaise, you've got to move!" Gideon bellowed at his protégé. "Come on!"

Snape struggled up, but Zabini had shut his eyes. Harry's magic was still pulsing through him, though, if only for a couple more moments. The more Zabini came back to himself, the sooner he would be able to react to them and push back their threat.

And then Zabini reached Blaise, grabbing onto him again. Blaise's scream echoed through the air as Zabini yanked him, kicking and struggling, back into his own mind.

Harry's free hand dropped to his belt and, before he could overthink it, drew his knife and plunged it up into Zabini's sternum, slamming through the sternum and piercing the heart. Zabini gave a huge, wet gasp, eyes fluttering open in shock as he collapsed onto the knife, burying himself into it to the hilt. He blinked, stunned. One hand touched the blood dribbling down his chest.

Harry stared at him, at the expression of innocent surprise that he'd seen once in a blue moon on Blaise's face in training when they had tried something new. His magic stuttered, swirling uncomfortably inside and around him instead of surging into Zabini, and his connection was lost. In the span of one of Zabini's fading heartbeats, he'd disposed of his ability to help Blaise.

Harry yanked out his knife. The bloody hilt slipped from his hands with the sharp gesture, and it clattered to the ground. Zabini fell forward, pulled by the motion, and collapsed into Harry's arms. Harry grabbed onto him as he slumped, nearly dragging both of them to the ground in an uncontrolled motion. As carefully as he could, Harry lowered him, trying not to unsettle the wound he'd created.

A small part of him whispered that a slower death gave Zabini a chance to follow Blaise and capture him in his real body. Another part, just as small, said it allowed Blaise to collect the rest of himself before returning to where he belonged.
Most of him, however, was just struck by how frail and mortal and confused the murderer beneath his hands was, and how alike he was in mannerisms and tact to the children Harry had been fighting beside for years now.

Harry leaned over him, eyes focused on Zabini’s. He pulled Zabini’s hands from his chest, gripping them in his own, and watched as his labored breathing forced bloodied spittle out of his mouth. Zabini’s fingers tightened on him as they sought out any comfort they could.

"Snape!" Gideon shouted.

The Head of House shot off at the summons, sprinting to his student and fellow professor. Hotch stayed at Harry’s back, one leg pressed against Harry’s thigh to let him know he was still there.

Out of the corner of Harry’s eye, he saw Ginny sit up and scramble to her feet. Before he could stop her, she was following Snape, hurrying to the side of her friend. A burst blood packet on her front jumped under her shirt each time a foot hit the ground, but her Kevlar vest was still hidden by a glamour spell.

Zabini didn’t notice. His eyes hadn’t closed since his back had touched the ground, nor had they wavered from Harry. His breaths were coming in rapid pants now.

"Blaise, hold on!" Ginny screamed.

Zabini’s eyes were watering from the pain. He still didn’t blink.

"I'm scared," he whispered, stunned at his own words. There was a question there, but he didn't have the breath to voice it.

"I know," Harry whispered back. "Because you're human too. You were just like us all along."

"Liar," Zabini said. "Liar..."

His fingers loosened and slipped from Harry’s. When Harry looked up from his empty hands, Zabini was staring at the empty sky above him.
"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way — in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only." - Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities

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"So," Fred said, grinning, "you left fragments behind?"

"Yes."

"Then," George picked up, "I guess you could say you're...losing your mind?"

Blaise sighed.

"Losing his marbles, more like. I'll bet the fragments were round."

"Or maybe his screws were loose," George amended.

"Or he's left a few cards behind, and now he's not playing with a full deck."

"Or he's finally ditched his senses and taken leave of them."

"Or he dropped his rocker and now he's off it."

"Or-"

Blaise yanked a pillow out from underneath his head and buried his face in it with a loud groan. Ginny, lying on her back next to him like the nurses had told her not to, grinned widely. She patted him on the chest, awkwardly because of her proximity to him. "It'll end one day," she said. Blaise groaned a little louder.

It was Harry's first stop into the infirmary. They'd taken Blaise back to their home world, just to make sure he was protected, and his separation had protected him from any violent repercussions in the final battle site but had also blocked him from seeing anyone in the DA. That had probably been a small mercy. He'd had enough to deal with besides their overbearing concern.

They were in the FBI infirmary rather than anywhere else for the same reason. The BAU stopped in regularly to keep an eye on Blaise, and they were excellent at pushing people away when too many were trying to visit Blaise. When people did need to come in, however, it was easier to get them into and out of Quantico than Hogwarts, where they were swarmed by students eager for news.

"Please, just tell me what happened," Blaise said, dragging the pillow off his face.

"We cleaned up the scraps of the fighting," Harry said. "We told the lieutenants that your doppelganger was dead and we'd already captured a bunch of the other lieutenants, back when we polyjuiced them. The locals scrounged a new Ministry together and started imprisoning some of the
worst offenders, but I don't know how they're going to handle everyone who was working for the Dark Lord. It's going to take a lot of work. There's also magical and nonmagical relations to repair across the globe, but there's little we can do about that besides what we've already done. It's out of our hands now, and it's not our world. We'll let the locals decide what to make of it now."

"Finally, we're not getting involved in something," George said. "I never thought I'd live to see the day..."

"Oh, go run your joke shop, will you?" Ginny said, spending sparks out of her wand at him. "Be productive for once."

"Those are two sentences I never thought I'd hear strung together, dear sister."

"Never ever," Fred added.

"Harry, go on," Blaise said before they could get started again.

"That's about it for the Dark Lord. He's gone."

Blaise was looking at him calmly, expression relaxed and trusting. Harry couldn't help but feel like he still wasn't assuaged. He didn't blame him for that.

"Are you still Minister of Magic?" Ginny asked. She'd left the infirmary even less often than Blaise, which didn't seem possible yet was still somehow true. She'd had two cracked ribs from the proximity she had taken the bullet at, but that had been healed for a while now.

Harry winced. "Yeah... I'm still trying to foist it off on Kingsley. In a couple of months, once the war's completely over, I think it's probably going to be possible."

The war at home was nearly finished. Without a mysterious Dark Lord pulling strings in the background, they were able to focus all their efforts on their local territory and push back with little resistance. Most of Zabini's followers were surrendering rather than fight.

Everyone was exhausted. It wasn't just the kids.

"Fred! George! Ginny!" Molly shouted down the infirmary. The three looked at each other reluctantly, than apparated to where their mother stood. "You don't have to use magic for every single thing just because you can!" she snapped at them immediately. The rest of her words tapered off as she started hissing furiously at them.

"What's that about?" Blaise asked.

"She's been trying to get all her kids home since the war's almost over and they're avoiding her."

"Why isn't she coming after you to make them go home?"

"Because she knows I can't pick and choose who goes home first. Besides, everyone can leave safely sooner if we all just keep fighting a little longer." He turned from the redheaded cluster near the end of the infirmary to Blaise. "Really, though – how are you holding up?"

Blaise was quiet for a moment. That wasn't so uncommon anymore. It took him longer to organize his thoughts, and sometimes he cut himself off midword as uncertainty filled his features, tentative to speak when he couldn't be sure his idea was his own or the remnants of the man who had possessed him for so long.
"Better than I could have hoped for," he said.

"That's not really an answer."

"I'm alive. I can't complain."

"Sure you can. I do it all the time and I should definitely be dead."

Blaise snorted lightly. "Yeah..."

"Come on, man. Talk to me."

"You've got other things to be worrying about."

"I don't. Not really."

Blaise's eyes flickered to him briefly and then darted away. He sighed. "My mind is still in fragments. I don't know if I actually did leave something behind or not, but it doesn't feel like everything came back together the way it should have when I returned. Some things I understand quicker, and some things I don't get. A couple memories are just gone. I think I retained some of my doppelganger's knowledge."

"I didn't want to destroy the part of you left in him," Harry said, wincing.

"I could feel it, when you stabbed him. I thought you'd killed both of us." Harry's hands tightened on his knees. "But I was glad for it. I knew you'd protected everyone. You'd gotten rid of him."

"When he was dying, he looked so much like you that I feared you'd gone back into him before I killed him," Harry said quietly.

"You did the right thing," Blaise said. "Even if I had been in him, I wouldn't have won again. I would have been as good as dead." He reached out and put his hand on Harry's forearm. "But you should have killed both of us as soon as you knew what had happened."

"More people died because I didn't."

Blaise's face twitched but he didn't confirm it like he could have.

"I couldn't have done that, Blaise. I would have hesitated, I would have done something, and...he would have used it against us and he would have killed us. We had to try to get you out."

"You should have let Hotch kill me." Harry flinched. "You know he could have done it."

"He could have distanced himself at the right moment to pull it off. But later... Later..."

"You all could have died because you didn't kill us. My doppelganger relied on your reluctance."

"I know," Harry said. "But what you're asking for us to have done is impossible. We wouldn't have been in a fit state to fight anyone else after." He rubbed the hand Blaise had put on his arm. "Think you'll be okay?"

"I'll get there," Blaise muttered. "If the twins can just leave me to my thoughts for five minutes."

Harry grinned. "I'll keep them busy."

"Snape's been coming by to try to help me reorganize my mind. And when he can get away with it,
Gideon sneaks me out of here to run at the track."

"I was wondering how you were staying fit..." Blaise smiled briefly at him. "Blaise... Do you... Well... Do you remember everything that happened?"

Blaise stared at the opposite wall instead of Harry. "Yes." His hand shook under Harry's. "And I remember not being able to do a damn thing to stop it."

"But you did," Harry said. "You confused him enough that we were able to push him over the edge. Without you leaving suggestions that he wasn't as in control as he thought he was, we were able to play up any errors and make them seem like you had caused them."

"You could have done that without me."

"No, we really couldn't have." He rubbed Blaise's hand again. "It gave us hope that you were still in there."

"I thought you didn't know. I thought, if anyone knew, it would have been Hotch or someone else from the BAU, and then... he... She looked..."

"If he hadn't shot Ginny, you wouldn't have come out like we needed you to," Harry said. "You were buried too far in your doppelganger. By pulling you to the front, we could split you two up. He had to get you emotional enough that you overpowered your doppelganger."

"I wasn't strong enough. He stepped aside because he knew I would never fight him again if I killed you and Hotch in my anger." He shuddered, still looking away from Harry. "I thought I was going to. I was furious enough."

"The Dark Lord underestimated all of us. Let's just hold onto that for now."

Blaise shook for a moment like a dog flinging off water. "Enough about me. What are you going to do?"

Harry wanted to joke, say something about a long nap. But he couldn't, not when he was trying to get Blaise to open up. "I don't know. I don't want to control the government anymore, but I don't think everyone will let me out of my position so soon."

"Then the real question is what are you going to do with your position?"

Harry shrugged, exasperated at his situation. "I don't know. What is there to be done, besides finishing up the war effort? Then we'll be in peacetime. There's nothing else to do."

Blaise was watching him curiously. "Isn't it obvious?"

"No."

"You need to fix the Statute."

"I- What?"

"Things like this happen because there's no cooperation. There's too much separation between the magical world and the nonmagical world. I don't know if we should merge, but things can't continue the way they have. The magical world is falling far behind, and if we're not careful, we'll reach a point where we'll never be able to catch up. Especially when we're not unified with other magical governments across the world."
Harry sat there for a moment, dumbstruck. The Statute. Yes, there were things wrong with it, but...
Who was he to say *what* was wrong with it?

"I... I don't know if I can do that," Harry said.

Blaise shrugged. "Just something to think about. If you really want, start tackling small problems with society that have been ignored for ages. I know Hermione wanted to do something about the elves, and there's the BRP program. Find something to do."

"Maybe I'll finish school first."

"That sounds like a start. We've all got at least two years to catch up on." A small smirk crossed his face. "Congratulations. You've officially broken the Hogwartsian educational system."

"I break everything I touch," Harry said drily.

The smirk widened. "But you repair it too, and that's just as important."

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"That's the last of them that we know about," Kingsley said in the prime minister's office. The latter had greyed significantly since his term of office had begun. Harry sympathized enormously. "There will probably be more disturbances, but nothing on this scale and only by minor insurgents who are looking for attention."

"We'll be in contact with the local departments to help you manage," Hotch said. "We are also keeping a close watch on the situation. If anything happens, we'll be here immediately to counteract before it gets out of hand."

"But most of the people who started this whole mess are dead or imprisoned, aren't they?" the prime minister asked urgently.

All three men were standing around the minister's office. Harry was standing to the side of Kingsley rather than his father. It wouldn't do for the minister to start asking questions about why Hotch was taking his son to work.

A month had passed since Zabini had died in the other world. They'd had more than enough time to wrap up matters at home, but they hadn't wanted to lull anyone into a sense of false security by saying they thought the situation was under control sooner than it really was. Last week, though, Harry had sent everyone in the DA who hadn't been part of the original QDA home, and many QDA had also left at the same time since there was nothing for them to do, though all had remained on call in case help was needed.

"Yes," Kingsley said.

"Okay..." He glanced at Hotch. "I'm sorry, I know you said you were from the FBI, but I don't quite understand how you got involved in matters here."

Wasn't *that* a long story.

Hotch paused for barely a half second before saying, "Some of the war carried over into America, and my team had been the first to combat dark magic with nonmagical techniques. As a result, we were called in to assist with what we could. Our tactics were more useful than expected and we became a permanent fixture in the war."
"...I see. And how, er, how were you planning on explaining this situation to the public? I can hardly pass it all off as normal terrorist attacks."

Harry fixed his eyes on a spot right over the prime minister's shoulder as Hotch and Kingsley talked him through what to say. Their plan would work perfectly to hide what needed to be obscured and to emphasize details that the public could accept. It ground against his nerves all the same.

How many parents believed their children were dead from car accidents, blissfully unaware that they'd been killed by rogue werewolves? How many children were mourning their parents, never to know that they were in a St. Mungo's ward for spell damage after everything that had been done to them as a joke by Death Eaters?

His eyes slid sideways, watching Hotch for a moment as he described how to get media liaisons to tell the press that certain information needed to be kept under wraps to protect classified intel and agents in the field. No trace of reluctance or hesitancy lingered on his expression or in his tone. Harry doubted he was that certain about what they were doing, even if he was excellent at hiding it.

"When it comes to that," Hotch said, answering a question, "you'll be speaking with Kingsley."

"The Minister of Magic," the prime minister said, nodding. "Understandable." Kingsley's gaze flickered to Harry for a moment, who remained quiet. "So, you have my job?"

"Not quite," Kingsley said. "I'm the unofficial minister. Harry was put in charge during the war. You'll mostly see me around only when we need to handle relations between our governments, or if I need to alert you to news."

At some point, the prime minister had been made aware that the leader of the Light forces had been a teenager, and he didn't look surprised anymore after all the information that had been thrown at him. He barely glanced at Harry.

"But...what about if I need to talk to someone about the media again?"

"Contact me," Hotch said. "I've got experience with it."

"And questions about the magic world in general?"

"I'll answer any questions you have," Harry said, speaking for the first time since he had been introduced an hour and a half ago.

"You don't have other things to do?"

"I don't see how telling you about the situation of a significant portion of the people living in your country could be a waste of time," Harry pointed out drily. "Besides, I grew up outside of the magical world. I understand how hard it is to start understanding magic once you've been introduced to it."

When they apparated out an hour later to return to the Ministry of Magic, Harry told his father, "Congratulations. The British Prime Minister now has you on his speed dial."

"You'll be texting with him before the day is out if he takes you up on your offer."

"This is surreal."

"Of everything that's happened," Hotch said as the three of them walked towards the elevators, "that's what you find odd?"
"Well..."

"Excuse me!" They all stopped as a witch ran towards them, panting. She glanced at Harry and Kingsley briefly before coming to a halt in front of Hotch. "We have a wizard who's managed to curse himself against receiving any liquids, so we can't give him veritaserum, and he's an accomplished Occlumens so no one can get in that way either. We've got him on a couple charges, but nothing that will keep him in Azkaban for long without confirmation that he was working for Voldemort a couple years back and anyone else more recently."

She didn't say anything more, just stood there nervously and stressed.

Harry tried not to grin as Hotch strained between irritation at being summoned in an area he had no jurisdiction in and interest at the challenge. "We'll meet up with you later," Harry said.

In the minister's office five minutes later, Tonks was waiting for them. "Wotcher, Harry!"

"Tonks!" He accepted her one-armed hug. "How've you- Oh Merlin is that a baby."

Tonks smirked, rubbing a hand over her small stomach bulge. "It was. Came out two weeks ago."

Harry put both hands on his head. "How did I miss this?"

"You were a little occupied," she said.

"Sirius is the godfather, I'm guessing?"

"Oh, how'd you know?" She grinned. "But he's just got the honorary position. Please step in and be the responsible one if something happens."

"You have my word. So, are you my media update?"

"With all my time on bed rest, I'm very well caught up on what the public does and does not know right now. Have a seat, because this is going to be a while."

Harry sat down on the wrong side of the minister's desk. Without so much as an odd glance, Kingsley took the spot beside him, refusing to take the minister's chair. Completely missing the subtlety of the refusal of power, Tonks let out an excited whoop and sat across from them in the place of honor.

