Prometheus Bound
by AnarchicMuse

Summary

There once was a tale of three brothers and the gifts bestowed upon them by Death. Such a tale is one of intrigue, of adventure, of tragedy. Such a tale is a lie.

Or; a story of time travel, genocide, and a boy who just wants to live.
Triumph is nearly done so I figured I'd go on and post another one of my works lest I start feeling empty inside without fanfiction to take up all of my time. I like to think that Prometheus Bound will stray from the usual Master of Death stories, beginning with the origin of the Hallows, but in the end you all can be the judge of that. Feel free to let me know what you think in that lovely comment box below.

A/N: Here lies your first and only warning, this story will contain slash.

Edit 04/26/2018: I thought I knew what I was doing. I swear I thought I did. I planned the story from start to finish, pairings and all. But my muse does love to make a fool of me. The end pairing I had planned was meant to be slash, but the more I write these characters and watch them form outside of the outline I built I’m not so sure anymore. So new warning: there may be slash, there may be no pairing at all. Do with that what you may.

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This only left one parcel. Harry picked it up and felt it. It was very light. He unwrapped it. Something fluid and silvery gray went slithering to the floor where it lay in gleaming folds. Ron gasped.

"I've heard of those," he said in a hushed voice, dropping the box of Every Flavor Beans he’d gotten from Hermione. "If that's what I think it is-they're really rare, and really valuable."

"What is it?"

Harry picked the shining, silvery cloth off the floor. It was strange to the touch, like water woven into material.

"It's an invisibility cloak," said Ron, a look of awe on his face. "I'm sure it is-try it on."

Harry threw the cloak around his shoulders and Ron gave a yell.

"It is! Look down!"

Harry looked down at his feet, but they were gone. He dashed to the mirror. Sure enough, his reflection looked back at him, just his head suspended in midair, his body completely invisible.

He pulled the cloak over his head and his reflection vanished completely.

I open at the close

The black stone with its jagged crack running down the center sat in the two halves of the Snitch. The Resurrection Stone had cracked down the vertical line representing the Elder Wand. The
triangle and circle representing the Cloak and the stone were still discernible.

And again Harry understood without having to think. It did not matter about bringing them back, for he was about to join them. He was not really fetching them: they were fetching him.

"So it all comes down to this, doesn't it?" whispered Harry. "Does the wand in your hand know its last master was Disarmed? Because if it does...I am the true master of the Elder Wand."

A shaking hand reached out to touch the three objects sitting innocuously on the red and gold comforter but drew back at the last second, as if scared they would burn it. The owner of the partially extended limb was none other than the messy haired, tired eyed Boy-Who-Lived, although before he'd retired to the semi-privacy of his dorms he had heard a few people refer to him as the Man-Who-Conquered. Only a slight step up in his opinion.

Harry took a half step away from his bed and its unwelcome residents; the invisibility cloak, folded neatly into a triangle, with the Elder Wand and Resurrection Stone settled on top of it. He'd gotten rid of them, or at least he had the latter two; he'd left the stone in the forest and, after repairing his ever faithful holly wand, returned the wand to Dumbledore's tomb. And yet here they were, all settled on his bed as if he'd never attempted to get rid of them.

Sighing softly to himself, he reached out and collected the Hallows, it had been a bad idea to leave them there anyway, any mischievous student who decided they wanted to take a jaunt through the Forbidden Forest could stumble across the stone, and the moment some greedy wizard who wanted the most powerful wand in history figured out that Harry was no longer in possession of the Elder Wand, they would turn to where it had been hidden last and find no opposition when retrieving it. If the goblins allowed him to enter Gringotts after his stunt with the dragon, he would hide it in his vault, if not he would find somewhere else to hide the wand and stone, somewhere much less predictable.

Harry tucked the Elder Wand in his back pocket, smiling sadly when the memory of Moody warning him he'd lose a buttock stashing it there came to mind, then threw the invisibility cloak over his shoulders. It would be easier to get out of the castle if he wasn't mobbed by adoring wizards and witches wanting to shake his hand, to kiss their babies, to thank him and tell him they'd never doubted him, when in truth every last one of them had been despairing over the fact that only a seventeen year old Hogwarts dropout stood between them and the Dark Lord. It wasn't that he didn't appreciate their gratitude, he did, but he had hoped that after the war he could just fade into the background, hoped that he could finally be Harry, normal, boring, ordinary Harry. It was a foolish hope, but he couldn't bring himself to stop.

The Resurrection Stone remained in his hands for a moment longer, flipped without any intent between his fingers. Remus was dead, Tonks was dead, Fred was dead. The list was numerous and devastating, but Harry felt no urge to call upon any of them. Their deaths had been ugly, brutal, unnecessary, the least he could do was leave them to the peace of the afterlife. The Stone joined its sister Hallow in his back pocket, a tight squeeze and not at all secure, but it would get the job done. He would need shoes, preferably with socks, both of which had been carelessly discarded in his haste to burrow beneath his somewhat dusty sheets. The overstuffed mattress of his four poster bed and the thick curtains that blocked out even the memory of sunlight had been a luxury whose absence he'd felt every night he'd spent on the narrow, meagerly padded cots that the tent they'd called their home for the better part of a year had to offer. A luxury that he was quick to reclaim while others were occupied mourning and celebrating respectively.

His left shoe was wedged between his headboard and the wall, Merlin knows how that got there,
while the other was entangled in the velvet curtains hanging only partially open around the border of his four poster. His socks, unfortunately, were another matter entirely, the bloody things may as well have up and sprouted their own little legs with all the luck he was having finding them.

"Should have shoved them in my shoes," Harry muttered with his head shoved beneath his bed. He couldn't see a damned thing in the enclosed space, but maybe he could sniff them out, he couldn't remember the last time anything he'd worn had been properly washed. He cursed when a particularly deep inhalation drew a large clump of dust halfway up his nose. "Ah, shite. Where are the bloody things?"

The dorm was meant to be empty, Harry had only been talking to himself and his elusive socks, he hadn't been expecting an answer of any kind. So when his words were greeted by a low, almost eerie muttering, he reared back in surprise, which turned out to be a bad decision as his head was still buried beneath his bed and so came in jarring contact with the solid, wooden slats that held the whole thing together.

"Fuck." He clumsily extricated himself from beneath the wooden monstrosity he'd been pledging his allegiance to only an hour previous and glared around the room with watering eyes. It was empty, just as he thought it had been all this time, but he'd heard something, he was still hearing something. A murmuring, nearly silent and impossible to discern, but undeniably there.

"Who's in here? It's probably in your best interest to stop hiding, I'm a war veteran, I can and will curse you if you startle me, and I won't feel sorry afterwards."

Harry tilted his head and listened, the whispers, the muttering, whatever the hell they were had not changed in pitch, remaining at that same infuriatingly quiet volume that had his ears straining to pick up on the words being spoken. If he didn't know any better, he would think the quiet voices were actually the hissing of yet another monstrous creature lurking within Hogwarts' walls.

"Homenum Revelio." The spell swept through the dorm and the adjoining restroom, but it yielded nothing, he was alone in the room.

"Harry?"

The green eyed Gryffindor squawked in surprise and pivoted on the balls of his feet. "George? What?" He glared at the wand in his hand in betrayal, maybe the Elder Wand hadn't done such a good gob fixing it, the spell he'd cast was fairly basic, he shouldn't have had any trouble casting it.

"They won't stop crying."

Harry frowned. "What? Who's crying? Was that you whispering?"

But no, he could still hear the voices, they were if only the slightest bit louder, their words were still indistinguishable, but the tone was clear. They sounded pleading. Lost. Desperate.

"All they're doing is sitting and crying and touching. Touching me. I don't like it, I want them to stop."

"I don't understand. Do you mean your family? Is that who you're talking about?"

"I tried asking them to stop, but they can't hear me, no one can hear me. Except you. You can hear me. You can talk to them for me."

This wasn't right. This wasn't George. The young man before him was a cheap, worn out version of what he had once been, as if he'd been churned about in the bloody seas of the war for too long
only to be wrung out and hung up to dry in the stripping sun. His skin held no color, his eyes were
devoid of the warm spark of life, and yet he was whole. Two arms, two legs, two ears. He was not
George.

"Fred?"

Harry took a step forward and Fred took one back, out of reach of his young friend's touch.

"I don't want you to touch me."

"What? Why?"

A humorless smile quirked too pale lips, a far cry from the usual mischievous smirk. "It hurts to
look at you. It burns. I'd hate to find out what it feels like to touch you."

There was so much wrong with that statement, so much wrong with this situation, Harry didn't
even know where to start. "You're dead. But you're here, are you—are you a ghost?"

Fred shook his head. "I don't think so, they can see me and speak to me, but they're different. I'm
different."

"What are you?"

"Stuck. I think I'm stuck."

Harry winced, his hands crawled up the sides of his face to press into his ears. The whispers were
no longer just desperate, they were louder and angrier and clamoring to be heard. They weren't
overly loud, he could still here the catch of his own breath, the brush of his feet against the carpet,
but the mutter of those voices was comparable to the slow drag of jagged nails on chalkboard.

"They don't like being ignored." Fred tilted his head, hearing what Harry couldn't. "They want you
to listen to them."

"Yeah? Well, let them know not to hold their breaths. Their voices are wooly, like static, I couldn't
listen even if I wanted to."

"They don't like that."

"I don't like this."

The shadows lurking on the edge of his vision twisted unhappily, they grew longer, stretching,
reaching for him, before drawing back suddenly. Harry shuddered and his jaw clenched
uncomfortably, the discordant rasp of each whisper, each moan, each wail, sent a lance of not quite
pain, but most certainly discomfort, through each temple.

"Enough."

"They just want to be heard."

"I said enough. Shut up!"

A switch flipped and the voices fell absolutely silent, Fred reeled back, struck by an invisible force
that clamped his jaw shut. As if in direct contradiction, Harry's own fell open. He was momentarily
taken aback by the immediate response to his ire.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to shout."
Without thinking, he reached out and grasped Fred's elbow, as if to help him regain his kilter. A part of him was expecting his hand to pass through the limb, despite his denial Fred had to be a ghost, there was no other explanation for his presence. But Harry's hand met solid, if not a bit too cool flesh.

It took a moment for the contact to register, it had happened unconsciously and in the stilted moment between two blinks of an eye. They were utterly still for one long second but then it registered and Harry realized that the touch didn't hurt Fred like the redhead had feared, it hurt him.

It started off as an itch, a heavily uncomfortable sensation that held the promise of pain if not relieved in due time. But then the itch became a burn, radiating from the point where Harry met Fred and sweeping throughout his body into his core. Harry tore his hand away and staggered back several steps, but the damage had already been done; he let out a distressed whimper when his blood turned to acid sludge and yet continued to chug laboriously through his veins and burn a pathway through his heart.

Frantic hands tore into the thin, worn fabric of his shirt, granting him access to the itching, burning, excruciating flesh beneath. He scratched until bloody furrows carved searing pathways across his torso, but the drag of his fingers did nothing to relieve the pain. He gasped and he writhed until his legs gave beneath him and his fingers no longer had any flesh left to carve. Was this how he was to die? Prostrate between the unused beds of the boys dormitory? Darkening the rich burgundy of the carpet with his blood and tears and sweat? This ailment, whatever it was, was going to do what the darkest wizard in centuries had failed to do, and it would have him wishing for it to hurry up and finish the job as it did.

Harry heaved with the effort of pushing himself to his knees, if he was going to die he would do so on his feet. And to his surprise, that one act of determined fury caused the pain to falter; he was so focused on rising without ending up with his face planted in the carpet once more that the pain was, not forgotten, but at least momentarily not at the forefront of his mind. Bolstered by this discovery, Harry forced his body across the room and through the open door to the attached loo, each step tempered the pain that had only minutes before had him likening his bones to gelatin.

The uncharacteristically loud blast of water bursting from the faucet and the splash of frigid water he threw at his face helped to ground him a bit, though it did nothing to calm his violently shaking hands or clear his eyesight, which was painfully blurry and causing his head to ache.

He inhaled deeply, inflating his lungs for several seconds before releasing the oxygen in a heavy gush. Once. Twice. And again. The familiar routine forced the blood he could feel pounding behind his eyes to slow and, in turn, steadied his hands. The sharp burn of agony lessened with each breath he took, but his entire body remained coiled and tensed, half convinced the inexplicable pain would return any moment and refusing to be caught off guard once again. He was burning (in the metaphorical sense this time around) to work out what had afflicted him. What had caused his body to rebel against him so violently? And it seemed the only person with even the faintest idea of what had occurred had gone uncharacteristically silent.

Blessedly steady legs led him back out into the main room where he found himself to, once again, be alone. "Fred? I didn't scare you off with all my writhing and flailing, did I?" Disquiet twisted Harry's stomach when he received no response. "Fred?"

The older male's presence had already been cause for alarm, what with him having died the previous night, but his disappearance elicited even greater concern. If Fred really were a ghost, he
could have hurried off to find Harry help when the first bout of agony had torn through him, but something told him that that wasn't the case. Fred hadn't been a ghost, not the sort he was used to at least, and he hadn't just wandered off, he was gone. Harry was sure of it.

But he could call him back, he could ensure whatever had momentarily incapacitated him hadn't hurt Fred as well, he need only use the Stone to summon him.

The Stone was no longer in his back pocket, nor was the Wand, and the Cloak had fallen free from his shoulders. But that was fine, he'd done quite a bit of thrashing around earlier, they'd likely been dislodged and, even now, were waiting for him to retrieve them. Only they weren't

He had fallen in the few meters of space between his and Ron's beds, shredded bits of his destroyed shirt and droplets of blood adorned the small space, but the Hallows were neither around, beneath, or on top of either bed.

His holly wand was still there, having just rolled past the foot of his bed at some point in time. With it, he attempted to summon the Hallows, first altogether ("Accio Deathly Hallows") then each by their individual name. Not so much as a dust bunny stirred.

Panic and an overwhelming sense of wrong spurred his movements as he tore the room apart in search of the three objects; beneath Neville, Dean, and Seamus' beds were searched, between bed sheets and cushions, in nooks and crannies that hadn't been touched in months but were still thoroughly searched anyway. And when it became obvious that the Hallows were not in the bedroom, he moved into the bathroom. It was as he was shaking out one of many neatly folded towels that the door to the dormitory creaked open and two pairs of footsteps entered the room.

"Harry? Are you in here?"

There was one brief moment where Harry considered not answering, where he contemplated diving into one of the shower stalls and hoping Hermione and Ron would go in search for him somewhere else. But then Hermione was there and her eyes were frowning in that way he hated as she took in the destruction he had wrought.

"What are you doing?"

Harry floundered for a moment, it was quite obvious what he was doing (though the why was likely not as obvious) but he wasn't about to explain why she'd caught him in the middle of demolishing the neat towel pyramid that stood as the centerpiece of the boys' bathroom. "I, uh, was about to take a shower."

The fine lines around Hermione's eyes deepened as her gaze traveled from the towel now clutched loosely in his fist, up his arm, before settling on his bare torso. "You're bleeding."

Harry had nearly forgotten about the lines he had cut into his skin in his fit of agonized panic, they still itched and stung like you wouldn't believe, but he'd been too distracted to pay the mild irritation any mind.

"Yeah, I had a nightmare. It was bad."

He knew he should feel bad for using an affliction that had once seriously affected him to get her off of his scent, but Voldemort was dead, there would only be so many more times he could use the nightmare excuse before it began to lose its effectiveness. He may as well milk it for all it was worth while he still had the chance.

Before he could follow up his false admission with even falser assurances that he was, or at least
would be, fine, Ron was at Hermione's elbow, taking in the sight of Harry's shredded torso with an
awed sort of horror.

"Merlin's balls, you really did a number on yourself."

Harry shrugged self-consciously and only just stopped himself from crossing his arms over his
chest in what would no doubt be a painful and entirely fruitless attempt to cover the worst of the
damage. "It felt like there were bugs crawling under my skin, guess that was the only way I knew
how to make them stop. I'm fine now though, I stopped once I woke up."

Ron bit his lip uncertainly. "They don't look that deep, but there's a lot to get infected. Maybe you
should go see Madam Pomfrey, let her patch you up."

Harry balked at the thought of leaving the tower. As word of Voldemort's demise spread, a slow
trickle of tentatively hopeful wizards and witches arrived at Hogwarts' gates; some to see if the
rumors were true, others to offer their aid with healing the wounded and repairing damages done to
the castle, some came to reunite with loved ones, but then there were the unlucky few who had
come to collect their dead. They were the ones Harry had secluded himself up in the tower to
avoid, the ones who stared at him with their accusing stares as tears wet their cheeks and hollow
condolences from a million people who didn't matter rang in their ears. He avoided them because
he knew that their accusations weren't unfounded, maybe if he'd been a bit faster, a tad braver their
family members, their sons, their daughters, mothers and fathers would be still alive.

Hermione, beautiful, understanding Hermione, seemed to sense the cause behind his hesitation as
she offered an alternative option. "Or I could do it, I've still got a bit of dittany left."

Harry nodded eagerly. "Yeah. Yeah, let's do that. But maybe let me shower first, I can wash away
all this blood and give you a better idea of what you're working with."

Hermione didn't look entirely convinced, no doubt she was eager to rid him of the marks marring
his torso, she had never liked seeing her friends in pain, but Ron nodded and gently wrapped his
hands around her arms, using the grip to steer her back out into the bedroom.

He smiled softly at Harry, though it didn't fully reach his eyes, as he reached out to grasp the door
handle. "Take your time, I'll ward her off the best I can."

The door shut with a soft click and Harry finally allowed the painfully false smile he'd affixed to
his face to drop. He gave the towel tower he'd previously been demolishing a half-hearted glance
before sinking back onto his haunches with a heavy sigh. The Hallows weren't there. He could
spend the rest of the evening upending laundry hampers and tearing apart bedrooms, but he would
not find them anywhere in Gryffindor tower. And yet, a part of him, a small, niggling voice at the
back of his head assured him that they weren't gone gone. They had not fallen into the hands of a
ne'er do well wizard intent on enacting Voldemort's final vison. The Hallows were gone, but they
hadn't been lost.

_Gone but not lost._ The thought left Harry disgruntled, he couldn't even trust his own mind to make
sense anymore.

Despite having likely not been used since the beginning of the new year, the showerhead furthest
from the door took less than three seconds before it was producing water hot enough to send clouds
of steam billowing throughout the entire room. The torrent washed away the blood that stiffened
his skin and the tension that bunched his muscle in a matter of minutes, but he remained under for a
while longer. The heavy rush of water over his ears dampened the sounds of Hermione and Ron
moving about in the room outside, for a moment, there was only him, not even his thoughts dared
disturbed him.

But soon enough, too soon, he had to surrender the tranquil moment and shut the showerhead off, there was only so long Ron could keep Hermione at bay after all. One of the many towels displaced during his bid to find the gone but not lost Hallows was draped over his shoulders and used to gently pat at his torso. The ribboned flesh was sore, each pat of the towel irritated his tender skin, but it wasn't near as painful as it should have been, one cursory glance down revealed exactly why.

As if the water he'd showered in had been laced with dittany, the numerous shallow lacerations he'd inflicted upon himself had closed over. A fragile layer of skin had healed over them, leaving behind no sign but the silvery pink of fading scars, he was sure that in a few hours even those would be gone.

Was this a side-effect of finally being rid of Voldemort's accidental Horcrux? Now that it was no longer leeching off of his magic was he finally reaching his full potential? But no ordinary wizard had above average healing, not without liberal use of certain spells, potions, and salves. So did this stem from that long moment of pain? Had whatever inflicted him changed him deeper than he could see?

The thought sent disquiet shivering down Harry's spine as, suddenly, he no longer felt comfortable in his own skin. He was different, he had changed on a level that surpassed the superficiality of skin.

Facing his reflection in the slightly fogged mirror, there were differences, though none so radical to be noticed by anyone who wasn't as intimately familiar with his face as he was. His eyes were just a touch too wide, a shade too green, his skin had taken on a pallor that could only be described as deathly, and yet it bespoke of longevity, vitality. But the greatest change wasn't one that could be viewed by the naked eye, it was a feeling and yet it was almost tangible. A shroud that clung heavy to him like a viscous smoke, it reeked of darkness and death, but it didn't feel inherently evil. Not evil, but still not right because it wasn't him.

The longer he focused on the clinging aura, the more uncomfortable he became, and, as his discomfort grew, he slowly became aware of the voices once again plucking at the very edges of his consciousness.

"Stop." Harry knew, even as the word left his mouth, that it wouldn't have the same effect as it had the last time he had ordered the voices away. He lacked the energy and the fury required to truly compel them, though he was certain the latter would come in due time.

There was a soft knock at the door, jarring Harry from his distress long enough for him to lunge for the jogger's he'd tossed aside earlier and hastily shove them on. "Harry? It's been nearly an hour." Hermione was obviously trying to repress the worry in her voice, but faint strains of it still tainted her words. "Are you all right?"

"No-I mean, yeah. Yes." Harry cleared his throat nervously. "I'm just…I might need some help."

There was a pause, and then, "Can you unlock the door?"

Harry didn't even move, not a finger lifted, but the moment his eyes flickered over to the turned handle, it unlocked. He whimpered pitiably.

Hermione entered the restroom, Ron only a few steps behind her, and immediately focused her gaze on where Harry stood somewhat awkwardly before the row of sinks. She took in his still
damp hair, his worn joggers, then settled on his bared chest.

"You healed yourself? You know I could have-"

"I didn't. This wasn't me." Harry winced at the near hysterical pitch to his voice. "Sorry, I'm feeling a bit out of sorts." He took a breath to steel himself. "Can you…can you hear that? Can you hear them?"

Both Hermione and Ron took a moment to stop and listen, for what they weren't sure, but whatever it was was clearly upsetting their friend and they were eager to put an end to it. But there was nothing, they couldn't hear anything but their own quiet breaths. Harry looked absolutely gutted when they told him so.

He looked around anxiously as he spoke between tremulous breaths. "I think I might be going mad." He knocked roughly on his temple. "Voices, I can hear voices. I want them to stop. I asked them to and then I told them too but they won't be quiet. They won't stop."

An involuntary noise of confused distress bubbled from the back of Hermione's throat. "What are they saying?"

Harry shook his head. "I can't understand them. They're too quiet, they're whispering."

Harry was clearly distressed, only a few wrong questions away from what could potentially be a panic attack, only incredible amounts of stubbornness had kept him this calm for so long. But then Hermione touched him, one hand on the side of his face and the other on the inside of his wrist, and his tentative control began to unravel.

It didn't hurt, thank Merlin it didn't hurt, and yet the alternative was (debatably) just as bad. Harry's vision flickered out and the pleasant humidity that lingered after his long shower was swept away by a sharp, dry cold that froze the marrow in his bones. He was no longer in the bathroom, somehow that simple touch had transported him to a room. Dark and so tiny he couldn't stretch unless he lay diagonally on the floor, head in one corner and feet in the opposing one. His lungs rattled wetly, filled with the condensation that went down with each breath and his entire body trembled pitiably. He could hear others in the rooms (cells?) around him. Some were weeping, some were screaming, but they all fell silent when there was a dull rattle followed by the sudden plunge in the already arctic temperatures. Death was coming.

The room around him exploded. There was a shriek of surprise and Harry was suddenly doused in a geyser of water, yanking him free from whatever nightmare he'd been trapped in. All around him, chaos raged, the pipes that connected to the sinks, the toilets, and even the showers had burst, sending water in powerful arcs all around. Ron spluttered and cursed as he attempted to run from the bathroom but only managed to skid across the slippery stone and collapse against the sink where he promptly got a faceful of water. But both Hermione and Harry remained still, staring at each other with wide, fearful eyes.

She was the first to speak, barely audible over the roar of broken pipes. "What was that?"

Harry shook his head. She had seen it too, he hadn't been the only one to experience that horror.

"I'm going mad."

When he turned to leave, Hermione's hands remained clutched to her chest, she didn't try to touch him again.

He left the dorms, he left the tower, he left the castle. Harry wanted to be alone, he wanted to be
away, so he went to the forest. It was involuntary, his body was on autopilot, his feet carried him of
their own accord through the double doors, across the grounds, past Hagrid's hut. He didn't
particularly want to return to the place where he nearly died, and yet when he slunk into the
treeline he felt one tiny knot in the clusterfuck that was his nerves loosen infinitesimally.

A morbid sense of curiosity led him back to the scene of the crime, the clearing where Voldemort's
Death Eaters had watched and jeered and cheered as he died. It looked so different in the fading
light of early evening, it looked normal, completely unlike any place he would venture to willingly
hand his life over. Though he wasn't entirely sure what he'd expected coming here, Voldemort was
dead, his Death Eaters gone, this was, once again, just a clearing, just a forest, and he was just a
boy. Or at least he should be. He wanted to be.

"So this is where it happened."

Harry flinched violently at the sudden intrusion to his not-so-happy place. Luna had appeared,
silent and as ethereal as a forest nymph; her bare feet, the dirt crowning her cheekbones, and the
way she clung to the trunk of the tree nearest him only lent credence to the image.

The young Ravenclaw's eyes were just as pale and disconcerting as they'd always been, but there
was a darkness to them that reminded Harry that Luna had been a prisoner of Voldemort's forces
only a few short weeks ago. She unapologetically used their unsettling force to fix him in place.
"This is where they met."

Harry's head bent sharply to the left and his brows crowded together. "Voldemort and I?" He
nodded, unsure how Luna could know that this was the exact place where Voldemort's end had
begun, but he'd long since come to accept that, sometimes, she just knew. "Yes, this is where we
met."

"Not you and the dark lord. Your Heart. It's whole again."

"I don't understand."

Luna hummed sweetly, her bare feet disturbed not a single fallen leaf as she crept closer. "That's all
right, you have time."

A smile coaxed its way across Harry's mouth. "I do. Don't I? I've got all the time in the world
now." That had never been a notion he'd had the chance to consider, having time to do what he
pleased, it was daunting, but in the best way possible.

"All the time in the worlds," was Luna's characteristically odd agreement. "Is it strange having
them in you? Can you feel them?"

"Er." Harry couldn't help but run a nervous, searching hand over his torso. "What exactly do you
think is inside me?"

"Your Heart."

"My heart? Well of course I can feel it, though only when I'm paying close attention. Can't you?"

"Well, I don't have any."

"Any? You don't have a heart?" Harry sighed, forcibly stopping his confused queries before he
made things worse. "Luna, dear, I love your strangeness, it's so refreshing, but can you, just for one
second, say something that makes sense?"
"Your Heart."

This time Harry could practically see the capitalization she put on the second word.

"In uniting the three pieces, you made them yours."

Slowly, the muddles puzzle pieces she spoke slotted into place. "The Hallows?"

Luna rolled her eyes as if it were obvious. It wasn't. "Yes, the Hallows. They're yours, aren't they?"

Harry hesitated to respond, unwilling to confirm or deny the assumption, though with Luna that likely made very little difference.

"They changed you though, didn't they?"

Very little difference at all. But if she knew something, anything, maybe it would be okay to unofficially confirm it. "Can you see what they did to me?" He subconsciously rubbed at his left pectoral, one of the places that inexplicable pain had taken especial delight in tearing into.

"They fixed you." An excited gleam momentarily chased away the shadows in Luna's gaze. "They let you see, hear, feel."

Harry matched her enthusiasm with what he was beginning to feel was perpetual bewilderment. "See what?"

"Everything."

The frame of Harry's glasses received a sharp prod. "Doesn't feel like it."

"No." Luna shook her head, fondly exasperated, but still near glowing with delight. "It goes deeper than that. Past what the normal eye can see. But you can't fear them, you have to accept them, embrace them, otherwise all you'll see ever see is the horror in death, not the beauty and the peace."

"Death?" Harry frowned unhappily. "Mine?"

Luna laughed despite the morbid turn the conversation had abruptly taken. "Everyone's but."

Harry didn't particularly like the sound of that, but something told him he would get nothing more concrete from her. "How do you know so much?"

A serene smile overtook Luna's entire face. "Haven't you heard? I'm odd."

Harry and Luna lay in the dirt and the leaves and the bugs and watched the moon rise in the very same spot where Harry had once lay dead. Harry drew upon his years of Astronomy lessons to map out the constellations, while Luna made up her own, and when the errant cloud or two disrupted their star gazing, they squinted at the balls of fluff until their eyes tricked them into seeing shapes that weren't really there. Harry was content, he was so drunk off of laughter he might even consider himself to be happy. He would have remained in that clearing with Luna until the sun rose if it weren't for Ron and Hermione's arrival.

The two arrived with none of the ghostly silence and surreal grace that Luna had, their frightened whispers and stumbling steps alerted the stargazers of their approach long before they stepped into
"How did you find me?" Harry posed the question with no anger or irritation, only contended laziness with only subtle hints of curiosity.

Hermione was the one to answer. "Well, after we checked all of your usual haunts and came up with nothing we came back here and used a point me spell." She shrugged and refused to blush under Harry's incredulous gaze. "Yes, I'm aware of how impractical that was, but with you not in your usual spots, we hoped you were just lurking somewhere in the castle and that the spell would lend us a bit of a hand in leading us to you."

"I don't lurk."

Ron immediately and mercilessly shut down his protests. "You lurk. You're actually scarily good at it. Like a vampire or something."

Harry flipped him the finger. "Go away. You're ruining our feng shui."

"I don't think that means what you think it does. But you were close." Hermione circled around Harry's prone body so that she could lean directly over him and peer down into his face. "What are you doing out here?"

"Well, we were stargazing." Harry allowed a pointed silence to linger for a moment, hoping Hermione would realize that her unfairly enormous head and even more unfairly enormous hair were inhibiting his view of the stars. She realized, she just didn't care.

"You had us worried. What you did because of your nightmare, the way you blew up those pipes, the voices only you could hear….that vision."

"I lied."

The full blown worry attack Hermione was quickly approaching faltered. "What are you talking about?"

"I didn't have a nightmare, I only said that to distract you."

Worry quickly turned to dangerous anger. "Distract me from what?"

"I think I united the Deathly Hallows."

Ron frowned, though more from confusion than from any actual anger. "But I thought you got rid of them. You put the wand back in Dumbledore's tomb, we saw you do that, and the stone is still somewhere here in the forest."

Harry nodded in vehement agreement. "I did. It was. But when I woke up they were back as if I'd never tried to get rid of them."

Luna offered Harry a sympathetic but irritatingly knowing smile. "All it took was one time. Once united they'll never be separated again."

"Okay, wait." Hermione folded her legs beneath her, ignoring the damp dirt that soaked into her jeans, in order to sit level with Harry and Luna. Ron was quick to follow suit. "Start from the beginning so we can understand. You got rid of the stone and the wand earlier this morning but when you woke up this evening they were there, yeah? But then what?"
Harry hesitated, pondering the best way to explain the events that had occurred only a few hours earlier. But in the end, there was no gentle way to put it. "I saw Fred. He appeared in the dorms after I found the Hallows, but he wasn't normal, he wasn't like any of the other ghosts."

Ron looked pale. "What do you mean?"

"He didn't float and he wasn't translucent." Harry paused trying to recall every moment he'd spent with the strange, undead Fred. "He was pale, washed out, but he looked real. At first I thought he was George, but he had both ears. When I tried to talk to him he seemed disoriented, I don't think he knew what was going on either."

"What happened to him?"

Harry quelled his urge to fidget mindlessly by plucking at the blades of dying grass around himself. "He wasn't the only one there. I couldn't see them, but there were others talking, whispering things I couldn't hear."

"The voices you asked us about before you ran," Hermione realized.

"Yes." Harry nodded uncomfortably. "There were so many of them, it was hurting my head. So I told them to stop, I yelled it, and they did, but it did something to Fred. When I reached out to touch him he disappeared and I…I hurt."

Ron inched closer to Harry, but he very noticeably didn't touch him. "You hurt?"

"It was like the Crucius, but so much worse because I didn't know where it was coming from, I didn't know what was happening to me, why it was happening."

"Is that what happened to you?" Ron gestured to Harry's bare torso where lacerations had once adorned his skin.

Harry tugged shakily at the ends of his hair as he nodded. "I just wanted it to stop, it hurt so bad. When it did, I realized the Hallows were gone, I searched everywhere but I couldn't find them anywhere. And then you two showed up and…well everything after that happened."

"So what do you think this means?" Hermione looked between her three friends. "The stories say that the one to unite the Hallows becomes the Master of Death, but that doesn't mean literally does it?"

Luna shook her head. "Not Death's master, only his equal."

"Where can we go to find out more about this? There has to be something other than the children's story."

"No." Harry immediately shook his head, shooting down Hermione's pondering. "No books, no research, we're just going to let it be. Let it all play out how it will. I just want to take a break, yeah?"

Hermione didn't look all too pleased with this idea, but she understood, Harry knew she did. "Of course. We'll let it rest for now. But it can't be ignored forever. Agreed?"

Harry nodded reluctantly. "Agreed."
Harry left the castle early the following morning. Despite sequestering himself in Gryffindor tower, the voices that whispered continued to plague him, and though they never rose above a muted mutter, they were so numerous he found it near impossible to tune them out.

To Harry’s pleasant surprise, Grimmauld Place had made it through the war entirely unscathed. The last time he had been to the townhome bequeathed to him by his godfather, Yaxley had hitched a ride and broken through the wards. He, Ron, and Hermione had only stuck around long enough to release Hermione from the man’s grip before apparating away, leaving the man to wander and plunder the house to his heart’s content. So it came as a surprise to him when, after bypassing the security measures set up in the hall, he found the house to be in pristine condition. Everything from the nasty looking portraits to the severed house elf heads were as they should be, it was as if Yaxley had never entered Grimmauld Place. And, according to Kreacher, that was nearly the case.

The Death Eater hadn’t even managed to make it past the front hall before Harry’s somewhat mad, but incredibly effective house elf used his elven magic to transport him halfway across the country. With no address and no immediately recognizable landmarks, he had not been able to find his way back.

In the weeks following the end of the war, Harry, for the most part, remained the only human occupant of Grimmauld Place. Hermione had taken time off from mother henning her two best friends to retrieve her parents from Australia and work on restoring their memories as well repairing what would no doubt be a damaged relationship. Meanwhile Ron spent the majority of his time with his family, working through their shared loss and preparing to put Fred to rest. It was lonely, Harry wasn’t used to being alone considering he’d spent the majority of the previous year camped out in the woods with Ron and Hermione, but they all needed a bit of time away from each other, time to find themselves after having played such an active part in a war so early in life.

Although Harry’s idea of ‘finding himself’ mostly consisted of wandering Grimmauld Place’s halls and (very cautiously) picking through the strange, and oftentimes dark, artifacts that had survived Mrs. Weasley’s purge from a few years ago. Thus far, some of his most fascinating finds had been a fully intact thestral skeleton, an opal wrist cuff that, according to Kreacher, held the souls of some of the Black family’s worst enemies in each of the jewels studding the band, and even a complete copy of Secrets of the Darkest Arts. Finding himself with nothing better to do as well as insatiably curious, Harry flipped through the tome; between its leathered covers were instructions on how to create Horcruxes, how to raise Inferi, and even how to commune with the dead. It was an interesting, if not morbid read, but soon set aside for something a bit shinier. For several days, he didn’t think once about it, his attention and interest being occupied by other relics that lay about the house, but then those who’d survived Voldemort’s reign began laying those who hadn’t to rest.

For reasons Harry couldn’t fathom, a majority of the funerals were held within only a few days of each other. The first of those close to him to be buried where Remus and Tonks and her father, Ted, then Colin, then Lavender, and finally Fred. And Harry attended none.

He had wanted to, so badly it ached, but he was the Boy-Who-Lived, the Man-Who-Conquered, his presence would only draw the press and create spectacles of what should be private, peaceful affairs. So he hunkered down in the main parlor of Grimmauld Place and honored those who had passed with a sixty year old bottle of firewhiskey.

It was strong, perhaps too strong for someone whose drink of choice was the mostly non-alcoholic butterbeer. After only a single glass, he wasn’t entirely drunk, but he was certainly lacking his usual coordination and his judgment was without a doubt terribly impaired. It was on the latter side effect, that he blamed his decision to summon his fallen friends.
Their memory had been nagging him all night, Fred's especially as he had been buried only a few hours before. Harry's slightly inebriated mind wanted to ensure that they truly were at rest, that, even though they were no longer with those they loved, they were still somewhere good, somewhere they could be happy. Figuring out how to go about summoning the deceased was entirely too easy, Harry had literally stumbled upon the answer only a few days prior in a certain notoriously dark text.

The ritual to commune with the dead was fairly simple, all things considered, it required only four ingredients: asphodel, henbane, a branch from an ash tree, and, as most rituals did, blood from the caster to tie the whole thing together. Harry was to entwine the flowers around the branch into a wreath of sorts before burning it over a consecrated fire. While the wreath burned, he was to allow four drops of his blood to fall into the fire as he spoke the incantation to summon his dead.

Harry was able to find asphodel and henbane in the Black's potion cupboard and Kreacher was more than willing to pop out and grab him a branch of ash despite the late hour. His biggest hurdle was the consecrated fire, he had very little clue what such a fire was or even how to go about consecrating one, so he cast the blue bell fire Hermione had once been so fond of and hoped for the best.

The wreath caught alight the moment it touched the blaze, and Harry immediately began reciting the incantation, not once stumbling over the Latin words. As it was drawing to a close, he quickly cut his hand on a kitchen knife Kreacher had so helpfully provided and allowed his blood to mingle with the ashes of the wreath. All the while he kept the names and faces of those he wished to summon at the forefront of his mind and drew upon every ounce of his desire to see them, to speak with them one last time. The fire seemed to glow brighter for a moment, blinding Harry with its brilliance, before dying down just as quickly and, suddenly, he was no longer alone.

It wasn't Remus, it wasn't Tonks, Fred, or even his parents; across the table from him, dressed in an impeccable black suit, stood an incredibly imposing man. He was strikingly handsome in an unconventional way, his face was all sharp planes and angles, his lips a thin, stern line, and his nose straight and severe, with cheekbones so sharp Harry imagined he could cut himself on them. Dark hair was neatly combed back and fell just to the nape of his neck, contrasting sharply with his deathly pale skin, but matching perfectly with the twin pools of fathomless black locked on Harry's still form.

A slow, predatory smile spread across the man's face. "So you're the bacterium that united my heart and dares call himself my master. I must say, I'm rather unimpressed."

Harry took a step back, fingers clutched tightly around the handle of his wand. This man radiated power and timelessness and death, and yet Harry didn't feel threatened in his presence, he didn't feel as if he were in danger because he knew without speaking, without any sort of introductions who this stranger was. He had summoned Death.

Such a realization should have him quaking in fear, but he was calm, cool, if not a bit indignant about the entity's condescension. When he spoke, his voice was steady. "Well, that makes two of us then. One would think a powerful being such as yourself would be better at keeping a hold of his toys, and yet here I am picking up after you."

"So you did. You are the first to conquer my possessions and yet you've done nothing with them, you waste their potential." Death seemed genuinely irritated by this. "You could bring this world to its knees with the power you possess but you cling to the pathetic magics taught to you by mortals. Why use sticks and flowers to commune with those who have passed when all you need do is call and they will come crawling?"
Harry felt himself bristling in the face of the man's harsh words. "I'd have loved to save myself the trouble of using sticks and flowers to call upon the dead, but unfortunately your Hallows seem to have run off again. They have a terrible habit of staying put, don't they?" And, holy shit, he should not be mouthing off to fucking Death lest he wish to be reduced to a pile of ash, but the guy was a prick.

"You fool, they've not run off. Once united, my Heart had no more need of their physical binds, they are within you now, part of your core being." Harry flinched when Death poked a long finger into the center of his chest. "You can call upon their power whenever you wish, or you would if you weren't ignoring the gifts bestowed upon you in a fit of cowardice typical of those of your species."

Harry felt his face twisting into a snarl. "It isn't cowardice. I'm not ignoring them because I'm afraid, I'm ignoring them because I don't want the bloody things. I've had enough death in my life, thanks. So if you're so unhappy with the way I've been using your Hallows, feel free to take them back, but make sure to keep a better hold on them this time around, yeah?"

Rather than being angered by Harry's show of anger, Death seemed the slightest bit amused, though he still didn't completely let go off his aggrieved attitude. "If only it were so easy," he lamented. "My Heart has accepted you as their master, they will not be so easily removed."

"But they can be removed?" Harry urged. "How?"

"You must die. Only when your soul has been reaped will the Hallows be returned to my possession."

Well that was just great. "Do you intend to reap my soul then? Or were the tales true and I'm immune to that sort of unpleasantness?"

Death looked down upon Harry, clearly unamused. "Your soul can be reaped, but only when both you and I are in agreement that it is the right time."

"So if I don't want to die, you can't reap me?"

Death nodded curtly.

"But if I do want to die but you don't want me to I still couldn't be reaped?"

"Correct."

"That sounds incredibly unfair."

"Trust me, I doubt there will be a time where I won't want to reap your soul."

"You are incredibly unpleasant," Harry observed. "Especially to someone who is supposed to be your master."

Death's next scoff was far less amused than his first had been. "You are no more my master than I am yours."

"I'm not?" Harry's brows drew down in confusion. "But the stories said…"

"I presume you are referring to the tales written by that fool of a Bard."

Harry nodded. "Beedle the Bard's Tale of the Three Brothers, yes."
"There was only a basis of truth to that story," Death sighed. "Uniting my Heart does not make you my master."

"So when you gave the Peverells your Hallows-"

Death hissed in irritation. "I did not give them to anyone. They were stolen."

Harry tried his best to hide his disbelief, but he was fairly sure he wasn't at all successful.

"Someone stole the Hallows? From you?"

His only response was a venomous glare.

"All right, so it's pretty obvious by now that most of the Tale of the Three Brothers is just hogwash, so what is the truth? What are the Hallows, why are you calling them your Heart, and how did they end up with the Peverells, if they even did."

At last, Death seemed pleased by something Harry had asked. "This universe is far more vast than you could ever fathom. There are entire galaxies and star systems you mortals have yet to discover, thriving with life, teeming with culture and progression lightyears ahead of the rudimentary practices humankind has managed to scrape together. Referring to you as a bacterium is a kindness as, in the grand scheme of things, you couldn't even be compared to a quark.

"There are thousands of worlds and races yet to be discovered. And in the middle of it all, at the very center of this madness was the Heart."

"The Heart?" Harry repeated blankly.

"The Heart of the Universe was power in its purest form, created eons ago to act as a neutral force in the universe, a balance between the forces of good and evil. When it was discovered by the Celestial Order, they attempted to use it to create some form of order in the universe, but all they succeeded in was placing the full power of the Heart into the hands of the mad titan, Thanos. With the full power of the Heart at his disposal, Thanos wreaked havoc across the universe, destroying entire galaxies indiscriminately. It was only when the universe had been reduced to a barren wasteland did he truly realize the gravity of his actions, so he used the Heart's power once more to revert everything to how it had once been. Once the universe had been restored he relinquished his power and led everyone to believe that he destroyed the Heart."

"But let me guess," Harry said dryly, "he didn't actually destroy it."

"Not in its entirety. He preserved just a piece, barely a sliver of its power, and gifted it to me."

"You? Why you?"

Death barked a twisted sort of laugh. "Because he believed himself to be in love with me, or a version of me that is. And, as all gentlemen do when courting a pretty lady, he presented me with a gift, a token of his affection."

"Only most gentlemen present aforementioned pretty ladies with flowers and jewelry, not masses of energy that have the power to wipe out the universe."

"I'm a creature of expensive tastes," Death shrugged. "I imbued the Heart with my power and intended to use it to build my empire. However, not long after, the remnants of the Heart was stolen from me by one I trusted and used to wage a war against me."

"Who would try to wage a war against Death?" Harry asked incredulously.
The ancient being arched a well-manicured brow. "You would be surprised. However, the story is far too long and far too bloody to waste my time explaining to you at the moment."

Harry rolled his eyes. "All right then. But considering the fact you're standing before me, I'm going to assume you won."

"Your assumptions would be correct," Death nodded. "That sliver of the Heart was truly a force to be reckoned with, however it is a force of balance and so could not be wielded to its true potential by just anyone. To wield such a weapon, one must have some form of balance within themselves. That is why my opponent ultimately failed, but not before he broke the sliver into three pieces and entrusted them to three powerful Necromancers. They paid for his mistakes with their lives, but by then what remained of the Heart had been lost."

"Until now," Harry said dully.

"Exactly. You managed to not only reunite all three pieces of the Heart, but to conquer them in one of the only ways possible."

"And how is that?"

"By conquering death. You looked me straight in the face and accepted your fate. When realizing that death is a force far beyond your reckoning, that it could not be stopped, only delayed, and even then not for long, you found the balance that fuels the power of the Heart, for there is nothing more impartial, more neutral, than Death."

"So what does that mean for me exactly?"

Death's lip curled in disgust. "You have become my equal in nearly every sense of the word."

Harry felt the blood drain from his face. "I've become Death?"

"No you imbecile! You are able to do what I do, see what I see, but you are not \textit{me}. You are, for lack of a better term, my protégé, you possess most, if not all, of the capabilities of Death. However, there will never be a time when you, as most protégés do, take up my place as Death as I am a cosmic entity, I cannot truly die. As long as there is life in this universe, I will exist."

"What does it mean for me then?" Harry asked. "Am I immortal? Can I die?"

"No man, beast, or any other such creature can kill you, only I reserve that honor, and it may not be permanent even then."

"How will we know?"

"You could relinquish your soul to me so I may attempt to harvest the Heart from whatever remains. There is no guarantee it will work and it will be incredibly excruciating for you, but it is a risk I am willing to take."

Harry's stomach tightened at the thought. "Thanks, but I think I'll pass, there's bound to be a better solution. But in the meantime, could you tell me about these…capabilities I've been bequeathed with."

Death arched an eyebrow questioningly. "What have you experienced thus far?"

"Voices, mostly, constantly whispering to me. I've seen friends who have passed on and once I saw a…a vision of something, I'm not entirely sure what it was."
"The most basic of our abilities," Death snorted. "If you are overwhelmed by something as simple a shade you will surely be driven mad before you have manifested the full might of your abilities."

Harry flushed in indignation. "I just need to know how to control them. They came upon me with no warning, there was no explanation as to what they were, of course I was overwhelmed. But if you teach me how to control them it won't happen when I begin to manifest any other abilities."

"I have neither the time nor the inclination to waste on such trivial matters."

"Do you really want to spend potentially all of eternity with a being driven mad by the power of this Heart?"

"Who says I will be spending any eternity with you?"

"We're bound to have to spend some time together," Harry reasoned. "Me being your protégé and all."

"You are quite…irritating."

"And unimpressive and less than a bacterium, yes, yes, we've been over this already," Harry waved a dismissive hand. "That doesn't, however, mean I'm wrong."

For the briefest of seconds a look that could have passed as amused flitted across Death's face before it was, once again, purged of all emotion. "Do not expect me to teach you anything more than is strictly necessary for your continued mental health. I have far better things to do be doing with my time."

"Duly noted."

"The friends you saw and the voices you hear are nothing more than the shades of souls who have yet to move on. They were attracted by the power of the Hallows."

"Shades. Like ghosts?"

"To a certain extent. After a life is lost the souls of those who have passed on are given a choice by my reapers, they can either move on to the next life or they can remain as ghosts. However some souls rebel and refuse to choose either, they remain stuck between worlds unable to contact those still alive but unable to move on. After several decades, they are forcefully crossed over to the afterlife, but some are known to affect the mortal plane before they do, appearing as unidentified lights, ghostly faces, and such. They are the cause behind many paranormal occurrences in the mundane world."

"So all of the voices I heard were the souls of those who had died in the battle?"

"That is more than likely."

"How do I tell the difference between a ghost and a shade?"

"Ghosts are described as pearly white translucent beings who have a tendency to float instead of walking. Shades look exactly as they did before their deaths, they walk not float, and are neither pearly nor translucent, though they are washed out version of themselves, less bright and colorful, less alive."

So Fred hadn't been a ghost and Harry hadn't killed his soul, he'd only forcefully crossed him, which, while not ideal, was undoubtedly better than the alternative. "You said that I can also
summon the dead, anyone I wanted, anytime I wanted, is that it? Is that the scope of my powers? Or do I have more to look forward to."

"More." Death's face stretched into a grin that left Harry feeling the slightest bit wary. "So much more. But it will not be immediate, your body needs to change and grow in order to withstand what you will be capable of. I imagine it will be quite painful."

"And when I'm done growing?" Harry pressed. "How will I control them? Can I count on you to help me?"

"Certainly not," Death scoffed. "They key to controlling your abilities is simple."

Harry arched a brow, waiting impatiently.

"Clear your mind."

Harry gaped when the ancient being disappeared just as silently as he had appeared.

"Fucking bastard."
Death's visit had been short, it had lasted no longer than ten minutes, and yet it left Harry reeling. For three weeks he had coped with the idea of being the bearer of the Hallows, the supposed 'Master of Death' by ignoring it all; he wanted nothing to do with the madness so he simply went on with life as if the stone were still lost in the forest, the cloak was still folded neatly in his trunk, and the wand was safe in Dumbledore's cold, dead hands. And the crazy thing was, it had worked. For three weeks there were no voices, no inexplicable visions, no blinding, back arching pain, and, yeah, maybe their absence had more to do with his being locked away from pretty much any human contact, but who was he to look a gift horse in the mouth?

But of course he had to go and ruin it all in one moment of inebriated stupidity. The whole thing could have been avoided, he knew that; he should have just visited the graves of his deceased friends, brought them some flowers, talked to them there like a normal person, the sort of person he was always making a fuss about wishing he could be. Instead he'd gone and consulted a book of some of the darkest arts in an asinine attempt to summon Fred, Remus, Tonks, and maybe a few others (he still wasn't sure what he would have done or even said if he'd actually succeeded).

He had half of a mind to just forget everything Death had told him about the Heart and its power and being his equal and go back to ignoring anything to do with the Hallows, but now that he knew exactly what it meant to have conquered them, now that he knew that he couldn't die and had a whole host of strange abilities to look forward to manifesting in the coming years, that was just a bit harder to do. He didn't want to be Death's master, or equal, or whatever the hell his official title was, he was sick to death of being different, but at the same time he wanted to learn to control what he'd be able to do, he wanted to be able to go out again without being accosted by the dead. So he ventured into the Black family home's library, he scoured the shelf for instructionals on Occlumency and how to 'clear his mind', he spent days among the dusty shelves reading and researching so intently he knew even Hermione would be impressed. And yet his tireless efforts yielded absolutely nothing.

There were plenty of books on Occlumency, almost too many to count, but they all spoke only of the theory of the art, not how to actually go about performing it.

"Not all books be kept in the library." Was Kreacher's explanation when Harry asked him about this phenomenon. "Too many too keep so Mistress kept them safe with the goblins."

Gringotts. Of course the damned books were being kept in the same bank he'd more than likely gotten himself banned for life from. The goblins, no doubt, were no longer any fans of his, but he needed those books and if it meant he'd have to do an embarrassing amount of groveling and pleading for forgiveness, well, he'd suck it up and do it.

Harry held off until the early evening before venturing into Diagon Alley, by then the worst of the lunch rush had passed and he was able to slip through the streets and up to the bank unmolested. Gringotts had been returned to its usual pristine (if not somewhat crooked) condition in the short time he'd been away, it bore no signs of his, Ron, and Hermione's escape via dragon, which he hoped would go some way in diminishing the goblins' ire toward him. At least he and his friends hadn't inflicted permanent damage upon the structure.

Not a single goblin looked his way when he stepped through the doors, but there was no doubt in his mind that they were all hyper aware of his presence. The weight of their disdainful attention did nothing to lessen his unease as he crossed the hall to the goblin furthest from the handful of wizarding patrons, the few wizards present were too interested in their own transactions to notice
his arrival, but he felt no need to risk it.

Harry bestowed the unimpressed goblin with a quivering smile and dipped his head in a nervous little bow. "Hello, I'm Harry Potter. If you don't mind, I'd like to speak with the uh…the goblin in charge?" Silently, he cursed himself, he should have looked into what the head goblin of Gringotts was referred to as before coming here.

The goblin looked down on him with flinty eyes. "What is your purpose here, Mr. Potter?"

"I just wanted to say sorry. I mean-I wanted to apologize, formally apologize for my actions against this establishment, and I wanted to offer any reparations that you would take. Monetary or otherwise."

The goblin glared, expressionless, at Harry long enough for him to begin fidgeting nervously with his fingers, he seriously contemplated turning around and leaving. But then the goblin snorted disdainfully and reached for a translucent, quartz-like stone on the edge of his work station. He flipped it upside down and immediately it began letting off a soft, blue glow.

Harry waited in silence for a second goblin, somewhat rounder than the first with less hair on his head and more on his chin, to appear from one of the many halls and approach. He stepped up to the goblin who had summoned him and listened as the situation was explained to him in the harsh cadence of gobbledegook. When all that could be said was spoken, he turned his attention to Harry.

"You've come to apologize and explain your actions?"

Harry nodded. "I admire this bank and the work it does greatly, I wouldn't have done what I did unless I had no other choice. My companions and I broke into the Lestrange vault and stole the cup because it was one of several objects that kept Voldemort tethered to this earth. If I didn't destroy it, I wouldn't have been able to kill him."

"And the dragon?"

Harry shrugged sheepishly. "We needed a way out."

The goblin's face remained impassive, entirely inscrutable to Harry's untrained eyes. "What you sought from the vault of the Lestranges was not gold or jewels, but an item that helped you bring about the defeat of the dark lord?"

"I took nothing else," Harry swore.

"Then you will pay a fee of one hundred galleons to Gringotts and we will accept you once again into our establishment."

Harry only barely refrained from gaping. One hundred galleons was pocket change when compared to what he held in his vaults. He'd expected to be groveling and begging for far longer before the goblins even began to consider accepting half of his wealth as apology. But who was he to sneer at an unexpected turn of good fortune, especially when thus far his life had been plagued by the opposite?

"Of course," he agreed with an easy nod, "it's the least I can do."

The goblin nodded curtly. "The fee will be drafted from your main vault. Is there anything else we can do for you this evening?"

"Oh, yes. I'd like to visit the Black family vault, I've got a key right here." He fumbled in his
pockets for a few moments before producing the heavy vault key.

The goblins granted it a cursory examination before nodding and leading him back to the carts that would take him down to his vault.

The mounds of gold, silver, and bronze that towered in semi-organized heaps throughout the cavernous room were ignored in lieu of the stacked trunks along the walls. They were filled with innumerable books and tapestries and dusty old parchments that were no doubt of great value to the Black family but held very little interest for Harry who sifted through the richly detailed family trees with disinterested haste.

It still took him the better part of an hour to find the texts he was in need of, but find them he did. A full collection of books with multiple different and detailed techniques on how to learn and eventually master Occlumency were shrunk down and tucked into his pocket and Harry, already feeling incredibly accomplished, returned topside.

The bank had grown busier in his time below ground, nearly every teller had a line of at least five wizards or witches patiently waiting their turns. Harry hadn't brought a cloak with him, Voldemort and his cloaked followers were still too fresh of a memory for everyone, so he knew that walking through Diagon Alley in the early summer with a heavy cloak and a hood over his head would draw far more attention than going without one, Boy-Who-Lived or not. So he bowed his head, allowing his slightly longer hair to fall over his forehead and eyes and casually walked across the hall. He was only a few meters away from the exit, a mere dozen or so steps before he could celebrate a successful escape, but then a hand fell on his shoulder, heavy and constricting enough to halt him in his steps.

"Mr. Potter." It was Xenophilius Lovegood of all people, Harry hadn't seen the man since he'd tried to turn him over to the Death Eaters and, quite frankly, he looked awful.

"Mr. Lovegood." Harry tried for a smile, but even to him it felt incredibly insincere. "It's good to see you well."

Xenophilius laughed shortly. "What a lovely lie. Last we met, I tried to hand you over to the dark lord's forces, I'd fear for your mental health if you were happy to see me."

Harry shrugged. "I don't hold it against you. You did it only because the Death Eaters had taken Luna, and the only reason they took her was because you were one of the few brave enough to speak out about your support for me."

A strange look passed over Xenophilius' face, but it was quickly veiled by his long hair when he bowed his head in a thankful nod. "Your understanding means much me, you are a good man. But that's not why I stopped you." The older man paused uncertainly. "Mr. Potter, might I ask you something?"

"Of course." Harry nodded encouragingly. "What is it?"

"There are rumors of what was said the day you killed He-Who-Must-Not-Named." Xenophilius glanced around as his voice dropped below a whisper. "They say you mastered the Elder Wand. Took it from him. And that that was what allowed you to defeat him."

Harry took a step back, immediately on his guard. "I don't have the Elder Wand, only my own."

Xenophilius hastened to smooth his raised hackles. "Well, of course you don't have it on you, such an artifact is too precious to carry with you on an everyday shopping trip. But whether you've
simply left it at home or locked it in your vault, you have it, it's yours. You are the master of the Elder Wand. And the cloak."

"Cloak? Sorry, what cloak?"

"You came to my home that day, and asked about the Deathly Hallows, and I told you."

Harry's jaw dropped and he shook his head. "But Hermione….How do you…?"

"How do I remember what we discussed after your lovely friend obliviated me?" Xenophilius raised a wry brow. "I presume from what she tried to take from me, she was not aiming to make me forget the entire conversation, only that your young, redheaded friend was present. From the reports I heard, he was meant to be home sick with spattergroit. But, in her haste, the spell she cast was sloppy, underpowered, easily thwarted by the protections around my home. I did not forget the interest you showed in the Hallows nor did I forget the look you and your friends shared when I told you of Death's own invisibility cloak. You know of it, more than that, you own it."

"This is all some wild conjecture, Mr. Lovegood."

"And yet you've not denied a single word." Xenophilius took a step forward. "Do you have the Resurrection Stone? Did you unite the Hallows?"

"Why?" Harry was floundering, caught completely off guard by the man's fervored interest. "Why does it matter to you?"

"Because, once they've been united, we all will die."

Harry froze, a part of him was waiting for Xenophilius to laugh and claim it was a joke. Or, what was probably more likely, go on to explain some completely eccentric conspiracy theory claiming the rise of a clumdinger army. When such an explanation was not immediately forthcoming, he pressed for a bit of elaboration. "I'm sorry, what?"

"The Hallows are objects far too powerful to even put to words. Death would not and did not give them up willingly. We took them and we used them and we abused them."

Harry shook his head as he considered the best way to placate Xenophilius' mad theory. "Those who took the Hallows are long dead, Death has no one to punish."

His words did nothing to soothe Xenophilius, unfortunately. If anything, he seemed even more distressed. "It's not Death who wishes to punish. The object from which the Hallows came was one of neutrality, balance. Those who had them used them for their own selfish purposes tried to cheat Death, they tried to become death, and in doing so, they upset the balance. With the Hallows separated, there is nothing they could do to right the balance, unite them and they once again have the power to right them in the only way they know how."

Harry could see where this was going. "They kill us."

Xenophilius laughed bitterly. "No, not you, you're their master. Only us."

"Mr. Lovegood….."

"You don't believe me. Of course you don't. They won't either, not at first, but when it begins….then they'll see. Then they'll believe."

Harry felt his heart sink, the man was so sure in his fear, there would be no convincing him that he
hadn't actually united the Hallows or, even if he had, that their union wouldn't actually bring about the end of days, but he could still appeal for his silence in the only way he knew how. "If you tell them, they'll want to hurt me...I'm-I'm Luna's friend. You know the sort of person she is, if I hurt, she will. You would hurt her?"

Xenophilius shook his head. "No. I would save her." He smiled a small, sad smile as he began to back away. "I'm sorry, Mr. Potter, it seems we just weren't meant to be on the same side, not when it means putting my Luna at risk."

Harry raised his wand. Xenophilius was resolute in going to the papers (specifically his own no doubt) to warn all of the wizarding world of their coming demise at Harry's hands, he would not be reasoned with. It was more than likely that these warning would go unheeded, Xenophilius and the Quibbler were notorious for printing outrageous and entirely unbelievable conspiracy theories, but if even one person believed him, that was one too many. He wouldn't risk it. "I can't let you go." His wand aimed at the point just between the man's eyes. "Please don't make me."

"I won't," Xenophilius reassured. Harry frowned in confusion, but then the man was yelling, drawing everyone's attention to the two of them. "It's Harry Potter! It's the Boy-Who-Lived! The Man Who Conquered!"

They were upon them, Harry specifically, in a matter of moments. Dozens of wizards surrounded him, all trying to congratulate him, to thank him, to touch him, and in the ensuing chaos, Xenophilius got away.

It was an hour before Harry was able to return home. There had been so many who had wanted to see him and speak with him, so many who weren't willing to listen to his feeble attempts at excusing himself or his insistences that he really did have somewhere to be. They only dispersed after each and every person had been granted a chance to shake his hand and personally thank him for saving their world. When he was finally back in the safety of Grimmauld Place, he was tired and irritable and just really wanted to settled down with something warm to eat and begin sorting through his books, but the little luck he'd been seeing earlier that evening had apparently fled and he found himself with guests.

Ron and Hermione had let themselves in sometime during his absence and set themselves up in the main parlor. Harry expressed his surprise at seeing them, but hugged them both in greeting anyway.

"My parents are finally settling back in," Hermione explained as she happily accepted his hug. "They're still a bit angry at me for taking their memories, so I thought it'd be a good idea to give them a bit of space for a week or two."

"I can't stay as long," Ron said, "I'll probably head back home sometime tomorrow. But I needed to get away for a few hours, we're all mourning but sometimes it gets to be too much. Almost suffocating."

"Well, if you've come to distract yourselves from your own terrible woes, you've come to the right place." Harry heaved a dramatic sigh as he flopped onto the nearest armchair. "I had a day. Wait, actually, these past few weeks have all been something else."

Hermione leaned forward in her seat. "Oh?"

"Brief summary? I had a conversation with Death and Xenophilius Lovegood is convinced I've brought about the end of days."
"Um, okay no." Ron frowned. "We do not want the brief summary. Tell us everything."

Harry scratched at the back of his head. "It's a long story."

Ron made a point of settling back in his seat. "We've got time."

"Well, okay." Harry sighed again. "The other day, the same one as Fred's funeral, I got smashed and decided I was going to use a dark ritual I'd found to summon the dead." He felt sheepish explaining what he'd done as, now, he knew how much of a monumentally stupid idea that had been. "I just wanted to talk to them and make sure they were happy. But they didn't show up. Instead, a man did, Death."

"Death?" Ron repeated weakly. "Like Death Death?"

Harry nodded.

"Did he look like the stories said? All skeletal and scary?"

Harry shook his head. "No. He was actually kind of fit, a bit older and definitely intimidating, but he looked like a man."

"And what did Death say to you?"

"After comparing me to a bacterium and calling me a great, big coward?" Harry snorted. "He was actually nice enough to explain what the Hallows were to him and what uniting them meant for me."

"What does it mean?"

Harry sobered at that. "A lot, apparently. I'm not his master but his equal, his protégé without the chance of him actually dying and passing his position on to me. That means I don't die, not from old age, not from a killing curse, not even from bad shellfish. Eventually I'll be able to do the things he can, though I'm still not entirely sure what that is. It's actually already started, when I saw Fred that day at Hogwarts and when I nearly went mad because of the voices only I could hear? That was me sensing those who have passed on but haven't crossed over yet."

"Shit," Ron whispered. "Is there nothing you can do? Do you get any say in this?"

Harry smiled sadly. "Not really. Death said I can die, but only if we're both in agreement that my soul should be reaped, and he's still not sure it'll work. The Hallows are a part of me, they've absorbed into my core or something, the only way I can stop being Death's equal is if they're harvested from my soul, and I've been told that it's incredibly painful."

"So, what, you're just going to sit back, eternally young and healthy, while we grow old and drop like flies around you?"

"Well, I have no intention of outliving you, not for long at least. Death has assured me that there won't ever be a time where he won't want to reap my soul, he's an arsehole like that, I figure once you're gone I'll finally give him permission to have at it and cross my fingers that it actually works."

Hermione seemed stricken by this idea. "That's horrible. After everything you've endured…it's so much less than you deserve."

"I know." Harry shrugged. "But I've just about come to terms with the fact that I won't get to live
the sort of life I'd really been hoping for. I guess I'll just have to work with the cards I've been dealt."

Ron reached out to squeeze Harry's knee. "I'm sorry."

"So am I."

"If you really don't age, we'll have to find some way to make sure you at least look like you do." A contemplative look settled over Hermione's face as she began attempting to find some way past this issue. "The last thing we need is for the wizarding world to become aware of this mess."

"It might be a bit too late for that," Harry snorted ruefully. "Remember how I mentioned Xenophilius thinking I've brought about the end of days?"

Ron nodded. "Yeah, what's with that?"

"The Hallows come from an ancient object that was all about balance. Xenophilius believes that the wizards who possessed the Hallows and used them for their own personal gain upset that balance; with them reunited they'll attempt to right the balance by wiping out the wizarding world. He's declared it his personal mission to warn the wizarding world of their coming demise. I have a feeling he's drafting an article for the Quibbler as we speak."

"How does he even know you've united the Hallows?" Ron asked. "He shouldn't even know you were interested in them. Hermione obliviated him, didn't she?"

"Yeah, but according to him the charm was hastily cast, weak enough for his wards to stop it. I guess he took what I said to Voldemort during the final battle about my being the master of the Elder Wand, and added it to what we talked about that day and came to his own conclusions."

Hermione looked appalled with herself. "Fuck."

A bubble of surprised laughter burst from Harry at the sound of the expletive leaving his friend's lips. "Don't worry about it, Hermione, I don't blame you. We all did the best we could in that situation."

"You seem awfully calm," Ron observed.

Harry shrugged. "I tried reasoning with him, tried to convince him the Hallows would do no one harm, then not to tell anyone, but he won't be swayed. I have a feeling he's going to use the Quibbler to spread the news, but they've never exactly been a reputable source."

"Not before the war, no," Hermione pointed out, "but during, when Voldemort had taken control of the Daily Prophet, the Quibbler was one of the only reliable sources of news. People subscribed and they listened to what he had to say. Now that the Daily Prophet is back up and running he likely has less followers, but he still has them and they still listen. It may not be a lot, but it'll be more than enough to cause you trouble."

"Then we go and stop him from writing that article." Ron declared this as if it were the most obvious solution in the world. "Ginny said he and Luna have been staying at the Leaky Cauldron since their home was pretty badly messed up. We'll go up there and give him a talking to. And if he doesn't want to be reasoned with, then Hermione can obliviate him. Only this time, try and do it right, yeah?"

Hermione gaped, clearly affronted. "That is a terrible thing to say."
Ron frowned in confusion. "What? My suggestion that we obliterate the man for a second time or that the only reason we have to is because you couldn't get it right the first time?"

Hermione scowled and very pointedly didn't answer.

Harry smiled, feeling lighter now that he had a potential solution to this newest set of challenges. "All right, let's go. Let's do it."

After spending a few minutes hashing out who would say what to Xenophilius, Harry, Ron, and Hermione apparated to the Leaky Cauldron. However, the moment they landed, they were met with a surprising amount of chaos; Aurors were swarming the place, searching every nook and cranny while wizards in strange, navy blue robes stood along the edges of the room, specifically near the exits and entrances as they muttered obscurely. The moment the Aurors caught sight of the trio, they were herded out into Diagon Alley where a large group of patrons was already gathered. At the forefront was a supremely unconcerned looking Luna.

Harry made sure to shield his face and, subsequently, his scar as he moved to stand beside Luna and question her on what was happening.

Luna smiled excitedly up at him. "A muggle came into the Leaky Cauldron." She was near bouncing on her toes in excitement. "Just walked right in. And no one even noticed until she began making a fuss about two hags who had gotten into a duel because they found out they were dating the same ogre."

Ron's jaw dropped. "Really?"

"Yes." Luna nodded. "It's terrible isn't it? You would think they'd realize they were dating the same man. Perhaps he didn't know? They did look very similar."

"Not the hags, Luna, the muggle. How did she even get in? The wards are meant to keep them from realizing this place even exists."

"I reckon it has something to do with the way the wards are beginning to fail. They're not as strong as they once were."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione all looked to Luna sharply, unsure if this was another of her wild tales or if there was actually a basis of fact to what she was saying.

"Surely you've noticed it by now?" Silvery eyes looked between the three friends quizzically. "The magics we've cast to keep us safe is dying, they won't keep us hidden for long."

Harry felt something uncertain and just a little bit worried settle in his stomach, this was too much of a coincidence. "Luna, what do you know?"

"More than a bit, Harry. I wasn't in Ravenclaw for nothing."

Luna didn't even flinch when Harry gripped her wrist and dragged her further into the Alley, away from the crowd, Ron and Hermione followed uncertainly. "Luna, you know what's happened to me, you know what I've become. Did you tell your father about it? Any of it?"

Luna frowned. "Of course not. That's your secret to keep."

"Yeah, well today he cornered me in Gringotts, certain that I had united the Hallows, he said that bringing the Hallows together would destroy our world and now here you are telling me that the
magic that's been set to protect us is dying. What do you know?"

"You're hurting me, Harry."

He immediately released his grip on her wrist, but he didn't retreat an inch. "Please."

"Daddy's always been obsessed with the Deathly Hallows," she admitted. "His parents told him stories of them, though in those stories they were only the Heart, not the Hallows. It was a story that was passed on from generations. He told me of it only a few years after Mummy died, he told me about how once the Heart was whole again we would all die. Our magic would fail us and the wizarding world would find its end. It frightened me terribly so he never told me again, but I never forgot."

Harry's hands felt as if they wanted to begin trembling, so he tucked them beneath his arms. "Do you think the stories were true?"

Luna looked pointedly to where the Aurors and the blue robed wizards had moved to investigate the outside of the pub.

"Is there any way to stop it?"

Luna smiled, sad but not at all afraid. "No, there's nothing you can do. I know it's hard to accept, you who were born to be a hero, but we are finished, our end is inevitable."

Harry left Luna, Hermione, and Ron to watch as the source of the Leaky Cauldron's breach was searched for. Luna's words had left a tight band of worry around his chest, but he refused to allow himself to begin actively fearing for his friends' fate until it was confirmed by the only source he could trust. First he apparated to Grimmauld Place to collect a few leftovers from several weeks ago, then he apparated to a place he'd intended to never return to again.

Privet Drive was still empty, wherever the Dursleys had been moved they must have liked it quite a bit as they had yet to return. Or maybe they had been forgotten about and were still huddled in some drafty hovel fearfully waiting for Voldemort to track them down and murder them for sharing blood with his greatest enemy.

Either way, he didn't care.

He took great pleasure in placing his wreath of asphodel, henbane, and ash wood atop of one Petunia's prized dinner platter and setting the whole thing alight, no doubt irreparably damaging the china. He used one of the pristinely kept steak knives to cut into the flesh of his palm and allowed his blood to mix with the flames.

"Again with the sticks and the flowers. I thought after our last conversation you would have learned, but it seems not. That is most disappointing."

Harry glared coldly at Death. "Whether it has your oh so revered mark of approval or not is no concern to me, it worked in bringing you here and that's all that I care about."

Death snorted inelegantly, he waved his hand and extinguished his fire and then, just to spite him, returned the plate to its once pristine condition. Harry responded by shattering the fine china across the linoleum.

"Well, we are in a mood today, aren't we? What has you in such a snit, little quark?"
"The Heart, does it intend to destroy the wizarding world?"

A slow look of amused realization hijacked Death's features. "This upsets you."

Harry felt something deep within him shatter, he hadn't spoken the words he'd been seeking, but Death's reaction was confirmation enough. "Yes, this upsets me," he hissed. "Those are my people, my family, and you failed to tell me that they would all be dying because of me."