"Okay!" Her hair color flashed golden. "So, what's first?"

"Hogwarts."

"Completely repaired structurally. All students who should have been older than a fifth year when the war started have had their education completely disrupted. Most are completing a sort of independent program where they take multiple grade levels simultaneously, without an attached year level. You'll have to ask Headmistress McGonagall for more information. It's complicated beyond my knowledge, but all of it's true on paper and in practice. Just so you know, I would pay to see you back in school after seeing you on the battlefield."

"I'm doing it, so..."

Tonks let out an excited squeal. "Yes..."

"Personal lives of particular leaders?"
"Everyone who breathes knows you're a Hotchner. It's very restricted knowledge that your younger brother is a werewolf; even the newspapers haven't gotten wind of that. No one knows anything else about your family life. Hermione's and Ron's relationship has been well documented because you haven't given anyone anything to work on from that front. Most people know Draco is no longer living with his parents and is researching an eclectic range of whatever he feels like looking into with Elle. No one has a clue how to even get in touch with the BAU, though, since the papers miswrote it as the FBAU so they can't even find out what out what the group is."

"Alternate worlds?"

"Not a clue. Official word on the streets about why all of you vanished for a while is that the Death Eaters were spreading illnesses among you guys."

"Does anyone in the public know that I don't actually want to be minister?"

"Everyone knows, nobody cares."

"If I do a bunch of stuff no one likes, do you think I can get kicked out?"

"I think they'll all decide that they actually do like that stuff."

Harry sighed.

"If there was ever a time to get legislation passed, it'd be now," Kingsley said.

Harry sighed deeper.

Once he was done with meetings for the day, he picked up Hotch from the interrogation rooms. Hotch looked thankful for the rescue, which would have been convincing if he hadn't sought out certain people to talk about one of the twelve people he had ended up helping them with. Harry watched in amusement until Hotch finally passed him muttering, "Let's go."

"You sure?" Harry whispered.

"Just keep going. Don't look back."

"Wait, Agent Hotchner!" someone screamed.

Hotch looked back immediately like a Pavlovian dog.

Harry released the laugh he had been fighting for the last ten minutes and made no effort to stop Hotch from returning.

A half hour later, they finally arrived back at Quantico. Rossi raised an eyebrow. "What are you here for? I thought you two were running England."

"It's Britain, you unsophisticated swine," Snape said, walking out from behind the nearest bullpen divider and past Rossi with such suddenness that even Harry, who had dealt with the Potions Master randomly appearing at just the wrong moment for five of his years in school, had to blink a couple of times.

"Britain, then," Rossi said. "I'm sorry, I forget about that hot mess of political names over there all the time. I'm much more used to the chill pill America took as soon as it won its independence from an oppressive regime."

"Actually," Reid said, shoving his chair back from his desk to insert himself directly into the
conversation he'd had no part in, "the American revolution was primarily run by the middle class, as is common in most revolutions, because their profits stood to gain enormously by separation from Britain because of the mercantilist policies at the time. It wasn't considered oppressive by the time's standards, and the king took seemingly harsh measures only because the colonists had killed civil servants through the tarring and feathering practice and had destroyed an enormous amount of private property – including the tea that was dumped in the Boston Harbor off the ships of the Dutch East India Company, which had been given a monopoly by the British in America because it was floundering and the crash of the company could have resulted in economic turmoil for the colonists."

"Oppression. Regime. 'Murica."

"Did you know that John Adams wanted to be king?"

"Hotchner, I need to see you," Snape said when he was halfway up the stairs to the raised floor, completely ignoring the historical description behind him.

Harry followed him. Hotch remained behind, watching the back and forth between Rossi and Reid with amusement. It was probably going to take him a while to settle back into the regular swing of BAU life, but probably not without a disturbing amount of happiness to return to bloody, gruesome, terrible crimes.

Harry was entering the conference room just as Snape took a seat. "Why are you home?" Snape asked without any greeting. To be fair, it hadn't been that long since they had seen each other since they regularly brushed shoulders in the infirmary with Harry visiting Blaise and Snape mending him, but still.

"I wanted to actually see my family and things are calming down in the government. It's stabilizing."

"You haven't implemented all the changes you wanted to," Snape said brusquely. "You should be overseeing those."

"What changes?"

Snape gave him a look Harry hadn't seen since he was a third year in potions class. "The Auror Department is hardly to your satisfaction, as is the Muggle Liaison Office. There are numerous laws that have been passed over the years that have been ignored or were obscene on their own that you can hardly bear to think of, without me mentioning them by name."

The sloppy excuse of habeas corpus, werewolf legislation, house elf registration... Harry broke that thought off. "I can't abuse my power to fix everything I don't like. Society chooses what's right and wrong, not me."

"But you control society right now, Hotchner. Don't pass legislation without support, but don't disregard your influence over public opinion."

Harry shifted uncomfortably. "I'll figure something out."

"Yes, you will," Snape said sternly. "Now, I need to know the status of your DA. Are they returning to school?"

"The plan was to go back next semester officially, but some were thinking of returning sooner and trying to review and get caught up a bit on their own before jumping into classes." Snape nodded, and Harry asked, "Are you still teaching?"

"Yes. Slughorn was temporarily filling my position while I taught Defense Against the Dark Arts,
but he is retiring."

Harry frowned. "I thought you liked teaching Defense."

"I do." Snape didn't seem at all distraught at the prospect of leaving the post. Instead, Harry saw a small smirk.

"So...who's teaching Defense?"

"I cannot say at this time, until the board has confirmed the position."

Harry put a hand to his heart. "I'm not trustworthy."

Snape gave him a skeptical look and an unwavering, immediate, "No." Harry grinned and dropped his hand. "Communicate with everyone in the DA and get a list of their respective plans to the headmistress." He stood. "That is all."

Harry walked with him out the door. The rest of the BAU had gathered around Reid's and Morgan's desks. Behind him, he heard Snape apparate away. A gap opened in the circle as Harry neared the BAU and he stepped in.

"What're you doing here?" Prentiss asked.

"Don't you know this is where all the cool kids hang out these days?" Harry replied, grinning. "Stopping by to get caught up on you while Dad gets caught up on paperwork."

"Nothing much happening over here, compared to what you've been doing," Morgan said. "Just cases. More and more of them are...abnormal, though. Elle comes back to consult for those."

"Get a lot of them?"

"Just a couple total, really," Rossi said. "The magical community isn't big enough to have a huge need for us."

"Hey, are you heading back to any of the other worlds?" JJ asked.

"A couple. Why?" He paused, then his eyes narrowed. "What do you know?"

"Elle mentioned handcuffs."

Harry groaned as the others laughed at him. "Does anything stay secret?"

JJ was still grinning at Harry's predicament. "Come on, tell us what happened."

"He felt it was the only way he could keep me from running off," Harry grumbled crossly.

"Does Hotch know about this?" Reid asked JJ, who smirked in reply.

"If he doesn't, I'd rather appreciate him not finding out," Harry stressed, but the response was less than sympathetic.

"After all the trouble you've gotten into, I wouldn't be surprised if Hotch came to the conclusion that you need a leash even without someone else suggesting it," Morgan said. Harry lightly scowled at him, and JJ ruffled his hair in a friendly manner. "Although, maybe you can help your case by staying out of any messes for the next couple of months."
"I'm not doing this on purpose!" Harry protested. No one looked convinced and JJ and Prentiss shared a look. "Oh, come on, it's not like I could manage this if I tried!"

"You're a very talented person," Prentiss said diplomatically and Harry spluttered around a disagreement that would lend itself to his cause while the others watched, grinning.

Finally, he settled back in his chair. "You're going to tell him, aren't you?" he grumbled.

"This story is too amusing to pass up," JJ said, nodding in agreement, and he moaned. "However, if it eases the pain... We do have some information about the teaching situation at Hogwarts." He perked up. "Interested?"

"Yes. Who's the DADA professor?"

"No telling, all right? And you didn't hear this from us," Prentiss said and he nodded quickly.

"Apparently," Morgan said, "not many want to sign up to teach a group of students who just ran off a dark lord and attend a school that's regularly the epicenter of chaos. Potions, DADA, and muggle studies all needed to be filled."

Harry nodded. Professor Burbage had taken several curses during the Hogwarts siege and had spent a lot of time in St. Mungo's; it was no wonder she had decided to retire from muggle studies. "So...?"

"So Snape's taking potions, and they're hiring someone else for muggle studies, but both of them were trying to not obviously go for the DADA post. An agreement was reached so they don't need another professor and so that no one's at risk from the curse."

Harry narrowed his eyes. "Are you about to say what I think you're about to say?"

"Gideon and Snape will be sharing the DADA position, effectively making neither of them the teacher so the curse can't apply. Snape will be teaching potions as well, and Gideon's taking over muggle studies, to the delight of the muggleborn students who were tired of hearing their culture be murdered by the crappy textbooks. Besides, it won't be a huge difference when everyone there knows him already."

"Blackwolf did always say he looked more like a professor than an agent," Reid said thoughtfully.

Morgan nudged him. "He also said you looked more like a student than an agent, so maybe you should be going to Hogwarts too."

"Planning to break into Hogwarts anymore?" Harry asked.

"I think I'm going to have to, now that I've seen that library," Reid said, groaning at the thought of all the books. "Maybe I can get Snape to help me in."

"Elle would probably be up for it," Harry pointed out, "and she and Draco are still destroying magical pride piece by piece, so..." At the agents' confused looks, he added, "They've discovered, to their absolute delight, that magical folk completely fail logic tests. They find it extremely amusing, while the rest of us just have to acknowledge that it's sadly true." Kindly, none of the agents said they'd noticed the very same thing at Hogwarts. "So, I heard that something happened to the Warrington estate. Do you know what that was about?"

Most of them shrugged in confusion, but JJ shook her head with a smile. "Yep, but no telling."
"Ah, don't go quiet on me now! What is it?"

"You'll just have to wait and see."

"JJ! We went through a war together and you're keeping secrets from me?!!"

She snorted and lightly kicked him. "This isn't going to kill you. You've only got a little while longer to go."

He moaned dramatically, almost falling out of his chair. "I feel the end coming!"

"Sometimes," Morgan said, one eyebrow raised, "I have no clue how you're related to Hotch."

"And other times I'm terrified to acknowledge he has offspring," Reid added on.

JJ's phone buzzed and she glanced at it briefly. "Huh. Apparently, Will would like to see me at some point tonight."

"Ah, the responsibilities of the married life," Morgan said.

"You wouldn't know anything about that, would you?" Rossi replied.

"Whereas you, on the other hand..."

"There's a reason there are three ex-Mrs. Rossi's," Prentiss muttered playfully to Reid, who grinned. His eyes flickered up over their heads. "Ah, it looks like we have news."

The others glanced up as Garcia practically came to a sliding stop in front of them. "Guys, guys, guys, guess what?" she panted.

"Elle broke into Hogwarts again," Reid said.

"Well, that's probably not wrong, but guess who I just spent the day talking to!"

"I'm hoping one of us got something done in the last few hours, so...someone important?" Prentiss guessed.

"Something work-related, no; someone important, yes." Morgan dragged a chair closer with one foot and she eagerly took it, plopping down in their oddly formed circle. "So apparently, certain universities around the world have a bit of a magical focus, especially the older ones, because it lets them investigate into both the nonmagical and magical communities. So... Guess who just was talking to the dean of a prestigious school about accepting a certain student into advanced programs with a full ride scholarship?"

"Harvard's taking Draco!" Reid exclaimed.

"How'd you know it was Harvard?" Prentiss demanded when Garcia beamed wider.

"Ranked consistently among the top five for an economics graduate degree and oldest university in the country, founded in 1636."

"Guess we know where he's going when he graduates Hogwarts," Rossi said. "Do they have conditions?"

"Yeah. He and Elle just have to keep researching and they'd prefer for him to finish with both the Hogwarts and high school diploma, so he knows more about both worlds." She shook Morgan's arm
in excitement. "Harvard, my love!"

JJ pushed back from her chair and stood up. "I love him as much as everyone else, but I really do need to be getting home. Tell him congratulations for me when you see him, though!"

"Will do! I see him at least twice or thrice a week now, since he keeps popping over."

"That's not legal..." Rossi said, "...in so many ways..."

"Because he's not supposed to leave Hogwarts, or apparate out of the country without government approval each time, or apparate under age, or..." Harry asked.

"All of the above and more. Have a good night, JJ."

"Oh, shit, I need to get home to feed Clooney," Morgan muttered, glancing at the clock. "Looks like I'm out of here too."

"We should all be getting home, probably," Prentiss admitted. "Harry, usually I'd say we'd stick around until your dad shows up, but I think you'd be fine even if a group of trained special agents broke in and tried to kill everyone."

"And if a dark lord shows up, Dad's not far away in case we need a team effort," Harry agreed, smiling in agreement.

"Yeah, you'll be fine." Rossi pushed his chair back to where it had come from. JJ walked off to her office while the others started pulling their things together in the bullpen, and a couple started slowly moving towards the doors. With a hug to Harry, Garcia went back to her own nest to begin to get ready to leave for the day. Rossi gestured for the remaining agents to move along. "Go on without me. My stuff's in my office."

Harry waved at the group as they moved into the elevator and got a few waves back. As the doors were closing, he overheard Prentiss mutter to Morgan, "I pray for the sorry bastard who thinks it's a good idea to go after anyone in that family."

Rossi claimed Morgan's desk, taking the chair across from Harry. "So," he said.

"How's everything really been, around here?" Harry asked, the good humor from before starting to fade.

Curiously, Rossi replied with, "What do you think?"

"I can't imagine the readjustment was easy, from living in a war zone to this. Not to mention that now you all know so much more about magic, and I'll bet you can't help but wonder how many lives it could save."

Rossi nodded slowly, thoughtfully. "All true. I think we've all come to terms with understanding that the magical world just isn't...mature enough to be acclimated into the rest of the world, though." Harry smiled slightly at his apt word choice. "Besides, to bring you into our problems would be to bring us into your problems, and I don't think we're ready to handle that on our end."

Harry leaned forward. "But... Do you think that eventually, both sides could one day be ready?"

Rossi tilted his head. "It would take one hell of a person to prepare both sides for that."

Harry gave him a deadpan. "Subtle." Rossi smirked. Harry set the matter aside for now – he wasn't
fixing it tonight. "But anyway, that's not all that's happened around here, right?"

"We had to pretend we were away on a top secret mission for the upper echelons of the government," Rossi said, amused. "Most of the people directly around here were sworn into the magical world, though, since a lot of them work with us and we're going to start getting involved in more magical cases. We keep getting weird looks from others, which means Morgan has gotten Reid and Prentiss to randomly drop into hushed, furious whispers whenever they're walking in the hallways with each other. Then there's the part where we claimed we faked your father's death, which has only increased the awe factor. I'm just glad they don't know he actually died or it'd be much worse."

Harry had never understood that more. From the grin Rossi gave him, the older man knew it too.

"Hey, Rossi... I know this is kind of a strange question, but I'm not going to be offended with whatever you say. But... Are you glad that you found out about all of this? Or would you rather we kept obliterating you when you got close to the truth?"

There was a long, ponderous pause as Rossi mulled the question over in his head. "Magic," he finally said, "has not changed my views on the world. Everyone uses power for their own reasons, and some of them are horrifyingly terrible and others are beautifully magnificent. I'm satisfied I saw so much of both in your world. And I won't regret getting involved in what happened no matter how bad it got, because, in a way, that's our job. More importantly, we were doing it for people we've come to think of as our family. The stakes were just higher this time than they usually are."

"I sense a but."

"It's unsettling to know that, while there are people who can use their magic with such benevolence, there are also others like Riddle who, sometimes, go unchecked. And who can go on like that for quite a while because magical government systems haven't quite advanced like they should have. That's unpleasant. Overall, though, I'm glad I found out. We have the same problem in our own society too." With a small smile to try to put Harry more at ease, he added, "Besides, it would have been rather bizarre if I'd woken up one day to find the entire team gone without reason because they'd gone to fight in a magical war and hadn't told me."

Harry mulled the answer over in his head, and Rossi asked, "What about you? Are you glad we got so involved?"

"After... After Dad died... No. I... I actually told him once that I'd rather we'd never met, if that was the result," Harry said slowly. Rossi grimaced in understanding. "But I don't know how I would have made it through without all of you, and I'm just grateful everyone came out of it in the end."

"Don't feel guilty for what did happen to us," Rossi warned, and Harry smiled slightly at being caught. "We made our own decisions, and if you hadn't been Hotch's son, or even if this had been someone else entirely, we could have easily still been involved when we learned about the magical world. Besides, you saw how badly organized everything was in the alternate times. Can you imagine how many would have been hurt or died if that had taken place instead?"

Harry nodded. "I know. And despite everything that happened, some of you actually used the experience to your advantage."

"Elle's way too happy."

"So's Garcia. I'm a bit scared."
"With good reason." He leaned back a bit in his chair. "Last bit of advice, okay?" Harry tilted his head slightly. "Always tell your dad what's going on. Always."

There was a long pause. "You know, you'd think that'd be the first thing I took away from all this," Harry said slowly, thinking it over. "That would have fixed so many problems before they even started. But in the end... Well, honestly, there were some things it would have just been better to keep myself. Things that no one could solve, and that I wish I hadn't told him."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, the whole thing with Umbridge, for one. I wish he'd never found out about how bad that got. I'm not saying he wouldn't have found out somehow, but I just wish he'd never known. He couldn't get to her, we couldn't get out of the situation, and in the end, she's on trial for what she did and is likely to get imprisoned for a very long time. Why did he have to hear what happened? Just...things like that, where there was no good in it."

"I see where you're coming from," Rossi agreed, "but at the same time, I just hope you remember that that's not a bad wish to have but not one that's ever going to come true. Something major like that – I think you'd be safer assuming that your father will be hearing about it sooner rather than later."

"That is a lesson that I will always remember."

"Besides, sometimes it's a relief to be able to just rant. There are times where you just need to bitch about something without getting help. Your dad gets that." Rossi's eyes flickered away for a moment and then back to Harry. "Speaking of whom." He rose from the chair and pushed it back in as Hotch approached.

"Are you waiting for me?" Hotch asked.

"Yep. Did JJ mention she's planning another dinner to you?"

"She did. So did Garcia. And Prentiss. And my brother, who somehow knew before me."

"Then I won't remind you again. My duty is done here. Hotch, I'll see you in the morning. Harry, I'll see you whenever you drop in on a whim."

As the glass doors closed behind Rossi, Hotch nodded towards his office. "Give me a minute to grab everything."

Harry followed him up the steps to the office, pausing for a moment in the entrance. The sun had completely set outside, and Hotch flicked on the light before he moved in to grab his briefcase. Harry let his eyes travel over the room quietly, trying to push down his discomfort.

"Harry?"

"Sorry," he said immediately, tearing his gaze away from his surroundings to look at his father, who was watching him closely. "The last time I was here was after... Well, this was the first place Morgan and I came to when we were telling everyone you were dead."

Hotch tilted his head slightly. "Didn't you come back after that?"

"What do you mean?"

"I thought you helped Blaise, Ginny, and Luna when they were looking into resurrection rituals."
"No, I was already in the other world. Besides, they said they didn't want to get my hopes up or anything, or accidentally lead me into doing something desperate. Probably a good call on their end."

"Harry..."

He smiled wearily. "Let's just get home to Jack and his babysitters."

The comment immediately and effectively redirected Hotch. "Right." The quick response earned a larger smile from Harry. "What?"

"Some things don't change, even when a dark lord dies."

Hotch scowled as he grabbed his coat and draped it over his arm. "'Dark lord,' " he scoffed, moving towards Harry and the door. "Not 'deranged murderer' or 'terrorist with delusions of grandeur' or..."

"'Rude trespasser'?" Harry suggested. "'Irritating charlatan controlling a snake charmer with poor fashion taste'?" Hotch raised an eyebrow at him and Harry followed him out the door. "I agree, doesn't have quite the same ring to it."

"Are you heading back to any of the other worlds before you start school again?" Hotch asked as he pulled his office door shut behind them.

"Thinking about going to the first one I visited. I was closest to the people there. I think it'd be rather weird if you went over, though."

"Talking to myself is a rather surreal experience, yes."

"He still hates you, doesn't he?"

"Not so much 'hates' as 'intensely despises,'" Hotch corrected. They descended the stairs and headed across the bullpen towards the glass doors. While they had been in his office, most of the lights had been turned off to conserve energy, leaving only a couple on.

"Oops."

"Yeah. Thanks."

"Sorry I'm so good at the abuse-victim image. Now I feel like I need to start carrying a sign with me saying 'I come from a good home'..."

"First, don't do that. Second, don't that either."

"Don't be sorry?"

"In a way, I'm glad you could give off that feeling. Morgan, Reid, and Elle might not have noticed otherwise, and then you would have gone to stay with the Dursleys while they were in America instead of with me when you were in danger from the Woodsmarked Killer."

"Silver linings," Harry agreed while they stepped into the elevator. "Your other self really does know nothing like that happened, though."

"I think he's still irritated that you ever got involved in any of this."

"Yeah, but he's also made plenty of mistakes you didn't, so... Stones and glass houses and all that."
Hotch glanced at him curiously, pushing the button to send the metal contraption to the right floor. "What do you mean?"

"Well... I mean, he had to sign divorce papers in that world," Harry said. "You never had the chance to have to make the decisions that resulted in that, just like he never had the chance to make the decisions to enter a war. Besides, I really doubt he would have been able to do anything differently."

"Better, or just differently?"

"Both, I suppose. The war couldn't have ended much quicker with fewer casualties, and I don't think there were many other options you could have taken that would have satisfied your conscience. The only thing you could have done that wouldn't have been so traumatizing for me would have been to never take me in." The elevator came to a halt on the bottom floor.

"That's hardly true," Hotch said immediately, missing Harry's victorious smirk as he stepped out of the elevator when the doors opened. They started out into the lobby of the FBI building and towards the front doors. "There were probably plenty of ways that could have gotten us around any of that, if only we'd had more time. Besides, things went badly enough in the other world that me not taking you in clearly had it's own problems – including the continued threat of several of my own enemies, I might add. And-" He finally caught up to Harry enough to see his expression. "Hey!"

"As I said," Harry replied smugly, "no other options without satisfying your conscience." Hotch sighed irritably at him. "I'm not complaining."

"There probably were other choices I could have made," Hotch muttered.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Even if you made a bunch of mistakes, you still did more good than most of the magical leaders did, so it all worked out."

"Still."

"If we have to continue this argument, I'll go find the alternate world where you somehow screwed everything up by making poor choices in the war and we can become more traumatized together."

"Let's make an early New Year's resolution to find a different method of family bonding."

They stepped out into the parking lot and Hotch started leading them towards where he'd put the car that morning. Harry walked beside him. "Anyway, let me know if there's a day or two where you wouldn't mind me heading over. I think Jack had better stay here, since I'd rather not take him when I'm randomly dropping in."

"Are you going to go see your other self?"

"...Probably should. Maybe I'll go find that world's Snape and irritate him. It's so much fun." Hotch gave him a look. "I mean, I'll totally not do that. Duh."

"If you have to do it at all, keep it to a minimum. And Harry?"

Harry glanced at him as they came to a stop in front of the car. "Yeah?"

Hotch tossed the keys at him, and Harry caught them with a clatter. "You're driving home."

"What! No!" Harry exclaimed as Hotch started towards the passenger's seat. "I haven't driven in over a year!"
"And the last time you did, you got arrested."

"Exactly! ...Though that was on purpose!"

"So you need the practice."

"Is this revenge for being right for once?" Harry grumbled as he opened the driver's door.

"You can think that if you want," Hotch replied calmly, "but I was planning this the whole day."

"Can't we just apparate home?"

"Let's get this over with, Harry."

A couple of minutes later, when they were on the road and Harry was still lightly sulking, Hotch asked, "Are you going to have problems, going back to school?"

"What do you mean?" He spared a brief glance at his father before turning back to the road.

"You were looked up to during the war. People could have a hard time treating you like normal after everything you did."

"I've only got two more years of it, and enough people were fighting and leading that it'll be dispersed," he pointed out. "The biggest problem will come from the first through third years, but I don't really see them all that often. I guess the best thing about this is that it's not so pointless for people to be whispering about meeting me, since there's more to it than a stupid scar now."

"I'm just glad that ridiculous prophecy was inaccurate," Hotch muttered. "Putting faith in superstition, really. I can't believe that practice has carried on for as long as it had." There was no reply, and he saw that Harry was staring straight at the road with a small, odd smirk on his face.

"What?"

"...Well, what part of the prophecy do you think was wrong?"

Hotch paused, frowning. "You didn't defy him through action rather than word. In the graveyard, and at Hogwarts whenever you saw him, you were quite verbal in your dislike of him, but you were powerful through action."

"Maybe, but it's hard to measure how much that had an effect on the war. And there was plenty that was accurate."

"You were born in the seventh month, but you're not a 'power' so I assume that refers to the blood wards that immediately formed from that." Harry nodded in agreement. "And...I suppose...the ones who that power comes from must mean family, and from young to old you did forgive us."

"How do you mean?"

"You forgave Jack for running away from you, your grandfather for how he treated you, and me for...everything."

"I took it to mean that whoever the prophecy was about would forgive from the youngest to the oldest," Harry said calmly, still not turning from the road. Hotch was definitely starting to pick up on his use of his position to keep from looking at Hotch.

"...Maybe," Hotch said slowly, clearly wondering what his son was up to. "Either way, I don't think you would have been so motivated to go against Riddle if you hadn't wanted to protect your family."
Harry didn't say anything. "All right, Harry, what is it?"

"I don't think the prophecy was about me," he said simply.

"But no one else was born that month," Hotch replied, confused.

"Maybe I should put it this way - I'm not sure the prophecy was just about one person."

Hotch paused, frowning. "You can't be serious..."

"Think about it. The blood wards apply to all of us, or even just the beginning of that familial bond. Emotions have a potent power in magic, and love, however sappy it might sound, is probably the strongest of them. So that's the power. And as a group, we definitely fought with as much action as we did with words. I might have had a lot of the magical power, but Jack kept us going and even handed over the horcrux we had the most trouble finding. You took Riddle and Zabini down with words. I'm pretty sure you were more responsible for the dark lord's downfall in the end than I was, really."

"Okay," Hotch said slowly. "But..."

"Forgiveness? Jack first. He didn't have anything to forgive us for in the beginning, but then he forgave me for putting him in a situation that got him turned into a werewolf, you for dying, and our grandfather for never existing in his life. If that hadn't happened, he wouldn't have trusted us enough to stay safe so we didn't worry about him. Then there's Ethan Hotchner. He never had a problem with Jack, but he forgave me for being an arse towards him once we talked after you died, and you when you both decided you were more interested in helping Jack and me than staying angry with each other."

"I'm not sure that happened," Hotch said, trying not to scoff but not quite managing it.

"He did," Harry said quietly. "You haven't seen his expression when..." He trailed off, but Hotch was looking at him curiously now. "When he thinks you're not looking," he finished.

"What do you mean?" Hotch asked slowly, almost warily.

"He..." Harry paused. "I think..."

"Harry?"

Harry shook his head. "You won't believe me."

"Harry," Hotch reprimanded lightly. "When's the last time I didn't put faith in what you said?"

Harry was quiet for a long moment, genuinely thinking up the answer to that question. Then he pulled the car over into a parking lot to properly think, earning a small smile from Hotch. He sat a little longer, seriously applying brain power to the question.

"Never happened?" Hotch asked finally.

"I think," Harry said slowly, "the last time was when we were talking about the Dursleys and you were sure I wasn't properly describing them."

"Okay, so with that out of the way, stop stalling."

Harry opened his mouth once, twice, and then sighed. "He looks proud."
It was Hotch's turn to sit there in silence for a minute. He looked like he was dying to ask Harry if he was sure, but he held the words back, and Harry smiled slightly at his dilemma.

"Why?" Hotch finally said, slowly, and Harry's stomach plummeted in horror at the statement. "After everything, why would he be now? Because I was there when we took down Riddle and Zabini, even though that's my job and what I do almost every day at home?"

Harry took a moment to put his thoughts together, and then said, "I think...he didn't believe you when you made it sound like Jack and I had turned out all right, because he thought he did everything he was supposed to do with you and Sean. But then he saw you'd treated us differently and we had turned out well, and I think he respected you for managing that. For being the parent he wasn't."

Hotch was quiet. While Harry didn't know if he'd come to terms with his father today, he hoped that one day he might. "What about me? The only one I had to forgive was my father, and that never really happened."

Harry tilted his head at him. "You never had to forgive Jack, but there was so much you had to forgive me for."

"That's not true," Hotch protested immediately. Harry raised his eyebrow at him. "I'm serious, Harry; you had much more to forgive me for. I can't even think of anything I've ever been angry at you for."

Harry gave him a look. "Yes, you somehow never cared that I destroyed the house twice," Harry agreed, "but you were pretty pissed when I didn't tell you what was going on. And when I'm being vague there, it's just because there were so many times when I didn't tell you something that you can take your pick. Besides, you probably also had to forgive me for growing up without you."

Hotch made a noise like he wanted to disprove Harry but had no way to do so.

"Exactly. And I think you did forgive your father somewhere along the way, even if you didn't want to and didn't mean to. So the only one of us who the prophecy didn't relate to is most likely Sean, since the rest of us match, but magic doesn't tend to recognize anything past a once-removed relative. Besides, the prophecy said the power will be 'granted to that who will defy him.' That's either bad grammar or a reference to something specific, like a family rather than a person."

The car was quiet as Hotch thought it over, examining Harry's words in his mind. Finally, instead of responding, he put his arm on the armrest and rolled it over, opening his hand and exposing the scar across his palm. Harry took it, squeezing in reply.

"Dad," he started hesitantly, after a pause. "You don't have to answer if you don't want to, but...how did you forgive your father?" Quickly, he added, "I mean, I don't think I'm ever going to forgive the Dursleys, but you still..."

"My father was nothing compared to the Dursleys."

"I would disagree with that," Harry immediately replied, frowning. "They just went about it differently."

Hotch knew a losing argument when he saw one and didn't bother trying to convince him. "He...tried, in his own way. I came to terms with that when I had to go visit him to get his blood. But I didn't completely forgive him until he said he was going to come with back with us. He could have given the minimum and kept his distance. He didn't. He came because we were both going to be in
danger and he wanted to help. But I don't think I would have managed to forgive him if you hadn't
given me."

Harry tilted his head at him, frowning. "Why?"

"Because I hurt you worse when I died than he ever hurt me, and I figured if you could manage it...
Then I should at least try."

Harry glanced away from him. "Sorry."

A trace of exasperation slipped through, but it was warm after so many apologies from his son. "Oh, Harry, for what now?"

"I hurt you too, when you died. Everything I said, everything I did, when you were just trying to
help and the only way you could have any impact was to talk to me through my dreams. What I did wasn't..."

"Considering you thought you were just dreaming, there's no reason to apologize," Hotch said,
thumb stroking the back of Harry's hand. "And you were still hurt so much more than I was that you
hardly need to say anything. I still don't know how you managed to forgive me."

"Because I couldn't hate you no matter how much I tried," Harry murmured. "And I knew that I
would have done the same thing, and that you wouldn't have had to die if you hadn't been followed
me to the war."

"Harry..."

"But I also realized," he continued, "that no matter how selfish it was, that I was wrong when I told
you I wish I'd never met you. When I was with your alternate self, I wanted him to hate me because
I'd feel justified. If I could convince myself I was really as bad-tempered as my alternate self, that I
deserved hate, than I could hate you back. But I couldn't manage any of that, and he wouldn't stop
trying to help me no matter how hard I pushed him to."

"It's been said that this family has stubbornness issues."

Harry grinned. "Us? No way."

After a moment, he put the car in drive and pulled back out onto the road. They hadn't hit the next
stop light before Hotch said, "Now that neither of us are in constant danger, I want to prosecute the
Dursleys again."

Harry laughed. "That's your first major life choice after the war?"

"It's been put off for four years now," Hotch said, and Harry swore he could actually hear the
leopard's growl in his voice. "With dark lords off my plate, I have all the time in the world to go after
them."
"All we have to do is decide what to do with the time that is given to us." - J.R.R. Tolkein, *The Fellowship of the Ring*

Harry glanced at Hotch as he locked the car behind them. Hotch was opening the door with his key, back to Harry. "Anything else important I should know about?"

"Nothing world-changing," Hotch said far too dismissively.

Harry narrowed his eyes. "Really?"

"Truly."

"But...?"

Hotch, to his surprise, smirked slightly at him. "Go ask your brother where Kiyo laid eggs."

Harry's eyes widened, and he shot past Hotch as his father held the door open for him. "Jack!" he called, hurrying up the stairs to his brother's room. Hotch shook his head behind him, amused.

"Where's the fire?" Sean asked on the couch. "And there is a fire, because the two of you can't be in one place for more than a couple of minutes without something going wrong."

Hotch waited until he'd closed the door behind himself and settled on the cushion beside his brother to quietly say, "One of the snakes on the property laid eggs a week ago."

A frown came from Hotch's opposite side on the recliner. "What snakes?"

Hotch smiled to himself. "Didn't you know that both your grandsons are Parselmouths? Snake-talkers?"

Ethan Hotchner scoffed. "Don't be ridiculous. Sean, he's just bullshitting you."

Hotch gave his father a long, cool look, and then Sean ruined it by shrieking beside him and pointing frantically at the large, russet snake that was lifting itself onto the coffee table in front of him. Zagreus paused, tongue flickering in annoyance at the source of the loud sound, then slithered up until his whole body was curled on the table and he could raise himself up to look Hotch in the eye.

"Is that one poisonous?" Sean whispered loudly. "I can never remember."

"Snakes are venomous, not poisonous," their father replied dryly, without any concern for his older son's safety despite his proximity to the large snake.

"And yes," Hotch said. "This one's a copperhead, and it once tested its venom on an intruder. Of course, so did the other venomous one, and the other three, but the coroner made it sound like both had potent venom."
"What 'other' venomous one?" Ethan demanded.