Death didn't even have the grace to look ashamed or repentant. "Lives on earth are so fleeting, entire races and species die out only to be replaced by another in a single day. I confess to having forgotten about their coming extinction."

Harry flinched at his blasé words. "But it can be stopped, yeah? If you harvest the Heart from my soul, would it save them?"

"No, the Heart has been united, it is whole again and it must restore its balance."

"Those are good people," Harry protested. "They've done nothing wrong."

"The Heart makes no distinction between those who used it to do wrong and those who exist now. It was magic that has upset the balance so magic must right it."

Harry wilted, his people would die because of him and, according to Death, nothing, not even the power he was to be granted could stop it. "How long do they have? How long until they're all dead?"

"Oh, it will not be immediate. They will have a century, two if they're careful. But they will no longer grow, no longer thrive, their death will be a slow one." Death idly paced the length of the kitchen, running thin fingers along the lurid, floral studded wallpaper. "The magics that have kept them hidden for so long will fail, it has already begun; those who they wished to keep their existence hidden from will become aware of their lurking presence. They will be frightened of these strange new people, they will want to try to control them, want to regulate their powers. Of course your people will not stand for such a thing. And so there will be war. As it wages, pestilence will strike. Sickness will spread killing the weak and rendering many unable to bear children to continue their lines. The disease will shut down butchers, bakeries, markets, they'll have to venture into the world they are at war with or famine will take them." Death seemed spellbound, almost reverent by this point. "Only when they are weakened, suffering, and unable to reproduce, only then when my Heart feels as if they have paid their due, will I, Death, take them as my own."

Death bestowed Harry a smile, both pitying and terrifying. "And then they will be gone, as if they had never existed. The era of magic is ended."
Chapter 3

There was an article in The Quibbler the very next morning. It bore an arresting headline written in big, bold letters and was accompanied by a menacing looking photo of Harry; the same photo, he realized, that had been used on his Undesirable No. 1 posters. The article itself was pretty much what Harry had expected (though it was wildly different from the few articles he had seen in The Quibbler back when he was still in Hogwarts) it revealed Harry's status as 'Master of Death' and carefully listed all that Xenophilius knew about Harry and his quest for the Hallows. There wasn't much, honestly, but what little he had was damning. The article then went on to explain how and why the Hallows meant the end of them all. Or, at least, all but Harry. It was clear and well written, completely devoid of Xenophilius' mad ravings; even if didn't immediately succeed in convincing those who read it of the wizarding world's fall, it would eventually and it would bring trouble right to Harry's front door.

"So we're back to this," Ron noted angrily as he tossed The Quibbler aside with a sneer of disgust, "having your name slandered in the papers."

"Xenophilius was actually pretty good about not slandering my name," Harry pointed out. "He didn't blame any of this on my greed or my hunger for power as the Prophet would have. But it was inevitable that I would come off looking like the bad guy, the wizarding world is dying because of me."

"It's not because of you," Hermione snapped. "If you hadn't united the Hallows someone else would have eventually and this same thing would be happening then. So quit trying to beat yourself about it, we need you focused."

"Focused on what?"

"Finding some way to stop this." Harry had returned to Grimmauld Place after his discussion with Death the previous night and grimly informed his two friends that all that Luna had said was true, they were coasting towards extinction and the brakes had been cut. There'd been horror and more than a small bit of fear, but then Hermione had declared his lamentations of hopelessness as bullshit and locked herself in the library for the rest of the night. When Harry had shuffled down to the kitchen after a night of fitful sleeping, she was already up and poring over a large book while she sipped at a mug of tea. Seeing her so calm and assured allowed the smallest bit of hope to nip at Harry, if anyone could prove Death himself wrong, it would be Hermione.

"Have you found anything?"

"No, not to stop it." Hermione spared Harry a quick glance while she turned to the next page in her book. "But there is a way we can prevent this whole mess from happening. It'll be just like third year."

Just like third year? It took only a second for Harry to process the statement, his jaw dropped. "You want to go back in time?"

Hermione nodded. "If we can go back to before the war ended and stop you from uniting the Hallows, maybe even find some way to destroy them, then this whole mess would be stopped before it could even start."

"But how would we go back?" Ron wondered. "All of the time turners were destroyed our fifth year, and even if they weren't, they only go back a few hours, right? Not the weeks and months
we'd need."

"You're right," Hermione smiled at her boyfriend approvingly. "But we won't be using a time turner." She tapped the spine of her book. "There is a ritual, it's old and powerful and probably really, really dangerous, but it can send us as far back as we need."

"How dangerous."

"If done wrong, best case scenario you're displaced in time, worst case scenario your magic is drained and you die."

"Then we'll just have to make sure we do it right. What do you know about this ritual?"

"Other than that it's incredibly high risk? It's not like time turner travel, when you go back, you replace the you that exists, they're gone so you have to live from that point on. There's no traveling back, we'll have to relive every moment."

Ron didn't seem at all upset by this. "That's a small price to pay. How far back do you intend to send us?"

"I was thinking Christmas of last year," Hermione suggested. "That was only a few days before we made the mistake of visiting Xenophilius."

Harry hummed contemplatively. "At that point I had both the stone and the cloak, but I hadn't actually physically touched the stone and the wand was still with Voldemort. I like it, we should do it. What will it take?"

Hermione sighed heavily. "A lot. The ingredients we need are obscure, I'm not even sure where we can find some of these things, and they're bound to be incredibly expensive. Not to mention it needs to be done in a specific order at a specific time of the year."

"When?"

"Mid-November, I think." Hermione consulted her book. "It has something to do with moon magics and such, that specific time of the year is when the spell will be most effective. If we have everything we need when the time comes around, actually performing the ritual won't be all that hard. It requires a basic knowledge of runes and a fair bit of magic, but it can be done."

What Hermione was saying was all good news, but something about her delivery indicated that there was more to what she was saying. Ron seemed to sense it too as he immediately pressed her to go on. "But…?"

"But," Hermione sighed, "all three of us won't be able to go back. One of us will have to remain behind to perform the ritual."

"And you think it should be you," Harry guessed.

"Well, yes actually. Of the three of us, I would be the easiest to convince that the two of you were from the future, I've dealt with this sort of thing before. Not to mention, I'm the only one with experience in ancient runes, I should be the one to perform the ritual."

"What will happen to you when we change the past?" Ron frowned. "Will you remember what we've done or will you just be gone?"

Hermione shrugged. "I honestly don't know. But no matter which way it goes, you'll still have me.
It'd be a slightly different version is all."

"It's the best option we have," Harry was speaking directly to Ron, who didn't seem entirely convinced. "I think we should do it."

"It's risky."

"But it's worth it. Think all of the people we'll save, not just those who will die, but those we already have."

Realization slowly dawned. "Fred?"

Harry nodded. "And Remus and Tonks and anyone else that we can save."

Ron still looked uncertain but his jaw no longer held that stubborn set that signified that he was completely against the idea. "What are we waiting for then? Let's get started."

Hermione had said that some of the ingredients would be obscure, that, in any ordinary situation, the items they were in need of would be near impossible to get their hands, but of course neither Harry nor Ron had really paid much mind to her warning until they saw the actual list of ingredients.

Most of it was easy enough, basic supplies that could be found at just about any apothecary; feathers of a diricawl, dried forsythia petals, the liver of a tawny eagle, the root of an Angel's Trumpet soaked in the brine of the Dead Sea. But then there were a handful of ingredients that weren't so simple.

"Unicorn blood willingly given," Ron read incredulously, "the skull of a girtablilu, the fingerprint of the gods. The hell does that even mean?"

"Unicorn blood actually shouldn't be that big of a problem for us," Hermione soothed, having already gotten over how difficult it would be to procure those final objects. "Hagrid has quite the way with unicorns, I'm sure he'll be willing to give us a hand with that. The latter two are what may give us some issues."

"Well, yeah," Harry agreed cynically. "The skull of gerty-whatever and a god's fingerprints? What's a gerty-thing and how do we get a god's fingerprint?"

"A girtablilu is a sort of man, scorpion hybrid," Hermione explained, "they're ancient creatures, I don't even know if they still exist or where we could find their remains. The fingerprint of the gods is just a fancy way of saying fulgurite, sand that's been crystalized by a lightning strike. Our only problem is the amount and quality of fulgurite that will be needed to perform the ritual will be expensive. Really expensive."

"But you know where to find it, yeah?" Harry asked.

Hermione shook her head. "Not specifically, but I know that if I looked I'll eventually find somewhere that sells it."

"Then don't worry about it. Our main focus right now needs to be figuring out where we can find that girtablilu."

"I did a bit of research on them last night, they supposedly originate from the Mesopotamic region, but," Hermione shrugged, "it doesn't get more specific than that."
"If these creatures really do or did exist, an apothecary in that region might have something," Ron suggested. "And even if they don't, maybe they could point us in the right direction."

Hermione nodded. "I'll look into it a bit more, see if I can't find something a little more specific."

Harry granted Hermione a reassuring smile. "I wouldn't worry too much about it. You said the ritual had to be performed mid-November? That's six months from now."

"In the meantime, I'll get started on getting the rest of these," Ron waved the list of ingredients about, "I should be able to find most of what we need in Diagon Alley. And Harry will...Harry what will you be doing?"

"I've got some research of my own to do," Harry nodded toward the Occlumency texts stacked on the counter. "I've got six months to keep whatever abilities may come under control, then I'll be free of them."

"All right." Hermione nodded decisively. "We've all got our tasks. Let's hop to it."

There was a wizard enclave, a small but prosperous farming community just within the border of England. Within it were only a few hundred wizards, witches, and their families, but with a little help from their magic, they were able to provide farmed goods, meats, dairies, fresh vegetables, to nearly every wizarding establishment and quite a few homes in the United Kingdom.

They were a peaceful people, if not a bit introverted. None of their children attended Hogwarts, choosing to be taught within their small community, and none of them played any part in the war, choosing to remain neutral in regards to that particular conflict. Most of the population of wizarding Britain didn't realize the importance of these people, they kept a portion of the European wizarding world fed and happy and thriving. But then, one evening in the middle of the month of May, only weeks after the defeat of the dark lord Voldemort, they were attacked. They were destroyed.

It started in the dead of the night with a shiver, then a quake, then a fall. Their wards fell with absolutely no warning before or after, the wizards within had no reason to believe they were no longer safe behind the privacy of their wards until the muggles began showing up, curious as to what this strange place was, this community that had most certainly not been there the previous day.

They were only curious at first, if not confused, they didn't wish to do any harm, only to find some answers. But the members of the wizard community were taken off guard and just the slightest bit frightened, they attempted to use their magic to drive the intruders away and for a short period of time, it worked, but then they returned with more. More people and more guns and things turned violent.

There were less than one hundred muggles in comparison to the two hundred wizards, but the muggles were armed with weapons that could fire and kill five wizards in the time it took to cast one spell. They didn't fight for long only because they didn't survive for long. When the Aurors finally arrived only three wizards, all gravely injured, and twelve muggles remained.

The acting Minister of Magic, Kingsley Shacklebolt, oversaw the interment of the dozen muggles into the Ministry's temporary holding cells with a disbelieving horror.

"This is the second incident this week." His tone belied his overwhelming concern. "What is the cause of this?"
A navy adorned Unspeakable immediately stepped forward to answer the Minister. "Since the breach in the Leaky Cauldron, we've been tracking the strength of wards across the region, from what we've seen so far, their strength have dramatically decreased. The larger the area cloaked in wards, the more dramatic the decrease. Establishments such as Hogwarts, Hogsmeade, St. Mungo's, Diagon Alley are seeing the worst of it."

"But why?" Kingsley pressed. "What is causing the wards to fail? And why are the wards around some falling altogether while the wards around Hogwarts and the like remain?"

"We believe it's due to the strength of the wards. The protections surrounding the enclave were weak and hadn't been renewed in years, whereas those around Hogwarts and Hogsmeade are restored every month. As for why this is happening," the Unspeakable shook her head, "we've yet to pinpoint the source."

"All right," Kingsley sighed, "well keep working on that. Meanwhile, I've got to deal with this mess."

"Reporters from the Prophet were already on the scene when we left," Gawain Robards, the new head auror stepped in, "a few followed us and the muggles here so we can expect the mob to be on our doorstep no later than this evening. They'll want blood."

"More than enough has been spilled already. I've already arranged a meeting with the muggle prime minister, I'll be heading that way once the muggles are settled in. I'm hoping we can at least begin sorting this out before the news is released to the masses."

"Go on then," Robards urged. "I'll keep an eye on them, they're no longer much of a danger to us."

Kingsley sighed again, not at all looking forward to the coming meeting, he was eager to just get it out of the way already. "I'll leave them under your capable supervision then." He clasped Robards on the shoulder then turned to leave.

When he stepped through the floo, the prime minister was already waiting for him, seated comfortably behind his desk with an expression of deep weariness that matched Kingsley's own exactly.

"What a mess this is, isn't?" the man lamented, startling a rueful laugh from Kingsley.

"That it is," he agreed as he settled in the seat across from him. "One that I wish to sort out as quickly and quietly as possible."

"Quickly I can do," the prime minister nodded, "however, I'm not sure about quietly. I don't know how I can cover this one up, eighty-nine of my men were killed."

"Two hundred and thirty seven of mine were, children included. And all because your men were a little spooked."

"And don't you think they had a right to be? After all those unexplained killings."

"Unexplained killings that have ended and been ended for nearly a month now," Kingsley interjected testily. "And whether they had a reason to be spooked or not, that does not justify their attack on my people."

"What would you have me do? They can't be punished, not without revealing your existence to them and others."
"I don't know," Kingsley growled in frustration. "But I can't just let them walk, not unless I wish to have a riot on my hands."

"Surely if you explain it was only an accident, one performed out of fear and a belief that they were defending themselves," the prime minister implored.

Kingsley shook his head. "It won't be had. Those who were killed were important, they provided a large portion of our food, this will have a far reaching impact on our world, one that cannot be so easily forgiven."

"Then perhaps a trade? We, the muggle world, will provide your people meats, dairy, crops and whatever else was lost in the attack for as long as is needed, but only if our men are returned whole and healthy."

Kingsley took a long moment to consider the proposal, it would not completely quell the outrage that would spark when the wizarding world was informed of the massacre, but it would do well to dampen it if only slightly. "Their memories would have to be altered," he countered. "Looters killed your men, a posse of young gang members strung out on drugs went from farm to farm and killed those people."

"That's a lot of damage done by one group of kids," the prime minister pointed out.

"Change it around as much as you like, just make it work." Kingsley rose to his feet. "I'll return in a few hours with a proper agreement worked out."

With that, he stepped into the fire and disappeared once again.

The article detailing the attack on the farming enclave was released that evening, just as Robards predicted, and it shook the wizarding world to its core. They had only just rid themselves of Voldemort and already they were dealing with a new threat. Only this threat had always been there, surrounding them, outnumbering them one to one hundred million. They'd lulled themselves into believing that they were protected from this threat, their wards were supposed to keep them safe, but they were falling and people had died because of it.

But if the Daily Prophet article had been bad, the Quibbler was worse because they had predicted this, they had said that Harry and the Hallows would be the end of them, and it would start with their magic failing. But no one had listened, or at least not enough people had listened, assuming Xenophilius was back to his usual mad ravings now that the war had passed. Xenophilius had nothing new to say, he had poured every bit of proof into his last article, so he reprinted it, and this time, people listened.

"I think maybe we should leave," Ron suggested the night the article was rereleased. "The three of us and all of our family. Just until November when we can get this all sorted out."

Hermione looked up from her reading to fix Ron with a contemplative frown. "You want to leave? And go where?"

Ron shrugged. "Somewhere far from here. Far from muggles. If the wards around this place falls, people will notice, there's never been a Number Thirteen and they know it. Same goes for the Burrow. And even if the muggles don't get us, the wizarding world certainly will. If any more wizards are attacked, and I have a feeling they will be, people will really start listening to Lovegood, they'll want to bring Harry in and they'll come for my family to find him. That's a lot of enemies, our best bet would be to, ah…tactically retreat."
"Where?" Hermione repeated.

"I have a few properties," Harry spoke up. "The Potters have a home somewhere in Scotland, far from both wizards and muggles. Its location has always been a pretty big secret, I don't think even the Ministry knows where it is."

"Your parents are muggles, Hermione, so they'd be all right if they decided they didn't want to move again. My family might be a bit harder to convince, Dad's got work, Ginny has school in the fall, Bill has the cottage, but I think they'll come around once things start getting worse."

"If," Hermione corrected firmly. "Things only might get worse. The Prophet said that Kingsley has already been working with the muggle Prime Minister to address this issue and make sure it never happens again. It seems as if he has everything well in hand."

Things were not well in hand. Three days after their imprisonment, only hours before their memory was to be wiped and they were to be set free, the twelve muggles who had survived the massacre were found dead in their cells. They showed no sign of poisoning nor did any of them have any sort of injuries, which led those who were investigating the deaths to believe that they had each found themselves to the recipient of a killing curse.

The muggle prime minister was furious, he had upheld his end of the bargain, he'd pinned the slew of deaths in the countryside on a fanatic cult and he had sent his first shipment of perishable goods to all the right people only just that morning. And all he had asked in return was the safe return of his men. He demanded answers, he wanted to see those responsible punished, but Kingsley had nothing to offer him, he too had been blindsided by the murders. And so, until he could provide the prime minister with some proof that the situation was being handled, their deal was off.

In the wake of this newest complication, it took no effort at all to persuade Ron's family to take some time off of work to spend a few months away from the wizarding world. They were just as eager to be away from the growing danger in their world as Harry, Ron, and Hermione were, even if it meant putting their careers on hold. Mrs. Weasley was especially pleased with the idea, she loved the Burrow, nowhere else could be home, but it held so many painful memories, it would do her and her family well to get away for a while.

The morning of their departure, everyone gathered in the Burrow to ensure last minute details were in order and to share one more meal around the well-worn table for what was sure to be a long while. It was loud and hectic, but there was a palpable air of excitement throughout the entire house. Their reason for leaving to the country certainly wasn't the greatest; fleeing ones homes to escape the angry mob sure to descend upon them at any given time would leave a bitter taste in anyone's mouth, but their place of refuge was to be one of the Potter family's more resplendent manors located in the secluded highlands. With all of the amenities the manor was sure to boast, they would be hard pressed not to view their temporary stay as a vacation of sorts. One that they had most certainly earned.

"Good morning, Harry." Mrs. Weasley reached out to run a gentle hand across his cheek when Harry entered the kitchen she'd been working away in and leaned against the counter beside her. "Decide to take a break from the madness?"

"I don't want to be in the way of Fleur and Ron and they're numerous trunks. I don't have much so it didn't take long to give it one last check. Do you need any help in here?"

"I've just about finished actually. But if you don't mind, could you go and find Ginny for me? Knowing that girl she's probably still asleep."
Ginny's room was only one floor up from the ground level, but the tossing about of trunks and bickering voices couldn't be heard once he climbed the staircase. No doubt through the use of a handy charm. In the ensuing quiet, Harry could hear the absolute silence coming from Ginny's room and could only find himself agreeing with Mr. Weasleys assumption, in all the years he'd known her, he'd come to know that Ginny was a late riser.

"Hey, Gin. Your mum's got breakfast that'll be gone quicker than you can breathe if you don't hurry and grab some now."

With his head leaning against the wall, ear fairly close to the space between the frame and door, Harry was just able to catch the creak of a dried out throat attempting to speak.

"Ginny? Are you awake?"

There was nothing this time, the noise, faint as it had been before, had now fallen completely silent.

"I'm coming in, okay?"

The first thing Harry noted when he entered Ginny's room, was that it was stiflingly hot. Both the windows and the door had been shut, preventing the proper circulation of air and trapping the body heat Ginny was letting off. And she was letting it off in waves. Her thick comforter had been thrown to the floor, discarded in a sad little heap at the foot of her bed, while she remained tangled in her sheets, the thin fabric of which clung to her sweat soaked skin. At first glance she looked asleep, but when Harry approached and crouched beside her bed, a thin line of white between her barely open eyelids became visible.

"Gin?"

And there was the noise again, a pitiful groan of exhaustion and discomfort, forcing its way from Ginny's chest.

"Merlin, you're burning. But you were fine last night." Harry gently tucked a strand of red hair behind his friend's ear, the only form of comfort he could relay in that moment. "All right, I'm going to get your mum, she should have something in her potions cabinet to help."

Ginny murmured something he couldn't understand, but the trembling hands she brought up to weakly pat at his own conveyed her thanks just as well.

"Did you manage to rouse the beast, for me?" Mrs. Weasley smiled when Harry came bounding down the stairs.

He shook his head, a concerned frowned taking over his face. "I couldn't get her out of bed, she's sick, I think. Running a high fever."

Mrs. Weasley set aside the pot she'd been transferring to the table, her brow furrowed in concern. "A fever? How can you tell?"

"I could feel it, once I walked into her room."

"Oh dear, she must have caught something from Diagon yesterday. I told her that little sandwich shop she likes is just no good. Let me gather a few things."

Several potions were gathered from a cabinet above the sink and a handful of herbs tossed into the kettle before Mrs. Weasley followed Harry up to the second floor. Ginny had managed to prop
herself up on a few pillows in his absence as well as arrange the sheets around her legs a little neater than they had been earlier, but now that she sat a little straighter, the dark growths ringed in an inflamed purple that clung to her neck and disappeared beneath the neckline of her shirt became painfully obvious.

"Oh dear." Mrs. Weasley set the potions to the side and used her wand to cast a bubblehead charm over both herself and Harry.

"What is it?" Harry asked, words the slightest bit distorted due to the charm.

"The growths along her neck, it's not just a fever she has, but scrofungulus."

"That's a wizarding disease, right? Is it dangerous?"

"It won't kill her, fatal cases of scrofungulus are rare. But she'll need to be taken to St. Mungo's if she's to be treated properly, we'll have to put our plans on hold for the moment."

"Seeing her well is more important. Besides, the manor isn't going anywhere and things have been pretty quiet as of late, we shouldn't be in any danger if we hold off on our retreat for a few more weeks."

When the others were informed of Ginny's sudden illness, they all wanted to sit with her and offer whatever comfort they could, but due to the contagious nature of the sickness, they were firmly told to keep their distance by Mrs. Weasley. Harry, who had already been exposed to the virus was the only one allowed to remain with Ginny, offering his companionship and distractions in the form of stories of when Dudley had been sick as a child. And it was him who carried her through the floo, with Mr. and Mrs. Weasley just a few steps behind her.

The healers took one look at the boils that had begun creeping up Ginny's throat and across her chin, before encapsulating their entire group in some modified version of a bubble charm and herding them up to the second floor. They were taken to their own room, private from any other patients in the ward and Harry was finally able to set Ginny down (she really was quite heavy) on a small cot.

A healer was at her side immediately, casting a diagnostic over her while simultaneously looking her over from top to toe with her own two eyes. "Mark this down as one more scrofungulus case," the healer ordered one of the two medi-wizards observing the procedure before turning to Harry and the two Weasley's. "When did she begin showing symptoms?"

"Sometime in the night, I would think. She went to sleep fine, but when Harry went to wake her this morning she was already sporting the growths." Mrs. Weasley wrung her hands worriedly. "Is there something else wrong with her? It doesn't usually come on this quickly, does it?"

"Not normally, but we've seen a few cases of quick onset scrofungulus these past few days, it may be a new strain. Any idea where she may have caught it?"

"She visited Diagon Alley with a few friends yesterday afternoon, it could have been from anyone there."

"Medi-wizard Prudence will take the name of those friends if you have them. He'll then have a few forms for you to fill out. Were bubble-head charms worn throughout the duration or, at least, the majority of your time with her?"

Mrs. Weasley nodded.
"Did any of you have physical contact with her?"

Harry stepped forward. "I did, before I knew what it was she had."

"I'm afraid that means you're ours for the next twenty-four hours. We'll need to keep you quarantined to make sure whatever you may have caught from her doesn't get passed on to others."

"You said this isn't your first case of scrofungulus this week," Mr. Weasley spoke up. "But it's not usually so commonly occurring. Should we be worried?"

"No. At the moment there is no cause for concern." The healer tucked away her wand, done examining Ginny. "You said she was at Diagon Alley yesterday, such places are where one is most likely to pick up any sort of sickness, especially one as contagious as this."

"And how quickly it set in?"

"We see mutated viruses and new strains of sickness all of the time. So far it has shown no sign of being any more fatal than the previous strain."

"But it must be more aggressive if the symptoms have begun showing much sooner than usual."

The healer shrugged. "Or perhaps it just has a shorter lifespan now. But it is not our job to research the disease, only ensure your daughter is well treated for it. Now, if you don't mind getting those names to Prudence. And we'll need a bit more information from you sir, once we have you settled in a room of your own."

The last thing Harry wanted was to be stuck in quarantine for the next twenty-four hours, not when he had far better things he could be doing, but the healer allowed him no option. She guided him into a separate room with the skill of a woman used to dealing with stubborn patients and set him up with a clipboard and quill to fill out his personal information. Mrs. And Mr. Weasley paid him one last visit with an update on Ginny before they returned home, she was still having trouble remaining conscious for more than a few minutes at a time, but the healers were already plying her with the necessary potions and salves to see her better.

"It shouldn't be more than a week before the worst of it has passed," Mr. Weasley explained. "Once she's no longer contagious we can take her home, you'll be out of here by then and we can be on our way."

A week's postponement wasn't much of a setback, the muggles had been quiet and with those responsible for the farm town's massacre dead the wizarding world had settled down if only slightly and focused their energy on finding some way to rebuild their food stores rather than fruitless attempts at revenge. They could wait a week.

But then it passed, a full seven days, and Ginny wasn't better. Harry had been released after twenty-four hours, miraculously having avoided catching the illness in the short time he'd spent exposed to Ginny, he returned to the Burrow where the rest of the Weasleys remained gathered, waiting for the news that the treatments were beginning to take effect. But the news never came, she got worse. The pustules spread across her entire body, covering every patch of skin with painful blisters that burst when they grew too swollen and excreted a foul smelling pus that seemed to burn at what little skin of hers hadn't been covered by the boils.

All of the cases that had come before hers and the multiple more that had come after were just as awful, the healers cited them as being far more aggressive than any strain they had seen before. And it was incredibly contagious, of the five friends Ginny had been with when she'd likely been
exposed to the virus, four of them had fallen ill with it. An entire corridor of the magical bugs floor had been taken up by those suffering from scrofungulus and another one was being cleared to prepare for the continued influx of infected.

"This is it, he said this would happen." Harry set aside his copy of the Prophet. The front page bore an article pondering over this curious spread of this magical bug. It was worded with concern, but no one had yet died from it so fear had not yet set in. He knew it would only be a matter of time. "The Ministry is doing their best to keep it quiet, but we're already beginning to see the start of another war, we're already beginning to see the effects of famine, and now this, now pestilence."

A heavy look was exchanged between Ron and Hermione, one that they assumed he couldn't see because of the way his gaze still lingered on the Prophet even though he really could.

"How do you know?" Hermione spoke softly, gently, as if afraid of spooking him.

"I can sense it."

"Sense it how? What does it feel like? How do you know?"

And for a moment, Harry had no answer. There were no words that could wholly encompass the magnitude of what Death and his Heart had done to him. "If I was born without sight, how would you describe its existence to me?" His head tilted curiously to the side as he waited for a response, when it was evident there would be none, he answered for his two friends. "You couldn't. There is no way to describe it, explain it. It just...is. I can't tell you how I know, I just do, the same way that you can look at this horrible bedspread and tell me that it's orange. People are going to die, a lot of people."

Hermione's hand trembled when she reached out to place it atop his knee. Harry's was steady when he allowed his fingers to trace along her knuckles before twining them together. "We have a way to stop it."

"We haven't touched the ritual since we got here. We don't know how to perform it and we don't have the items necessary to perform it."

"We will though; we'll learn how to perform it and we'll find everything we need to perform it."

Harry smiled, unable to do anything else when Ron was so confident in himself and the words he spoke. He wished desperately for a bit of that confidence for himself, because now, when Ginny's life was quite possibly on the line, he couldn't afford not to be.

"And you're wrong for that matter about us not having worked at all on the ritual since we arrived here." Hermione's tone had taken on the lofty pitch of the know-it-all schoolgirl he'd once found to be dreadfully grating but now only felt an unparalleled affection for. "I never stopped working on it."

"What have you got for us then?"

"I owled Hagrid about the unicorn blood, he was understandably curious about what we would need it for, but he agreed to collect a vial or two for us."

"Which leaves only the fulgurite and the skull."

"There are places that sell it here in Europe, but it's pricey. As in tens of thousands of galleons."

Harry didn't even flinch. "We have that. So the skull is really all that's left."
Hermione nodded. "I've been in contact with a few vendors in the Mesopotamic region, I'm just waiting on a response now."

"You know, when we first started all this hero-ing, no one told me there would be quite this much waiting." Ron sighed and sprawled out across his bed. "It's not nearly as glamorous as the stories would lead you to believe."

Hermione laughed and reached for a book she'd been perusing in her spare time while Harry settled down on his own cot. "I don't much mind waiting," he mused. "The moments in-between are nice."

There would no doubt be a half-hearted scolding from Mrs. Weasley waiting for them in the morning, she'd never condoned Hermione spending the night in the attic with Ron and Harry but since she and Ron had officially begun their relationship she'd been even more adamant about sticking to boundaries. But Harry knew she didn't like sleeping in the twins' old bedroom, George still slept in his own apartment above the joke shop, but the room still had too much of his and his passed twin's personality's in it for her to truly be comfortable, and Harry was suddenly and inexplicably too tired to care.

He fell asleep to Hermione's soft voice reading aloud for both his and Ron's benefit, expecting dreams of the white ravens and encroaching winters she spoke of and instead falling into something entirely different.

It was exactly like every Voldemort induced nightmare that had been forced upon him before the dark lord had met his final end. He was in someone else's body, experiencing all that they could but unable to influence any form of movement. He was outside, the sharp fabric and plastic mesh of a dog's lead cutting into his hand while a massive mastiff bounded several yards ahead. This wasn't just a leisurely stroll to enjoy before the late of the night really set in though, Harry, or whoever he was meant to be, his dog, and two others, young men, no older than Harry himself by the look of them, were trudging through the woods, whispering and laughing with each other as they snuck to whatever destination they undoubtedly had no business being at.

"What're we even looking for?" the voice that came from Harry's mouth had a distinctive cadence to it, as if they were somewhere in Wales. Though Harry couldn't for the life of him imagine why his dream would lead him to Wales of all places.

"I told you, I don't know what I saw," one of the others panted as the ground began to incline, "I veered off the trail this morning and saw it taking off with a sheep."

"What did it look like, at least?"

"Green and huge….and I think it had wings. It was through here."

The trio broke free from the trees into an expanse of open land nestled between the bases of two low reaching mountains. It was almost entirely barren, not even a lost sheep in sight, and dark, barely lit by the half moon.

"Something doesn't feel right," Harry felt his hijacked body shiver in something deeper than cold. "We shouldn't be here."

"No, I know what you mean," the third member of the group said. "Feels like we forgot something, you cook anything before we left? Accidentally leave the stove going?"

Harry shook his head.
"Then don't worry."

The first friend, the one leading the strange search, began jogging in the direction of the closest mountain. "I saw it by there. But it disappeared around the mountain when I tried to take a closer look."

The three boys and lone dog picked their way across the open field, slipping in the ankle high grass that had been muddied by an earlier rain shower. It took nearly half an hour to reach the first mountain, though it shouldn't have even taken half that in the right conditions. The boys were filthy and exhausted, but their spirits remained unflagged in the face of their childish curiosity as they split up to search the area around the mountain.

"There's bones here!" one of Harry's companions shouted after a little over five minutes of searching. "Picked apart and all bloody, I think it belonged to a sheep."

Harry's meat-suit headed in the direction of the shout, he could just see his two friends bent over the gnawed on remains of some poor animal's bones, but then the dog who had, until then, been happily trotting along at his side, dug his clawed feet into the ground and let out a high pitched sound of primal terror.

"There's something else here. Ellian, come take a look! There's a whole bunch of them."

"Hang on, something's got Alwyn scared." Harry gave a sharp tug to the leash, still wrapped around his hand, but the dog remained put.

"They look like some kind of egg, but I don't know what kind of bird they could belong to. These things are bigger than my head!"

"Alwyn, come on! Bring one here, he won't move."

The two boys tripped over to Harry, one was cradling an egg that truly was the size of his head, if not bigger, in his arms. It was a rich brown interspersed with a deep, earthy green. It was a handsome egg, one that Harry recognized all too well. He had seen a whole cluster of the things surrounding a solitary golden egg of the same size, while its mother fiercely protected the whole bunch from the beautiful french woman who had gone on to marry his best friend's brother.

He wanted to speak, to warn the three idiots and their dog of the danger, but this wasn't his body to pilot, he could only watch as his host did when the dog, Alwyn, screeched on last final yelp of fear before racing off with such speed and force he tore the lead from his hand. And when the boy turned back to his friends confused and preparing to chase after the loosed canine, he saw through eyes that weren't his own as something enormous and straight from his nightmare slunk from around the mountain, blending in frighteningly well despite its size with the lush green landscape. The other two saw it the same time he did, the egg fell from suddenly nerveless fingers and cracked open on one unfortunately placed rock. Thick, slimy liquid and the fetus of a not yet fully developed Welsh Green dragon spilled across the ground.

Its mother roared.

Harry woke violently, hands clutching at a shoulder that, only moments earlier, he'd felt talons impossibly long and fatally sharp tearing into. He rolled out of bed, panting and struggling to reorient himself. Somewhere above he could hear concerned voices and hands trying to pull him upright, but he shook them off and leaned himself heavily against the wall.

"Ron, get your dad….I need your dad."
"What?"

Harry forced himself to open his eyes as he gulped in heavy breaths. "I need to talk to your dad."

Ron's lips pressed into a tight, worried line, but he nodded and stepped quickly from the room. Hermione reached out as if to touch him, but then reconsidered her action, clearly remembering the last time Harry had been overwhelmed by some force she couldn't understand. He laughed, a tad breathlessly, and reached out to take her hand, finding some comfort in her grounding presence.

"Sorry," he whispered. "I didn't mean to wake you."

"Don't worry about me," Hermione snorted. "Is everything all right? What happened?"

"I saw something…in my dream."

"Another attack?"

"Not exactly."

It had to be well past midnight by this point, as evidenced by the sleep heavy glaze over Mr. Weasley's eyes and the wrinkled pajamas he wore, but Ron's father, when he arrived, showed a great amount of concern for Harry's tale and agreed to help him get in contact with those capable of finding out if what he'd seen had really come to pass. Kingsley would be the best person for that, and thanks to the fact that the Weasleys and the acting Minister of Magic were still on close terms, that proved to be much easier than it would be for just about any other wizard. The Burrow's floo network was connected with Kingsley's own and so Harry was able to establish contact with the man almost immediately.

"I had a dream."

Kingsley's entire face darkened. Those four words had grown to be a source of dread for the Order during the war as what succeeded them was rarely ever good news.

"You-Know-Who?"

"No, something else. I don't know how I saw it, but the reserve-the dragon reserve in Wales I think, muggles got into it, three boys."

"You saw them?"

Harry nodded. "It was just like it was with him. I could see it through their eyes, the whole thing. They found a dragon, or rather it found them, and it's furious, I think it's going to kill them if it hasn't already. One of its eggs was broken."

"And you're certain it was real? Not just a dream?"

"I've learned to tell the difference."

Kingsley sat back on his haunches, releasing a heavy sigh. "There are two reserves in Wales, one is much closer to muggle population than the other. Did you-"

Behind Kingsley, a portrait whose frame had previously been empty burst to life, it was a stately looking man whose ridiculously coiffed, powdered wig sat askew on his head. The acting Minister gestured for Harry to wait as he rose from in front of the fireplace to greet the portrait. Words were exchanged and grimaces had before Kingsley returned with news that he would have to end their
call as he was needed immediately at the Ministry.

"Is it the dragon?" Harry asked before the call could be ended. "Did it kill them?"

"It didn't just kill them." A tired hand ran over a bald head. "It escaped."

Fifteen muggles were killed during the dragon's rampage and over thirty others seriously injured. The Welsh Green species wasn't known for being particularly violent, they preferred to keep away from muggles, but her territory had been intruded upon and a hatchling killed, such a crime would send even the most peaceful of creatures into a rage. A rage that was ended only when the mother dragon was put down by the handlers who had cared for her from her hatching.

It was worse than the Ilfracombe Incident had ever been, the Prophet claimed, because the attack didn't occur in just one centralized point, farms and homesteads across the countryside were hit. Too many to properly account for. Perhaps if they had had the full cooperation of the muggle government it would be different, but they had already been on shaky grounds with them since the still unsolved murder of the survivors of the farm massacre, the dragon's violent spree across the country only aggravated the unhealed wound of their relationship. The First Minister of Wales point blank refused to aid in the cleanup of the attack, he would have no hand in concocting another fairy tale to help mask the wizarding world's blunders, not when it had turned out so badly for his counterpart in the United Kingdom. If his people were in danger of being attacked and killed by mythical creatures then they had a right to know. He couldn't outright expose the wizarding world, he'd formed an agreement when first learning of their existence to do no such thing, but it was not his obligation to help account for their mistakes.

The Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes, more specifically the Obliviator Division, worked in conjunction with the Auror Corps and the Muggle Worthy-Excuse Committee to cover up the catastrophe with the liberal utilization of memory charms and crafty cover stories. But without the backing of the muggle governments, their cover story was not quite as solid as it could have been and more than a few muggles remained unaccounted for, and so, unobliviated.

Harry was certain that, sometime in the future, those very muggles would be giving them a hell of a lot of trouble.

The indefinable sensation of encroaching death buzzed beneath Harry's skin, he was consistently on knife's edge, waiting for the day where one disaster too many struck and the wizarding world began looking for someone to pin the blame on. There was no doubt in anyone's mind that it would be him, Xenophilius had set him up to be the perfect scapegoat. So he moved on to Potter Manor, Ginny was still sick and growing worse with each day, but Harry couldn't risk his pseudo-family's safety by remaining in the Burrow. Hermione joined him in the manor and while Ron remained at the Burrow to be close to his sister and family, he visited nearly every day to help in preparing for the ritual that would fix everything.

Cut off as they were from the rest of the world, there was very little to distract them from fully devoting themselves to gathering the last of the required ingredients. The fulgurite came first, Harry had to fork over nearly a quarter of the Black family's fortune, but the hunk of fulgurite as long as his forearm was well worth the cost. Unicorn blood, gathered with no trouble by Hagrid arrived via owl post only days later. Third and finally was the skull of the creature whose name Harry still couldn't pronounce, it took the better part of two months communicating back and forth with different vendors in the eastern Mediterranean region before one contact finally pointed them in the right direction. One day trip to Khaitan, Kuwait later and they possessed the skull of the half-man, half-scorpion who would send Harry back in time.
With no more ingredients to gather, all there was left to do was wait. November was the ideal time to perform the ritual, it was then that it would be at its most effective. But November was still four months away, a long time to sit back and watch as the world outside their door burned.

There were no more rampaging dragons or muggle on wizard massacres in the countryside and wizards and witches were continuously charging the wards around their homes and business with an almost religious tenacity, even the slightest falter was dealt with swiftly and efficiently. But the scrofungulus pandemic was growing to be an enormous cause for concern, the virus remained completely undeterred by the treatments that usually worked so well in ridding its host of it and it was still spreading with alarming alacrity. So far three of the original patients had passed from the disease and another two were in critical condition. Ginny continued to doggedly fight not to succumb but with the influx of patients all suffering from the same affliction as her, the healers were no longer able to provide her with the same focus they had been in the early days and it was beginning to reflect on her health. Mrs. Weasley had seriously considered pulling Ginny from the hospital and caring for her herself, it was only the fear of contaminating the rest of her family that stayed her hand.

By the time August rolled around, Mr. Weasley reported that the muggle prime minister and his counterparts had cut all ties with the wizarding world, the alliance the two worlds had held for centuries was well and truly broken. Most wouldn't even give such an occurrence a second thought, but that was because most didn't truly understand how important that alliance had been. It was from the prime minister and his men that the wizarding world received most of its tips on muggles who were getting just a touch to close to cottoning on to their existence. It was their papers that printed articles to explain away strange deaths and unusual occurrences spilling over from the magical world. Without them, speculation on what had really happened in the countryside fostered. Were the twelve men who had mysteriously disappeared and the dozens of others that had been brutally murdered really the work of a group of cultists high on drugs? Had it really been a natural gas leak that had wreaked havoc in southern Wales, seeing several homesteads burned to the ground and countless dead or severely injured?

The Weasley patriarch regretfully relayed the news that those within the Ministry were beginning talk of bringing Harry in for questioning. The Quibbler had not yet ceased publishing articles exposing just what Harry's part in all of this was, and with each disaster that struck their world more people were listening. It was the consensus throughout the entire Ministry that Xenophilius had proven that he had the ability to set aside his mad beliefs and report the real, important news when it was needed, he'd done it for majority of Voldemort's reign (short as it may have been). Who's to say he wasn't telling the truth now? Using his daughter's friendship with Harry and his unique knowledge of the Hallows to see what the other news outlets couldn't? It was best to be safe, bring Harry in, and find out what he knows, what part he plays in all of this, and whether he has the ability to fix it.

It took only one more incident, an incredibly close call with a wizarding family living among muggles, for that talk around the Ministry to be pushed into real action. The wizarding family hadn't been keeping up with their wards quite as strictly as the rest of their peers, they didn't have the funds for it, and as a result the wards failed in the middle of the day and a townhome that had not been there the day previous was suddenly wedged between numbers six and eight Strickfadden Drive. It was only the quick thinking of the mother of the small family and a particularly powerful incendiary charm that saw the entire home, and the two homes on either side of it, burned to the ground and the family free from discovery.

No one had been hurt or killed, but the incident turned out to be the one disaster too many that Harry had been waiting for.
The Ministry reached out to Mr. Weasley first, he and his family were the only ones they knew of that might have continued contact with him. When Mr. Weasley denied having seen or heard from Harry in several weeks the Burrow was raided, searched top to bottom for any sign of him. Of course they found nothing, but the search didn't stop there, they couldn't afford to end it prematurely.

Harry and Hermione were supremely well hidden, so well hidden that they had fooled themselves into believing that the manor was completely untraceable. But those looking for Harry had the backing of the Ministry and they were desperate. Kingsley threw every ounce of his considerable clout into stalling the search if not stopping it altogether, but those orchestrating it only went underground with it; they were of the belief that Kingsley was compromised, he was allowing his friendship with Harry to influence his judgment, and so his orders must be ignored, they couldn't afford not to. It took time, time that saw several more dead from the virus and even more in danger from their rapidly declining relationship with the muggle world, but the disasters only saw their resolve to do what they were doing, illegal as it was, strengthened. Countless lives depended on their ability to make the hard decision.

They found what they needed in the Administrative Registration Department through the highly illegal exchange of what was meant to be a secure and private dossier of the Potter family holdings, it was a list of every property and business that had ever belonged to the once well respected family and it was just the thing they needed. The list was long, and the specific locations of each property were not on the list, but, with the finish line so close in reach, those gathered to bring Harry in threw every last resource and connection they had available and they found what they were looking for.

There was no warning from Kingsley or Mr. Weasley or any of their connections in the Ministry, the night the wizarding world came for Harry he and Hermione were caught utterly off guard.

Ron was away, visiting Ginny and helping his family in whatever way he could, Harry and Hermione were resting in Harry's bedroom, having just finished a meal and decided to spend a quiet evening reading on Hermione's part and doodling on an old sheet of parchment on Harry's. The atmosphere throughout the manor was quiet, content even, which is why the sudden piercing shriek of the wards nearly saw the both of them dead from sudden hear failure. Harry and Hermione were on their feet in an instant and at the closest window, they were half expecting to see the crackling glow of failing wards and a hoard of muggles descending upon the house, but the wards were still intact, their protection had not yet failed. But they wouldn't be able to stand for much longer, because surrounding the property in an unbreakable chain were not muggles but Harry's own people, not only Aurors and ministry workers, but everyday witches and wizards all attempting to break through the protections surrounding the home. Some of them he recognized, some of them he had fought Voldemort with, gone to school with.

Hermione reached for Harry, the sharp crescent of her nails dug into the inside of his wrist. "How did they find us?" she whispered tremulously.

Harry shook his head. "It doesn't matter, they're here. Grab everything, grab our research and our ingredients and let's go."

Together they stumbled down the stairs and to the study where they haphazardly threw anything pertaining to their time ritual into a conjured satchel. When every item had been collected, Hermione grabbed a pinch of floo, tossed it into the fire as she named Grimmauld Place, and almost set her pants alight when the flames remained their customary hue instead of flaring an emerald green.
Their floo connection had been cut, and failed attempts at both apparating and creating portkeys confirmed that wards had been erected to stop them from fleeing via magical means.

"Okay, so we can't run, there's far too many of them for that," Hermione thought aloud, striving to remain calm even as the intensity of the alarms increased. There wouldn't be much time before the wards failed. "There are no brooms, so flying isn't an option. All we can do is hide."

"Or fight."

"No," Hermione snapped. "There are dozens of them, if we fight, we'll die."

"I can't die." Harry grabbed his best friend's shoulders. "You can hide, I'll engage them and, when they're occupied you run, get Ron, bring help."

Hermione shook her head. "I wouldn't make it out the door before they caught me."

"Then let them take you, they don't want you, only me. You'll be safe."

"That's such a stupid fucking idea," Hermione growled. "I'm not going to hide, I'm not going to run and leave you here."

"Hermione-"

"Shut up," she barked. "That's a stupid plan and we're not doing it. But you are right about one thing. They're not here for me."

"Yeah, which is why you should just leave."

"If they find me here without you, they'll do nothing, I'll be safe."

"But, I can't leave, otherwise we would both would be gone already."

Hermione ignored him. She snatched the satchel that hung from his shoulders and rapidly began to unpack it.

"What are you doing?"

Hermione shoved the jar of runespoor eggs, a mortar and a pestle into his hands with the instructions to, "Grind them to dust, and quickly."

"Are you trying to perform the ritual?" Harry gaped. "The time isn't right! We can't do it for another two weeks."

"That timeline was more of a guideline than anything." Hermione shoved the rug set before the fireplace to the side, then quickly began etching an enormous runic pentagon onto the hardwood. "We're close enough that it should work."

"And if it doesn't?"

"Then you die, but you've assured me that you're immune to such unpleasantness, so it's worth a shot. Grind the eggs, Harry. When they're powder, pluck the down from the diricawl feathers and mix it in."

"This is insane," Harry muttered, but quickly got to work.

Together, they silently prepared the ritual. As Hermione drew Harry mashed, mixed, and combined
their numerous and expensive ingredients into one enormous stone pestle, the sound of the wizards steadily and efficiently breaking through the wards played on their ears.

"Put the pestle in the middle of the pentagon then grab the girtablibul skull," Hermione ordered. When both tasks had been performed, Hermione slashed the inside of Harry's wrist with a weak cutting curse and smeared his blood across the forehead of the skull. "I'm going to light the mortar on fire and you're going to stand above it," she instructed briskly. "Once you're in place I'll recite the incantation and you'll be sent back. Go on, move. We don't have any time left."

"Hermione." Harry grabbed her wrist to hold her still for a moment. "Wait, just…when I'm gone, you run and you hide in the highest room. And if they find you, tell them I ran, I apparated and you were only a moment behind me when the anti-apparation wards went up. Tell them that, do you hear me?"

Hermione nodded. "Of course."

"Okay." Harry took a shuddering breath, he looked back at the hastily scrawled pentagon then reached out to envelope Hermione in a hug. "I love you so much, and-and I'll see you soon, okay?"

"Don't worry about me," Hermione whispered, "you go back and do what needs to be done, and I'll be fine."

Harry nodded and exhaled heavily. "I will, you're right. All right, let's do this."

The ground ingredients went up in a burst of curling white smoke, Harry stood just behind the fire, holding the bloodied skull in his left hand. Hermione inhaled deeply, then began to chant. The Latin she'd practiced for hours and hours rolled off of her tongue in a smooth cadence, her voice betrayed none of the fear and anguish that wet her eyes.

Harry smiled, so overwhelmingly proud to have this strong, beautiful woman in his corner, the confident set to her shoulders and her unwavering gaze helped him wrangle his nerves and stand steady as the incantation slowly came to a close.

Outside, there was a rippling breeze as the wards fell, and Harry was gone.

A/N: And there's the time travel! Oh what fun is in store for Harry and his crew. I'm over on both Facebook and Tumblr under my penname (AnarchicMuse), so please, stop by, say hi! Updates on the progress of this story and any other stories I may be working on can be found there.
Falling through time was immemorable for Harry only because he was unconscious throughout it all. When Hermione spoke those last words of the ritual, the world, however briefly, disappeared, and when he woke, it was to darkness and a sturdy chair to which his arms and legs were bound. Trying to tug himself free from the rope coiled around his limbs like a restricting boa wouldn't free him, but it was a sort of unacknowledged, universal truth that, when one woke tied up in an unfamiliar place, some sort of struggle had to be put up, even if it yielded nothing.

He didn't keep at his required struggling for long though. Once it became obvious raw strength and dogged resolve weren't going to see him free, he decided it might be best to save his energy for something more likely to see him out of this mess. Something like assessing the situation or observing his surroundings.

And after only two seconds of assessing and observing his surrounding, one thing became glaringly obvious: the ritual hadn't fucking worked. The stupidly fancy desk that wouldn't at all look out of place acting as a center piece in someone like the Prime Minister's office was still sitting with its back to two floor to ceiling windows that remained uncovered enough to silver-wash the room in the light of a less than full moon. The fire had been doused, the ritual cleared away, and Hermione was nowhere to be seen, but this was still, unmistakably, his study. He must have passed out from inhaling all of that smoke coming off of their ritual fire, granting the wizards busting down his door no opposition in taking Hermione wherever she'd disappeared to and tying him up to be dealt with in whatever way they deemed fit.

More wriggling was to be done, this time not in an attempt to squirm free, but in an effort to see if there was anything on him that could be used to get him out of these ropes before whoever had tied him up returned. A wand would be preferable, but he'd take a handily sharp belt buckle if that wasn't an option.

But, of course, his captors weren't complete idiots, his wand was nowhere on his person and anything that may have been used to cut away his binds had been removed and kept carefully out of reach. Of all the times the wizarding world decided it wanted to be competent, it had to be now. He was completely at their mercy, no amount of straining and struggling would get him out of the ropes and time was just about up as, somewhere outside the door, mingling voices and several different sets of footsteps approached.

He wanted to do something, he wanted to buck and squirm and wriggle his way to freedom, but knowing the chances of him accomplishing anything were slim to none, Harry forced himself still and the hissing of his breath to go completely silent. His captors were steadily drawing close enough for him to distinguish what was being said between them and he couldn't miss a word.

"The tremor was powerful, just about knocked me off my feet. And the shockwave that came after is what I'm blaming my singed nose hairs on."

"And he was unconscious when he arrived? He wasn't awake to give you a name or tell you where he came from?"

"Nope, he was down from the moment I found him. Thought he was dead at first, gave my Monty and Moira the worst of scares."

What? None of the voices were familiar, that in and of itself wasn't too strange, there were plenty of people in the wizarding world Harry had yet to meet, but their talk of powerful tremors and
singed nose hairs was odd, and the question about getting his name and where he'd come from was outright baffling. These men knew him, they'd come for him.

Unless, of course, they hadn't.

Unless, of course, the ritual hadn't failed, not exactly, and that worst course of action Hermione had mentioned had come to pass.

He didn't try to feign unconsciousness when the door swung in, no point in wasting time with the act if that really was the case.

The first two men to enter were unremarkable enough, one was tall, one was slightly less so, they shared the same sort of coloring with dark hair and dark eyes, though their features couldn't have been more different. The most remarkable thing about them were the robes they wore, an outdated version of the same ones Tonks and Kingsley as Aurors had once sported.

Point one for the theory of screwed up timelines.

One more man entered, he too had dark hair, slightly curled but otherwise neat, but his eyes were strikingly blue; he was just the slightest bit familiar despite the fact that Harry had not once laid eyes on him before this moment.

"Look at that," one of the maybe-Aurors urged "he's woken."

The second maybe-Auror nodded at Harry, a polite but distant greeting. "Evening, lad. You feeling all right?"

Harry nodded hesitantly.

"Good, good. I'm Auror Bones, this is my partner, Auror Sully."

The only Bones in the Ministry had been Amelia Bones, who'd been killed at the very start of Voldemort's return. There were no Sully's that he was aware of, at least not among the Aurors.

"Do you know what brought us here?"

"There you are, asking all the wrong questions, Bones." Sully was the larger of the two, but he immediately came of as far less serious than his partner. "He knows just as well as we do why we're here. The real question is what brought him here."

If the names of the two Aurors wasn't a pretty good indicator that Harry had landed somewhere other than where (or rather when) he was supposed to, their complete lack of recognition certainly was.

A scowl, one that was every ounce the unbearable fifteen year old Harry who'd done nothing but skulk around Hogwarts' like a miserable sack of angst his entire fifth year, fixed itself to the nineteen year old slayer of dark lord's face as he cast his eyes down to his lap. "Was an accident," he muttered.

"No doubt, and one you won't be punished for if you go on and tell us what happened," Bones encouraged.

"My mate didn't believe me when I told him I'd learned to apparate, I just wanted to prove him wrong, pop to the boundaries of the Forbidden Forest." Harry shrugged petulantly. "Turns out he was right, I don't know how to apparate."
"I thought as much," Sully nodded, proud of himself for whatever reason, "Hogwarts student."

However, Bones was frowning. "Apparating isn't possible within Hogwarts' wards."

Harry, striving to adopt his former roommate, Seamus's, attitude of casual indifference and cheerful naivety shrugged his shoulders. "Could be why I ended up here. Do you think I broke through the wards? That could mean I'm powerful, like Merlin."

"I find that to be incredibly unlikely." Bones flicked his wand, releasing the tight ropes that held Harry immobile to his seat. "Come, let us head off and leave Mr. Potter and his family to what's left of their evening."

Harry gingerly rose from his seat, rubbing at the inside of his wrists where the ropes had rubbed uncomfortably. "Mr. Potter, did you say?" he queried innocently. "Is that where I wound up, the Potter's home?" He turned his gaze to the mostly silent Potter patriarch who still stood nearby the partially closed door. Perhaps he had seen the man before today, there was a parlor on the main floor of the manor in which the portraits of several of Harry's relatives, his grandparents included, had hung. He'd ventured in there only once, at an hour so late all of the portraits had long since fallen asleep, he hadn't gone back since.

"I apologize for interrupting your evening, Mr. Potter…Fleamont Potter, is it?"

The man expressed his confusion with a small downturn of his lips. "That would be my son. Are you not classmates? You look as if you would be in the same year."

Henry Potter then, Harry's great-grandfather. If that wasn't confirmation of his and Hermione's massive blunder, nothing was. "Yes, well different houses, I tend to get names mixed up."

"Speaking of," Sully piped up, "you never did give us yours."

"I didn't, did I?" Harry bounced on the balls of his feet. "Well, about that….Stupefy."

There was a ripple through the room and the three wizards before Harry staggered back a few steps, they seemed disoriented, but still clearheaded enough to reach for their wands, so he repeated the spell again, this time more emphatically.

"Stupefy."

It had its intended affect this time and the men collapsed, unconscious.

Hysteria disguised as humor burst from his lips. How the hell had that actually worked?

Quick work was made of riffling through the two Aurors' pockets, his wand was in Auror Bones' robes, before he was out of the room and headed down the stairs. The Monty and Moira Henry had mentioned earlier, Harry's grandfather and great-grandmother, were waiting in the same parlor Harry and Hermione had been reading in only a few hours earlier. Moira was pacing agitatedly in the space before the fireplace while Fleamont watched his mother. Twin stunning spells met them before they even realized Harry's presence.

And that's about when his momentum careened to a halt. There was no protocol for what one should do when they found themselves thrown back to their grandparents time, which was pretty foolish on his part seeing as Hermione had told him from the very start that this was a very big risk. But that was fine, he was good at working under pressure, Voldemort would still be alive if he weren't.
Step one was finding how far back he'd gone. The exact date was what he needed. The parlor in which Fleamont and Moira were unwillingly napping in held no answers, but in the family dining room, on a small table off to the side of the room, was what looked to be a recent copy of the Daily Prophet. At the top was the date; December 25th, 1941.

The day was right, and the month, the plan had always been to go back to Christmas, it was the year that was off. By sixty-six years.

"Only a suggestion my arse," Harry muttered to a Hermione that hadn't been born yet, he tossed the newspaper back onto the table and sunk into the seat before it. "The bloody lunar phase was important. How the hell am I supposed to go forward sixty-six fucking years?"

The ritual had specified that once done there was no going back, he would have to relieve every year. But surely that hadn't been taking into account cases like this? If the ritual malfunctioned there had to be some way to rectify the mistake, because if there wasn't….If he was stuck here….What would he do if he was stuck? It was nineteen forty-one. Harry's parents weren't even an idea yet, his grandfather was still a Hogwarts student. Voldemort was still just a kid. He paused.

Voldemort was still a kid.

Sure he'd been pretty powerful while young, but not near as powerful as a (newly-named) protégé of death. If Harry wanted to, he could kill him. Now. Tonight. Stop him from ever creating a Horcrux, ever killing Myrtle and framing Hagrid, he could stop him before he grew to become the awful creature he'd known in his timeline, so many people would live for it. His parents would live.

"I would abandon that line of thinking, quark, and quickly."

Harry whipped around, knocking his chair to the ground with an enormous clatter, and glared up at Death. "What are you doing here?" he hissed. "How are you here?"

"I would be a poor cosmic deity indeed if such an inconsequential restraint as time got in my way."

"You can time travel?" Harry perked up. "So you could send me back to my time, or rather the time I was trying to get to in the first place?"

"No." Death looked around the room, surveying the horrible striped wallpaper that hadn't been around by the time Harry had inherited the manor. "While I can pass back and forth in time, I cannot bring along passengers."

"But time travel is still an ability you possess and so, technically, one I possess. Teach me how."

"Teach you?" Death seemed faintly amused by the idea. "Passing through time is not a learned ability, it is instinctual, one you cannot do until you simply can. How would you instruct someone on how to perform an act that is akin to breathing? To controlling one's limbs?"

"So you can't take me along as your passenger," Harry summarized. "And you can't teach me how to time travel. What use are you then? Why are you even here?"

Death allowed the angered statement to pass over his head as if it hadn't even registered, and, knowing the deity, it likely hadn't. "I'm here to prevent you from creating a future far worse than the one you've just left."

Harry shook his head, confused.
"The thoughts you were entertaining, killing your dark lord to prevent the deaths of your allies, it is a dangerous one."

Harry scowled. "How could it possibly be dangerous?"

"Tom Riddle, for better or for worse, changed the world. Killing him would create a far different future, one that I cannot guarantee would be better."

"I can't think of a single way in which a world without Voldemort would be a worse one."

"That's because you lack any sort of common sense. Among his victims could have been a wizard far worse than he ever was or could become, one who would rise to cause an infinite amount more destruction than he ever could."

"Right," Harry said dully. "The devil you know and all that…." He sighed, then righted the chair he'd knocked over and fell back into it. "So I'm right back to where I was before, sixty-six years in the past with no plan and nowhere to go." He glared up at the ceiling, refusing to allow the moisture building up in his eyes to escape.

The first traces of devastation were beginning to tighten his chest. Sure he was immortal, he could wait out the sixty-six years, but that was a long time to be alone.

"Get away from England. Europe if you can."

Harry blinked, dispelling the gathering of tears he was still resolutely holding back, then looked Death's way. "What?"

"The further you are from here, the less you might be tempted to change things. Run into any trouble in this time and those from your present will be able to find you much easier. Ergo, leave Europe."

"And go where?"

"Wherever you want. You have nothing holding you here."

Harry laughed, confused and a little amazed, Death was trying to comfort him, this frigid being who had made it very clear from the start how insignificant he considered Harry to be had seen the panic attempting to grip hold of him and had offered an attempt at soothing him. Sure, he was awful at it, the reminder that he had nothing for him in this time was actually pretty crushing, but the attempt itself did what Death's words hadn't.

"I guess I could go to the States. The culture's not too different from here, so I won't be completely out of place. Plus they have enough of a magical presence that I have places to go to look into ways back home, but not so much of one that I would be found easily. And their part in the war with Grindelwald was-is much smaller than the communities here in Europe what with the distance between our two continents acting as a buffer."

Death shrugged, seemingly lacking any further advice. His attempt at comfort must have momentarily drained him of any further compassion. "Whatever you decide to do, best decide it quickly as your ancestors and their guests won't remain unaware for much longer."

"Right," Harry rose from his chair and carefully pushed it beneath the table. "Okay, the U.S., I'm going to the United States. Merlin, that's far though. How am I even supposed to get there?"

"You're resourceful, I'm sure you'll figure something out."
Now that was just a bit too much for Harry, first Death had tried his hand at comforting and now he'd offered something that could almost be considered a compliment.

The cosmic being didn't scowl at the look of utter befuddlement Harry turned on him, he was far too composed for that, but it was a near thing.

"You're still an insufferable quark," he snapped, then moved as if he were preparing to leave.

"Wait!" Harry jolted forward, his hand swung out, only a hair shy of actually touching Death. "Don't go yet. I...They can't know I was here."

"I hardly see how that concerns me."

"I was never very good at erasing memories. I need your help."

Harry's own throat twinged in dehydrated sympathy at how dry Death's next words sounded. "You need my help?"

He shrugged and tried for a charming smile. "Please?"

As a whole, the day had been pretty awful, his world had finally turned on him and he'd been thrown back in time with no real solution as to how to get back, but then Death nodded, reluctantly and face full of disdain, but he'd agreed to help and Harry's awful day became just the slightest bit miraculous.

"Please, just...try not to kill them. I sort of need them to exist."

"Don't tempt me."

A bubble of surprised laughter burst from Harry before he could contain it, who knew Death could be so amusing?

The small bit of happiness the being's antics had conjured managed to hold the worst of Harry's fear and disquiet at bay long enough for him to see memories corrected before leaving the Potter's home for the only place he knew.

The Leaky Cauldron was being manned by Tom, though one who was quite noticeably handsome with a full head of hair and nearly all his teeth in his mouth. A handful of knuts, nicked from a dish beside the Potters' front door, bought him a room for the night and a hot meal. The tumble through time had taken a lot out of him, he was starving and exhausted and if he intended to make it up the street let alone across the Atlantic he would need a good meal and a few hours of rest to help recharge.

One of the tines on the fork that had come with his meal ran along the skin of his forearm, where the dark mark would rest if he'd been on the opposite side of his war. It was the late hours of December twenty-fifth in the year nineteen forty-one. He had left September eighteenth of two thousand and eight. The metal utensil acted as his marker as, silently, he counted years and months until he had rows and columns of straight little lines of red to account for every year in between the two dates. Sixty six years and nine months exactly. That was a lot of years, too many years.

He was alone, with nothing else to distract him from becoming truly overwhelmed. Something dark and invasive unfurled within his chest, it had no physical presence that he knew of and yet it still somehow sat heavy on his lungs and made it immensely difficult to breath. He'd been fighting this presence, this invasive magic that made him see things he didn't want to see and left the distinct taste of death at the back of his throat, since the day it had manifested.
Death had told him, in an attempt at irony, to clear his mind, the books had told him something different. They had suggested not to clear his mind, but merely calm it, soothe the overwhelming emotion every thought and memory of his elicited; such a method was far easier and, in the long run, much more practical than attempting to cease all thought. But Harry was a creature of passion, he wore his every emotion like a proud patch of honor on his sleeve; he'd been learning to get a handle on it, he was no longer a moody teen who could use puberty and hormones as an excuse for his violent moods, but Merlin was it hard. Especially in moments like these, when fear and anger and confusion congealed into one enormous ball of angst that made practicing thinking and acting logically a task of incredible difficulty.

He banged his head against the solid wood of his headboard once, then again, then one more time for good measure, hoping that the sharp aching that blossomed at the base of his skull might shake him from his feelings long enough to allow him to employ some of the techniques he'd been teaching himself. The last thing that he wanted was for the gifts given to him by the Hallows to start acting up and send him into a crazed sort of panic the likes of which had only been seen once in that cramped bathroom when these magics had first forced themselves upon him. That would surely draw the very sort of attention he was hoping to avoid.

He placed his hand over his chest, the point where the magic was at its most concentrated, and pressed just his fingertips inward. The sharp crescent of his fingernails were angled upwards so as to prevent them from cutting into his skin, but the pressure of his fingers into the unyielding bone beneath them wrought a strange sort of discomfort itself. Now his head ached and his chest twinged, the presence of the two separate sensations drew his attention away from the panic he'd been so close to succumbing too. Once its intensity had dulled just the slightest, he was able to force it back and away, wrapped up tight to be dealt with at a later date. Or never. He actually preferred never.

With his emotions slowly falling back into his control, he was able to try again at assessing his predicament. Sixty-six years (and nine months) in the past, with no money, no friends, and no way home. It was awful, but surely not as awful as facing a basilisk at the tender age of twelve, or a dark lord at only seventeen, and he'd made it out of both of those messes just fine. Or mostly fine at least. This was nothing different, only a mild setback in the clusterfuck that was his life. He just needed some order, he needed a plan to follow and keep him on track. And that started with getting to the States.

He was pretty proficient at apparating by now, but the distance was too wide to jump and he'd never been anywhere in the U.S. before so he couldn't exactly picture where it was he intended to land. Portkeys would do the trick, but it was Hermione who knew how to make them, not him, and while the Ministry could do that, it required some sort of proof of identification and galleons, neither of which he had. There were muggle means of travel, as well, of course, though he wasn't too sure about planes as he was fairly certain they were much different now than the reliable crafts he'd seen once or twice in his own time. A boat then, those had proved tried and true for centuries now, and though there was, again, the small matter of not having any money, a simple disillusionment charm would allow him the chance to try his hand at being a stowaway.

The London Port wasn't far from Charing Cross, a few hours walk perhaps, but barely even fifteen minutes on the Knight Bus. It took the last of his knuts to make the trip, but he was the first on the magical bus the next morning and so arrived at the port before any of the ships were set to disembark.

The port was enormous, it stretched for miles on either side of the River Thames' banks and handled dozens of ships, both passenger and cargo. A passenger ship would be best to stowaway
on, these trips tended to last for days if not weeks, and he didn't want to spend his entire time under a disillusionment charm, if he were to sneak onto a ship with a fair amount of passengers it would be no issue blending in, his presence aboard likely wouldn't be questioned.

A bit of window shopping led him to the *RMS Orion*, it was an impressive size with a crowd waiting to board that was just as sizeable, it would be incredibly easy to get lost in a crowd that size. It was slated to leave for Ellis Island in New York in less than three hours, the trip was predicted to take nine days total. Harry hadn't ever been on a boat of this size, especially not for a journey so long, but he had no issue flying, not even unbound and unprotected on a broomstick, bobbing along a few waves in a fairly secure ocean liner was sure to be nothing.

And it wasn't; the trip itself was bearable enough, Harry had snuck onto the ship with not a single issue and seamlessly integrated himself into the group of second class passengers. He kept to himself for the entirety of the nine days at sea, speaking only when spoken directly to and otherwise acting the perfect part of the recluse he was setting out to be.

The first sight of the famed Statue of Liberty saw everyone on the ship stirring excitedly. They crowded the railing of the ship, pressing shoulder to shoulder and back to chest to watch as they glided in the direction of their new home.

The ship docked at Manhattan first, those in first and second class who had been cleared as healthy by medical inspectors were let off immediately, while the passengers who had ridden third class and any who hadn't passed the initial inspection would have to endure one final stop at Ellis Island before it could be determined if they would pass on to become U.S. citizens or be deported back to the lands they had been attempting to flee. Harry, once again donning a disillusionment charm and a notice-me-not for good measure, insinuated himself among the first group and, together, they disembarked the ship and stepped onto solid ground with a great sigh of relief.

Harry hadn't once strayed from the borders of the United Kingdom, and never had he gone anywhere without so little to his name. No money, no home, and only the clothing he wore, it was daunting, but that long boat ride packed like sardines in a cabin with a dozen other men had helped him to realize that, perhaps, this could be a cause for excitement as well. Harry had no intention of being here long, certainly not the sixty six years he had inadvertently traveled; he had resolved to find a way to the time he was originally aiming for, December of two-thousand and seven. It would be quite the task without Hermione to help with the research, but Harry couldn't constantly rely on his friend to do all of the work and now was as good a time as any to learn to stand on his own two feet. And so he dropped his charm, tightened his jaw, and stepped into the city.

Manhattan was an incredible place to be, the buildings were enormous, the streets never empty, and something was always going on. The look and feel of the place wasn't so different from London, even so far in the past, not just because of the architecture of the building around him, but also because of the energy the city's inhabitants unknowingly carried about themselves. Harry didn't know much about muggle history, he hadn't stuck with school long enough to know more than the absolute basis of the world's history, but he did recall enough from primary school to be aware of the fact that the second of two world wars was a great cause for concern right now and that the United States had only just recently joined the conflict.

Harry had become reluctantly familiar with the shadow war cast, he'd grown able to discern the presence of the horseman in the slightly hollowed cheeks of children living off of strict rations, in the frantic, precarious ways in which people had taken to living, unsure if the war would allow them to see another day, and especially in the exhausted, desolate shuffle of those who had lost family, blood or otherwise, to the battlefield. Not always did they die, but they never returned the
same.

And yet despite the constant reminder that he world was no longer at peace, the stench of fear didn't permeate every street and store and home like it had during Voldemort's reign. Sure the odor of despair might waft past on a not-so-gentle breeze when another son was drafted or a telegram bearing the worst of news was received, but it never lingered, it always passed.

Harry oftentimes found himself admiring this resilience and drawing upon it for himself, especially during his first few weeks in Manhattan, because things were hard. The MACUSA center of operations resided in the same city he had taken up residence in, but he had resolved to cut himself completely off from the magical world. He was to live as much like a muggle as he could, a task made supremely difficult by his lack of legal documentation and the fact that he hadn't even attended high school. But that wasn't to say it was impossible.

If there was one thing that war was good for, it was creating jobs. Most of the higher paying ones in factories in office buildings had already been claimed by actual legal citizens, but the smaller, more overlooked jobs were still up for grabs and, more often than not, those looking to hire were so desperate for help they didn't ask for proof of citizenship. Harry found one such gig at a family run grocer; the couple who ran the place were in their later years of life, they had once had help maintaining their store from their three sons, but every last one of them had been drafted and shipped off to the battlefront within months of each other. So Harry stepped in to perform whatever physical task was needed, most often unloading the delivery truck and restocking the shelves, in return he got a couple of dollars every week and his pick of any fruits, vegetables, and other such perishable goods that had grown too old to be sold.

The little he earned wasn't enough to amount to even a month's rent in some of the more destitute neighborhoods in the city, all it was really good for was a few days' worth of food and, eventually, a few changes of clothing, but those two basic necessities were a start, the rest could be worked out given enough ingenuity.

With magic on his side, money really shouldn't be an issue, the dollars he was paid every Thursday could technically be stretched infinitely with the use of a duplication charm, but something about his duplicates always seemed off, it wasn't glaring, but they never seemed quite as authentic as they could be, and, after the horrible recession that had struck the country only a few years ago, muggles had grown especially good at spotting counterfeit currency. A befuddlement charm could certainly be used in ways as small as confusing his employers into paying him just a bit more or something as large as tricking potential landlords into believing he'd paid rent that month. However, either could figure out something was amiss before long and, even if they didn't, the continued use of magic on muggles would undoubtedly draw the attention of the Ministry. So instead of using his magic to con those he encountered, Harry settled for using it to simply build himself a suitable shelter.