"The timber rattlesnake. She's calmer, much less likely to bite."

"What's this one doing?"

The snake's tongue was flickering in and out.

"Not the faintest clue." With a look in his brother's direction, he added, "He's not going to bite."

"How sure of that are you?"

"He knows it would be rather distressing for Jack and Harry, and he adores both of them. All the snakes do, really."

"And you didn't think to mention we were going to be sharing the house with a couple of venomous snakes and their not-so-venomous friends?" his father asked dryly.

"How does that work with Hedwig?" Sean interrupted. "Shouldn't she be trying to eat them?"

"They came to some agreement a long time ago," Hotch replied offhandedly. "I don't know how."

"Who's Hedwig?" Ethan asked, resigned.

"Harry's owl. It delivers letters."

Ethan deadpanned at Sean, who grinned back at him, enjoying the full benefits of the truce that Ethan had to follow while he was under the same roof as his grandchildren. "An owl."

"Yep!" Sean cheerfully replied.

"I hate this fucking house."

"You invited yourself over," Hotch reminded him.

"Much to my regret."

"Hey, now, we were getting along so well five seconds ago," Sean said. "Let's not kill each other."

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Draco twirled around again on the swivel chair, legs tucked up slightly to avoid hitting the legs. He drifted to a stop, then kicked out again to get momentum going.

After a couple minutes of this, Garcia reached over with one hand and stopped him, eyes never leaving her screen. "I have more reason to be concerned about this than you. Calm the frick frack down."

Draco let out a sound that was half-groan half-sigh. "I just don't want to do this," he whined.

"Well, suck it up. She'll be here any minute."

"You know, most of the magical community thinks we've already done this."

"That's because you haven't been living with them. She still hasn't officially signed over the paperwork yet." She reached over and poked him in the side of the head to push him out of his sullen mood at the thought of that. "And hey, if she doesn't, I can just kidnap you."
"Kidnap me," he repeated doubtfully.

"Yeah. We'll use Reid as a distraction because apparently all the Death Eaters think he's adorable, and my mocha god will come in and steal you away. And she won't be able to break into Quantico because Rossi'll spew bullshit on her from the window so she can't get in."

"From the window- That makes me sound like a princess in despair who needs to be rescued from her tower!"

Garcia took a pointed sip of her coffee.

Draco caught a flash of movement out of the corner of his eye and turned as a little bundle of fluff tumbled past him, scampered up the side of Garcia's chair, and nestled into the corner of her neck, hidden by blonde, blue-streaked hair and the edge of her jacket. Garcia put a hand over her mouth to suppress a giggle at the ticklish feeling, and the creature purred louder in response to the motion. She moved her hand to awkwardly pet Lafla, who snuggled in closer to her.

"I didn't know you were stopping by," Draco said as Luna stepped in. Ginny was right behind her. "Where's Blaise?"

"Waiting in the bullpen. Garcia called us, said it might go better if your mother met someone she knew first."

"Prentiss's idea," Garcia immediately said.

"Hey, as the only one of us who's been reliably going to class," Ginny said, nodding her head towards her friend, "Luna's got something to tell us."

"There's a New Year's celebration, for everything that's happened in the last year," Luna said. "It's taking place at Hogwarts, and the headmistress would like to formally invite all of you to give you awards for services to the school. Professor McGonagall told me to tell you first, since she doesn't think Hotch is going to be too agreeable to any more publicity." Draco was already smirking at the very idea of it.

"Is that what she said?"

"I think it was implied."

The small ridges along the boggart rippled as it took a deep breath, causing Garcia to stifle another giggle.

"She's not really expecting any of you, though, not since all of you are still intensely hiding from the magical world's obsession over you. Besides, everyone else who was supposed to get an award isn't going to be there either."

"They'll be at the Warrington estate, or back here, right?" Draco guessed and Luna nodded. The Warrington estate had been turned over to those orphaned by the Silent Massacre in Cassius's will. Besides its original inhabitants, it was now also filling with more students who were orphaned by the war. Blaise, once he had gotten back on his feet with his mind functioning soundly once more, had taken over its management.

"She thought it'd be nice to check, just in case."

The two newcomers waited in the office and talked a little more with the original pair, until Garcia felt Lafla's fur stand on end. Wordlessly, Luna collected her boggart, who slipped up Luna's arm and
hid behind her neck as she felt someone else approaching.

"Nice seeing you!" Ginny said, waving to Garcia. "And, Draco, do we have a set date we're all heading back on?"

"That probably depends on when Hotch is done obsessively counting heads in his house. I'll ask Harry. I mean, theoretically we could go back without him, but...well, it's about the same time we'll be getting all of the Weasleys and others with hypervigilant parents back too."

Ginny nodded. "Let us know, then."

"Most definitely." The light lines around his eyes went lax, and Ginny shifted to the side as she heard footsteps coming down the hallway behind her. "Mother," Draco greeted softly.

"Draco." Narcissa's eyes flickered around the room, obviously trying to hide any surprised reaction at all the muggle technology and managing it quite remarkably.

"Mrs. Malfoy," Blaise said coolly by her side, having led her down to the office, "correct me if I'm mistaken, but I believe you've never met Ginny Weasley or Luna Lovegood." He gestured to them in turn, and Narcissa nodded cordially to each. "And of course, this is Penelope Garcia, our resident technological mastermind."

Garcia smirked briefly at the term, said in such professional tones, and got to her feet. "Hi."

Narcissa stood there for a moment, obviously not sure what to make of the woman before her but politely not saying so. "It's a pleasure to finally meet you."

"The same to you. Um, this would be your first stint in the muggle world, wouldn't it?"

"Yes," Narcissa replied. "I've never had the occasion to cross over, particularly not into the muggle government's realm."

"Ah, if you'll excuse us," Ginny said, grabbing onto Luna and Blaise subtly and tugging them towards the door. "Have a good morning, but we better get going." She nodded to Narcissa, and when Malfoy-nee-Black turned away from them she waved enthusiastically at the other two and mouthed, "Bye!"

Draco smiled briefly at her then turned back to his mother as the door closed behind the trio. Narcissa seemed entirely able to ignore them, which no one could blame her for. They were an even odder combination than the Gryffindor trio.

"Draco tells me you work in...communications?" Narcissa said, almost tentatively.

"In a sense," Garcia replied. "Most people in the muggle world carry phones and computers, especially in America, but those are traceable so I can hack into them and see what people are doing or where they're going. It can let me tell the rest of the team where someone's at, or what they've been looking into."

Narcissa blinked a couple of times. "Is that how you found everyone..."

"During the Silent Massacre?" Draco finished. "Yeah. Hermione had a phone with her."

Narcissa looked like she was just now beginning to understand how Draco had made the decision to leave the Malfoy family behind.
Ethan Hotchner and his two sons finally reached the expected degree of tension that was irreconcilable and Ethan turned back for home, cheerfully saying that he'd be back at some point to see his grandsons. He and Hotch had managed not to murder each other thus far, and Sean agreed it would perhaps be best that they not push it further.

"You know," Harry commented, "it was almost like he was sticking around in case something happened."

"What was he expecting to be, a meat shield?" Sean asked before his older brother could say something worse.

Harry was positive that he wanted to keep a close eye on the workings of his son's family to clarify that yes, it was in fact a functional group of people who got along without the abuse that had taken place under his own roof. By the end, Harry had kept a small tally of the times he'd seen Ethan look at his son with something akin to a grudging respect. He kept that to himself, though.

Sean reluctantly admitted that he had probably better get back to work. He'd told his boss that his nephew had cancer and was going through pretty rough treatment for the last couple of years, which had gotten him some leniency. "Now that everything's cooled down," he said, "I probably shouldn't use that excuse anymore. Know what that means?"

"No?" Harry replied.

"You've got to come to the restaurant and meet my boss. It'll give me some sort of validity."

Harry grinned and promised he would, and Sean left shortly after.

Before the end of the week, Harry found himself suddenly scooped up into a hug by someone he realized that he had not thought of for the better part of a year, he realized rather guiltily. "Hey, Aunt Jessica," he said when she finally released him.

She looked him over quickly, face slowly growing more horrified. Her eyes scanned him again, taking in the scars that were visible, and turning pale as she caught sight of the ones that disappeared under his shirt, particularly the ones from Greyback's claws on his neck. "Dear God, what happened to you?" she whispered. "Sean told me all of you were back, but he didn't mention..."

"Er, it's a long story," Harry said, exchanging a look with Hotch and expressing gratitude to the universe that they'd manage to rectify Hotch's "zombie-poltergeist" situation, which would definitely have thrown Jessica even more. "I don't think you really want to know."

She assured them that she really did. They did their best to give her the PG version, without mentioning alternate worlds or dark lord doppelgangers. She told them she changed her mind, and that she actually hadn't wanted to know and could they please scrub her brain?

With no one left to receive an impromptu visit from, Harry decided it was time to return the favor. "I'll be gone only a day or two," he promised, and Hotch nodded reluctantly. Harry grinned at him. "Oh come on, I'll be back before you know it. And hey, maybe I'll manage to convince him this time that you're not an abusive jerk."

"Yeah. Thanks for that, again."

"Well, maybe you'll think twice about dying next time," Harry replied, beaming.
He spent the morning at the Ministry in meetings. Somehow, his actions had culminated into doing the thing he had said he wouldn't do, and he realized in the middle of one conference that he was discussing potential methods for restructuring the justice system to ensure fairness and consistency. A mental review of his schedule told him that his next meeting involved discussing legislation that was coming up for review. His afternoon had been purposefully free, however, and he darted down to the Department of Mysteries and through the Veil before he could properly consider what he was doing.

He showed up on Haley's doorstep first. "Hi," he said right before she pulled him into a tight embrace.

"Harry," she breathed, then let him go. "You never stopped to see us before you left!"

"Yeah," he said awkwardly, rubbing the back of his head. "Everything got out of control, and it just... Sorry. I wanted to come see you sooner but I had to get things sorted out back home first."

"Well, now-" She looked him over. "Come get something to eat."

"I'm either getting fed or forced to sleep. Or asked if I'm abused," Harry said as he closed the front door behind him. "I'm beginning to accept that this is my life from now on."

"The war's over, isn't it?" she asked as she brought him into the kitchen.

"Completely done. Nothing left. All over. Except a few stragglers, that is, but it's close enough that we're tentatively celebrating. Unfortunately, they put a bunch of us in charge of some reconstruction efforts because we were the only ones who appeared mildly competent."

"That's terrible," she said, frowning. "Your childhood's gone."

"Yeah, I suppose." He smiled slightly. "But honestly, I wouldn't have traded this for anything, not after seeing what happened here for the magical world. We did a lot of good, and we stopped a lot of terrible things from occurring. I'm satisfied with that."

"Hmm." She pulled out some leftovers from the refrigerator and got a plate out. Her expression shifted a couple of times as she let her thoughts run their course, and he let her think things through while she got the meal ready. "Since your father's...back," she said, "are you living with him again?"

"Of course," he replied calmly, awaiting the accusation.

"That's...good."

"But?"

"Well, would it be better for you to stay somewhere that you'd be protected? You were endangered several times that you were with him," she said, neatly avoiding the statement that Harry knew Hotchner would be making when he went to see him.

He paused, thinking over the proper wording for his response. "If I left," he finally said, "it would be because I'm too much of a danger to my family, not the other way around. Any work that follows him home... I'm prepared to deal with it. Maybe I'd say something different if the last couple of years hadn't happened, but as it is -- no, I'm happy where I am." He could hardly blame her for being distrustful of any version of her ex-husband after the one in this world had made a choice that got her followed by a serial killer.
"If anything goes wrong," she said, interrupted awkwardly by the ding of the microwave, "would you consider living here?"

"Miss me?" he cheekily asked before he could stop himself.

"Well, yes," she admitted and he was startled into a grin.

"I've brought home more trouble than my father has," he pointed out. "I'm not sure that'd be very safe for you and Jack."

She set the warmed plate of curry in front of him and handed him a fork. "I lived for a year from a killer. For my kids, I'd do it again."

"But you shouldn't have to," he said gently. "Have you gotten settled back in yet?"

"Yes," she said. "It was quite interesting to explain the situation to my old boss, but once she understood what had happened she was quite willing to take me back. Jack's returned to his normal school, and he's actually a bit ahead in some of his classes because of the school he was at under witness protection so he's doing well. What about you?"

"I'll be going back to school in a month or so. We need to get some things worked out in the government first, and..." In an undertone, he said, "Well, Dad needs to stop doing a headcount every five minutes and mother hen us a little less before I feel comfortable returning."

Haley blinked rapidly a couple of times. "Really?"

"He's understandably a bit twitchy about keeping the two of us close for a while. I think he'll get over it by the time next term starts. Or maybe he and I will devolve into PTSD attacks, but I'd like to hope for the best."

The next stop was to a small apartment near Quantico. The door was locked and the alarm set, so he felt a bit awkward breaking in but he'd been assured it was all right. He sent a message to Hotchner warning him that there was someone in his flat so he didn't come home and have panic at seeing someone there, and then gave in to having no life and started doing catch-up homework.

Hotchner jumped when he opened the door and saw Harry sitting at the kitchen table, prompting the latter to raise an eyebrow. "I did text you," he said.

"My phone's dead," Hotchner admitted, trying to be subtle as his hand drifted away from his gun. It was rather impossible to do so, considering that he was balancing a plastic cup of coffee in one hand and his go-bag in the other, evidently having just returned from a trip.

Harry snorted. "Pass it over," he said and Hotchner did so with only a trace of suspicion. A couple of moments and a spell later, Harry handed it back. "Charging your battery is no longer necessary."

"You didn't have to do that," Hotchner said slowly.

"Sorry, but your habit of letting your phone die is starting to get a bit annoying," Harry admitted without any reluctance. "Dinner's on the stove."

Hotchner glanced over, blinked a few times in surprise, and then decided not to ask where Harry had gotten half the ingredients from. "How long have you been here?" His tone did little to hide how much he dreaded the answer. Or rather, it would have done a lot to hide it if Harry hadn't been living around profilers practically for years by now.
"Since eight in the morning two days ago," Harry said calmly and he heard Hotchner wince so badly behind him that some coffee slipped out of his mug and hit the floor. Without even looking, he waved his wand towards the ground to clean it up. "I'm kidding. I got here a couple of hours ago."

Hotchner let out a breath that could have either been a sigh, a groan, or a silent agreement with himself not to kill Harry unless he got way too annoying.

"Seen Haley yet?"

"This morning. She says hi."

"No, she didn't."

"Well, no, but maybe it was implied."

He knew he was making light of their divorce and all the hard feelings that ran between them because of it, but at the same time, he knew he couldn't see their relationship as it was without hurting. From the look he saw Hotchner give him out of the corner of his eye, he knew Hotchner was fully aware of that too.

"How've you been?" Hotchner asked and Harry found himself describing what had happened since he'd left this world for what was probably the thirtieth time at least.

"What's happened over here?" Harry asked.

"A couple of things. Have you stopped by to see the magical world here yet, or were you planning on doing that as you went back?"

Harry snorted. "How about never? They've all got attitude problems."

Hotchner decided not to say anything about how Harry's own attitude the first month they'd known each other. "Harry Potter contacted me."

Harry paused. "How'd he manage that?"

"I'm not entirely sure, especially since he used a phone instead of an owl or any other magical communication and I know he didn't ask anyone for my number while he was here getting help from you. At any rate, he's living with Sirius Black and Remus Lupin right now. He wanted my advice on prosecuting the Dursleys, and it doesn't seem to matter that I know next to nothing about British law."

"I'll give you the same resources we're planning on using before I leave," Harry said, smirking slightly. He was still facing his homework, back to Hotchner while he worked around the stove. "Sorry, our pathetic little leechy selves tend to latch onto anyone who gives us any concern. It's an unfortunate habit."

And a classic abuse sign, but for once Hotchner didn't pounce on that. Maybe he'd finally come to the conclusion that his alternate self had never intentionally caused his son harm.

"Right... Anyway, he seems to be doing well with Sirius and Remus. What?" He frowned at Harry's muffled laugh.

"You first met Black right after he'd gotten out of prison in our world, so he wasn't exactly fit to be taking care of anyone at the time. You didn't get along with him until you both discovered how I'd been taken through the BRP, and then you two united just to go after Mundungus Fletcher."
"In this case, we've united against the Dursleys. They're a piece of work."

The growl that entered Hotchner's voice made Harry turn around and look at the alternate version of his father. "What's got you so badly against them?"

Hotchner turned sharply, an incredulous and almost outraged look on his face. "What the he- What on earth do you mean by that?"

The shift to avoid cussing almost made Harry smile, but he tilted his head to the side instead. "I mean, you've never even met them, but you're just as angry as...

Hotchner was quiet for a long moment. "Because you were so nonchalant about telling us that your throat was scarred from metal they'd starved you into eating. If the Dursleys here were half as bad, than there's no way I'm letting them get away with what they've done."

Harry nodded slowly. "Okay."

He didn't expect anything else, but Hotchner provided it anyway. "Besides, if things were slightly different, what happened to Harry Potter would have been my responsibility anyway. It wasn't a big change that caused you to be my son."

Harry sat quietly, a strange thought occurring to him. "Hey," he slowly said. "Knowing what you know about both worlds, and how badly things went... Would you rather have never known about magic? About how incompetent some of the most powerful people in the world are?"

Hotchner put his back to the kitchen counter so he could fully face Harry and leaned his palms on the edge. "I could be happy both ways," he said after a long moment. "I was happy both ways. I can't say I'd rather have this knowledge taken from me now. It really isn't that different, since magic doesn't affect me much."

"Well, what about the war? Would you have rather stayed out of that, like you did here?"

"Personally, yes. No one sensible wants to go into a war. But if I had investment to get involved, then there's nothing that could have stopped me. It sounds like profilers did a great deal of good in your world during the war, and I would not have minded being a part of that."

From his tone, he already knew the next question, but Harry asked it anyway. "Again, after seeing what's happened in both worlds, would you..." Hotchner waited calmly, and Harry searched his gaze beseechingly for some answer that he knew wasn't there. "Never mind," he sighed, turning away slightly.

"Harry," Hotchner said quietly and he looked up at him. "I regret not taking the wrong bag that day I got into a fight with Nickelson. I wish the Hallow would have given my line magic if I meant I got two sons."

Harry blinked rapidly as the meaning behind his words settled in, and he nodded abruptly. "Okay," he said, unable to get across what he wanted to say. "O-Okay."

Hotchner smiled slightly at him, and as he turned back to the stove, Harry realized that it was the first time he'd seen that look on the man's face.

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Hermione sent out an official day to gather all the stray Hogwarts students back at school to get them out of the public eye and back into education. It might have been harder to herd everyone back, but
the Weasley family decided to hold a celebration to commemorate it and gathered all of them to the Burrow for a feast. Stomachs full, the kids collapsed on various pieces of furniture around the house that night and in tents that had been pitched in the yard, sometimes sharing four to a bed, and were roused in the morning to go back to Hogwarts.

Once they were there, it took less than three hours to gather the entire QDA in the Room of Requirement without sending a single text message or patronus. Absolutely no one was surprised.

"Don't take my railroad!"

Harry ignored the indignant squawk from the direction of the Monopoly board and its psychotic players, instead heading over to a corner he hadn't frequented in what felt like years. Really, he hadn't gone there with the sole purpose of relaxing since fourth year, so the statement wasn't wholly inaccurate.

"How's everyone's 'break' been?" he asked and grinned as the other three stifled groans.

"I'm going to die," Draco groaned. "I keep getting attacked by reporters every time I step foot in a public place. I was hiding in Garcia's office by the end."

"Speaking of which..." Ron said. "You got the papers signed, didn't you?"

"Well, of course," Draco said, rolling his eyes. "Did you doubt Garcia and I?"

"If I did, I shouldn't have."

There was a short scream behind Harry. "One day," he said calmly, "I'm going to burn that board in an exorcism ritual."

"I want proof that that thing's dead when you do," Ron said quickly.

Draco's phone vibrated and after glancing at it the Slytherin got to his feet. "Hey, I'll catch up with you later," he said.

"What? Where are you off to?" Hermione demanded and Draco paused.

"Well, um, someone might have broken into Hogwarts..."

"Ooh, let's go see Elle," Ron agreed, pushing himself off his chair and hurrying to stand by Draco. "This'll be fun."

Draco rolled his eyes but the other two were also getting up so he succumbed to having tag-alongs. "Fine," he said. "Harry, don't look so eager. You just saw everyone!"

"I just saw the current BAU. I haven't seen Elle in months," he replied. "Now quit chattering and lead the way, why don't you?"

Elle was not alone in her break-in. Reid was next to her in a corner of the library, and Harry could hardly be convinced to believe that Madame Pince had not noticed the two walking in, like Elle claimed.

"She let us in because I spent so much effort trying to protect the library," Reid muttered and Hermione beamed at him.

"You two are something special," Ron said.
"It's been months since I've seen either of you," Hermione said, pulling out a chair and dropping into it. "How have you been?"

"Surprisingly happy to be back to normal work," Reid chirped up immediately. "Much less immediate action and a lot more planning and deduction. You know, what I was actually trained to do."

"But you were introduced to this library for your troubles, so I hardly think that you left ill compensated," Draco pointed out.

"Oh, I never said anything against that," Reid agreed. The stack of books beside him was a rather stark testament to his statement. "I don't think I'll ever get used to the floo network, though, no matter how convenient it is."

"The first time I used it, I plopped out in Knockturn Alley," Harry said. "Probably almost got turned into Boy-Who-Lived stew by some hag, but Hagrid pulled me out of there."

"I feel like I need to compile a list of things your dad should never hear about," Elle mused, "but I feel the list would be so long I'd become very depressed."

"Probably," Harry agreed.

"Can't we just make portkeys for them?" Draco asked, glancing at the other three.

"They couldn't use them without a witch or wizard to activate them, I think," Hermione said, shaking her head. "It'd be more inconvenient. Besides, Harry's already made enough illegal ones that we should probably hold off on that."

Everyone looked at Harry, who blandly said, "So I made about thirty to take me to various places around America in case something goes horribly wrong. Sue me."

"I'm sure the Ministry would hate to do so, considering your glorified status," Elle said, amused. "Hey, Reid, when are you heading down to bother Snape?"

"Er, probably about now, before any of his classes start," Reid replied slowly. "Why?"

"I was going to look something up in case students come in here soon, so I suppose we both better hurry."

"I'll go with you," Hermione volunteered to Reid, pulling the strap of her bag over her shoulder. "Just in case you get stopped in the hall or something, which I don't think will happen but would be rather strange to explain. There are still some students here who never saw you, after all."

"Fine with me," Reid said.

"I've got to see Snape's face when he sees you broke in again," Ron said without pretense, hurrying to get up and avoid being left behind. Draco brightened at the prospect and followed them.

Harry raised one foot to start after the trio, a grin already across his face, but a thought made him pause and he stayed where he was. "I'll help you find what you're looking for," he said to Elle instead. "Before the first years come in to harass you."

"Oh, my knight in shining armor," she said dryly.

"We have a lot of knights in shining armor around here, actually," he replied and she rolled her eyes.
at him.

The other four left, quietly talking amongst themselves, and Elle moved over to another row of books to start scanning for a certain title. She sent Harry off in another direction to gather some books on the history of the foundation of international magical governments, which he decided not to ask about, and they met back up where they had started a couple minutes later.

"So what's up?" she asked without glancing at him, sorting through the books quickly.

"I just realized I haven't really seen you on your own since you kept checking up on me in the first world we found," he said, sitting on the edge of the table. Elle didn't stop what she was doing, though he saw a new tension in her shoulders."I was so out of it back then that there were a few questions I didn't think to ask and I thought that maybe I should just try to forget about it but... I think it's going to bother me more if I don't find out for sure."

"Ask away," she said, tone too casual.

"When you came to visit," he asked slowly, "were you keeping me on suicide watch?"

Her hands stopped their motions.

"And did you make sure I stayed connected to Hotchner because you knew I wouldn't kill myself while I was attached to him?"

She closed her eyes and her hands clenched into fists on the table.

"Thought so," he said quietly.

"Harry," she started carefully.

"I get it."

"No, you have to understand," she said. "We'd already lost so many people, and you and Blaise were both pulling away from everyone so quickly and so harshly that we thought you two were going to be the next casualties. I love Blaise, we all do, but I couldn't do anything for him. I didn't know him as well as others did, and I knew that he was around the rest of us enough that maybe we could wear him down. But you were out of our reach, and every time I went to see you..."

"I was getting worse, and I was dying," he agreed. "It's all right. Really, I understand."

"No, it's not all right. I knew that if we stayed around you longer, you'd just learn to fake everything and we wouldn't know how you were actually doing. You had to be on your own, especially if you were ever going to learn that you had to stop taking care of others and start thinking about yourself while you were...in that state. But if you were too much on your own, you'd have opportunities, and we didn't want to give you that."

She took a deep breath. "So, yes, I told Hotchner that I knew you wouldn't run if you were still attached to him, and that your magic would calm down if someone consistently stayed in between your magic and you. He thought I meant your unconscious magic that was trying to kill you; I don't think he ever knew I was worried about a conscious effort." She finally looked up at him. "I didn't want you to know about this."

"If this were anything else, I probably wouldn't be exactly pleased that you were all so focused on me when you had other things to be worried about, but... I understand this. You had a lot more to lose than I did by not doing anything. And I'm glad of all of you knew me well enough to get that I"
needed help." He glanced away, almost guiltily. "As for keeping me handcuffed to him... You were probably right."

"You pulled through on your own," Elle said cautiously.

He gave her a look filled with dry humor. "Now come on, the survival bit? I managed that. Forgiving my father? I wouldn't have done that if not for you, Elle. I don't think you know how much I owe you for that. Can you imagine how horrible it would have been, if I hadn't forgiven him by the time he came back? If he went through all of that, and then discovered I hated him? If he returned and I couldn't get over how much pain I'd been in?"

"I helped a little."

"You saved me," he corrected. "Perhaps more than you know. I would never have been able to forgive him if you hadn't made me consider what happened from his view, or any view besides my own, really. I was in too much pain for logical thinking."

"You would've managed it."

"Eventually. But it would've hurt a lot more if I'd gone through all of that on my own, the forgiveness and the dying. So... Thank you."

Elle smiled briefly at him. "You're one of us, practically. It's not like I could have just let you go off on your own like that without any guidance. Once a kid of the BAU, always a kid of the BAU."

Harry paused. "What do you think's going to happen when someone else eventually joins the team? I mean, if the BAU continues what it's doing now, occasionally taking magical cases, they'd have to introduce a newcomer to the magical world, but how would they explain the war and everything else?"

Elle snorted at the idea of it. "A lot of coffee and the offer for psychiatric help once the explanation's been given." She tilted her head at him. "Is it weird, that everything's over?"

"It's not over until all the trials are done, and we're still missing a few Death Eaters." He grimaced. "There's been no sighting of Lestrange. I'll bet someone's hiding her."

"Worried?"

He snorted lightly. "After everything, I don't want to be arrogant, but I think we can handle her when she shows up again. I know Dad's still looking for her, even if he claims he's leaving her case to the magical authorities, and I know that one day she's going to try to come after us again. But we know more than we did before, and as long as we don't get cocky or slow, we can win against anything she throws at us."

"If I knew any less about what she'd done, I think I could possibly feel sorry for her when she shows up again," Elle said. She went back to sorting through the books, calmer now that she knew Harry wasn't holding her scrutiny over him in one of his worst moments against her.

"What about you?" Harry asked. "How's everything been?"

"Transformations are getting less painful. I've been at the Ministry a lot because of that werewolf legislation they're trying to get passed. No one seems to care that I'm not actually an uncontrolled werewolf anymore, and they keep using me as an example for a good citizen of society. That cure's circulating through research groups now that more people are hearing about it, so maybe it's going to hit the markets soon."
"I hope so."

"Yeah. I'm still doing my own research with Draco, and can I just say how weird it is to be working with so many teenagers all the time? It's worse when you guys know a lot more about something than I do. My ego's really taking a blow. Or it would be if you guys hadn't taken over your own government, killed a Dark Lord, outmaneuvered some of the brightest minds in your country, etcetera."

"We're special."

"You're something."

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The winter passed without incident.

Well, it passed without incident considering what Hotch now considered to be an 'incident.' No one tried to kill his family, the Unsubs were all nonmagical, and not a single Dark Lord rose. Strauss once made an offhanded comment to him that she was sorry their workload was so terrible after he had just returned from the dead – eight times. He told her it was a refreshing relief.

Harry informed him that Gideon was having way too much fun with his new post as one of the DADA professors. Gideon had also unofficially been made the muggleborn go-to man, since he could best explain the differences in the worlds for them. The elitist response that should have been present never happened, since many of them had to admit that he'd already taught them very well as the DADA professor under Umbridge.

So when his phone went off at three in the morning, he knew it could only be a case.

It wasn't a case.

"Hotch, tell Harry to get over here right now," JJ said urgently on the other end.

"Do you need the rest of the team?"

"No, just Harry. Tell him to hurry."

Hotch put her on hold and called his oldest son as he sat up and started grabbing clothes. The phone rang, long enough that it went to voicemail. He hung up and moved to try again, but the phone vibrated in the next instant.

Behind Harry's voice there was an undercurrent of loud noises in an echoing chamber that he was rapidly moving away from. "Sorry, I was in the Great Hall."

"JJ needs you."

"I can have a group of us in less than five minutes-"

"She said she just needed you."

"I've never been to her house."

"Get here and I'll drive you over." He snagged his keys off the bedside table as he spoke, shoving them into his pocket.

"I'll be right there."
Harry hung up, and Hotch went back to JJ's line. "He's coming. What's going on? Is it safe enough for me to bring Jack?"

"You'll see," JJ said, almost annoyed. "And yes. I've got to go. Will, Will, grab that, get it before he-Ugh, I've really got to go." Then she hung up on him too.

Hotch woke Jack up, shaking his shoulders urgently but gently. "Jack, buddy, I need you to wake up." Jack stirred slightly, and Hotch shook him a bit harder. "You can go back to sleep in the car, but-

There was an odd sound from downstairs that he'd learned to recognize as the sound of a portkey. Jack sat up immediately. "Harry?" He looked at Hotch. "What's happening?"

"We need to go help JJ."

Harry was waiting impatiently for them in the living room, shoving the portkey into his pocket as he did so. He perked up when he saw them. "Jack's coming with us?"

"We're all sticking together," Hotch said firmly, and he ignored Harry's grin. "Grab the keys."

Behind him, he heard Harry mutter an *accio* in the direction of the kitchen while Hotch opened the front door and locked the house.

There was a popping noise in front of him, and he glanced up to see Harry already waiting by the car door. Jack hurried to his brother, effortlessly moving with his sharper senses despite his lack of sight. Harry ushered him into the back seat while Hotch opened the driver's seat door.

"Hey," Harry called and Hotch stuck up his hand to catch the keys midair. As he slid into the seat, put the keys in the ignition slot and turned the engine on, he took a moment to tell the side of himself that dismissed magic as cheating that Harry's assistance was certainly useful whenever he needed something to happen faster.

The drive to JJ's home went as quickly as he could manage without breaking speed limits too badly. He was sure, however, that Harry was switching some of the lights to their favor since they never hit a red light. Within what felt like a couple of minutes and an eternity, they were pulling into JJ's driveway.

"Jack, stay here," he ordered. "We'll be right back." Harry was already getting out of the car, but he waited until he got a nod from Jack before he hurried after Harry. His oldest son locked the car behind them with a dismissive wave of his hand and was knocking on the door with Hotch just a few steps after him.

Will opened the door a couple of seconds later and ushered them in. "Upstairs, second room on the right," he panted, face red like he'd been running for the last hour. The Hotchners followed his directions, and almost immediately skidded to a stop, bewildered.

The room was turning colors as they washed, from mauve to a horrible yellow to neon green, as half the objects in the room hovered between waist-level and eye-level. The crib had been secured to various parts of the room, including the window ledge and the door jam, through bungee cords. The rest of the items for the baby's room had been completely abandoned to the wind, and a couple were flying around at rather dangerous speeds.

"Help," JJ said flatly from where she was holding onto the crib with both hands and leaning all of her weight on it. Despite her efforts, the crib was still shakily hovering above the ground by a couple of inches.
"I think Henry's got magic," Harry said wisely.

"If I didn’t know you, I'd have some rather choice words for you about the obviousness of that and more important concerns right now."

"*Finite incantatem,*" Harry said, waving his wand. A couple of objects dropped to the floor. "Hm. One second."

"Do you remember this happening with Harry, or Jack?" JJ asked as Harry moved closer to her, casting protection charms around her and the crib in case a flying object came near them.

"No," Hotch said. Will came up beside him, carrying more bungee cords. Before he could use them, Harry cast sticking charms to the bottoms of the crib legs and combined his weight and JJ's to force the sticking charms to connect to the floor. "The first time I noticed something odd was when Jack started speaking parseltongue." And when Harry had started dueling the Woodsmarked Killer right in front of him, of course.

"Dad," Harry said cautiously. "Do you think this could have anything to do with...?"

The wand, Hotch realized. He lifted his head slightly in understanding, eyes widening.

"The way you too do that is a bit disconcerting," JJ said, no longer having to lean on the crib to keep it from going airborne. "Are you sure you two don't have a telepathic connection?"

"That'd be easier on the phone bill, surely, but no," Harry said. "Well, I guess this could confirm that..."

"But why would it have shown up so much earlier in Henry than either of you?"

"Well, the source of your line was, practically be definition, invisible. Hers has been anything but invisible."

"Source of what line?" Will asked.

Hotch and Harry exchanged another look, and then Harry turned away to start settling the items back to where they were supposed to be one by one. "The Invisibility Cloak gave my line magic because it was afraid it would never be passed on. Similarly, the Elder Wand knew it wouldn't be used if its owner was nonmagical, so it gave your line power too. JJ became the master of the Elder Wand when she took it from Dumbledore, the night she went into labor."