The fantastic thing about New York was that it was full of convenient alleyways and hidey-holes for one to claim, and only a half days jaunt through the city found him the perfect one to hole up in. It was small, cozy even, and tucked away from the worst of foot traffic; the scraps of a dismantled bookcase were assembled with the use of a sticking charm or two to create him the perfect lean-to, and a few warming and impervious charms protected him from the worst of the weather. Harry only knew a handful of low powered wards, most of which he'd learned from Hermione during their cross-country camping trip, but they were more than enough to keep curious muggles and animals alike away from his shelter.

It wasn't much, he was living in an alley for Merlin's sake, but it was warm and somewhat private and, for someone who had never truly had a place to call home anyway, it wasn't half bad.
Chapter 5

Warning for period-typical racism and homophobia

It took time, too much time, before Harry was ready to stop being completely alone, before he'd gathered the necessary courage to leave his comfortable nook of discarded cushions and warming charms and traverse the handful of blocks it took to reach the New York Public Library.

Up the many stairs and past the hulking columns that stood guard before the heavy wooden doors lay the muggle entrance. But if a witch or wizard were to present their wand to the leftmost of the two marble carved lions, the far right entrance would grant them access to a wing completely hidden from the mundane world. A wing in which resided enough books and knowledge regarding all aspects of the wizarding world to sate a rabid learner of even Hermione's caliber. There would surely be plenty a text on time and the wizards foolish enough to attempt meddling with it, there might even be some sort of solution to the mess Harry had wound up in.

He hesitated though, he put the trip off for weeks not because he was afraid to fail or because he was wary of making any sort of contact with the wizards of this time. He hesitated because he was selfish.

He wanted to go home, he wanted to see his friends and right his wrongs, but at the same time he needed a break. Correcting the ritual's error didn't mean just going home and seeing his family again, it meant returning to a time where the Hallows were not yet united, which also so happened to be a time when not all of the Horcruxes had been retrieved and destroyed, a time when Voldemort was still alive. And after making it out of that last encounter with the dark lord by just the skin on his teeth, he wasn't all that eager to repeat it once more. Not so soon. So he hesitated, he allowed himself to be selfish for one week that turned to two that lengthened to three, ignoring the guilt that plagued him every goddamn second until he finally thought he might be strong enough to give saving his world one more go.

Behind the protections that the hulking lion with his condescendingly knowing stone eyes guarded was a place unlike even Hogwarts' trove of books. The floorspace allowed only enough room for a dozen or two rows of shelves, but each shelf rose and twisted far above his head, branching off like enormous trees adorned not with green leaves of a spring Harry was anticipating with a fervent desperation, but with fat and long and thin and squat books of all hues and contents.

Among each aisle were women, tall and skeletal with feet like eagles and arms like wings, harpies who fluttered among the branches to collect the books outside of the patrons' reach. They were as severe as Madame Pince, but effective and quick in retrieving every book he was in need of, of which there were more than a few.

The section devoted to books on the different forms of time travel and the many ways of accomplishing it was enormous, there was an entire branch on which sat row upon row of the books. There were too many to count and too many to read through in one sitting, so the first ten on the directory were selected in a vain attempt at narrowing his options down and he moved to sit at one of the comfortable desk and chair sets resting in the shadow of the closest bookcase.

The first book to be cracked open was an index of every creature and artifact that possessed the ability, no matter how minor, to alter time. It wasn't very thick as there weren't very many such creatures, but it was useful and so was set to the side to be studied more dedicatedly sometime later.
The next described the potential consequences of unregulated time travel in great detail, and while Harry figured that perhaps it could have been of some use to him, Hermione, and Ron when first embarking on this mad endeavor to prevent the collapse of the wizarding world, it was now pretty useless. Thus it began the pile of texts to be returned to the shelf.

The process of sorting each book into a pile to be kept and a pile to be discarded saw only a little less than a quarter of an hour pass and left Harry with a half dozen books to be kept and read. Once those he didn't think would be of much use to him were returned to the shelf, the topmost book of his remaining pile was selected to begin his research. It was a journal containing accounts of all wizards known to have manipulated the time stream and what had become of them. It wasn't overly large, about half the thickness of one of his old schoolbooks, and was precluded by a rather long foreword detailing the theory of time travel and all of its possibilities. Had it been for any other subject being studied for any other reason, Harry might have skipped the prelude, but the last thing he wanted was to miss some potentially vital piece of information because of his own laziness so he grit his teeth and choked down each drily written word with a resolve that would have made Hermione proud.

As it turned out, that was a mistake.

The concept of time travel introduced in the prelude, no matter how simply explained, was absolutely mind-boggling. The ritual had cast him into the past, but had it also stopped his present from carrying on? Had the time he left stopped simply because he wasn't there to witness it, or, even as he sat in this library, was the wizarding world still battling pestilence and famine and terrified muggles? It made sense to believe the latter was the case, he hadn't stopped time itself only traveled through it, and until he made it to the date and year he had originally been aiming for and altered the events that had led to this entire ordeal, were his friends and the world he had left behind still experiencing all levels of misery? Was the wizarding world still dying? Ginny still suffering from scrofungulus? Were the Weasleys even now dealing with harassment concerning his whereabouts from the Ministry? Were his friends and family preparing for a war against a foe that outnumbered them astronomically?

The aged pages of the journal connected in the center with a muted thump, the book collided with the table with an identical sound and slid across its smooth surface before coming to a teetering halt just at its edge. Harry's lips were screwed into a grim frown as he attempted, with very limited success, to stop himself from falling back into the morbid mood he'd been struggling with since arriving in this time.

Half an hour, he'd lasted only half an hour actively focusing on his time troubles before his implacable angst had taken over. Not bad for a first attempt, but now he needed air, a break would do him good, he could stop for lunch. There was a stand set up just across the street that sold fresh fruits and chilled drinks, both of which sounded mighty appealing at the moment.

Harry was allowed food from his place of employment, but only the wares that could no longer be kept on the shelf, the breads that were sprouting mold and the apples with worms burrowed into their cores. Most days he was able to ignore the repulsiveness of the food, especially when money was short and his stomach was willing to take anything so long as it didn't have to remain hollow another moment longer. But actual fresh fruit did him good every now and then, it left him fuller and more energized than whatever he could pick out from the grocers. Besides, tomorrow was payday, he could afford to splurge just a little.

The thought coaxed a snort from him, not one of amusement, but rather one laced with a bitter sort of irony. Since when was buying an apple not infested with worms considered a luxury? He'd never been particularly spoiled, not when growing up under the Dursleys' harsh thumb, but
Hogwarts and its casual luxuries had allowed him to grow used to simple comforts such as a soft bed and warm food. It was only when he was forced to do without it that he realized just how much he had taken for granted.

Every apple at the stand was just on the wrong side of overripe, but he still selected two from the pile with great relish and, only somewhat reluctantly, handed over several cents to the woman standing guard over the stockpile of fruits and vegetables. The first bite to be taken was soft, lacking that sharp, crisp crunch Harry only ever dreamed of nowadays, but it was also, thankfully, lacking a mushy, fermented center and wriggling intruders lurking beneath mottled brown flesh, and so he counted this purchase as one well worth the money spent.

Of course, that still didn't stop him from wishing for something just a bit more savory. The deli next door sold cold cut meat and real cheeses with bread baked fresh every morning, what Harry wouldn't give for a proper sandwich right now was frankly laughable, but the few cents he had to his name wouldn't be able to afford him even a slice of bread from the place, let alone one piled with all of the fixings. He'd have to simply settle for lingering in the doorway and enjoying the scent of the place.

But another seemed to have had the same idea as him, a girl no older than four or five had her small face pressed against the glass of the shop and was watching avidly as the younger man working behind the counter piled an assortment of meats and cheese on a sliced loaf of bread for a customer. The man had glanced over at the girl a time or two, he looked the slightest bit dismayed by the streaks she was leaving on the glass, but made no move to shoo her away. But it seemed not everyone was so tolerant of her harmless presence, an older man accompanied by a middle aged woman who looked similar enough to him to be his daughter exited the deli with a scowl on his face. He held the bag his food had been tucked away in to his chest, as if worried the little girl who stood no more than three feet high might try and snatch it from his person.

He let out a sound that sounded suspiciously like a cross between a hiss and a snarl in the girl's direction, a noise that was reminiscent of one who was trying to frighten off a wild animal. "Get on away from here now!" the man moved several steps towards the girl, as if trying to herd her away without actually touching her. "Get away from there 'less you plan on cleaning up the mess you're making. Folk like you don't belong on this side of the city, bringing down the reputation of places like this."

The girl jerked away from the window, startled from her childlike awe by the vehement disdain the stranger was radiating.

"Where's your mammy, girl? She should be better at keeping you out of the way."

A quick glance around showed a woman similar in appearance to the child in question standing with a toddler on her hip several meters away at the fruit stand Harry had only just left. The girl was looking toward her mother as well, clearly wishing to return to her side, but the bitter old man was blocking her path and steadily moving closer. He was seemingly emboldened by the girl's fearful silence and the pointed way those around them looked away as they passed.

With her immediate route blocked, the girl attempted to back away, but the buckle on her shoe was loose and, when she attempted a shuffling step back, it came completely undone, unbalancing her and sending her sprawling to the ground. Frightened by the hostility still bearing down from her and likely in a fair bit of pain, all she could do was begin to wail.

As if trained to pick out the sound of her child's cry from within a crowd, the woman at the fruit stand whipped around, almost immediately she zeroed in on the scene she'd previously been unaware of and a mixture of fear and fury washed across her face. However, before she could
begin to push her way past those moving along the sidewalk, Harry was already moving in to aid the girl.

Of its own volition his face began twisting in a scowl much more impressive than the one the other man was bearing as he stepped between him and the fallen girl. "Leave her, she's just a kid."

"The dirty little monkey is getting underfoot."

Harry knew he likely didn't look particularly menacing, he was never overly tall and his new lifestyle had him leaner than ever, but he'd defeated a dark lord dammit and become Death's equal, that had to be worth something, he could frighten off one racist old coot. "What a brave little man you must think yourself to be, harassing a child due to your own small mindedness." Being on the receiving end of countless disdainful sneers, first from Snape then from Death, left him surprisingly good at doling out a few of his own. His own might not be quite on par with either man's but it was still surprisingly close. "Leave her."

Harry didn't flinch when the man spat at his feet, nor when he purposely slammed into his shoulder as he passed. The weak old thing barely even moved him an inch anyhow. Once he was gone, Harry knelt before the little girl and quickly replaced his own look of disdain with a smile.

"That was quite the fall you took, are you all right?"

Fat tears were still rolling from the girl's eyes as she shook her head and held up her little hands, her palms were scraped from where they had broken the worst of her fall and little bits of dirt and grit had embedded themselves into the flesh.

"Oh goodness, look at that. That's quite some damage you took." Harry gently ran the backs of his knuckles over her hands to brush away the worst of the mess. "But you're hardly even crying anymore, you must be a brave one."

The reverse psychology worked like a charm, the girl blinked several times to banish the last of her tears, then scrubbed them from her cheeks with the hand Harry wasn't working on.

His smile only grew wider. "Yes, I was right. You are brave. And look at this," he carefully maneuvered her wrists so that her hands, palms facing forward, were at eye level, "you're all better too."

"I lost my shoe."

"Oh no, it's right here." Harry reached behind himself to retrieve the shiny black shoe, then gestured to her bare foot. "May I?"

Once receiving a nod, he placed the girl's foot in his lap and proceeded to tuck her foot back into the shoe before buckling it securely. "There you are, Cinderella."

The little girl cocked her head in confusion. "I'm not Cinderella, I'm Annalise. I don't look nothing like her."

"Maybe not. But who needs blonde hair and blue eyes when you have such lovely braids."

Annalise's round cheeks flushed as she gripped the ends of her two cornrowed braids, tied off with a set of pale blue ribbons.

"When someone says something nice to you, you say thank you, Lissi."
Harry glanced over his shoulder and found the young girl's mother standing only a foot or so behind him. Her brow was furrowed but she didn't look particularly upset.

Annalise patted one of Harry's hands with her own and did as her mother instructed and thanked him.

"It was my pleasure."

Harry gently helped her to her feet then stepped aside so that she could move to her mother's side and take hold of her hand.

"Thank you." This time, the show of gratitude had come from the young mother.

Harry dipped his head in acknowledgment but said, "There's no need to thank me for showing some human decency, no matter how uncommon it seems to be in these times." Harry retrieved his bag of apples from the stoop in which he'd dropped them off, then waved at the two women. "Have a good day, miss. It was lovely to meet you, Annalise."

There was a break in the automobiles that were rumbling past on the street, so Harry took his chance to quickly jog across and up to the steps of the library where he might finally have his meager lunch in the shadow of one of the lounging stone lions.

The cruel bite of early January winter was curiously absent for just these few hours, the heavy warmth of too many bodies crammed into one city and the curdling smoke coming from street cars and automobiles had chased it away just long enough for Harry to enjoy his lunch without fear of losing a few toes to the cold. The air couldn't really be considered fresh, not in this city, but it at least wasn't foul, there was a certain charm to the amalgamation of gasoline, the unique tang of human, and the aroma of whatever hot food the vendors on the corners were selling today. It couldn't be considered home, not when the closest thing to home carried the sharp scent of the Scottish highlands and of pure, untainted earth, but it was soothing in its own right. He'd fallen asleep to it and the ambient noise of the place one too many a night not to have grown at least somewhat comfortable with it.

The first of two apples was steadily whittled to its core and Harry allowed himself, for a brief moment to relax, unworried about his position in this place and this moment, untethered from the pressing concerns of money and security and his overall lack of productivity.

It didn't last long, of course, such moments never did, a mind untethered had the nasty habit of drifting unpermitted to those thoughts that wished to be tucked away and forgotten. Harry could fight it, he knew it would be excellent practice at the Occlumency he was neglecting, but he didn't want to. Maybe indulging in these awful thoughts for a few minutes might finally make them go away, or at least stop pressing at his psyche so insistently. One question in particular refused to cease dogging him; what had happened to Hermione? He'd left her in the manor with the wizarding world tearing down their door and demanding his head, had his assumption that the wizarding world was only after him proven to be correct? Had they bought the lie he'd insisted she tell and left her in peace? Or had the entire ploy failed miserably leaving her to pay the price?

The thought that she might be suffering because of his ignorance weighted his chest, it was an ugly thing to consider made even worse by how little he could do to fix it until he found a way back to his time. If he found a way back to his time. Because as of right now, he had a fistful of nothing and was still only inching in the direction of even a little something. It could be weeks or months before anything of value was found and the thought of being stuck in this time until then, eating moldy apples and sleeping in alleys (no matter how comfortably he'd fixed it up) was constricting.

Sickle shaped fingernails pressed and depressed the skin on the side of his wrist, not hard enough
to break skin but just enough to provide a grounding pain. It was the only technique Harry had found that actually worked at keeping him from blowing up another round of toilets or forcing visions of the dead onto himself. Hermione had tried to get him to stop, claiming it was dangerously close to self-harm, but he wasn't willing to give up the one thing that kept him in his head at least until he found another method that proved to be effective. And if he'd yet to find such a method...well, he had a lot on his mind at the moment.

Somewhere beside him, the crunch of wrapping paper drew him from his mind and back to the painfully wrong present. A man, elderly but not yet stooping with his age, had managed to approach without him hearing, he'd stopped far enough so that he wasn't crowding but it was clear he was waiting on something. When Harry's attention turned to him, he smiled and covered the last bit of distance between them to place an oblong object wrapped in unmarked wax paper on the ground at Harry's side.

Harry first looked down at it, then up at the man, confused and maybe a bit wary. But the stranger only continued to smile.

"For you."

Something like a confused frown played at Harry's lips, he reached out cautiously to touch just a single finger to the object, he was half expecting a familiar pull behind his navel but there was nothing but the yielding of something squishy beneath his finger. The man only nodded encouragingly.

It was a sandwich, the fixings weren't anything elaborate, but they were cold from the ice and the bread still smelled of the oven. It was all Harry had been dreaming of, but he knew Moody would rise from the grave, traverse the timeline, and curse him six ways to Sunday if he accepted, let alone ate, food offered to him by a stranger.

"It's only meat and cheese." The man spoke with a faintly European accent Harry was just shy of placing. "A nice compliment to the rotten apples you'd been overcharged for."

The wrapper crinkled again when Harry replaced the sandwich on it. "Why...?"

A shrug was his immediate response, followed by a simple but not at all clarifying, "I saw you looking."

The older gentleman tipped his hat, then turned and sauntered off. Harry watched him until he rounded a corner then looked back down at the unwrapped sandwich sitting in his lap. It would be incredibly irresponsible of him to try his luck, the wizarding world was dependent on him (even if they weren't yet aware of it) to make it back to the present and fix what needed fixing. He shouldn't risk being taken out by a sandwich of all things. But he was supposedly immune from such things as poisoning and death, the worst it was likely to do was give him a bad case of the runs.

Mind made up, he took a tentative bite from one end and tried his best not to groan too obscenely over just how good the simple sandwich was. It only took one more bite for him to come to two conclusions a) the sandwich wasn't poisoned and b) even if it was, he wasn't sure he'd be able to bring himself to stop eating it as it was divine.

The money he made at the grocers was enough to afford him solid meals each day, but when shopping for goods he had to look for canned foods, non-perishables as his lean-to in the alley didn't come with an icebox and keeping perishables such as meats and dairy at just the right temperature with spellwork was tricky business, the sort he wasn't the slightest bit proficient in. So it was mostly canned fruits and spam for him. He might have enough left over at the end of the
week to allow a small treat, but never enough for something as fresh and good as a sandwich.

The stranger's kindness baffled him though, in the time he'd been here he'd grown used to being completely ignored or, when his outer appearance reflected just how rough his nights could get, thrown disdainful looks, no one had once gone out of their way to show him even the smallest bit of compassion. Harry wished the man had stuck around long enough for him to get over his suspicion and grant him a proper thanks.

The last of the sandwich was swallowed mournfully, leaving Harry gazing contemplatively at the wrapper with the question of whether or not it would be socially acceptable to suck the crumbs from the paper in an effort to regain just a bit of that flavor.

But living on the streets hadn't completely done away with the manners Petunia had instilled in him, so he tossed the paper into the closest bin and decided to begin heading in the direction of the grocers. He'd end up being a little early, but he doubted he'd be turned away.

Natania Aronoff, the female half of the couple who ran the shop was working behind the counter as she often did while her husband, Obadiah, worked on artistically arranging cans of spam on the shelf. As predicted, neither were the slightest bit opposed to getting started earlier.

"Mr. Aronoff over there tried moving a few of those boxes all alone," Natania tittered as Harry began moving crates of fresh vegetables to the front. "Near pulled something in his back."

Obadiah grumbled good naturedly in response to his wife's teasing. "Didn't want the fruit getting bad sitting in the back 'till he showed up, did I?"

"And yet all you managed to do was nearly send a whole crate of melons to the floor."

Harry hummed softly in amusement, only half listening to the couple as they bickered. The Aronoffs were kind to him, oftentimes doting upon him as if he were one of the sons he'd heard so much about. They were much like Mrs. And Mr. Weasley in that respect, and while occasionally that could be a comfort, most times it was an unwelcome reminder of what he was missing. He was sorely lacking in company these days, Death had visited him but once since their conversation in Potter Manor and though Natania and Obadiah treated him so kindly, he was still only their employee and saw them only a few hours a day. The rest of his days were spent mostly in silence as he explored the streets alone, kept warm in his makeshift home, and, now, researched within the quiet of the library. His human interaction outside of work was limited to thanking the men and women who accepted his payments for food and wishing them a good day.

It wasn't quite as awful as it sounded, Harry was used to solitude considering he'd spent the first half of his life living in a cupboard, but he'd also grown used to the chaos of the Burrow and the complete lack of privacy in the boy's dorms. It would be nice to have that, or even something like that, back.

There were plenty of pubs and dance halls in the area around where he slept, Harry's own alley was often visited by a drunken young adult or two looking to relieve the contents of their stomach, but the thought of wasting his already limited funds on watered down liquor didn't seem like the wisest of decisions and he'd learned all the way in fourth year at the Yule Ball that dancing was not his strong suit. He was looking to make friends, not send some poor girl to the hospital due to his own hazardous dance skills.

And while it would be nice to have friends again, it was probably best Harry didn't go around forming attachments as it would only make it harder for him to leave when his small problem was finally solved.
But then he took his lunch out on the steps of the library the next day.

He wouldn't lie and say a part of him wasn't hoping the stranger might return, he wanted to thank him, that one small act had made the rest of his day infinitely better. He'd even bought two apples, perfectly ripened without a hint of brown anywhere on their smooth surface, with the last of his money. He would have liked to go for something a little more, but it was all he could afford at the moment.

Harry was on the steps for no more than half an hour before the man arrived, this time he carried two sandwiches and, instead of heading off after Harry had accepted one of the two, sat down on the step just below him with a happy little sigh. Harry hastened to collect the two apples from the paper bag he'd had the shop owner put them in and held them out to the man who looked them both over for only a hint of a moment before plucking the one from Harry's left hand.

"They're both for you," he insisted, continuing to hold out the second of apples.

But the man shook his head decisively. "We will share."

Neither spoke after that as there really wasn't much else to say. Harry enjoyed this sandwich just as much as he had the first and hummed happily when his apple crunched just the way he liked it. The man seemed just as pleased, his unusual smile didn't leave his face throughout the entire meal and, when he was done, he departed with a friendly pat to Harry's knee and a simple farewell of. "I will see you tomorrow."

And he was true to his word. The very next day, around the same time as the previous afternoon, he was back on the steps of the library, this time before even Harry, with two sandwiches, one of which he happily traded for an apple and a bottle of still cold cola. As lunch was eaten, the man read from a newspaper folded neatly in his lap while Harry observed the multitude of people that passed his resting spot, both as one whole crowd and the individuals moving within it. There were men, some old, some young, some dressed to the nines in suits and shiny shoes and others sporting work stained trousers and cracked fingernails. There were women, closely followed like mother ducks leading their ducklings as they moved from shop to shop collecting groceries for the week, then there were women, in a variety of different uniforms alone and brisk as they stopped for a quick lunch before break ended and it was back to work. And though the hour was still fairly early, there were even a few children out, most in their later years of adolescence, teens cutting class for cokes and a movie, or whatever it was teens in the forties did when playing hooky. It were those in that final group Harry found himself watching the most, there weren't many out, and though they were doing their best to remain inconspicuous, they were very easily spotted. They carried an aura of cheer and vibrancy that seemed to be lacking in those a bit older.

A subconscious smile crept across his face as an acne spotted teen with knobby knees poking out from beneath his shorts and a slightly larger teen with a crooked smile and hair that shone copper in the sun playfully pushed at each other as they moved from shop to shop collecting groceries for the week, then there were women, in a variety of different uniforms alone and brisk as they stopped for a quick lunch before break ended and it was back to work. And though the hour was still fairly early, there were even a few children out, most in their later years of adolescence, teens cutting class for cokes and a movie, or whatever it was teens in the forties did when playing hooky. It were those in that final group Harry found himself watching the most, there weren't many out, and though they were doing their best to remain inconspicuous, they were very easily spotted. They carried an aura of cheer and vibrancy that seemed to be lacking in those a bit older.

"I wonder if they know what it is to suffer."

The words, more than either had said the entire day, tensed the muscles in Harry's shoulders. They were so morbid and yet spoken so casually, and considering they'd come unprompted, caused his danger radar to perk interestedly.

Harry's lunch companion was no longer reading his paper, but was now watching the two young
men Harry had been. When he noticed his scrutiny, he smiled calmly and continued to speak. "Looking around, it's almost hard to believe there is war. Take away the propaganda posters and the recruitment stations on every block and all seems normal."

"Does this make you angry?"

Harry's tone was cautious, but the man only laughed, though the sound wasn't entirely happy. "No. It only makes me sad."

"Why sad? Why not happy? Relieved these people are still untouched by war?"

"I am. Happy. Relieved. I am all of those things. When I wondered if they had felt suffering, it was not out of spite or any malicious desire to see them unhappy. I hope they never feel it. But while I am happy, relieved, I am also jealous. My people suffered, my family suffered, I wonder why they couldn't have been afforded this same freedom to not fear for their lives and safety come each rise of the day."

"They were victims of the war?"

"We all were. Augsburg, have you heard of it?"

Harry hadn't.

"Some of the first to suffer at the Fuehrer's hands. But they are often overlooked, even villainized for the one thing we had in common with him. There was none of what we see here for them, our stores were not plentiful, we did not thrive. When the Fuehrer invaded we were a broken people."

"Many of them will never know the full magnitude of suffering," Harry said, "but they will not remain untainted by this war, they've already experienced a sliver of its cruelty and they will experience much more. But they will not bow, they will not break, and though they might come out a bit tainted, they won't be ruined."

This time it was the older man's turn to look upon Harry speculatively, he only shrugged and returned the calm smile he'd been shown when the roles were reversed.

"I know war."

"You know suffering."

The calm on Harry's lips turned bitter, such truth was rarely spoken. "I do."

There was no question that Harry knew very little about the finer details of the war, he knew it was one in which much of the world had been involved in, hence its later dubbing of the second of world wars, and that Germany, headed by Adolf Hitler, was one of the main antagonists of the conflict. But the rest, how Germany came to be such a formidable power, the intricacies of why they felt the need to wage war upon the world, were lost upon him.

As it had only begun a few years ago, and only affected American soil a few months ago, there were no books on the war. There were news stories and magazine articles aplenty, but those to be found in the library were very heavily biased in favor of America and the Allied powers. It was only thanks to his knowledge of what would come to pass, minimal as it may be, that helped him piece together what had already occurred and, more importantly, why.

"This is not the text of your world of magic."
Harry startled when, from nowhere, Death appeared to pluck the magazine, dated from nearly ten years ago, from his grasp. He glared for both the infraction of nearly stopping his heart with his sudden arrival, and for being interrupted just as he was beginning to become absorbed in the frankly boring article of economic crises in far off countries.

"I'm broadening my horizons," he snapped as he reached across the table to snatch his magazine back.

"Does that mean you've given up your pitiful attempts at unlocking the secrets of time travel and decided to focus on more worthwhile ventures?"

"Not in the slightest. Why are you here?"

"I'm worried for you, quark." Death managed to maintain his façade of caring concern for a grand total of three seconds before cracking in the face of Harry's incredulity. "No, I was merely curious to see if you'd yet cracked under the strain of being displaced in time."

"You didn't have to interrupt my reading to do that," Harry noted drily. "All it would have taken was a quick peek to see I had most certainly not cracked under any sort of strain."

"I'm much better at gauging such things through face to face conversation."

"For whatever reason, I don't believe that for even a moment."

"Cynic."

"Until the end."

The magazine was tossed to the side, ignored now that Harry had something much more interesting to focus on.

"If you're not going to tell me what you've really come for, you can at least answer a question for me."

Death didn't verbally respond, but he also didn't disappear as he often did when he grew bored of a conversation, so Harry took it as permission to ask his question.

"Those skills you told me I would manifest as time passed, those to do with death, I haven't seen anything of them. And the ones I've already inherited from you have been strangely absent. It's unnerving. Especially because you said they make themselves known when I'm experiencing heightened amounts of emotion and that's about all I've been feeling these past few weeks."

"You've been frightened? Angry? Under much stress?"

"All of the above, all of the time."

"Poor little quark."

Harry could only roll his eyes at the utter lack of sincerity behind his companion's words, he only waited patiently for Death to continue.

"Until you gain some semblance of control over the gifts you've been granted, they will continue to rise in your defense when you're feeling unusual amounts of emotions. And because, as you said, you've been feeling heightened emotions on a regular, they've reserved themselves for when you're feeling truly catastrophic."
"So I'd have to go nuclear in order to see a repeat of what happened in the bathroom?" Harry surmised. "All thanks to my messed up emotional health?"

"Precisely."

"Well, that's comforting I suppose. But after I gain control of myself and my emotions, how would I be able to consciously call forth those skills?"

Death shrugged. "How do you wield your magic?"

"With a wand?"

The look Harry received in response was witheringly condescending. "You've performed feats without it, yes?"

"Once or twice, yeah. But that was when I really needed it to work."

"Then you'll really need this to work as well."

"Brilliant advice. Truly."

Death smiled immodestly. "A being as old as I am would be full of such advice. Do with it what you will, I'll be taking my leave now. But before I do, I'd like to relay that discovering you haven't yet succumbed to madness was a true disappointment."

Harry's eyes were bound to fall out with how much he was rolling them. "I'll try and have that rectified by the next time you decide to pay a random visit."

"Please."

There was no indicator of his departure, just as there had been none for his arrival. One moment Harry was seated across from a darkly handsome man in a neatly pressed suit, and the next he wasn't, however, the muggle or two browsing the shelves around the table Harry was seated at seemed totally unaware of the magic that had occurred only a few meters away. Just to be safe though, Harry quickly gathered the magazine and newspapers he'd collected from the archives and, after returning them to their proper places, hastily departed the library.

The evening was drawing late, just behind the clouds was a patchwork of bruised amethyst and coral pinks with haphazard streaks of burnt orange across the horizon. It would be another half an hour or so until total darkness fell and even then it would be too early to settle down in his home where the only entertainment he might find was trying to pick out a star or two around all of the light pollution. On nights like these, ones when he found himself with far too much time before the end of his day, he took to wandering, simply walking and observing until he grew too tired to carry on, but it was cold out and the gathering of clouds above looked as if they were prepared to soak him to the bone quicker than he could draw his wand for an impervious charm, it wouldn't do to remain out here for long.

It had already been decided that cheap alcohol was not a wise purchase considering his budget and dancing just wasn't for him, but perhaps he could find a hall, pull up a seat and watch others enjoy themselves. At the very least it was sure to be warm considering how packed those halls so often were.

It would be a bit of walk to make it to the west-most side of the city, but it was there Harry knew he would be able to find a few of the less reputable halls and the like, places where it would be much easier to lose time even without drink and dance.
Harry wasn't dressed for dancing; his shirt was untucked, his shoes unshined, and his hair, in all of its gravity-defying glory, stuck out sorely from all of the neatly gelled coifs men of this era liked to sport, but he was allowed within one particularly thriving hall with little fuss and, after collecting a glass of water that could easily be mistaken for clear liquor, moved to a seat along the wall where he could watch with little concern of being watched in return.

The floor was writhing with the number of men and women twisting and leaping and swaying across it, the band with all of its roaring instruments made it hard to keep track of his thoughts while the lead singer, a beautiful women with a voice that crooned and commanded her audience to move stood above them all like a glittered goddess.

A smile touched Harry's lips as he tracked the movement of the dancers; he hated this time and he'd made no secret of that fact, it was poor and racist, the streets stunk of sewage and the air was weighty with war, but if he could continue to find sanctuaries such as this, places of levity and good spirit, he might survive his misery long enough to make it home.

That bolstering thought and his single glass of water kept him company throughout the whole of the night. He didn't move from his spot, even upon receiving an invitation or two to dance, but not once did he feel the niggling sense of boredom that often began to plague him after an hour or two of inactivity.

The hall closed well after midnight and it wasn't until the band began shutting down and the dancers hobbled, exhausted and satisfied, from the floor that he peeled himself from his seat in the corner and stepped back out onto the street.

That temperature had plunged from cold to below freezing, as it usually did once night had fallen, and the deluge of rain that had started up just as he'd ducked into the hall was now a slushy mix of mist and snow. There were still people about, though noticeably less than during the peak hours of the day, most on their way home from whatever dance hall or bar they'd been passing time in. Most were well past drunk, but none seemed particularly interested in giving him any trouble, and even if they were, a few inebriated muggles didn't pose much of a threat to him. That still wasn't any cause to let his guard down, inebriated muggles might not prove to be very dangerous, but fully sober muggles with the intention of preying on those too full of liquor to properly defend themselves just might be if they got the drop on him. He remained relaxed yet vigilant, fully prepared to defend himself if need be but not unnecessarily tensed. And he would have made it home with no problems if he hadn't tried for a shorter route he'd seen on his way in, if he'd stuck to the way he came he wouldn't nearly have been barreled over by a man who looked well past terror and was sporting a bleeding gash over his left brow and barely managing to keep his undone pants from falling around his knees and tripping him up.

The man didn't pause, not even long enough to apologize for nearly flattening Harry into the snow, and the noise of flesh impacting flesh and wounded yet furious yelling was a pretty good indicator of why. Around the corner, in the narrow space between two shops, three men had a woman surrounded and were doing there level best to grind her into the pavement through a series of brutally aimed blows. And though she wasn't going down easy, kicking at her attackers every chance she got and valiantly struggling to rise, the combined fists and feet of three heavyset men, all of whom seemed clearly inebriated, was simply too much to hold up against.

The thought of leaving, keeping his nose out of a strangers business and allowing a woman to be beat to death never even crossed his mind. The moment the scene fully registered in his mind, Harry was casting his gaze about for anything he could use as an improvised weapon. Almost immediately, he settled on the rounded lid of a metal trash can, it wasn't ideal, but it would certainly do in a pinch.
The lid, stiff from the cold as it was, made the most satisfyingly crisp whistle as it swung in Harry's hands to collide into the closest man's back. He pitched forward, hitting the ground heavy only inches away from the injured woman, in that moment of confusion, Harry leapt forward and directly on top of his ankle, crushing the bone beneath his feet and effectively taking him out of the skirmish.

As their friend howled on the ground, the remaining two men turned on Harry confused but ready for a fight. The trash bin lid swung up just in time to protect his face from an already bloodied fist, but the strength behind the blow was enough to cause Harry's arms to buckle and knock the lid directly into his face. It was a stunning, and slightly embarrassing if he were being honest with himself, injury to be had, but he couldn't let it, or the stars dancing before his eyes, impair him, there were still two men somewhere in front of him.

He found one when a fist made impact with his stomach, nearly buckling his knees from under him, fortunately there was a conveniently placed head of hair for him to latch onto to help keep him standing. And while he had it, he might as well use his handhold to yank his attackers head back, it threw his equilibrium off just long enough for Harry to introduce his clenched fist to the man's exposed throat. Though the blow was lacking the same strength his attackers had behind their own, it was still more than enough to temporarily close his airways and leave him in a gasping pile of uselessness.

Harry spun, trash lid raised to defend against the third and final assailant, but he was already occupied fighting the woman Harry had been rushing to protect. The both of them were lying on their backs with the woman half underneath the man, her stocking clad legs were locked around his waist, keeping him in place, while her muscular arms were clenched around his head in a devastating chokehold. The man struggled and flailed but his previous victim didn't budge an inch and, within only a handful more seconds, he was unconscious. She held on for a moment longer to make sure he wasn't faking, before allowing him to slump onto the pavement.

Three men down in less than two minutes and the worst Harry had to show for it was a throbbing face and potentially bruised ribs. The woman, on the other hand, looked much worse for wear. Her stocking had runs all up and down her legs, her dress was already staining with blood and dirt and whatever else it had accrued while she was rolling around on the ground, and she'd lost her shoe, one half of her face was a mess of bruises, the deep red of her lipstick had smeared across her face and mingled with the blood dripping from several wounds, and her hair was slightly askew. When she pushed herself off of the snow damp ground, Harry immediately noted she was careful not to put any weight on her left leg and her hand fell to her ribs on the same side. There was no doubting she was several times worse off than Harry, and yet she made it a point to remain standing at her full height, which was, incidentally, several inches taller than Harry, even missing one heeled shoe.

One sweeping look from head to toe and Harry quickly realized what had likely caused this attack. Though the makeup that hadn't been smeared by fists and blood was artfully done and her figure did look fairly feminine, it was obvious once she was no longer crouched in shadows that the she Harry had been defending, was actually a he.

"Hello."

Shaped eyebrows rose slowly as the drag queen studied Harry just as intently as he was him. "Nice moves, Flash." A deprecating smile finished the look of wary interest. "To what do I owe the pleasure of being your very own damsel in distress?"

Despite being far worse injured than Harry, his hilariously dubbed 'damsel in distress' looked prepared for another fight. It was evident he suspected Harry of being another one of the
homophobic pigs that ran all about this place in this time, one who'd thought they were swooping in to save a lovely lady in danger, not a fellow male in drag. Now he was preparing for the fallout, but Harry only cocked his head and gave a tiny shrug.

"Three on one hardly seemed a fair fight. And I wouldn't exactly label you a damsel in distress seeing how you took out that last one." Two sets of eyes glanced over to where purpling bruises could just be seen forming around the only unconscious assailant's throat. "But I'm afraid sir knight in shining armor is a bit of a mouthful, not to mention entirely inappropriate considering I forgot my armor at home, so you can just call me Harry."

He received a slow blink of bemused surprise as the man across from him studied him intently for any sign of mockery then, when he found none, quickly began to reassess the situation. "Ives."

"Pleasure to meet you Ives."

Even as he granted Ives a warm smile, Harry stepped to the side and turned on his heel, the lid still held loosely in his hands swung up and around to meet the jaw of Harry's first victim, the one who had been knocked from the fight due to a broken ankle, just as he attempted to wobble onto his one good leg to, presumably, resume the fight. This time, when he hit the ground, he didn't get back up.

Harry whirled on the only remaining man, his hands were still clutched to his throat as he struggled to draw a proper breath, it would be another minute or so before he full recovered, but Harry wasn't willing to completely count him out as a threat just yet.

"We should go," he decided. "They won't stay down for long. Is there anywhere we can go? Find you some help?"

Harry looked over his shoulder when, several second passed and there was no response, Ives was frowning at him, not in anger or disappointment, but something fairly similar to confusion. Unfortunately, they had far too little time for such introspection.

"Ives," he said sharply. "Did you not hear me? They won't be down for much longer. You're hurt and I only did so well because I caught them off guard, if they decide they want to continue the fight, we might not last a second round. We need to go before it comes to that."

"I have a place." Ives spoke slowly, reluctantly, but at least he was speaking. "It's a few blocks away."

"Are you good on your own or do you need help walking?"

As if it was costing him much to admit, and it probably was, Ives said, "I'll need some help."

With the taller man's arm draped over his shoulder and Harry's around his waist, the two of them hobbled from the alley with as much quickness as Ives' injuries would allow. It was a long way to Ives's safe place, made even longer by their inability to go any faster than a pained shuffle and their constant need to check over their shoulders to ensure they weren't being followed. But make it they did.

"It's that one," Ives was panting for breath and his entire body shook in pain, cold, or both, but a look of intense relief had smoothed some of the tension from his features as he nodded in the direction of the apartment building across the street from them.

It was a task making it up the stairs, but it was accomplished thanks to the dogged determination one was often overcome with when the finish line was in sight. The moment the door to the apartment on the farthest end of the hall swung open, Ives slumped from Harry's grasp and onto the
only couch in the main room. He huffed a moan of mingled pain and relief as he yanked the head of blonde hair from his head, allowing his own wig tousled, strawberry curls to flop in a riotous mess around his face.

"Thanks for the help up, Flash. I won't keep you any longer though, I just…I just need to sleep this one off." A wheeze of pain choked him up midsentence, lending the rest of his words a distinct stutter.

"They got you in the ribs." Harry said, ignoring Ives' attempt at seeing him gone. "How bad is it?"

"I can breathe fine, ain't any pressure, so I don't got to worry about them being broken. Bruised maybe, fractured at worst, but I know how to handle them just fine if they are."

"Wrapping fractured ribs alone isn't so easy."

Ives frowned at him, eyes squinted in a confusion and wariness that spoke of distrust. "You offering to help?"

Harry shrugged. "I don't have anywhere else to be."

"Why?"

"Why what?" Harry inquired, purposely obtuse.

"I can understand why you stepped in at the alley, thought I was a lady who needed help, but after, you helped get me here and now you're offering to help patch me up. You want something?"

"No, I don't want anything. I helped you and I'm offering to continue helping you, because, believe it or not, not all humans are terrible creatures. There's no ulterior motive, I'm not trying to trick you, if you want I'll go, but it'd seem an awful waste of my time to have helped you out of the alley and all the way here only to have you die from a punctured lung because you wouldn't let me wrap your ribs for you."

Hesitant interest and maybe even some bit of amusement tried to rob the suspicion from Ives' features. A sound like a snort huffed from between his lips as, gingerly, he pushed himself upright on the couch. "The bandages are in the cabinet above the sink." Long fingers skimmed the buttons adorning the front of a ruined dress. "I'll have to take off my dress, will that make you uncomfortable?"

"Don't worry about me."

There weren't just bandages above the sink, Harry counted dozens of ointments and creams to help with bruising and scarring, bottles of antiseptic, gauze and bandages of all fabrics and sizes, even packets of surgical needles and thread. There was no need for a collection so extensive unless someone was truly accident prone or they'd come to expect altercations such as the one Harry had stepped in on earlier.

"Being a fairy in this city isn't without its dangers."

Harry looked over his shoulder and didn't even blink at the sight of Ives stripped down to a loose pair of cotton briefs. He'd seen more than enough half and fully naked males his age to no longer be even remotely fazed by nudity. It was the awful discoloration of his torso left by heavy boots and fists that caused him to frown.

"How far would they have gone, if I hadn't shown up?"
The sound he received in response was like a laugh, only angry, bitter, *terrified.* "Fellas like that? They would've kept kicking me 'till I was dead."

Harry turned back around, he faced the cabinet so that Ives wouldn't see the hatred he could feel for those men churning like a rancid potion inside his gut. This man could have died tonight, he hadn't done anything, he was a threat to no one, but he was different, and people didn't like *different.*

"Does this happen often?"

There was a moment where Ives didn't answer, where he tried to read the unreadable tone of Harry's voice. Then, "Not often, and never like this. I've been caught before, beat up real bad, but I never found myself in a spot where I couldn't fight my way out or squirm free just long enough to make a run for it. They caught me by surprise, by the time I realized I needed to fight I was already on the ground."

"Fuck them. Cowards." Harry snatched a long cloth bandage from the cabinet and marched over to Ives' side. He'd never wrapped bandages for a fractured rib, but he'd had more than enough experience tending to injuries inflicted upon him by Dudley to have a basic idea of how it went. He was firm with the bandage, making sure it was wrapped tight around the bruised torso, while making sure he wasn't cruelly so.

"Are you like me?"

Harry grunted in wordless confusion as he concentrated on winding the bandage beneath Ives' armpits. But his patient only repeated himself, a little slower and a bit louder, but still lacking any further elaboration.

"I'm like you in a lot of ways, and I'm completely unlike you in others. Why do you ask?"

"This doesn't bother you. Touching me, being near me, even when knowing what I am. Seeing what they did to me makes you angry."

Harry shrugged, unsure of what the right answer would be to a question like that, but willing to give it a try anyway. "You dress the way you do, you step out with the people that you do because it's just a part of who you are. And being you makes you happy, right?"

"Yes."

Harry tucked a pin into the loose end of the bandage, fastening it to the rest, then looked up at Ives. "Then who am I to judge what makes you happy? So long as no one is being hurt or taken advantage of, you have just as much right to purse your happiness as I and any other person in this world does. No one has the right to tell you who to love."

The bandages around his chest creaked in protest at the sudden and deep inhalation that came as response to Harry's vehement words. He looked stunned and maybe he was, but someone needed to let this man know that he wasn't wrong for loving the way he did, that he didn't deserve to fear being beaten and broken and killed for embracing who he was, and he was standing right here so it may as well be him.

"It's a relief knowing that people like you actually exist. Good people." Ives tangled their fingers together then let the palm of his other rest on top, bracketing Harry's inside of his own two, then he squeezed in gratitude. "You never answered my question though."

Humor lent Harry's face a youthfulness it hadn't seen since before the war. "I know."
There was coffee somewhere after that and small talk that carefully avoided that night's events and anything to do with them. Harry stuck around for far longer than he'd intended to, long enough to see the snow start back up. Ives tried to protest him going home, it was late and cold and those men could still be out there, and while the offer to set up camp on the man's couch was tempting, he kind of missed the comfortable familiarity of his own patchwork home.

"I like you," he told Ives, tightening his thin jacket around himself as he prepared to brave the cold night. "I'll be seeing you again."

The streets were almost completely deserted, at just past three in the morning even the crowds from the dance halls and bars had gone home. It was nearly silent, undoubtedly peaceful, Harry hummed softly to himself as he crunched through the snow, mostly unaffected by the cold thanks to a warming charm.

All things considered, his night had been pretty productive; he'd enjoyed himself at the dance hall, helped keep a man from being murdered in an alley, and formed a tentative friendship with that very same man. And sure he'd made a pact with himself to not go around befriending people in this time, but maybe if he made it a point not to get too close, the separation wouldn't be that hard on him when it was time to go. Besides, who knew how long it would be until he found a way home, he couldn't spend his whole time here depending on his elderly employers and Death to make conversation with. He'd surely be granting the ancient entity his wish to see him go mad if that were the case.

Sleep came easy that night; Harry was untouched by the cold within his shelter, his charms had and would hold up against the bitter cold for weeks longer, and his body, sore from the undue amount of work he'd put it to what with the walking and the fighting and the more walking that came after, sunk into his collection of fabrics and old sheets without any protest. The short period between the moment he lay his head down and the rise of dawn was offendingly brief and forcing himself to rise was probably the most difficult thing he had to do, but taking a peek at his dwindling supply of food and calculating how much smaller his already miniscule paycheck would be if he dared miss even a single day of work was all the motivation he needed to drag himself vertical.

But, if there were one good thing to be said about his early start to the day, it would be that it saw his work ended just as early. Early enough for him to secure a spot on the stairs before his lunch companion had even left the deli.

"You look as if you've had a long day and it's not even noon."

Harry only just refrained from frowning as he accepted his sandwich from the man and tore into the delicate paper. "My day's been all right, it was the night that was long."

The tomato on the sandwich, a new addition to his usual plain fare, was fresh enough to be mistaken as ripe from the vine. The pale juice trickled down his wrist at the first bite and, when once he would have wiped it carelessly across the leg of his trousers, now he prevented any waste by quickly slurping it up.

"I miss the days when I was so young. Staying out until the sun rose to drink and dance and charm beautiful woman."

Harry laughed. Drinking and dancing and charming beautiful women wasn't exactly how his night had gone, but it was close enough not to merit a correction.
"I think I'll keep away from that sort of fun from now on. I don't think I'm fit for late night adventures anymore."

"Please." The man's scoff was full of amused derision. "You are young still. Nothing about you is unfit."

"You would be surprised. Sometimes I feel much older than I am."

"You cannot claim any such feeling until your knees begin to creak whenever you try to stand and your bones protest everything from ascending a staircase to the irritable weather."

"All right, well you do have me beat there."

Harry's concession was met by a rueful laugh that saw the wrinkles framing his companion's eyes deepen. "It is a shallow victory. But if you do not enjoy dancing and debauchery, what do you do for fun?"

Harry shrugged. "Not much really. I spend a lot of time here," the hand not gripping his sandwich gestured in the direction of the library behind him, "catching up on all of the reading I was too lazy to do in school"

"Not a particularly motivated student?"

"Not even close." Exasperated nostalgia curled his lips as he recalled all of the hours he and Ron had wasted while at Hogwarts. "I was much more interested in causing my professors and headmaster grief than in doing any sort of learning."

"I think that must be the norm for most children. Though, I myself was a bit of an anomaly, I knew how privileged I was to be attending so I took it much more seriously than my peers."

Funnily enough, it should have been much the same in Harry's case. He should have seen Hogwarts as the grand opportunity that it was, he had been upgraded from the drab existence of Stonewall High to an honest to goodness magic school. He was certain any other person in his predicament would have thrown themselves into their studies with a bit more passion that he had, Hermione was a prime example of such a person, but once the novelty of magic and the like had worn off, he'd joined Ron, who had grown up comfortable in the knowledge that magic existed, in shirking all of his duties as a student. Looking back on it now, he wished he would have shown even the slightest bit more initiative, maybe joined Hermione in doing some serious studying outside of those nights before exams where he frantically tried to absorb several weeks' worth of knowledge in a few insufficient hours.

"I think I'd like to start those days over," he said quietly. "When things were so easy."

"That must be everyone's dream. To get one more chance at doing it right."

But Harry actually had the chance to do that. To reach into his past and correct all that he had done wrong, if only he could figure out the proper way to do so.

The other man was watching Harry, cataloguing each emotion he knew he was shit at hiding, and when he offered a change of subject, it was snatched up gratefully. "What do you read when you are in there?"

He shrugged. "Whatever I want. Yesterday it was the last war and all that led to this one."

A gray eyebrow raised in interest. "What did you learn?"
"That Hitler, like most men like him, didn't rise from nothing. He didn't just show up from nowhere and charm a well rounded, stable country into going to war with the rest of the world." Harry was down to the last few bites of his sandwich which he contemplated heavily as he spoke, he was full to bursting but he couldn't bring himself to waste it. "Germany was on the wrong side of the last war and they paid heavily for it, they are still paying heavily for it. All because of that treaty."

"The Treaty of Versailles," the man offered.

"Yes, that one. The Treaty of Versailles which was, from what I can tell, drawn up with very little input on Germany's part, stripped them to a fraction of their size, did away with much of their military, and imposed upon them a very heavy obligation to pay reparations for all damage caused by the war. They were defeated, humiliated, and in a financial crisis. Hitler must have seemed like a godsend to the German people in those early days, as charming and confident as he was with honeyed words and false promises of building a better world in which they would no longer be poor and weak and looked down upon for past mistakes, but one in which they would be the superior race. Stronger men have fallen for less."

"You do not think Germany is in the wrong then?"

Harry frowned. "I think a distinction has to be made between the government and the people. The government most certainly is in the wrong, Hitler is probably among one of the most evil men I've ever heard of." And that included Voldemort. "But I think the German people are victims just as much as those Hitler and his crew have turned their guns toward. Perhaps even more so because much of the world doesn't see it that way, they're comfortable lumping the whole lot of them together."

"You're familiar with war, but I can't understand how." Harry's companion wasn't looking directly at him, his gaze was fixed just past him, but Harry still felt pinned by the focus he had on him. "You can't be old enough to have seen the effects of the Great War and there wasn't much conflict in the world between the wars."

"I'm not as familiar with them as you might be, I've never seen a war large enough to span continents." Harry hesitated, taking a moment to choose his words wisely. His companion was exceptionally smart and he knew the man would spot any falsehoods in his words. "But wars can come in different forms, different sizes. And though what I went through was much different than this war now, it was still fully capable of seeing my parents taken from me before I ever had the chance to know them."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"I survived." Harry shrugged. "Not being allowed to know them hurt, but it also made things easier. You can't miss what you can't remember, right? And by the time I was old enough to understand what I was missing out on, I'd already begun to build my own patchwork family. They were small, mismatched, but I loved them just as fiercely as I would anyone borne to my blood."

"Where are they now?"

That last bite was ash in his mouth. No matter how much he loved himself a cold cut sandwich and how loathe he was to waste any food nowadays, food just wasn't palatable when he was reminiscing on the touchy subject of his family.

"Gone." Was what he finally settled on. "I lost them after the conflict and the death. When I thought it was finally time for peace."
"And now it is just you?"

Harry's head dips in a shallow nod. "Now it is just me."

Bound to an amortal being and living just around the corner from perhaps one of the largest magical gathering points in the country and it was still just him. It was just him slumming it in a New York alley, making less than a living in a store that reminded him too much of home, and wasting the rest of his daylight in library searching for a solution he wasn't sure even existed. It was just him with the occasional interruption from a kind man with a sandwich or a bloodied cross dresser in an alley, and while each encounter added some modicum of light to his day, neither were enough.

"I have to go."

The abruptly spoken words caused the older man, who had until then been finding some unprecedented interest in what was left of his own lunch, to look to him in surprise. "So soon?"

"Yes." Harry rose and quickly brushed the crumbs of his sandwich from his lap. "I'm sorry, but I need a walk. To clear my head."

He didn't look happy, but Harry's companion nodded. "Of course. I will see you tomorrow?"

"Yes, I will see you tomorrow."

Harry cast a glance up the staircase, only a moment was spared contemplating heading into the library before it was decided against. Another day spent crouched over old books wearing away his teeth at the end of a quill would see the last of his energy evaporated in a matter of minutes. So he pretended not to be staggering under the weight of exhaustion that was growing to be just as mental as it was physical, as he trotted down to the street. Even after he merged himself with the growing lunch crowd he could feel the press of a wire rimmed gaze following him up until the moment he turned the corner.

He walked where the flow of the crowd was heaviest, the thought of visiting his few haunts was dissatisfying so he allowed the natives to lead him around the city for the time being. There was a lot to be found in the area surrounding the library; museums that spanned whole blocks, theaters proudly proclaiming each show to be put on once dusk fell, hotels that stood taller than many of the surrounding buildings and teemed with the well to do and their entourage. The park was where he finally decided to detach from the pack though, a decision made mostly due to the fuss his aching feet were making. The benches that could be seen from the street reeled him in before he truly even noticed he was moving in the direction.

There weren't any signs to be immediately spotted to inform him of where he was, but the sheer enormity of the place was enough to clue him in on the fact that he had wandered all the way to Central Park. It was well populated considering it was the middle of the weekday, but not so much so that Harry had any trouble finding himself a place to sit. The solid wooden bench didn't so much as creak when he threw himself onto it, heaving with a bone deep tiredness, the day had been long and it was barely even half over.

Most of his weariness though didn't even come from the long night he'd had, sure his muscles ached a little from overuse and his eyes were a bit itchy from too little sleep, but majority came from the conversation that had been unsettling enough to put him off his sandwich.

There had been no ill intent behind any of the words Harry and his companion had exchanged, that much even he could acknowledge. It was only meant to be an easy way to pass the time between
their first and last bites of lunch, but Harry couldn't help but resent the other man for steering what had begun as an easy enough conversation into much darker territories with only a few curious questions. Now Harry was left, once again, picking at the festering wound of his displacement. It seemed the longer he was in this time and the longer he went without finding anything among the books of the library, the easier it was to send him sinking into homesick misery, of which it seemed to be harder to pull himself out of each time.

It had been four weeks and four days. And each of those days, minutes, and seconds had been elongated tenfold by his aching desire to be not here and the amount of effort he was putting to maintain the façade of normalcy he needed to keep up until he was no longer a wizard living surrounded by muggles. It was the latter especially that made each day a struggle, because even though over half of his life had been spent not knowing it, he was a wizard. Even in the days when the word magic was just another word never to be spoken in the Dursley's household, he had never actively tried to repress what he was and could do, on the contrary, he had secretly embraced his strangeness. Now, so far from home and with a foreign power trying to make itself at home within his body, so much of his energy was being spent trying to quell his urge to cast and curse and simply revel in the innate power within him. Warming charms and weak anti-muggle wards weren't enough to assuage the itch he felt in the crease of his palm, where his wand fit best, and in times like this, when he was drowning in misery, he was struck by the urge to be surrounded by magic. More than that, he was struck by the urge to do magic.

And usually it wasn't so bad that he couldn't ignore it, but something this time was different, the conversation had struck a chord within him, and now the urge was immutable. So he acted on it.

No one noticed the too thin, improperly dressed for this weather figure step into the first patch of trees. He wandered for a while, exhaustion forgotten in the face of this new purpose, he was in a public park and it was no easy task finding a place well removed from any park goers. But he found it in time and secured it with the same spells that protected his home in the alley.

The first spell to leave his wand was weak, a cutting curse too mild to even split the bark of the tree he'd been aiming for, the next was better and called for a shield charm to protect him from the shards of splintered wood that clouded the air for a moment.

He'd fought in a war, but the number of destructive spells in his arsenal were surprisingly few; blasting charms, cutting curses, incendiary spells. But once those had run their course the basics of what he'd learned before dropping out of Hogwarts to hunt soul fragments did just fine, because he wasn't looking for destruction and chaos, he wanted only this. The freeing sensation of not holding back, not hiding who he was both born and grown to be.

In the woods of Central Park, trees uprooted and flipped root over branch, shrunk to barely the size of a finger before expanding once more and changing from hues of earthy brown and vibrant green to eclectic blues and eye-watering yellows. There was no order to what was being done, Harry had no plan, he simply cast and reveled in the sensation. And if a wondrous grin stretched cheeks damp with salt, well, he wasn't one to be ashamed of the emotion, because he had missed this and he missed home.

For all that wizards claimed to be superior to those without magic, the ordeals of the past years had proved that, of their two peoples, they were the weaker. A plague, though severe and widespread and unlike one seen for thousands of years, had done well to cripple much of the European magical population before spreading to the States and several countries within Asia. Magical borders in Australia, Africa, and South America had been closed indefinitely, and while that didn't prevent those fleeing the disease stricken countries from stepping onto their soil, it barred them from
entering any portion of the magical communities, the hospitals included, preventing the risk of exposure and infection.

And even as they battled the disease that killed indiscriminately and responded to none of their treatments, the magical communities of Europe were facing the very real threat of discovery by the muggle world. A solution for wards that continued to fall and protections that failed to protect had not been found, the best that could be done was the placement of weak, short term wards around smaller enclaves and family homes, wards that provided less protection but that could be recast every day. While teams of ward constructors remained on standby in larger magical hubs such as St. Mungos, Diagon Alley, and the Ministry in case of sudden failure. It was imperfect and impermanent, but the best that could be done when resources were stretched so thin and so much energy being thrown toward finding some peace with their muggle counterparts.

The world outside of their own was advancing, there were technologies now that could capture damaging images and transmit them to another server halfway across the world in less time than it would take for an obliviator to come knocking. Muggles knew of them now, and what was more, they had proof, so even those who hadn't seen with their own eyes what their wards were no longer hiding were much easier to convince than ever before. And worse yet, they were making connections. Inferior as wizards may claim them to be, muggles weren't unintelligent, they were linking past encounters and disasters with wizards that hadn't been covered up quite as well as they could be to the attack in the country, to the dragon loosed in the mountains. The number of those who suspected their existence were still among the minority, but without direct intervention from both the muggle and magical government those numbers would continue to grow until they became a very real threat to the Statute of Secrecy. But amends had yet to be made with the muggle government, a rift had been forced between the two factions and it seemed as if there was nothing to be done to fix it.

This was a time of crisis. Europe's population of magical folks and creatures was larger than any others', they had direct links to each continent and every government, if they were discovered, if they fell, the rest of their world would not be far behind.

Fortunately, there was one with a solution.

He did not belong. That much was evident the moment he entered the atrium of the Ministry of Magic. He entered through the phone booth with a girl who stood bedraggled and barely upright, the both of them ignored the security wizard and his request to see their wands and continued to the center of the atrium, where the fountain of magical brethren had once resided. On the edges of the crowd several law enforcement wizards had noticed their presence and had begun to approach, but the man only smiled and the girl only cowered. And when they were close, too close, he drew an object, short and cylindrical save for the grip in which he held it and pointed it to the girl. As if commanded by unspoken words, her eyes closed, her head tilted back, and she wailed.

There was a wave of energy so powerful all who were unprepared, which meant all but the man and his conduit were thrown from their feet. The polished floor began to warp and crack and those too close arched their bodies in unimaginable pain as their bones vibrated with enough force to crumble.

For a moment that could be mistaken for a lifetime it went on, and then there was a word of whispered praise and the girl fell silent and the world went still once again. The man stood smug as he surveyed his destruction, the motion of his head turning side to side sent jagged shards of light reflecting from the lens settled against only one eye.

All attention was on him and so he spoke. "I am Wolfgang von Strucker, and I bring your
A/N: So sorry for the long wait, I hadn't even realized it had been so long since my last update. But in my absence I've been working plenty on this story so hopefully the next update won't take near as long.

I exist on Tumbr and Facebook, come say hi!
Harry liked being in the park. It was nice. Peaceful. So far into the trees it was easy to pretend, if only for a moment, that he wasn't in New York and it wasn't nineteen forty, but rather it's 2007 and he's in the Forest of Dean. He's only wandered away from the tent to get away from Ron and Hermione's bickering/flirting and find some quiet for himself. It smelled just like it did in the Forest of Dean, woody and wet, the air had the same bite of mid-winter, and now that the sun had set, it even sort of looked like it.

None of that made it easier being there, but it was still nice to pretend for a little bit.

From where he lay, Harry could almost see the shape of the stars, peeking down at him through the wide gap of leafless branches, the silence around him was heavy, comforting, more than he'd had since migrating to New York. The sparse bit of snow on the ground had long since begun to seep through his clothing and chill the backs of his limbs and torso, it was uncomfortable, but not unbearable, so he didn't move, he didn't rise from his spread eagle sprawl or even briefly contemplate making the trek back home because he didn't want to. Not yet. He wanted to hold onto this moment, this brief period of peace for as long as he was allowed.

The explosion of anger and emotion and magic had done him well. He felt better, he felt lighter, the suffocating misery that had been pressing in on him from all sides had passed. He was self aware enough to know it wouldn't last forever, there would be more moments of loneliness and doubt, but he would deal with them as they came and he wouldn't allow his resolve to crumble when they did. Because he was getting home, one way or another, he was resourceful and stubborn enough to see it done.

He would make it home and he would stop himself from uniting the Hallows and he would defeat Voldemort a second time over and when that was done he could finally breathe. He could take a vacation, a long one, maybe even come back here to New York to see it without the taint of misery and war ruining the experience. And after, he could finish school, he could apply to become an Auror or join a Quidditch team, hell he could spend every day doing nothing if that's what he wanted, the Potter and Black vaults would certainly allow for that. He didn't have to decide now though, or tomorrow, or the day he returned to his present, or any of the days following, because he would have time, all the time he wanted to decide, or at least all of the time a normally lengthed lifetime would allow. He just had to be strong for a while longer.

Harry slept in the forest that night, just because he could, and he slept well because of it. When he woke there was no lingering unrest or exhaustion, he felt prepared for the day, perhaps even eager for it. Mrs. Aronoff was infected by his mood, she smiled more than she ever had with him and spoke extensively of her sons as he worked with an unprecedented buoyancy to his movements.

The woman behind the fruit stand was as well, she didn't smile (she never did), but she tsked in warning whenever his hand strayed too close to an apple that had been carefully arranged to hide the places where it was peeling and bruised.

His friend with the sandwich was not.

He arrived with only one sandwich in hand, a shiny black automobile waiting for him at the curb, and the hurried explanation that important business had come up. It was urgent, needed his
attention immediately, he would be unable to sit in for their usual meal.

Harry was disappointed and he knew he did a poor job of masking it. He didn't particularly want to resume yesterday's conversation, he was in no hurry to disrupt the good mood he found himself in, but he also wasn't all that excited by the prospect of taking lunch alone, he'd come to enjoy the easy company.

"You could come with me, if you'd like."

Of course the man had noticed his disappointment, nothing about Harry was subtle. The offer, however, was a surprise. Come with him? The man who was only a week's worth of sandwich's and talks of war past being a stranger. It was common sense not to get into a car with a stranger. Even if the stranger had a kind smile and an enticing sandwich. Especially then. But Harry could hold his own if something went down, couldn't he? And something within him wanted to trust this man.

"Yes. Where are we going?"

"I have two jobs." Was the explanation Harry received as he entered the car. "One pays, one does not, but they are both equally important. We are headed to the one that does not pay."

"What do you do?"

"I'm a doctor. I lend my expertise to the rich and the intelligent who wish to see the world become better, when I am not with them I help those too poor or too sick to see a doctor."

"We won't be going far today, only just up the road a ways."

Not far was almost an hour's drive spent in silence. Past streets, buildings, and landmarks Harry, who'd never really left his comfortable corner of the city, no longer recognized. Into parts of the city more run down and derelict than even the rat colonized, rubbish infested alley he took shelter in.

When industrial buildings and storefronts made slow way to row houses and tenement buildings, the car, so out of place in the way it shone bright and new and wealthy even in the weak sunlight, slowed to navigate the tight streets before rolling to a full stop.

"This is Brooklyn?"

"Yes, Flatbush." There was a pop of knees spent folded in one position for too long and Harry's companion sighed, relieved as he stretched contracted muscles on the sidewalk. Once suitably recovered from the long car ride, he nodded to the building closest to them, it was identical to the two flanking it, save for the four numbers peeling over the arched entryway.

"We go to the top and to the back."

The woman waiting for them five flights up looked made of sharp edges and hollow bird bones except for where her stomach protruded strangely, full with a child prepared to join the world any day now. Shadows not caused by the windows too dirty to filter through anything more than the most tenacious rays of sun added unneeded depth to her cheeks, her collarbones and beneath her eyes. She was frail with hunger and grief and too much hard work, but she was beautiful in that, even when weighted with child and fatigue, she smiled waveringly, but sincerely and met both men with a steel grip and a gaze that promised pain if they made her regret inviting them into her home.

"She's asleep, been down for a few hours." The apartment was cramped, tiny, with a living room
that doubled as a kitchen and a bedroom with a door that didn't even sit properly on the hinges. There was a girl in the actual bedroom, curled on the flimsy mattress in the corner, she was sweat soaked and fever flushed but it seemed as if every quilt and blanket that could be found in the apartment was piled on top of her.

"Ms. Walker down the hall used to be a nurse, she said it looked like strep and that I should see a doctor for her as soon as I could. But I can't afford a day off, there'd be no food to bring home and no apartment to come home to, and the amount they were asking is beyond what I have. So she gave me some home remedies and has been keeping an eye on her while I worked. But it's been almost a month and last night she got worse, was up until the early hours wailing loud enough to raise her Pa from his grave."

The little girl's limbs were stiff, difficult to manipulate, under the doctor's touch, with joints irregularly shining and so swollen she could barely bend her elbow or roll her ankles.

Tools were unpacked swiftly from a leather satchel and used to measure her fever, her heartbeat, the irregular pattern of her breathing. Lights shone in her eyes and mouth, checking for responsiveness and the tell-tale features of strep throat.

"She fell asleep when?"

"Early morning, seven maybe. The first few hours she woke once or twice, was disoriented when she did, but she hasn't stirred in a good three hours."

"It's not strep. Not anymore." Two needles and two vials of clear liquid were retrieved from the bag, the older man's hands remained steady as he filled each needle before injecting their contents into the crook of the girl's elbow. "It's rheumatic fever now. That was penicillin to help fight off the bacteria and aspirin to try and bring that swelling down some. But we must get her to a hospital, with proper equipment and medicines, immediately. She's gone untreated too long, her heart's begun to fail."

Grey eyes half hidden behind rounded spectacles found Harry, where he'd been lingering uncertain but out of the way at the door of the bedroom. "I'll need your help on this part, we need to get her down to the street."

"Of course."

The girl weighed nothing in his arms, even after five flights of stairs, but the alarming heat her small body was letting off and the random jerks of her arms and head made her presence a constant point of awareness for him. The car hadn't moved from the curb in the quarter of an hour they'd been gone, the unnamed driver was still seated behind the wheel, but a woman in a simple grey dress had made herself comfortable in the passenger's seat of the car. No one acknowledged her presence, not even the doctor questioned what she was doing in his car, and for a moment Harry assumed it was because she was there to lend aid to the girl. But they pulled away from the curb, the car angled towards the closest hospital twenty minutes away, and not a word was spoken to the woman or a glance spared in her direction, so Harry looked again and, this time, he actually saw.

There was no proof, but after one real look, he understood, she wasn't acknowledged because she wasn't there, she couldn't be seen just as Death couldn't be seen by anyone but him.

"You're his protégé, the one with the Heart in your soul." Her eyes were wide and dark and made incredibly unnerving by the fact that she didn't blink once. "I'm Tamiel. I've come for the girl, but it's a pleasant surprise to meet you."
She was, in whatever way, one of Death's, Harry could feel it in her aura, in the way something inside him reached for her. So perhaps, in some ways, she was his.

"Don't take her." He spoke softly, but neither the doctor nor the mother heard, so engrossed were they in ensuring the girl was comfortable. "Please."

Tamiel frowned. "I have to. You know that. She lived the time she was allotted, anymore would cause upset."

"She's too young."

"She is, isn't she? She must have been an extraordinary soul to have fulfilled her purpose here so quickly. I can't wait to see it."

Harry jerked in tandem with the girl when Tamiel reached back and splayed her fingers over her sternum. Her fingers bore down, they would have broken skin if she were tangible, they corkscrewed one way, then another, then drew back sharply. A light came with it bright and beautiful and shining with a rainbow of colors Harry couldn't even name.

"I was right." Tamiel's entire demeanor shifted with an unspeakable joy as she looked at the light, the soul. "She's extraordinary."

She was gone after that, and Harry was left to watch as the car's occupants realized that the little girl curled in her mother's lap had gone. There was a single wail of despair and a barely audible sigh of distress. But Harry remained still and so silent it looked almost as if he too had stopped breathing. Because as the life drained from the body now absent a soul, something in Harry stirred and it rejoiced at what he'd just witnessed. The part of him that was Death suddenly felt powerful.

The girl and her mother were dropped at the hospital where the body would be properly dealt with. Harry kept quiet throughout the entire painful process of seeing them off and for a large portion of the ride back to their side of town. His entire body buzzed with a deadly energy that could only derive from the Hallows, he could barely repress the shudder that wanted to quake him like a windblown leaf and sitting on his hands was the only way to stop their perpetual trembling.

"I wasn't aware how critical the child's condition was, if I had I wouldn't have exposed you to more death. I'm sorry."

The soft leather of the car seat squeaked with the shift of Harry's body. "Don't apologize. If I spent the entirety of my life trying to run from Death, I would have a very exhausting existence. It can't be avoided."

"No, maybe not. But that doesn't make it any less tragic." The doctor sighed another of his tired sighs, he slid his glasses from his nose and carefully cleaned the lenses with the hem of his shirt, more out of a need for something to do rather than for real visibility. "A year ago, a happier woman would have been hard to find. That family, that beautiful young woman and her precocious child, were whole, alive in all of the ways that mattered. They didn't live in those slums. Her husband had not been lost to gunfire or mortars across the sea, her daughter was not suffering from a disease that is so easily treated. Now she and her husband and her daughter and the child growing within her are just another family destroyed by a war they never asked for."

"No one ever asks for it." Harry shrugged, exhausted even as he was wired from the strange energy running through him, but far too used to the cloying misery that succeeded death to be jarred by it. "No one but those who are evil."
"Who was your evil?"

"My evil?"

His companion nodded. "A sickness, a war, a man. Something made you suffer."

Harry's bottom lip rolled between his teeth as he observed the man beside him. They were strangers still but this awful, miserable experience had allowed him to see a side of the man that there short visits hadn't allowed. He wasn't with Harry because he wanted something from him, he didn't ask because he wished to use the information against him one day. He just wanted to know. So he told him.

"A man. My evil was a man. One much like Hitler actually, he drew people to him because he was charming and knew just the right things to say. He too was obsessed with lineage and he was willing to go to great and horrible lengths to see only his version of the perfect race thrive."

"I've not heard of anyone like him."

Harry shook his head. "You wouldn't have. My war wasn't like this one, it wasn't between countries and enormous powers. It was small, between only a few communities, but that didn't make it any less devastating."

"You lost your family."

"Yes, much of them. A part of me misses it though. It sounds awful and not a moment fighting was one that could be considered happy, but when I was at war I had purpose, I had no concerns other than surviving one more fight. Always one more. With it gone, that part, though small and dormant most days, is lost, helpless."

There was something in the man's eyes, a spark of some sort of intrigue, maybe hope, that made Harry fall silent, curious to see what he had to say in response.

"You would want it back? That purpose?"

That hadn't at all been what he was expecting. "That isn't...are you being hypothetical?"

He received a small smile and a shake of the head. "The rich and intelligent men and women I said I worked with, the ones who seek to make the world a better place, together we are working on a project to take men like you, good men, and make them great."