JJ stared at him for a long moment, and then she looked at Will. "I hope you liked magic while we were at Hogwarts."

"What's one more magical child when we've already got another twenty or so?" Will asked and JJ smirked in agreement and approval. "I'm not used to anything else by now. What wand is this, by the way?"

"The Elder Wand, one of the three Deathly Hallows," JJ said, and launched into an explanation. Harry spent the time soothing the room back to its normal state, one hand up with its palm towards anything that could hit him while his wand moved, sending restorative magic towards the charmed objects floating and flying around him.

Hotch watched his son working, a slight, soft smile coming over his face. With one hand protecting himself and the other setting everything back to normal, all of Harry's attention was divided but he wasn't straining nearly as badly as just about anyone else would have been. Hotch had heard
murmurings since the beginning of the war about how strong his son was, and he had no illusions
about the power Harry was wielding. His son was just cautious about how he used it.

A flicker of movement caught his attention, and he glanced to the side and saw JJ looking at him
with a smile. He raised an eyebrow slightly at her and her smile widened before she turned away to
watch Harry try to set everything back to normal.

"Harry, promise not to blow anything up in the next five minutes?"

"I'll try not to."

Hotch glanced at Will and JJ. "I'm going to bring Jack in. We brought him, just in case."

"I'll go with you, if you don't mind," Will said. "Nothing for me to do here."

They had reached the bottom of the stairs before Will came to a halt. "Your son doesn't have any
way of hearing us from here, does he?"

Hiding his amusement at the very nature of the question, Hotch said, "He does, but he's not going
to."

"What're the problems, with having a magical child?" Will asked immediately.

Hotch frowned slightly. "I'm not sure that should be your focus," he said cautiously.

"What? No, I'm just asking about problems so we know how to deal with them. I know the benefits
must outweigh any consequences."

"You're sure?"

"The first time I ever saw you smile was watching your son, and the happiest I've ever seen you was
about twenty seconds ago." Hotch blinked for a moment, startled. "So, problems?"

"Well... I think you're going to have issues with a lot of unintentional magic, like this."

"...What problems do you have with Jack and Harry?" Will asked when Hotch didn't offer anything
else.

"I'm going to have a heart attack if I don't get used to apparition," Hotch said.

"That's it?"

"Mine are old enough to be smart about how they use their magic. You're going to have other issues,
I expect."

"And...since he's got magic from a Hallow, like Harry and Jack do... Is he going to be stronger than
normal?"

Hotch sighed, shrugging slightly. "I don't know. These two incidents are the first times a Hallow
have given families magic, as far as we can tell. Harry's stronger than normal, but it seems like that's
because of his experiences and training."

Hotch brought Jack in and got him settled on the couch in the living room, where he almost
immediately went back to sleep. Harry finally finished putting the room back to normal, and JJ
collected Henry from his crib. The three of them came downstairs and went into the kitchen, where
Will was making coffee for everyone.
"Sorry about calling you out so early," JJ said to the Hotchners.

"It was seven my time. No problem," Harry pointed out.

Hotch waved off the apology. "You would've done the same." He glanced at Harry. "Don't you have class in a couple minutes?"

"It's Binns," Harry said unconcernedly. "He won't notice." He pulled out his phone as he spoke and added, "Probably should let someone know where I'm at before they go storm the Ministry or something. Again."

"I heard someone was starting a campaign to get you to be the Emperor of Magic," JJ said and Harry made a soft noise of protest.

"That petition needs to die a horrible death."

"I'm sure you're more than capable of fending off the hoards of attention from your adoring fans," JJ said calmly and Harry gave her a mournful look. "Oh dear. What happened?"

"I spent last Tuesday alternatively hiding in McGonagall's and Gideon's classrooms and sprinting around the school."

Hotch tried to muffle a snicker but some of it slipped out. Harry graciously did not point it out.

"They ambushed me on Wednesday."

JJ clapped a hand over her mouth, shoulders shaking.

"Well, ask a teacher for help?" Will suggested awkwardly when it became clear that the BAU agents weren't going to offer advice.

"Snape laughed at me. So I took to staying near him whenever they showed up because most of the group would back off and he stopped laughing once he had to threaten to hex a few. His suggestions were, uh, illegal, and required some potions ingredients that are on Ministry-restricted lists. Gideon just kind of patted my head sadly and pushed me back out of his office."

Henry woke up and immediately started crying, and JJ shifted away from the others, rocking the baby in her arms and murmuring softly to him. Will watched the two for a couple of moments, smiling softly. Hotch glanced at Harry and caught the wistful expression on his face, then turned away with a pang of forlorn longing. Of course, he realized, he'd never seen Jack as a baby, and he'd never gotten the opportunity to play that guardian role of big brother when Jack was too small to take care of himself.

There were a lot of things Harry had missed out on, Hotch knew, but all of a sudden, he understood something else. There was a lot that Harry had gotten in the last couple of years that no one else could ever have claimed. A student organization, over a hundred strong, at his beck and call if he so desired it, who relied on each other like family and often trusted each other more than their own kin. A blood family whose loyalty and strength had been tried enough times that no one could ever worry about its weakness. An experienced group of adults who not only treated him like a fellow adult but also like an equal, not out of politeness but out of refined respect. All that and so much more, made with Harry's own hands whether he realized it or not.

There was a shuffle behind him and he turned to see Jack sleepily walking over. "Sorry, buddy," Hotch said, reaching out to rub his shoulder as he came to stand between him and Harry. "Did we wake you?"
Jack nodded. "He's loud," he said, not gesturing but somehow making it understood that he was talking about Henry.

"Your brother was louder," Hotch said and Harry looked scandalized.

"Really?" Jack asked doubtfully.

"Oh yeah. He screamed the first week he came home and it sort of tapered off after that."

"Well, I'm glad I wasn't around then," Jack replied and Harry put a hand to his chest like he'd been shot.

"So unfair," Harry said, glancing at Will. "Can you believe this?"

"You'll live," Will said.

Harry turned to JJ. "Do I get any sympathy?"

"Considering how behind on sleep I am because of this little guy... No."

"Ugh, such a mean group."

Jack turned to JJ and Will, his sense of smell probably alerting him to their presence. "Hi!" After spending months with them during the Hogwarts siege, the two had claimed a special place of attention for him.

"Hey, Jack," Will said. "How've you been?"

"Good," Jack said, some of the tiredness beginning to leave his voice.

"How old are you nowadays?"

"Almost eleven."

Will glanced at Hotch, eyebrows going up with an unspoken question. "Jack's going to Hogwarts with Harry next year," Hotch said.

"Excited?" Will asked Jack.

Jack shrugged slightly. "I already know it really well, so not really. It won't be that different."

"You'll have class, though."

Jack grinned. "Yeah." He turned his head towards JJ, like he was about to say something, and then he paused. "Why's his nose so red?"

"He's been crying a lot," JJ said, absently thumbing Henry's bright nose for a moment. The infant reached up and touched her hand, quieting a bit. Harry smiled at the image, but Hotch paused.

"Jack," he said slowly and his youngest son looked up at him curiously. "Can you see what color his hair is?"

"Blond," Jack said after glancing at him quickly.

Harry's head snapped around, focusing on Jack. JJ and Will went quiet.

"Can you point to the lowest cabinet door near you?" Hotch asked, trying to keep any urgent
emotion out of his voice.

He should have known better than to try that with someone who's hearing was so excellent and Jack tilted his head at him with a small frown. Without saying anything else, though, he pointed at the cabinet door.

"Jack, can you see?" Hotch asked. The rest of the room was waiting for the answer with bated breath.

Jack nodded like he'd just been asked a particularly stupid question.

"You could see colors before, but you couldn't tell what they were or what you were looking at," Harry said quickly, rambling as he tried to clarify. "Do you know what you're looking at now? Is everything in focus?"

"Yeah," Jack said obviously. "I figured out how to shift my eyes without shifting anything else, so they fix it."

Hotch crouched in front of him. "Can you show me?"

Jack nodded. The light of the kitchen reflected gently off his eyes, and as Hotch watched, the point of entry for that light into his lens changed as the orb's convexity and concavity adjusted to a more lupine shape. Behind him, where Harry had moved, he heard a soft gasp. His son's eyes were now the form that had become so familiar over the last few months after the lycanthropy treatment, but even as he watched, Jack was making the shift back, and the eyes were human again.

"When did you realize you could do that?" Harry asked.

Jack shrugged. "A couple of weeks ago."

JJ laughed silently on the other side of the island as Hotch's eye twitched.

"You can see again," Harry breathed. "Why didn't you say anything?!"

Jack shrugged.

"Jack fixed his blindness and Henry got magic."

Will paused. "I'm making pancakes."

"Yes!" Jack cheered.

When the carb crash came an hour later, Hotchner shepherded his lot to the living room while JJ and Will tried to get Henry settled upstairs. Harry sprawled on the couch and Jack moved into his wolf form and dropped himself onto Harry's legs, head resting on his brother's stomach. With a couple of deep breaths, he was asleep.

"He's not blind anymore," Hotch murmured, still hardly believing it.

"I love magic," Harry sighed. He glanced upwards, where they could hear the low voices of Henry's parents. "If they don't mind, I'll cast a charm on the house so I'll know if he's using magic, and I can create a portkey here so I can come fix anything that goes badly wrong."

"Looks like you'll be supervising two underage wizards for the next couple of years."

Harry snorted. "Already supervising the lot back at Hogwarts. What's two more?" His fingers stroked through Jack's fur mindlessly, comforted by the feeling of his brother's back rising and falling with each breath.
Hotch watched him for a moment. He'd known that Harry had sought out signs of life from those around him, particularly during and after the war, since he'd been the subject of much of Harry's scrutiny. He'd always thought that it had given Harry comfort, but he had to reconsider that now. When he'd returned without working lungs, Harry had hardly paused, instead adapting within an instant. Now he couldn't help but wonder if Harry found signs of life to prove that he was still alive, that Harry had actually made it through the whirlwind of battles and everything else to come out the other end all right enough to be amongst the people who moved and breathed.

"I should probably get back to Hogwarts soon," Harry admitted softly. "History of Magic only goes for so long."

"I understand," Hotch said and Harry smiled sadly down at his brother's head. "Once you get him off you."

The blandly spoken words caught Harry off guard and he had to stifle a snort. "Yeah, there's that," Harry agreed. "I'll leave once he wakes up." He shook his head. "He's not blind... For weeks and he didn't even-!"

"Not mentioning something," Hotch said slowly, eyes moving up to the ceiling thoughtfully. "I wonder who he got that from."

"Hey, I resent that comment...mostly because it's true...but there's still resentment."

Hotch raised an eyebrow at him.

"Well, maybe not. More like resignation and defeat."

"I thought so." Harry smiled slightly, then bit back a yawn. "Get some sleep, Harry," Hotch suggested. "I'll wake you up when Jack starts stirring."

"But..."

"Sleep. You look like you need it."

"I always look like I need it."

"You almost always do." He reached over and ruffled Harry's hair. Harry leaned into the gesture subtly. "I'll confirm there was a small catastrophe if anyone asks back at Hogwarts. Now sleep."

Harry, unsurprisingly, refused the suggestion quietly. He turned his head to look straight up at Hotch. "I think I'm going to do it. Everyone else was right."

"Have you considered the consequences?" Hotch said, not even bothering to ask what he was talking about.

"Yes. The issue right now with introducing the magical and nonmagical communities is that the former would be completely swamped by the latter. But if we take the process slowly, the magical community should start to grow quickly when economic benefits come in from a larger market."

"It sounds like you've spoken to our local economics experts."

Harry smiled briefly, but it was strained. "I think it'll work."

"If it goes wrong, it could go very badly."

"We'll do it slowly and we can back out if we need to. Do you think it'll work? I mean, I'm probably
going to do it anyway, but..."

"I think you'll pull it off, if anyone can," Hotch said. "Just be thorough, be careful, and mobilize support. If the magical community isn't enthusiastic about it, you won't get anywhere with it."

Harry nodded. "We'll let more people in the government in on the secret, and then we'll add to the list of family members who can know. Word of mouth might just carry it from there, but internationally we're going to have to make sure everyone else is making similar moves. Britain can't just come out about it before the rest of the world by decades. That could be a catastrophe."

Hotch brushed the bangs off his head as he kept talking, discussing the details Hotch hadn't gotten around to pondering yet and considering who might make a good ally for it. Hotch let him go, no longer trying to get him to rest. There were plans and plots and schemes swirling over their head, hopes for what he could accomplish within a couple weeks to make gains in a couple years. Beneath Hotch's hand as he stroked Harry's head, he could feel a burning ambition to create something good to offset all the evil he'd seen done by the secrecy of magic.

Someone would turn the situation around and use their new knowledge of magic to create mischief, or to take the lack of a Statute to control anyone without magic more easily than they ever could before. There would always be those people. But for everyone else, it was a chance to grow into a more wondrous society than they had dreamed possible alone.

Harry's hair was soft between his fingers. He leaned against the physical contact, perhaps even consciously, as the hand he hadn't wound into Jack's fur gestured in the air. At some point, Jack woke up and rested his chin on Harry's sternum, watching him animatedly talk. Jack's eyes flickered to Hotch's and the two of them shared a grin.

Maybe the war was over and the dark lord defeated.

That didn't mean there was going to be downtime at the Hotchner house.

Chapter End Notes

This was originally the final chapter, but it ended with Hotch telling Harry to go to sleep and Harry finally got some rest. After thinking about it... I don't think that would have happened. None of them are going to rest, I mean, really.
"But though Death searched for the third brother for many years, he was never able to find him. It was only when he attained a great age that the youngest brother finally took off the Cloak of Invisibility and gave it to his son. And then he greeted Death as an old friend and went with him gladly, and, equals, they parted this life." - J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*

He never knocked on the door when he came to visit.

The door was always locked and required at least fifteen countercharms in the middle of the night, like now, and there was no sense in making his father answer the door every time he stopped by when he was over just as often as he was home.

The house was quiet. The arrangement of the living room hadn't changed since he had arrived decades ago, although the furniture and carpet had all been replaced at least once due to various incidents. He glanced around, silently listening to his magic to make sure nothing was wrong, then walked to the back door and slid it open.

Within minutes, a timber rattlesnake appeared on the patio, mostly masked in shadow. *Harry,* he hissed in greeting.

"Everyone doing okay?"

*Always. Are you staying long?*

"*No. But it's nice to see you.*"

The rattlesnake, a great-grandchild of Kiyo's, slipped off the patio and back into the grass. *Harry* closed the door and settled at the kitchen table to wait.

He'd barely had time to contemplate whether or not he should make tea when Jack loped into the room, muscular body making no sound on the carpeted floor of the living room nor the tiled kitchen despite his size. *Harry* swore he was seeing more grey and white in Jack's fur each time he saw him. He stood up, becoming human at the same time he slowed to a halt.

"Ready?"

*Harry* took his hand, and both of them vanished from the kitchen. When *Harry* opened his eyes, they were standing in a graveyard. In the summer daylight, it would have been beautiful with the flowers and foliage that the gardeners had taken such care of.

*Jack* had an extendable pouch attached to his belt. He stuck his hand in it and pulled out a whiskey bottle. Without saying anything, he opened it up and dumped half of it on the grave they had come to stand in front of.

"Ass."
Harry snickered. Jack took a swig of the whiskey bottle and passed it to Harry, who swallowed the same amount before upending the rest on the grave.

"Waste of a good whiskey," Jack said.

"His dead body will still appreciate it more than us," Harry pointed out, eyes flickering over the top of the headstone. Ethan Robert Hotchner.

Jack wrinkled his nose. "Yeah, I really hate that crap."

"Ready to go back?"

"No, we need to make another stop first."

Harry groaned. "Please, please don't do this to me."

"It's not my fault you cry every time we go."

"You do too!"

"I never said I didn't!"

He grabbed onto Harry's arm before Harry could protest further and apparated them away again. They arrived in another cemetery, but both sat on the grave immediately, plopping down without any decorum.

"He'd laugh at us for this," Harry mumbled irritably, putting his elbows on his knees and resting his chin in his palms.

"Nah, he'd ask us to share and then poke fun at all the mistakes we made in the sauce," Jack said. He opened the pouch again and pulled out a large Tupperware container and two forks. "I'd just like to point out that he, Sean, and you all taught me to cook and your favorite past times have consistently been making fun of my cooking."

"Not our fault you burn everything." Harry took the forks while Jack opened the Tupperware.

"I don't burn everything."

"Yeah, I suppose. You haven't burned the water yet."

Jack flicked him in the forehead and stuck his tongue out, simultaneously setting the lid aside and snagging a fork back from Harry.

"What time are Dad and Uncle Sean expecting us?"

"I don't know," Harry sighed.

"Aren't you supposed to know everything, with all your fingers in every pie?" Jack chided.

"No, I just know a bunch of maniacs, and together we have our collective fingers in all the pies by specializing in what we know and do."

"So shouldn't one of your specialties be your family schedule?"

"Nah, my go-to guy for that is Dad."
"...Dad remembers these things about half as often as you do..."

Harry stuck his fork in the Tupperware and twirled it. He pretended not to notice when Jack growled irritably at the pasta sauce that spun off and landed on his hand. "That explains why I just show up whenever I feel like it at his house. Statistically speaking, I have a one in three chance of arriving on the right day of an event I forgot about."

"Are you making an explanation for why you arrived seven hours late to Garcia's fifty-fifth birthday party?"

"I don't know what you're talking about, surely."

"That's because you forgot about the party."

Harry smirked and stuck his fork in his mouth. He made a show of tasting the pasta. "Hmm. Hmmmm. Hmmm."

"Shut up or I'll shove more down your throat." He glanced down for a moment to scoop up a sausage. "Plans for world domination next week?"

"Why?" Harry asked, mouth full. "I practically run it already. The only person I could arguably steal it from would be Garcia. She's got just as many contacts but just doesn't act on them."

"Point. What're you going to do with the world you've got?"

Harry chewed for a moment. "I don't know. We're still transitioning slowly, and it probably doesn't need me anymore, but... Well, it's my brain child. I want to be there while it grows."

Both of them jumped as someone appeared in front of them. Jack had a mouth packed with spaghetti as he looked up at the newcomer.

"I should've known," Henry said and sat down next to them. His knees cracked. "Shut up," he added before either of them could say anything.

"It reflects badly on my own age if I call you old," Harry pointed out. "Spaghetti?"

Henry pulled out a covered bowl from his satchel. "I brought chicken Parmesan."

Jack whimpered as Henry pulled off the cover and freed the aroma. "Okay, half here and half at the next stop?"

The other two nodded in agreement. Henry stowed his meal away and conjured a fork to eat Jack's food with the Hotchners. "How long have you guys been here?"

"Less than five minutes. We didn't think anyone else would be stopping by," Harry said. "Not since everyone is going to be at our house in a couple hours anyway."

"Not everyone," Henry corrected. "That's why I stopped by to see the ones who couldn't make it."

Jack took a breath to respond, then broke down on the exhale, sobbing over his fork of spaghetti and tomato sauce with sausage bits. He hiccupped painfully.

"I wasn't first this year!" Harry said.

Henry rolled his eyes at Harry and turned to Jack, rubbing his arm comfortably. "It's okay. I cry most of the time I come here. Just take a couple of deep breaths, and-" He made the mistake of
glancing at Harry for help. "Oh, not you too!"

Harry's face was buried behind both hands. His fork was lying forgotten in the Tupperware. "Don't look at me," Harry begged, shoulders shaking.

"You two have got to be kidding me. It's been years!" His phone rang. He cast a silencing charm on it.

"But- But he's not coming to dinner tonight with- with everyone!" Jack gasped out. "And- And everyone else is going to profile each other shamelessly, and- and you know that he and Garcia would have been the gossipers if- if he were still here." He heaved in a huge breath.

Harry let out a pathetic sound. His hands were still masking his face.

Henry groaned. "Some teenager just hurried past the cemetery gate. They're probably going to call the police about a group of old guys crying on the ground in front of a grave."

"He'll call Life Alert for us," Jack managed to get out.

"We're already in a cemetery. The police are just going to ask us which plot we want and get the gravediggers," Harry disagreed, sniffing.

Henry put a hand down, running his fingers through the grass beneath them. "Sorry," he said. "We'll have to come back for you another time, when the police aren't coming to arrest us for breaking into the cemetery."

"You're crying too!" Jack said, pointing in accusation.

"Shut up!"

Harry waved his wand over the setting in front of them. The forks cleaned themselves off and the lid went back onto the Tupperware. Harry handed it all to Jack, who packed it up into his bag again. He stood up, wincing only once, and patted the tombstone in farewell.

"Miss you," he whispered, feeling his heart tug painfully in his chest.

"Next stop?" Henry asked, voice cracking.

"I don't like getting older," Jack complained. "Everyone dies and everything hurts."

Harry took both of their arms this time and pulled them through space to the next spot.

This time, their interruption was waiting for them. Blaise, Ginny, and Luna were sitting around a Monopoly board, and all of them looked up when the Hotchner and LaMontagne-Jareau trio appeared.

"Why are you crying?" Blaise asked slowly.

"I'm not crying, you're crying," Jack wept.

"He's our third stop tonight," Harry said, trying to take a deep breath. "Okay, okay, I've got this." He sat down next to Luna. Jack dropped down next to him, shoulders slumped pathetically, and Henry took the final spot between Jack and Blaise, completing the lopsided circle.

"Are you guys okay?" Ginny asked doubtfully. Her hair was, remarkably, still half-red after the years.
"No. Don't talk to me. I'm not here." Ginny reached over the board and patted Jack sympathetically on the head. He responded by pulling out forks and the Tupperware. Ginny took out her own bowl of Greek salad and Henry pulled out the chicken parmesan.

"Any other stops for you three tonight?" Blaise asked before he bit into Henry's dish.

"No, I think this is enough agony," Henry said. "I just meant to visit these two."

"Who was the third?" Ginny asked the Hotchners.

"Grandpa Asshole," Jack said.

"I always forget you guys never got along with him," Blaise said. "It's so unlike your family."

Harry glanced at his phone as it vibrated, then hushed it and put it back in his pocket. Jack's almost immediately rang after his, but he too dismissed it.

"Could be important," Luna said.

"It's three in the morning," Harry said. "If it were really important, they'd know better than to do anything less than break my door down to wake me up. Anyway, why are you guys here at this time?"

"We always go around and visit everyone before a party," Ginny explained. "It feels appropriate. What about you?"

"Dad's still an early riser, and he'll make us clean the whole house and get everything done so there's no chance we'll get to sneak off to do this later."

"You guys do have magic," Blaise pointed out.

"We don't cook or do a lot of the chores with magic," Jack said, still hiccupping.

"Why not?"

"It's more satisfying not to use magic," Harry said. He was finally wiping away the last of his tears. Ginny was still watching them with amusement all over her face. "Why does he bother hosting at his house when someone else is going to do everything for him anyway?"

"It's an excuse to get us to clean the house without having to actually ask us," Jack said. Now he was wheezing.

"His arthritis is acting up more than it used to," Harry explained.

"Can't he just take medicine for that?"

"I know this is hard to believe, but my dad can be stubborn sometimes."

She smirked at him. "Your dad? I can't believe my ears. Someone pass the spaghetti this way." Before she took a bite, she asked, "Who's cooking for the party?"

"Sean and Harry," Jack said.

"I'll come help you guys clean if I get free food out of it."
"Thanks," Harry said, "but you probably need to get back home and I think Dad likes being able to order us around without an audience."

---

The sun was just beginning to poke above the treeline when the trio landed back in the Hotchner kitchen. Instead of an empty room, they were greeted with by a cluster of furiously concerned faces. "I take it I'm about to learn what all the missed calls on my phone were about," Harry said slowly.

"I didn't hear my phone buzz," Jack automatically interjected.

"I surrender," Henry added.

"You three are so dead," Garcia slowly enunciated. "So. Dead."

"What's wrong?" Harry asked.

"Bellatrix Lestrange was sighted nearby," Morgan said.

"Credible sighting?"

"Very. Kingsley was meeting with the local politicians and spotted her."

Harry glanced at the papers sprawled over the tables and counters for the paper-enthusiasts. The rest were using various methods of technology to scan files and other information sources. "...Right. Well, we'll leave you to your profiling, and we'll start cleaning the house."

"Wait, I want to hear more," Jack protested.

Harry grabbed the back of his shirt and Henry's. "Yeah, but I'm still responsible for keeping you alive and bringing up the fact that we didn't answer our phones for three hours is definitely going to get you killed so how about we start in the dining room?"

It was only when Jack was vacuuming that Henry asked Harry, "Do you think they'll ever stop profiling?"

"Never," Harry said with a grin. "Never."

"All but three of them have retired!"

"Only because they couldn't physically keep up with their job anymore," Harry said. "Besides, they all still consult often, and they use their skills in whatever they do now." After a moment of hesitation, he said, "I always thought that was why Rossi wrote."

The tiled or wooden floors had been swept and washed, the carpets had been vacuumed, and the house had been cleaned in what small ways were possible when the doorbell rang at a reasonable time in the morning. Jack answered it while Harry and Henry were discussing whether or not they should tell the BAU to move out of the kitchen and into the dining room so they could start cooking.

"Uncle Sean! Come on in!"

Sean stepped into the house. Henry and Harry could hear him taking off his shoes. After a pause, he asked, "Who died?"
"You're going to have to be more specific," Jack said dryly.
"Everyone's here and way too quiet."
"Oh, a case came up."
"You're all retired!" Sean shouted towards the kitchen.
"I'm not!" Reid protested immediately.
"Come in here and I'll fight you with my walker!" Garcia shouted after him.
"My mom's not the sort to holler across the house," Henry called, "but she does still work with the FBI." They could hear her snickering in the kitchen.
"Lestrange showed up. They're trying to take her down," Jack explained as he walked with Sean into the dining room, where Henry and Harry were at.
"Lestrange? Isn't she the one who killed Aaron, like, the twelfth time or something?" Sean asked.
"Yeah," Harry said. "She's been lying low since the end of the war."
"Then why did she come back now?"
"I think you'd be better off asking the profilers in the other room about that," Harry said. "Now, incidentally enough, you're just in time to help us. While you're asking them, politely shoo them from the kitchen so we can start cooking."

Sean gave him a mock salute. "On it!"

---

"Where were you guys this morning?" Sean asked an hour later when they had switched rooms with the BAU. "JJ said they couldn't get a hold of any of you."
"We went to go visit Rossi and Gideon," Jack said.
"At three in the morning?"
"Don't you dare question my life choices."
"I won't. I have too much pride to dwell on matters like that."

Morgan hurried into the room. "Guys, we'll be right back. We just need to check something out."
"Oh, for fuck's sake," Sean groaned. He gestured irritably at Harry. "At least take the Light Lord with you! We've got one so we might as well use him."
"I'll be faster than a car," Harry pointed out.
"Hotch, do you mind if we bring your kid?" Morgan called back to the dining room."
"Tell them to stay here! Lestrange will use him against us if she can!"
"Does he even know which one I was asking about?" Morgan muttered.
"Probably doesn't care," Sean said. "Harry, it'll make me feel a lot better if you go with them"
anyway."

"I was already planning to."

Hotch's eyes narrowed when Harry walked towards him as they were heading out the door. "No."

"I'm coming with you," Harry responded, walking past him on Morgan's heels.

Hotch turned sharply, giving someone else his irritable displeasure. "Don't look at me!" Sean squawked. "He's your kid!"

Ahead of Harry, he saw JJ and Prentiss, neither of whom had ever gotten tired of Harry's tendency to cause exasperation after all these years, exchange grins.

"We'll be back," Hotch told everyone staying behind in his house and closed the door. He pointed at Harry, who was just about to get into Morgan's car. "Do exactly what I say and don't argue with me."

Harry stopped, one shoe in the leg space of the passenger's seat. He leaned his forearm on the roof of the car. "Now, Dad," he said, "when have I ever argued with you?"

"Almost every day for fifty years. Get in the back."

"You could've just called shotgun," Harry said, not moving while Prentiss's car started to back out of the driveway beside them.

"Harry, move your butt or they're going to be refilming Civil War about our house."

Morgan wasn't quick enough to hide an amused snort.

As Hotch took the passenger's seat and Harry settled into the back, Harry asked, "Where are we going?"

"Stake out a couple of spots we think Lestrange might be going."

"Why do you think she came back now?"

"She's probably worried she'll never get another chance to get revenge," Morgan said, glancing over his shoulder to make sure he didn't hit the mailbox. "It's likely she's suffering from a degenerative disease or curse, since we know no one is getting close to her scent."

"Why did she never come back before?"

"She took a lot of damage in the war. She might not have physically been able to for a while, and then your position was too strong to try attacking either of you. As the years passed, she would have been less interested in striking immediately, until she was told that she was running out of time."

Harry glanced back at the house they were leaving. "And you don't think she'll stop here immediately?"

"She knows there is going to be serious warding on the house. She'd try somewhere else first."

"Quantico's wards are just as strong," Harry said.

"Yeah, but I'll bet she doesn't know that," Morgan replied.
She didn't show up that day, so the group returned in the evening for dinner. Local aurors took over the case – and with it, the notes that the BAU had added, as well as their suggestions and other bits of advice for handling Lestrange – which left them free to focus on other matters if they so chose to. They did not, which meant the dinner topic was mostly about Lestrange. The non-profilers at the table just watched in amusement.

"She's not an idiot, though," Morgan said.

"Yeah, but even the smartest people do desperate things when they're backed into a corner," Elle pointed out. "Besides, she was always a little unsteady."

"Do you think they'll get her?" Sean whispered into Harry's ear, leaning down far enough that no one else could hear.

Harry's eyes flickered down the table to where Hotch was quietly talking with Reid. "I think they'll keep looking until they do, now that she's shown her face," Harry replied. "It might take a while, but they'll get her."

"Is Aaron coming out of retirement for this?"

Harry smiled. "Maybe just as a consultant."

"Has he ever stopped consulting?"

"In the way that I finally stopped being Minister of Magic."

"So you mean...he only officially stopped."

"Exactly."

"Keep an eye on him, would you?"

"Did you really think you needed to ask that?"

Sean smirked knowingly and leaned back.

---

Harry stayed at the Hotchner house even after the party clean up. His and Jack's rooms had never been cleaned out since they were over regularly, and he sank into his bed gratefully after his long day. About a half hour later, he got up again, checked the wards on the house, and then tried once more to get back to sleep. Shuffling down the hall, stairs, and first floor aroused his attention, and less than twenty minutes later he was following the smell of freshly brewed coffee into the kitchen.

"If I Vanished your coffee and your coffee machine," Harry said from the doorway, "would you sleep?"

"I'd just go over these files more grumpily," Hotch replied honestly, not even looking up from the file he was scanning through.

Harry sighed and sat down next to him. "Pass me some." Hotch handed him three files without even looking. "Rookwood...Rosier...Avery... You think she met up with some old acquaintances?"

"The other way around. If they heard she was on the move, they would go to her. All three have
disappeared from where they were supposed to be within the last four months."

"Hm."

It was early in the morning when Hotch made a grab for his coffee and completely missed. Harry
turned to tell him to go to sleep and promptly slipped off his chair, barely catching himself in time.

"Bed," Hotch said. Before Harry could protest, he added, "Both of us. We'll go over this again after
breakfast."

As Harry stood, he snorted, "During breakfast, more like."

Hotch smiled slightly, and that was enough of an agreement for Harry.

"You still too stubborn to let me apparate you up?"

"I'll deteriorate entirely if I don't keep moving in any way I can," Hotch said. Harry pretended not to
notice the way his hands tightened as well as they could around the back of his chair and the edge of
the table as he pushed himself up, or the faint tremble that ran through his body at the strain of
standing after sitting in one position for so long. "I don't have the magic you've got." With complete
objectivity and no jealously, he added, "You'll probably be over a hundred by the time you have
back aches."

"You know, most of your arthritis is probably from long hours hunched over and chasing bad
guys."

"You're probably not wrong." He moved slowly out of the kitchen. Harry kept pace with him.
"Worth it."

"Your body would be doing a lot better if you got more sleep," Harry chided. "Or, you know, took
medication, magical or not."

"It wouldn't make that much of a difference."

"It would, actually. Especially the sleep thing." They took the next few paces in silence. "Is it always
the same dream?"

"No. I can never communicate with anyone, but the people around me and what they're doing
usually changes. Whatever the changes, though, they always die."

Hotch bent beside Harry, who quietly watched him turn into a leopard. It was just about the only
action he could perform without hesitation or pain nowadays. The leopard form had no fewer
problems with arthritis, but he was steadier at climbing the stairs and he removed the temptation for
anyone walking with him to offer their arm to help him up.

Harry moved a couple stairs behind, not bothering at conversation when Hotch was done talking. He
kept his eyes fixed on his father in one of the rare times of the day that he could get away with
unabashedly making sure his footing was sure and he wasn't going to fall. Hotch couldn't see him do
it when Harry was behind him so he never complained.

At the top of the stairs, Harry turned the opposite direction as Hotch and went towards his room.
"Good night," he called behind him.

A couple of moments passed as Hotch made it to his own room and transformed back into a human.
"Good night, Harry."
In the morning, as per usual at his dad's house, the first thing Harry did, even before he went to the bathroom, was to go wake Hotch up. Jack did the same on the days he stayed there, which sometimes overlapped with Harry's but more often than not covered the days that Harry wasn't at his father's house.

Harry patted his shoulder. Hotch's eyes flickered open immediately. "I know you probably wanted to sleep more," he said, which was a lie because Hotch hated sleeping like he hated thunderstorms that played with his joints and dark lord lieutenants who came back after years of hibernation to come near his family, "but it's almost ten o'clock."

Hotch sat up. "If you get breakfast," he said, "I'll get the mail."

"I could just summon it."

"Or I could go get it."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Magic is amazing."

"It's cheating."

It wasn't yet lunchtime when their house was, once again, filled with profilers and one tech analyst. Harry couldn't pretend to be surprised that they had all gathered to track down the last of the Death Eaters. What had been the BAU split up into four separate groups to follow their missing Unsubs, hoping that someone might find something that could lead them to the rest of the group.