A furrow carved its way between Harry's brow. "And what do you intend to do with these men?"

"End this war. Prevent another mother, father, wife, daughter, from feeling the pain that we've endured."

"You want me to be a soldier."

The doctor slid closer to Harry, suddenly eager to make him understand. "You would be no ordinary soldier, you would be more."

"How would we achieve that?"

"Through the miracles of science and modern medicine."

Considering Harry was sixty years in the past, he doubted any of their medicine would pass as modern to him. "Some sort of...drug?"
"Serum. I have been working to develop this for years."

"It's completed? Tested already?"

That gave the man pause, though not for long. "Not complete, not yet. We had only one test subject and it failed even when it succeeded. I find that it lacks a certain… balance. But once I have found it, through the help of those like you, we could restore peace."

"Men like me…” Harry faltered, saddened, unsure. "You're wrong. I'm not great, I'm not good."

Something akin to surprise crossed his companion's features, then gentle amusement. "I did not tell you," he said, "but I saw you that day with the girl and the man who thought terrible things of her because of her differences. I saw how you shamed him, drove him off, even as others looked away, even as others approved. And though when I approached, it was not with the intention of extending this offer, I still hoped. And when we spoke, of this war, of your war, of our lives, I knew. You are good. You are great."

"Maybe so." Harry's fingers twisted in his grip. "Maybe you're right. Or maybe I am. But either way, it doesn't matter. I would have to fight….I'm sorry, I can't. I can't fight anymore."

The speed with which the doctor wilted made guilt curdle in Harry's stomach. But he had a purpose already, he had to get home. He couldn't put that off to help fight a war he knew they would win without his aid.

Neither of them spoke again, not until the landmarks around them once again became familiar and the car was cruising along the street that would lead to the library. When they stopped only a few meters away from the familiar set of stairs, Harry reached for the door immediately and swung it open, but he hesitated for just a moment before leaving.

"I'm sorry to disappoint you." He spoke without turning to face the man. "I wish I could be different. I wish I could be the man you think I am."

"I don't. I respect your decision, I understand it, and I would never wish for you to be anyone other than who you already are. Whoever that might be."

Harry couldn't help but laugh at that, all the times they've spoken and they never once shared names. "That would be Harry. I'm Harry."

"Harry. I am Abraham Erskine." Abraham smiled with no ounce of disappointment or resentment. "Will I see you tomorrow, Harry?"

"Yes, you will."

Harry was used to being hungry. His pitiful meals, insubstantial even with his daily dose of cheese, meat, and fresh baked bread, allowed for nothing else. He was used to being tired. The menial but back breaking task of hefting crates of vegetables several hours a day, seven of seven days a week wore away the little energy his meager caloric intake was able to produce. He was used to being cold. Used to always being not quite dry despite numerous anti-damp spells. He was used to these menial discomforts, they'd become a reluctantly accepted part of his existence and, so long as his ribs remained only a vague shadow rather than a clear imprint against his chest, so long as he had enough in him to keep himself standing upright, and so long as his extremities continued without the distinctive blue hue of oncoming frost bite, then they would remain menial discomforts.
But then he watched the girl die and simply being in proximity of the act of death saw him renewed.

The hunger was gone. No more quiet ache of exhaustion. If he hadn't known any better, he could have mistaken himself for the Harry of two years ago, comfortable within the halls of Hogwarts, if not fully happy then at least safe, warm, fed. And he knew it was because of the girl and whatever twisted connection his newly Hallowed soul had with Death and dying.

It was awful, but it was also exhilarating. He'd almost forgotten what it was like to feel whole and human and he didn't want to forget again. Even if it meant being near it again, witnessing it again. It would be far too easy to become addicted to the feeling.

The girl was rendered unconscious and bound to her seat, the man was allowed to remain aware and unbound only because these backwards people still didn't fully understand, of the two, who held the real power. They were in the largest courtroom of the Ministry, which also so happened to be the most intimidating, and upon the raised dais encircling the room were wizards and witches of all backgrounds and ethnicities, any country with a significant magical presence had sent the representatives of their governments to oversee the proceedings within the courtroom.

In their time of crisis, the acting Minister of Magic, Kingsley Shacklebolt, had been retired and replaced by the full body of the Wizengamot whom answered and reported directly to the ICW. They had reached such times where one wizard could no longer be expected to shoulder the full burden of the disaster upon them.

Babajide Akingbade of Uganda, the current Supreme Mugwump of the ICW, took the place of honor at the head of the courtroom and, once all representatives had settled into their seats, wasted no time in addressing their only conscious intruder.

"You are muggle."

Strucker blinked, then frowned, then bowed his head in a false attempt at humility. "I'm afraid I don't understand."

"A muggle," the word was spat, not with disgust, but incredulity. Disbelief that this man with no magical background was able to breach their most hallowed halls. "There is no magic within you or your immediate ancestry."

"Magic as is in the supposedly inconceivable power that can be harnessed within?" A saccharine smile, sweet as rotten fruit, exposed Strucker's teeth. "Perhaps you would be correct in assuming I have no such power within me. But that does not mean I am completely without it, as my Aliana only just proved."

"You are not one of us," Akingbade amended firmly. "You should not have been able to enter."

"Yes, well, you've all been so focused on the protections outright falling, you failed to notice those that only weakened, not much, but enough to allow men such as myself to exploit them."

"Why did you come?"

"Because my people have been watching you and yours for decades, trying to understand who and what you were. We'd been unsuccessful until only very recently. When your magic began to fail
and your secrecy became threatened, it was an easy task to collect a few of your unsuspecting folk and learn what we needed from them. Your race is threatened, your people are dying, you will be extinct in a century, a century and a half, perhaps, if you're careful. But continuing on as you are now you will all see your end soon."

Akingbade was unimpressed, when he spoke again he merely repeated his earlier words with ten times the ferocity. "Why did you come?"

"I have a proposition for you."

There was a rumble around the room, a short outburst of disbelief and amusement, this muggle dared come into their Ministry, wreak havoc on their halls, and then offer them a deal? He was surely insane.

However, Strucker was unfettered in the face of their derision. "We two have a common enemy, muggles you call them, and the government they look up to as if they are gods. Because of them our world has fallen to war and ruin. Help me destroy them and I will usher in a new world order where you and yours no longer need cower in fear of those inferior to you."

"Who are you to make such promises?" It was clear Akingbade was not remotely convinced, a quick look around confirmed that his colleagues were of the same mindset. "What makes you so certain you would be successful in bringing down the muggles? And why would you even want to? They are your people."

"They are." Strucker nodded. "But they are sick, flawed to their core. Every day my people are lost to starvation and war, poverty and hatred and it is because those elected to preside over them do not have the nerve to do what must be done. If we want this world to prosper, those rotten in the bunch must be done away with. My organization and I are willing to see that done, we're willing to do it ourselves, for the good of all. It cannot be done alone though."

"And you assume we would help you? Why? Why when we could cut out the hassle of a second player in the game and rid the world of the rotten muggles ourselves?"

"If it could be done, you would have done so long ago rather than cower behind your steadily weakening wards." Strucker shifted in his seat and the chains that had not yet bound him moved along with him, a clear threat. "Neither of us can do this alone. If we want to see those who hold this world back from it's potential eradicated, then we must work together. Your people are powerful, far more powerful than those who oppose you, but you are few and fewer every day, you might find success in ending the governments of your enemies, but the people would rise up and destroy you, not because they are stronger, but because there are many more.

"On the other side, my organization has enough men at their command to keep any who might overthrow the current leader in power long enough to make some sort of difference. But we are not yet at a place where we could actually overthrow those leaders. We could cause unrest, eliminate many important figures, but it would not be enough to topple a government, let alone the multiple ones needed to be ended in order for this coup to be successful.

"So you see, where one is incapable the other is astoundingly able. If we were to join our forces it could be done."

A soft murmur had begun to build among the crowd of wizards, a murmur that almost sounded considering, but Akingbade held his hand up, silencing them at once. "Your offer comes at an interesting time. We are close to war and here you are offering a convenient solution. It smells of a trap, and we are not in a place where we can afford to risk the lives and safety of able bodied
fighters."

"You would not need to, the weak and sick will do just fine. This disease plaguing you, I've seen what it's done, what it's taken." One of Strucker's pale hands reached out to stroke through the hair of the girl still unconscious beside him. "Aliana was once one of you, talented, powerful, her illness stripped her of that potential, that one thing that made her special. But I gave it back."

"No. Returning a wizard's magic once it has been taken by the plague is not possible." Akingbade was flush with anger at just the thought of it. "You, a muggle, could never achieve what some of are best were unable to."

"I should have been more specific." Strucker amended. "I cannot return her ability to cast as she once could, that is likely gone forever, but she was not fully stripped of her spark, and with it I was able to create something new, something that, with the right tools, could grow to be more than you all have ever been capable of."

"Who gave you this right?" the representative for the French Ministry, Sabine Moreau, rose from her seat, anger contorting her otherwise beautiful face. "Perhaps you were successful in granting her some form of magic back, but she and her magic were not yours to meddle. You are not one of us."

Strucker laughed with a malicious sort of humor. "If I and my colleagues kept away from all that is not ours by right, we would not be the force we are today. Some toes must be trod upon for the sake of progress. If you can find the strength to get over your bruised toes you can ensure the survival of your race.

"I don't need much, as many wizards who have lost their power to this disease and a few healthy ones, for research."

Moreau rounded on the Supreme Mugwump who had gone uncharacteristically silent. "Akingbade, the fact that we have entertained this horrible man for so long is insulting." Those around the woman nodded their agreement. "To hand over our own to a muggle who wishes to strip them down and expose the secrets of our magic is blasphemy. It is the one thing that should not ever be considered."

"Without me, you all die." Strucker spoke calmly despite the mounting hostility within the room. "Without you, I will find another way to see it done. But it would be much easier and far more beneficial for the both of us if you were to agree. You have everything to gain from this proposition and so little to lose."

"You, who has not lived a single day among our people, know nothing of what we would lose," Moreau spat.

"Enough." Akingbade's gaze was solemn as he surveyed the outraged wizards and witches. "We are in dire times. No option can be overlooked." There was another rumble of protest that was quelled with only one glare from the Supreme Mugwump. "We will take three days to discuss, debate, and decide. Three days only and you will have our answer."

The answer was yes, it was always going to be yes despite the uproarious protests.

Two days later, the worst victims of the disease with no visitors and no family to miss them were transferred to a facility across the sea and their work was started.
A/N: Anyone still here? It's been some time, I know, I don't think it's ever taken me so long to update a story in all the years I've been publishing on this site. There's a whole laundry list of reasons excusing my absence, but it really boils down to the fact that what I had planned for this story really just wasn't working. So I took time, too much time, to re-evaluate just about everything I knew. But now I have a new plan, a solid one that I'm about ninety-five percent certain I'll be able to stick to, so now I can continue actually writing and producing chapters without a whole four plus month wait.

I'm still on Tumblr and somewhat on Facebook under my penname. Plus I have a shiny new Twitter account! Follow me so I'm not tweeting to no one!
The energy didn't diminish with sleep. The night passed and Harry prepared to leave for the grocers but the disconcerting power whose tang of death lingered at the back of his throat remained writhing just beneath his skin. He wanted some way to shake it off, so he left for his work earlier than usual, eager to see if the hours of physical labor might do the trick. But the doors were locked and the windows dark and it took nearly five minutes of steady knocking before he received an answer.

Mr. Aronoff met him at the back door, in the same clothing Harry had left him in the previous afternoon and with a rim of red encircling each eye. He'd been mourning, it didn't take much to guess what, only who.

It was the youngest, Jerome; he'd been gone for nearly two weeks but the telegram had only just arrived the evening before. The store would be closed for a week, maybe more, while they tried to recover from the loss. Despite his protests Mr. Aronoff forced a handful of bills at Harry, two weeks' worth of pay, before shuffling back into his home.

Harry lingered on the doorstep, dumbstruck and uncertain and already feeling secondhand grief for a couple too kind to deserve such an injustice. Eventually he moved on, there was a park nearby, empty due to the early hours and biting temperatures, where he sat himself on a bench as far from the street as he could manage.

It was easy to lose himself in his own mind in moments like that, there was plenty to lose himself in these days. But one thought in particular remained at the forefront, morbid but unshakeable, of the youngest Aronoff's last moments.

He knew very little of the man, he'd never actually met him as he'd been deployed before Harry had taken up with the Aronoffs, but his parents spoke of him and his brothers extensively and with a devoted pride and overwhelming love that made the revelation of his death so bitter even to the stranger that Harry was.

Harry hoped that, at least, the man had died quickly, his own death had been quick, painless, but had Jerome suffered? Did he realize he'd been shot? Or had he not understood what the intense pressure just below his sternum was? Why he was suddenly choking so violently on this dirty air?

_He didn't._

Was he confused as to why his legs no longer supported him as he ran toward enemy fire? Why the ground beneath him was inexplicably slick and warm?

_He was._

What was he thinking as spots began to crowd the border of his vision? Of his mother? His father? His two brothers lost somewhere in this hell?

_It was of the sand he was staining red and how he wished he could stand at the edge of his home state with the salt on his tongue and the ocean stretched wide at his feet one last time._

Harry flinched, recoiled hard enough that the bench, weakened by age creaked in warning beneath him.

He was still in the park, he was still in New York, but for a moment he'd been there too, dying from
a bullet to the gut on a beach somewhere in Europe. And his skin was still quivering with the energy that he knew must belong to Death.

The need to speak to the being was immense, but he didn't have the ingredients, the flowers and the branches to summon him. They might be found in an apothecary but he had no means of purchasing any of it, the meager amount of muggle money on him would do no good for him there, not to mention he had no idea where he might go to find an apothecary.

But he needed to talk to Death. The last thing he could afford was another Hallow induced breakdown while stranded in this time. His desperation must have transcended planes of reality as, between one blink and the next, Death was there.

"What," he said unhappily, "do you want?"

Harry silently congratulated himself on managing to quell his second instinctual flinch of the day. "What…how did you know I wanted to see you?"

"You were screaming."

"I wasn't…."

"The power behind the thoughts and emotions you were hurling my way was akin to screaming. It was very difficult to ignore. What do you want?"

Wasn't that a handy piece of knowledge? Perhaps he should have listened to Death's mocking reprimands for using 'sticks and flowers' to summon him months ago. He might have saved himself a fair bit of stress.

"I'm sorry," he said, trying and only somewhat succeeding at seeming contrite. "I didn't mean to… yell, but it's happening again. I think I'm losing control."

"Of?"

"These abilities. It's not voices again, more like a vision or an out of body experience, maybe. I was dying. I was someone else who was dying."

"You're not losing control, quark." Death twisted his mouth in a mocking smile and gestured somewhere over his shoulder. "You're being stalked."

One hand fell to the wand at his hip while the rest of Harry's body whipped violently in his seat, craning desperately to see who Death was speaking of. But there was no one. "Where? I can't see them."

"Of course you can't, you're weak and your refusal to embrace who you've become is making you weaker. You're being stalked not by one of the living, but by a spirit, a shade. You must have encountered him at some point in your day and he was drawn to what you are."

"Excuse me?"

"He died violently, his parting from this world was not an easy or peaceful one, and, in the process, he left a piece of himself behind. Who knows how long he's been trapped here, but it's likely when he felt the power you're attempting to suppress he latched onto you in hopes that you might find him some peace." Death held out a hand and for a moment Harry could see the ghostly outline of a man, a soldier reaching for the proffered limb. "He will be returned to his whole and passed on peacefully."
"That was Jerome." Harry spoke quietly, awe struck but confused. "He died continents away."

"But he lived here, no? Shades rarely linger where they passed, they prefer to lurk where they once held the strongest ties."

"Home. But he's been dead for weeks and I've been there nearly every day, why did he only just now begin following me?"

Death shrugged, not cluelessly but carelessly. "Something within you has changed, expanded."

Harry frowned but nodded. "I've been feeling strange, powerful. I watched a little girl die and I've felt it ever since."

"That is to be expected. Our very existence revolves around dying, our power is rooted in it, it is only natural that being in proximity to it invigorates us. The effects will not be so severe though once you have inherited the full scope of what we can do."

"So this….itching beneath my skin, it'll pass? Just like everything else did?"

He received a sharp nod in answer. "One day it will no longer come in bursts of uncontrolled power, it will simply be who you are."

To most that might have come as a comfort, the promise of one day no longer having to wrestle with abilities beyond his control. But the truth of it was actually more daunting than anything to Harry.

"What's it like?"

Death didn't have an answer, all he could do was raise a brow in question.

"Being Death. The power you say you have, that I'll have one day, it seems…vast, limitless almost. You can travel time, cross space as if it's nothing. Are there no drawbacks to being what you are?"

For perhaps the first time since meeting him, Harry was able to witness Death's usual façade of condescending arrogance replaced by something that could almost be consideration.

"There are many drawbacks, too many to name, but even then the perks of the job far outweigh any imperfection. I would much rather be what we are now, than what you once were."

"You've always been this way? You were born death?"

Death shook his head. "I was not born. I've existed always."

"Then how do you know that what you are is better than what I had? Because I want it back, I don't want an endless future stretched before me. The thought of eternity…it's terrifying."

Gone was the consideration, replaced now by pity.

"It seems so, yes," Death agreed. "Because, despite what you will grow to one day be, you are still shackled by the mindset of a mortal, it will take much to break you free of it. But when you are, the thought will not seem so terrifying anymore."

Harry shook his head, unable, unwilling to believe. "I can hardly imagine a time where that would be true."

Especially because accepting what he was, throwing off the fear of both death and eternity every
human seemed to cling to, would mean he'd failed to find a way back in order to stop the union of the Hallows and that would mean the wizarding world had met their end.

And that simply wasn't an option.

Death left and Harry remained only long enough to regain his bearings. The past few days had been heavy with death and grief, all he wanted now was easy company, someone with whom he could unwind and relax. So he went back to Ives.

It was early morning still, not yet even noon, and he was still home, there to answer the door after only a handful of knocks.

"Harry?" Unpainted brows rose, surprised but not unhappy.

"I'm sorry, I know it's early but my employers closed the store for the day and I thought I might come and see you."

"Well, I won't say it's not unexpected, but it's not unwelcome either." Ives stepped away from where he was blocking the door. "Come in." A firm hand tugged him past the threshold before shutting the door behind them. "Have you eaten?"

Harry nodded, the last slice of a loaf of soda bread Mrs. Aronoff had gifted him a few days earlier had acted as his breakfast.

"Well, you can stand to eat a bit more. I was fixing to cook anyway." Once sure he was seated and comfortable, Ives set to work in the kitchen, grabbing a pot from one of the cupboards before filling it with water and placing it on the stovetop.

"Thank you." Long gone were the days where Harry'd pass up any sort of kindness, he'd take every bit he could get his hands on. "You look good, by the way." His fingers tapped his cheek. "No bruises."

Ives laughed. "Can't credit no kind of quick healing on my part. I've got bruises and they're nasty, but powder's good for covering it up."

"I can't see it." Harry squinted, trying to find some indication that Ives' flawless complexion was the product of makeup. "But then again, I don't know much about it and what to look for."

"With some dames it won't take much looking, if they're no good at putting on face you'll see it. But if you can match your colors and blend it all right, that ain't an issue."

"You do it well."

A slick smile spread across Ives' face and he laughed. "Thanks, doll. I wasn't always so good at it though. It took some time before I got the sultry look I was going for instead of the whole Bozo get up."

"You've been doing this for a while then? Why?"

"Why?" Ives repeated, confused.

"Why'd you start? Why'd you keep doing it?"

And there was that smile again, back in full force. "What's got you so curious? Thinking about joining our ranks? Need someone to show you the ropes?"
That startled a laugh from Harry. He couldn't ever imagine he'd be able to pull off taking on the persona of a woman, he was sure he was very poorly suited for that sort of act. "No, I just like understanding people."

"Shame. I started because of a feeling and I kept at it because I liked it, I liked that it felt right. That I wasn't trying to hide or pretend anymore. I'm different, strange, I know it's true, I'm a man but sometimes I enjoy putting on dresses and painting my lids blue and my lips red and feeling beautiful."

"I like that." Harry nodded resolutely. "I like different."

"What kind of different?"

"Any kind. No different is the same. That'd sort of defeat its purpose."

"Are you? Different? My kind. Tell it to me straight."

"I don't think so. But then I've never tried it, never thought I wanted to."

"Thinking 'bout it doesn't give you the jitters though?"

Harry shook his head. "Where I'm from, a man laying with a man, or a woman with woman, or even either dressing as the other, there's prejudice, disdain, but it's not criminal, it's not taboo. It's done and people accept it."

"Where you're from sounds like somewhere I'd like to be."

"No, that's one of the only good things about that place. There's plenty of bad there, maybe just as much as here."

Ives' didn't look entirely convinced, but he was good enough not to press the issue. "Is that why you left?"

Harry shrugged this time, loosely and trying his best not to consider the question too closely. He'd come for easy company and conversation after all. "It's something I'd hoped to change, but not exactly why I left. I intend to go back, soon. But what about what you do? It's obviously not widely accepted here but you don't seem to make much effort in hiding it. Does dressing as a woman at night affect your life during the day?"

"Not as much as you might think." Ives graciously accepted the new topic with no comment. "Most of the boys I hang out with are fairies same as me, or tolerant of them at the least. And the people I work for don't care what I am as long as I keep doing good work for them and don't bring it into their business. Worst I got to look out for are the drunk assholes I run into at night looking to bring our beef to the daylight."

"Does that happen often?"

"Not much, no. I'm good at acting normal, so the fellas who recognize me aren't always sure and they don't want to look cockeyed slingin facts they ain't sure about."

Harry murmured in thanks when he was handed a bowl of lightly sweetened oats and milk. "I don't mean to take up your time asking all of these personal questions. If you need to prepare for work you can kick me out, my feelings won't be hurt."

"Don't worry about it. You're good company, kid."
How long had it been since he'd heard something like that? That someone wanted to be with him just because. Too long, for sure.

"You don't mind the questions?"

Ives smiled and shook his head. "It's different, talking about this during the day with someone who isn't like me and doesn't look at me like I'm less because of it."

"Good. One more question then."

"Just one?"

"Just one. Was it hard, accepting that you were different?"

"Yes. Near impossible. But when I did it, when I stopped being afraid, my world changed. Questions I didn't know I was asking finally made sense, a weight I didn't even know I was carrying dissolved, and the miserable days I thought were normal weren't anymore. It was terrifying, I spent so much time disgusted with myself, it took me a long time to grow past it. But I think if I hadn't, I wouldn't be here, because that, more than the beatings I catch for being seen with red lips and a cock in my mouth, was killing me. Slow but sure."

When Harry left the apartment some several hours later, Ives' unflinching acceptance of himself and all of his dangerous differences stuck with him more than the rest of the conversation that followed. Because while they were two wildly different sort of differents, what he'd said was still unnervingly applicable to Harry's own situation.

He didn't like what he was becoming, this creature that could one day be likened to Death, he wanted to ignore it, push it to the side until the day in which he could be rid of it for good. But until then, suppressing what was not so easily suppressed would more than likely wind up doing far more harm than good. If he could make like the way of Ives and make some sort of effort to acknowledge this terrifying part of him, at least until he could see it gone, maybe he'd spend less time petrified of all that it could do and more time using it to his own advantage. Because there was no way home, at least no way that could be found in this time and this library. He'd looked everywhere, he was doing the best research he could but it was becoming increasingly obvious that wizards had no way to move forward sixty years in the future.

But he wasn't just a wizard anymore, and the sort of being that he was could move through the stream of time. Death had said it himself on that first day in this time, he needed only power he did not yet have access to to see it done. But he knew a way in which he could, potentially, take the little power the Hallows had granted him thus far, and make them great. Great enough to see him home.

Erskine was late showing up, not late enough to cause worry but just enough where Harry, who was already one edge with a strange mix of trepidation and excitement, began to grow just a bit restless. He forced himself to hold off, however, when the doctor finally did arrive, allowing time for warm greetings and the exchange of an apple for a sandwich before bringing up the topic that chased all other thought from his mind.

"I wanted to ask you about what we spoke of yesterday in the car. If you don't mind."

Erskine nodded, unperturbed and unsuspicious as he unwrapped his sandwich. "Of course, what is it?"

"The serum," Harry made it a point to keep his voice low in order to prevent the few around them
Erskine remained unbothered despite the sensitive topic of the conversation. "Have you changed your mind then?"

"Not exactly…But maybe. I'm not sure."

"All right, well the serum is very simple in concept. It was created with the purpose of enhancing everything about a man to the peak of human standards, past the peak, actually. It amplifies all, both in mind and body."

"And you want to use it to make soldiers? To fight the war?"

"Just a few of these men could change the tide in our favor. I'm not looking for an entire army of these enhanced men, only a team, a small one of highly trained soldiers able to do what full battalions can't and end this war before more lives are needlessly lost."

"How many men have received it so far?"

"Only one."

"And it succeeded?"

Erskine shifted on the step he was seated on. "It succeeded in what it was created to do. But the timing was wrong and the subject was wrong."

"What about it was wrong? What happened?"

"It is as I said before, the serum is meant to amplify all, the bad and the good. It is unfortunate that our first subject had far too much bad within him. He was an angry, spiteful man, full of greed before the serum, after he was worse, monstrous. Physically, he was near perfect, but his mind was chaos, the serum didn't know when to stop and his emotion grew to be too much. Even in a man full of good this would lead only to insanity, too much of even a good thing can end very poorly."

"But you've fixed it? It's stable now?"

Erskine shook his head. "Not at the moment. We've been working to find that bit of balance we need to make it perfect, but it's…elusive."

"Can I help?"

"Help?"

Harry wasn't a scientist or a genius, he wasn't even a graduate of his class, but he didn't need to be, Erskine was all three, at least he presumed he was, and there was sure to be a potion, a ritual, a spell or something that could work to find this man what he needed, all he needed was to be pointed in the right direction.

"I said I couldn't do it because I don't want to be a soldier, I don't want to fight again and I still don't. But I think I can help and I hope in return you might help me."

Erskine didn't seem mocking or disdainful as one might when a scruffy looking barely adult offered to do what some obviously very bright minds couldn't. He was open and curious, willing to listen as long as Harry had something to say. "What did you have in mind?"

Harry couldn't speak for a moment, because this moment here was when he finally had to prove
that he really meant it when he'd thought and said that he wanted to trust Erskine, because if he couldn't, he was putting everything important to him at risk. But this might be his only way home, he had to be willing to pay that price.

"I want to show you something." One hand fisted nervously in the hem of his shirt, but he still stood on steady legs and nodded to where he recognized Erskine's car to be waiting. "But we need somewhere less busy."

Unlike Harry, there was no hesitation when Erskine stood. He led the way to his car and allowed Harry to instruct the driver on where to go without an ounce of distrust.

The sleek car looked out of place in the rundown area in which Harry's alley resided, but no one stopped long enough to cause them trouble, likely frightened off by the intimidating stance of the driver who stepped out long enough to check Harry's alley.

"It's clear. Do you want me to…?"

Erskine shook his head as he climbed from the car. "There's no need to accompany us, we trust Harry. He worries insufferably." The doctor confided as he and Harry made their way to the back of the alley. "But he is a good man. A good friend. Perhaps I should go back, reassure him one last time, I wouldn't want him to make himself sick worrying."

Harry smiled and gently took Erskine's arm, preventing him from stopping and guiding him forward. "He'll be fine. That's only the wards talking."

"The what? But really, I should go and get him, I don't like the thought of him waiting in the car alone-oh…"

The doctor's worry turned to confusion the moment they stepped past the barrier of the wards, his heavy brow drew down on his eyes as he took in the addition to the alley that hadn't been there only seconds ago. "What is this? What is that?"

"Wards, to keep people stumbling upon here."

"Here?" Harry didn't flinch from the embarrassment he felt coursing hot through him when dark eyes made darker with an emotion he refused to read turned on him. "Do you live here?"

Harry nodded sharply. "I did not bring you here for pity. I brought you for privacy."

"To show me something, you said."

"Yes. But before I say anything more, I need you to make a promise." Taking the subtle tilt of the older man's head as curious interest, Harry continued on. "You can't tell anyone what I'm about to show you. I need you to swear that, so long as I'm not intentionally doing anyone harm, you will not tell a soul what you're about to see unless given express permission from me alone."

"So long as it puts no one in harm's way," Erskine agreed.

It wasn't a binding contract, Erskine could go back on his word if he wished to, but Harry had decided to trust the man and this was the first step in doing so.

"As a man of science, you might find it difficult to believe that there are forces in this world that can defy the basic laws of gravity, physics, time. There exist people able to manipulate the world and its energies with words," cautiously he drew his wand, "and a stick."
He started small, a flick of his wand summoned one of his threadbare blankets to his arms, he quickly wrapped it around himself, more for show rather than for comfort as his warming charms were still holding strong. Then he tried for something a little more difficult, conjuring two chairs from nothing. He'd only tried the spell once or twice months ago, and his chairs always wound up a bit lumpy and the fabric a bit of an eyesore, but they were comfortable and wouldn't disappear the moment they were sat in.

"What is this?" Erskine's eyes grew wide with shock as Harry continued to cast several low level charms. One to change his hair color, another to change a two day old newspaper to a raven whose wings still sported war propaganda, and one more to turn it back. All were small, innocuous charms, nothing powerful enough to tip of the MACUSA and bring them down on his head, but just enough to get his point across.

"It's magic."

For whatever reason, that didn't seem to be answer enough for Erskine, if anything, he looked even more baffled. "Magic."

"Yes. I'm a wizard." It was a little bit awful, but Harry found himself actually enjoying himself if only a little. No wonder Dumbledore spoke in riddles so often. "This is my wand."

"And the help you wish to provide…." "Would be magical, yes."

"How?"

Harry gestured to the armchair he'd conjured, once Erskine had gingerly sat himself in one and he was comfortable in the other he explained. "We have libraries worth of spells, potions, something that could find you the balance you need."

"And in return you want what?"

"The serum. I don't want to fight or be one of your soldiers, I need it in order to get back to my family."

"The one you lost."

"I can get back to them, I'm just not powerful enough yet. Your serum can help."

"It was never intended for something like this."

"But you think it could work?"

There was only a moment in which he hesitated, mulling over the new possibilities, before he nodded. "Yes. I do. Do you really think you can help?"

There was no hesitation on Harry's part. He'd thought this over long enough. "Yes. I do."

"There are men I'd need to speak with, men you'd have to meet. But I'm willing and they will be too."

"How many?"

"We'll keep it small," Erskine assured. "Two men, one woman. Experts in their respective fields."
"I'll need oaths for them as well. I don't know them or trust them like I do you, so they'll have to be a bit more binding."

"How long will that take?"

Harry shrugged. "Not long once I find the right ones."

"Tomorrow then? Morning?" Once he received a nod from Harry, Erskine rose from his seat so that he could move close enough to clap him on the shoulder. "Tomorrow then. I'll head back now, speak with a few people about getting you the proper clearance to enter."

"Sounds a bit intimidating."

Erskine laughed, deep and warm and no different from any other time despite how much had just transpired between the two of them. "Only a little. I will see you tomorrow."

"Tomorrow, Doctor Erskine."

The Strategic Scientific Reserve was the name of the organization in which Erskine was employed and they were located in the back of an antique store guarded by an elderly woman who Harry was certain was there to be underestimated.

The three members of the organizations Harry was to be introduced, the two men and single women, were waiting for them several stories below the antique store front and passed a cavernous room that Erskine informed him would be where the procedure would take place when it was finally ready.

Peggy Carter was the woman, beautiful and untouchable beside the two other men, the older Colonel Phillips and the young and eccentric looking Howard Stark. Each of the three surveyed Harry curiously, then slightly disbelievingly.

"This is the one you said could help with your serum?" Phillips was the one to speak, voice holding that hint of scorn Harry had been expecting to hear from Erskine the previous day. "He's a kid."

"Yes." Erskine's grin was enormous and proud. "He is young and so he is full of much I had not once even stopped to consider. Harry, would you show them what you showed me?"

"I have to secure vows first."

The library had held several different books on contracts and vows Harry was able to pull inspiration from. He'd had a lot to choose from, too much really, but he eventually decided to go with a simple one, one best suited for muggles. It was prewritten and all that it needed to be binding was a signature in the signer's blood.

Phillips, Carter, and Stark accepted the short scrolls of parchment the vows had been written on, the incredulity their features had expressed upon Harry's entrance only grew as they read.

"You didn't mention we were expected to sign anything, Doctor." Carter's words coming accented with a brogue not much different from Harry's own was a discovery he found surprisingly welcome. The sound of home did wonders to settle the jitters that shook him imperceptibly.

"If this doesn't go as we'd hoped, I'd like to keep my privacy." Harry informed her and the two others. "In order for it to be binding, it needs to be signed in blood."
A startled laugh burst from Stark. "Are you...he's serious?"

"He is looking out for his safety just as much as you would yours. I made the same promise and found it to be for good reason. Although, I will admit that the blood was not a part of my own oath."

Harry shrugged unrepentantly. "I know you. I don't know them."

"Yes, but why blood?" Stark raised his parchment questioningly. "I can understand why you'd want a written agreement, but signing in our own blood seems a bit excessive."

"It would seem so, yes. But it's necessary."

Stark remained unconvinced, and from a quick glance at Carter and Phillips, they did as well. Harry did his best to suppress a frustrated huff. He knew walking in that there would be resistance, signing in blood wasn't exactly a common practice, even in the wizarding world. But he'd hoped the combined efforts of him and the doctor, coupled with a fair bit of curiosity would get the job done.

"Fine. Wingardium leviosa."

A chorus of shrieks filled the room as three chairs scraped across the floor in an attempt to push their occupants away from a suddenly airborne table.

"What..."

"Sign the contract and I'll tell you more. Please." Suddenly recalling something, Harry reached into his pocket and retrieved three crumpled but still fully functional quills. "Do you need a quill."

Beside him, Erskine nodded encouragingly. "Sign it."

No one moved for an awful moment and Harry began wondering if he'd have to shoddily attempt to obliviate the three. But then Carter reached into a coat pocket and drew back with a knife she then used to cut the palm of her hand. Her attempt at signing her name with the quill was a bit clumsy, but it got the job done just fine.

"Would you like me to help with that?"

Harry held out a hand questioningly, after a moment, the woman realized what he was offering and cautiously reached across the table to lay her hand palm up in his.

"Episkey."

The sluggishly bleeding wound sealed quickly, leaving nothing but a smear of blood across her palm.

Galvanized by her action, Stark and Phillips drew their own knives and carefully signed the bottom of their respective parchments, though only Stark accepted his offer to heal him.

Explaining the basics of his magic after that wasn't easy, but it was made quicker by his previous demonstration and Erskine's backing of all of his claims. And though it took a few more charms before they were fully convinced, it wasn't long before the crux of his presence was returned to.

"You think with your...abilities," Stark reiterated, "you might be able to help us perfect the serum?"
Harry was quick to cast out a disclaimer, these people looked as if one wrong or less than truthful word would be all it'd take to throw him out on his hear. "I can't say with absolute certainty that I have the answers to your problem. But between your science and my magic, I really am confident we can get it done."

"And you said in return we would help you how?"

"After the serum has been successfully completed and you've found your soldiers, I need the serum for myself."

Why?"

"So that I can go home. What I'm able to do now isn't enough, it'll take years for my abilities to grow to be enough to get me there. I don't have years. But the serum could amplify them, it could make them enough."

"I trust him." Erskine spoke calmly but with an immutable authority. "You should as well. He is deserving of our help."

Carter and Stark nodded, but it had become quickly apparent in the time he'd been in the room that they didn't call the shots. Phillips had remained mostly silent, choosing to observe rather than engage, and throughout it all his face had remained carefully impassive.

His response took several minutes, it was clear he was in no rush to make any kind of hasty decisions. When he spoke, it was a question directed at Erskine. "How are you sure that he won't end up another Schmidt, or one who's worse?"

"Because I've seen him show compassion for those any other would overlook, grieve for strangers, and indulge an old man just looking for company. He is not Schmidt. He is a good man."

"Hm." There was another pause and this time Harry was sure he was doing it just to be dramatic. "All right then. If you can get it to work, you won't hear me complain."

And finally, Harry could breathe. A yes wasn't yet his ticket home, but it was one step closer to it.

Hours were spent drawing up an arrangement between Harry and the Strategic Scientific Reserve, immortalizing their agreement in ink and paper so that neither side could back out when it best suited them. When they were done night had long since fallen and Erskine insisted on driving him home.

The worst of winter was beginning to wane, but the doctor still frowned when they pulled up at Harry's alley, clearly uncomfortable with allowing him out into the cold

"You do not have to stay here," he finally decided to offer, "I have a home with plenty of room."

Harry smiled, grateful but clearly with no intention of accepting. "Thank you, but I actually like it here. I've worked hard to make it what it is."

"Well, the offer will remain open if you change your mind. But I imagine you won't really need it in another few months. You will compensated generously for your help with the Reserve."

"I thought that had already been settled upon?" Harry said with a frown of confusion.

"The serum is a reward for a job well done. The time and work you put in leading up to it will still
be deserving of compensation." Erskine looked immensely pleased with himself. "You are now a member of our organization and so will be treated as such."

The thought of finally having enough to afford a home with an actual ceiling and walls to retain warmth more authentic than that of a cheap warming charm stirred up an almost embarrassing amount of emotion in him. "Thank you."

A warm hand, rough with age and hard work, closed around Harry's for just a brief second. "Why do you thank me? This was all your idea" Same as every parting, Erskine closed their conversation out with the same question. "I will see you tomorrow?"

And just like always, Harry confirmed. "I will see you tomorrow."

He slept that night with no worry, no pressing anxiety or cloying homesickness. Only a hope that grew less tentative by the moment.

A/N: That Infinity Wars trailer though.

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Chapter 8

The magical branch of the New York Public Library prevented visits from muggles, whether accidental or intentional, and the protections were much too old and much too powerful for a fully trained curse breaker to take a crack at, let alone poor, undertrained Harry. So the onerous task of muddling through the mazelike organization system, tracking down every text they might need, and copying all pertinent information (by hand he might add, due to extensive anti-theft charms) fell to the beleaguered boy-who-lived. But he bore the work with good cheer, it was painstaking and tedious, but, at the end of the day, procuring the books and information for the real scientists like Erskine and Stark was where he was most helpful. That and lending his magic for study.

He'd been a bit wary about casting more than the most basic charms in the presence of his muggle companions, but he quickly found that the laws regarding casting magic in front of muggles were either much more lax so far in the past or he hadn't understood them very well to begin with. Harry had so far worked up the courage to perform fifth year offensive spells for Stark and Erskine and still had not received an owl or any other form of warning from the MACUSA. Of course they could simply be using every spell used in front of the muggles to build an indefensible case against him, but that was an issue he would deal with when-if it ever came to pass.

In the meantime, Harry would continue to plagiarize texts meant only for those of his kind and perform tricks not allowed for muggle eyes; he would carry on breaking the law and do so happily as long as the SSR continued to make progress in their work. And progress they were indeed making, even if it was slow, so slow he was sometimes convinced they truly didn't know what they were doing and hadn't yet told him because they liked his magic tricks. But all it took was a moment listening to Erskine and Starks confusing but knowledgeable science babble, or spot the excited gleam in Carter and Phillip's eyes after every experiment that failed just the slightest bit less for him to be sure that progress of some sort was being made, even if he didn't fully understand it.

Until one day, after nearly a month spent copying every theoretical potions book and every herbologist's text in the library's extensive repertoire, Erskine found his answer.

"Pale anise may be just what I'm missing."

Harry looked over the older man's shoulder, down onto the sheet of copied parchment Erskine had marked and notated extensively. He recognized the sheet only because he'd had to rewrite it three quarters of the way through after spilling an entire pot of ink over it.

"Anise?" Stark peered at the two over a pair of protective goggles, he'd been tinkering with some machine or the other in preparation of the eventual perfection of the serum. "Isn't that some kind of flower?"

"Yes. Anise is." Erskine nodded. "As is pale anise, although the latter is a magical sibling to the first."

"What properties does it have?" Harry wondered aloud.

"It's good for temperance, balancing out the extreme. It's used in a variety of potions, but its most notable inclusion is in the Draught of Peace."

Stark scoffed, quickly losing interest. "That sounds like about a thousand and one of these plants you've found."
Erskine only smiled patiently. "The thing that prevents it from joining those plants as the thousand and second failure is that it's used in a wide variety of potions because of its compatible properties. It can be mixed with near every chemical ingredient and not alter the fundamental chemistry of the potion."

"So it could potentially be added to the serum and lend its balancing properties without screwing up the enhancing benefits of the serum?" Harry guessed.

"Exactly." Erskine beamed. "We'll make a scientist out of you yet."

"Should I put in an order with the apothecary for some of the anise?"

"Yes," Erskine nodded. "And perhaps a few more orders of the gilliflower? It nearly worked the last time we tried it, I'm curious to see how it would react with the addition of the anise."

A few weeks earlier, Harry had, in a stroke of luck, found himself in contact with the owner of an apothecary who also so happened to be a muggleborn. Around that time Erskine had concluded that it was in potions and specifically the magical ingredients that went into them that the answer to his problem lie. So Harry had begun the process of attempting to find an apothecarist who would take muggle money just as readily as wizarding. His contact was more than happy to take his money despite not being in the right currency, he was familiar enough with dollars and coins thanks to his muggle upbringing and it was an easy enough matter to convert the dollars to galleons if one was a legally registered wizard of the United States. And what was best, the man never asked questions regarding why Harry could never pay with wizarding currency or why he ordered all manners of strange ingredients in such large quantities.

The shipment of anise took the better part of two weeks to show up, Harry's apothecarist had to procure it all the way from the Mediterranean. Its arrival was met with much eager anticipation, something about Erskine's infallible optimism kept the ranks of smaller league SSR scientists just as hopeful, but he'd seemed especially positive that this latest breakthrough would work and it had rubbed off on just about everyone.

Harry sat with him for the thirty-nine consecutive hours it took to mix, extract, compress, mash, and brew each ingredient, too full of nervous anticipation to even consider doing anything else. He envied the man his steady hands and quiet patience. In times like these he was most aware of how much easier life would be with both.

"I've been trying to perfect this serum for many years," was Erskine's response when Harry voiced his frustrations aloud. "Somewhere in that time I learned the patience I needed to see this through to its proper end."

"What makes you so sure this is it?" Harry queried.

Erskine shrugged. "Something about this feels different. I've repeated this process more times than I could count, this is the first I've felt so absolutely certain that I have found my answer."

Harry hummed thoughtfully in the back of his throat as he curled a little tighter into his seat, he'd made himself comfortable a few meters away from the scientist; far enough to not be in the way, but still close enough to carry on a conversation. "What will you do when it's done? After you've tested it and confirmed what you already know?"

"Then comes the real tests. The harder ones."

"Human trials?"
Erskine dipped his head in agreement, too engrossed in his work to look away. "We've never made it this far for good reason," he said. "If, somehow, this fails the results would be catastrophic. It would not end well for our subject."

Harry was silent for a long moment, considering. "They would die?"

"Perhaps. Or worse they would live, disfigured, crippled, an awful shell of the person they once were." For just a second, Erskine looked away from the serum he was steadily producing to pin Harry with a stern stare. "I know what you're thinking and the answer is no, you will not be my first human subject."

"Why?"

"I see and I understand that for whatever reason you do not fear death, but there are things far worse and I will not subject you to them. The men who will undergo the coming trials are fully informed on what they are agreeing to. They know the risks and they are willing to go forth anyway."

"So am I."

"I know you are." Erskine smiled, just a bit twisted and not at all happy. "But you don't have to. Save yourself for the family you've worked so hard to return to."

And there was nothing Harry could say in argument, so he sat back and observed as the man before him doggedly worked until he was left with a row of vials all carrying a liquid of unnaturally blue color.

"What do you think?" This time, Erskine's smile was bright, full of years upon years of hard work finally paid off. "Will this finally give us that super soldier we've been hoping for?"

There were samples the serum could be tested on, isolated samples of human DNA, flesh and tissue. And then there were animals, a set of three primates who were peacefully put to rest after the testing had been completed. Every test came back with one conclusive result, the serum worked and the side effects that had plagued it were no more.

"I didn't believe it." Howard beamed as he swooped forward to clasp Erskine's hands in celebration. "When you brought this kid on with his stick and his spells I wasn't sure he'd be able to deliver. But, by god, he's done it."

Harry shrugged. "All I did was copy a few books for you, everyone else did the real work."

"You lent your time, energy, and magic," Peggy spoke up before Erskine could refute his attempt at modesty. "Don't be so eager to sell yourself short."

"We'll have to celebrate!" Howard continued as he bounced around the room, overcome with awe and furious excitement. "Dinner and dancing and drinks."

"The work is not yet done, my friend," Erskine laughed. "The serum is complete, yes, but now it's time to begin our search for our candidate, one who is both willing and worthy of being our first soldier."

"The colonel has already begun compiling a dossier of candidates he believes to be best qualified for the job," Peggy said. "None have reached the front lines yet so it'd be a simple matter to pull them aside for evaluation."
Erskine hummed noncommittally. "Harry and I will look them over, see who our colonel deems as worthy."

"We will?" This was coming as quite the surprise to Harry, his contract for the SSR extended only until the successful completion of the serum, from what he'd seen today they'd done that.

"Of course." Erskine spoke as if it were obvious. "We cannot be fully certain of the serum's success until our super soldier stands before us. I won't have you leaving a moment before that. Besides, you've proven to be a rather good judge of character, I'll need your help when it comes to choosing a proper candidate."

"If you won't allow the dancing you'll at least allow me to take you to dinner and drinks," Howard interjected. "We can look over your candidates then."

"A bit of drink might make the process easier," Erskine conceded. "So long as you can assure our privacy, it wouldn't do for someone to overhear."

"I have just the place." Howard held his arm out to an amused Peggy. "I'll bring the car around?"

"And we'll pay Mr. Phillips a quick visit for those files."

Phillips wasn't in when Harry and Erskine made their way to his end of the facility, but his assistant, a bright woman with a wide smile, had all they needed already prepared for them.

The file was surprisingly thick, a quick glance numbered the candidate profiles within at nearly one hundred. And after scanning the first few evaluation sheets they quickly found majority of these candidates had something in common.

"They're all already very fit," Peggy observed after they'd arrived at the quietly expensive restaurant Howard had chosen for them and received their first round of drinks. "Impressive scores, very good physically, and obedient."

"Yes." Harry smiled at the way that single syllable word so eloquently expressed Erskine's apathy for the candidates. "Good, American soldiers, all of them, but these papers tell me nothing I want to know." Erskine plucked up the file of one of the many soldiers and surveyed it with a displeased frown. "He is strong but is he kind? He can follow orders but does he have the ability to think for himself?"

"We'd have to meet them," Harry agreed. "Face to face. It won't work otherwise."

"Exactly," Erskine nodded. "To know if he deserves this opportunity I must look each man in his eye, speak directly to him, then I will know."

"Meeting each of these men would take time we don't exactly have, Doctor," Peggy said, though she hadn't yet outright turned down Erskine's request. "But perhaps we could arrange a second round of training and evaluation under the SSR's supervision? You would be given the chance to see for yourself each of these candidates in person and how they measure up as both men and soldiers. A week would be more than enough time, yes?"

Erskine hummed and tapped his chin in thought. "I would like to submit a few candidates of my own."

One of Peggy's brows arched in surprise. "You already have men in mind?"

"No, but how difficult could it be to find a few? Men have been signing up to join this fight since
It shouldn't be any trouble at all to allow you evaluation privileges in some of our more local recruitment stations," Peggy conceded with a fond shake of her head. "Any more requests?"

"Harry comes with me."

She waved her hand as if any other alternative weren't even one to be considered. "Of course."

Erskine leaned back in his seat, a satisfied smile on his face. "Then that will be all. Now," he clapped his hands once before reaching for the drink that had, until that moment, gone untouched, "we drink and we dine, we have much to celebrate!"

The first man they meet had promise, reasonably fit with a kind smile and a desire only to see the world safe for the wife he has not yet built up the courage to ask to marry him. He was intelligent, having grown up in a family well off enough to allow him to continue school to the end rather than drop out to take on a factory job. But he was a bit timid at times, not as quick to speak his mind as they would have liked.

"He would make a good soldier, but not much of a leader," Erskine noted after he had gone.

"That's not a deal breaker though, is it?" Harry asked. "We wouldn't want this team of enhanced men running around full of alpha males. We want men who can lead and those who can take orders."

"Yes. Excellent point. Shall I put him on the list?"

Harry nodded.

It took at least a dozen more men and several days of the week long time limit they'd been allotted before they found another that sparked their interest. Young and a bit naïve, but whose heart was in the right place.

"I'm not sure he's suited for the fight," was Harry's observation. "He's innocent. Put him down anyway."

There were a few more; a man whose father had been lost in the previous great war and another with no family and nothing to lose but the country he loved. But none left either Harry or Erskine feeling overwhelmingly impressed, they were pleased with their selections, yes, but not yet thrilled.

Then came the asthmatic.

They were scheduled to head out to the camp to meet the rest of the candidates the next afternoon, but Erskine insisted on one more evening spent in the recruitment tents. This one was set up just outside an expo hosted by Howard and received a constant influx of men hopped up on beer and the allure of their sweet dates' smiles. Every man they met with was recruited into the US' military but passed up for the SSR's own team.

"I suppose we'll have to be satisfied with what we have," Harry said after another disappointing session. "The men we chose are fine contenders for the serum."

"One more," Erskine insisted looking down at a noticeably thick file. "This one I recognize from our last station, he was turned away. And from the looks of it, many times more before that."
Harry peaked at the file and saw it full of different attempts at enlistment requests, each from a
different city but all bearing the same name. Steve Rogers. "I can see why they would turn him
away," he said, taking in the numerous medical conditions ailing the man, "but the repeated
attempts at joining says much about him."

"Shall we see what he has to say for himself?"

Harry nodded and followed the doctor into the blocked off examination room where a man of frail
stature looked as if he'd been in the process of shoving his shoes on to flee. Erskine followed the
general script they used when speaking with potential candidates, while Harry perched on the edge
of the examination table, content to observe. It was evident from the first statement that left
Erskine's mouth, a challenge poorly disguised behind a smile, that this encounter was different.
The doctor watched this small man and listened to each response with a rapport he hadn't shown
any of the others.

So when he turned his gaze to Harry, the same question he'd asked one way or another each session
in his eyes, all the younger male could do was nod. Erskine had found his candidate.

A messy stamp was pressed onto a sheet of paper, as Steve Rogers watched on, stunned that
someone had finally looked past his weak form to see the potential that lurked within.

"You do not feel the same way I do?" Erskine asked after he and Harry strode from the center, their
task finally completed.

"The ailments are a non-issue, the serum should be able to correct every one, but…" Harry
hesitated, trying to find the best way to word his thoughts, "…he seems the sort who feels as if
they have something to prove."

"He does." Erskine agreed. "But he is the first I believe can actually prove it."

"You've not led me astray yet." Harry said fondly even if he was still unsure. "I look forward to
seeing him in action."

"As do I. Tomorrow, Harry?"

"Tomorrow, Doctor."

There were fifty candidates to arrive at the Lehigh training camp, of which only eight had been
personally selected by Erskine. Rogers stood out stark amongst them all. But not always in a way
that reflected poorly on him. He was just as abysmal as they'd all predicted he would be when it
came to just about anything physical, but it was his attitude, his demeanor that stood out from the
rest.

"He's small, he's weak, and he's got a mouth on him." Was Phillips' opinion.

"He's interesting." Was what Peggy had to say. "Physically underwhelming, yes, but he's brave,
dagged, and his moral code is…strong."

Which was at least better than Erskine's unhelpful, "He has potential."

Harry was still reserving his final judgment until the end of the training period, but not even he
could deny Rogers' differences were refreshing in the seemingly never-ending sea of meat headed,
overly muscled army jocks.
"In the end, it doesn't really matter what the rest of us think," Peggy said when Harry brought it up over their meager army ration lunch in her at least somewhat private tent. "Erskine adores him, he's the only one he will consider to receive the serum."

"He'll have to settle for at least a few more if he wants his army."

"But Rogers must be his first."

"He's such a strange man," Harry laughed. "Sometimes I believe he's just contrary for the fun of it."

An answering smile stretched Peggy's red painted lips. "Oh certainly. But compared to the others, Rogers does have something that could make him remarkable, even if the serum doesn't work."

Harry rapped sharply on the wood of the table between them. "It will."

Peggy rolled her eyes, but otherwise carried on as if he hadn't interrupted. "-Erskine won't let him go so easily. Just as he didn't for you."

"Yes, well hopefully Rogers has better sense than to take up with that mad scientist." Harry paused as he prodded at his lukewarm meal. "But it will work. The serum. It will."

"Yes," Peggy said, not an ounce of uncertainty in her voice, "it will. And then what?"

"It will win you all the war and see me home."

"You still have yet to tell us where home is."

Harry frowned, more from a sad pensiveness than anger at the prying question. "It's hard to explain."

"Are you from another world?"

That startled a laugh from him. "Nothing so exciting, no. But I do come from far, so far it's impossible for anyone, even my kind, to bridge that gap without an extraordinary amount of power." Harry forced himself to refrain from saying any more, Peggy was smart, any more than that and she would begin to piece together the truth.

"I hope it works, I'm confident that it will, even while I don't look forward to that moment." Peggy reached out and took gentle hold of Harry's hand. "I've become fond of you. I'll miss you."

"Agent Carter," Harry ducked his head to hide the red he could feel heating his cheeks, "one might mistake such sweet words for a declaration of love."

"No," Peggy laughed, "you remind me of all the things I miss of my sweet brother Michael. He was as progressive for his time as you are now, and you both have such kind hearts."

Harry stopped trying to hide the red that had by then fully engulfed his face. He looked up at Peggy who in turn reminded him of all the things he missed in Ron and Hermione; intelligent and brave, fierce but kind. "When the time comes, I will miss you."

"Of course you will," she said, something brighter took hold of her face as she attempted to forcefully expel the suddenly heavy atmosphere. "You've more than proved you're just as incapable of keeping yourself out of trouble as Stark, without me to fish you from your messes I fear what will become of you."

"A painless death, if I'm lucky."
"You're odd and a cynic."

"We're at war, most of the men here are, and even more of the women."

"Yes, well you have a stranger affinity to the macabre than most."

Harry barely suppressed a smile, perhaps that was his close connection with Death shining through?

"Odd," Peggy repeated after one glance at the strange expression he failed to hide.

"I never said I wasn't," Harry agreed easily. "Do you have anything booked for this evening?"

"I'm meant to meet with Seargent Duffy and the Colonel at a quarter till to discuss the candidates progress. Care to join?"

"Ah, no thanks," Harry said with a grimace. "I don't have the patience or the attention span to sit through any sort of meeting. I'd much rather watch you bark at the recruits until they cry."

"I'm rather good at it, aren't I?"

"Uncannily." Harry rose from his seat and crossed the table to press a kiss to Peggy's cheek. "I'll leave you to prepare for your meeting, Erskine wanted me to come round his to hash out details of the procedure when I was free."

"Lunch was fun. Find me when you're free and we'll find some recruits to bark at."

"Yes, ma'am," Harry said with a smile and a salute before ducking from the tent.

He'd forgotten the logic behind his resolve to keep away from the people of this time. But now he remembered that he'd wanted to keep away from avoiding attachments in this time to both leave as little of an impression as possible and to make his eventual leaving as painless as he could. Of course he'd failed spectacularly on both parts, he'd befriended some seemingly pretty important players in the second world war and aided in the creation of a serum meant to grant men abilities far past that which was normal. And he knew when it was inevitably time to go it'd be difficult saying goodbye to Erskine and Peggy and even Stark, more than difficult.

And yet no regret nagged at him despite this realization. He'd potentially altered the timeline with his helping hand and certainly made leaving harder than it needed to be, but he was convinced that if he hadn't met Erskine and Peggy and Howard and Phillips, he'd still be wasting his days away in the library, not a single step closer to finding his way home.

Any issues his meddling might have caused could be smoothed over when he was back in his proper time, and while he would miss his new companions fiercely it would be nowhere near the hollow ache of being without those he'd endured so much with.

So there were no regrets for going completely back on his word, in order to accomplish his primary goal of getting home, he'd needed to go back on his word.

The conclusion made it easier to enjoy the trek to Erskine's quarters, there was only so nice a muggy New Jersey day could be, but at least it wasn't clouded by one of the awful funks he'd found himself consistently falling into when he'd first been displaced. Perhaps it was his heightened mood that allowed him to not only notice the faint sounds of an uneven brawl occurring somewhere behind one of the nearby building but also find enough care within himself to track down the cause of the disruption and try his hand at putting an end to it.
It was Rogers and two other recruits behind the barracks, rolling around in the mud in what could be considered less of a brawl and more of a savage beating of the smaller of the three. In the time it took Harry to reach them, the man had been knocked flat on his back with a right hook that had even him seeing stars in sympathy followed by a kick to his mid-section that probably left him with more than a few bruised ribs. And yet still he managed to clamor to his feet and raise his fists in an almost admirable refusal to concede.

"What is this?" Harry barked, voice as sharp as a whip crack, before the men could get another hit in.

Immediately the two men, one of whom Harry recognized as Gilmore Hodge, leapt away, guilt painted across their faces until they realized it was Harry rather than one of their more intimidating CO's. They were both still smart enough not to ignore him completely, while he may only be an unranked agent of the SSR, he was very familiar with each and every one of the higher ups in the camp and could easily make things difficult for them.

"Just a bit of training, sir," Hodge said.

"I wasn't aware training involved potentially landing one of your fellow recruits in the infirmary."

"Just giving him a few pointers on his fighting stance."

"Yes, the way he was laid in the mud not even half a minute ago is testament to your teaching abilities," Harry drawled. "Leave and hope I don't see you sent home for this."

Both Hodge and his companion did little to hide their anger at being ordered around by one they didn't believe had earned that privilege, but still wisely did as instructed and stalked off to be generally unpleasant somewhere else.

"Thanks," Rogers panted, weak breath whistling through potentially damaged lungs. "I had 'em though."

Harry frowned as he took in the poor state the man was in. "What in the world possessed you to try and fight those two?"

"They were disrespecting Agent Carter. Saying crude things about her…"

"It likely wasn't anything she hasn't heard a thousand times before," Harry pointed out. "It's something she's had to grow used to being one of the only women in her line of work."

"That doesn't mean I have to sit back and listen to."

"But you're small." Harry hastened to correct himself the moment the words left his lips and Rogers puffed up in indignant rage, preparing for a second round even while he attempted to stem the blood gushing from his nose. "I don't mean it as an insult, only a fact. Nearly every man here outweighs you by a significant degree but you always seem to be picking one fight or another with them. It's almost as if you actively go looking for them."

"I don't actively go looking," Rogers said petulantly, "but…"

"But when you see an injustice you can't turn away from it." Harry couldn't exactly fault him for that, half of the trouble he landed himself in was for that very same reason.

Rogers seemed to sense the lack of mockery in Harry's regard for him, his tightly wound shoulders loosened just a notch and he finally stopped glaring at him. "All that is necessary for the triumph
of evil is for good men to do nothing," he said. "I may lose a couple teeth, black my eye, or break my nose, but I refuse to do nothing."

Harry's head unconsciously tilted a bit to the left as he found himself looking at Rogers in a new light. "Hm." Was the response he finally settled on before turning and carrying on to his original destination.

"He's an odd one, Rogers." Was how he greeted Erskine.

A slow smile spread across the older man's face. "Does that mean you approve?"

"Something tells me you already have your heart set on him, so I may as well make it easy on the both of us."

The day to choose the first candidate for the procedure arrived, the incredulity and even anger among the ranks of soldiers when it was announced to be Rogers had been expected, but anyone who had carried on even half a conversation with Erskine would have known that there had never been anyone but him. Even if Rogers himself hadn't seen it coming.

He met with the doctor that night, over a bottle of schnapps he wasn't allowed to drink and finally learned just how highly Erskine regarded him and why. As he listened to the man tell him the tale of his first attempt at the serum and how horribly it failed, only one thought lingered in his mind.

"In all of the time since, I've been the only one you thought deserving of the serum?"

Erskine paused to take a careful sip of his drink, then shook his head. "No, there was Harry."

Steve could do nothing to hide how taken aback those words left him. "Harry? Then why…did you take back the offer?"

"He refused it."

"I don't understand why…"

"It has been almost a year since I met Harry. When I did he was much sadder, he was unhealthy and alone but he viewed the world and those within it with such kindness. He had very little but he was willing to give even that up when he thought it fair." Erskine smiled, small and nostalgic. "It had been so long since I'd seen such untainted generosity. Unfortunately all I could see was how great of a soldier I could make of him when he had no desire to fight, he had endured enough already in his short time. When I offered he turned me down, but I couldn't bring myself to cut ties with him, so he remained by my side and from then to now I have learned and gained much from him."

"Is he…"

"He is like the son I lost. I feel great pride when I look at him and know the world will be much emptier once he's moved on."

"Moved on where?"

"He is here only for a short while. Only until he has the chance to return to those who understand him as not even I can. It will be a sad day when it happens, but still I feel grateful for even this short time of knowing him."
"He sounds like the kind of man I'd like to be," Steve said, just the slightest bit intimidated.

"Oh no," Erskine laughed. "He is kind and generous and gentle, but he is just as much stubborn and hot headed and ruled by his emotions. I could not deal with a second one of him. Be you and be-"

"-good. Yes, I will."

Erskine smiled and patted his leg. "Then you are already just as great a man as he is."

It had come as a surprise to many when Erskine insisted on having Harry on the floor with him during the procedure, as far as most knew the young man was only the doctor's ward, there for moral support and nothing more. But Peggy, Howard, and Phillips knew better; the part magic had to play in the administering of the serum was minimal and would likely have no side effects, negative or otherwise, but Erskine wanted him at his side just in case something were to go wrong. Harry had protested that his training was minimal, he wasn't sure there was much he could do if anything at all. Erskine was of the belief, however, that an untrained wizard was better than no wizard, and if he couldn't save Rogers from any potential magical backlash he could at least prevent the complete ousting of his race in some way or the other.

So there he stood, among some of the most brilliant minds this decade had seen, tasked with the simple but no less onerous job of administering penicillin to one of Rogers' skinny arms.

"Try to avoid puncturing any of his arteries and all will be well," Erskine had teased only to backtrack the statement when he saw how terrified he'd rendered his charge. "It's a joke. That's not even possible, he will be fine."

"Maybe someone a little more qualified should do this."

"There's not much too it, kid," Howard said, half his attention focused on doing one last check over the pod's control console and half his attention on Harry and Erskine's muted conversation. "Just poke and push. Not too fast though or you'll give him an embolism and stop his heart."

"He won't," Erskine said just as Harry gave a quiet mewl of terror. "You won't."

Howard snorted, finally taking pity. "It's a minor fear on a laundry list of things that could go wrong. Don't worry about it."

"I'll still worry about."

Erskine clasped Harry on the shoulder before pressing the admittedly intimidating needle into the palm of his hand. "No time now." He gestured to where Rogers was settled into the vita ray capsule, looking impossibly tiny and all too easy to kill with just a single syringe and an unsteady hand. "It is time to begin."

They split ways, Erskine to a clunky mic to address those gathered in the viewing amphitheater looking down on the lab and Harry to the small platform bearing Rogers and the pod.

"You look cold," he observed, a small smile tilting his lips to belay his teasing.

Rogers snorted and wriggled a bit in a vain attempt to find a more comfortable position. "Stark mentioned this thing will turn into an oven once the procedure's begun, so I'm appreciating all of the cold while I still can."

"You'll survive," Harry assured.
"How are you so sure?"

"You don't want to disappoint Abraham, that's incentive enough."

Rogers looked lost for a response, but Harry had already turned his attention to giving the smaller man's arm a cursory wipe with a bit of alcohol before injecting the syringe and its dose of penicillin into the meatiest part of his arm.

Rogers looked even more terrified of the process than him, but it passed quickly and with no accidental deaths by embolism.

But then it was time for the real thing.

The needles connected to the vials of serum unsheathed from their metal casings with a series of terrifying hisses, Rogers jolted when they burrowed into the muscles of his arms and flooded his system with the electric blue liquid.

Harry remained close by even as the others scurried several steps back when the capsule moved to stand vertically and enclose Rogers in what would either be his cocoon or his tomb. He wasn't sure what he was looking for exactly, but he hoped that if the magical additions to the serum were to go wrong he'd be able to sense it somehow.

He could sense Erskine close by his side, one hand resting bracingly on his shoulder as he barked orders and surveyed the progress, but his focus remained narrowed in on Rogers and the capsule. He couldn't afford for anything to go wrong, this was his only chance at making it home. Even when the light emitted by the rays became near blinding and Rogers' screams reached a pitch that had everyone assembled scrambling to ensure he didn't die within the metal sarcophagus he remained still and intent.

But the man within proved his strength of will once more, insisting on carrying on despite the agony he must be enduring. And when he emerged he was wholly transformed, it had worked and Harry could almost cry because this was it. This was his way back.

He turned to seek out Erskine, they had been separated in the rush of bodies that had clustered around the platform in a desperate bid to see and touch the man who had been changed and the one who made it possible. He could just barely make out the golden blonde of Rogers' head, suddenly taller than everyone in the room, and began to push his way toward him. If Erskine were anywhere it would be by his side. His thinner stature and diminutive height made reaching him remarkably difficult, but a liberal use of pointed elbows saw him through. Before long he had Erskine in his sights, he was at Rogers' side looking at the man with unconcealed awe.

Unseen to him and all but Harry, was a reaper at his shoulder.

Harry took one step, desperate to reach the man before the reaper could inflict irreparable damage, but then there was a burst of fire and molten glass that threw him from his feet and across the room. His head met the unforgiving edge of one of Stark's machines with enough force to temporarily black his vision. But he shook himself and the stars dancing across his eyes and struggled to his feet just as there was a crack, then another, and another, muffled both by his suddenly damaged hearing and screams from all over. Gunshots.

Harry found his footing at the very same moment Erskine lost his, three perfectly aligned splotches of red blossomed across his chest.

"No," he gasped, lurching forward to intercept the reaper as she knelt to collect a soul he wasn't
willing to see parted. "Leave him."

There was no malice in the reaper's gaze as she looked down on him, only surprise and worry. "I must."

"Leave." The single word tore from Harry's chest in a snarl that surprised even him. The reaper surveyed him for one moment longer, then she was gone.

She would be back or another like her, of that Harry was certain. He wasn't sure how long they would heed his words and leave the soul, he had to heal the man, bring him back from the verge of death before they did.

The jacket torn from his own shoulders was folded into a tight pad as he pressed it into Erskine's chest, but the blood didn't slow. Within seconds it had soaked through and bubbled between his fingers.

Somewhere behind him he could hear Phillips barking orders, he could see both Peggy and Rogers dashing from the room, after the would be assassin, but he had eyes for no one but the man weakly attempting to grasp his wrist.

"Can you heal him?" Harry allowed only a quick glance up to meet Howard's gaze, the man was singed at the edges but otherwise unharmed. "With your magic."

"I don't know any healing spells, I never learned, but sometimes I don't need it, sometimes my magic just listens." He tossed aside the soaked jacket, it was doing no good anyway, and laid his bare hands over the wounds. "Make them move, I need space and quiet."

Phillips and Howard leapt to herding the terrified and wounded scientists and politicians away from the capsule and away from Harry and Erskine, none of them were trained in any life saving techniques so they were only in the way.

Harry and his magic had a strange sort of bond, he'd relied on it for much of his life, even when he hadn't known what it was he was relying on, to protect him first from his cold relatives then from the cruelties of the wizarding world. It had always been there when he needed it most, not once had it failed him, but since the Hallows it had changed into a power he no longer recognized, no longer trusted. And for this he shied away from it, neglected it, an issue that became even worse after his displacement in time, and now that loss was becoming apparent in how much slower it was to come to his aid, its response was sluggish and unsure of his intent.

"Please," he begged silently, digging deep within himself for some ounce of power to help him heal the man who had grown to be so important to him. "Please."

But there was nothing, his fear and neglect had weakened the bond with his magic and he was paying the price.

"Quark."

Harry gasped out a sob as something colder than terror settled in his gut. He looked into Death's eyes and saw the desperation in his own mirrored in those twin pools of ink.

"Leave."

Even as he spoke he knew the words would not have the same power as they had had before, Death was not a reaper and he was not his master.
"He has done all that he can in this world." Death's words were hushed, kinder and gentler than Harry had ever heard from the entity. "It's time now for him to go on, see his family once more."

"I can save him," Harry pleaded.

"You would damn him." A hand, cool as bone settled on the back of his neck. "Quark, he cannot be healed, he cannot be saved. You are only prolonging his suffering."

"He's all I have."

"There will be more. He is not your only way."

"This isn't about the serum." Harry snapped. "This isn't about finding my way home. He's important to me. You can't take him."

"Harry."

The young man in question jolted at hearing the weak rasp from the dying man's throat. He turned his attention away from Death to focus wholly on Erskine.

"You fight Death for me." Trembling lips stretched across blood stained teeth in a weak but no less genuine smile, Erskine's eyes flickered up and with another jolt Harry realized that he could see his companion. "You are good. So good."

"I would do worse to see you remain alive." Harry wrapped his hand around Erskine's, his grip tight enough to hide the way they were both shaking.

"I ask though that you don't. Don't destroy yourself to save me, I will find peace."

"I can't lose anyone else," Harry whispered, his voice broken even to his own ears.

"I won't be lost. There is nowhere you will go that I won't be." Erskine's free hand reached up to cup Harry's cheek. "I'm not afraid, I am ready. I will see you, Harry."

"Yes," Harry choked. "Tomorrow."

"No, never so soon. But one day again."

Erskine breathed only once more after his soul parted, long enough for him to bestow his charge one last upturn of his lips, an attempt at comforting even in his final moments.

"He will find his way with ease." Death cradled the soul gently, reverently. "He has earned his peace."

Harry nodded, head bowed low over the still body. "He did."

Death departed without another word as footsteps approached from behind, Howard come to see for himself why Harry had fallen still. "Is he…?"

Harry nodded sharply. "I couldn't save him."

"You tried, kid. No one blames you for not being able to do what we couldn't either."

"I should have been able to." Harry swiped angrily at his eyes. "I should have…"

He stood and without another word left the room.
Something was curdling in his gut; not anger or despair, not even grief. Betrayal. And shame. His magic had betrayed him, abandoned him at his most dire hour. But perhaps it was his fault. Perhaps he might have been able to save Erskine if he weren't so much of a coward. Afraid of something that was within him, a part of him.

The desk in the closest unoccupied office found itself suddenly and violently upended. Soon to follow were the half a dozen chairs neatly arranged around it, then the small cart meant for holding refreshments. All were displaced and destroyed without a single use of magic. Why should he use it to express his grief when it, in part, was the reason for it to begin with?

But soon he ran out of inanimate objects to take his anger out on, and only one skin splitting, bone rattling blow to the wall dissuaded him from trying to find a release for his emotion through that method. So he slumped to the ground, not even close to exhausted but suddenly without an outlet and no desire to find another.

He wasn't there for long before he was intruded on, Peggy arrived, ash was smeared across her face, her hair was more disheveled than he'd ever seen, and there was something tight and angry in her expression.

She didn't speak, just carefully picked her way through the aftermath of his raging emotions and stopped to kneel directly before him. She took the bloodied, mangled hand he had cradled to his chest in hers and surveyed it with a frown of disapproval.

"Did you catch him?" Harry spoke before she could, not at all in the mood for a lecture.

"No. Cyanide capsule."

Unconsciously, Harry clenched his injured fist, a sharp pain radiated all the way to his elbow and Peggy glared sharply at him.

She stood and left the room without another word, but returned in a matter of minutes with a handful of gauze and a brown glass bottle.

"I don't think it's broken," Peggy said inspecting his bloodied knuckles, "but you'd do well not to put too much more stress on it or you'll wind up hurting yourself worse."

Harry hissed when she smeared the contents of the bottle, iodine, across his knuckles, sopping up the worst of the blood.

"The senator will want to speak with you," Peggy said as she began wrapping his hands almost painfully tight in a strip of cloth bandages.

"For what?" Harry scowled.

"You were Erskine's protégé and you worked closely with us all on this project. They'll want to know if you have any knowledge of how to recreate it."

"I'm sure his notes can tell you more than what I can."

"They won't. Erskine was suspicious, and for good reason it seems, his notes would give some insight into the creation of the serum but only he knew the exact formulas and contents."

"I certainly hope they don't think I know," Harry scoffed. "I wasn't his protégé, only his ward, his companion. I helped him find a few plants but I know very little about the serum as a whole."
"Tell them that then. It'll take some persuading but they'll believe you eventually."

Harry shook his head. "I don't know if I can go back out there."

"You can." Peggy took his hand and smiled, heartbreakingly sad but still full of reassurance. "Because I will be right there with you."

He hesitated for only a sliver of a second, then reluctantly took the hand Peggy held out to him. He was no longer surprised by the strength she possessed and how easily she was able to haul him to his feet, but he stumbled nonetheless when she did.

Phillips, Rogers, and the collection of government officials who'd been present for the serum infusion were waiting for them in the same room Harry had first been introduced to the core members of the SSR. The mood in the room this time around was noticeably different.

"Sit down, son," a man who introduced himself as Senator Brandt said with a falsely, fatherly frown. "I imagine you're worn out after this trying day."

"Yes," Harry said stiffly. "As a matter of fact I am. I'm ready to return home where I might rest, so I'll save us all the time you're about to waste in pointless questioning by saying that I don't know how the serum was created. The doctor didn't divulge his life's work to me."

"You spent the most time with him outside of all others in the SSR," a member of Brandt's entourage protested. "In all that time he told you nothing?"

"I'm not a scientist or a doctor, he knew I would have no understanding of what he told me." Harry gave them all the most scathing of condescending glares he had in his repertoire. "I was his ward, there in hopes of gaining some expertise in the medical field, he would never share information as sensitive as the makeup of the serum to me."

"Yes well, I'm sure you understand why we have to be sure."

They held him for hours, asking him the same handful of questions dressed up differently each time in hopes of tripping him up. But they didn't because he wasn't lying. Harry had helped Erskine find the balance his serum sorely needed through magical means, but he knew nothing of the serum's actual composition. Erskine had already perfected that years before he'd met Harry, his time in New York was spent only fine tuning it.

When he was finally free to leave night had long since come and Harry had fallen into a numbness that left deep lines of worry carving grooves into Peggy's forehead.

"I've called a car to take you home," she told him. "I have a bit more work left to do here but I can stop by and lend you some company when I'm through."

"Don't trouble yourself," Harry said. "I'll be awful company, I don't have much energy to do anything but sleep."

"It's not for my sake I'll be stopping by."

Harry mustered enough energy to roll his eyes in fond annoyance at her insistent mother henning. "Give me until tomorrow at the least."

"I'll bring breakfast." Peggy bent to press a kiss to his cheek. "Don't lie in the dark feeling sorry, try for some real sleep."
Harry knocked off a mock salute then stepped into the car she'd arranged to take him to the small room he'd rented out in a nearby tenement building. Erskine had offered him a place to stay in his own home, but Harry had turned him down for a bit of independence and now he was glad for it. It would have been impossible to return to a home he and the doctor had shared so soon after his death, he would have rather returned to the alleyway he'd happily left once receiving his first bit of money from the SSR.

Of course his own empty flat wasn't much better. The quiet and the dark were the perfect conditions for doing exactly what Peggy had told him not to do.

The fact that Erskine was dead wasn't one that had left his mind throughout all of the days events; from destroying the small office, to mutilating his fist, to spending hours convincing know it all politicians of his ignorance, that awful, niggling thought had festered in his mind. It was only now that he was alone was he reminded of a fact just as awful. Erskine was dead, his serum lost, and with it Harry's only way home.

They had Rogers, the answer to the serum was locked within his DNA, but even if somehow they were able to unravel its secrets with their primitive technology the likelihood of him receiving it now, without Erskine there to vouch for him were slim to none. He'd made a contract with the SSR, but the only person of authority aware of it was Phillips and he didn't know the man well enough to be certain he'd carry through on his end.

Losing the serum was almost as bad as losing Erskine, because without it he was right back to where he'd started. Only worse because he'd already established that this time period held no resources to help him find his way back forward, Erskine and his serum had been a desperate bid for a solution. The fact that he had lost it when success was literally a hairsbreadth away was crippling.

Peggy stopped by the next morning for breakfast and Harry put on a lovely act of healthily coping with his devastation for the entire hour she hung around. But the moment she was gone the palpable aura of misery, desolation, and utter hopelessness settled back over him as suffocating as a shroud.

He existed in that pathetic vat of sorrow in the days following, but then came time to lay Erskine to rest.

He'd been afforded nothing but the best; a casket polished until it gleamed, a headstone that shone ivory in the weak sunlight, a suit more extravagant than any he'd worn while still alive. Only Harry, Howard, and Peggy were there to see it all.

Erskine had been a kind man, he'd been well liked, but he was eccentric and reclusive and the sole surviving member of his family. All those who had worked with him felt a sorrow for his passing, but more in the sense that they were sad to see such a brilliant mind and all of his potential taken too soon, only a few knew him well enough to mourn the man beyond the mind. And so it fell to them to see him put to rest.

There was a bar afterwards. Too lively for the somber mood they carried with them but enough alcohol would remedy that inconvenience.

"They're carrying on as if he didn't mean something," Howard said, anger finally breaking past his melancholy after his third drink. "As if he wasn't an integral part of what this organization is. They already have me off building new weapons, they don't even care anymore about searching out answers in Rogers' blood."
"It's pointless, they know it just as well as we do." Despite being ahead of Howard by a full drink Peggy remained just as composed as always. "What Erskine did cannot be replicated."

"So we move on to bigger and better things then? Treat the work he devoted his life to, gave his life for, as if it means nothing."

"Yes," Peggy snapped, losing her composure for the single moment it would take to match Howard's anger and subsequently bring it down, "we do because we are still fighting, men are still dying. The serum was our best chance but it wasn't our only one. If we intend to not only survive but win we must look past our grief and anger. Erskine would want that at the least."

"It doesn't sit right with me."

"Or me," she scoffed. "But it's not about how I feel anymore."

Howard sighed, anger gone as quickly as it had come. "Then to England I go." He retrieved his glass from the bar top and took a healthy sip. "The SSR has a stockpile of HYDRA weapons they want me to try my hand at reverse engineering."

Peggy nodded. "I've been stationed in facility there as well, they'd like me closer to the front." She turned to a noticeably silent Harry with an expectant gleam in her eye. "I expect you to join us."

That finally sparked a reaction from the younger male. "I'm not actually a part of the SSR, Peg. I was there to help Erskine, now that he's gone I've no use for your cause."

Howard snorted derisively. "You sell yourself short, kid. We've got plenty use for you. Your magic and our science could do incredible things for our cause, they already have."

"I couldn't. I didn't join the war effort when Erskine asked because I don't have the resources to split my attention between it and finding my way home. And I need to get home."

"We could make the same arrangement you had Erskine. Your aid for ours." Howard pressed forward, almost as if her we offended by the doubtful expression Harry felt settle across his face. "We don't have a serum but we have other sciences and technologies that might do you some good."

"It's something to try," Peggy coaxed. "And if it doesn't work out you'd go with no trouble from us."

"Neither of you have the authority to make that promise."

"But we have the influence to convince those who do," Howard countered. "The SSR needs my brain and my money, hashing out a deal to have you work with me would be too easy."

"I feel like every deal I make with the SSR takes me a step further from a way home. I have so little control over the outcome."

"Think on it," Peggy said before Harry could give them an outright no. "We're not set to leave for a few more days anyway."

He was reluctant to, but Harry gave them at least a promise to think it over. He wasn't sure more time would change his reticence, he'd tried one mad, muggle scientist already and that had so clearly ended in disaster. But he had enough affection and respect for Peggy to promise her at least that.
Drinks were wrapped up soon after, even after plying themselves with alcohol they still couldn't shake the wrongness of being surrounded by such fun and vigor. Howard offered to drive the both of them to their homes but Peggy declined, citing she was right around the corner, an easy walk. Harry volunteered to escort her safely, after which he would make the trek back to his. It was a bit of a walk but the evening was nice and the fresh air might do him some good.

However, when he reached the block on which his tenement stood he carried on his steady pace until he'd passed the building and crossed over to the next block. It wasn't much of a surprise, he wasn't eager to repeat the three days of grief laden solitude and there was only one person left whose company he'd seek out.

Dark had fell not long after and all manner of reckless youth and no gooders crawled from their holes for another night of debauchery, but Ives could be found at none of his spots. It was prime time but he wasn't propped seductively on the lamppost just outside the dinner, or reclined on the stoop across from the pub, or waiting just out of sight but unmistakably there in the space between two dance halls. Harry knew them all and he went to great lengths to check each, but Ives was in none of them.

He allowed himself a moment to worry, the last time he'd seen the man he'd mentioned how much harder times were getting, he wouldn't have passed up a night as full of promise as this unless he had good reason to.

Already prepared for the worst, Harry set off to the last place Ives might be save for the hospital or, Merlin forbid, the morgue. He found relief though not yet answers when he arrived in the hall outside of his flat and heard some signs of life behind the closed and bolted door. But when he knocked sharp and clear to ensure he could be heard over the noise, a man unfamiliar to him answered the door.

They both took a moment to survey each other, the apartment's resident with a barely there frown of distrust and Harry with a look of wide-eyed confusion. He'd seen Ives only just the week before last, there was no way he'd been booted from his flat and replaced by this vaguely threatening gentleman in such a short period. Was there?

"Yes?" The monosyllable grunt in a voice deep as thunder did nothing to dissuade Harry's notion of the man's less than welcoming nature.

"I…I came to see Ives."

"Who are you?"

"I'm a friend."

The faint hostility coming off of the man became much more pronounced without him even twitching a cheekbone. "Don't know how you found him here, but it'd be best if you-"

"Hold on, Ray, don't scare this one off."

Harry nearly melted with relief when Ives appeared at the stranger's elbow, appearing at first glance entirely in one piece.

"He really is a friend." Ives shooed the man, Ray, back into the flat, before reaching forward to tug Harry in as well. "I wasn't expecting him tonight, but he's always welcome."

Harry faltered when, upon entering, he discovered Ives had guests. Along with the man Ray, there were already three other men gathered in the flat, all complete strangers to him.
"I'm sorry, I didn't know you had company." He would have stumbled his way back into the hall and all the way home after that awkward apology if it weren't for the steel grip Ives had on his elbow.

"I said you were always welcome," the older man said with a quirk of his lips. "The words just left my mouth, didn't they?"

Harry offered a weak smile. "I don't want to take up any of your time. I didn't see you at any of your usual spots, is all. I just wanted to make sure you were all right."

"You were looking for me while I was on the job for a reason." Ives took a moment to survey Harry's face and obviously didn't like what he saw. "You all right, Flash?"

The weight of four unfamiliar gazes on Harry's back caused a noticeable hesitation in his response. Ives, of course, realized the cause of his discomfiture in the blink of an eye.

"You want something to drink?"

"I just left the bar."

"Water then."

A hand on the small of his back directed him to the kitchen, it was tiny and there were no walls separating it from the living room, but the few feet of distance between it and the couch allowed for at least the illusion of privacy.

Once Harry had a glass of tepid water in hand, Ives resumed his concerned questioning. "What happened."

"My mentor…" Harry toyed with the rim of the glass without actually drinking from it, "he died."

"Oh." A gentle hand settled on Harry's arm, offering sympathy in the best way Ives knew how. "What happened?"

"Accident on the job." A stupid accident," he scoffed, "we should have been looking out for it."

"You all right?"

"Not really."

"You sure you don't want that drink?" Ives wheedled. "Me and the boys were just about to head out."

The reminder of the guests waiting for Ives caused another frown of apology to break across Harry's face. "You have plans. No, I don't think I'd be the best company right now."

"Hold on leaving so quick," Ives protested before Harry could beat a hasty retreat. "None of us are the best company right now. You'll fit right in."

Now it was Harry's turn for concern. "Has something happened?"

He was casually waved off with a promise to "talk about it later" but Harry was having none of that.

"Ives."
The single stressor he put on the name made it clear he wouldn't be backing down without an answer. Ives sighed as if he hadn't just been wheedling answers out of Harry a handful of seconds ago. "I got my papers today," he admitted. "The second out of us this month."

Something like dread began bubbling in Harry's chest. "You got drafted?"

"It was only a matter of time."

"Do they know about…"

"Nah," Ives shook his head. "They don't and they won't. I'm good at playing normal for the straight-laced. I'm not trying to get that blue ticket."

It took Harry a moment to understand what he was referring to, but when he did, "But if you do you won't have to fight."

Ives snorted, incredulous at the mere idea. "And I won't have a home, a job, nothing to come back to here. Everyone would know what I am and I wouldn't survive a month. At least on the front I have a fighting chance."

And wasn't that a kick in the jaw? Ives had more of a chance surviving at war than he did as an out and proud queer on US soil.

"I'm sorry."

"For what?" Ives queried, brow raising in confusion.

Harry shrugged. "That we're stuck in a time like this. Are you afraid?"

"Maybe a little. But I'm ready to help end this sorry fight. And maybe I'm a little excited by the thought of making a difference."

Harry could no longer sympathize with that line of thinking. He'd gone into his fight with Voldemort with that exact mindset and came out all the worse for it. "You're a better man than I am," he said. "If I were in your place, I don't think I'd be able to fight, not for these people who see you constantly hiding for fear of being condemned and ridiculed and killed because of something that's none of their business. You could die in this fight, they wouldn't deserve such a sacrifice."

"Maybe not," Ives agreed. "But if I survive, if we win, maybe I can come home to a place where the people are a little more willing to tolerate sort like me after all we put on the line for them."

"Maybe. Maybe I'm just a cynic."

"Nothing a bit of drink can't cure. None of us are in the mood for a party, but after the days we've all had, maybe it's exactly what we need."

Harry looked down at himself, still dressed in gloomy clothing he'd worn to the funeral. "I'm not dressed properly for a night out."

"That won't be a problem for long. Come meet my boys first."

Harry was dragged back to the area that could very loosely be dubbed the living room and officially introduced to the small group of men left patiently waiting. He'd met tall, imposing Ray already, but now that it had been established Harry was neither a spook or a John his demeanor had softened remarkably. He was still intimidatingly large, but the lack of folded arms and mean scowl
There was also Stanley, built like a beanpole with a shock of ash blonde hair atop his head. Everything about the man from his pale hair and paler eyes, to skin thin enough to map out veins beneath gave him an air of one easily knocked over. Everything but the faintly devilish smile and gleam of something noticeably impish in his gaze.

Russell reminded Harry of Seamus, full of energy and dark humor, but with an innate kindness one could just sense when being around him.

And then there was Elton, roughish and confident with a gaze and a leer that made something faintly embarrassed squirm in Harry's stomach.

"Harry's been a good friend these past few months," Ives said once Harry got to know the names of all of his present companions. "He's good and discreet, I trust him about as much as I do you guys."

"That's saying something," Russell observed.

"He earned it." And the way Ives spoke those three words effectively shut down any other misgivings the four men might have had. "I was thinking he could join us for drinks. Rough day, same as ours. But first we've got to get him looking sharp."

"I might have brought a thing or two that could fit him with the right padding," Stanley gestured to a bag set just behind the door.

It took Harry a moment to catch on to what the man meant by padding, within seconds he'd turned bright red all the way to his roots. "I've never worn a dress before," he admitted with a feeble cough of embarrassment. "I'm afraid I wouldn't look very good in one."

Ives traded a glance with Elton, one part exasperated and one part knowing. "He actually believes that," he said. "He's not saying it to try and fish some compliments outta you. Don't worry though, Flash, I'll set you up in something you're comfortable in."

The process of making a selection from the collection of pressed slacks and starched shirts Ives presented him with was honestly more difficult than Harry though it had any right to be, he hadn't the slightest clue on what would be best to wear out for a night dancing. He'd seen it often enough in the halls he'd visited, but he didn't know the first place to try and start replicating it.

Eventually Ives, sensing his dilemma, stepped in to help with a fond exasperation. "I'm afraid I don't have the full suit," he said as he pressed a pair of dark slacks into Harry's arms followed by a crisp white shirt and a set of suspenders. "But this works almost as well."

Ives was about the same build as Harry, having been living off of rations for so long, although he was just tall enough where the height difference between the two of them was evident in the way the shirt's cuffs dangled nearly to Harry's fingertips and the pants dragged at the heels. A few pins put that to rights then Ives accomplished what Harry thought to be the impossible by wrangling his hair into a parted sweep that could almost be mistaken for neat.

"Don't he just look heaven sent?"

Harry laughed at the proclamation, sure his clothing were a bit neater and his hair remarkably tamed, but honestly he looked no different than most days. Ives, on the other hand, was already stepping into a pair of pleated navy slacks and a pressed white shirt that left Harry with the smallest spark of envy over how effortlessly handsome he made the set look, especially considering, just two weeks before, he'd been marvelous in a loose dress and burgundy lips.
"The hall we're headed to doesn't mind when two fellas get a little closer than might be proper," Ives explained when Harry asked why he'd opted for pants and a clean face that night, "but with two of us shipping out so soon, we want to play it safe. Just in case."

Rodwell Hall was the spot Ives had been referring to, it was private and ultra-exclusive, no doubt for good reason, but once they were through the doors Harry found the space to be just as lively, if not more so, than any other halls he'd been to.

Harry allowed Ives to buy him just one drink, he'd already had too many with Howard and Peggy, but the moment he was done nursing that glass he was dragged out onto the floor.

"I don't dance!" he tried to protest.

"Good thing I do," Ives grinned. "And I'm the best teacher there is.

Harry warily eyed a couple several meters away who were whipping and swinging at a pace furious enough to make his stomach turn. "You'll be no good of a dancer or a teacher when I break your ankles attempting that."

"You're a while away from a proper Lindy," Ives laughed. "No, I've got something easy for you. Just put your arm like this." He tucked Harry's left arm over his outstretched right and had him settle his hand on the outside of his bicep. "Now just mirror my steps."

The steps Harry was meant to be mirroring looked easy enough, he only had to rock back on his foot and do a few side shuffles. But the actual execution was…lacking.

"It's only your first shot," Ives said as he tried to suppress his amusement at Harry's awful failure. "Look, just rock step, left, right, left."

"The hell is a rock step," Harry muttered, mostly to himself as he attempted to copy the move in synch with Ives.

"Stop thinking."

"I established long ago that that's not possible."

"Stop thinking so hard. It looks like it hurts."

Harry glared at Ives, only to squeak in disconcertion when he was forced into a quick spin under his arm.

"That almost looked like a dance step. And my ankles aren't broke yet so you're already doing better than you thought you would."

"Better is relative."

"Mm, maybe so. How about another drink to help loosen you up?"

Harry almost groaned in relief, he was probably getting close to having had too many, but he was willing to risk getting drunk if it meant getting off the dance floor.

"Giving in already?" Russell teased when they slid into the two open seats at the bar.

"We'll need to get Harry good and drunk before he's any kind of dancer."

Ray tilted his glass in toast. "Lucky we got all night."
Ives laughed even as Harry felt something like trepidation settle in his guy, the lip of his glass met Ray's with a resounding clink. "All night."

"I got nipples on my tittes, big as the end of my thumb; I got somethin' between my legs'll make a dead man come."

Harry's laughter was touched with just a hint of mania as he watched Elton and Stanley twist down the street, singing their filthy song loud and boisterous as they performed the dance moves he couldn't do sober while far past drunk.

"Baby won't you shave 'em dry. Want you to grind me baby. Grind me until I cry."

"Can't even count how many times we've near been nailed by a coupla bulls 'cause these two mooks are sloppy drunks," Ives muttered conspiratorially from where he was propped up on Harry's shoulders.

"You're not as sober as you might think, either," Harry confided.

"Yeah, well least I'm not sloppy about it."

"At least there's that."

Ray's toast had seemed almost like a challenge to Ives' crew. Immediately after they'd begun plying themselves and Harry with all the alcohol they could get their hands on. Harry had had to tap out when the room around him began spinning, but the others were too occupied in pickling their livers to notice.

Ives and Harry wound up the least messed up out of everyone, though that still wasn't saying much, while Elton and Stanley were, unquestionably, the worst off. Ray and Russell were at a happy medium, though even that was on the wrong side of too drunk, they'd spent the entire walk back to Ives' building whispering conspiratorially to each other and giggling like school girls.

"I've only got two blankets to spare," Ives said when they finally made it up to his flat after no doubt pissing off every resident of the building. "So they'll have to share. My beds big enough if you want to bunk with me." He leered playfully when Harry raised his brow at the proposition. "I won't try nothing funny. On my honor."

"You better not," Harry mumbled as he kicked off the shoes and slacks he'd borrowed. "I'm too tired to have to kick your arse."

Ives laughed, quiet enough not to rouse the already flagging four. "Go on and get settled in, I'll take care of these guys."

The bed was big enough to fit two men of their size, although it would be a squeeze. He hesitated only briefly before burrowing under the covers. Sharing beds with anyone had never been a part of his pastime, even when he'd been stuck in Privet Drive that one bit of space had been his, but Ives was a good enough friend to keep things from getting awkward and he really did trust him not to try anything. Drunk or not.

"Do you kick?"

Harry shuffled over to make room for Ives. "You'll have to tell me."

"Joy. At least your feet aren't cold."
Several minutes were taken to adjust and readjust until they'd each found the most comfortable position in the slightly cramped space. They wound up facing each other, knees only barely touching and arms curled under their respective pillows.

"Don't mean to spoil the night by bringing it up," Ives whispered into the few centimeters of space between them. "But I really am sorry about your mentor. I saw all the good he did for you, even if I never met him I know he was a good kind of man."

"Thank you." The leaden weight of grief Harry had become all too familiar with since Erskine's passing settled back into its preferred spot right on the center of his chest. But then Ives reached out to grip his arm bracingly, and for a moment the pressure of it eased. "I lost a lot when he died."

"Do you need somewhere to stay now that he's not around? I don't have much but it could be enough until we got you sorted out."

Harry felt something warm within him at the unselfish offer. "I do have somewhere, thank you though. Peggy and the SSR actually offered me a job even though mine was meant to have ended by now."

"What do they want you to be doing? Fighting?"

"No. I've managed to dodge that so far. It's something to do with weapons I think, defense. They want me to go to London."

Ives was silent for a moment, then, "Do you want to?"

"I didn't think I did when they offered. But taking time to consider it now…maybe. I don't have to fight, but I can still help the ones who are, ones like you. And the SSR offered to help me in return. I'm not sure if they actually can but if they're willing to at least try…"

Ives surveyed Harry's troubled expression for a moment, his own was creased with worry. But then he smiled, soft and sad. "Sounds like you've just about made up your mind."

"Yeah." The realization wasn't as comforting as Harry might have believed it would be. "Maybe I have."

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A/N: Finally after some amount of build up we're getting to the good stuff!

Come say hi on Facebook and Tumblr (I also have a twitter but I've only posted like one thing .)
Chapter 9

There was one question that nagged at him. One he'd forgotten to ask in the days following Erskine's death and funeral. What was to happen to Rogers?

Howard had mentioned that night at the bar that the SSR had already given up trying to reverse engineer the serum through his blood as a lost cause, so that at least meant he was being kept locked up in some far off lab. But that still left all too many options. Was he to join the front with the rest of the US' soldiers? Form his own team? Become a covert operative for the SSR? Any of those options were viable.

The truth, however, was much more disappointing.

"He's teamed up with Brandt and the USO to travel 'round the country selling war bonds."

It took a long moment for Peggy's explanation to fully register with Harry. Erskine's first and final success, a literal super soldier was gallivanting around the US in tights with a team of showgirls and a false Hitler. His mentor hadn't been buried long and he already must be rolling in his grave.

"I know what you're thinking," Peggy said before Harry had time to decide on a response. "I thought the same thing. But he wasn't presented many options, it was either that or be shipped off to a lab. He chose the option he thought would make the most difference, and, knowing the sort of man that he is, he won't remain there long, he'll find some way to the real fight."

"It doesn't make any less disappointing."

"I know. But I have faith in him."

"You would be the only one."

Harry was saved a reprimand from the older woman when their car came to a smooth stop at one end of a small airfield, owned, of course, by Howard. The man had left for London the day before to get started on his next SSR assignment as soon as possible, but he'd still allowed Harry and Peggy the use of one of his private planes to make their own trip to England a little more comfortable.

But even after they'd boarded and settled in, the conversation regarding the disappointment of a super soldier wasn't picked back up then or at all in the hours long trip.

It was strange being back in London, the architecture hadn't changed much in the sixty or so years he'd traveled. But just like New York the fog of war had touched and warped the city; there was less color, less cheer, everyone moved with a resolute purpose. And then there were the more tangible reminders of the war. Entire cities blocks had been decimated, bombed and reduced to charred rubble in the blitz. Seeing the city in such a sad state was jarring.

The facility Harry had been assigned to work out of was unnervingly close to the muggle entrance of the Ministry of Magic, less than a ten minute walk away. But he didn't worry (much), he'd been actively working alongside muggles for some time now, almost a full year at this point, and the Ministry had yet to descend upon him. If they hadn't yet, they likely wouldn't now. He'd still take precautions of course, but it seemed the measures put in place to enforce the Statue of Secrecy were much different in this time.

Howard and the SSR allowed him the day to settle in, get comfortable in the boarding house they'd
set him up in and recover from the long flight. But on his second day back in London, it was down to business.

"Our job, in a nutshell, is to utilize whatever tools we have in our possession to arm our soldiers with the best weapons and supplements to keep them alive and whole long enough to see old Adolf tossed into the pits of hell." Was the introduction Howard presented Harry with his first day as an official agent of the SSR.

Unfortunately it left him with more questions than answers, the first one being: "Supplements?"

"Drugs."

"Erskine's serum wasn't the only thing the SSR's been trying to cook up, but it was granted priority because of its potential. For their everyday foot soldiers they're still looking for whatever can make them less susceptible to cold, exhaustion, hunger. You know those inconvenient human frailties, even if its temporary."

"And they want you to produce them?" Harry wondered. "I thought you dealt with mechanics, technology."

"You will find, my friend, that I wear many hats. Tech is where I'm at my best, but my intelligence goes beyond that."

Harry barely suppressed a roll of his eyes, it was going to be a joy working with someone with such a high opinion of themselves.

However, Howard quickly proved that while his hubris was truly massive it was at least well deserved because the man was brilliant. He'd never had the chance to truly appreciate it while working alongside him with Erskine as his focus had been the vita ray machine, but just listening to him explain his newest project, a supplement that might dull the effects of wounds inflicted on the battlefield, most notably the blood loss, long enough to see get soldiers to some semblance of safety, reminded Harry all too much of the way Erskine once passionately ranted about his serum.

"And for you," Howard said once he'd finally run out of things to say on the project, "there are two things we can do for your situation." He reached into a bag tossed haphazardly onto one of the work tables, from it he produced a vial of dark red liquid. Rogers' blood. "We can try to reverse engineer the serum through this. Or we can go a different route, mix magic and science to go for something on a smaller scale but still just as effective."

"You have something in mind already?" Harry asked.

"I have the start of something, soon it could actually be something."

"Of the two options, which do you think you'd have a better chance succeeding at?"

"That would be door number two." Howard carefully set the vial down between them. "What you wanted to do with Erskine would have worked, I'm almost sure of it. But I can't do what he did. The serum was a culmination of decades of study and training in sciences I can admit I've not even close to mastered. Maybe somewhere down the line, if I threw all of my energy and resources into it, I could do what he did, maybe. But the idea isn't even a little appealing to me, my mind and money are best suited elsewhere, and I'm sure you don't have twenty to thirty years to spare."

Technically, Harry did, but he wasn't at all keen on waiting that long. "So we start from scratch."

"In a way," Howard hummed noncommittally. "But if we can find a way to build off of your initial
plan of enhancing your magic to get you home then we may not have to. It will take some work though. And time."

Harry didn't even blink. "I've got nothing but. Let's do it."

Harry would have liked to spend every moment in the day working with Howard on enhancing his magic, but the man did have real work to do, actual lifesaving products to innovate and create for the war. And Harry himself had signed on to aide in the production of those same products, that had been the deal he'd made to remain with the SSR and enlist the help of Peggy, Howard, and all of their resources to find a way home. So they split their time between the workloads as evenly as the could with the entire organization breathing down Howard's neck for the supplements.

It was four months before he managed to produce a batch of the highly experimental blood clotting aid that could be considered passable enough to be handed off to those in charge of testing and distribution. Harry's own situation was even slower going.

Howard had very little idea of how his magic really worked, and if he was being honest with himself, Harry didn't either, not beyond the basic point the wand and utter some half-Latin gibberish. Howard was convinced if he could understand the fundamentals of how it worked, how he could draw upon it and the magic of the Hallows, amplifying it would be a simple matter.

"We'll start with EEG." Howard held up cap of some sort covered in small metallic discs and protruding wires. "It's meant to track electrical pulses let off by your brain. If your neural activity when you cast is distinct enough we might have a chance at pinpointing what areas are most in use when you draw upon your magic and through that we can look at ways to amplify it."

"I don't understand at all how any of that might be done," Harry confessed. "Just promise not to do anything that might leave me a drooling vegetable and you can have at it."

"What about something that might put you in the ground?"

Harry confessed. "Dying's not what I'm afraid of."

"You've found yourself in the right place then."

Howard settled the cap over Harry's head and secured it with a strap beneath his chin. Then he had Harry cast, any spell he might think of was to be used while he monitored the readouts.

"You've got spikes that go a little higher than what could be considered normal brain activity," Howard said after nearly a full hour had gone. "But not nearly as much as you'd think would be happening considering how much power you're throwing around. I wonder what the difference in the magic from the Hallows might be, could you cast some of that?"

Harry considered the request for a moment before shaking his head. "None of my abilities from the Hallows are voluntary," he said. "They only occur in moments of stress and heightened emotion."

"Like a defense mechanism?"

"Exactly."

Howard hummed thoughtfully. "This should be enough to work with," he stopped to look over the readouts again. "Even if I don't know where the hell I'm going to start. What you do is against everything I ever learned. You're not just bending the laws of science with some of these spells, you're outright ignoring them. You're disproving theories and rules established centuries ago with
incantations you teach children."

"But you can work with it? Right?"

"Yes. Or at least I think I can, but not overnight."

"Just tell me what I need to do."

"You won't need to keep casting for me, but I am going to need a more complete list of the
different categories of magic you practice, if I can start breaking down the elements manipulated
with each spell we might be able to get somewhere."

"I can-"

A sharp rap at the lab's closed door stopped Harry mid-sentence, before either he or Howrad could
call out in response, Peggy was pushing the door open and entering the lab. Her easy entrance had
the resident wizard rounding on Howard with a furious glare; he had sworn he'd secured the room
before Harry had begun casting, if anyone else had walked in even five minutes earlier that would
have been the end of that secret.

Knowing that the younger man's ire was fully deserved but not at all willing to endure a tongue
lashing from him, Howard turned fully away from him to offer Peggy his full attention.

"I hope I'm not interrupting anything important," she said, eyeing the machines surrounding Harry
with a hint of trepidation. "But something's come up."

That at least worked in temporarily distracting Harry from his irritation. "What's happened?"

"An infantry was attacked by HYDRA several days ago. Most were killed or captured but those
who survived spoke of weapons that spat blue fire and disintegrated men where they stood. You're
our resident experts when it comes to weaponry and the arcane so we'll need your input on this
one."

The two men exchanged worried glances, Harry had never been called to provide his magical
expertise on anything larger than the enhancements Howard was working on. "Where?"

Peggy sighed heavily through her nostrils. "Italy."

Captain America was in Italy. The super soldier had arrived just a day before they had and was
scheduled to perform for the troops the evening of the next. Those first few hours Harry did an
admirable job avoiding the man, mostly because he wasn't sure he'd be able to face Rogers without
displaying some degree of his disappointment, but also because, from the moment he, Peggy, and
Howard had touched down in Italy their time and attention was monopolized by the dilemma of
HYDRA's newest weapons.

Of the two hundred men to go against Schmidt's forces only fifty had returned and none with
anything more than the shell shook tales of disintegration guns and blue fire. They had all been too
busy fleeing for their lives to collect even one such gun from the battlefield, so neither Harry nor
Howard had anything at all to work with outside of the soldiers' testaments.

But the task of interrogating the traumatized men only kept him busy for so long, and by the time
evening of his first day in Italy drew near he'd been cut loose for the night to mull over the next
best move. It was then, of course, that he ran into Rogers, right before it was time for him to head
to his performance.
His getup was ridiculous, the garish colors of the flag stitched into the tight mesh of his costume would have been funny if the very sight of the man didn't leave something leaden in Harry's stomach.

They caught sight of each other at just about the same time, and while Harry would have been more than fine with carrying on his way, Rogers immediately readjusted his course to intercept him. He halted a good meter away, growing noticeably more hesitant the closer he drew. Perhaps he could sense the disquiet Harry was already beginning to radiate being in his proximity.

"I didn't expect to see you so close to the front," Rogers said, as an awkward attempt at a smile quirked his lips.

"I could say the same for you."

The smile was immediately replaced by something that could almost be interpreted as bitter. "Yeah, the senator thought I might be of some use lifting the spirits of the men out here."

Harry looked pointedly around the camp; they weren't even a full week into November yet but the bitter chill of early winter had already begun to descend upon the place, an earlier rain shower had left every tent and barrack soaked in mud, and the place stunk of gunpowder and discontent. Then he looked at Rogers, mockingly cheerful and perfectly groomed in his bright suit and shining boots.

He wilted under the stare alone, catching every word Harry hadn't said. "I didn't say I agreed with him."

"But when the senator says jump…"

"I didn't ask for this." Finally something more than the hangdog expression he'd been sporting since the start of the conversation flashed across Rogers' face. It reminded Harry of what had convinced him to agree with Erskine about Rogers being the right candidate for the serum. "When I signed up to become this it was with the intention to fight, I wanted to do some good, not sell war bonds while others were dying in the mud and the trenches."

"Then why aren't you fighting?"

"Because that wasn't one of the options I was presented."

Harry didn't even try to hide his eye roll. "Erskine gave you a gift, Rogers, not just with the muscles and the strength. He made you special, he made you valuable. It's high time you started acting like it."

Harry would later feel bad for how harshly he'd treated "America's New Hope", he'd been nothing but sincere when he said the USO show hadn't ever been part of his plan. But in that moment Harry had been too blinded by the rage of seeing Erskine's work utterly wasted to feel any form of sympathy for him. He certainly would later, but by then Rogers would have already skipped camp to prove just how wasted his talents were lifting showgirls and motorcycles overhead.

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Harry learned of Rogers' suicide mission only a few hours after he departed; for most it was meant to remain a complete secret, but he'd been called in to confer with Phillips because apparently both Peggy and Howard had assisted Rogers in not only skipping camp but also making it into enemy territory.

He wasn't all that upset that they'd gone AWOL and potentially committed some sort of felony, if
he was being entirely honest he would have done the same thing if he'd been presented with the opportunity.

The problem was that he hadn't been presented the opportunity.

He would have expected to at least be warned by one of the two people he considered to almost be friends before they went gallivanting off to Nazi territory, maybe even invited to come along. Sure he couldn't navigate a plane, but he liked to think he was good for moral support.

Maybe he was just used to being one part of an inseparable trio and had considered Peggy and Howard to be suitable, temporary replacements until a time where he could return to the real thing.

"It happened so quickly," Peggy explained when she got back from the unsanctioned mission sans Rogers and noticed Harry's ill-concealed hurt at being left behind. "Rogers was in a frenzy and he needed a pilot."

"Don't let me make this about me," Harry assuaged. "You did something good. Reckless and stupid, which honestly I expected from Howard but not you, Agent Carter, but it was good. You didn't have any need for me there and you don't have to explain why I wasn't."

"We should have at least given you a warning before we just took off."

Harry waved her away as if he hadn't been thinking the same thing not much earlier. "I didn't even notice you had gone until Phillips pulled me aside. Just tell me what happened, why it happened. What lit that fire in Rogers? Phillips wouldn't tell me anything."

"I let slip to him what happened to the 107th," Peggy said without hesitation. "He hadn't known about their recent losses. His friend was a part of the unit, his best friend, and he had been among those captured. Phillips had no intention of sending men to retrieve them, it wasn't a battle he thought we could win, so Rogers decided to go in alone. He wouldn't be persuaded otherwise, I knew that, so I offered him the help that I could."

"Do you think he has a chance at making it out alive?"

"I want to believe he can. What he's capable of due to the serum is beyond incredible, if anyone could do it, it would be him."

Phillips didn't share her faith, especially after two days with no word from Rogers or the transponder he'd jumped with. Even Harry doubted enough to call on Death to see if Rogers had been ferried to the afterlife.

"I would have noticed a soul as unique as his pass through," Death told him, "even if it hadn't been reaped by my own hand."

"So he's lost then, or injured," Harry said, a surprising amount of relief sweeping through him at the confirmation. "Let's hope the serum is good for keeping him alive long enough to make it back."

And in the early afternoon of the third day it proved that it was. Rogers returned with not just the one hundred odd men from the 107th, but with men from at least a dozen other units who had been captured in the time before the 107th and written off as a lost cause just as they had been. With them came the guns he and Howard could do nothing without, and grenades and tanks.

Howard was in nirvana. Harry was just a bit more subdued. The energy emanating from the weapons was strange, unsettling. It was intense in a way he couldn't describe, especially in the way...
it caused his magic to roil within him.

"We still have no word of what powered these?" Harry asked. Cautiously he reached for the rectangular shaped grenade Rogers' had personally recovered from the HYDRA labs. At its exposed core it glowed with the same ominous blue fire he had heard many a tale about.

"No," Rogers said. "the prisoners were forced to assemble the weapons, but the process of actually powering them was done somewhere no one was allowed."

"What you hold is a weapon imbued with the power of an immensely destructive artifact."

Harry was slowly growing used to Death's unannounced visits, but he still nearly detonated the grenade in his hand from the jerk of surprise he was barely able to surpress. Carefully he set it down on the nearest worktable.

"I have to step out for a moment," he announced to the room at large before quickstepping from the lab. Death followed him like an eerie, black clad duckling into the closest room and waited patiently for him to close and seal the door behind himself, then he continued his explanation as if he hadn't even been interrupted.

"It is the space stone, one of six infinity gems."

"I don't even like the way those sound," Harry groaned.

"You will like them even less when you understand the full scope of their power. No man, especially no mortal man, should be attempting to harness that power."

Harry could already feel he was going to regret asking the question, but he had to know. "What exactly can an infinity gem do?"

"Each represents a different facet of reality," Death explained, surprisingly forthcoming. "And so each is capable of something different. The space stone manipulates exactly that, space. Its master could go anywhere, be anywhere, if they were using it to its full potential they could be everywhere."

"But it's being used to create weapons."

"That are said to be capable of disintegrating a man," Death stressed. "Wiping him from existence, from space. This mortal does not understand the danger he possesses."

"Then why not take it from him?" Harry asked.

"It is not my place."

"How convenient."

"If I could pluck the stone from that foolish little man's grasp and reap his soul in the most painful scenario imaginable just for deluding himself into believing he was worthy of even gazing at one such object I would do so with relish," Death snarled.

Harry felt his eyebrows climbing his forehead as he studied the uncommonly upset entity. "You're worried. Why?"

"The stone was meant to be hidden. The longer it goes unsecured and unaccounted for the closer you and your world will find itself to annihilation."
So much for being forthcoming, it felt as if every question was being answered with an increasingly confusing riddle. "What are you talking about?"

"Thanos."

Harry groaned in horrified exasperation and threw his hands in the air. "Him again."

"Yes, him again. He gifted me what remained of the Heart but he would never be content without his own objects of power. The gems were his next best option."

"What does he intend to do with them? He already tried wiping out the universe and found it not to be to his liking."

"I don't know," Death admitted. "And I pray that I never do."

"The SSR intend to fight Schmidt, if they win they'll possess the stone."

"They cannot."

"Then who?"

Death had no answer for that.

"This isn't my fight," Harry said in the ensuing silence. "This war isn't my responsibility, but if there's anything I can do to retrieve this cube...I'm willing to try. If only to stop Thanos."

"That is noble quark." And the look that lit Death's face for just a fraction of a moment almost appeared fond. "But not even you are capable of wielding it, controlling it. One day, but not today."

"That seems to be the common problem when it comes to me," Harry sighed. "I'll keep working on that then, and in the meantime I suppose all we can do is hope this mad titan doesn't get wind of the stone's presence."

"I suppose it is."

Harry did his best to stifle the unease bubbling in his gut. Sitting back and hoping for the best had never really been his thing, but there was nothing more he could do. He made to exit the room, expecting Death to take his customarily silent leave, but the entity spoke up once more, pausing him midstep.

"Have caution when dealing even with the byproducts of the stone. It and the heart are two entirely different but incredibly powerful sorts of artifacts. That much power is not meant to mix."

"Duly noted."

Rogers had departed from the lab in Harry's absence, but he'd been replaced by Peggy who was watching a safe distance away as Howard poured over the assortment of weapons.

"The weapons are a product of something more than science," Harry said, wasting no time in announcing his return and relaying his newest discovery. "It's magic. Powerful magic."

Howard looked up, shock written across his face. "How do you know?"

"I could feel it," the half-lie came easily, he didn't even need a moment to think it over. "That's why I had to step out, it's potent once I opened myself up to it. I needed to collect myself."
"So Schmidt…is a wizard?"

"No. This isn't magic my people ae capable of wielding. Whatever his source is, it's old and foreign."

"Foreign as in found only in the depths of uncolonized rainforests?" Howard hedged tentatively.

"Foreign as in potentially not from this earth."

"Well that's just great. Now there are aliens."

"I didn't say that," Harry refuted before the scientist could work himself up. "But the energy emitting from these weapons are unnatural, I know for a fact nothing from my world is capable of it." He hesitated for a second, considering how much he wanted to reveal. "I can say for certain that whatever Schmidt is playing with, it's powerful enough to annihilate us all."

"We won't give him the opportunity," Peggy said firmly. "He'll be dead before he even gets the chance. But in the meantime," she pinned the both of them with a stern glare, "you have the weapons you've been begging for, now we need a defense. Hop to it boys."

She marched from the rooms, her heels clicking ominously with each step as Harry and Howard rolled their eyes in unison.

"I'm looking forward to the day where the only person giving me orders is the woman in my bed," Howard sighed.

"The sooner we win this war for them, the sooner that day will come," Harry said with a commiserating pat to the other man's shoulder. "But until then, you heard her, let's hop to it."

There was very little science involved in the copious amounts of blowing shit up Harry and Howard got up to in the following days. But honestly there was no better way to study and understand HYDRA's weapons than seeing how they operated first hand, especially considering Harry wasn't any kind of scientist to begin with.

Their preferred method was simply setting up a line of dummy soldiers in varying forms of protections and armor and letting off round after round until they had all been reduced to nothing. And, surprisingly enough, they were able to learn much more than to be believed with the simple if not destructive method.

"They don't leave any residue," Howard noted as he walked along the line where the dummies had once stood. "No ash, no scraps of cloth, nothing."

"They're ripped from space. Vanished as if they were nothing," Harry said, reiterating what Death had told him once already.

"And your people can't do that?"

Harry shook his head. "Not to this degree. We can vanish objects, small animals maybe, not entire people."

"Is there a counter?"

"A good solid shield."

Howard sighed. "But these guns will vanish any shield we put in those men's hands and then them
"Physical shields, yes," Harry agreed, but slowly an idea was beginning to take form. "But something magical based, energy based, might be capable of deflecting this power."

Howard's face lit with interest. "What did you have in mind?"

"The energy from the weapons vanishes everything on contact, but it's able to be contained within the weapons for extended periods of time. Not only that, it's powering them. What about these," he hefted the bulky energy gun cradled in his arms, "is so special to be able to hold that energy and not be vanished or melted or exploded from the amount of energy it's containing?"

"If we broke the weapon down," Howard said, realization dawning on him the same as it had Harry, "we could replicate the safeguards that stabilize the weapon into some sort of shield. Kid, you're invaluable."

"You would have figured it out eventually," Harry said with a dismissive wave of his hand. "Maybe. But you did first." Howard's eyes drifted to the gun Harry held, behind his gaze his racing mind was clearly visible. "I have a few shield prototypes already lined up for Rogers, we could redesign them and have them mass produced. Actually breaking the gun down will be the tricky part, you saw how well dismantling the grenade went."

He had indeed. Taking apart the weapons hadn't been much of an issue, it was when they tried to handle the energy contained within that the results got a bit more explosive.

"Leave the energy alone for the time being," Harry suggested. "Our focus should be the mechanics of the things, the safeguards within, the materials they're using." He frowned when he realized how much mechanical knowledge would be required for such a task. "I don't think I'll be of much help when it comes to that."

Howard laughed at the reminder. "Don't worry, that's my area of expertise. I'll try my hand at breaking this fella down when you're a safe distance away."

Harry grimaced in thanks. "Did we want to continue studying the energy blasts in the meantime?" he asked. "Or am I done for the day?" It would be kind of nice to have some time away from the facility, it felt like majority of his waking moments were spent toiling for the SSR. And he really would be no help in dismantling the weapons other than handing over whatever tools Howard might have need of.

"I'll need your time for just a bit longer," Howard said, dashing his dreams of having a quiet night in. "You've been holding up your end of the bargain for some time now without any complaint, I figure it's my turn to hold up mine. Peggy and I had some time to talk it through on our way back from dropping Rogers off in Italy."

"There are some things we'll need to know before we can get into it though, more secrets you might have to share."

Harry sighed heavily. "I figured as much."

"I warned her to expect us sometime this afternoon, she'll be in office all day so we can't miss her."

When Howard and Harry arrived in her workspace with the request, Peggy seemed more than eager to step away from the monotony of her paperwork to join them in the privacy of the lab.
"That was quicker than I was told to expect," she said as she pulled up one of the few seats available in the room.

"We had a productive day," Howard grinned, opting to use the edge of one of the many worktables as his own perch. "I've got a bit more work cut out for me tonight, but I wanted to tackle our boy's issue before I sent him off home."

"Ah, yes. We did promise to, didn't we?" Peggy turned her gaze onto Harry, who had settled a bit nervously in the seat across from her. "I'm afraid the most I can offer is a second opinion and whatever resources I might be able to provide, it will be Howard doing most of the work."

Harry shrugged. "That should work just fine. But Howard said there were some more things you needed to know first. Secrets I would have to give up."

"Yes, well it never escaped our notice or even Erskine's that you never stated exactly were home was."

Harry was only just able to suppress his wince, of course that would be the secret they wanted unveiled. And he thought he'd been being subtle about it. "That's not so easily answered," he said evasively.

"When we spoke of it last you said it wasn't anything near as exciting as being from somewhere other than this world," Peggy pointed out. "Anything outside of that should be easy enough to explain."

"You'd be surprised, he could be like the guy from that Heinlein novel and home isn't where but when."

And of course Howard would be the one to hit the nail on the head while only joking. Harry could deny it of course and they wouldn't think anything else of it, but if he really wanted to get back it might be in his best interest to give up at least that secret. If he were being honest, there really wasn't much danger in telling them, Howard and Peggy had already made their vows, and more than that they'd proved to be trustworthy.

"Yeah," he said, choking down his hesitation, "that's about right."

Howard and Peggy laughed at first, assuming he was playing along with Howard's joke, but then they saw his face, grim and serious, and stopped short.

"You're taking the piss."

Harry couldn't help but laugh, the words were unusually crude coming from Peggy's lips.

"He sure as hell is," Howard agreed. "Ain't no way I'm going to believe you're some kind of time traveler come stumbling in from the past."

"I'm not." Harry said, his two companions only had a moment to exchange glances, triumphant at calling him out on the joke before he carried on. "You're the past, I'm from after."

"The future."

And saying it as deadpan as Howard did of course made it sound far-fetched and ridiculous. But Harry only nodded. "It was two thousand and eight when I was displaced."

"That's..." Peggy floundered, trying to calculate the amount of time he'd traveled while still
attempting to work around her disbelief.

"...sixty-five years."

"How?"

Harry shrugged. "It was an accident. We'd only intended to go back a year at most, but I have the worst sort of luck."

"So you intended to only break the laws of science and time and reality just a little bit but ended up breaking them much more?"

"We messed up."

Howard shook his head, he'd taken finding out Harry had magic much better than this. "We need everything from the start."

"The start is a long way back." A small smile quirked Harry's lips. "Or forward."

Peggy glared at him for the ill-advised joke. "We have nowhere to be. Start at the beginning."

The beginning was the union of the Hallows, but with that came the power he was granted and the curse it had placed upon his world. He purposely refrained from explaining everything that came with being the master of the Hallows, specifically his relationship with Death, not because he didn't trust them but because they could barely wrap their head around the fact that he had been able to move back in time. Revealing that he spoke with the abstract entity that was Death on a regular basis would leave them catatonic he was sure. But he made up for it by detailing everything he was able to and believed he may be capable of doing, sans the whole reaping souls bit.

It was strange talking about it, he'd held these secrets so close to his chest since arriving in New York. Finally speaking such long held secrets was uncomfortable but there was also something cleansing about it, like he was finally unburdening a great weight that had sat constantly on his shoulders.

"She'd practiced the act of the ritual so many times," he said, speaking of that night in the manor, his last with one of his two best friends, "she knew what she was doing, but something still went wrong. Maybe in her haste she said the wrong word or drew the wrong rune, maybe because the time wasn't right, or because the ritual had been prepared for two to be sent back rather than just the one that was. I don't know. But whatever happened it landed me here, in this time, with you.

"There's nothing I can really do to prove what I've said," Harry continued when it seemed Howard and Peggy were too deep in thought to say anything. "It's not as easy as whipping out my wand and casting a few spells. All you really have is my word."

"We know you're not lying," Peggy said affectionately exasperated. "There'd be no reason to lie when doing so would only prolong us finding a way back for you."

"Not to mention, the idea is already so out there no one would choose to lie about it," Howard added.

"But I'm afraid I'm even more out of my league than I'd thought beforehand. Time travel isn't exactly something I'm well versed in. Could we see the ritual you used to go back?"
Harry shook his head. "That was one of the first things I tried to find when I began looking for a way home. But it's nowhere I've looked, maybe it hasn't been published yet. I can write out all that I remember from the ritual, but it's not much."

"No," Howard said, "Erskine was always better at working your magic into his science."

"You were relying on his serum to help you get home," Peggy recalled. "And now Howard is working at another method to amplify your magic, but how will having more power do you any good if you still have no idea how to put it to use?"

"It's not the magic I was born with that I want to amplify, but the Hallows. I did what little research I could on them and it's been hinted that they can manipulate the time stream, or rather my place in it. All I need do now is gain access to the power from the Hallows."

"So really all we need do is find some way to amplify your magic and you'll do the rest."

"Essentially."

Howard nodded. "Give me a few days and I'll have something for you."

Harry frowned dubiously. "Just like that? You'll have a solution."

"I've already been working on it, the reading from the EEG and the list of magics you and yours are capable of was a much bigger help than I'd thought. If I don't figure it out entirely I'll at least be on my way to. Tonight I'll work on the guns, tomorrow, your magic."

"It seems like you've got your work cut out for you then," Peggy said, she'd already begun to rise from her seat, sensing that the conversation was coming to a close. "Unless there's something else you need from us, we'll leave you to it." She held her arm out to Harry, a silent request to walk with her back to her desk. "Try not to kill yourself while no one's here to keep an eye on you."

"I've yet to make a promise I could keep, I won't start now." Howard's dark gaze settled on Harry for a moment. "Take tomorrow off, I'll have this figured out the day after."

Harry tilted his head in a nod of acknowledgment. "See you then."

"Well," Peggy sighed when they were in the lift on their way back up to her workspace, "that was rather enlightening. And productive."

"I'm sorry I had to keep that from you," Harry said, a touch sheepishly, but Peggy waved the apology away. "Don't be. If I were in your place, I would have to. Just don't make a habit of it."

Harry could only laugh and nod in acknowledgment. "Yes, ma'am."

"Good boy." The lift came to a slightly juddering halt. "This is me. Go straight home and get some rest, I daresay these next few days will be rather eventful."

"What was it Howard said?" Harry said with a teasing quirk of his lips. "I've yet to make a promise I could keep…."

Peggy rolled her eyes. "He has the worst influence on you. But you'll do as I say."

"Of course."
Satisfied with the half promise, Peggy stepped from the lift at that same moment Rogers and a second man with an easy smile and a head of dark hair approached. Peggy murmured a quick greeting to Rogers and his companion before moving on while the two men joined Harry on the lift.

"Agent Potter," Rogers greeted with a duck of his head, "headed up?"

"Yes, I'd like to get out of here before Agent Carter finds another task to keep me 'occupied.'"

"It's a hard thing telling her no."

Harry smothered his smile at the clear affection in Rogers' tone. "It gets easier. But never easy."

"I'm not looking forward to the day she and Buck meet proper," Roger's nodded to the dark-haired man at his side. "They'd get on too well bossing me around."

"From what I hear it's a task getting you to follow orders," Harry noted with a small laugh. "Maybe you need the two of them teaming up against you."

"It'd save me a couple gray hairs," Roger's companion said with a sage nod, however the super soldier eyed his head full of flawless dark hair dubiously.

"You're as worried about your looks as the skirts you used to chase," he muttered. But then he straightened and flashed Harry a guilty look. "Oh, I forgot to introduce the two of you. This is Bucky…Seargent Barnes, I mean, my best pal. Buck, this is Agent Harry Potter, he was Doctor Erskine's ward and student."

Harry offered the man a smile and his hand. He'd heard plenty about Seargent Barnes, the one Rogers had run off on his suicide mission to rescue. He'd seen the man in passing when he'd first arrived to camp, beaten and battered and fresh from HYDRA's clutches, but he looked to be a whole new man after a few good night's sleep and some proper clothing.

"Call me Bucky," he said with a charming smile.

"Good to meet you, Bucky. Are you two headed into a briefing with Phillips?" Harry asked as the lift began shuddering to a halt.

"Just left it as a matter of fact," Barnes said. "We were thinking about grabbing a drink now that our day's through."

"You're welcome to join us if you'd like," Rogers offered.

Harry immediately shook his head. "Oh, I'm not much of a drinker."

"You're friends with, Stark."

"He drinks enough for the both of us," Harry laughed as he stepped out of the lift. "And then some."

"How about dinner then?" Harry felt his brow furrow in confusion at the offer from Barnes, he'd only just met the man but he seemed almost eager to speak with Harry. "I heard all about what you did with Erskine," he explained as if sensing Harry's confusion. "I'd like to get to know the man tasked with keeping Stevie alive, especially when I know from firsthand experience that it's no easy job."
"Not to mention we could really use a native to show us around a bit," Rogers tacked on.

Harry was certainly not the one for that particular task, London was sure to have changed a great deal in the sixty year difference between his times, but he was finding it hard to say no when faced with these two earnest men and he had nowhere else to be anyway. "I can't say I'll be much help showing you around," he finally conceded, "but I suppose a quick bite wouldn't hurt."

There was a vendor at the end of the block who boasted sandwiches made to order with bread baked fresh every morning. Just the sight of it sent a jolt of grief filled nostalgia through Harry but both Rogers and Barnes were taken with the idea of having their meals in hand and taking advantage of their small bit of freedom to roam about a bit.

"I'm buying," Rogers insisted when they stopped off at the cart, "but I don't know a thing about these British pounds so I'll at least need help with that."

Harry rolled his eyes in Rogers' direction, but didn't bother putting up a fight, he'd heard enough stories (read: rants) from Peggy to know that the man was just as, if not more, stubborn than he was. He simply helped the man count out the right amount of currency for the ridiculous number of sandwiches he'd collected and held his tongue.

The city wasn't all that great for a scenic walk considering the recent onslaught of bombings, so Harry steered them away from the storefronts and residential areas that had been hit the hardest and over to the rivers and docks. Soon enough, he found a familiar sight in the London Port.

He took a contemplative bite of his sandwich (corned beef, he didn't think he'd ever be able to eat a cold cut again without feeling some modicum of sadness) as he watched the bustle of crew and passengers scurry about the port and its many ships.

"I snuck aboard a ship here," he said, struck suddenly with the mood to share. "It's how I got to the States."

Rogers looked surprised by the admission while Barnes was merely interested. "Erskine never mentioned…"

"He probably didn't mention a lot," Harry shrugged, "he was good at keeping secrets. But this is where it started, the ship was called the Orion if I remember right, I'd never been on one before and that was an awful first experience. Unfortunately there was even less for me in the States than there was here."

"He did mention that," Rogers said sheepishly.

"Yeah, well he was always a sucker for a good rags to riches story," Harry smiled fondly. "I slept in alleys and ate scraps for months before we found each other."

"And he took you in, taught you, even offered you the serum." This seemed to come as a surprise to Barnes who looked between Rogers and Harry with an inquisitive frown. "He didn't tell me why you didn't take it."

"I'm not a fighter," Harry said simply. "Not that kind. Not anymore. My talents could be used elsewhere, I wanted him to give it to someone who deserved it, who would put it to good use."

A deprecating frown turned down Rogers' lips. "And all you got was me."

Barnes bristled and Harry snorted. "You're more stubborn than a bull," he said, "and probably the most righteous person I've ever known, myself included…but you're not all bad."
"If that's not a ringing endorsement, I don't know what is," Barnes said, an enormous grin replacing the ire he'd been directing toward Rogers.

A matching if not slightly less boisterous grin settled upon Rogers' face as he dipped his head in that clumsy little nod he did. "Thank you."

Harry could do nothing but smile back. They'd gotten off to a rocky start that was certain, but maybe someday, one day, he could accept that the man was more than the cocksure asthmatic starting fights he'd never be able to win or the reckless super soldier wasting the gift he'd been given. Maybe he might start seeing him as someone capable of bearing the mantle he'd been given, someone worthy.
Chapter 10

A little time away from the SSR and the sometimes seemingly fruitless work he'd been doing for them was something Harry had been craving almost since arriving back in London. Just a few days to himself was all he wanted, but once he actually got it his entire day off was wasted wishing he were back at the facility. Any other time that wouldn't be the case, he'd take the day off and catch up on some much needed sleep, but he'd been sent home the day before after being told Howard was finally actively working on getting him a way home and he itched not being able to be an active part of the research and work.

He knew he would only get in the way though, there was nothing he or even Peggy could offer Howard to make his work go any quicker, so he grit his teeth and waited the day out with a patience that should have granted him a sainthood. And if, the next morning, he was back at the facility and heading toward the labs hours earlier than he usually showed up, no one called him out on it.

Howard was there when he arrived, already hunched over a worktable elbow deep in a giant, square…something with wires and strange paneling spilling haphazardly from its core.

"You're late," he said around the wrench clenched between his teeth.

"I'm early actually." Harry stopped a good dozen paces away, too wary of the contraption to come any closer. "It's half past five."

"In the morning?"

"I couldn't sleep."

"Try harder next time. Peggy's been on me about being a bad influence."

"You are." Harry tilted his head in the direction of the box-like device. "What is that?"

Howard brightened immediately, he beamed at the object with more pride than Harry thought a hunk of metal and wires really deserved. "It's a power core. For you."

"Me?"

"You." Grease smeared forearms finally extracted themselves from the device, it only took a few seconds to tuck away the wires and shut the panels, then Howard was hefting the thing into his arms. "Come on, I've been working all night on this for you."

Howard's lab was one large room with various dividers and glass partitions strategically placed throughout to separate certain projects from others. There were a few attached rooms, mostly closets to hold unfinished projects and designated storage areas for equipment and materials; it was to one of the larger of these storage rooms that Howard led Harry.

But where once there had been rows of shelves and unmarked boxes collecting dust within it, there was now an open space and some kind of control console running along the wall. The console wasn't very large, only spanning a few steps from end to end, and on its face were different meters and gauges Harry didn't even bother trying to understand. It was unfinished, he could at least tell that much looking at it, but something told him the core in Howard's arm would slide neatly into the gaping hole in the console's center.
"Is this for me also?" Harry asked.

Howard bobbed his head in an excited nod. "It is, actually. Or it will be once it's finished, this is mostly the bare bones." He hefted the core in his arm. "This will power the whole thing once it's finished."

"What exactly is it?"

"Your way home." A manic grin spread across Howard's face. "You told me before that your magic, specifically the magic of the Hallows, isn't something you can just call upon. The only times you've had access to it were in times of stress and heightened emotion. And that makes sense, it's protecting you, its host. If I can trigger that emotion, that stress, I can trigger the magic. Once the magic is triggered it'll be up to you to channel it, control it. The more you do it and the more comfortable you get wielding it, the easier it should come."

There was a long, long moment where Harry said nothing, honestly lost for words. "That's…that's brilliant." Is what his mind finally managed to formulate. "And simple."

"The best ideas often are." Howard didn't even try to hide his pride behind a mask of false modesty, and Harry couldn't even begrudge him for it. "We just have a tendency to overlook them more often than not for the…flashier, ideas. Myself included."

"So the machine is meant to trigger the stress in some way?" Harry guessed.

"No, actually. It's a suppressor, or well I call it a suppressor but what it really does is absorb and redirect. From the way you've described some of this magic, it's volatile maybe a little violent."

Harry nodded in vehement agreement.

Howard gave the unfinished machine a quick pat. "This absorbs that energy and feeds it back into the machine where its safely dispersed without causing any undue explosions and the like. I actually based the idea off of the energy gun defenses we thought up the day before. The stress trigger is actually this."

It was a small bottle produced from Howard's lab coat, containing only a few milliliters' worth of an unidentifiable clear fluid. "Adrenaline." Another bottle, this one full of a thick tar like substance in an unpleasant shade of bile green, came immediately after the first. "Mescaline."

"Mescaline?"

"It's a hallucinogenic."

"A hallucinogenic?" Something like an incredulous laugh burst from Harry's lips at the absurdity of the situation. "Like LSD?"

Howard shook his head. "I don't know what that is."

"Oh, trust me, you will." Harry eyed the vial of viscous liquid dubiously. "How is that even meant to help?"

"The hallucinations it will trigger, paired with the instinctive flight or fight made more intense by the adrenaline, will be the stressor you need to start seeing some reaction from your magic."

"Is it dangerous?"
Howard hesitated for only half of a second. "Separately? No. Together… I'm not sure. I'll have to run a few tests-"

"No, I'll do it. I'll be your test subject."

"Um, no. I mentioned already Peggy's been on my ass about encouraging your reckless behavior. She'll take my head off if I let you try this without having tested it beforehand."

"It won't do you any good to test it on an animal or even another human," Harry reasoned. "The Hallows make me a good deal more durable than the average man, or even wizard."

"Durable enough to survive a heart attack?"

Harry shrugged. "Yes?" For all he knew, it was true. He hadn't had much chance to explore the whole immortality side effect of the Hallows, but he'd already been assured something as mundane as a heart attack wouldn't be the thing to take him out.

"That wasn't even a little convincing."

Harry glared at the man. "Trust me."

"Sure, and when we both wind up dead, you because I pumped you full of two incompatible drugs and me because Carter will take my head off, you can be the one to sweet talk us through the pearly gates."

"I'll do you one better and persuade Death to give us another shot at life."

"You're a fucking cunt."

Harry perked up, not daring to fully hope his wheedling had actually worked. "Does that mean you'll do it?"

"You're telling Peggy."

Harry made a big show of being against having to be the one to inform the terrifying woman of their admittedly dangerous plan, if only to make Howard feel a bit better about caving in to him. But the joke was on the scientist because all it took was one look in his eyes and the steel laced assurance that a bit of recreational drugs and adrenaline wouldn't be the thing to do him in and Peggy was, if not agreeing, at least not outright against the plan.

"You're not serious," Howard sputtered, outraged by her easy acceptance. "That's it? What about your lectures about responsibility? How many times have you told me off for being reckless and influencing him into doing the same?"

"Nothing I say will change his mind," Peggy shrugged. "And I trust him. If he says the procedure won't kill him, I believe him. He wouldn't risk dying and never getting the chance to return to his family."

"Well of course he's right. I know it won't kill him, even without whatever magical invulnerability he thinks he has, but a little indignation on your part still would have been nice. I can't even count how many times I've been chewed out because of my "reckless decisions". I was looking forward to seeing someone else on the receiving end."
"Would you like to try it again?" Peggy asked, mockingly serious. "I can put on a good show if it makes you happy."

Howard looked between the two of them for a moment, then heaved a put upon sigh and shook his head. "Not that good of a show. Just next time he decides he wants to do something this reckless, because I'm sure it's going to happen, I expect you to put up some kind of fight."

"You have my word."

The older man sniffed haughtily, not fully appeased but at least aware that he wouldn't be getting much else out of her. "What I have is enough for just one dosage, but I have more on its way in if we need it."

Harry frowned in confusion. "What would we need it for?"

"We don't know how effective the stressor will be in regards to breaking past those barriers between you and full access to your magic, we won't until we've tested it. Chances are it'll take more than one try to see it done."

Harry's sigh was full of disgruntled mourning. "And here I was hoping this would be a quick fix."

"I'm afraid not, my friend." Howard gave him a bracing clap on the shoulder. "But at least it's a fix."

"How soon were you thinking to start?"

"I'll need a few days, a week at most. This," he gave the machine built to suppress any accidental magic on Harry's part a loving tap, "still needs a bit of work. Once it's done we have enough for a test run."

"I can wait a week."

And he could, seven days was nothing compared to the weeks and months he'd been waiting. He was a few days short of a month away from having been in this time for an entire year, and in that time he'd endured enough failures and disappointments to help temper the impatience he was so infamous for. It didn't make the wait any less torturous for him, but at the very least he wasn't driving his colleagues halfway to insanity with a constant badgering for updates. He kept himself occupied helping Howard where he could and, when he was only getting underfoot, shadowing Peggy as her unofficial secretary.

And then a week and a few days had gone, and Harry arrived at the SSR facility one morning to the notice that they were finally going for that test run.

"It's a lovely morning for some highly experimental and potentially deadly drug therapy, isn't it?" Was what Howard greeted both him and Peggy with when they entered the lab.

Peggy leveled him with a look that expressed just how not funny she found him.

"Everything is ready then?" Harry asked, just a touch nervously.

"As ready as it can be at this stage," Howard shrugged. "Today is meant to let us know what we're missing, what needs improving."

A tilt of his head beckoned Harry and Peggy to the back of the lab where the room for the entire procedure had been set up. The small closet seemed to have shrunk even more in size, perhaps due
to the formidable iron door that had replaced the previously flimsy wood, and the metal plates lining the walls from floor to ceiling.

"I commissioned a few chromium panels to be used to line the walls, in the event the suppressor doesn't...suppress, they should hopefully contain any magical blowout to this room."

Harry frowned at Howard in concern. "Is that a possibility? The suppressor not suppressing?"

The older man could only shake his head. "I don't know. I hope it will, I think it will, but I don't know. I've never tried to build anything like it, no one has. Those shields we developed are the closest thing, but not even those are this. Until we let your magic rip at it full force we won't know."

"Explain to me again exactly how this is going to work," Peggy demanded, a small divot carving itself into the space between her brows.

Howard nodded, suddenly the epitome of patience despite having explained the entire process in detail to Peggy at least a half dozen times by now. That uncertainty she'd claimed not to feel regarding the procedure was obviously rearing its ugly head.

"The purpose of everything we're doing is to see you, Harry, stressed enough to grant you access to the magic of your Hallows, to do that, we'll start by restraining you." He gestured to one of the newer additions to the closet sized room, a bare cot like structure with several heavy and ominous looking straps running along its sides. "They're to keep you from dislodging the suppressor. Once we begin, neither Peggy or I will be allowed in the room with you, so once it's on it needs to stay on for the duration."

"I won't like that. Being tied down will only aggravate me more." Harry noted. "That's good."

"An unexpected benefit." Howard agreed. "Once you're secured, I'll inject you with our two drugs. I've come across a good few ways to ingest mescaline, but taking it intravenously seems to be the method that allows it to be most potent. If all goes to plan, it will begin producing hallucinations quickly, within forty-five minutes to an hour.

"The adrenaline will be injected slowly, it'll be around half an hour before you've been administered the full dosage, after which it should take effect in a matter of minutes. The adrenaline is acting as the stressor, it is what's going to get that reaction we're hoping for from your magic."

"If the adrenaline is the stressor, what is the purpose of the mescaline then?" Peggy cut in.

"Being distressed won't be enough," Howard explained. "We need a target, a supposed cause to the stress so that his magic has something it can attack. The hallucinations from the mescaline will do exactly that.

"But something we'll want as much control over as we can get is the nature of your hallucinations, what your mind is dreaming up. If it's something you've personally experienced and have felt threatened by before I can almost guarantee we'll see some kind of reaction."

"I've got a few things in mind," Harry said morosely. "So all I have to do is think about it?"

"Peggy and I will speak to you through the intercom, once the drugs are in your system it might be harder to keep your mind in one place, so speaking it aloud should help keep you focused."

"Recreational drugs and talk therapy," Harry sighed. "Sounds like a hell of a time. How long will
"It'll be an hour for the drugs to take effect, after that it's fully dependent on how long it takes to get a reaction from your magic. I'd predict it won't be any more than two, two and a half hours before we see the results we want. Once we do, we'll gas the room."

That hadn't been mentioned in the plan before. "Gas the room for what?"

"The effects of mescaline can last up to twelve hours, more depending on the dosage and we're going for a big one. We don't want you in constant distress for that entire time, so we'll sedate you until the worst passes."

"You'll stay here for at least another day after, so I can keep a close eye on you and any reactions from your magic."

"You want to keep me locked in that closet for two days?" Harry asked incredulously.

"You'll be unconscious for most of the first and you'll be free to roam the lab for all of the second, as long as you keep away from my more sensitive projects there shouldn't be much of a problem."

The thorough explanation seemed to have at least eased Peggy's worry a bit. "And you said you won't know how many times this will need to be repeated in order to be effective?"

"Correct," Howard confirmed. "We won't know until we drug him up and stress him out." He paused, waiting for the next onslaught of questions, but no more were forthcoming. "Should we begin now?"

"There isn't-"

"Yes," Harry cut off Peggy's protest before it could be fully formed and didn't feel the slightest bit sorry for it. He'd done his waiting, he was ready. "Drug me up and stress me out."

"None of this is going to be fun."

Harry peered over at Howard from his prone position on the frankly uncomfortable cot; the older man was kneeling near the foot of the cot, securing his legs almost painfully tight in the restraints.

"I figured as much, actually."

Howard scoffed at the sarcasm Harry hadn't quite managed to keep out of his voice. "What I meant is it's going to be actively miserable, this could be considered psychological torture in some circles. Most circles."

"I'm asking for it."

"And you're crazy for it." Howard laughed. "But I guess I can't blame you. I don't have much of a family, but if I did, I'd like to think I'd be just as willing to do anything it took to get back to them should we be separated."

"You would."