Harry left them to it. Even if he could have helped, they were having too much fun for him to cut their chase close sooner. Lestrange and the others wouldn't kill anyone, too focused on coming after the BAU, and Harry could keep an eye on everyone in danger from the kitchen. He put his efforts to keeping the group fed. It was one of Gideon's recipes for lunch and one of Rossi's for dinner. Garcia smiled at him, and he knew she understood even if the rest were too focused on the psychopaths and sociopaths they were hunting.

Morgan didn't say anything, but he followed Harry to the kitchen with dirty plates after dinner. "Has Hotch been sleeping?"

Harry let out a soft huff of amusement. "No, of course not. But that's not unusual."

"He's snappy and distant."

Harry stilled, the plates in his hands halfway to the sink. After a moment, he set them down. "I think he knows this is his last case," he said quietly. "To work in any manner, as an agent or a consultant."

"What do you mean?" Morgan asked without an instant's pause to try to reason it out on his own.

"You already know," Harry said. He took Morgan's plates from him and set them on top of the ones already in the sink. For no reason other than the sake of doing it, he flipped the faucet on with his wand. Morgan went back to the dining room without saying anything else.

---

Two weeks passed. They weren't any closer to catching Lestrange or any of the others, but they weren't as stressed as they could have been when they weren't killing anyone. As far as the team
knew, the four were unaware that they were being sought after.

Hotch was definitely getting more restless. Harry heard him up at all hours, and it became part of his
daily routine to stay up with him into the early morning before forcing him to bed. Any sooner than
midnight was impossible. He snapped at Harry for it and for any other attempts Harry made to
hamper him, and his resistance was as strong as it had ever been.

One night, as the bags under Hotch's eyes were getting deeper and his temper was getting shorter,
Harry pulled his wand out from his pocket and prepared to stun him. Before he could even raise his
wand to start the spell, Hotch turned, shot to the ground in the same moment he shifted into a
leopard, and slammed his shoulder into Harry's legs. Harry toppled over with a surprised shout, his
wand went flying out of his hand, and he found himself pinned by two paws on his chest while
yellow eyes glared down at him. The snarling muzzle was white with age.

"Let me up," Harry whispered.

A tense moment passed. Then one of Hotch's ears flickered, as if dismissing a fly or hiding
uncertainty, and then he stepped off Harry, turning his back to him immediately and returning to his
files without saying anything. Harry collected his wand from behind the couch and watched over
Hotch silently until four, when Hotch was exhausted enough that he didn't put up any protest at
being sent to bed.

Harry felt like his head had barely hit his own pillow when he was being shaken awake. "Harry-
Harry!"

He jolted up, throwing aside his exhaustion. "What? What's wrong?!"

Hotch stared at him, eyes wide. "...Never mind," he breathed. "Never mind."

Harry frowned in concern, throwing the blanket aside. "You need more sleep," he said.

"The team's coming over... Lestrange, we need to get her."

"She won't get to any of us while we're here, and she definitely won't get past me. You need rest if
you're actually going to catch her."

"No..."

"And I'm going to get you a Dreamless Draught so you'll stop having that bloody nightmare."

Hotch's entire expression twitched in irritation at the mention of a medication. "I don't need it."

"You thought I couldn't hear you because you were stuck in limbo or I was dead, didn't you?" Harry
snapped. "That's why you woke me up. To make sure we were both okay."

Hotch's lips pressed into a firm line as he glared at Harry.

"I'll be right back."

It took him less than ten minutes to get ahold of the potion. Hotch was sitting on Harry's bed when
he returned and Harry pressed the vial into his hand. Neither of them said anything. Hotch stared
furiously at Harry; Harry looked back determinedly. Finally, gritting his teeth, Hotch tossed back the
contents of the vial and shoved the empty glass back at him. Harry tucked it into his pocket and
reached out at the right moment to catch his father as the potion took effect. He lowered him to the
pillow and covered him with the blanket.
Someone apparated into the house just as he finished tucking him in. Harry walked out of his room, wand at the ready out of habit, but Jack was waiting for him on the couch downstairs.

"Is Dad okay?" Jack whispered as Harry sat down next to him.

"I think he's terrified that he's losing his mind and that he knows he wouldn't have a clue if he were," Harry murmured back.

Fear was etched across Jack's expression but he didn't ask the question that was burning in his heart.

"He's fine. But he's not sleeping, and it's messing with his head just like it messes with anyone's."

"Is he still not sleeping because of that stupid dream?" Jack snapped, fear dissolved by growing annoyance.

"You probably don't remember," Harry said, trying to stay calm, "but Dad has good reason to be afraid of being invisible."

"I do remember that!" Jack hissed.

"I just mean that you don't remember how he reacted when he got back," Harry said quickly. "He never admitted to me that he ever had problems with it until years afterward, and it took him months to visibly recover. I'm sure he still had issues later that he hid from everyone."

Jack's face pinched, looking remarkably like Hotch's had minutes before when Harry had handed him something he hadn't wanted.

"He can't keep functioning like this."

"I know. I'm going to stay here until the case is over."

"That could be months and you need to show your face in Britain at some point."

"This is more important," Harry said quietly. "Britain can run itself without my interference." He gave a small smile, and Jack's frustration with him ebbed. "But I'd appreciate your help."

"Idiot," Jack muttered. "Of course I'll stick around."

Harry got up to start making breakfast. He glanced back towards Jack as he asked, "Snape told you that I asked him for the draught, I'm guessing?"

"Yeah."

"Nosy bugger."

---

Hotch woke up a couple hours later. Harry was reading a book in a chair beside him, feet up on the edge of the bed.

"Lestrange hasn't shown up because she's waiting for one of us be alone and weak," Hotch said without any introduction. "We've been moving in groups because we've been looking for her, even if she hasn't known that. If she really does have a degenerative disease or something similar that means she's running out of time, she won't be strong enough to risk taking on more than one of us at once. Her best bet would be to take me out immediately, since she's most infuriated at my family but she
doesn't stand a chance now of being able to kill you or Jack."

Harry blinked at him.

"If we give you a polyjuice potion of me, you could probably pull me off well enough that she'd come after you. We'd be waiting for her, of course, but even if she got close you could fight her easily. That would be the quickest way to lure her out, and once we have her we could find out where the other three are, if they're not tailing her already. They might be moving as a group now to make sure they can finish what they started."

"Well," Harry said, closing his book, "isn't sleep a wonderful thing?"

Hotch rolled his eyes at him as he threw back the blanket. "It was what you said before the sleep, actually. You said 'She definitely won't get past me.' You were right."

"Damn straight," Harry muttered as he followed Hotch out the door.

---

There was very little to it, in the end.

Harry took the potion. His father was talking to him through an invisible earpiece the whole time, mostly telling Harry he didn't grumble under his breath that much. Harry could hear the rest of the team laughing near him while he tried not to grin.

The aurors caught Rookwood, Rosier, and Avery behind Lestrange. She hardly noticed, too focused on Harry. The only thing that didn't go according to plan happened then – Harry had been loading groceries into the car, in the moment they had expected Lestrange to attack him, and then instead of an auror stepping forward to arrest Lestrange Jack leapt from the trunk, startling Harry badly enough that he dropped to the ground, and slammed into Lestrange. He snarled, lupine teeth inches from her neck.

"**Incarcerous,**" Harry said, waving his wand at her. Ropes bound her, slipping around Jack without tying him as well, and she turned her head to glare at him. "**Expelliarmus.**" He caught her wand.

"Jack, you could have waited with everyone else."

Jack swished his tail in a manner that Harry was sure was supposed to be interpreted as a very rude hand gesture.

Harry stood up. The team was already on the street, heading towards them quickly. Lestrange was put on her feet just as they reached Harry. Hotch turned his head, meeting Lestrange's gaze briefly, then turning away in casual disregard. She opened her mouth, but before she could scream at him, the auror holding her arm apparated.

"Probably the fastest, cleanest end to a case you guys have ever had," Harry said, brushing himself off and now eagerly awaiting to turn back into his regular body.

"For a case of this complexity, definitely," Prentiss replied.

"I'd say let's party," Morgan said, "but..."

"I want a nap, screw you," Elle flatly said. "I haven't slept in **forever**."

"All of you have insomnia problems and are going to end up with health issues if you don't already," Harry said, gesturing at all of them.
"Please don't speak with that much sass in Hotch's voice," Reid pleaded. "It's so unnerving."

"Okay, how about party at..." Garcia checked her watch. "Five. Enough time to sleep and shower and then get back to Hotch's."

After a rumble of assent, Harry apparated Hotch and Jack back to the house with him. "I think that sleep thing is going to apply to us too," Harry said.

"Nah, I'm ordering pizza for lunch, catching up on Doctor Who, and then getting ready for that party," Jack said. He nudged Hotch as he passed. "Anything you want in particular?"

"Not really. I'm sure you'll pick well."

Jack flashed him a grin over his shoulder.

Harry groaned in relief as he felt the potion wear off. "Okay, Dad, I like you and all, but I officially don't like being you." He moved towards the stairs, already planning a change of clothes.

"Wait, both of you," Hotch said. Jack stopped a couple of steps from the kitchen; Harry paused with one foot on the bottom stair. "I know I've been...rough the last few weeks-"

"We know," the boys chorused, smirking.

Hotch didn't dignify that with a response. "And you both have still stuck with me. You've been patient and kind throughout this ordeal."

"It wasn't really an ordeal, though," Jack said. "I mean, it sucked and all, but we knew you guys were going to catch her."

"Shh, he's trying to apologize."

Jack rolled his eyes and went into the kitchen. "You two apologize over the weirdest things!"

"I just meant to say thank you!" Hotch tried.

"Considering you literally spoon fed me for years when I was incapable of doing no more than planting my face in my food and sucking it up, you don't need to say thank you for a long time," Jack called back.

"I have never heard a more disturbing description of babies eating, Jack, so thanks for that image," Harry said.

He came back downstairs a few minutes later. A part of him had expected Hotch to be asleep on the couch, but he was in the kitchen talking to Jack with more positive energy than Harry had seen in a long while. Harry leaned back against the counter, arms folded and smiling as he watched the two.

At the appointed time, the rest of the team showed up. Elle and Jack somehow ended up wrestling in their lupine forms in the backyard. Harry saw Hotch look out the window at them once, without any sign of nostalgia for the times when he could run and play like that, then went right back to joking with Prentiss, JJ and Reid. Harry turned to his own conversation, asking Morgan and Garcia for ideas to get back at the Weasley twins for the prank war that had been started between them and the Hotchner children.

The Hotchner pair had already admitted that they were going to lose terribly, but they could hardly just admit defeat.
Harry felt lethargic by the end of dinner, but it was a bone-deep contentment that filled him rather than weariness. Instead of jumping up to clear the dishes before anyone else could in his own home, he waved his wand for once and sent all of them to the kitchen. Hotch arched an amused eyebrow at him before returning his attention to Morgan's story. Harry surveyed the room for a moment. There was a painful ache in his heart, painful but warm, and the thought crossed his mind that every hardship up until now had been worth it for this peace.

The group stayed late into the night. It was one when Reid and Elle finally left. There was some cleaning up to be done around the house that Harry would have usually done while everyone was settling after desert, but just this once he thought it could wait.

Hotch was on the couch, talking with Jack. Harry settled on his other side.

"I think I'm done consulting," Hotch said.

Jack and Harry were quiet for a moment.

"What else are you going to do in your retirement?" Jack asked, baffled.

Hotch shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe it's time to find something new. I just don't think it would feel right, after finally wrapping up the last few strings with this case. It was strange to finish it so efficiently."

"I should think you'd be pretty good at cleaning things up after all the practice you've had," Harry pointed out.

Jack let out an enormous yawn. "Well, that's a matter for the morning, I think. I'm going to bed."

"Right behind you," Hotch agreed, getting to his feet. For a moment, he looked just as young and full of life as he had when he'd dragged Harry behind a car to protect him from the Woodsmarked Killer. He'd been at the beginning of a new journey then, even if he hadn't known it. Harry wondered if this was the start of a new story too, but he couldn't help but think that his own identity was so inextricably tied to Hotch's profiling and BAU and deranged criminals that he wouldn’t be with Hotch in this next one.

Harry stood up beside him. Jack ascended the stairs while Hotch and Harry made their way to the first step. Harry paused, but Hotch didn't transform.

Hotch put one hand on the railing and held out the other. "Would you mind?" he asked.

"Of course not," Harry said, clasping his hand. He felt the rough edge of a scar on his father's palm, one that hadn't faded in decades.

Hotch took the first step, leaning hard on both the railing and Harry. His muscles were shaking against Harry's touch, but he didn't complain and Harry, for once, didn't offer to apparate them up to the top.

He only let go when they were standing on the second floor. Before he could step away, Hotch pulled him into a light hug. "Good night," he said and released him.

"Good night," Harry said.

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He woke up abruptly, cinching off a scream. The details of the nightmare vanished as he saw
something leaning directly overhead. After a few panicked moments, he realized the large shape above him was a familiar leopard. The light flipped on, and he saw Jack standing in his doorway, smirking.

"Damn, Dad," Jack said. "I didn't know you could still move that fast. You were breaking down his door before I'd even gotten mine open."

"Did I wake everyone?" Harry groaned.

"Yeah," Jack said shamelessly.

Hotch made a dismissive noise.

"Sorry," he said.

"We all do it," Jack said. "Okay, now that we know Lestrange isn't strangling Harry in his sleep... You two have a good rest of your night."

"Yeah," Harry said. "Maybe we'll actually sleep through it."

Hotch stayed where he was, staring down at Harry in concern. Harry hadn't had a screaming nightmare in years; it had probably taken him off guard.

"You staying in here tonight, Dad?" Jack asked. Hotch's tail twitched. "All right." He turned the lights off and closed the door behind him. As he walked back to his own room, Harry felt Hotch move off him and stretch out on the bed. With every shift of his muscles, a tremble ran through the blankets.

"You okay?" Harry whispered.

Hotch huffed at him. His tail flicked Harry's side for a moment.

"All right, then." He turned over to face Hotch, took a deep breath, and closed his eyes again.

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In the morning, he knew something was wrong before he even opened his eyes.

It wasn't an earth-shattering fear, like when he'd known Greyback was after Jack. It was a mute resignation.

No matter what trauma was unfolding in the world, though, he knew he had to wake Hotch up. It was just what he did these days. Once that was done, they could figure out what was up and how to handle it.

So he opened his eyes. Hotch was still there, lying next to him. His expression, so tense two days before and so excited last night, was entirely at ease. His fur, despite his frantic dart down the hallway in the night, was perfectly tamed as always. His ears and nose, both rimmed with white and grey, were still in his rest.

Harry was reluctant to disturb him, but he didn't want to risk leaving only for Hotch to wake while he was gone. He put his hand on Hotch's shoulder.

And then, with a jerk of understanding, he realized what was so wrong.

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Morgan came to sit beside Harry on the couch. "His heart gave out," he said quietly. "Jack told me what happened last night. The shock from his sprint was probably too much for him."

"I'm a light lord," Harry whispered. "What did he think I was in danger from?"

Morgan wrapped his arm around Harry's shoulder. "He was probably thinking you were his twelve-year-old son, in danger from everything all over again, no matter how old you've actually been getting."

"I'm not twelve anymore. I didn't need his protection."

"I don't think he gave a damn about what you thought you needed, Harry," Morgan said. "I think he just always wanted to be there for you, even if you had everything under control."

Morgan looked up, nodded faintly at someone, then stood and, with a final reassuring squeeze to Harry's shoulder, left him. Jack took his place.

Harry turned and met his gaze.

"I knew he'd never stop profiling," Jack whispered. "I knew he was lying."

Harry leaned against him. "I'll bet he's probably profiling Death."

Jack smiled ever so slightly. "You know... I think you're right. Are you worried about him getting stuck in limbo again?"

"No. This feels...final. And he knows that his time was up."

"His time was up years ago when he first died."

"No. His time was up when he was damn well ready to go," Harry said. "And I think he was, last night. I think he knew he was ready."

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No medical treatment, blood wards, or Hallows. He was all right with that.

Death swept her arm out to the side, motioning on. She tilted her head curiously, then gestured with one hand back in the direction he had come from.

She was offering him a choice. Somewhere along the way, he had earned her respect enough to be granted that opportunity.

There were voices behind him. Someone was crying.

But there were voices ahead of him as well, voices he hadn't heard in far too long.

"No," he said calmly. "I don't need to return anymore."

Death extended her hand. Hotch took it without hesitation and didn't look back.

Chapter End Notes
I hesitated to add this chapter because I wanted a happy ending, but A) the story was about Harry's and Hotch's relationship from beginning to finale and B) I think it was a bittersweet ending and I think it was important to see that everyone did turn out okay after everything. And my wonderful beta Rowen Morningstar practically threatened me so there was that too.

This is the final chapter of this story! Thank you all for sticking with me for this long and reviewing or lurking. I hope you enjoyed reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it!

If you're looking for more, the outtakes and other clips are in a story called Extras from Fate and Choice, which was posted as part of a series with this story.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!