"Your confidence in me means a lot."
A sharp tug at the restraints tested and subsequently ensured that he wouldn't be going anywhere.

"How does it feel?"

Harry shook his head, restraints wound from the base of his throat to the top of his foot in restricting, suffocating waves. Not a single bit of him could so much as wiggle and it was awful. "I hate it."

Howard's laugh was a short, humorless bark. "We're off to a good start then. I'm going to strap you into the suppressor now."

There was small space on each of Harry's wrists that had been left unbound where deceptively thin cuffs that wired back to the machine against the wall were secured. A similar band was wrapped around his forehead and tightened enough where he knew he would have a hell of a headache later.

"Please try not to fry this," Howard only half-joked. "It'd be a hell of thing explaining to Phillips how we burned this place down."

"Considering the amount of volatile chemicals and equipment you keep down here, and your infamously reckless reputation, it really wouldn't be that hard. But I'll try my best not to anyway."

"I suppose that's the best I'm going to get. Are you ready to begin injecting?"

"That shouldn't even be a question. Yes."

"All right, this might pinch a bit."

A wicked long needle, one attached to a line that led to a suspended vial of clear fluid went, into his right arm without much fuss. A second syringe, just as intimidating, but this time full of the dark colored, liquid Harry remembered seeing that first day was the one Howard hesitated injecting him with.

"Final chance at getting out. Once this is in you, we can't stop."

"I'm not backing out."

Howard sighed. "I didn't actually think you would."

The injection was quick, nearly painless and followed by a near immediate rush of warmth flooding through his veins. There wasn't any other reaction aside from that, but Howard had said it would be a while before it to really begin to take effect.

"All right, you're all buckled in and the good stuff is working its magic now," Howard said with a nervous clap of his hands. "I hope you went to the bathroom, because you're going to be here a while."

Harry rolled his head on the cot just enough to pin the man with an unamused stare. "I should be fine. Now what happens?"

"Now I lock you in here nice and secure, and me and Peggy will begin psychoanalyzing the darkest moments of your past to really make sure you get the fullest, shittiest experience out of all of this."

"Can't wait."

Howard didn't leave immediately, to Harry's amusement he lingered for maybe just a moment too
long, struck by a sudden hesitance. "If it gets to be too much say the word and we'll shut the whole thing down," he said, uncommonly sincere. "Don't go trying to play the hero. This isn't our only shot at this."

"I won't." The expression on Howard's face had Harry pressing against his restraints just enough to tap a reassuring finger against the back of the man's hand. "Promise."

"It wouldn't be any fun if you died before I could collect the proper amount of data."

The door creaked heavy on its hinges as it swung behind Howard, slamming shut with a finality that Harry would admit to no one was maybe a bit terrifying.

Even now, strapped down to the uncomfortable cot, actual drugs finding their way deeper into his system with each frantic pulse of his heart, and preparing to experience what was no doubt going to be the most unpleasant trip in his history, he wasn't rethinking his decisions to give this crazy idea a shot. But at least in the privacy of his own mind Harry could admit how mad it was, if it didn't kill him he was sure to feel like shit in the morning.

"Comfortable in there?" Peggy's voice, tinny with interference, crackled through a speaker mounted to the wall above his head.

"Better than a room at the Ritz."

"Glad you're liking the accommodations," was Howard's snarky reply. "We at Casa Stark strive to provide a quality experience. I'm afraid we don't have any drink specials on offer at the moment but the drug cocktail we've injected into your veins should more than make up for that, and we have a truly spectacular evening of relieving some of your most unpleasant memories planned for you."

Likely at Howard's command, the lights dimmed to barely anything; the brightest source now coming from the flickering red light from the suppressor. It didn't escape Harry's notice how deep the shadows suddenly seemed, or the jagged shapes they sent spilling along the floors and walls.

"Sounds like my kind of night. I was thinking the dark wizard who murdered my parents and spent near a decade trying to do me in might be a good source for traumatizing memories."

There was a beat of surprised silence, then Peggy's voice. "I'd be inclined to agree. That's not one you've told us."

"A bit too morbid for everyday conversation. But yeah, he was a manic."

"All right, let's hear it."

Harry allowed himself just a second of silence, bracing himself for a long and unpleasant recollection of his past. "He called himself Voldemort and he believed that only those of a certain birth should be allowed a place in the wizarding world, those whose parents had magic and their parents before them and so on. A lot of people, not just wizards and witches, died because of the belief. My parents were among those who did. I should have been too, but magic got involved, the kind I still don't fully understand and I survived and Voldemort was banished from his body for a bit. He took that as something of an insult and an open declaration of war on my part even though I was one when this happened. When he got his body back, or a body, he spent the next few years trying to kill me until I figured enough was enough and killed him myself.

"He's pretty much the reason I'm here, if it weren't for him I would never have got my hands on two of the three Hallows and so they never would have been united, not by me at least."
"Okay," Howard said, "let's go back to the part where you decided to kill the guy."

"I didn't exactly decide, there was a prophecy involved."

"That doesn't actually make this any easier to understand."

"An old professor of mine who was only a proper seer when it was most inconvenient foresaw a future where I would be equal to the most powerful dark lord in our history, in that future we were doomed to fight one another until one died at the hand of the other. That prophecy was the reason the dark lord went to my home that night, killed my parents, and attempted to kill me."

Peggy took a turn to speak into the intercom's microphone. "What was he like? Your dark lord?"

"Disgusting. Unnatural. He was hairless, pale as spoiled milk, his pupils were slits and he didn't have a nose, just gashes were his nostrils should be."

"That sounds like…"

"…a snake. Yeah."

"Did he frighten you?"

Harry laughed humorlessly and stopped short when the restraints around his chests made it hard to breathe. "He terrifies me."

"Why?"

He understood what Peggy was doing, why she was asking the questions that she was, Howard had only just explained every detail of this awful procedure. That didn't mean he liked it.

But he answered anyway, because he wanted this to work. He needed it to. "Aside from the obvious? He was so…intense and so sure that he was right, that he would win. And he could have. I won because of luck only; he had decades of experience on me and it showed. He was more intelligent, more powerful, he should have decimated me."

"But he didn't," Peggy reminded. "You won."

"I did."

"So what else is there?"

"What?"

"You said he terrifies you. As if he were still here, as if you're still at war with this creature."

Harry laughed again, this time from amazement at how accurate the statement was, and of course it would be Peggy to stumble upon one of his deepest rooted fears without even realizing what it was she was doing. "Because I am, I suppose. Or I will be. I went back on purpose, I told you that already. The plan was to go back to a time before the Hallows had united, but the only time like that that existed was also one before the dark lord had been defeated."

"I see…"

"But you don't," Harry pressed, and maybe it was the drugs, maybe it was the restraints and the dark room and the flickering lights but he could feel something deeper and darker than simple agitation building in his gut, "because it was the Hallows that allowed me to kill him. I was able to
do it because I was their master and when he tried to wield one against me it defied him and killed him and allowed me to win. Without them I'll have nothing but a broken wand and six years of learning to turn teapots into cozies to go against the most powerful and evil man in our history."

"You're afraid you're going to die."

"I'm afraid my friends are going to die. That they'll see me fall—because there's nothing else I can do when I go against him—and know that they'll be next, that their parents and children and siblings will be next because I had failed."

His stomach churned in one wild, disgusting mesh of fear and anger and desperation at just the thought of having to go against Voldemort again. What was the point of preventing the union of the Hallows, of stopping the wizarding world's end before it had even begun, if it was at the cost of their freedom from Voldemort? Was being alive really worth being under his rule?

"And once they and everyone else who opposed him are dead, the rest will be forced to live in a world where those like my brilliant Hermione will be outlawed, locked away and tormented because they were born to what Voldemort deems the wrong families. Where men like Ron will be shunned and isolated and disowned because they won't allow themselves to be blinded by hatred and bigotry Where magic is controlled and prohibited to fit the narrow-minded world view of a handful of fascists."

As he spoke his fear into the world, each word painted the air around him bright as the red of Voldemort's eyes, dripping and curling like a noxious fog with every poisoned thought he finally put to words.

"They'll die if I don't go back and stop the Hallows from uniting. But they might be facing something just as terrible if I do."

"Damned if you do…" Was Howard's response.

Bitter cynicism bared Harry's teeth in a poor parody of a smile. "And damned if I don't."

"You were always such an awful cynic."

The hair-raising grind of metal on metal shrieked through the tiny room when Harry jolted suddenly in his bonds, stretching the reinforced straps to their limit.

"What was that?" Peggy's voice was back on the microphone, concern in every syllable. "Has something happened?"

"Something must have. You look awfully pale all of a sudden."

Harry's lips trembled around the words he struggled to form. "I—is this real?"

"Is what real?" Peggy snapped. "Harry, I need an answer. Are you all right?"

"Hermione is here."

And as he said it, a beatific smile spread across his friend's face and she perched herself on the small bit of unoccupied space of his cot. She was more shadow than substance in the low, pulsing light of the room. He could really only make her out by the untamable curls haloing her head and the sweet tenor of her voice, but if she turned her head in just the right direction and he squinted hard enough he might get lucky and catch just a glimpse of those intelligent, umber eyes.
"Hermione…Your friend from the future, Hermione?"

"You've told them about me?"

"Are you hallucinating already?" Surprise was heavy in Howard's voice, and for good reason. It couldn't have been more than ten minutes since the injection, nowhere near the hour they'd predicted it would take for the drug to really begin taking effect.

"You've told them all about us, haven't you? You've broken the statute, if the Ministry finds out they'll have your head."

Harry shook his head, ignoring Peggy and Howard's questions to focus fully on Hermione. "Different time, different rules."

"You don't honestly believe that, do you? They know, they've always known; who are you, where you, what you're doing. They've only been waiting, patiently biding their time until they can get you and as many others as possible in one, quick swoop."

"No."

"They'll come for you when your least prepared, wipe your existence from their memories and lock you away in the deepest, darkest pit they can find and you'll never get home and you'll never save us."

"It's not true," Harry spat. "I have time, I can fix this."

"We're going to die because of you, Harry. I already have." She leaned forward then, thick, dark curls mere hairsbreadths away from brushing his face, and in the scarce few moments were the room was illuminated by that single, blinking red light, he finally saw her clearly.

There was nowhere Harry could go, strapped down as securely as was, but there was no way he wasn't at least going to try. He cringed into the unyielding mattress of his cot, turned his head in the farthest direction from her, and screwed his eyes shut until he could see nothing of that fucking red light and the terrible image it illuminated.

She was dead, long dead. Rot had begun eating away her face, having already claimed an entire eyeball and much of the skin down the left side of her jaw, exposing the muscle and sinew and gleaming bone and molars that lay beneath. The only remaining eyeball was milky white and shot through with the red of burst blood vessels and what little flesh remained had already begun to bloat and peel away.

"You're not real."

"Who says I'm not?" Pale white hands, shriveling and clawed with decay, stroked along the divots of the mattress, still not touching him though, never touching him.

"Go away."

"No. You never want to hear what I have to say. But this is important." There was no warning before she was suddenly halfway across the room, moving swiftly and unnaturally in a back and forth pacing too dizzying to track for long. "You left me alone to face that mob, and I died because of it. Horribly. Miserably. Alone. And it was all for nothing, because you can't fix this. All this time you've spent here, every opportunity you've been presented and somehow you've managed to muck it up every single time. If it had been me, it would have been done already."
Her words burned; they set something that felt like fury but growled like magic alight in his chest. "You told me to go. You said it had to be you who stayed behind to perform the ritual."

"You should have stayed anyway. You should have fought. You should have protected me. You should have saved me."

Harry shook his head, frantically denying the words he himself had thought when at his lowest. "It's not my fault."

"It is your fault."

"Leave me alone."

"After everything we went through together, all the atrocities I endured for you, the things I sacrificed you repay me by leaving me to fend for myself?" Hermione wasn't angry when she spoke, and that perhaps made the whole thing worse, she only sounded defeated. "I thought I meant more to you."

"Please forgive me," he begged, desperate for this to end and willing to say and do whatever it took. "Please. Please."

"No."

The red light flashed a familiar green and she fell, a marionette violently released from her strings. And then Voldemort stepped over the corpse that seemed to grow more rotted with each passing second, a wide, cruel smile carving an unseemly gash across his face.

"Harry Potter." The simple greeting could barely be heard over the hissing of the dozens of snakes that bled from beneath his robes, they spread across the floor one giant, writhing carpet that whispered evil nothings in the sibilant language he'd been so eager to be rid of.

Harry groaned in horror, his hands twisted in their restrains, trying desperately and fruitlessly to claw their way up to his chest where an inexplicable pressure was caving it in. "No. No, go away."

"Failure in all that you will ever do. You are a disease. A plague. A curse. The world would have been much improved if you'd died that night on that cold doorstep."

"Go away."

The sea of snakes parted silently as the dark lord glided forward on bare feet to hover over his trapped form. "Because of your foolishness I've been given the chance I was denied. You have no hope of standing against me, so you will fall before me. On your bones and the bones of your loved ones I will build a world in my image, and your kind and the filth you associated with will be purged."

The snakes coiled around each other, forming twisted shapes and crippled forms that could just be distinguished as the broken bodies of his friends and family. All dead at Voldemort's feet.

Something in Harry shattered, his scream was one torn from his chest and amplified by the unfiltered magic that had been building in his chest, waiting for this perfect moment to let itself and his fury known.

The world around him warped but Voldemort remained the solitary, steady figure. Laughing at his pain even as everything else stripped away. Then there was a concussive banging, the sudden gush
of unnaturally thick air, then nothing.

He didn't wake easy. Five, ten, twenty hours passed and Harry jerked to consciousness with a heaving gasp and a mouthful of bile. Peggy and Howard were on the other side of the room, crouched over something he couldn't yet see and so were luckily out of the splash zone.

They were at his side a moment later though, Peggy with a soothing hand between his shoulder blades and Howard with a rag at the ready and a sheepish smile.

"Too many drugs in your system," he said as the rag was tossed over the watery mess. "I knew they wouldn't sit well with your stomach, should have had a bucket at the ready."

"Mark that down for next time," Harry rasped around his sore throat.

"Any other symptoms we should take note of? Dizziness? Disorientation?"

"My head feels like someone took a sledgehammer to it." Harry tucked his head between his knees, struggling to form rational thought around the pounding in his head.

"Want something to take the edge off?"

He moaned in protest. "Please, no more drugs."

Howard barked a quick laugh. "I meant something more along the lines of bourbon. But I feel that would receive about the same warm reception."

"You would be right."

"Aside from the headache. How do you feel?" Peggy asked. "How does your magic feel?"

Harry took a good long moment to seriously consider the answer, hesitantly focusing inward in search of his magic. It didn't take much to find it. The second he sought it out, it was there, itching beneath his skin like a rash he couldn't quite reach; he felt alight with energy, restless and unsettled, the same as he'd felt the day he'd seen the girl die and the reaper who took her soul. It was different, more, and indisputable proof that it had worked.

"We had a feeling it did," Howard said when Harry relayed as much to them. "You had a pretty serious reaction in no time at all." He hurried across the room to collect what he and Peggy had been looking over when Harry had first woken, then quickly returned to his side, the strangely marked paper held loose in his hand. "I went ahead and did an EEG while you were out, just to make sure we hadn't rendered you braindead, and even unconscious and not actively casting your markers were off the charts. This one experimental procedure had an enormous impact on your magic."

Howard was near vibrating out of his shoes he was so excited, and Harry was growing to be near as bad. "So that means we can continue? We can actually do this?"

"Yes, not now but soon. That half hour took a lot out of you, you've been out almost twenty-four hours and I still need to observe you for at least another twelve to make sure there aren't any surprise side effects. But we can continue. I really think this can work."

Harry slumped back onto the cot, heaving an enormous breath of relief. "Thank you."
"Thank you." Howard beamed down at him. "I've never worked on something so incredible, I don't think I ever will again."

"I wouldn't be so sure." A matching grin was quick to spread across Harry's face. "Don't forget the disintegration rays powered by an object of possible alien origins stored in the room over."

"Good point."

"If you're feeling up to it we'd like to get you up on your feet," Peggy cut in. "There's even food out in the main lab for you to give a try."

"The only time I'll allow it," Howard said, faux-sternly. "Try and keep it down this time around?"

"I can't make any promises."

Harry grunted softly as he swung his legs over the side of the cot, he allowed himself a moment to firmly ground his feet to the floor before pushing forward onto unsteady legs. Peggy and Howard were at his side in an instant, close enough to provide support should he need it, but allowing him just enough space to maneuver on his own.

It was dizzying the first few steps, but he shook off his vertigo quickly enough and managed to stagger out into the main lab without any assistance. A chair was waiting for him, already invitingly pulled out in front of a cleared off work station.

"Soup to start," Peggy said imperiously. She unscrewed a clunky, metal thermos and placed it in front of Harry. "If you're able to keep that down and in the mood for more after I might have a few biscuits I'd be willing to share."

"Cheers."

The soup was the bland kind of fare that spoke of how heavily rationed anything with any kind of flavor was, but it was warm and hearty and did wonders to fill the gnawing pit in his stomach so there wasn't much he could say in complaint. Especially when, after finishing off the entire thermos and waiting a good few minutes, it didn't make a second appearance and he was allowed one of the raspberry biscuits Peggy liked to take with her tea.

"How did the whole thing look from your end?" Harry asked as he steadily worked his way through his lunch.

Peggy hummed thoughtfully. "A bit disconcerting," she finally settled on. "It wasn't so awful when we were speaking with you, but when the hallucinations began and you grew upset it was difficult to watch. The reaction from your magic wasn't at all what we were expecting either."

"What did it do?"

"Nothing," Howard said, looking the slightest bit bemused. "We were expecting a big, destructive display from the things you've described, but all we saw was you shouting at an apparition and then you were screaming. When we gassed the room we didn't know your magic was having a reaction, we thought something had gone wrong. It was only when we did the EEG that we realized otherwise."

"Do you think it was because of the suppressor?"

"I can't say. Maybe? Or maybe whatever your magic was trying to do wasn't a physical attack. You've said that it's inflicted auditory and visual hallucinations on both you and another before,"
maybe it was trying something along those lines this time around too."

"We'll just have to be careful next time," Peggy said. "We know what it looks like and how quickly
everything happens so we can be prepared. Are you still feeling all right?"

Harry shrugged. "A bit itchy and full of energy, but all right otherwise."

"You should be fine for me to step out for a bit then, yes? Rogers and his men are leaving this
evening to bring down a HYDRA facility in the Tatra Mountains, I'd like to be there to see them
off if I can."

"I promise I won't blow Howard up with my newly manifested powers," Harry said, maybe just a
touch insincerely.

"And I promise not to goad him into blowing me up with his newly manifested powers," Howard
added, no more believable than Harry.

Peggy rolled her eyes even as she battled a small snort of amusement. "If either of you winds up
dead the other would do well to follow him, because I'll have no mercy on you."

"Noted."

She left with a short nod and the sharp click of heeled shoes on concrete, Howard was rounding on
Harry with a grin full of mischief the moment she was gone. "Should we test to see how much
more effective at making explosions the procedure has made you?"

"Yes, please."

Twelve hours and several demolished slabs of granite later, Harry had worn himself out near to
nothing, but no surprise side effects had reared their ugly heads in that time and Howard eventually
gave him a pass to head back home. He offered to call him a car, save him exerting himself any
further, but he opted to walk instead. His legs still worked just fine and the boarding house the SSR
had put him up in didn't take long to reach by foot.

That was a good decision, as it turned out. Death made an appearance without any sort of warning,
as he often did, halfway through the walk and it would have been horribly awkward trying to carry
a conversation with the entity visible only to his eyes without completely freaking out a driver.

"I take it you're here because of what we did." Death never wasted time on any kind of niceties,
Harry figured he should get into the habit of doing the same.

"It's fascinating and very stupid."

Harry shrugged not even a little perturbed. "I had a feeling you wouldn't approve."

"I could care less what you do to your weak little body so long as my Heart remains unbroken."

"How poetic," Harry laughed, however Death wasn't yet done speaking.

"But if you damage it or yourself in this pointless crusade, the infinity gem may never be
recovered."

"And that upsets you."
"Yes that upsets me," Death snarled. "Were we not both in agreement that the last thing we wanted was for Thanos to get his hands on the space gem?"

"Well, of course, but in my present, when I left, did Thanos have the space gem?"

Death took on an expression eerily similar to the scrunched nosed, pursed lip grimace Aunt Petunia seemed to always sport whenever Harry was near. "Not when you left. but there were whispers, he was making moves to begin collecting."

"But we'll still have time. I won't have forgotten anything once I'm back in my time, I can still help retrieve and hide it. I just need to make it back first."

"You intend to give up the Heart, and while I have no complaints about that, once you do there is nothing you can do to contain an infinity gem. You will be mortal, weak, powerless."

"I won't be completely powerless," Harry protested. "I'll still have my magic."

Death scoffed mockingly. "Your parlor tricks are nothing when compared to even one of the gems."

"A mortal has it now. A magicless mortal. The way I see it, I already have an advantage."

"You're a fool."

"Maybe." Harry's mouth ticked up in a small smile. "But I'm determined fool. And I know how to get things done."

The look Death pinned him with was surprisingly free of malice or disdain, but it sent a shiver down Harry's spine all the same. "One day, you'll find yourself facing odds not even you and all your dumb luck can overcome."

And wasn't that just an awful repetition of the very same thing his drug riddled mind had considered one of his most deeply rooted fears? But Harry only smiled wider in the face of Death and refused to be cowed.

"As long as that day is not today or the day after, I'll make do." He snapped the entity one last jaunty salute then marched his way home.

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A/N: This is not at all the chapter I had intended to write. I wanted to just add a quick scene to the beginning of an already fully planned and plotted chapter and it just…snowballed. I'll just have to save the fun explosive death powers and Harry & Bucky bonding for next chapter.

On an only somewhat related note, the next time you all hear from me I will have seen Infinity Wars and so will be a changed woman. Please come cry with me on Facebook and Tumblr.
Chapter 11

Those easy hours after the procedure, the ones spent causing reckless explosions for the fun of it and restocking Harry's energy with the biscuits Peggy left behind, made them complacent. Howard kept an eye on Harry in the days following of course; every hour on the dot he would ask for a status report from Harry, he'd measure the growth in his magic, any changes that might be marked even long after the drugs had worn off. And every hour on the dot he would declare Harry healthy, changing still but he and his magic were stable.

The problem was Howard was muggle and mortal. He was a genius, no denying that, but there were some things he didn't and couldn't understand about this power simply because he had no experience in it outside of the single test subject he had found in Harry. The magic they'd meddled with was quiet in the days following the procedure, complacent, and so it fooled them all into believing it was tame.

Until the moment it proved that it wasn't.

It began with the return of Rogers and his team. They'd been in Slovakia, storming a HYDRA base in some mountain range Harry vaguely recalled Peggy naming when he was freshly through with the procedure. The mission had been a test to see how well the unit worked together and they proved without a shadow of a doubt that they worked well.

It hadn't been a very large base, housing a dozen agents at most, half of which had taken the route of cyanide capsules hidden in teeth before they could be apprehended, but the rest were taken into the team's custody and all of their work was rounded up and brought back to the SSR. A few more of the energy guns were brought in for Harry and Howard, a welcomed gift as Howard had broken down all of the others in his quest to understand what made them tick.

"The shields are just about done and ready to be handed off for field testing." Howard said even as he began unpacking the bag stuffed haphazardly with a whole array of HYDRA's energy weapons. "But it wouldn't hurt to give the ones we've got one more test here in a controlled environment."

Harry couldn't find any reason to object, there hadn't been much for him to do the past few days save for sit around and endure Howard's endless questions. But he'd stuck around, suffering his boredom in not so silence, so Howard could keep an eye on him.

"What do we have to work with?" Eagerly he bounced over to Howard's side to take in the assortment of weapons.

The pack must have belonged to one of the HYDRA agents as, along with the weapons stuffed into it, there were a few personal effects stored within it as well; a pair of spare socks, a compass, some laces, and other oddments to that effect.

"Doesn't look like much," Howard said. "The standard rifles for the most part, a few grenades, a normal knife." His hand found the bottom of the bag and he paused, Harry caught confusion and, oddly enough, recognition cross his features, but then he withdrew the only remaining item from the bag and he understood.

It was a wand.

A real wand. Harry didn't even have to touch it to feel the innate magic radiating from its core.

"Is this what I think it is?"
Harry could only nod even as his mind scrambled to form a practical explanation for the wand's presence. It being a lucky find was the most obvious one, a souvenir picked from the corpse of one of HYDRA's many victims. And yet his mind kept falling back to a wilder, much less likely rationale for no other reason than it just felt right: the pack from which the wand had come belonged to a wizard. A wizard was working with HYDRA.

"Where are the prisoners being kept?"

Howard startled at the sudden question, as lost in his thoughts as Harry had been until just a moment ago. "The interrogation rooms, Phillips wanted to ask them a few things before they were sent off to a camp. Do you think…"

"We need to find Peggy. Or Phillips. Or both."

They were together, the two agents, in Phillips' office no doubt going over the mission debrief and making arrangements for their prisoners.

Harry rapped sharply on the open door, then marched right in, Howard close behind and the pack containing the wand clutched tight in his fist. "Do we know who this belongs to?"

"Glad to see your picking up Stark's impressive manners," Phillips drawled sarcastically, not even bothering to look away from the report in his hand and to the bag in question.

Peggy was another matter though. Harry must have looked as off as he felt as a frown of concern was already beginning to wrinkle her forehead. "Has something happened?

"Not yet. Do you know who this bag belonged to?"

His sharp tone finally drew Phillips' attention, but it was again Peggy who responded. "One of the HYDRA agents Captain Rogers took in I believe. I wasn't there to see though. Tell me what's wrong."

"We found this inside of it."

Peggy, and Phillips to a lesser degree, had seen his wand enough to recognize one on sight, even if the one he held aloft was noticeably darker and longer than the one he kept tucked up his shirtsleeve.

"Could it have been stolen?"

Harry shook his head at Peggy's question. "It was hidden in a false bottom of the bag, it belongs to him."

"Let me see."

He obligingly handed the bag over and watched as Peggy searched through each compartment and pouch, coming up empty in every one, just as he and Howard had.

"Captain Rogers would know who this belonged to," she finally concluded.

"Then have someone go and get him." Phillips said only to immediately call for the young woman working at the desk just outside of his office with orders to find Rogers and bring him to them immediately.

But the man had left already, along with his Sergeant and almost the rest of his team. A Gabe
Jones was still in the facility though, resting in the infirmary with a strained ankle, but he was quick to leave his bed and the boredom of the medical wing when the urgency of the situation was relayed to him.

"Dugan grabbed it off the back of one of the agents we took in," he confirmed the moment he saw the bag. "Tall guy, real skinny with dark hair cropped short and a mole just beneath his left eye."

The one matching his description had been set up alone in the third of six interrogation rooms, he hadn't spoken a word since arriving, the same as all of his other colleagues.

"Let me talk to him," Harry all but demanded.

Phillips laughed right in his face. "And why would I do that?"

"Because he's one of mine. A wizard working with HYDRA, we have to understand why, if someone ordered him and others there or if he's working alone."

"I have real agents for that. Men and women trained and cleared for interrogation. You are not."

"No SSR agents but the ones in this room have been cleared to know about the wizarding world."

Phillips raised a sardonic eyebrow. "It's a good thing Agent Carter has the proper training and clearance to carry out an interrogation."

"He won't tell her a thing," Harry said certainly.

"Why do think that?" Peggy finally spoke up.

"Because not everyone in my world is as forthcoming with our secrets as I am. He won't say a word about magic." Harry chanced a quick glance at the glass that allowed them a perfect view of the wizard but still kept them hidden from his sight. "And just looking at him I can tell that he's the sort who wouldn't speak with you even if he was allowed. Too much of the wizarding world is home to some very narrowminded men, nothing is more beneath those men than a muggle."

Peggy nodded, she knew of the war with Voldemort and the disdain he and those like him had for those without magic. "Let Harry talk to him," she told Phillips. "He's best equipped for this job."

"He's not qualified."

"He's most qualified out of all of us."

Phillips looked between Peggy and Harry and an unusually silent Howard, then snorted ruefully and waved his hand in clear permission. "I know when I'm beat. But if this goes bad the blame falls on you, Agent Carter."

"Understood."

"Finding out if he even is a wizard and what affiliations he has with any others is the most important thing to get out of him." Phillips was speaking directly to Harry now. "But if you could get any of HYDRA's plans out of him while you're doing it, that would be just fine."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"Good. Now get in there."

The room was tiny, barely ten paces from end to end and only just large enough to fit two
uncomfortable looking chairs and nothing else. The man who might be a wizard was in one of the
two chairs, each wrist bound securely to the metal arms of the furniture. He kept his eyes cast
down when Harry entered, a move that might be viewed as submissive by some but just looked
bored to Harry.

The silence lingered while Harry took the time to get settled into his own seat (it was just as
uncomfortable as it looked), and lingered for a while longer as surveyed his interrogee.

He wasn't all that fine looking of a fellow with his smooshed up nose and thin lips naturally curled
in a scowl, the unnaturally gray pallor of his face and the crooked way he sat in his seat wasn't
doing him many favors either. The man seemed dedicated in his cause to pretend Harry didn't exist,
right up to the moment he pulled out the wand.

"This yours?"

Steel gray eyes flitted from the knobby length of the wand to Harry's impassive face once, then
twice, before settling back onto his lap.

"Is that a no?" Harry tilted his head curiously. "It sounded like it might be a no. All right then…"

The wood of the wand made in ominous groan as Harry gently began to fold it into itself. The
shoulders of the man across from him stiffened in a move that was only noticed because Harry had
been looking for it. He ceased his attempts at breaking the wand in two the moment he saw it.

"You're a wizard." The prisoner's words were thick with an accent of Eastern Europe and spat with
all of the reluctance of one who knew he'd been outsmarted.

Harry gave a noncommittal hum as he allowed the wand to fall safely back into his lap. "Why are
you working with the muggles?"

"Why are you?"

"They're a means to an end," Harry shrugged. "I'm helping them so that they will help me."

The wand in his hand twisted between his fingers, there wasn't any intent to cast behind his actions
but the wood still hummed happily in his grasp.

Wary gray eyes met unflustered green for the first time since the start of the conversation. "Who
are you?"

Harry offered a bland smile. "Oh no," he said, "I've already answered one of your questions. It's
only fair you answer one of mine. I'll even be kind and give you an easy one to start. What is your
name?"

There was no answer from the man, he seemed to have clammed up without reason.

"Have you forgotten how to talk all of a sudden?" Harry goaded.

When that second question went unanswered, Harry reached across the small bit of space between
them and placed his hand on one of the man's cuffed wrists.

"Please, brother," he said, layering as much sincerity into his words as he could manage, "none of
us have want to hurt you, but your silence will not be stood for much longer. Can you give me your
name at least? Just your name and I'll give you mine. A trade."
The man's eyes fixated to the point where Harry's skin met his own, the hairs on the back of that arm had stood on end.

"I am Adalgar."

"Adalgar." Harry carefully tested out the sound before offering another, more sincere smile. "A pleasure. I'm Harry. What did you want from the muggles?"

And once again there was silence.

"Adalgar," he repeated with a bit more steel in his tone. "What did you want from the muggles?"

In the few seconds Harry was waiting for an answer, his attention was redirected once again to the point of contact between him and Adalgar. He was struck with the sudden realization that this was the first physical contact he'd had with another magic user in almost a year, once the thought took hold he found himself hyperaware of the touch between them. If he sat still enough he could feel the man's magic, a faint hum just beneath the surface of his skin. His own magic let out what almost felt like a contented purr at the contact.

As if acting on commands other than his own, Harry's hand wrapped firmly around Adalgar's wrist, seeking out every instance of magic that it could. But not much was to be found there so he sought it out, searched higher until just the tips of his fingers came to rest at the center of his chest, only millimeters to the right of his heart.

"What are you doing?"

"You haven't answered my question yet," Harry reprimanded. "We trade, remember?" There was a point just beneath his finger where magic or energy or something was gathering, attracting much of Harry's focus as it did.

"The muggles, Adalgar," he prompted, when the silence dragged on for too long. "What do you want from them?"

Adalgar squirmed uncomfortably in his seat, exhaling shakily as he finally responded. "Recon. I was sent to find their energy source."

"The stone?"

"Yes."

"Who sent you?"

Adalgar shook his head. "We trade, remember?"

"I did say that, didn't I?" Harry crooked his finger and felt a corresponding tug from something inside of Adalgar.

The other wizard hissed in discomfort, cringing back in his seat in an attempt to escape Harry's touch. "What are you doing?"

"I don't know."

He bent his finger again. Then he drew away, but he was caught on something, a curling strand of iridescent light that unraveled from Adalgar's chest the further away he pulled.

"Stop."
"Who are you working for?"

"Please, stop."

"I just need a name, Adalgar."

"He will kill me."

Harry's smile this time was a gentle thing that held just an edge of mockery. "No. He won't."

"Grindelwald."

Somewhere in the back of his mind, the name registered as one that meant only the worst of news for him. Harry had done so well avoiding Voldemort, the last thing he wanted to do was tangle with the dark lord of this era. But another part of him, the part entranced by the lustrous thread coiling from within Adalgar and around his finger didn't have the slightest care for the name or what trouble it could mean for him.

"What does he want the stone for?"

Instead of an answer this time, he received a broken sob.

"Adalgar? What does he intend to do with the stone once he has it?"

"Please, I do not know," Adalgar's wail was one full of pain, but from what Harry didn't know, he was barely touching him. "He wants to defeat the man… the professor."

"Dumbledore." A harsh tug and enough of that silvery thread unraveled to fill the palm of his hand. It was weightless, barely registering as anything in Harry's hand.

"Prosím, nič viac." Adalgar was trembling violently in his seat, tears streaked down his cheeks but they remained completely unnoticed by Harry. "Have mercy."

The door swung open and hit the wall with a concussive banging. Harry jolted in his seat, jerked suddenly from the trance he had fallen into, his gaze swung upward to meet Peggy's eyes, wide and maybe just a bit fearful.

"Harry?"

He blinked rapidly, then clarity came crashing down on him and he snatched his hand away, the strand of light curled its way back into Adalgar who fell silent the moment he was released. Harry fell from his chair and stumbled as far from the suddenly prone man as the tiny room would allow.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I don't know what I... I don't know that was."

"Is he dead?" Peggy's usually steel laced tone wavered just the slightest.

Harry shook his head and just barely refrained from turning his back on the whole, awful scene. He watched terrified as Peggy touched two fingers to the base of his throat and waited near half a minute before wilting in relief.

"He's alive. Only unconscious." She turned to Harry then, no judgment in her gaze and the fear gone now that he'd found control again, but there was still something deeply unsettling in the way she looked at him. "What happened?"

"I don't know."
"You were doing something."

"And I don't know what it was."

Harry's voice rose and broke with distress, he didn't miss the way Peggy took a half step away from him at the outburst.

"We need better than that." She moved forward, and this time there wasn't a moment of hesitation when she took hold of his hand. "Focus."

Harry sucked in a breath that audibly trembled. "I just…I just need a moment. To collect myself."

A few wrong questions and he would be falling into a full blown, breakdown, and knowing what she did about the unusual and often violent ways his magic reacted to stress, Peggy wasn't at all inclined to let it get that far. "That's fine, darling. The conference room down the hall, go there, take as much time as you need. We'll get him sorted out in medical and then we'll take care of this, yes?"

"Yes." Harry tightened his grip on her hand for only half a moment, seeking out the comfort she was so readily offering. Then he stepped away and out of the room, Howard and Phillips were waiting just outside the door, but they said nothing to him and he didn't even look their way as he rushed to lock himself in the conference room.

Death had once told him that when he fell into his moods of overwhelming fear and anxiety while pondering the Heart or really anything else to do with it and the entity they once belonged to, it was like a beacon, a cry into the void for him. Well if that were true he must be screaming, shouting, wailing for Death now. Only this time it was intentional.

He was still too shaken to be able to muster a smile when the entity arrived, but he felt a marked sense of relief all the same. Whatever had happened in that room was linked to the Heart, Death would have answers.

"Your new method is better than the sticks and the flowers at the least, but I would appreciate a less…deafening call for my company the next time you might have need for me."

"Maybe you can teach me that trick." Harry tucked his hands in the crook beneath each arm, more in an attempt to hide the way they still shook than for the confident pose it might look to some. "But later. I need help."

"You always do. You're an insufferable, helpless little quark."

"I think I almost killed someone."

That earned him a sarcastic little smirk. "And why would I, Death, find any issue with that?"

"Because I didn't realize I was even doing it until it was almost too late. There was just this light and I felt so powerful but I had no control. It was like all that there was was the consuming need to have it, whatever it was."

"The light?"

"Yes. It was coming out of him, Adalgar." Harry rapped sharply on his own chest in a rough approximation where he had been connected to the other wizard. "Here."

"Oh, quark." Death laughed and it did nothing to comfort him. "You were reaping his soul."
"What?" The word was barely a whisper, pushed with enormous effort past trembling lips.

"You can do all that I can. I reap souls, it's perhaps the thing I'm most well known for, and so you can too. How is he? The man whose soul you tried to take?"

"I don't know...he was unconscious when I left."

"Yes, well the process when done before their time is very painful. Like extracting one's organs through their nostrils with a rusted hook."

Harry stomach rolled, a quick hand clasped over his mouth saw him heaving violently but not expelling his lunch all over the floor.

"This is because of what we did," he whispered once the heaving had passed and he had some form of control again. "Isn't it?"

"I could only presume. You showed no propensity for the ability before whatever little experiment you conducted on yourself came to pass."

"This is what I was afraid of."

"Being granted the power of a primordial being?"

"Not having control," Harry snapped and felt bad for it almost immediately after, even if Death remained as unphased as ever. "I could have killed him."

"Lucky then, that you didn't."

"Your words of comfort are doing wonders for my stress levels, thanks."

"Anything for you, quark." Sarcasm dripped from every syllable and Harry couldn't help but laugh humorlessly at Death's ability to just not care even when it felt like his world had, once again, been shifted on its axis.

He sank into the chair at the head of the table and folded his form in half until his forehead was resting against his knees. "I never wanted this."

"But it's yours anyway." The touch Death placed on the back of his neck was freezing and wholly unexpected. "You're fighting it. Stop. You don't want this power, this mantle, I understand, but it will not be ignored. If you do not use it and embrace it, it will find its own way."

"And if I hurt someone trying to wield this power?"

"Then comfort yourself with the knowledge that one lost life is nothing compared to the hundreds more that would be taken if you do not learn to control yourself."

And then he was gone. And Harry could do nothing but contemplate the harsh truth of Death's words.

Peggy returned sometime later- he'd stopped keeping track of how long he was in the room the moment Death disappeared- and Howard and Phillips were right behind her.

"Ready for your debrief, agent?"

"No." But he stepped to the side anyway and watched them file into the room and to their seats before reluctantly joining them at the table.
"So, explain to us what the hell happened in there," Harry could almost appreciate how little time Phillips wasted getting straight to the point, it would certainly make this entire, painful process go a little quicker.

"I lost control."

"No shit. How?"

Harry shifted restlessly in his seat, then glanced to first Peggy then Howard. "It's because of what we did."

Neither seemed surprised but Phillips was understandably lost. "What did you do?"

"We've been helping him try to access more of his magic," Howard stepped in to explain for Harry. "Just as Erskine promised. We made a breakthrough only a few days ago and have been keeping an eye out for side effects since." He turned back to Harry. "This is one of them?"

He shook his head. "Not a side effect. This is it working. I wasn't prepared for the reaction my magic would have when it came in contact with another's, it was overwhelming and I lost control."

"What were you doing to him though? He was screaming, but you were barely even touching him."

Harry hesitated, all the time he'd had in this room alone and he hadn't considered a proper cover story. He couldn't tell them he'd been reaping the man's soul, but he had to tell them something. "It's um…it's not something I even understand. My magic felt threatened by his so it tried to neutralize the threat. Snuff it out. I didn't even realize it was happening until Peggy stepped in."

Phillips didn't seem at all enthused by the response, and if he was being honest Harry couldn't really blame him. He wouldn't be at all happy to hear he had a nineteen year old wizard with only the most tenuous control of his power taking refuge in his agency either. "Is this something we should expect from you often?"

"No," Harry said immediately. "None of you have any power my magic might view as a threat, and I know what happened now, I won't be caught off guard again."

"And we'll be keeping a closer eye on him as well," Peggy input.

Phillips still didn't seem entirely pleased, but his scowl of disapproval had passed at the very least. "It'd be in your best interest that you do. Another incident like this and we might have the wrong people trying to look into our affairs."

Once he received confirmation from the other three in the room, he gave a satisfied nod and leaned back in seat, relaxing infinitesimally before moving onto the next order of business. "It sounded like he was giving you names before it went tits up. What were you able to gather from what he told you?"

"Well he's definitely a wizard," Harry sighed. "And he's not working alone. He's answering to a man named Grindelwald, he's a dark wizard. He wants the artifact, the energy source of all those HYDRA weapons. It's powerful and it's magic in its own form, I could see the appeal of possessing it, especially for a man like Grindelwald."

"What would he do with it if he had it?"

"That's harder to say. He'd wreak havoc on the wizarding world, that much is certain, but anything outside of that…"

Phillips leaned forward in his seat, his entire attention focused on Harry. "Is he a danger to us?"
"Him particularly? No. But wizards in general..." Harry hesitated. "Where there's one there's more. You won't find them fighting on the frontlines, they'll be in the HYDRA bases trying to track down the energy source."

"So it's Rogers and his men who might find themselves in danger of them," Peggy surmised.

Harry nodded. "They're the ones most likely to run into them. When confronted the wizards might run, but if they deem them enough of a threat, some will try to fight."

"With magic, you mean?" Phillips sighed.

"Yes."

"Is there any way they could defend themselves against it?" Howard asked.

"The shields will be of some use. We've tested my magic against them, we know they can deflect certain curses."

"But not all."

"And they'd be going in blind," Peggy added. "They don't know what to look out for. What they're defending themselves from."

Harry could hear the request she was avoiding putting into words. "You think I should tell them?"

"I think it might be the difference between life and death for them."

And maybe that was true, but a selfish part of him didn't care. He wasn't here to save lives, Rogers and his men would be going up against Grindelwald's spies even if he weren't in this time and they surely didn't have a wizard to tell them what to look out for then. His focus should be getting home and not mucking up the timeline anymore than he might already have.

But he was Harry fucking Potter and he had morals, he couldn't let these men die if he had the means to prevent it.

"If it's any comfort, they already have some experience in the arcane," Peggy said as if she could scent his wavering resolve. "We've given them a full debrief on the possible origin of the artifact that's powering HYDRA's weapons. They know the consequences of speaking any of the SSR's secrets."

"And you can have them take the same vows we did," Howard added. "Sign in their blood and everything."

"I'm sure that would go over about as well as it did with you lot," Harry snorted.

"We signed them didn't we?"

They had.

"When?"

"As soon as we can get them back in the building," Phillips said. "Tomorrow? 0600."

"0800," Harry countered. "It's been a long day."
Harry knew only two of Rogers' men; Barnes who he was at least somewhat familiar with and Gabe Jones, the soldier who had identified Adalgar as the pack's owner the day before. The rest were strangers to him and while they all, at first glance, seemed nice enough they wouldn't exactly have been the sort of people he'd have felt comfortable sharing this secret with if it had been any other scenario.

They were already assembled in the same conference room he'd held the debrief in the previous night, wide awake despite how early it still felt for Harry and curious about the purpose of the meeting. This probably wasn't the usual place they gathered to be briefed for missions, deep in the bowels of the facility, away from curious agents and listening ears.

All eyes fell on Harry the moment he entered the room, the last to arrive, and while the members of the team he hadn't yet become acquainted with appeared confused by his presence, Rogers and Barnes smiled and rose to greet him.

"Agent Potter," Rogers' enormous hand engulfed Harry's own when he reached out to shake it. "Curious to see you here."

"Yeah," Harry winced, "it's sort of my fault you all are here to begin with."

"We weren't really told what to expect from this meeting," Barnes hand was just as large but a touch less formal when he added a quick pat to Harry's shoulder. "Want to fill us in?"

"Or you could wait long enough to be seated, Seargent Barnes," Peggy cut in. "After which we could begin debriefing you all and you'll know exactly what you've been called for." She was smiling as she spoke though, taking away any bite the reprimand might carry.

"Good morning, Peg."

Her smile widened and she turned her focus on Harry, a soft hand reached out to smooth over his cheek before resting just beneath his chin to tilt his head up enough for them to make eye contact. "Good morning, darling. How did you sleep?"

"Like shit."

"So crass," Peggy laughed, not the slightest bit perturbed.

"Sorry," Harry murmured. "Had a lot on my mind."

"Well let's get this over with quickly then so we can't get you some more rest. No lab today, straight home after this."

"Oh come on, Peg!" Howard complained from his seat at the table. "You can't keep stealing my assistant."

"I'm not stealing him. I'm giving him a day off, a much-needed day off. Now come on, sit so we can start."

He was guided to the seat opposite the only exit to the room, bracketed by Peggy on one side and Rogers and Barnes on the other. Phillips was in the same seat he'd claimed the day before, at the head of the table and needed only a quick clear of his throat to silence the room. But before he could even speak, Peggy was interjecting.

"Introductions first." When it seemed like Phillips might protest, she added, "He needs to know who he's being expected to trust."
"Go on then," the Colonel grunted and Harry had to hide his smile at the fact that even Phillips caved so easily to Peggy's whim.

"Gentlemen," she said, addressing the room at large, "we're being joined today by Agent Harry Potter, he works with Stark developing the weapons and defenses you use to fight HYDRA. Harry, meet our anti-HYDRA combat unit; you're already familiar with Captain Rogers and Sergeant Barnes, and you briefly met Gabe Jones yesterday evening. Across from you is Timothy Dugan."

The burly ginger being introduced tipped his hat, a bowler hat of all things, in greeting. "Only Agent Carter knows me by Timothy, most call me Dum Dum."

"Dum Dum is a child's name," Peggy snorted. "Beside him you'll find Jim Morita, to his left is James Falsworth, and across from Sergeant Barnes is Jacques Dernier."

"Pleasure," Harry smiled awkwardly and dipped his head in a nod.

"Agent Potter is here to brief you on a worrying addition we've recently discovered to HYDRA's ranks, a sort of people you've not encountered before. They work very closely with HYDRA and so we think it safe to assume your unit is most at risk of encountering them during operations. If you're not equipped with the proper knowledge in who they are and how best to defend yourselves against them then those encounters could very well lead to your deaths."

"Okay," Barnes leaned forward in his seat, "I'm interested."

"I'm sure it goes without saying that everything that is about to be disclosed to you is highly classified. If we have any reason to believe you have spoken of this with anyone not in this room, you will be court martialed and prosecuted to the fullest extent."

It had been Harry's decision to forgo the vows; not because he had an overwhelming trust in Rogers and his men (even if he'd at least come to accept the super soldier wasn't completely awful), but rather because he trusted Peggy and, to an extent Phillips, and their ability to ensure these men's silence without him having to put in the work of crafting seven different vows and taking the time to convince each man to actually break skin and sign with their blood.

The combat unit were soldiers first and foremost, not spies or politicians, they knew how to take their orders and keep their silence. So he would tell them and not worry about this coming back to bite him in the arse.

And as if he could hear Harry's unspoken resolve and wished to further prove he was making the right choice, Rogers spoke up. "You know we won't say a word, we understand the importance of discretion."

Peggy nodded in thanks. "You've proven that you do. But assurances needed to be made all the same."

"Consider them made."

"It's time then, I suppose, to begin. Harry?"

The Boy Who Lived. The Boy Who Lied. The Man Who Conquered. Harry was used to being thrust in the spotlight, the unwilling center of attention, but it was still never easy. Especially when the eyes on him were so few and so personal. But the sooner he started the sooner it would be over, so he breathed out heavy and spoke.
They didn't doubt his story once. Even before the demonstrations and the endless questions, when Harry was only telling them of the sub-species of humans who could defy laws of physics and bend reality to their will, the group of soldiers showed no sign of disbelief.

There was confusion. As to the wizarding world felt the need to hide so many for so long.

There was wonder. Barnes had been thrilled when Harry apparated him across the room and even more impressed when he vanished his vomit.

There was even a bit of exasperation. Because of course HYDRA would find a way to get their hands on a few of these wizards.

But there was no doubt. No accusations of tricks or lies. Not even Erskine had been so quick to believe him, and yet these men listened to what he had to say and believed him. After so many times being called a liar, it was a nice feeling to be so easily trusted.

"What's your favorite bit of magic?" It was Barnes who asked, he above all the others seemed most taken with the entire idea of magic and the little of the wizarding world Harry had explained.

"My favorite bit?" Harry, who had noticeably relaxed the more he spoke, took a second to ponder the question. "I think the Patronus would have to be it. It's really meant to be a defensive spell but it's got a few other uses and mine is a bit...sentimental."

"What does it do?"

Figuring it would be easier to show rather than tell, Harry maneuvered his wand in the series of flicks and twists as he spoke the incantation; the stag that burst into the room drew gasps of delight from even the hard to impress Morita, who went so far as to reach out and touch the specter.

"I can feel it," he said, hand running through the silver mist, "but it's not actually here."

"A Patronus isn't fully tangible," Harry explained. "Only dementors, the dark creatures they're meant to be defending the caster against, are physically affected by a Patronus."

"Dementor?"

"Wraith like creatures that feed off your souls and leech all happiness from a room, literally. They're disgusting and terrible and I hope you never have to encounter them. If I recall correctly using dementors among his forces was never Grindelwald's thing." Only Voldemort's. "But if you do come across one, don't try to fight it, or shoot it, or blow it up, run."

Phillips finally took that as his cue to reenter the conversation, steering it back to its original point. "Agent Potter is capable of some incredible things, looked like something fresh out a fairy tale when he introduced me to it, but that's only because he's on our side. The wizards with HYDRA aren't going to show you pretty lights and neat tricks, they're going to be using their magic to kill you."

"We're telling you of all of this so that you can learn to defend yourself against it," Peggy added. "Some spells have only a physical effect on you, they might cut you up, knock you off your feet. Others can be deflected with the shields we've been working on to defend you against the worst of HYDRA's weapons. And others you simply have to avoid contact with altogether. We want to make sure you can tell the difference in a fight."

"How is that going to be done?" Rogers questioned.
Harry was the one to answer this time. "You're going to fight me."

"Fight you?"

"Yes, magic against whatever you have. You need to see it in action, being used against you for you to learn to defend against it."

Neither Peggy, Howard, or Phillips had been privy to this particular decision until just now, it was one Harry had made alone, after returning home the night previous to consider the days to come. Telling them which spells to look out for wouldn't be enough, showing the spells wouldn't be either, if these men were anything like him, which now that he met them he was sure they had at least a few similarities, they would learn best by actually being put in the situation and learning as they went. And if teaching them had the side effect of preparing him for his eventual fight with Voldemort, that was just an added benefit. Who cared if they were only muggles? One was a super soldier and the others members of an elite combat unit, he had to start somewhere.

Rogers seemed to find merit in the idea too. "How soon would you like to start?"

Harry glanced over to Peggy, then over to Phillips, both were good enough at their jobs to keep the surprise from their faces, while Howard was totally unconcerned. He probably assumed he'd been too deep in one of his projects to hear of the plan to use Harry as a sparring partner against Rogers and his men.

"We'll have to arrange a space out of the way of curious eyes for you to use," Peggy finally said. "There are a few places here in the lower levels I can think of, I'll take some time today to look each one over and get back to you with what I decide."

"We're going to hold off sending you boys after anymore HYDRA bases until we get you comfortable fighting against this kind of weapon," Phillips said. "We can't have any of you getting killed by a spell you didn't recognize when we've got the means to teach you right here. No one wants you out of commission for too long though, so believe we're going to make this process as quick as we possibly can."

"We appreciate it, sir," Rogers thanked with a crisp nod. "Is there anything else we need to know?"

"Not at the moment, no. If anything else comes up we'll inform you."

"And if you have any questions, feel free to ask any of us," Peggy tacked on.

There were no more questions from any of the men so Phillips allowed them to head out while Harry, Howard, Peggy, and Phillips remained behind. The moment the door clicked shut behind Jones, Peggy was rounding on Harry, a smile that only barely hid her exasperation already rounding her cheeks.

"So you're going to fight them now?"

Harry shrugged. "We need to get this done quickly if we want them back to busting HYDRA bases, this is how we do it."

"Are you sure you're up for it?"

She wasn't just asking after his stamina or even his magical endurance, they could all hear the hidden question, the unspoken reminder of yesterday's debacle. To Harry's credit he didn't get defensive, or even flinch away from the reminder, he stopped to consider the question with seriousness then nodded.
"Yes, this is different. I'm calling on the magic I've always had in a controlled, non-hostile environment. The Hallows should have no reason to react."

"Will you let any of us sit in during these sessions?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "As if I could keep any of you away."

"Of course you couldn't. It's good of you to acknowledge that." Peggy laughed. "But now I actually have to go and find that practice space. I expect your help with that."

"Just let me know when."

"Now, if you have nothing else planned."

Howard heaved a sigh, finally breaking his uncharacteristic silence. "Just the other an hour ago she claimed she wasn't stealing you. This looks like theft to me."

"It's only for a few hours and then you can have him back only if he's feeling well enough to do so. If he even looks too pale for my comfort we're going back to my original suggestion of taking the day off. Whatever you boys get into down there will have to wait."

"Uh, that would be pioneer advancements in modern technology."

"I'm sure that's what you would have us believe. If that's all, Colonel, we'll take our leave now."

Phillips nodded in short acknowledgment. "Go on. I expect an update by the end of the day."

"Of course." Both Howard and Phillips received a nod in parting, then she was gripping Harry's arm and leading him from the room. "Let's make this quick, I have real work to be doing."

She didn't need Harry, if they were being entirely honest, Peggy already knew exactly what she wanted and where to find it. He was just being brought along for the company. And to annoy Howard.

There were three potential rooms Peggy had in mind to utilize for the practice room, they only visited one before she decided she liked it best. After came filling out the proper paperwork to stake their official claim on the room and a visit to Phillips for an update and that was all. It barely took two hours and Harry was left with still way too much of his day ahead of him.

"Maybe figure out how you plan to go against Rogers and his men without killing them or yourself," Peggy suggested.

"No one is going to die," Harry huffed. "I have a few basic spells to put them up against that can give the same effect as the nastier ones just fine."

"Then I'm sure Howard would love your company."

"Are you trying to get rid of me?"

Peggy smiled sweetly. "Yes. But for your own good. I have an afternoon full of strategy meetings and paperwork, unless you want to sit in on either you should probably find something to do."

He didn't want to sit in on either. But neither did he want to lurk around in the lab with nothing to do. But then he remembered the medical wing one floor up and someone he needed to visit.
Adalgar was a prisoner, a dangerous one with magic, but the security surrounding the private room he’d been put in amounted to a single lock on the door to which only one member of the medical staff had a key to. Harry would have been outraged by the lack of caution, but then he actually laid eyes on the man.

"He's unresponsive, has been since he was brought in." The nurse heading his care was immediately forthcoming with any information Harry requested when she was told he'd been present during the event that had put him in this state. "It's still too soon to tell if he'll come out of it or not, it just depends on the level of trauma."

Having one's soul improperly extracted before its time by an untrained protégé of Death had to be pretty up there on the trauma scale.

"Is there anything physically wrong with him?"

"He's running cooler than normal and he gets bad sleep terrors every few hours. But he's healthy otherwise. Whatever's wrong with him, it's in his head."

"Yeah, but that can be just as dangerous as a bullet in the gut. More painful too."

"Maybe." The nurse didn't sound entirely convinced, but the people of this era hadn't ever been known for their progressive thinking regarding mental health. "But I've got to go on and make my rounds, will you be all right with him in here?"

"He's not any danger to me." It was the other way around really.

"I'll be back around in a half hour or so, if you leave before then make sure to lock the door behind you."

Harry didn't respond outside of a curt nod and she didn't seem to want much more than that. He watched her leave, attention already moving on to the next patient in her care, and found himself wondering over how little care seemed to be going into keeping Adalgar secured. No member of the SSR was lazy and he'd learned all too quickly that every agent and member, no matter their assigned position, was incredibly competent in all that they did. So the lax security wasn't borne from laziness or an improper understanding of the threat Adalgar could pose when awake, there was something else, something more, and the only thing he could think of was they didn't believe he would be waking.

But why would they jump to that conclusion? How had they come to it so quickly? He'd been there not even a full twenty four hours, and yes all of it had been spent unconscious but a long rest after a traumatic experience wasn't unheard of. Was it?

He scrubbed a hand through his hair, hoping somewhere in his hindbrain that if he was rough enough he might scrub the thought, and the unpleasant turn it had the potential of taking, from his head altogether.

He was just guessing anyway. He could be completely wrong, the security could be airtight and he and his untrained eye just couldn't tell. Adalgar could already be on the mend and the SSR was just giving him a nice bed in the infirmary to recover in peace.

But a part of him, a part he needed to learn to stop ignoring, wasn't feeling at all optimistic.

Merlin, he needed to sit. But there were no chairs in the room, just the small cot and its unresponsive occupant. It was low to the ground though so Harry just folded his legs beneath himself and settled on the floor just beside the cot.
The position put him just about level with Adalgar, close enough where every one of his features could be picked out in clear detail. He looked well enough, maybe a bit pale and he'd been thin even before having his soul halfway ripped out, the rings of purple bruising each eye was new but everything else looked normal, just as the nurse had said it was.

But Harry was plenty experienced with seeing men reduced to drooling vegetables when subjected to too much pain, he'd been privy to some of Voldemort's darkest moments for the better part of three years after all. And what he had done to Adalgar was beyond the Crucatus; like having one's organs extracted through their nostrils with a rusted hook, is what Death had likened it to. It was no wonder his mind had broken.

The thought sent a wave of conflicting emotions rushing through him. Torture, accidental or not, wasn't his thing and would never be his thing, just the thought of inflicting pain to that degree on another person made his stomach turn. But…

"But you work for Grindelwald."

He almost didn't realize he'd spoken, he definitely hadn't meant to, but it was almost a relief to do so. He had a thought that was weighing heavy and it might only be relieved by speaking it aloud. So he did.

"He's not as bad as Voldemort was or will be, I don't think. But he's still killed, he's still tortured and terrorized and his followers are no better." He paused, waiting for a reaction or a response or something that never came. "You chose the wrong side and now you're suffering for it. I guess some would call that karma, justice, and maybe it is. I just wish it hadn't had to be dealt by my hand. I'm just…what I'm trying to say is I'm sorry. I wouldn't have done this to anyone, not to the man who spent years torturing me, and especially not to a stranger. No matter what he may have done in his past."

The nail of his ring finger scratched insistently and almost unconsciously at the inside of his thumb until the skin felt raw and burned red with pain. He forced himself to focus on that, that point of discomfort rather than the awful feeling of violation.

He felt guilty, of course he did, but that was so easily overshadowed by the reminder that in that moment when he was reaping Adalgar's soul Harry had had no control. His consciousness had been booted to the backseat and his magic, the Heart's magic, had taken the reins. It had been like the Imperius curse even while it hadn't: nothing had been forced, he'd wanted to do it. The need to find that spark within Adalgar and hold it in his hands had been consuming, there had been no thought outside of that single one. But where usually that thrall came from an opponent's curse, this came from within Harry, from the power he'd only just been helping to cultivate. And because of that there was no escaping it, he couldn't shake it off the way he might sometimes be able to with the Imperius. His body and his magic had no way to defend themselves against something they thought to be one of their own.

That didn't mean he was going to stop. Not even remotely. He was going to go back to Howard, allow himself to be strapped to that table again and injected with all manner of drugs until the terrors in his mind became indistinguishable from the terrors of the real world and his magic flared and attacked and expanded. Because he was too close now, the end was in sight and he would be damned if something like a little fear was going to stop him from getting back. And maybe people would get hurt, like Adalgar or maybe even worse, but that was a small price to pay. The entire wizarding world was at risk, the were thousands of witches and wizard who didn't even know they were relying on him to get this done. A few lives in exchange was negligible.

There had to be sacrifice if his world was going to survive. People were going to die; good people,
innocent people, but not all of his people. And that would be worth it.

But then he looked up at Adalgar, pale and haunted even in sleep. Broken, potentially irreparably, because of what he had done, and that resolve broke.

He was off the floor before he realized he was moving, crossing the room and yanking open the door too quickly for there to be any real thought behind his movement. When he left he couldn't remember if he'd locked up behind himself, but if he hadn't who cared? Adalgar was going nowhere.

Something was burning in his throat, not nausea or tears or a scream ready to tear its way free, maybe shame? Or disgust? Or maybe it was all of that combined. Whatever it was it hurt bad as a collapsed lung and made him feel out of control. It made his breath come out short and sharp in a way that wasn't helping him feel any more composed and was drawing the eyes of the nurses and doctors already there. He left before they could stop him, ask him questions that meant well but would only make things worse.

It didn't matter that he didn't know where he was going or where he wanted to be, or that his world had narrowed to one blurred out tunnel that made navigating difficult, or that if he didn't take a full breath soon he might drop right there in the middle of the hall. It didn't matter because five, ten, fifteen paces out of the infirmary his face met an immovable object that really just turned out to be one Sergeant James Barnes' chest.

For a moment what Harry now realized was the panic attack he'd been all too quickly spiraling into stopped in its tracks as he gawked at Barnes and Barnes gawked back at him. But then the moment was over and he went back to heaving for breath that wouldn't come, then Barnes had him by the arms and was dragging, dragging until they burst through the door of the washroom and he was collapsing forward onto the tile.

A hand fell onto the back of his head, the other wrapped around his wrist and maneuvered his whole arm until his hand was pressed into the center of the chest his face had only a minute or two ago been getting very well acquainted with.

"Hey, c'mon kid, breathe for me. You're okay, just breathe with me."

Harry felt the low rumble of Barnes' words beneath the palm of his hand more than he heard it. But those first few words and the soothing lilt to each of them was just enough to draw him out of his head to listen.

"Match my breathing."

A warm hand settled over the one Harry still had pressed to Barnes' chest, pushing it close enough where he could feel each rise and fall of his breath and track the steady pulse of his heartbeat. He kept his eyes closed tight, forcing himself to focus on that alone as he struggled to do as instructed and match the steady inhale and exhale.

"Good job," Barnes murmured. "Just like that. Can you do it again?"

It was audibly shaky the next breath he drew in, but it was still large enough to inflate his lungs and chase away the lightheadedness that had been beginning to take over.

"There you go. Try for one more."

He took in each word of praise greedily and followed every gentle instruction to just keep breathing until the world no longer felt as if it were closing in on him and his lungs had stopped rebelling
against his body. But the worst had not yet passed. Harry took in his first full breath, something shuddered down his spine and he crumpled. His forehead hit his knees and he screwed his eyes shut even tighter to try and hold back his stinging tears even while he gasped out a painful sob.

Barnes didn't move away or even seem surprised by the burst of emotion, he only shifted his grip from Harry's head and wrist to cradle both of his shoulders; the contact should be terrifying considering what he'd done to Adalgar just the day before through touch alone, but he only felt warm and grounded.

"I'm sorry." Harry choked the words out of his aching throat with an enormous effort. "I'm sorry."

"Hey stop that," Barnes chided. "There's no reason to be sorry, I ain't judging. Just keep breathing. "Okay."

And for a long moment Harry focused on doing just that until the heavy knot that had been constricting his chest and turning every other word into a choked off sob had dissipated for the most part. By then Barnes had made himself comfortable on the floor right across from him and seemed to be itching with a question he wasn't able to hold in for long.

"This wasn't us, was it?"

Harry finally allowed his eyes to blink open as he swung a confused frown up at Barnes. "What?"

"You didn't look much like you wanted to tell us all about your…you know. Did it upset you, having to do that?"

"No. No, I wanted to tell you. If it meant keeping you all safe, I wanted to do it. This," he gestured at himself and the sorry picture he must make, "was something different."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

And the crazy thing was, Harry did. Unburdening himself to Peggy and Howard each time that he had was always a cathartic experience even if it made his hair stand on end the entire time he did it. It was nice not having to hold onto a secret any longer, and it was a feeling he was in sore need of at the moment. But how could he say even half of what he wanted to without sounding completely mad?

"I'm afraid." Is what he finally settled on.

Barnes cocked his head curiously. "Of what?"

"Me." Harry tapped at the center of his chest in an indication of his magic. "This. What it can do with or without my say because it's not just mine anymore. It's been altered without my consent, made into something I didn't want, something I can't control. But I need this power if I ever want to see my family again, if I want them to be safe then I need more of it even while I'm terrified of what will happen when I actually get it."

One long second dragged on in silence and Harry worried for a moment that he hadn't chosen his words quite as sanely as he'd hoped. But then:

"I kind of know exactly what that's like."

Harry squinted at the man in front of him, surprised and confused at the same time. "What?"

Barnes heaved a troubled sigh as he dragged his hand through his hair. When he spoke, his voice
was pitched so low Harry, who was sitting mere inches away from him, almost had trouble hearing.

"In Azzano HYDRA would take guys to their labs, strap 'em to tables, and pump 'em full of some drug they were trying to make right. They took me back there one day, strapped me up and pumped me full and I was sure I was gonna die like all the others. Only I didn't, because of Steve; he got me off that table and whatever they did to me failed. Or I thought it did. Now I ain't so sure."

Barnes' face was guarded, maybe even a little afraid, but he spoke with an open honesty Harry couldn't bring himself to doubt.

"No one knows. What they did, that I remember, that it's working."

"What did they do?" Harry whispered.

"They made me like Steve. Only difference is he got the way he is in minutes, mine is taking weeks."

Harry felt something in the bottom of his stomach drop, whether it was fear or awe he wasn't entirely certain. "They perfected the serum?"

"Perfected might not be the right thing to call it," Barnes said with a shake of his head. "They did something right, but I'm not sure they even knew. They wouldn't have been so quick to let me get away if they did.

"Since then I can see and hear and smell and shoot and fight better than before. Everything Steve says he can do my body is trying to mimic, only slower. And it's just like you said, having what you are changed and twisted into something you never asked for is fucking terrifying and… violating. But what's even worse? Needing what those bastards did to me. Because with it I know I can keep Steve safe long enough for him to win this war."

Harry's brain struggled to wrap itself around the bomb shell that had been dropped on him. HYDRA had developed their own version of a working serum and it was enhancing Barnes even as they spoke. How had they managed it without magic? And in the seedy, underground lab Harry had heard described to him too many times. It had taken Erskine years and outside intervention to get what he needed and they'd managed with less resources and even less backing than the SSR.

If anyone else were to find out...

Harry forced himself to abandon that line of thinking. No one could or would, not from him at least. Barnes had told him this out of trust and with the desire to see him comforted, he wouldn't betray that.

"Thank you."

The smile that quirked the other man's lips was just a hint bashful as he brought his shoulders up in a shrug. "I think it helps having someone who knows what it feels like. Shared experiences and all that."

"It does," Harry agreed. "It really does. I won't tell anyone, if you want to keep it quiet for a while longer or forever, they'll hear nothing from me."

Barnes' smile morphed into something more genuine and grateful. "Thanks, kid." He fell back onto his heels, rocking back just far enough to get a proper look at Harry's face. "How do you feel? Up for walking?"
"If I have to, yes," Harry said, taking note of the way his legs, still tucked up beneath him, no longer trembled.

"You should head home, then, take the day to get your head on straight. I'll make something up with Stark."

He really shouldn't, he had work to do. But it was barely past noon and Harry was exhausted, Howard would forgive him for giving himself the rest of the day off, especially considering how light their work load was at the moment.

"I can walk the way with you, if you need some help."

Harry smiled but shook his head anyway. "I should be able to make it fine on my own. But thank you." He gripped Barnes wrist for just a second and gave it a gentle squeeze, trying his best to convey every ounce of his sincerity through his gaze alone. "Really, thank you."

"Hey," one broad hand gave his a gentle tap, "we take care of our own, that means you too. Now get on home, get some rest. I expect you to have some more color in your cheeks next I see you."

Harry laughed as he hauled himself to his feet with only a hint of uncertainty. "I don't think there's ever been a spot of color in my cheeks, no reason to start now. But before you run me out…"

Harry's feet stalled before they could cross the few steps that would lead him back out into the main hall, there had been a question lingering in the back of his mind since he'd first run into Barnes, now that he was clear headed and in control again it plucked at his curiosity even louder.

"What were you doing headed into the infirmary?"

And suddenly Barnes looked bashful. "I, ah, was looking for you actually. Agent Carter mentioned you'd gone up this way, I just wanted to ask you a bit more about…well, you know. I grew up reading stories about this kind of thing, I guess I wanted to know how much of it was actually true."

Harry couldn't stop the smile that inched across his face; it got tedious telling the same unhappy stories of his past, he didn't think anyone had even once asked him to speak of the wonders of his world rather than all of its horrors. "Most of it is, actually," he confessed. "I can tell you all about it, if you'd like."

Barnes grinned, delighted and not even embarrassed to show it. "Oh I would, tomorrow."

He laughed and nodded and easily agreed. "Of course. Tomorrow."

"Do you not wonder what made you all that you are? What gave you this power? This right to wield as you do."

Twelve wizards and witches, representatives of twelve of the many ministries of the European continent, stood in silence; they waited impatiently but wisely for the answer they knew would come with or without their prompting. Eight months had been spent working with this man, this muggle who had sworn to them salvation, they knew better than anyone how much he liked to talk.

And true to form he did, he talked, showing no interest in any response other than his own. "I did. Before I knew even what you were I wondered, and when I finally got the chance to understand, when your wards fell and your people, broken and beaten, finally revealed themselves to my curiosities I wondered more. It didn't take much work once the first of yours surrendered to my study for me to find what I wanted."
The baron named Strucker led them through a labyrinth of tight white corridors; the halls of his home and his workplace, where the magics and miracles he'd promised to provide were being performed even as he spoke. They'd come to collect on his promises, see the progress he'd made in all the time he'd been given, and he was only too happy to show them. Only after a bit of monologuing however.

"I've met others like you, not identical but similar. They considered themselves other than human, unique from the homo sapiens from which they descended, all because they could do what you could; bend matter, harness energy, rewrite the rules of the universe. They were lesser in some ways, only able do one rather than the multitude you're capable of. But the one that they could was with a force that outstripped the tricks you cast."

"I studied you both and found what was needed to make this possible. You two share a common history, descended from the same few altered and enhanced by a race not seen on this planet in centuries. They wanted to make your ancestors more than human, soldiers for a war they couldn't win alone, they thought they had failed and left them to die. But they didn't fail and their subjects didn't die, they evolved.

"Some remained with a single devastating ability that needed to be triggered through certain circumstances. And some were born with a latent capability of manipulating them all on a smaller scale. As they evolved they grew apart, considered themselves separate from the other; one called themselves wizards, the other inhuman. But they both thought it wise to isolate themselves from those different, lesser, than them, tucked away in their own little worlds safe in their anonymity. Until now."

"As fascinating as this," a representative no longer able to hold out as patiently as his colleagues finally spoke up, "we did come here for a history lesson."

"No," Strucker agreed, "but if you want to understand what is being done here, you need to know."

At last they came to something other than the twisting, seemingly endless corridor; a room, wide and tall equipped with technologies none of the gathered wizards, even the more progressive among them, had any hope of recognizing.

"I mentioned that your inhuman cousins needed to be triggered through certain circumstances to obtain their abilities, they need a very specific catalyst." The baron led them further into the room, to the epicenter of the controlled chaos. "While those of your race are born able to cast, no trigger necessary. However, the catalyst that unlocks the abilities of the inhuman kind does have a rather interesting effect on your own as well."

He took a moment to allow the assembled witches and wizards to take in the sight of the strange devices that would change their world. The best way to describe them would be with a word like coffins, completely transparent glass in the front, metal across their backs, upright coffins. They were identical in make and height (standing several heads taller than the tallest in the room) and connected across the less than foot of space between them by a similarly transparent piping system that would, when opened, circulate the breathing air in both capsules with little effort.

The only visible difference in the two devices was a compartment at the base of the first capsule, empty for the moment but reserved for something that would no doubt be integral to the overall process of...whatever Strucker was aiming to do.

It was an impressive sight in theory, but one none of the members of the wizarding council truly understood.
"What exactly are we looking at here?"

The smile Strucker granted his nonplussed guests was something close to amused, as if he found their confusion endearing.

"These chambers are where the transformation from man to inhuman take place. In the traditional procedure only one is needed, one similar to this chamber here." He gestured to the capsule with the yet unexplained compartment at its base. "We've made a few modifications to suit our purposes but the core idea remains the same.

"We begin with the catalyst, a crystal if you would believe it. Unfortunately the kind needed to make this work aren't ones you could dig up in just any mine, the Terrigen crystal is very rare, very hard to find; fortunately I have access to resources not many do." Strucker's words, unremarkable as they might seem at first, were taken as the warning they were meant to be. Even if the wizards could find some way to replicate the setup he had, they would be unable to get any further than that without these rare crystals he spoke of, highlighting the undeniable if not slightly bitter truth; they needed Strucker.

The man in question carried on without a hitch in his speech even as a little smile tugged at his mouth. "When exposed to very specific conditions the crystals produce a mist that triggers the evolution of the inhuman to their higher self, they are entombed within a cocoon like covering and their potential is unlocked. With wizards, there is a notable difference.

"Any of yours who have lost their magic to disease are given the ability back tenfold, but within a week they're dead, overwhelmed and burned out. At our request you provided us a dozen fully functioning wizards, eleven of those twelve died when exposed to the mist same as the others. One didn't."

Strucker inclined his head just so and two men were immediately dragged into the room, both heavily shackled and dressed in garb reminiscent of a prisoner, and shoved into a chamber each.

"You'll find him to be the one on your right."

The wizard in question appeared a mere shadow of the man he might have once been, inches away from collapse, or death as one of the aide's fit a mask over the lower half of his face before shutting him in.

"He's what I've heard you call a pureblood, it's because of that he survived. His family's history of magic dates back several centuries, their ties to their inhuman ancestry is stronger than any of the others I'd been given and so when he was exposed to the mist his reaction was much less fatal. We did as we always do, we studied him, experimented, and in doing so found a rather convenient solution."

The compartment at the base of the first chamber disengaged at Strucker's command, an aide sporting protective gear up to his elbows carried in a vessel that radiated neon light. The crystals. They fit perfectly into the space beneath the chamber and were locked within with no issue.

"The power of the crystal is too much for just any wizard, magic or no."

A dull hiss played as soundtrack to Strucker's explanation, the glass granting them sight of the crystals fogged with sudden humidity as temperature controlled rain filled the compartment.

"But our pureblood friend can take it within himself."

The mask attached to the strangely compliant wizard was attached by a thin tube to the
compartment containing the crystals, where a thick, billowing mist began to curl from them. With every breath he dragged in, the mist crawled its way through the tube until it filled his mask and he was pulling it into his lungs with each inhale.

"But his magic sees it as the intrusion that it is and tries to fight it."

Within the capsule the wizard began to jerk, small uncontrollable spasms that sent arcs of raw magic dancing across his skin in violently hued sparks.

"This is usually the part where they die, too much power overloads the body and they just crumble. But whatever manipulations were done to his ancestors guard him from the same fate, and instead of killing him that influx of power is expelled."

The wizards tore the mask from his face as he heaved, choking on the viscous fog that poured from his mouth, thicker and darker than it had been when it went in.

"What is returned is different, tempered, attuned to a lesser wizard's physiology. They can intake it and what happens after is similar to the crystal's original purpose. Only bigger and better."

When the heavy, storm colored fog completely filled the capsule, the piping system connecting the two tanks slid open and the fog was vacuumed into the neighboring tank. The wizard was left slumped over the best he could in the small space while his neighbor pressed himself against the glass, struggling to break free as he suffocated on the suddenly too thick air.

Strucker watched his desperate bid to escape with a practiced sort of dispassion. "We've found that only those with the potential for magic produce the desired results, like those who've lost their magic to your disease, or your squibs, but there seems to be no shortage of those at the moment."

Through the fog and the desperate press of fists against glass, a blue-silver light was beginning to emanate, the first sign of power the man had shown since losing his magic near half a year ago. Strucker raised a clenched fist and immediately a pale gas was flooding the capsule rendering the man unconscious in a matter of seconds.

Strucker turned his back on the scene, two men, one void of consciousness and the second clinging to it by the tips of his fingers, the smoke from the experiment and the sedative mingling at the bottom of their glass prisons, a look of contentment began to make its way across his features.

"He'll be revived sometime later this evening, it's always best to give them several hours of uninterrupted rest before testing the effectiveness of the procedure, but from the display he showed just then he's sure to be on the more powerful end of the spectrum."

"And what are the side effects to be expected?"

"With our newly awakened wizard? None, save for a brief period of difficulty in control, he'll have much more power at his disposal than what's he's grown used to."

"And with the first?"

"Fatigue is our greatest setback at the moment." Strucker gestured to the man and the way too prominent bone cast shadows across his drawn gray skin. "We've worked him hard these past months, each session with the crystal takes more and more from him, he'll be dead within the week if we continue as we have been."

The wizards could already guess where this line of conversation was leading them, the representative for the German Ministry spoke up to save them the time it would take for Strucker to
finally get to the point. "You want us to provide you a replacement."

"One is all I need," was the immediate assurance. "I was able to restore a sizeable amount their power with just him, if you can find me one more with old blood, I won't need another and you'll have your army."

"How old?"

"How far back can you trace?"

"Even one is asking too much," Austria's representative denied. "This plague has hit us hard, the old families that haven't been altogether wiped out have gone into hiding to protect themselves and their lines."

"Humor me," Strucker coaxed. "The oldest families in your history. Who are they?"

"I can't say much for anywhere outside of Europe," France at least seemed willing to play along for the moment, "but the Blacks were one of our oldest."

"But the last Black heir died almost a decade ago," Germany reminded. "Lady Malfoy was a Black and so her son was as well, but the entire family was killed by muggles just two months ago."

"The Lestranges dated back nearly to the start."

"All passed in the plague."

"The Slytherins were of the oldest," Spain added. "They were absorbed into the Gaunts."

"And if rumor is to be believed, the last Gaunt was killed in the war."

There was a ripple of unrest through the crowd of wizards at that reminder.

"Anyone else?" Strucker prompted.

"The Peverells."

Germany scoffed. "The Peverells have been extinct for over a century."

"No," Croatia said. "The last Peverell was a daughter, the blood remained even if the name was lost when she married into another pureblood family."

"The Potters."

If the mention of the last Gaunt had the wizards uneased, the single mention of this one family had all of their hackles erect.

"Are there Potters remaining?" Strucker inquired.

"Only one."

His guests' strange behavior had Strucker curious and maybe just a bit unnerved. "What has you so concerned?"

"Harry Potter is the last of his line," Spain clarified when no one else would. "Three years ago we were at war with the rumored Gaunt heir. It was Potter who killed him and ended the war. But he did it by collecting three dangerous artifacts, those artifacts were cursed and because of that curse
we are now at war with muggles and dying everyday from plague."

"One man is the cause behind all this trouble?" None of the others seemed to share Strucker's amusement. "Do you at least have him in your custody?"

"There was an attempt to detain him, in hopes of finding some way to reverse the curse through him, but he and an accomplice used an illegal ritual to send him into hiding."

"And none of you have been able to find him since?" Incredulity dripped from every one of Strucker's words.

Great Britain bristled, not appreciating the muggle's condescension one bit. "The ritual sent him through time. We have no way to find him."

"Perhaps you don't. Tell me first, are there no other viable options?"

There was a round of denials, of the old blooded families of Europe only Potter remained.

Strucker hummed, deep in contemplation for a moment. "If I were to find when he has gone, do you at least have the means to retrieve him?"

A strange spark of hope was beginning to light Great Britain's eyes. "We do. But can you really find him?"

"I have access to resources not many do." The recall to his earlier words were accompanied by a slow, slick smile sliding its way across Strucker's face. "I'll find your Harry Potter."

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A/N: Finally some quality time with Bucky, I love writing him!

But Infinity Wars though, right? Come scream with me on Tumblr.
Harry was given a deadline, one week to prepare Rogers' combat unit for hostile encounters with magic users of his kind, one week to familiarize them with any dark magic they might run into and teach them every way to defend themselves against it. The SSR could afford them being out of commission for no longer than that.

Getting the job done in the allotted time frame wasn't completely out of the question, it wasn't as if Harry had to teach them how to cast these spells, only recognize them through sight and incantation and be able to determine on the fly the best way to avoid being killed by them. So he sat down, biro in hand, fresh sheet of paper before him, prepared to name every dark spell he'd ever encountered (and they were numerous) and how best to survive them. And he could think of nothing.

Harry had lost count of all the dark spells cast at and around him, he'd seen his share of cadavers torn open, dismembered, disemboweled by dark spells. He'd fought in a war after all, and spent more time than he would have liked in Voldemort's head, but his own personal experience in actually casting them was…woeful.

The most destructive curse he had in his arsenal was the modified cutting curse, Sectumsempra, but it wouldn't even be created for a few more decades so was all but useless to him now. After that he had a myriad of cutting and blasting hexes he'd learned his later years in Hogwarts and during his time on the run, which might as well be tickling charms compared to the destructive, nightmare inducing curses Grindelwald's men would be sure to toss about when finding themselves in a fight against muggles.

It was frustrating being faced with how little he knew, how few spells of importance he'd been taught while at Hogwarts, even if a part of him could understand why.

The thing about ten years of peace was that it lulled soldiers of war and relics of battle into a comfort that made them complacent. The instructors and headmasters and board members of Hogwarts had certainly been complacent. Otherwise there would have been fewer lessons on turning cats into tea cozies and more on how to efficiently subdue a dark wizard. Some people probably felt strongly about perpetuating violence in the classroom, but surely they could have introduced more than stunners and disarming charms after Voldemort's return. There had been an entire year between the time he was confirmed alive and the time he took control of Hogwarts and they had done nothing to prepare the students for probable run ins with all manners of dark wizards. Harry had felt their negligence in the war and he felt it even more now, when seven men's lives were dependent on knowledge he didn't have.

"So what do we do about it?"

After near an hour of staring blankly at a list made up of the only three truly dark curses he knew Harry gave up, tossed the sad sheet away, and went in search of Peggy. He explained the dilemma, unburdened every doubt and concern, and she was unimpressed.

"Their lives are dependent on this," she continued, tone sharp as whip crack. "So leave your pessimistic bullshit at the door and let's get to work figuring this out. What is stopping you from marching into the closest library for people like you and reading up on what you need to know?"

"I'm trying to teach them to defend themselves against dark magic and spells," Harry explained, "the best I would be able to find in a public library would be a few manuscripts on the history and
theory of dark magic. For the specific stuff, curses and rituals, I would need a personal collection."

"Which you don't currently have access to," Peggy surmised.

Harry sighed, frustrated. "Not here. Not now."

"And there's nowhere else?"

Well of course there was, he could think of half a dozen semi-viable options, one of which was a half hour walk away, but they were options he hadn't considered for a reason.

His half-second hesitation of course wasn't missed by Peggy. "What are you thinking?"

"It's dangerous," he tried to protest.

She raised an eyebrow, unimpressed by the halfhearted excuse. "How dangerous?"

"I lost control when introduced to just Adalgar's magic, to get just one book I'd have to be surrounded by it."

"Explain."

"I'd have to visit my world. We have a shopping district not even an hour away from here; in it there's a collection of shops geared specifically towards dark wizards. No one would look twice at my collecting a book or several on dark curses. But to get them I have to pass through wards of pure magic, rub elbows with people with the same power Adalgar and I have. I could lose control same as I did last time." Peggy didn't look fully convinced, so he carried on. "And that isn't the only danger. The library in New York is the furthest into my world I've gone since I first arrived here, there's a reason for that. I'm not supposed to exist yet, I don't know what impact my being here has on my future."

"So you've been keeping away to prevent accidentally changing your reality."

"Or purposely." Harry shrugged. "I can't say I haven't been tempted."

"But you'll do it anyway," Peggy said, entirely unmoved by his concerns. "For them."

"Of course I will," Harry scoffed, more irritated with himself at his inability to keep away from trouble than of Peggy's terrifying ability to sniff out his weaknesses and call him out on them. "I'm too noble not to. And I won't lie, part of me is thrilled to even consider going back, even if it poses a bit of a danger."

"You'll take someone with you then, to minimize the danger. Rogers or one of his men if you'd like."

"Take a muggle along with him into the wizarding world? There was an idea asking for trouble."

"You get into far more trouble than is good for you," Peggy said, sensing his hesitation and moving quickly to nip it in the bud, "if something were to happen I would feel much better knowing you had someone to keep you from doing anything reckless."

"There are spells in place..." But even as he spoke he reconsidered. The wards were really only put in place to dissuade muggles from entering, and just on the Leaky Cauldron's entrance at that, once they were in he didn't think there were spells that could physically eject them. And it would be nice to have someone on his side if things were to go wrong.
"Rogers and Barnes."

Peggy blinked, surprised both by his easy acceptance and by his choice for backup. "Both of them?"

Harry nodded. "I'll be in good hands with the both of them. Besides I promised Barnes I'd show him more of the wizarding world and I owe him one."

If anything, Peggy looked as if she had more questions, but she shook off her curiosity for the time being to focus on the matter at hand. "Rogers and Barnes then. How soon would you be able to go?"

"As soon as possible," Harry said. "There's no need to wait, it's a quick walk from her. Though I suppose I'll need to stop off at a bank, all I have is muggle money but I'm sure they're able to convert it into what I need."

The issue of converting muggle to wizarding currency had never come up for him back in his Hogwarts days, he'd had not a bit of muggle money but too much wizarding. But he supposed the muggleborn students had to pay for their school supplies somehow, it made sense that Gringotts might provide currency exchange services.

"Don't bother. We have a few reserves in the facility you can draw from. Rogers shouldn't be difficult to track down either, he and the others were scheduled for a training exercise in a few hours."

"Should we add a stop to the colonel's office to let him know I'm borrowing two of his men?"

Peggy shook her head. "I'm authorized to sign off on tasks this small. I'll brief him once you've returned. To save time."

The young agent accounting the small reserves of funds didn't even blink when Peggy arrived with the request of a hundred quid, he handed it over within minutes of verifying her credentials and then they were on their way up to the common areas of the facility to search out the unwitting seconds for Harry's foray into Diagon Alley.

The whole team was in the mess hall, long since finished with their meals but hanging around until the exercise Peggy had mentioned.

"Agent Carter," Dugan called out when he noticed her entrance and the path she was cutting directly towards them. "Strange seeing you among us lowly folk."

"Almost as strange as the smell lingering around your boots," she teased. "But Agent Potter and I are here on official business, we were hoping we might borrow Captain Rogers and Sergeant Barnes for a few hours."

Rogers' immediately straightened in interest. "What can we do for you, ma'am?"

"Well this is more of Agent Potter's task, so I'll let him explain."

Harry looked around at the near empty hall, then surreptitiously waved his wand, casting a muffliato around the immediate area before speaking. "To properly train you all in recognizing and defending yourselves against magic there's a bit more I need to know," he explained. "I was never properly trained so I have to rely on self-instruction, but to do that there are a few things I need to collect from a nearby shopping district."
Falsworth aimed a playful grin Barnes' way. "They want you to go shopping for them."

"Not exactly," Harry laughed. "The shopping district is one of my kind's, it's been some time since I was among them so Peggy insisted upon...backup."

At just the mention of being introduced to more magic, Barnes lit up. "We're the backup?"

Harry shrugged nonchalantly. "You and Captain Rogers should fit in well among a crowd of wizards, and you're both large enough to make a nice human shield should I need one. I should warn you now though, we'll be running into all sorts of creatures while there, if you don't want to draw attention you can't react. The bank for instance, it's run by goblins."

Even Peggy appeared stunned by this revelation.

"Goblins?" Barnes managed to stutter around his shock.

"Yes, tiny and very pompous. Don't stare, don't be rude, and don't ever try to steal from them and there shouldn't be an issue."

"I'm sensing there's a story behind that, but I'm still stuck on the goblins."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Honestly they're not all that awe inspiring. I'd hate to see how you'd react to seeing the dragon they keep down in the vaults."

All the color drained from Rogers' face. "The what?"

"Don't worry, we won't be going into those," Harry assured. "We'll just be popping into exchange some money for a book or two I'll be needing."

"Book shopping he says you're doing," Dernier muttered. "Something tells me it will be much more exciting."

"When do we leave?" Barnes grinned.

"Now, if you don't mind. It's a quick walk up the block. When we get to the pub that leads out to the shops you'll feel compelled to turn back, but that'll just be the wards trying to turn you around. Follow me and once you're through you'll be fine."

"Should I call for a car?" Peggy asked.

"We should do fine on foot," Harry said with a shake of his head. "We're only headed to Charing Cross. Before we do go though..." On the table were a handful of unused paper napkins, remnants from an earlier meal, Harry sized first Rogers then Barnes up before transfiguring a napkin each into a set of plain black robes then tossing them to their new owners. "You'll be needing these to fit in."

"Dresses?" Rogers asked dubiously.

"Robes. All the rage in wizarding fashion. If you're to come along with me you'll have to wear them."

Harry hid a smile at how quickly both men tugged the garments over their heads, they were a bit of a tight fit on the shoulders and Rogers was flashing a bit of ankle but all in all they looked presentable enough. Their teammates still howled in laughter and Harry allowed them a few minutes of ribbing the captain and sergeant before deciding it really was time to head out.
True to prediction, the walk to Charing Cross was easy enough and took no time at all, it was actually getting Barnes and Rogers through the Leaky Cauldron's entrance and the anti-muggle wards cloaking where he found a bit of a challenge. Rogers insisted they turn back to collect the shield they'd all agreed would be best served left behind, while Barnes was struck with the recollection that he'd yet to break down and service his rifle. But a guiding hand on each of the men's wrists was enough to propel them through the wards where, once past, they were able to shake off the worst of the effects.

"That was a fun time," Barnes grimaced.

Harry laughed at him as a wave of his wand transfigured his jacket into his own set of robes. "That was the worst of it. The entrance is right through here."

Beyond the alley wall Diagon Alley was near deserted; whether it was because of the frigid weather, it being the middle of a work week, or the war, or a culmination of all three, Harry wasn't sure. But he was grateful for the small crowd all the same.

"We'll be headed to Gringotts first." Harry gestured to the crooked building at the end of the row. "Remember keep your heads down and don't stare."

Rogers and Barnes only partially followed his directive, he could feel the wonder emanating from them as they took in the colorful and often magically animated window displays, decorated for winter and the coming holidays. They were at least discreet in their gawking and could be passed off as run of the mill tourists seeing Diagon Alley for the first time.

Harry expertly herded them into Gringotts and, upon catching his first glimpse of a goblin, Rogers honest to god gasped.

"Oh Merlin," Harry muttered to himself, exasperation in full effect.

"They're like grumpy little men!"

"You were about as tall as that one before you met your mad scientist, Stevie."

"Yeah, well that one there looks a bit like your ma."

"Good evening," Harry smiled up at the goblin at the closest unoccupied station, speaking pointedly over Rogers and Barnes' whispers. "I was wondering what your policy on exchanging muggle pounds to galleon might be?"

"Fifty pounds is the minimum we'll exchange," the goblin drawled, "with be a two percent exchange fee."

Harry nodded. "I have a hundred pounds."

"Should the exchange be made into predominantly galleons?"

"Sickle actually, if you don't mind."

The goblin nodded sharply and accepted his handful of notes before stepping down from his seat to duck into a room off the hall.

"This is amazing!" Barnes whispered as they waited, near bouncing on his toes in excitement.

"We haven't even done anything yet," Harry grinned.
"We're in a bank with goblins."

The goblin was quick to return, pounds gone and replaced with a small satchel of coins. "After the exchange fee you have thirty two galleons, eight sickles, and twenty-five knuts." He stacked the currency on the desk between them in neat little rows for himself, once Harry had confirmed it correct he swept it back into the sack. "Would you like to deposit this into a vault?"

"Oh there's no need for that." Harry accepted the bag from the goblin with a nod of thanks. "I'm afraid this will all be gone by the end of the evening." He thanked the goblin one last time and bid him a good evening before ducking out of the back.

"Gallons, sickles, and knuts is what he said?" Rogers asked once they were back out on the street.

"Galleons, sickles, and knuts," Harry corrected, he fished around in the sack until he had one of each coin to show his companions. "A galleon is worth about three pounds, while a sickle is about eighteen pence and a knut is one. I'm afraid I never got the American conversions down though."

"Are these real gold?" Barnes squinted one eye as he held a galleon up to the weak sunlight.

Harry frowned contemplatively. "I don't actually know," he admitted. "My friend would though, she was scary smart. Knockturn Alley is right down there." He held a hand up so they paused just before heading down. "I keep telling you not to bring attention to yourselves but down here is where it really counts. There are all sorts down here, a few of Grindelwald's followers no doubt, if they realize you don't belong some won't hesitate to kill you."

Both Rogers and Barnes nodded, suddenly grim and the perfect picture of the deadly soldiers Harry knew they could be. He smiled though, to help lighten the mood if only a little.

"But don't worry, you look the part. Play it right and they won't ever know."

The flight of stairs leading into the alley were steep and narrow and at their base the sunlight cut off, as if the early evening rays couldn't or wouldn't reach into the pits of the alley. It was more crowded than Diagon, or maybe the tight space between the walls just made it appear to be busier. Either way the three men remained pressed close together, not making eye contact with the toothless hags and bedraggled warlocks peddling their cursed wares.

The bell above Borgin and Burkes announced their arrival with a dissonant jangle, as unpleasant as just about everything else in the place.

Harry nodded coolly to the shopkeeper behind the counter, Borgin or Burkes he could never tell, and stepped deeper into the shop. "Don't touch anything," he murmured to the two men behind him, eyeing a suspiciously innocent pincushion. "Could be cursed. Books are along the back wall. There won't be many, it's not their specialty, but there should be enough."

"Are they at least safe to touch?" Barnes asked cautiously.

Harry shrugged. "Should be. The worst a book's ever done to me is scream…or well except for the one with the teeth, or the one that tried to drain my ex-girlfriend's life force."

"So that's a no?"

"Probably best to keep away."

Barnes reluctantly heeded the advice but still leaned in as close as physically possible to peruse the titles along the dusty, cracking spines of the books. "Study into the Possibility of Reversing the
"Actual and Metaphysical Effects of Natural Death, with Particular Regard to the Reintegration of Essence and Matter," he read aloud. "That's a zinger."

"Keywords we're looking for are: dark arts, evil, curses, and things of that nature," Harry advised, skimming over a text on how to spot mudbloods.

"How about: Magick Moste Evile?" Steve asked. "It's got evil in there and it has a bunch of extra, unnecessary letters added in to make it look more ominous."

"That's perfect," Harry grinned. "It's the standard dark arts text, any budding dark wizard will have stocked his arsenal with curses from here."

Cautiously, he plucked it from the shelf and when no curse took immediate effect he tucked it under his arm. "See anything else that might be of interest?"

"An A-Z of Spooky Spells?" Barnes offered.

Harry flipped through the book and snorted when it proved to be a guide for "junior" dark wizards. "You can never start too young," he murmured, adding it and a darkly bound The Dark Arts Outsmarted to his collection.

Borgin or Burkes looked over the books with a suspicious eye, when he brought his selections up to the counter, but Harry only shrugged when he turned it on him. "News of the dark lord has reached even my secluded neck of the woods. He has me intrigued."

The man grunted but accepted payment- nearly all Harry had- without protest. Not willing to push their luck any further, Harry hustled Rogers and Barnes out of the shop as subtly as he could manage. It wasn't until they were up top in Diagon Alley that he managed to release the tension he'd been holding in his shoulders pretty much from the moment they'd entered Knockturn.

"Sorry that had to be your first proper introduction to the wizarding world," he told the two men at his side with a sad little smile. "I swear most of it is a lot nicer and not near as creepy."

But Barnes shook his head emphatically. "No pal, my first introduction to the wizarding world was crooked buildings that don't have any business standing up on their own and honest to Christ goblins."

"The goblins were a sight," Rogers agreed. "And even Knockturn wasn't all bad, it had…character. But there is one thing I don't get."

Harry hummed in question as they began a slow pace back toward the Leaky Cauldron. "What's that?"

"If this sort of magic is illegal, why is there an entire sector of the district specializing in selling books and objects of its kind?"

"Well it's not illegal actually," Harry said. "Dark magic is frowned upon. Very heavily frowned upon, but there's no laws prohibiting its use outside of only three specific spells. So long as you're not using it kill or maim its fair game."

"Aren't all dark curses used to kill and maim?"

Harry shook his head. "Not all. Some can be used on yourself to expand your lifetime or as wards to protect your home or rituals. I've not seen them all, but there are different spells for different purposes."
"So what makes it dark?"

Hermione had asked that same question once, during that short span of time between Xenophilius' outing of his involvement in the Hallows' union and his tumble through time. The ritual they were using was technically classified as dark, even though it caused no harm and required only a bit of blood as sacrifice. She'd been curious as to what had earned it that classification, was even making noise about doing some research into it when she had a few spare moments, but then everything that had happened happened and she'd never gotten the chance.

"I don't know," he confessed for the second time that day. "There's been discussions, debates on that same question, but I was never much of a scholar. Maybe it's the intent behind the spells creation. What it was made to do. Or maybe it's the cost of the magic itself."

Barnes frowned. "The cost?"

"Every spell cast takes something out of you, it requires magic or energy or both. The longer you cast the harder it gets to continue and eventually you can't cast anymore until you've had time to recover. But maybe dark spells cost more than just your energy." He thought of Voldemort, flat faced, inhuman, and half insane from soul tearing rituals and blood thieving resurrections. "I've seen rituals that have had some gruesome side effects, the more you perform the more it chips away at your sanity and alters the sort of person you are." Harry shrugged. "I'm sure it's a widely debated topic, but like I said, I was never much of a scholar. Hermione was the smart one."

Barnes looked ready to protest, no doubt with some platitude about how he thought Harry was smart. And it would be appreciated, it really would, but he was so awkward at taking compliments and declarations of confidence and would rather just avoid the whole thing, so he scrambled to redirect Barnes' attention before he could get a word out.

Lucky for him they'd just reached the section of the alley where the storefronts were brightest and decorated with overt displays of magic.

Gambol and Japes was open even in this time period, nestled exactly where it had always been between Twilfit and Tatting and what would later become Diagon Alley's second book shop. Barnes and Rogers were taken with the little joke shop immediately; they'd been introduced to a few elementary charms a few days before during Harry's explanation and demonstration of magic and they'd gotten a taste of the darker side of magic in Knockturn Alley, but magic used to craft jokes and pranks was an experience of an entirely different sort and they were delighted. The commotion Rogers caused when Barnes introduced him to a gag pen that sent actual arcs of electricity dancing across his skin was loud and enough to draw them further back into the store to avoid the suspicious eyes of the shopkeeper.

The visit worked well to erase the lingering unease from their short time in Knockturn Alley, and even if Rogers and Barnes claimed to have not minded visiting the darker sector of the wizarding world he was glad it would no longer be the part of the trip that stood out most in their memories.

Gambol and Japes and Gringotts and exploding, prank toilet seats and goblins were all they spoke of as they made the walk back to base. They were so caught up in their wonder and overwhelming excitement it was a moment before they realized they were being followed.

The two men would have been hard to spot on a normal day, they kept a fair distance back and didn't draw much attention to themselves among the flock of pedestrians Harry, Rogers, and Barnes were navigating their way through. But then there was a moment where they drew a few meters too close and Harry felt them. They were wizards and just like with Adalgar he could feel the hair raising, goose flesh inducing energy of their magic. Once he became aware of them there
was no way to ignore the deliberate way they matched pace with Harry and his companions.

After two detours down streets not on their route back to headquarters and a stop at a peanut cart where Harry took a second too long looking over the limited selection, Rogers and Barnes finally began to catch on that something was off.

"Pinstriped bowler hat and his friend with the pea green coat," Harry murmured for their ears only. "They've been on us since we passed the cathedral. At least. They're wizards."

Neither Rogers nor Barnes reacted outwardly save for the subtle curl of the latter's fist. "Do you think they followed us from the alley?" he asked.

"Could have. But you didn't give yourselves away as muggles so I don't see what has them so interested."

"Are we shaking them?"

"We're only a few minutes away from headquarters," Harry said. "Let's duck into that bookshop there and I'll cast a disillusionment spell. They won't be able to see us and we should be good to make it back."

They did exactly that, Harry cast the disillusionment and a notice me not on top of it while they were tucked behind a set of cases that just barely hid Rogers and Barnes' too wide shoulders. When their tails stepped into the store to search them out they ducked out before the door could swing shut and began the last leg of the trek back with a quickness.

It would have worked if a third wizard hadn't been waiting at the phone booth just outside of the textile factory that acted as the front for the SSR headquarters.

Harry hadn't noticed him until he was sidestepping a group of schoolgirls and ended up nearly right on top of him. The buzz of energy he was beginning to recognize as the presence of magic broke the man's cover the same as it had the other two's, but any wizard worth anything could see through a disillusionment when close enough and Harry had certainly moved within range when avoiding the muggles.

They reached for their wands at the same time, but Harry had always been quick on the draw and managed to land a stunning curse just before the other could put one to words. He stepped forward and caught the man before he could fall out of the booth and then Rogers was there with Barnes only steps behind. The charms hiding them had fallen in that hairsbreadth of space between Harry being discovered and casting the stunner, but no one around them seemed to have noticed two walking tanks appearing from literally nowhere, no doubt passing it off as failing eyesight or a trick of the light.

"Get him inside," Harry grunted, struggling to juggle the unconscious wizard and the books he was still holding tight. "Before the others track us down."

They were stopped just past the threshold of the shop, the SSR agents masquerading as workers recognized the three conscious men as members of the agency but none of them, not even Captain America, had clearance to bring in guests, no matter how urgent of a situation they claimed it to be. Peggy had to be called to escort them into the hidden lower levels of the facility and appeared wholly unimpressed when presented with their situation.

"This was meant to be an easy job," she snarked on the way down.

"Well we couldn't have expected we would be followed," Harry said defensively. "And we still
would have made it back fine if that one wasn't lurking so close, he was right outside our door. That might have been a coincidence, but if it's not it'd be nice to know before they come kicking it down."

"What reason would they have to follow you?"

Harry shrugged. "They could have recognized Barnes and Rogers as muggles while we were in the alley. Or they're with Grindelwald and they know we have one of theirs."

Barnes sighed heavily. "Why does it feel like the second one is what we're going to end up dealing with?"

"It makes sense," Peggy said. "Phillips will be pleased at least. He's been tearing his hair out trying to come up with a way to get his hands on another one of this dark lord's men."

The lift let them out in a familiar hall leading to the same room another wizard had lost his sanity in only a few days prior. As Peggy guided Rogers and Barnes through the steps of properly securing the still unconscious wizard, Phillips arrived down the same juddering lift.

"What have we got?" he asked, taking in the sight of their newest prisoner.

"Wizard," Harry said shortly. "He and two others were tailing Rogers, Barnes, and me on our way back from a trip into the city. We managed to give the other two the slip but he was waiting right outside."

"Harry says he could be one of Grindelwald's," Peggy stepped in. "Come to retrieve their lost compatriot."

"If he is and he knows this is where we're keeping him, we'll have some problems on our hands," Phillips frowned. "We can't afford to be infiltrated by a bunch of magic users."

Peggy nodded in agreement. "But if we have been compromised, it's a good thing we have him to find out to what extent."

"You want to be the one to question him then?"

Peggy smiled blandly. "If you have no objections."

Phillips shrugged. "You won't hear any from me. Potter?"

Harry shook his head emphatically and none of them even had to ask why. The memory of Adalgar was still all too fresh.

"Try to get him to talk about what his boss has planned while you're in there."

Peggy rolled her eyes, as if annoyed Phillips even had to ask. "Of course," she said before turning to Harry. "How much longer until he's awake, do you think?"

"I knocked him out with a spell, I can wake him with another whenever you give the go ahead."

"A moment then. Captain do you and your Sergeant intend on observing?"

"Only if you don't mind."

Peggy waved a magnanimous hand. "Feel free. Have we searched him yet?"
"When we put him down in the chair," Barnes confirmed. "All he had on him was this."

His wand, knobbled and short with visible fingerprint smudges on the pale wood. Barnes held it reverently but with a dose of caution that made Harry smile, it wasn't the sort of weapon to go off without warning. But considering the sergeant's experience with wands began and ended with Harry's own he couldn't be blamed for his care.

Peggy and Phillips seemed unsure what to do with the thing, there was nowhere they could safely store it, not without putting it through the extensive SSR mandated logging process which wasn't an option for obvious reasons. And they too seemed to share Barnes' wariness of even touching it, so Harry rolled his eyes and plucked it from the man's hold.

"If he's one of Grindelwald's we'll destroy it," he said then shoved the wand into his back pocket. "If he's not we'll give it back. Wipe his memory and plant it on him."

Rogers looked surprised and Harry was guessing it wasn't because he'd suggested destroying the wand. "You can do that?"

"I know the theory of it," he shrugged. "I haven't had much chance to practice it of late though."

"So long as your half decent at it," Phillips grunted. "It'll be a useful skill."

Harry shook his head. "I don't make a habit of tampering with others' memories. It conflicts with my morals you see."

"Yes, that's very noble," Peggy snorted. "But that's something we can discuss at a later time. I'm about ready for that spell now, if you don't mind. Let me just take a seat first."

Where Harry had been a poorly concealed ball of anxiety fit to burst at any given moment when confronting Adalgar, Peggy sat across from her own source of information with a cool poise that left him full of equal parts envy and admiration. When she at least looked comfortable in the stiff backed, hard bottomed seats and her skirt was settled around her knees just right, she directed a nod to where he stood just outside the doorway.

"Rennervate."

The door locked shut on its own behind Harry and the prisoner woke with none of the over-exaggerated gasps of air he'd seen done so many times on the telly.

Peggy waited patiently for him to shake off the lingering effects of the spell; she allowed him to twist in his binds, mentally catalogue the layout of the room, and surreptitiously reach for the wand that was no longer on his hip. She smiled when he failed to hide the shock at finding it gone and the concern at realizing just how tight his binds were.

"Do you know where you are?"

He looked at her, dumfounded and wary, but he didn't say a word.

"Or whose company you're in?"

Ten seconds in with two unanswered questions and Harry was almost certain he knew exactly how this interrogation was going to go. Peggy was unphased though, he always thought she had a patience that could match even his old head of house's.

"You were right outside our door when we took you in, so I'm sure you can understand our alarm."
What's the point of having a top secret facility if just anyone can spend the day spying on it?"
There was no inflection in Peggy's tone, none but the subtest undercurrent of steel that made even
Rogers, who stood watching through the two way glass beside Harry, stand a little straighter. "It
raised a lot of questions finding you there, but the two I absolutely must begin with? Why were you
following Captain Rogers and his men? And how did you know where they would return?"

There was barely a pause between her second question and what would follow, but the lack of
response was deafening all the same.

"I can already see you've made up your mind not to talk, the others made the same resolution. Of
course they broke in the end, but they were weak, didn't last into the question for long and so I still
find myself with questions."

And finally she got a reaction, and maybe the bared, yellow teeth in a mocking parody of a smile
wasn't exactly what they were hoping for, but it was a start.

"You're lying."

Peggy didn't flinch or falter, she met the wizard's grin with her own curling smirk, a thousand times
more dangerous than he could ever hope to be. "Am I, wizard? How much are you willing to
gamble on that fact? Your freedom? Your wand? Your life? Although that seems it might be forfeit
already, I can only imagine how your lord Grindelwald would react if he found you'd been
apprehended by a couple of muggles."

Harry smothered a grin on the back of his hand. "Oh, that's risky."

So he hadn't been the only one who'd seen the disdain the wizard's face had taken on nearly the
moment he'd locked eyes with Peggy, the way he'd taken in her perfectly muggle appearance and
the lack of wand anywhere on her person, and drawn conclusions on the sort of man they were
facing. That is, the sort like Adalgar who'd align themselves with the current dark lord.

The gamble seemed to have paid off only in part however, the wizard was suddenly doing an
impressive imitation of a pail of sour milk which was always a good sign, but he wasn't immediate
in spilling the secrets Peggy was aiming for, which wasn't.

"It wasn't a muggle who caught me," he said instead. "One of mine did."

"Yes well, it would be horribly unfair if HYDRA was the only one employing wizards. Ours just
happens to have far fewer ulterior motives." Peggy's smile widened when the wizard could only
gape, dumbfounded. "I wasn't bluffing when I said they talked, our methods of convincing the
tighter lipped to speak up is rather... convincing. But they're never able to talk for long before they
expire. I was hoping you might be different. Shall we start from the top?"

"Do you know many wizards?"

"It's funny you think I'd answer even a single question when you've yet to grant me the same
courtesy."

The wizard shook his head, disregarding the woman's snark. "If you have, you'll know about the
Cruciatus."

Of course she did. Harry had mentioned the Unforgivables only just this morning.

"And you'll know that nothing you can cook up could even compare."
Peggy shifted in her seat, leaning back so she could take in the full picture of the wizard. She didn't spend much time carrying out interrogations, she'd been trained for it of course, but her talents were better suited for strategy and field work; tasks that required careful cunning and a firm hand, not the quiet tenacity needed to carry out sometimes hour long battles disguised as conversation eeking information bit by bit from recalcitrant prisoners. That wasn't to say she wasn't effective at it when posed the task, she'd never failed an interrogation because she was inordinately talented at getting someone's measure after only a few minutes alone with them. It was no trouble seeing the kind of man she was facing off against and deducing the best way to get him to talk, but there was a set to this one's jaw that spoke of nothing but trouble for her. She knew his kind, she'd tried interrogating only two like him before and both times she'd handed the job off to someone willing to take part in the less savory methods of questioning. And now he would have to be the third.

"I'm certain I can change your mind on that."

She left the room immediately after and Harry was already backing away because he knew what she wanted.

"He's going to be like that then?" Phillips said, his mouth curling into the same distasteful frown her own had taken on.

"Nothing is more beneath some men than a muggle." She stared straight at Harry as she turned his own words against him, and in her gaze he saw regret, sympathy, but no hesitation. "Harry, we need you to speak with him."

"You don't want me to talk to him."

And there was no point in denying it, they both knew what they wanted from Harry. "No, darling, I don't."

"I can't."

"You will." Harry had only ever known the side of Peggy that was fierce, firm, but still entirely gentle and kind and fair. He knew she'd seen war and battle same as him, but he'd never been confronted with it, not until now in this moment where she was asking him to use magic they both knew he had no full control over while he was still heavy from the guilt of the last man he'd failed. "He never said it, but we all know it, he's with Grindelwald and somehow he knew where to find us. We need to know how many more know and how many more they plan to send. If we don't, if we're not ready, they could kill us all tonight."

"What are you asking him to do?" Rogers was the only one among them who still didn't understand. Realization had settled over even Barnes who looked not at all impressed with Peggy's ultimatum.

"They want him to use his magic to make the man talk," the sergeant explained.

"Knowing full well that I could end up killing him," Harry said, he didn't look away from Peggy though, even as he spoke. "Or worse."

"You spare him and risk us."

"That's not fair," Barnes protested.

"No, but it's true." She took his hand in hers. "Speak with him if you want, try to appeal to his sensibilities, but if you can't do it just this once. One more time and we'll never ask you again."
"This is not what I do." Harry shook his head sharply when she made to protest. "And I don't just mean morally, I mean I don't have the knowledge, the spells in my arsenal to coerce someone, let alone torture. What happened before was an accident, I don't even know if I could do it again even if I wanted to."

"You can," Peggy said simply, "because we need you to. Just one more time."

Just the thought of inflicting half the pain on this stranger as he had on Adalgar made him feel physically ill, but Peggy had said and he had thought it sitting at Adalgar's bedside just the day before, one life in exchange for dozens more was nothing. And he'd had an entire meltdown after the thought, he'd broken down so hard he had needed to be rescued like some damsel and coaxed back to sanity by one of the men in the room with him now. But that didn't detract from the truth of the resolution. One in exchange for all.

"You can't let me lose control like last time."

Peggy nodded in immediate agreement. "Of course."

"If it looks anything like Adalgar you stop me, even if you have to knock me over the head to do it."

"You really want to do this?" Rogers asked and Harry laughed, low and deprecating.

"Of course not. But I don't have much of a choice, have I?"

He didn't try to mask his nerves when he entered the room, maybe he would come off as more sympathetic to their prisoner, maybe he would take pity on Harry and tell him what they wanted without all the torture business. Maybe he wouldn't.

But the wizard did speak almost immediately, Harry hadn't even had a chance to fully settle in his seat. "You're the wizard from before."

Harry dipped his head in a nod. "I am the wizard from before. I've come to hear your confession."

The dangerous edge he'd thrown at Peggy like a weapon was nowhere in the smile the wizard directed at Harry, he only looked amused. Maybe his unassuming demeanor was doing its work.

"You?"

"Yes, me. Adalgar was one of yours, wasn't he?"

Surprise and muted curiosity stole across the wizard's face for only a fraction of a second. "You were the ones who took him?"

And there was their first confirmation. He still hadn't said it outright, but in recognizing Adalgar he all but acknowledged he too was working for Grindelwald.

"They didn't know what he was when they brought him in," Harry confessed, relinquishing some truth in hopes of getting more from the man. "But I recognized him, his wand, his magic. He wouldn't speak either, but he did, eventually."

"If he told you what you wanted then you would have no need for me."

Harry shook his head. "I have plenty need for you. He was hesitant, I had to force him, but it was too much for him to bear.'
"You killed him?"

"No."

And there was the danger, finally the man was taking Harry as a true threat. "Then what?"

"He's alive, but his mind is elsewhere. I didn't want to. Didn't mean to. But..." Harry smiled deprecatingly. "I'm young and too powerful for my own good, I have no one to teach me how to control it, so sometimes it does what it wants and sometimes people get hurt." He leaned forward in his seat, eyes begging this stranger to understand. "I don't want to hurt anyone, but the men I work with need answers and I can get them."

"She said she would show me pain worse than our Cruciatus." The wizard looked Harry over, no fear in his eyes. "From you?"

"From me."

His gut clenched and something in his chest ached, he could hear his heart thundering and could feel every muscle within his body contracting in revulsion. Harry focused on that, he locked in on that fear and disgust and then he reached for the wizard. He touched him and the Hallows responded, they knew what he wanted and they could feel how badly he needed it and just like riding a bike, once you learned to do it once, your body never forgot. He purposely kept his body loose, unattached, and when he felt the hypnotic pull of a soul beneath his fingers he only held it and didn't tug.

"I want to know everything."

The wizard screamed, but he spoke.

Harry threw up after. Right outside the door in a bin Peggy had handily available for him.

But once he purged the contents of his stomach that was it, there were no panic attacks or mental breakdowns, he sat down to debrief and he was fine because they got what they needed and they would all be safe.

He was with Grindelwald, the wizard whose name was Claude admitted, and he'd been sent with the two others to retrieve Adalgar. Grindelwald was afraid he'd do irreparable damage to his cause speaking to the wrong person and so had sent his men to bring him back if they could and kill him if they couldn't. They didn't know where the facility was or even who was within it, they'd been following a tracking charm that had been on Adalgar up until three days ago after which it had simply disappeared. They'd narrowed the location down to a fifty kilometer radius, in which the facility sat, and had been searching for anything of use when they'd spotted Rogers.

Rogers and his men were making quite a name for themselves among HYDRA's ranks, in the short time they'd been active they'd done more damage to the organization than just about anyone else in the war. So of course there would be a kill order out for them. But while Claude and his men were technically working with HYDRA, they were wizards first, so when they spotted Rogers and his sharpshooting sergeant within their search radius they knew it had to be more than a coincidence, so they followed him rather than kill him in hopes he might lead them to Adalgar.

Grindelwald didn't know where the facility was and he hadn't sent men to attack it. It had been a fluke, an unlucky coincidence. They would have to be overly cautious leaving the building from
then on, but Claude had been the only one to see the facility and he wouldn't be rejoining Grindelwald or HYDRA's ranks anytime soon.

He didn't know much else that they didn't already, a few insights on Grindelwald's end goal (world domination) and even a few HYDRA bases wizards had managed to infiltrate, but none of the details they really needed. A disappointment on that end, but certainly much less worse than it could have been.

Phillips was the first to leave once they'd said all they needed to, while Peggy, Rogers, and Barnes hung back to do one last check on Harry.

"I'm all mixed up inside." He admitted if only to stop their badgering. "It was awful and I swear there's nothing you can say to make me do that again, but it came so easily. I'd done it only once before but all I did was call and my magic came."

"That's good then, yes?" Peggy said. "If it comes when you call and allows you some form of control then it's growing as it should be. What Howard is doing is working."

A knot of something he couldn't put a name to clogged Harry's throat at the reminder. "Yeah, it's working."

"And you stopped," Barnes reminded him. "You got what you needed and then you stopped before you hurt him."

"Before I hurt him irreparably," Harry corrected. "He still hurt. I don't like hurting people."

Barnes smiled, full of sympathy and understanding. "No," he said, "neither do I. But that's just the business we're in."

Harry went home right after, to read the books forgotten in the excitement and to prepare for the dark magic crash course none of them had had the foresight to postpone. When he went in the next day, it was with dark curses rattling in his head and the eyes of Peggy, Rogers, and Barnes tracking him worriedly.

They were waiting for his crisis of conscious no doubt, or a breakdown on the level Barnes had seen the day before, but Claude had lived and, more than that, his mind remained. He would be sore for a few days and traumatized for even longer, but the harm Harry had inflicted was passing, a few weeks from now all the man would suffer from would be a few painful memories.

That proved to make all the difference for Harry, even when he'd been alone in the dark of his bedroom with nothing but his thoughts to occupy him, that all-encompassing guilt had kept away.

So he ignored the worried looks the best he could, focusing instead on his purpose for being there. Ensuring Rogers and his men would remain unmaimed and alive against curses from Claude's kin.

"Wizards have crafted more dark spells than can be counted," was his preface. "If it can cut you, burn you, dismember you, disembowel you, enslave you, kill you, there's a curse for it. I have experience in casting three."

Harry almost laughed at the incredulous faces that stared back at him, it would be funny if their lives weren't on the line.
"Fortunate for us, those three are the ones you're probably going to see the most of. Most other dark spells require a certain level of skill and finesse, but with these curses all you need is a strong enough desire to cause suffering.

"The first is the easiest to recognize and the hardest to counter. *Avada Kedavra* is the incantation, it forms in a jet of bright green light, and it kills on impact; no pain, no drawn out production, just immediate death. It's called the Killing Curse and it's the one you'll see most often. When you hear it being cast or see that streak of green don't try to bat it away or hide behind your shields, duck, roll, hit the ground, do whatever you have to to avoid being hit. Because once you are it's over."

Harry gripped the wand he'd drawn when beginning so tight the molded wood creaked, the hum of its magic and sting of its sharp edges helped steady the nerves.

"I won't cast it, I never have and don't think I'd even be capable of doing it if I wanted to. But the next one…." He hesitated for only a fraction of a second before raising his wand, aiming it at Rogers who stood directly across from him. "Are you ready?"

He received a curt nod and so he cast.

"*Rictumsempra.*"

Barnes stepped forward, worry taking over when Rogers doubled over with an enormous howl. He stopped in his tracks however when he realized he was shaking not with pain but laughter. There was a moment of confusion before all the others caught on to their commanding officer's predicament and began snickering in amusement.

"Tickling charm," Harry explained as he ended the spell to the relief of a red-faced and breathless Rogers. "It's like a thousand tiny fingers targeting your weak spots and tickling you until you can't breathe or move or think around the sensation. It's overwhelming."

Rogers nodded in vehement agreement.

"Now imagine those thousand tiny fingers targeting your weak spots as rusted scalpels, digging down to your muscle, scraping against your bone. It doesn't tickle anymore, it's agony, inescapable, unending agony. If you can imagine, then you'll have some idea of what the Cruciatus curse is like."

All signs of laughter were gone as the men listened to every word he said with a grim intensity.

"The incantation is *crucio*, there's not light, no streak of color to let you know it's coming. Only the pain. The curse only ends when the caster decides it wants to end or they're forced to stop it, even after its over you'll shake uncontrollably for hours after, you'll ache down to your bones. If you're kept under it long enough, your mind will break and it can't be repaired. For obvious reasons I won't be casting that one either, but if you hear that incantation you should react just the same as you would for the killing curse. Duck.

"The last one, some consider it the tamest but only until they see it used to its full potential. I'll cast this one only once but only if I have your explicit permission."

Rogers exhaled nervously. "Will it hurt?"

"Not at all. It actually feels quite pleasant."

He frowned, not having expected that answer, but nodded all the same. "All right, go on."
Before he cursed Rogers, Harry turned to his six comrades. "Do you spar often?" He met the round of confused affirmations with a pleased nod. "Good. Imperio."

Harry would never be comfortable casting any of the Unforgiveables, but after his heist on Gringotts he knew he was fully capable of at least this one. Immediately the glazed look of full subservience fell over Rogers' face as his entire body went lax.

Harry gestured to the men behind the man. "Don't kill them, don't hurt them, but subdue them as quickly as you can."

Harry had been notably absent for those days following Rogers' transformation into a supersoldier, he'd never been present to see the myriad of tests performed to evaluate his speed, strength, and dexterity and he'd certainly never been given the chance to see it in a real fight. So seeing him now, the brutal yet graceful way he moved and fought would have been awe inspiring if he weren't fighting his own friends under Harry's command.

Barnes was the only one who stood a chance against the unexpected attack, while the others were tangled in their own laces and jackets in a handful of seconds each, Barnes could defend himself against Rogers' unorthodox but efficient attacks for nearly a full thirty seconds before he wound up in a headlock firm enough to keep him down but still gentle enough as to not restrict his airways or cause him any undo discomfort.

Harry ended the spell the moment the fight was through and Rogers released his friend in an instant, he was stunned and unnerved and looked to Harry for an explanation.

"That was the Imperius," he said as the others gingerly detangled themselves from clothing and rose from the twisted heaps they'd been tossed into. "Imperio. It takes total control over the victim's mind, whatever the caster wants them to do, they do it. You could be hit with that in the middle of a fight, told to kill your allies, and you would do it."

Barnes looked especially horrified. "Shit."

"There's some good news though," Harry added, striving for some levity. "If you have a strong enough will and you're exposed to it enough times you can shake off the effects of the curse, you can refuse the commands of the curse altogether. We'll work on it until you all can."

"Please," Rogers sighed, looking immensely relieved. That little demonstration proved how devastating having the curse cast on him specifically could be, because if it was a real fight, against real enemies, there would be no orders to avoid injury or death, it would be encouraged. And Rogers was more than capable, physically, of obeying.

"It'll take time and Phillips only gave us a week to get this done, but it's possible. But the hard part is over, you've see them now, the Unforgivables. The three worst curses to be cast by wizarding law. Be caught even casting one and that's a lifetime in prison."

"You just cast one," Dugan pointed out, looking shifty.

Harry grinned. "Yeah, so it's a good thing I wasn't caught doing it."

"Was that your first time casting one?"

The grin faded into something more rueful at that. "No."

"Is that right?" Falsworth, and all of the others for the matter didn't actually look all that surprised. "Would it be too much to ask how many times before today you've cast one?"
"Three times. The Imperius once, Cruciatus twice."

That answer did cause a ripple of surprise through their ranks, they'd likely suspected he'd cast only the Imperius. There was a pause as the new truth was processed, but then Barnes asked one more question.

"How many have you had cast on you?"

"All of them."

"But you said…"

"That once you're hit with the Killing Curse it's over, yes. And that's still true. It's always true except for those two times when it wasn't, but there were extenuating circumstances." Harry waved away the barrage of questions. "But that's a story for another time. We still have work to do.

"The Unforgiveables are the worst curses cast at you and will certainly be the ones you encounter most often, but they won't be the only curses you encounter and the others are just as deadly and oftentimes even more nasty.

"Let's start with the entrail expelling curse…"

Harry had only learned the curses he was naming and detailing to Rogers and his men just the night before, he'd been up almost until dawn searching out the worst of them and committing them to memory in a show of studiousness that would make Hermione proud. He'd never cast a single one before, most he hadn't even seen until reading them that night, but when it finally came time to demonstrate on a cluster of conjured dummies, the results were…not awful. It would take time and practice before his curses would roll from the tongue and tear through his enemies with the same ease he'd seen Bellatrix's accomplish, but he knew he could get there. And seeing cotton innards spilling across the floor and flesh colored cloth peeling away from the mannequin even in a toned down display of what his curses could do acted as effective motivators for the men.

By the end of the three hours they had together every last man could identify the spell coming their way either by its appearance or its incantation and had worked out the best way to avoid coming in contact with them all. Harry meanwhile was finding it easier with each curse he cast; where at first his entrail expelling curse could barely split the skin of the dummy's torso, now it sent cotton organs exploding everywhere. It was disconcerting but thrilling all the same.

"That went much better than even I'd hoped," Harry said as they wrapped up for the day. "We may not even need the full week Phillips gave us."

Dugan cursed in relief and his fellow soldiers were quick to repeat the sentiment. Learning magic, even dark magic, was all fun and good, but they all missed knocking in kraut heads and getting Schmidt worked up into a fit.

"And we've got plenty of new spots for you boys to hit just in time too," Peggy added. "With quite a few wizards to give you all some real time practice."

"Don't tease me with a good time now, Agent Carter," Dugan grinned.

She smiled, wide and teasing. "I always make good on my promises, Dugan." Then she turned her back on the hooting laughter of the team and met eyes with Harry. "Can I have a word?"
He nodded, powerless to deny her though he had a good idea already of what she wanted to speak about and knew he wouldn't find much joy in it.

She pulled him only to the other end of the hall, out of hearing range of anyone save for potentially a super soldier or two. "You look as if you slept well."

"I did actually. You expected something different?"

"Don't fake like you're some kind of idiot," she scoffed, eyes rolling back in her head, "you know I did. You really had no trouble last night?"

"Really," Harry swore. "I slept well, all night in fact. I don't like what I did, I'm not comfortable with it and I won't ever be, but...Barnes was right, it's the business we're in and I can't cry every time I have to hurt someone or kill someone to keep a person I care about alive. I'll just have to suck it up and get used to it."

Because even when he was done here with this time period and its set of problems, he'd have another war, another fight on his hands, he'd be expected to kill Voldemort again and any Death Eaters aiming to do it to him first. And sure he was learning the spells to get the job done in a variety of different and gruesome ways, but it wouldn't mean anything if he didn't have the grit to actually perform them when it mattered.

"Just don't ask me to torture someone else, not if we can find another way."

Peggy looked at him, brown eyes wide and surprised and maybe a little pleased, then she nodded. "Barring life altering and/or ending situations, of course." Harry scoffed and she laughed. "I at least have to ask, even if you do say no. Though something tells me you won't."

"Of course I won't, I can't help but be the hero." He heaved an overdramatic sigh that caused her even more laughter. "It's my curse."

"Well you bear it well." Peggy flicked a glance over his shoulder to where Rogers and men were lingering, they were occupied in conversation, boisterous and fully at ease in each others' company, but waiting for something. "There was talk of drinks."

Harry frowned, what had he said, or rather his face said, to warrant that non-sequitur?

"Steve wanted you to come along, if you were up to it."

So it hadn't been him, but Rogers. "It's barely past noon."

"Is that a no?"

"No."

"Good," she chuffed him under the chin. "You could do with some fun. You're so grim all the time, darling."

Harry snorted, Merlin he loved the woman but it was like having a second Hermione around at times. "And imbibing will cure that?"

"If only temporarily."

"And the same goes for you?"

She smiled good-naturedly. "When I'm given the chance. Not today though, I'm not blessed with so
light of a schedule as you men."

He rolled his eyes in mock outrage. "You're encouraging me to go and won't even be there to keep me company?"

But of course she was, there was hardly a time Peggy wasn't arranging and plotting something, it was as instinctual as breathing for her. He just wasn't used to her schemes involving him, and couldn't imagine what outcome she was looking for.

"You'll have plenty of company, more interesting than myself even."

"That's a lie."

"Only a little one." She gave him an encouraging nudge backwards, toward a captain who was glancing their way just a few times more than might be usual. "Go. Have some real fun at least once before we're all reminded of this terrible, bloody war we're trying to put an end to."

There wasn't much of a protest he could put up, Peggy had locked in on this strange desire to see him have fun and there would be no shaking her from it. Here he was in a completely different era but still with a bullheaded tempest of a woman ordering him about, it'd give just about any other guy a complex.

"It's no wonder you're so good at your job," he muttered good naturedly even as he let himself be pushed another step back. "You're bossy."

Rogers smiled at him as he approached, inordinately pleased. At least Peggy hadn't been lying when she'd said the captain had asked for him to come along, he wouldn't have put it past her to have made that fact up, or stretched the truth of it just a little to get him to agree.

But almost unconsciously his face rearranged to smile back, even if his was tinged with a touch more reserve, there wasn't any other expression he could make when faced with Rogers' megawatt grin. "I heard something about drinks?"

There was a pub a few streets up that was still stocked and serving even though just round the corner an entire block had been taken out in the blitz. It was a little run down, the sign bearing its name of Whip and Fiddle had lost its first two coats of paint, but the welcome was warm when they entered and the first round was up before they'd even parked in the stools.

The man pouring their drinks was a good few years older, he had a grey shot beard that lent his face some kindness and a wide grin he directed at Harry when he sat himself near the end of the bar. "An addition to the team?"

Rogers smiled with a familiarity that spoke of how often they visited the little pub. "He's a friend."

"Too smart to get caught up on the frontlines with us jarheads," Barnes said.

"You drinking Schlitz with the rest of your guys?"

Harry was still pretty green behind the ears when it came to harder drinks, but he'd spent enough time around Howard Stark and his liver of steel to know what the only right answer to that question was.
"If I wanted piss water I'd go round back and drink from the loo."

The man grinned, wide and amused. "You a Guinness sort?"

"Johnny Walker actually. If you have it." He would never be a fan of the hard stuff, but it was the closest he could get to the taste of firewhiskey and sometimes he liked the reminder of home.

"Good man. Good taste."

"We'll get along, you and I," Falsworth saluted with the only drink beside Harry's that wasn't piss yellow beer.

"Cheers mate."

Their glasses met in the middle with a pleasant clink, while the rest of the team groaned mockingly about another stuck up limey joining their ranks.

"Careful with all that," the bartender warned. "You're in our home now. Us limeys outnumber you one to a hundred."

"Sounds like a good fight to me."

"But not one you'll win, I'm afraid," Harry laughed. He hadn't spent much time around Americans before falling in with Erskine and his cohort, but he was pretty sure Dugan's ever present readiness for a fight was a trait unique to himself. Not even Rogers, pre-serum infusion, had been so eager for a tussle. "We're scrappy."

Rogers nodded in wry agreement. "I've got bruises up my side to prove it."

If it had been anyone other than the supersoldier complaining Harry might have felt sorry for marking them up with his magic, but the man was tough, Erskine had seen to that, so he only waved his hand negligently and said, "You'll be healed up by the end of the day."

"Those books did some real good," Barnes said, he spared a quick look over to the bartender who'd moved a few paces away to care for another guest, well out of hearing range. "You learned that all in one night?"

"I read pretty late into the night but I didn't get the chance to practice until just this morning with you all."

"You did well in school then?" Gabe Jones guessed and Harry snorted.

"Not even, I was an awful student. No motivation. Drove my best friend mad, she was the prodigy."

"Stark speaks highly of you," Rogers protested. "And you know he doesn't give out compliments so easy."

"I'm the only wizard he knows, of course I'd be impressive to him. Meet another and you'll find out quickly how lacking I am."

"Well you threw our supersoldier across the room with just a word," Morita said. "So not lacking everywhere."

"You said you went to school for this?" Barnes asked.
Harry nodded, moving on to the new topic gratefully. "I never finished, things got tough my seventh year and I was forced to put schooling on hold until it was sorted out. But the years before that were some of the best I can remember. Hogwarts embodied magic; moving staircases, talking portraits, ghosts."

"Ghosts?"

"They were harmless for the most part. Friendly. Even if they did have a habit of walking through walls at the worst times."

He recalled Myrtle's late night visit to the baths his fourth year with a pang of nostalgic disgust. He missed the weepy ghost just as much as he didn't, but there was never a time where that memory wouldn't leave a grimace of distaste on his face.

"What else is real?" Barnes prompted. "You've said goblins and ghosts and dragons, what else is there?"

"Just about anything else you can think of. Mermaids and giants and werewolves and unicorns, and even things you couldn't imagine; ten foot tall, talking spiders, talking mirrors, flying cars."

"Stuff of the future."

"In some areas," Harry admitted, "but in others we're still behind the times. We write with quills, see by firelight, seal letters with wax and sigils. In some instances we're lightyears ahead, and in others we still have much to learn."

"Why do they hide?" Jones wondered. "We could learn so much from each other."

"Fear, I think. Of being expected to solve all the world's problems with magic, and being persecuted when they wouldn't or couldn't."

He glanced around. They were still alone, it was too early for a reasonable sized crowd to be filling the pub and the bartender had disappeared somewhere in the back, so he felt safe going on. "Wizards make up a fraction of the population, there's thousands of you for every one of us. Any fight between our two people would only end in our destruction, we're more powerful one on one, but there are so many more of you, and with each day your technologies get more advanced, and more deadly."

"But why would we fight you?"

"Because you don't understand us, who we are, what we want, how we can do what we can. And we would never let you. The common folk would rise up in fear if they knew half of our history and the things we've done. The church would make no protest because there's nothing more unholy than a witch. And the government, they'd put up a token protest, insist on saving the lives of one or two, for research purposes. But the rest? They're competition, best to eliminate them before they get it in their heads that they want the world all to themselves."

"We would never..." Falsworth stopped himself before his sentence could even fully form, realizing that maybe they would.

And Harry could only smile, just a little bitter, because there was no maybe for him, they would. "Fear is a powerful motivator. And it's not completely unjustified, not all of my people are good, you know that well enough by now. Set a few of them out onto the streets to perform the spells you saw me do today and of course there would be cries for blood."

"Well I'm not having it," Barnes was scowling, clearly unimpressed with the turn the conversation had taken. "There's been enough war to last us a lifetime over, we'll figure out some way to get
along because like hell I'm dying without having seen a dragon up close."

And just like that, the heavy mood inching towards dark broke, Harry's next smile was wider, more cheerful as he said, "That's the whole reason I'm here, isn't it? There won't be even a whisper of war between our people if I have something to say about it."

The scowl disappeared from Barnes' face and he reached over to knock glasses, same as Harry and Falsworth had done earlier. "Keep on with the good work then, kid."

They gave up on their Schlitz after the second round, changing it out for a myriad of bourbons and whiskeys that found them the buzz they'd been chasing. But while Dugan and Falsworth and even Jones and the others tossed each drink back with a cheerful abandon, Rogers and Barnes were a little more conservative while Harry hadn't even ordered a round past the first.

"Someone's got to keep an eye out," Barnes explained when Harry questioned them on it. "We ran into those wizards just last night, there could be more canvassing the area, so it's probably best one or two of us stays sober enough to make sure the rest make it home without being followed."

"And it's been hard for me to get drunk since the serum," Rogers threw in. "Haven't managed it yet. It's not as fun without the promise of a good time."

"You had a good time before, did you?" Harry teased. "Unless fistfights behind the barracks count as such."

Barnes laughed. "I forget you two were familiar before he got this way," he gestured to encompass the height and bulk of the man in question. "Sometimes it feels like I'm the only one who remembers him from before. Did you get on before the serum?"

"No," Rogers said just a little sheepishly. "I don't think he liked me all that much."

"I didn't dislike you!" Harry protested. "I just…misunderstood your reasons for wanting to join up. Once I understood you a little better I liked you just fine."

"What did you think he wanted to join up for?" Barnes asked.

"To prove that he could."

Rogers spun his glass between his fingers. It was a sure sign of nervousness, he'd have to work on that little quirk. "That was part of the reason," he admitted. "It wasn't easy being rejected and mocked because of my size, but it wasn't the only reason."

"I know," Harry said. "I saw. It's why I didn't put up a fight when Abraham decided you would be the first."

"It's still work trying to get along with him." Barnes knocked shoulders with Rogers in a playful gesture, the other man rolled his eyes, no doubt long since used to this brand of teasing. "Walking around all patriotic and shit. And the outfit. How often you see a fella in tights?"

"Last I heard you liked the uniform. Weren't you the one asking if I was gonna keep it?"

"Course I did, I can wear anything and look good when I'm standing next to the guy in star spangled spandex."

Harry snorted into his glass, Merlin he couldn't wait until he was back in a time where he could rib Ron over his questionable dress robes and Hermione's penchant for wearing ink stains and used
quills as accessories. That easy familiarity was no question the best part of their friendship, it was disconcerting and fascinating to see it mirrored in two men completely unlike them in all ways but the one that counted.

Maybe it was about time he talked to Howard about giving their experimental procedure another go. It'd been nearly a week since the first and, other than the unfortunate incident with Adalgar, there hadn't been any negative side effects. The excitement of half reaped souls and trips to Knockturn Alley had been a nice distraction, one he might have actually needed, but it was about time they got back to work.

Tomorrow, he resolved. Tomorrow he'd crack the whip and the SSR would get back to fulfilling their end of the bargain.

The wizards had been vague, they'd shared everything they knew but it had never been much. Potter, the boy, *the child*, to have caused them so much grief and destruction had fallen through time; he'd intended to go back only a year was all that they'd been able to glean from the ritual, but he and his accomplice had botched it, left a few important runes out in their haste and performed it during the wrong time in the lunar cycle. The boy had been thrown back further, they assumed, or he'd been killed.

It was up to Strucker to figure out which of the two it was, and, if it was the former, where he'd ended up.

He'd expected there to be a challenge, the possibilities of when Potter could have ended up were endless and if the boy had survived only to be thrown into an era pre-modern conveniences they would have been hopeless to find him. He expected it to take time, weeks if not months of painstaking researching, tedious sifting through CV footage and government databases before they received even the hint of a clue. He expected to exhaust resources, favors he'd been saving for his hour of need, connections that were only good for one time use.

But he got lucky.

Or Potter got careless.

It was a photo he found, in files his brothers in SHIELD had allowed him access to, uploaded to SHIELD's database for reasons more sentimental than practical. It was taken in a lab, teeming with men and equipment that was cutting edge at the time but still so outdated now. The focus of the image was a man, older, wearing a lab coat and speaking into a microphone. At his back was a pod that easily stood twice as tall as him and was opened to reveal the painfully thin figure of the man who would become Captain America.

And just beside the pod was him.

His face was turned just slightly off center and the green of his eyes was made near black by the colorless photo, but the round spectacles, the dark, unruly hair, the hint of a scar peeking out from overlong bangs were enough to alert the recognition software to a match.

Strucker narrowed the focus on the black and white picture, drawing it in tighter and tighter until the blurred figure stood prominent in the center. He didn't need it, he'd spent long enough studying the image during his search, but on another screen he pulled up a second picture, this one in color with the bold words of "Undesirable No. 1" framing the grim face that was its subject. A rush of
satisfaction flooded his system, he did so love solving puzzles.

They were a match.

"Doctor List."

His associate was there in a moment, he'd just been preparing to leave for the night, but it seemed Strucker had one more task for him.

"Get in contact with our friends at the ministry." Was the order. "Let them know it's done. It's time we bring our wayward wizard home."
Harry was back in that little room, strapped to that cot, preparing for his second dose of hallucinogens by the end of the week. He knew what to expect when Howard stuck the needle in his arm this time around, was able to brace himself for what was to come, but somehow that made it worse.

The apparitions had changed; it was Ginny this time, emaciated, riddled with the telltale growths of scrofungulus. She'd lost her beautiful hair, the little bit of her skin visible beneath the countless boils was ashen, gray, and she stared at him with eyes full of hatred.

Then there were Fred and George, standing on either side of him, separated by a force through which they couldn't see each other as they cursed him and his name and they day their younger brother looked to him and thought to call him friend. Because it had been that to ruin their lives, to separate them by a barrier in which there was only one way to cross.

Teddy was the worst.

He sat on Harry's chest, weighing more than a child his size had any right to. His little arms stretched out for the near translucent forms of his parents, he wailed for them, did all he could to reach them, and still failed.

When Harry's magic finally burst free to batter at the walls in useless defense, the vents opened wide and rushed the room with poisoned air and he was relieved.

When he roused, Howard asked him what he'd seen. His magic had reacted quicker this time, and it had been so much more violent, but Harry couldn't bring himself to say. He retreated to the corner of the lab cleared away for him specifically, to curl beneath the shock blanket Peggy handed him without a word and tried to recover. And when the allotted observation period passed, he left for home.

If he'd stuck around a while longer they might have seen the spike in his brain activity, the change in his magic that showed it was working so much sooner than they could have anticipated. But Harry's luck was infamous in that he didn't have any, so he left too soon and they missed it, hadn't even bothered to look because the last time they'd tried the procedure, it took two days before his magic saw any change. This time it barely took two hours.

Harry had decided to walk home, for fresh air and all that, already thinking of all the things he wasn't going to do in exchange for a little extra time with his bed. But then a duo of women passed him, and at first glance they were unremarkable, both were pretty with contrasting hair in light and dark and dressed neatly in the latest fashion. They weren't speaking to each other, never once glanced at each other, but he knew they were together because they walked side by side, close enough for the backs of their knuckles to brush. Perfectly innocuous.

Then he looked again, and one woman shimmered.

There were times in London when it got so hot, the sun's beams reflected off of the pavement and
distorted the world in shimmering rays of heat. But it was early-January, not the time for weather that produced heatwaves, especially not heatwaves localized around just one woman. So he looked harder and longer with more than just his eyes, and he saw past the front she was hiding behind.

This woman was like Jerome. Like Fred. She was substantial, but just barely, paler than she should be, grayed and fading even in the dress that should have been as pale blue as the first flower in spring and the perfectly twisted rings of blond swept fetchingly over one shoulder.

And then he blinked and the curls were gone, burnt away, the skin across half her face, down her neck and into the neckline of her ruined dress grew spotted with blood and soot and char, her skin cracked open and peeled from the heat of a fire that had kissed too close. How she once was and what she was now twisted and morphed and merged in fluid motion between each breath and blink.

Then she looked over her shoulder to him, one moment beautiful and young, the next fire kissed and grotesque, and she looked afraid. But as if compelled by a force not her own, she shifted her course to match the sudden change in his. Harry turned on his heel and marched quickly across the street and she moved with him, away from her companion without a glance or a word. She fell into step just behind him, too wary to approach but unable to let him leave her sight.

Harry ignored her the best he could while she worked valiantly to keep up. Only once did she draw too close, but one sharp look from him and she fell back without complaint.

He needed to get away, not from her, he knew that now that she'd seen him and what he was there was no shaking her. No, he needed to get away from everyone else, witnesses who might see him interacting with thin air and call the crazy police to come scoop him off the street.

They branched away from the densely populated streets, in the direction of the south east end of London and opposite where he should be heading. The further they went the less people there were, the fewer stores without windows and doors boarded over to be seen, the rarer a building without some evidence of structural damage or fire impair was passed.

Harry had wandered into one of the many parts of the city devastated by the Blitz purely by instinct.

Or perhaps not instinct, but the directions of the shade he didn't even know he'd been listening to the entire time. The thought didn't frighten him as much as it once might have.

Destination finally reached, he stopped to lean against one of the less unsound buildings and waited. It didn't take long for the woman to catch up, no most of his waiting was because she hesitated a good few meters away, still uncertain even though the fear had gone.

"Where do you come from?"

She didn't offer a verbal response to his question, instead she turned and began walking again, this time Harry allowed her to lead. As they picked their way through the detritus more shades peeled themselves from the shadows of burnt out homes and demolished businesses; Harry allowed them each one glance before looking away, purposely unaffected. When they stopped it was at the foot of a tenement building near completely caved in on itself, the stairs leading up its stoop remained mostly intact though, so he sat and she moved to stand just beside him.

"This was your home?"

"Yes."

Harry had to strain to hear her, not because she spoke softly but because her words were spoken
without the presence of any real vocal chords. It was something more than hearing, something he didn't fully understand but still could recognize.

"It's not anymore." He gently informed. "Your soul doesn't belong here."

The apple of her cheeks blistered and split with the force of her frown. "Where else is there?"

"Something is after. I've never seen it, but I know it's there."

"How?"

He shrugged, because there was no way to explain how he knew, he hadn't even believed the words until he'd said them just then, but the moment he did he'd known they were true. "Don't you want to find out for yourself? Or would you rather stay here, stuck between reality and death, haunting people who can't even see you."

"You can."

"I'm different."

"But my sister…"

Harry remembered the woman she'd been walking beside, the one she'd abandoned so quickly to follow him. "Loves you. Misses you. But she'll move on, so should you."

He held out his hand, only just enough that she'd have to move closer, bridge the gap to take it. And she did. It wasn't like what happened with Fred; there was no pain, his entire body vibrated with the pure energy of her soul, but he didn't keel over and she didn't disappear.

At his side a man appeared, dressed in simple grays he'd seen once before. The fear had returned to the woman, she could tell this newcomer was not like the other spirits who continued to linger a safe distance in the background, but she allowed Harry to pass her hand into his and even offered a tentative one of her own when Death's reaper offered her a kind smile.

"More will be coming," the reaper said, eyes wide with intrigue and trained on Harry. "In case the others might have changed their minds as well."

Harry nodded his thanks, then the reaper and his soul were gone. He rose from his stoop, headed in the direction of the more populated side of the city and finally home, but not without a warning for any who might be listening.

"When the reapers come, you'd do well not to turn them away a second time."

Harry left that demolished little corner of the city and its undead inhabitants, and the world was different. Or maybe it would be more accurate to say he saw it differently, felt it differently.

The people around him were tethered to the earth, to life, by a force in which there were no words to describe. Blink and it was gone, but if he focused Harry could see them, shining strands bright and anchored to the ground beneath them.

His middle aged landlady had a tether that stretched short, she liked her smoke and her brandy, but her small son's was expansive and breathtaking for all that it spoke of life.

His encounter with the shade of that lost woman, his first not spent in confusion or fear, had changed him, allowed the power he and Howard had forced loose to take yet another form.
It was a relief when he reached his rooms, where he could draw tight his blackout curtains and fall onto the floor directly in the center of his room. Silencing charms layered his walls thick so none of the sounds of the other tenants and their evening habits breached his room. It was silent and dark and perfect after the day he'd had.

He wasn't nauseous or sore like he'd been following his first encounter with Fred, and he didn't feel terrified and a bit violated like after Jerome; his skin buzzed and felt as if her were too full of caffeine and sugar, but there was none of the fear or disgust. Never once had he felt so at ease after being an unwilling conduit of the Hallows' magic, he latched onto that, forced himself to remain in that state of calm as he tried to imaging the ripple and flow of time.

It was a river, enormous and violent and churning and he was caught right in the middle. The shore was only a few meters away, but to get to it he would have to to swim adjacent to the current that was so strong his arms felt as if they would snap just trying to bat against it.

The first step was a labor of pure stubbornness, the second a feat that took every ounce of will he had, the third he wavered and that moment of hesitation cost him everything. In an instant he was swept under and the image was gone. He snapped back to the dark of his room with a desperate scramble for air.

He got back to his feet and with a twitch of the curtains, flooded the room with light. He had failed, but his mood remained unsullied. He hadn't expected to succeed, he hadn't expected to see anything at all but he had. He'd seen time, he'd seen the ebb and flow of the stream and it was just like Death had said, once he was there he just knew what he needed to do to conquer it, to bend it to his will and twist it to suit his need. He only needed the power to do it.

And soon enough, he would.

Harry was back at base the next morning, the sun was just shy of risen and he was once again with the SSR, this time to speak with Howard who took the news of his magic's positive reaction with overwhelming optimism. His brain activity from the day before was near doubled from the last time they'd taken a measure, Howard guessed another four procedures over the course of two months and Harry might have all the power he needed.

Two months and he could be heading home. Two months. After waiting this long, having even a tentative countdown was surreal.

Howard kicked him out right after, his magic was still trying to settle and it was throwing all of his equipment off while it was, so he went to the Commandos to try and work off some of the buzzing energy beneath his skin.

He and the combat team had had their last designated training session together almost two weeks ago, but they still came to him between ops for a little extra practice. Harry looked forward to the sessions, the Commandos couldn't cast spells back at him, but it was still good to stretch his magic and perfect the spells he was learning.

But his focus was off. The Commandos were eager to fight as always, but Harry couldn't keep his attention on the magic he was meant to be casting, which resulted in spells with too little or too much power behind and their unlucky recipients being blasted ass over tea kettle more times than they weren't.

"Maybe let's take a break," Steve suggested after Harry threw Dugan clear across the room with only a leg-locking jinx.
The others grumbled their assent and moved to grab a drink, while Harry went to sit against the wall as he caught his breath and tried to reel in his magic.

When Steve came to crouch at his side he grimaced, sheepish and more than a little apologetic. "I'm distracted."

"Maybe just a little. Everything all right?"

"I had a session with Howard yesterday."

Steve looked intrigued, after Claude he understood too well the implications behind the innocent enough words. "You're okay to be casting today?"

"Maybe not so much as I thought." Harry looked down at his wand, betrayed. "Half of my fuck ups are because I'm distracted, yeah, but the other half…my magic feels off. I know it's because of yesterday, I just don't know how to fix it."

"Can't Stark help with that?"

Harry snorted "He knows about as much as I do. Less even, seeing as he's not a wizard. I should give it a few days, let it settle, then go from there."

"Well if you need to take another trip to Diagon Alley for some more of those books, you know me and Buck'll be the first to volunteer as backup."

Harry laughed and smiled wide at the man. "I wouldn't take anyone else, Captain."

Steve nudged him with a massive shoulder in teasing thanks and Harry made a show of acting as if he'd been bowled. Even if he'd been far from knocked of his feet, the simple action had more weight than Steve probably intended behind it, Harry remembered how small he he'd been before, even now, months later, he was probably still constantly correcting himself to adjust for the changes brought on by the serum.

Maybe if Harry had been able to save Erskine from dying Steve wouldn't be having such a tough time of it, the doctor surely could have given him some invaluable insight on what to expect outside of the obvious increase in strength. There had been so many questions left unanswered after his death, ones every state senator, military bigwig, and semi-involved scientists had made a point to ask Harry, the one closest to Erskine before his murder.

Was Rogers truly superhuman or had he simply been elevated to peak human strength? How severe of an injury could he heal from? What toxins could his body fight off? Was his lifespan extended thanks to the serum? Would he age? Could he die?

All questions Harry had no answers to, it had been infuriating and frustrating, especially so soon after his loss. But maybe now, after finally accepting the foreign magic inside of him, he could answer at least one?

He considered the possibility only idly, but that was as good as a command to his magic and suddenly his vision focused and Steve's tether was there. He'd seen dozens on his way home yesterday, some weak, barely clinging to the desperate grasp they had on the earth, and some firm, so deeply locked in Harry knew it would take a tragedy of epic and unexpected proportions to shake them loose before their time. But in all the tethers he'd seen, there'd been nothing like Steve's.

He wasn't so much as locked in as he was rooted; burrowed deeper than he could follow as it
twisted and winded and latched and branched into a connection so strong he wondered what, if there even was anything at all, that could pry him free. It was unshakeable, unmovable and made Harry desperately wish he was able to see his own, the only tether invisible to this strange sight, if only so he might compare the two.

"What're you two hiding from the rest of us for?"

Bucky had finally grown tired of teasing Dugan over his unfortunate spill and now he was heading in their direction, and Harry, still caught up in the wonder of Steve's longevity, didn't blink away his focus in time to avoid seeing Bucky's.

Abruptly, he was reminded of the secret the other man had shared with him that day in the toilets, after his meltdown over Adalgar. The secret of the labs in a HYDRA facility he'd been locked in and given a serum of his own. There had been moments where Harry doubted if the serum Bucky had been given was on par with Steve's; there was just no way that squinty little creep Zola had accomplished what brilliant Abraham had needed actual magic to do. Especially working out of a half assed, basement lab. But Bucky's tether and the incredible strength in which it latched to life, strength that was unmistakably equal to Steve's, was proof all by itself.

And then he was just behind Steve and their two lines met. Each wound around the other, unreservedly entangling amongst each other, drawing strength from each other in way he'd yet to see any others do. It was baffling and touching and somehow private, even if he was the only one who could see it, even if they had no idea they were even doing it. Harry blinked and forced the focus to unfocus and the tethers were gone.

Bucky, still entirely oblivious came to stop just at Steve's side where he bumped him with his hip without moving his gaze from Harry.

"Dum Dum says you owe him a drink after knocking him on his ass with that blast."

Harry quirked a smile as he shook away the remnants of his surprise. "Bourbon, right?"

"Jim's is all he'll take."

"Well I like cognac. Remy Martin. Let him know he can buy me a bottle in thanks for preparing him for a fight he would have lost otherwise."

That earned him a belly deep laugh and a playful salute. "Yes, sir. I'll let him know."

The suggestion didn't go over too well with Dugan, as Harry knew it wouldn't. The tirade it set him off on was loud and long. He didn't even notice when Harry slipped out halfway through; he'd be stuck there all day if he didn't take the chance to get out when presented, besides he had something he wanted to do.

Claude had been released a week after his capture, his memory of that day and all the others after had been carefully wiped away by Harry's wand. Then they'd dumped him two streets over, close enough to where they had found him as to not cause suspicion, but still far enough to keep him from finding them once again.

Adalgar hadn't been so lucky. There'd been no improvement as far as the medical staff could tell, when Harry had gone in and touched his soul he'd done so without the caution and modicum of finesse he'd practiced with Claude, he'd damaged something in the man. Perhaps irreparably. The sleep terrors he'd suffered those first few nights had long since passed, now he was just still, always still. Nothing they did got a reaction for him; noise, light, pain, he had retreated so far
Harry still made it a point to see him when he could. He wasn't sure Adalgar would appreciate it all that much if he was being honest, but no one else came to see the man and since Harry had been the one to put him in that state the least he could do was offer him some kind of stimulation.

"The muggles have done their best, but they say nothing they can do will wake you." Someone in medical had been nice enough to move a chair into the room so Harry wouldn't have to kneel at the bedside every time he came to visit. He moved it flush against the bed and reclined into its hard back, inexplicably weary. "I let them try what they could, it's impressive the medicines they can accomplish without magic. But this is something they say they can't fix, so maybe it's time I intervened? I'm no good at healing, but maybe I can stop at Diagon, see what I can find there that might fix you up."

He pressed down on a wrinkle in the sheets only a few centimeters away from Adalgar's hand, it smoothed under his touch but another popped up just above where it'd been.

"If it doesn't work though…if it doesn't work I'll make sure they continue to care for you, or find someone who can. I won't let them put you down because they've lost interest, I'll continue to hope you'll get better until the day you do or the day you die."

There was no answer of course, there never was, but maybe Adalgar's breath settled in his chest just a little, maybe the frantic pulse Harry could see beating away at his throat calmed just enough. Or maybe it was all just hope.

Steve and his men, left for Liechtenstein the same day in pursuit of the latest lead on Schmidt and his cohort. They returned, broken, bleeding, half-dead, and their first real fight against Grindelwald's men under their belt.

For weeks after learning of their existence they'd been prepared to face Harry's kind, they'd been eager if only to pit their skills against an opponent so different from anything else they'd seen. But when it came to it, the only difference was the weapon utilized, there was still blood and agony and death. No matter how above those without magic these wizards thought they were they still were entirely the same as them when it came to war. And they lost still, despite their magic and their unwarranted arrogance, the Commandos had learned from Harry and they'd learned well. There had been blood shed and limbs broken, it would take time for them to recover physically and even longer mentally, but they'd survived where the wizards hadn't, they'd walked away where the wizards had fled, and in doing so earned information that would quickly prove to be of value.

"Steve was the one to find it," Bucky said during debrief. Only he, Steve, and Morita were present for it, the rest were recovering in medical to be debriefed at a later day. "They had a room hidden behind magic. Like the kind on the alley…wards? We got that same feeling of wrongness, like we'd forgotten something important and should turn back right away, but he recognized what it was and shook the worst of it off. There were enchantments on it still, things that wouldn't let us even open the door," he smiled, a shadow of mischief finding its way past his exhaustion, "but the walls didn't have any kind of magic on them. We broke through and found all of that."

That being documents, newspaper clipping, plans, all vital information regarding the movement and tactics of Grindelwald's men, all spread along the center of the table.

"We didn't understand half of what it said," Steve admitted. "But first glance we could tell it was important."
That was what Harry was there for. He'd already begun sorting through the pile, trying to decipher the near illegible scrawl on the closest sheet of parchment. It was a recipe, untitled but he only needed to pick out a few words to understand what it was; lacewing flies stewed for twenty-one days, powdered bicorn horn, fluxweed, knotgrass, genetic material.

"This is a potion recipe," he explained. "Polyjuice, it lets you take on the appearance of anyone as long as you've got a bit of their DNA- hair, fingernails, blood even."

"How do you tell they're an imposter?" Phillips asked, worry already making itself known in the dark frown on his lips.

"You don't. Not through any physical means at least, back home we had a bit of problem with polyjuiced figures running around so we got into the habit of asking security questions, something only the real person could know. It only worked though if we knew the person."

"What could the wizards be using it for?"

Harry hummed noncommittally as he continued sifting through the pile, grabbing onto anything that made even some kind of sense. "Give me time to look through all of this and I might be able to say? It's a mess and half of it is random junk from home."

"Can we help at all?" Steve asked.

Harry was quick to push half the pile in his direction. "Sort anything you might understand from everything you don't? I'll read through the latter while you tackle everything else, that'll definitely help this go quicker."

"Gimme one of those stacks." Bucky was already standing to reach for his own pile of papers, and Harry was only too happy to oblige.

Phillips and Peggy left to speak with the remaining Commandos, while Harry, Steve, Bucky, and Morita set in on the daunting task of sorting through the documents that easily blanketed the table five times over.

A good amount of it was random junk, just like Harry had said; broom adverts ripped from magazines, correspondence to and from family members, personal notes on everything from the best wand polishes to potions to fight off hair loss. But there were still plenty of documents of interest, and while most of it wasn't dated, enough was to give them a timeline of Grindelwald's movement.

"There's a lot on the tesseract here," Steve said some time into their search. "You were right about this being Grindelwald's play, same as Schmidt's."

"Supervillains are never very unique in their goals," Harry derided, eyes glued to a sheet of parchment he was sure had been enchanted to be as unintelligible as it was. "They want the biggest, shiniest toy and they want to destroy the world with it. They're depressingly easy to predict."

"You've had some experience with supervillains then?"

Harry looked up just long enough to offer Morita a rueful smile. "You'd be surprised."

The parchment wasn't enchanted, he finally decided, its writer just had shit handwriting and an obsession with the kneazles he'd left behind. It joined the quidditch adverts in the pile of waste.

It took hours to work through everything, even with two supersoldiers and a semi-trained wizard
the process was slow and tedious. Every potion recipe, coded letter, agent dossier, and sloppily
drawn blueprint was looked over, passed around, and commented on until finally they understood
the one big plot it all came together to be.

"There's a HYDRA base in Italy," Steve explained to Phillips, Peggy, and the remaining
Commandos who'd been dragged from medical earlier than they probably should have been,
"somewhere around the Ligurian Alps. It's very well hidden and is where a scientist by the name of
Vsevolod Kuznetsov does his work."

"I met him a few times in Azzano," Bucky said, "he and Zola were best pals even though
Kuznetsov worked primarily on the weapons."

"The tesseract powered weapons," Steve stressed. "The wizards believe he's seen the cube, they
think he could tell them where to find it."

"They're going to hit his base then, and get its location out of him?" Peggy guessed.

"And once they do, they're going to use his DNA and their polyjuice potion to get to it."

"Do you think we should let them?"

There was a beat of confused silence, then Peggy shook her head, leveling Dugan, the speaker of
that controversial question, with a look slack with disbelief. "What if we did what?"

He shrugged, unmoved by the reception his question had received. "There were three wizards
today. Only three wizards, who were half asleep and caught by surprise and they still put up a hell
of a fight. We have a supersoldier on our side and we barely came out of that fight alive. Imagine
an army of them, marching against Schmidt's stronghold, surprise on their side this time. They
might very well do what we haven't yet."

"Except when they win they get the cube and now we're fighting an enemy that could be worse
than Red Skull and his guys," Bucky pointed out.

"Not if we get it first."

Steve nodded, of course the first to understand where Dugan was trying to lead them. "Use the
wizards as a distraction and grab the cube while HYDRA is occupied fighting them."

Dugan nodded, satisfied. "Maybe the wizards win, maybe HYDRA, or maybe we'll get lucky and
they wipe each other out. But no matter how the fight ends, we'll be the ones to have won."

Peggy hummed contemplatively "It's a risk..." she looked to Harry, the one who knew the wizards
and what they were capable of the best. "Could it work?"

He sat and considered for a moment, remembering his own war and the way Voldemort had
fought, then the little he'd learned of Grindelwald.

"It could," he finally said, "if it weren't for one thing. Magic has made wizards cowards. They don't
do frontal assault, not if it can be avoided; they'll only send a few and they'll go in quietly, they'll
snatch the Tesseract from Schmidt without him even being aware they were there."

"We'll sabotage their plan then." Dugan countered, not willing to see his idea fall to ruin so quickly.
"Find some way to get them caught in the act and force them to fight."

"You could," Harry allowed, "but then their element of surprise would be gone. Once the first of
them dies they'll flee, same as they did with you."

"Take the wizards out of the equation then." Steve decided. "They've got us this far, but we don't
need them any longer."

Phillips grunted, intrigued despite himself. "Explain."

"We get to the base before them and we grab Kuznetsov. He'll tell us where to find the tesseract
before the wizards and we'll get it ourselves."

Stated as simply as that, none of them could think of a reason why it wouldn't work. Sure none of
them were particularly thrilled with the idea of hitting Schmidt at home, they preferred Dugan's
plan where they allowed the wizards to lay down their lives fighting HYDRA while they slipped in
quiet and grabbed what they needed. But a full out assault on Schmidt's base had always been the
end game no need to try and change it up now.

"When was the attack on Kuznetsov meant to take place?" Peggy inquired.

"We were able to narrow it down to three or four days from now, around twenty-one hundred
hours, Italy's time. They've been tracking Kuznetsov's schedule, he spends a few hours around then
in his lab, alone."

"The perfect time to hit." Phillips scrubbed a hand over his eyes, taking a moment to think. "We've
got a camp in France, about a day's hike away from where your guy is holing up. We'll set up there,
figure out how to get you in and out once we've got boots on the ground."

Steve nodded in understanding. "How soon will we be heading out?"

"The very minute I can get transport arranged. Bunk here tonight and be prepared to leave on a
moment's notice, we're working with no time at all."

Phillips didn't give Harry an option on whether or not he wanted to join them in their expedition to
France. These were his people the Commandos were preparing to go up against, the colonel needed
to have him close at hand in the event anything went wrong.

Harry didn't appreciate being given no choice at all, but when the charter plane Phillips had
managed to secure on such short notice took off only a few minutes past three in the morning, he
was still aboard. Exhausted and grumpy, but there.

But then they touched down and his disgruntlement for being forced to come along shifted to full
out resentment.

The camp was a hive of death. Shades stalked everywhere, dressed in the combat gear they'd died
in, entire limbs missing and holes blown through their heads. And there were reapers. Death's
chosen ignored the already departed, they'd made their efforts when they'd first arrived, but these
men were too damaged by the trauma of their deaths to even desire the promise of peace on the
other side that they were offered. So the reapers focused on the living; dogging their steps,
lingering just outside the entrance to the infirmary, hoisting themselves into the back of the
vehicles that carted men by the dozens back out into the trenches. It was overwhelming the
desolation that clung to the place. Whoever said there was peace and beauty in death had never
seen a place like this.

But then Steve arrived and a palpable shift in the air occurred. The last time Harry had been in a
camp with him he'd been dressed in his garish USO outfit, singing along with a choir of perfectly
coifed women. The men had *hated* him, Harry had heard a tale or two of rotten tomatoes and bared arse cheeks during his one and only performance. But the men here looked to the supersoldier with awe, veneration, *hope*.

Steve wasn’t used to, it was evident in the uneasy slope of his shoulders that the eyes that locked on him from the moment he stepped from the plane to the moment he ducked into his tent weren’t something he’d ever be comfortable with.

Harry was just glad that for once he wasn't the focus of that unnerving adoration.

He was assigned a tent with Falsworth, who was an easy enough companion and one Harry had built rapport with through virtue of sharing a home country. Neither of them wasted much time before choosing a side of the tent to roll out their cots and collapsing on the flimsy things instantly, desperate to regain some of the sleep lost thanks to the late-night flight. And they remained there until Dugan came tearing in hours later, admonishing them for missing lunch but committed to making sure they didn't skip out on their evening meal.

"You've been rubbing elbows with moneybags Stark too long," the ginger said, directing a devious grin Harry's way, "I've been waiting to see you try to live off our rations."

Harry snorted. The joke was on him, he'd lived in a cupboard and survived off of stale bread and moldy cheese for the first half of his life, he would eat *anything*.

"Looks like corned beef and veg hash today."

Harry accepted his metal tray of rations without much fuss, even if the lot of it looked like something a hippogriff had spat up. The beef and veg hash had an interesting texture to it and of course he'd been handed a mug of coffee, he could barely stand the taste of it but the US troops seemed to live off the stuff. When he settled in at the table the Commandos had commandeered, he slid the cup over to Bucky who'd already finished his own and was trying to cajole a bit from an unwavering Steve.

He hid a smile at the sergeant's pleased murmurs behind a mouthful of his hash, and maybe he should have gone slower on his first bite because the concoction was *thick*. There wasn't much flavor to it, even with the corned beef mixed in, but he could survive that, it was the texture that got him. Whatever filler the kitchen had added to round the dish out made each bite feel like a dense, cakey mess.

Dugan was watching him over his own plate with something close to delight. "How's it treating you?"

"I've had beans flavored to taste like actual vomit and earwax," Harry took a pointed bite of his admittedly disgusting dinner, "this is nothing in comparison."

"Spoilsport."

Harry laughed and bent over his tray to focus on shoveling down the rest of the hash before it got cold, how it might taste then made him shudder just to consider. It was a tough job, one he almost lost when he nearly choked on an undercooked carrot, but even Aunt Petunia would be impressed with his tenacity and soon enough he was down to the hard little biscuits dipped in some off-brand chocolate to give them a bit of sweet. A reward he supposed, for his suffering.

It was while he was breaking a tooth on the biscuits, recovering from the ordeal that was his dinner, that a group of men approached the canteen. They looked the same as the rest of the weary
soldiers coming and going for their evening meals, but then the one at the center with his pale hair caught Harry's eye and he sat straight in his seat. He frowned and forced himself to look again, but what he thought he saw hadn't changed, he knew him. He was out of his seat in an instant.

"Harry? Where are you going?"

Harry waved absently at Steve, eyes still trained on...yes, it was him. "Ives!"

The man turned, startled, confused, then he saw Harry and only looked shocked. "Flash, is that you?"

Harry stumbled to his side and didn't even think before sweeping him into a hug. The gesture was returned almost immediately and a bit of tension he didn't even know he'd been carrying all this time finally loosened.

"How are you here? Why are you here." Ives released him and looked down with eyes wide in confusion. "You said you weren't going into the fight. You were supposed to be in London."

Harry took a moment to answer, too busy cataloguing all of the changes in his friend's face. That bit of red tint in his hair was nearly gone, making it near as pale as Malfoy's had been-would be, he'd always kept his face neat and smooth, but now something that could almost be a beard covered his chin and crawled up his cheeks and there was a bit of dirt on his forehead.

"I wasn't," he said, eventually shaking himself from his scrutiny. "I mean I'm not. I'm here consulting on an op my team's headed on tomorrow. They're going a bit further out but our CO thought it be best to camp here."

That didn't seem to clear anything up for Ives. "The only team that's here and not going straight to the front is..." He glanced over Harry's shoulder, confusion finally shifting to baffled understanding as he took in the men Harry had just left and who he didn't have to look over at to know were making no attempts at hiding their curious and blatant staring. "Flash, are you with Captain America?"

"Well, I mean I travelled with them. I'm not exactly with them, we're hardly even colleagues, or anything really. I'm just dragged along to wherever they need me in case they need someone to consult-"

"Hush."

"Sorry."

Ives nodded to his men who'd moved on to join the line for food, then steered Harry to the nearest empty table. "Now explain it to me."

"We work for the same organization," Harry began.

"Yeah, I remember. The SSR?"

"Right. I mostly do development, assisting in things like building the defenses against HYDRA's weapons and such. But there are...certain areas of study I'm well read in that not many else at the SSR are, so sometimes I'm brought in on jobs to offer insight where they might need it."

"And that includes being brought to the fight?"

"Well, like I said, the fight's a bit further out, but they want me as close as possible in case of..."
complications."

Ives didn't seem at all impressed by that. "Complications?"

Harry shrugged.

"Let me guess, it's classified?"

"Sorry."

He laughed but there was no displeasure behind the sound. "Don't be kid, I'm just glad you're safe. Sounds like you're doing good work."

"Hardly. Most of the time we spend blowing things up."

"Then our jobs are a lot more alike than I thought."

Harry grinned, he didn't realize how much he'd missed Ives until he was reminded what it was like being with him. "And you? On the way to finishing this fight like we talked about?"

"Getting there maybe." Ives shrugged bashfully. "I'm sergeant now."


"Oh, yeah. I'll bet we're just alike."

"Would you like to meet them?" Harry glanced over, most of the Commandos were wrapping up their meals, it was only Steve and Bucky who were still looking over every now and then. Harry wondered if they could hear the conversation over the din of the mess hall. "They're great, I think you'd get along just fine."

"I mean…"

Harry tried to hide how much he wanted him to say yes. There was no telling what the next few days would look like for either of them, he wanted to spend as much time catching up with him as possible.

"Geez, kid, tone down the eyes, will you? Of course I'll meet your famous friends."

"They're no more famous than I am."

Which, okay, that wasn't saying much.

Harry slid back into his seat at the Commandos' table without much pomp then nudged Bucky over until there was room for Ives to sit on the end of the bench. "This is Ives," he said plainly. "We're friends, from home."

Steve perked up right away. "Home? You from New York too?"

Ives dipped his head in a nervous nod. "Yessir. Born in Chelsea, raised there too, didn't leave 'till I got my draft."

"Manhattan's nice. We were right over in Brooklyn Heights." A mischievous shine Harry was finding more and more easy to spot lit up in Steve's eyes. "Great neighborhood."

Ives' brow dropped just a hair, he looked to Harry who shrugged, then backed to Steve who looked
entirely too innocent. "It was…colorful."

Bucky rolled his eyes even while he laughed. "Ignore him," he said, moving to block Steve, who made a noise like a squawk in protest, with his head. "His humor's shit. I'm Bucky."

"The sergeant, yeah, apparently we're just alike."

"Shut up." Harry muttered and reached for his tray, he still had two biscuits left and they'd almost been edible, they might be the closest thing he'd get to good food while here so he may as well enjoy them. But when he dragged it closer it was empty and Dugan was pointedly not looking in his direction.

He tried not to let his displeasure at the missing biscuits show, but he'd choked through that awful hash and he didn't even get dessert. It was ridiculous how disappointed he actually found himself.

"Oh, look what you've done," Dernier said, his words thick with his accent. "He looks so sad."

"Shut your hole, Frenchie," Dugan muttered at the same time Harry protested that, "This is just my face!"

But then Jones reached over and dropped a few of his own biscuits onto Harry's plate, and maybe what was "just his face" perked up a little.

"What does that mean?" Bucky pressed once the minor crisis had been averted. "We're just alike?"

"We share a rank and that's all," Ives shrugged. "That was enough for Flash though."

"Flash?" It didn't take much to guess who Ives was referring to, but Bucky was sure the story behind that nickname was a great source of amusement, one Harry might never share if the look on his face was anything to go by. He couldn't pass up the chance to hear it now.

"He hasn't said?" A slow smile was beginning to spread across Ives' face and Harry groaned. "He got the name thanks to how we met. He swept in and saved me from the sort of no good fellas who'd take a guy on three to one, like my own Flash Gordon."

Bucky looked delighted. "You two met in a fight?"

Ives nodded. "Wasn't much of a fight once he showed up. He broke one guy's ankle and knocked the other over the head with a trash lid, they were down before they even noticed he was there."

Dugan shook his head, refusing to believe Ives' tale. "I can't see that happening, not with him."

Harry frowned in mock offense. "Why's that? Because I'm not built like the sort of man whose diet consists only of protein and Schlitz? I've told you before, I'm scrappy."

"Well how come we ain't ever seen it then?"

"You have." Harry leveled him with a challenging glare. "Or has that bruise on your backside faded already? You need another to remind you?"

The others hooted at Dugan who scowled into his by then congealed hash. There wasn't anything he could say to that.

Harry sat back with a smile, satisfied that he'd settled that. "But I really only got those two guys because they were surprised. Ives put up the real fight, he kept them all back before I showed up and once I did he got the biggest one in a chokehold. He was out in seconds."
Bucky knocked his shoulder into Steve's. "Don't that sound familiar?"

"Yeah," Steve snorted, "only I never won."

Ives looked surprised. "You got into a lot of fights?"

The Commandos all groaned, already worn out by the turn the conversation had taken and it had barely even started. "Not a single one of their stories from before joining does not include a fight," Gabe confided to Ives.

"That's not true," Steve protested. "The one with the baseball games we used to start up with the kids on our block instead of going to Sunday mass."

"Always ended with you scrapping with the team captain who refused to pick you," Morita said.

"Okay then remember the one with the dog?"

Falsworth nodded. "The one you adopted for the day after fighting the group of kids who were throwing rocks at it?"

"I've told you about the pies Mrs. Eskenazi used to make me."

"Stevie," Bucky cut in, a gentle reminder in his voice, "she only made you those 'cuz she felt sorry you were getting beat up all the time for yelling at the kids who harassed her on her trips back from the grocer."

"Well I didn't tell them that part."

"So you did fight a lot," Ives concluded.

"No," Bucky corrected. "He got beat up a lot, it was me doing the fighting."

Steve rolled his eyes and responded with sarcasm heavy on his tongue. "Thanks, Buck."

"Well, you don't look like you'd lose too many fights now, Captain."

"The army did me some good."

"I'll say it did." Ives turned to Harry before Steve or any of the others could respond. "Did you say for how long you'd be camping with us?"

Harry shook his head. "Maybe a week? Maybe more. Depends on how quickly these men can do their jobs."

Ives nodded his understanding. "I have to meet with some of my men tonight, soon as a matter of fact, but we're not meant to go back out to the fight for another few days. Find me before then?"

Once Harry promised to do exactly that, Ives stood to leave. "It was good meeting you all," he told the Commandos. "Good luck on whatever you came here to do. I'll see you soon, Flash."

"He was nice," Steve said, a happy little smile on his face.

"I didn't think you knew anyone outside of us," Bucky teased.

Harry rolled his eyes. "I'm not a complete shut in. Or at least I wasn't, before I joined in with you lot." Harry pushed his tray away, finally empty of the debatably edible rations. "You're meant to
head out tomorrow? Did Phillips want one last debrief tonight?"

"No, our books are open for this evening," Falsworth said.

"So keeping with tradition," Dugan beamed. "I brought an old friend."

The men groaned when, a half full bottle of clear liquor was produced from a bag at his feet.

"What have we got this time?" Morita asked. "More of your own brew?"

"No, our livers are safe boys," Bucky said, squinting at the bottle and its pale label. "It's only Seagram's."

"Gin," Dernier spat, disgusted by his American comrades' poor taste in drink. "I'd rather the home brew."

"It'll get you sloshed same as any of the other fancy shit you and yours drink, Frenchie," Dugan teased. "But for our guest," here he looked to Harry who offered him a look of deep wariness in return, "I got something special."

Harry accepted the second bottle to come from the bag cautiously; it was heavy, a deep sea-glass green, and already half empty, but when he read the label he couldn't help the wide grin that rose almost immediately. "Remy Martin. How'd you get this? Where did you get this, it's terribly expensive isn't it?"

"When you've got a face as charming as mine, there's not much you can't get."

"You'll share, yes?" Dernier near pleaded. "I cannot think of the last time I'd had a drink so smooth."

"I don't think I could handle this all by myself."

And they all knew that to be the truth, there was no way Harry would manage to make even a dent in the bottle without sharing at least some.

"We won't be able to get away with setting up around a fire tonight," Bucky said once that was settled. "But I know for a fact Steve's got a tent near as big as our place back home and that's just as good in my books."

"You can't just offer up my quarters, Buck," Steve tried to protest but it was evident he was only putting up a fight for the fun of it.

"It's in the spirit of tradition. Don't be a square."

Harry claimed half of an army issued mug of Remy for himself then let the rest of the bottle go to the wolves. It was done in under an hour and the Commandos were gone, but they hardly even slurred and Harry didn't see a single one of them fall over. They were drunk, obviously so, but still almost…neat about it.

He'd never met a group of men so capable of getting so completely wasted and retain some sense of normalcy. The one night he'd spent with Ives and his crew had been entertaining but messy, he remembered the dancing too similar to upright sex and raunchy songs that echoed far in the empty streets.

Even Howard, who was never far from a finger or two of whiskey, showed effects after a cup too
many. But the Commandos destroyed his entire bottle and the gin Dernier had been so quick to scorn and all they had to show for it were redder cheeks than normal and a sudden eagerness to share every personal anecdote in their arsenals.

"They've been doing this since we formed," Bucky confided, careful not to disrupt Falsworth's recollections of his more exciting schooldays. "Probably even earlier. The night before any fight you'll find us in a circle at least one bottle being passed around."

"It doesn't affect them in a fight?" Harry wondered.

"Thought it might be a problem the first few times," Steve said. "But these guys are old hats at shaking off the worst of the drink in a few hours. You won't even be able to tell they put away near two bottles in the morning."

"I wonder between your guys and Howard who has the better tolerance."

"Let's make it through this fight and maybe we'll find out."

The reminder of what was coming once morning came around filled Harry with trepidation. Because this was big. They were going after the man who could bring them straight to Schmidt's door. Steve and his team were good, he never doubted that, but the Red Skull would be holed up in nothing short of a fortress. To get to him might cost some of them their lives.

"Phillips is hoping to find reason for you to fight."

Harry frowned, not angry at Steve for bringing the matter up, only frustrated in general at the predicaments he always landed himself into.

"I know."

Of course he knew. Phillips and even Peggy had been wanting to get him on the field since they'd seen the destruction his magic was capable of.

When he was with Erskine, researching potions and mediating purchases of magical flora, they hadn't seen the use of it; magic was exciting and new and useful in terms of the serum, but nothing they could utilize themselves. It was only after Adalgar was a drooling mess and the Commandos were learning how to duck eviscerating hexes that they understood the power they were associated with and realized the devastation it would cause their enemies.

Harry didn't blame them for wanting it, they were here to win a war, by any means necessary, not coddle his shaky morals. And maybe if he'd been someone else, someone free from his own brand of issues he might have said to hell with the Statute and lent his wand and his magic to their cause. But he wasn't, he couldn't, because he had problems of his own that needed sorting, and as unmotivated as he'd been in both mundane and magical school, he still knew the outcome of this war. They didn't need him, they never did; the body count might be different, the timeline a few days or weeks or months off, the number of Commandos to make it through alive might vary, but they would win. Without him.

"You're set in your decision not to fight and we'll at least respect that."

It wasn't lost on Harry, how incredible it was hearing something like that from Steve Rogers, the man who couldn't back down from a fight even when he was a head shorter than just about every man and plagued with innumerable health defects.

"But if we needed it, if things got out of hand…"
"I'd be there."

Perhaps that was the only way he'd break his no-intervention decree, if these men he'd grown so fond of so quickly were facing men from his own world and knew they had no chance of getting out alive. There was no saying how that would end, his array of offensive spells had broadened since he'd started his self-study. He could mutilate a dummy like no one's business, but it was different in a real fight against real men who fought back. But if anything he'd make a big enough distraction to give the real strategic geniuses a chance to figure themselves out of the hole they'd wound up in.

Steve smiled, pleased with the sincerity behind his promise, but there was something he still wondered. "You haven't had any more trouble with your spells? The effects of what you did with Howard have passed?"

Harry shrugged. As far as he could tell, they had. He hadn't had much reason to cast in the days between his last (disastrous) spar with the Commandos and winding up here, but there'd been no other reactions from his magic. He was seeing plenty of shades still and the tethers were always there if he looked hard enough, but that was tame in comparison to what had happened the first time they'd attempted the procedure.

"It'll work with me in a pinch. We just needed time to settle."

"Did you ever talk to Howard about it?"

"I never got the chance." Harry waved away his concern easily. "I know what he would have said though and it's exactly what I just did. We're pushing my magic further and quicker than it would be able to on my own, but it and I just need time to adjust to the changes."

"And you've adjusted?"

"As well as I can. But this is only temporary." Right after Claude, Harry had explained to both Steve and Bucky the issue of his dual magics in the simplest terms he could manage. He'd been just vague enough where they understood that he was struggling with a foreign magic trying to alter what he'd been born with, without tipping them off on the exact nature of said foreign magic. "We're getting closer, once I'm home I'll be rid of it and all of the side effects will be gone."

His words had the exact opposite effect he'd been hoping for, neither Steve nor Bucky relaxed at his attempt at reassurance.

"I still don't get what that means," Bucky said. "You're stretching your magic but for what? How will it get you home?"

Harry took his bottom lip between his teeth as he tried to puzzle out the easiest explanation. "It's more than just distance I have to cross to get home. I need power, a lot of it, to get there. So we're growing what I have."

"And you're close now?"

"Closer. A few more months maybe."

"Then you'll be home."

Harry was struck by how unhappy Steve sounded. Both he and Bucky were doing well to keep their expressions clear, but he could still sense the undercurrent of glumness they both carried.
"I suppose since it's taking so much power just to get back, it won't be so easy to pay Brooklyn a visit or two."

"No. Probably not." He had to look down at the mostly untouched mug in his hand for a moment, because wow that hurt worse than it should have. "You know, when I got here I swore not to get attached? To just keep to myself and find a way home alone. But then Erskine happened, then Peggy, then Howard, and you all. I fucked that one right up. I miss my friends and my home, but I'll miss you all now, once I'm back."

"We didn't want to make it harder…"

"No, I'm not upset. I'm glad I couldn't keep to my promise."

Bucky held up his own full mug. "Toast then, to broken promises."

And Harry laughed and knocked his mug into Bucky's and held it there until Steve joined them with his own. "To broken promises."

The Commandos left early the next morning, they had nearly a full day's hike to Kuznetsov's base camp ahead of them, and just as Steve had said, not a single one of them showed sign of too much to drink from the night before. It was impressive and really made him wonder how a faceoff against Howard and his liver of steel might end up.

Harry took advantage of not being an actual part of the combat unit to sleep in a little later, though he was still up much earlier than he'd ever been during his Hogwarts' days. The stir of camp was just too much to sleep through.

He met Ives for lunch, who introduced him to his unit, all of whom wanted to know every detail about what it was like to work with Captain America. It was a relief to break away from the questions and the curiosities to walk through camp alone with Ives.

"Elton shipped out a week after I did. Last I heard he's somewhere in Honduras, acting as a translator, lucky bastard."

"He speaks…Hondurian?"

"Spanish, Flash," Ives snorted. "And yeah, he was always real good with languages. I'm glad he's found a use for that here, especially one that keeps him further from the fighting."

"But you wish it was you, right?"

"Of course, but the only skill I've got is putting on face and last I checked the US army wasn't looking for queers."

"Their loss. I've seen you in a dress, flash them those legs and the Nazi's would be all but useless."

Ives' cackle of laughter did a good job masking the distant rumble of mortar shells for a few seconds. "Wow, I can't believe how much I missed you."

"Yeah, well you're keeping busy. Probably hard to miss anything when you're out there." Harry's head tilted in the direction of the crackling gunfire of the fight.

"That's actually when it's easiest."

"Harry."
Both men slid to a stop and turned to Peggy, lovely as ever even with mud up to her shins and her usual burst of bright lip color nowhere in sight. She crossed the distance between them in a quick few steps and, after sparing Ives a curious look, turned her attention to Harry. "They'll be there by sunset. Would you like to sit in with us while we wait for any updates?"

Harry glanced up at the sky, the day had gone fast, it was probably another hour before the sun was down. "Sure. Phillips won't mind?"

"He was the one to suggest it actually."

Harry rolled his eyes, of course he was, as manipulative as Dumbledore that man was. But it didn't take away from the fact that he did want to be there whenever the Commandos checked in, so he'd put his stubborn pride aside for the moment.

He looked over to Ives who'd been tracking the conversation in silent curiosity. "Will you be free later this evening?"

"Always for you, Flash."

"I'll come looking for you then. I want to hear more about Elton and Honduras."

"I won't go far."

Peggy waited until they were well across camp before speaking again. "Friend of yours?"

"He is, actually. I've known him longer than I've known you, even. He's from New York."

"He's handsome."

"Yeah?" Harry grinned at the woman. "I could put in a good word if you'd like."

"Oh, no need."

She ducked into Phillip's tent and he was quick to follow. The colonel was seated behind his desk as usual, a long range radio already set up and transmitting static.

"All right, colonel," Peggy made herself comfortable in the seat closest to the radio. "Sitrep?"

Their usual sort of mission was loud, bright, chaotic with gunfire that cast burning light across their faces and across the red and blue paint of Rogers' shield as it ricocheted through corridors and into skulls. Their directive was rarely to go in silently, their team was after all led by a walking American flag who tossed about a painted disk and included a hulking ginger whose standard uniform was a bowler hat and a shotgun and a Frenchman with a penchant for explosives. Covert ops weren't where they excelled.

But they needed to get to Kuznetsov and they needed to get their quietly, so Barnes took point and led them through the poorly lit halls to where intel said Kuznetsov would be.

Should be.

He wasn't.

He took dinner at this time, alone in his labs where he could carry on working while he ate. But none of his machines were running, their screens were dark, and the lab and each of its antechambers were deserted.
"We early or something?" Gabe asked, voice purposely hushed in the near silence of the lab.

Steve checked the little watch he kept tucked in the pouch of his utility belt. "Right on time actually. Kuznetsov's usually halfway through his meal by now."

"Maybe he's running behind schedule," Bucky reasoned. "Something's holding him up in mess. It would be just our luck that today is the one day his routine doesn't go like clockwork, but it doesn't have to be anything wrong."

"So we wait for him?"

Steve shook his head, already recalculating, adjusting to this shift in plans. "Intel says if he's not taking his meal here, he'll be in his rooms. That's two floors up. Dernier, Morita, you'll stay here, just in case he shows up, we'll go look for him there."

It was Falsworth who asked the question they were all wondering. "And if he's not in his rooms?"

"Then we search the whole building, top to bottom. This is our one shot at getting Kuznetsov, if the wizards get that location out of him the tesseract is as good as theirs."

To get to the upper levels, they had to go deeper into the building first, and the further they went, the more populated it got. They couldn't draw their guns, they couldn't risk the noise, so they broke necks where they could, dug knives between ribs and spinal cords where they couldn't. When they made it two floors up their hands were sticky with blood but the alarm had yet to sound.

"He's corridor 9D," Falsworth murmured, consulting the layout of the building, marked with every important location. "Only door on the left wall."

They made it as far as 9C before Steve was struck with the unshakeable certainty that the men he'd left in the lab were in danger. That wing of the building had been nearly deserted when they'd left, most HYDRA agents knew well enough to steer clear of Kuznetsov's labs, but what if the man himself had shown up and discovered Morita and Dernier waiting for him? Or what if they'd gotten into something they weren't supposed to? Dernier loved his explosives, was it too much to hope he wasn't already elbow deep in whatever experimental weapons Kuznetsov was known for manufacturing? For the good of the job, he should go check on them, turn back and-

Bucky's hand curled into a vice around Steve's wrist, stopping him from turning and heading back to the lab.

"Feel familiar?" He whispered, his face was pale and his lips drawn, but his gaze was locked steady on Steve. "Wards. There are wizards here."

And once he said it, Steve realized he recognized the feeling, same as when he'd gone to the alley with Harry and same as when they'd found the intel that landed them here, on this mission, from another HYDRA base similarly infested with wizards.

"They weren't supposed to be here until tomorrow," he hissed, as he herded the remaining Commandos further from the corridor. Now that he knew where the feeling of foreboding urgency was coming from, it was easier for him to ignore, and Bucky had shaken off the wards' effects before even him, but the others were taking a second longer to come back to themselves. Whether it was because they'd never experienced it the way he and Bucky had or for some other reason he didn't have the time to consider he wasn't sure, but he needed to get them a safe distance from the magical barriers before they gave away their presence.

"Maybe what we read was wrong, or maybe they decided to move their plan up a few days after
our last hit. Dugan stay still." Bucky wrestled the ginger to a halt before he could make a break for the staircase. "What you're feeling is not real. It's magic, trying to keep you away because down that hall is our target. Shake it off."

"You say that like it's easy," Dugan grunted, teeth gritted in concentration.

Bucky huffed a sigh. "We don't have time to try and walk them through the wards," he said, "there's no telling how long they've been in there, if they get that information from Kuznetsov this'll all have been for nothing."

Steve offered him an incredulous frown in response. "So we go in alone? We don't even know how many are in there."

"Doesn't matter. We'll slip in quick, take them out all at once." He reached for Falsworth and the smoke cannisters he kept on his belt.

"Kuznetsov could get killed with the rest of them."

"I'd rather him dead than squealing to the enemy."

Steve could already hear the cursing out Phillips was going to lay on him once they made it back, but he could recognize the logic in Bucky's suggestion even when he didn't want to, and they didn't have time at all to consider another course of action.

"All right. Dugan, Jones, Falsworth, post up here, keep watch and make sure no one gets out. I'm giving us five minutes, if we're not out by then you better dig deep and break past those wards or find us some backup."

None of the men looked happy, but they murmured their understanding of their Captain's orders and took up position on either end of the hall. They had a job to do, they could get on him and Barnes for their recklessness when it was through.

They first step through the wards was nauseating, the struggle to differentiate with what they knew and what the magic was trying to tell them was one hard fought, but each step after was easier, and soon enough they were through.

Once they were on the other side, the screaming started.

"They must have had some kind of silencing spell up with the wards," Bucky guessed. "Wouldn't want the whole compound coming down on them once they got started on him."

Steve winced. "Geez, I feel for the guy, but it's still a good sign for us. He hasn't given anything up just yet."

The hall just outside Kuznetsov's rooms was empty, the wizards had been so certain of the infallibility of their wards they hadn't even set up guards outside.

That had been their first mistake.

Their second was neglecting to even shut the door behind them.

"Arrogant," Steve murmured to Bucky, nearly inaudible over the sound of Kuznetsov's agony.

"Sloppy," was the equally silent response.

Inside the room, the man they'd come for was writhing on the plush carpeted floor, three wizards
were standing over him and another was honest to god lounging in an armchair to the far left of the room as if this were just another Tuesday evening. There were no visible wounds, no blood or broken bones for them to see, but the way Kuznetsov screamed was fervently agonized, the product of a Cruciatus if they had to guess. And all the while, the wizards barked at him in his mother tongue. Only one word was recognizable in the garble of Russian, but it was the only word that mattered: tesseract.

It was too bad Kuznetsov was too busy wailing to offer a coherent answer.

He shouldn't have sympathy for the man, Kuznetsov was HYDRA, but the way Harry had described the Cruciatus, its all-encompassing nature, how there was no sense other than pain, and the way the man screamed...Steve wasn't sure he could wish that kind of torture on even Schmidt.

And Bucky seemed to be of the same mind, he was rolling the cannister across his palm, an impatient tick in his jaw. "Tell me when."

Steve didn't see any reason to keep him waiting. "Whenever."

Kuznetsov's screams were too loud and the wizards too distracted for the gentle scrape of a pin being released to register. It was only when the grenade rolled to a stop against the closest wizard's foot did any of them take notice to the fact that they were no longer alone.

But then it went off with a fwoosh and smoke was flooding the room.

"Zasada." The wizard taking a rest in the armchair was on his feet in a moment. "Ambush. At the door."

Four wands turned on them and then the thick gray smoke still flooding from the cannister was suddenly lit with the multi-colored hues of spells intent on killing them. Luckily Steve's shield was great for deflecting most curses, so while he provided cover Bucky took aim and shot a clean hole through the head of one of Kuznetsov's interrogators. The others dove for cover immediately after, but one was too slow and caught a disc of red and blue vibranium to the throat for his trouble while another earned a bullet to the chest.

Kuznetsov himself was left in the center of the floor, forgotten in the face of a new foe, but still so obviously out of it from the curse there wouldn't be any fear of him going anywhere for a while.

"I'll lay down cover fire to keep the asshole behind the armchair busy if you want to get the one hiding under the desk," Bucky suggested, already aiming his rifle in the direction of the overturned armchair.

"Once I take his spot under the desk I should have an angle on the one behind the chair," Steve agreed. "If he tries to move it'll be right into your line of fire so be ready."

"You forget who you're talking to."

At the first burst of gunfire, Steve was leaping into the doorway, over Kuznetsov, and around the wide set, mahogany desk that wizard number three was hiding. He slid behind the man's cover with little finesse, but before he could even raise his wand Steve was cracking his head against one of the desk's unyielding panels. The body hit the ground and he was already drawing his sidearm and craning around the desk to where he could just see the fourth and final wizard.

The first shot went wide, the angle he was aiming from was awkward and uncomfortable and the wizard was doing his best to flatten himself against the chair.
"Come on Steve, don't play with your food!" Bucky chastised from the doorway.

The second shot was aimed true, it would get his mark in the center of his forehead, minimal mess, he felt that with a quiet confidence only achieved in the middle of a fight. But a fraction of a second before it hit, the wizard shouted out; one word muffled by distance and uttered in Russian and then there was a vortex of light, blue and bright and blinding, and he was gone.

The bullet lodged in the upholstery right behind where his head had only just been and Steve cursed.

"He gone?" Bucky asked, though he was wise enough not to leave cover just yet.

Steve kept low to the ground as he crept over to where the wizard had just been, checking behind and around the toppled armchair just to be sure he was really gone and not using magic to trick their eyes.

"He's gone, ran just like Harry said he would. Room's clear."

"Hall's clear. Our guy still alive?"

Steve kicked at Kuznetsov's side, rolling him onto his back. He'd fallen out of consciousness sometime during the last few minutes of the fight, finally too exhausted and flat out terrified to cling to awareness any longer.

"Still alive," he concluded when he caught the rise and fall of his breath.

"Grab him and let's go then. It's been five minutes, the guys'll be gearing up to grab backup by now."

Kuznetsov went over Steve's shoulder and then they were back out in the hall, heading back from where they came. And when they rounded the corner and found 9C occupied by their entire team, the two they'd left down in the labs included, Bucky scoffed.

"Frenchie and Morita aren't backup." He derided. "How were they supposed to get past those wards if you guys couldn't?"

Falsworth spared him one of those looks full of Englishmen arrogance that he hated. "Who said anything about getting through the wards? We were going to blow through the walls and storm them from behind."

"Great plan." Steve hefted Kuznetsov on his shoulders, more for show than anything else, the man was overweight sure but they'd all seen the captain run drills with three times the weight on his back without once breaking into a sweat. "Lucky we didn't need it or else getting out of here would be a lot harder. Run into any trouble on the way up?"

Morita shook his head. "Not much. A few workers and only one armed guard. I guess Kuznetsov and his work weren't important enough to warrant the whole armada."

"Let's take advantage and get out of here with no more bloodshed then. We've still got a long hike ahead of us before we can pitch camp."

The chorus of groans only made him smile as he hefted Kuznetsov once more for good measure, then started for the nearest flight of stairs down.

It wasn't like he could blame his men for the displeasure though, this op defined everything the
Commandos hated, everything they weren't. Over hostile lines in the middle of fucking nowhere, it had taken them literally all day to hike up to the base. Covert, Dugan hadn't even been allowed to bring his shotgun. And they didn't even get the satisfaction of fighting their way out or blowing the place to high heavens, no they had to be in and out without setting off any alarms. And now they had another day long hike ahead of them, the SSR couldn't send a plane or even a car until they were back on friendly soil.

He'd be pissed off if too if he were anyone else. But he was captain and at least had to appear unbothered. And when they ran into a half dozen agents, all of duty and headed for their evening meals, he stepped back and let his men take care of them, if only to see their moods boosted just that little bit.

It wasn't long before they were back outside, the air was fresh and crisp after the stale, recycled stuff they'd been sucking in inside the base, but it was cold, the promise of a harsh winter something none of them wanted reminder of.

"Let's try and make it a few klicks out then we can take a moment to regroup," Steve instructed, not breaking the steady jog he and the others had broken into once they'd stepped outside. "I want to get Kuznetsov properly secured and we can take the time to confirm where we're going from here."

Bucky, who was keeping pace without any sign of struggle, a far cry from the already cursing Dugan, offered him a quick smile and a slick. "Yes sir."

It was because Steve was looking at him, head turned just a little to the side that he saw the red glow light the back of his friend's head just before it was too late. He collided with Bucky, knocking both of them and Kuznetsov to the ground in a tangle of cursing limbs, he cracked his nose on someone's shoulder but the spell missed and disappeared into the treeline instead.

"We've got a dozen on our tail," Gabe was the one to report, "Hard to see but they look like wizards, all of them."

"Only one got away," Steve grunted, back on his feet in a second and throwing Kuznetsov back over his shoulder.

"And he brought the rest," Bucky scowled.

So much for them being cowards.

"Keep low and get to the trees. We'll engage when we get some cover between us."

It wasn't that long of a run to the treeline, a few meters maybe, but when spells were tearing bright, burning trails around their heads it felt like an impossible distance to cover. Steve was the first to break through of course, with Bucky right behind him, then Jones, Morita, and Dernier. Dugan was behind everyone, still a few feet out when a whip of gold crossed the distance between him and the wizards and caught him around the ankle. He fell with a curse and scrabbled for purchase in the dirt even while it began reeling him back toward base, Falsworth who had been just one step from making it to cover turned on a dime and dove for him. Both of his hands latched onto just one of Dugan's and his feet dug divots into the earth as he tried to provide a counterweight to the pull of the lasso but he barely served to slow Dugan's relentless drag backwards.

Bucky was the first to poke his head around the tree he'd been taking cover behind, rifle already on his shoulder and aimed at the first wand wielding man he could spot. He fell with one shot, but it wasn't the wizard with the spell on his friend, so he adjusted his aim and fired again and again and again. Soon the others were with him, their bullets wreaking havoc to the neat line the wizards had
conveniently arranged themselves in until a bullet through the head or against one of the hastily erected shields they'd conjured in defense caused the spell on Dugan to drop.

"Nice of you to join us, boys," Morita drawled, sarcastic over the crack of his gun, when the last two members of their team finally reached the trees.

"Got tied up for a moment there," Dugan joked and earned disapproving groans from everyone for his efforts.

"How many more are left?" Gabe asked, momentarily taking cover to avoid an arc of yellow light.

"I count nine," Steve said. "Let's keep them busy with a steady line of fire, shouldn't be long before the noise draws HYDRA from their nest. They'll attack from behind and we'll fall back."

It was a good plan, it would have worked too, but then the woods were alight with the sharp crack of apparation and more wizards joined the fight. A lot more. And suddenly they were surrounded.

"Shields up," Steve ordered, his own shield was already braced on his arm and blocking the sudden spellfire at their back.

The Commandos scrambled for their own, but Morita was too slow and was thrown off his feet by a spell that tore claw marks into his shoulders, then Jones fell, taking a curse aimed at Bucky's back.

"Form up around Jones and Morita." Steve had one hand on his shield and the other wrapped in Kuznetsov's collar, dragging him back along with him, leaving him with no free hand to fire.

"Dugan, Dernier, get those shields facing our guys at base. Falsworth, with me on these ambushers in the woods. Bucky, give us some fire."

They circled around their fallen, shields blocking the worst of the curses while Bucky stood in their center, firing in all directions until every round had been expended. Then he was pulling Steve's sidearm from his hip, taking down wizard with each release of a bullet, but there was only so long even he could go. His gun clicked empty and a curse caught his chest just off center, Steve couldn't here the incantation, hadn't even seen the color of it, but the way he crumpled and the awful sound that tore from his throat immediately after left him with no doubt what he'd been hit with.

The wizard who had cast the Cruciatus died when the edge of Steve's shield made terrifyingly accurate contact with his throat, crushing his windpipe and severing his spine in one throw. It didn't ricochet back to him, it had fallen with the wizard, so he grabbed for Bucky's shield, lifting it just in time to avoid a flurry of ominous purple curses. They were just barely covered on all sides again, but it was a temporary solution.

"What've you got, Cap?" Falsworth grunted as he slid back several inches from the force behind the last curse to come in contact with his shield.

"Dernier?" he shouted. "Got anything on your belt for us?"

"Smoke," the Frenchman responded. "That is all I was allowed to bring. Nothing to go boom. We were supposed to go in quiet, yes?"

Seriously, *fuck* covert ops.

"Lemme see what I can do with those."
There were only two grenades, but they would work as enough of a distraction to get them moving.

"Buck, can you walk?"

The sniper groaned low as he pushed himself into a sitting position. "I'm going to have to."

"Morita?"

"It's only a bit of blood loss, Cap. I can keep up."

"All right. Once the smoke gives us some cover we'll keep low, head back for base. Bucky and I'll grab Gabe and Kuznetsov while you three lay down some fire. There's only nine of them between us and the door."

"And once we're through?"

"HYDRA is easier to take down than wizards. Break through their front line and let them have at each other while we find our way out the back door. Yeah?"

"Let's go."

He waited, a breath in, a breath out, for a lull in the spells ricocheting against their shields. When it came, he pulled both pins at once and tossed them in the direction of the shadowy figures he could only just make out.

The moment the air was thick and clouded with smoke the Commandos were moving, perfectly in formation and carrying out Steve's directives to the letter.

They made it two meters.

"Ventus."

The incantation came from behind them, from somewhere in the dense wall of smoke, and sent up a gust of wind that threatened to bowl Steve right from his feet and cleared the smoke in seconds leaving their backs exposed to the suddenly too close wizards.

Kuznetsov hit the ground hard and Gabe followed with only a bit more care as Steve and Bucky knelt, shields once again at the ready. Dugan, Dernier, and Morita crowded against their backs, guns drawn and the wizards somewhere behind them momentarily forgotten in the face of this larger, nearer threat.

There had to be thirty of them, most likely more, even after all the ones Bucky had taken down. They were armed, with wands directed at them, but no one fired and so neither did the Commandos, unwilling to break this strange standoff.

But then a man stepped forward, and he was unlike anyone Steve had ever seen. He was handsome, in a cold sort of way, but he was stripped down, washed out, bleached of all color; his hair was like the spools of thread he'd used before the serum and before the war to patch his shirts up, pale and thin with just a hint of luster when the light hit it right. Even his skin reminded him of the parchments Harry's kind preferred, as pale and nearly see through as it was. His eyes were the only spot of color, two pinpricks of blue, still pale though, like entire lakes frosted over in the dead of winter. The ice over which was deceptively thin, just enough to present an illusion of stillness, but just a little weight and you'd freeze and drown in the depths.

"Just you few?" He spoke with the unassuming lilt of just about anyone from the London area, but
there was the undercurrent of something else there, something foreign, from parts farther north in Europe. "Seven men, seven muggles, have been giving us all this trouble?"

The wizards shifted, shamed and uncomfortable under a quick sweep of disapproval from those pale eyes.

"I would be angry, but it is almost impressive. And yet tonight you didn't last so long. What happened?"

Steve kept his voice flat, void of the tension drawing his spine taut. "It's been a long day."

The man nodded and something like sympathy tried to paint itself across his face. "I will do you a favor then and keep it from going on much longer."

"You plan on killing us?"

"Yes." There was no inflection, no remorse behind the confirmation. This man would kill them and feel nothing. "I admire your fight, but you've been causing much trouble. Your repeated attacks against my men has had an effect on morale. It can't go on, you understand."

He wouldn't go down easy, none of them would. Jones was still out and both he and Bucky had nothing left as far as ammo, but he still had his shield and the Commandos were suitably armed. There'd be no winning, they all knew it, they were outnumbered and outmatched, but they weren't going to make it easy. The first wizard to cast a spell would be taken down by a hail of bullets.

And maybe they realized that, maybe they could see the resolve in their stances, the conviction in their straight gaze, and they stalled, hesitant to start the fight. Because none of them wanted to be that first.

But then a third party made the choice for them.

That strange, pale man had been on the cusp of breaking the stillness, his wand, as strange and pale as him, was aimed still at Steve's chest and a green glow he'd heard a good few warnings about was taking form at its end. But then HYDRA finally made their move and the wizards' almost certain win was destroyed.

They'd been biding their time, waiting until Steve's team and the battalion of wizards they were facing were caught up fighting each other, then they circled around and attacked from all sides.

The Commandos were surrounded twice over now, with the wizards on either side of them and HYDRA on either side of them. But it worked in their favor. All focus had been on Steve and his men, so when the HYDRA men jumped from the woodwork and set to work with their assorted rifles and tesseract-fueled weapons, the wizards toppled like a row of dominoes leaving a neat little gap for the combat team to slip through. Once they'd passed the wizards they were face to face with revenge seeking Nazis with guns that could literally vaporize them, but Steve had said it before, HYDRA was easier to fight than wizards. Even with Kuznetsov and Jones acting as deadweights on their shoulders they tore through the agents easy as they did any other day and were on the other side while the two forces were still trying to figure out who to fight.

"Keep with what we planned, through the base and out the back," Steve instructed, calm as any other time they were in the field, even with a half dead man over his shoulders and magic users and Nazis brawling only a few meters behind them. "We make it out and find somewhere to rest up, far enough away from here to keep them from finding us. We'll figure out our next move after."

"How far do you really think we'll make it?" Dugan was propped against a tree, clutching a stitch
in his side, or maybe a bullet wound he'd acquired somewhere in the mess, it was too dark to tell. "We're all half dead, Gabe and Kuznetsov are both still out, and Fresno hasn't stopped bleeding yet."

Morita was looking a little pale, he had his jacket balled up against his injured shoulder but it was nearly bled through already.

"What else can we do?" Bucky answered for Steve. "We can't fight, not like we are now. And we don't got a cavalry anywhere close enough to swing in and save our asses. So we either get moving or we die, those are the only choices we've got."

"There's one more," Falsworth said. "There's Harry."

"He doesn't fight," Steve was quick to refute. "Especially not against this many."

But Dugan had caught onto what Falsworth was suggesting and he'd taken to the idea already. "But he can do that teleporting thing, and he can take someone with him. He could take Fresno, maybe even Jones and the rest of us could carry on on foot, or hell, maybe he can take us all."

Steve didn't like the idea, bringing Harry out to the fight, but there wasn't looking to be much other choice and he'd said before they'd even left camp, before everything had gone to hell, that he would come if they needed. And they needed.

He was the only one with a radio tuned and capable of reaching all the way back to camp, he unclipped it from his belt and tossed it to Falsworth.

"Make the call."

Somewhere in the trees behind them there was a roar of unnatural fire and screams he'd never heard the likes of.

"But make it while we run. Something's telling me the fight'll be winding down soon, and I don't think HYDRA's coming out of this one alive."

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Steve had sworn to keep radio silence until the job was done. They couldn't risk the feedback of his radio drawing the wrong kind of attention at the worst time so he turned it off and assured it wouldn't come back on until they had Kuznetsov in custody and were away from base, the only other reason he might turn it on was if things went wrong.

So when he made the call, they didn't worry. Hours had passed since their estimated arrival at base, he and his team should have had their man secured by then and been halfway to rendezvous. But then Falsworth spoke when it should have been Steve and the whole clusterfuck of what should have been an easy job came out.

"We're calling for a quick extract."

Falsworth was panting, great heaving gasps right into the radio as if he was running and had been for longer than even he was used to. "We've got one down, and wizards and HYDRA both out on the field making a mess of things."

"How the hell did that happen?" Peggy snapped. They'd worked this sort of op a dozen times over, she found it hard to believe they'd be so careless as tocock this one up all alone.

"We got to Kuznetsov and wizards were already there, interrogating just like we knew they'd be. Cap and Barnes were the only ones who could get through the wards so they went in, took them out, and grabbed Kuznetsov, but one got away and he brought the cavalry."
"How many?" Peggy asked.

"Thirty, thirty-five would be my guess. They were organized this time, split into two groups to trap and surround us, and there was a man leading them all. The creepy sort, pale all over and ready to kill us all, no fuss, no mess, for troubling his men."

*His men?* Harry held his hand out and Peggy handed over the radio without question. "He had blond hair? Almost white?" He asked, no preamble. "And blue eyes? Really pale blue?"

"Pale all over," Falsworth confirmed.

Harry had seen the man only twice, both times in visions; the first when he'd been young, handsome and mischievous as he robbed an old wandmaker, the second at the end of his life after decades spent rotting in a prison he'd created. But those two memories were all he needed to recognize him with just that description.

"That's Grindelwald. You all just faced Grindelwald. Do your best not to do so again, nothing I've taught you could defend against an attack by him."

"It's why we called. For you specifically. Gabe is out and Kuznetsov is slowing us down, we need you to pop in, do your teleporting thing and get us out of here. If not all of us just those two."

Harry didn't hesitate. "I can only take two at a time but nothing is stopping me from taking multiple trips. I need coordinates."

"I have them," Peggy said, "in the mission briefing."

"Peggy will give them to me, but it won't put me on your exact position."

"We'll go to Kuznetsov's lab, it's defensible."

"Then I'll find you there."

They ended the connection and Harry immediately turned to Peggy for the coordinates, but Phillips spoke up first.

"You'll have to fight your way through to them."

He didn't sound smug or excited, but Harry knew that this was always what he'd wanted.

Harry took a moment to find his words, ones that were free of insult and vitriol. Phillips was only doing his job, he had to remind himself, he was only trying to end this war, he couldn't be upset if he came off a bit pushy while doing so. "Maybe. But I've seen these sort of fights, they're loud, chaotic, everything, everyone is in a mess. And I have a few spells that'll make me harder to spot, I might just be able to slip right through." Point made, he turned to Peggy. "Where am I going?"

She listed the coordinates off for him three times before he felt as if he had a decent enough grasp on them. He'd never tried apparating by coordinate alone, it was possible he knew, but not practiced often because there were risks. But Harry figured if he lost an arm splinching he'd just have Howard build him a new one, the inventor would love the challenge.

"All right, so you know where the lab is?" Peggy looked like she wanted to fuss over him, but she did a valiant job holding herself in control.

"I do." Of course he did, he'd sat with Rogers as he poured over the map of the base, plotted out
his numerous concerns.

"Bring Kuznetsov back first and any of their wounded, then, only if your able, Captain Rogers and the others. Keep your head down the best you can, engage only if you have to" She broke character just long enough to take his hand and lean forward to dash a quick kiss on his cheek. "Be quick, be safe."

Harry smiled to reassure himself just as much as her, because what he was doing was so incredibly stupid. He'd made rules, he'd left London, endured an awful, near unbearably long sea voyage to a country where he had and knew nothing to avoid this. He was preparing to step into a fight led by Grindelwald, one wrong action, a spell cast in the wrong direction or the wrong wizard injured and the world he eventually returned to could be completely, horribly altered.

But he was going to go anyway, risk everything despite the danger, because his friends were in danger, his friends could die, and he had the ability to help.

"I'll be quick," he promised, and he forced himself to believe it. "I'll be safe. See you soon."

There was a worrying moment immediately after Harry disapparated from the tent where he doubted. He used imagery to navigate, a familiarity with where he was going and what it looked like to get him there safely, not a string of numbers and letters he was supposed to silently chant like some strange mantra.

But it was only for a moment, a half a second in the seconds long trip, then he doubled down and focused and when he landed it was with all of his limbs attached. He'd been deposited at the edge of a copse of trees, there were mountains all around him and an imposing structure that had to be Kuznetsov's facility, but there was no fight.

There were bodies, plenty of them; a few were riddled with bullet holes and dressed in dark, unmarked robes, but most were dressed as muggles and had died much more gruesome deaths. Some had been removed from their limbs, some relieved of their organs, and some had been charred to unrecognizable husks, all deaths wrought by dark spells.

The wizards had won this fight, there was no doubting that, and now they were nowhere out on the grounds and that was worrying. Because either they were inside, sweeping the facility for Steve, the Commandos, and their initial target Kuznetsov, or they'd already found them.

This was the sort of time Harry wished for his cloak, wished it hadn't been reabsorbed and rendered obsolete once the Hallows had united. Because it had been infallible, and he'd feel much better sneaking into a facility most likely crawling with wizards under an infallible invisibility cloak. But he didn't have it, not now, not yet, so the disillusionment charm would have to work.

In the encompassing dark that surrounded the facility the charm did its job well enough, Harry came upon his first two wizards standing at the entrance, guarding it from any who might try to leave, but he had them stunned and silenced and bound in rope before they even realized someone else might be lurking about. From their backs he stole a cloak, tugging it low over his face just in case the charm failed, then he went in.

Under the bright, harsh lights inside the building, the distortion of light that hid him was just a little more apparent, any who knew to look would find him. But Harry realized he was working with an advantage, the wizards thought they were fighting muggles. They weren't keeping an eye out for a wizard opponent, weren't thinking to defend themselves against magic. So he passed through
crowds of them, because there were many, more wizards he'd seen in one place in more than a year, unseen.

They had already reached the floor on which Kuznetsov's lab was occupying by the time he arrived, they were still several corridors away and working slowly and methodically but it wouldn't be much time at all before they were right on top of them.

The entrance to the lab was only locked, a first year spell was all it took to get him into the room and at the business end of several high caliber weapons. He only cocked an unimpressed brow at the Commandos as he silently latched the door and its useless lock back in place.

"Do you plan to kill the one who's getting you sorry lot out of here?"

"We're just a bit on edge," Bucky snarked, lowering his gun.

"I would be too if I managed to so thoroughly fuck up such an easy job." Harry put a second locking spell on the door, then the few wards he knew and muffliato to cloak the room. "They're a few corridors away, we have maybe two minutes, three at best before they're here. I won't have time to apparate everyone out, Kuznetsov maybe but they'll be on you before I can get anyone else."

A portkey could get them all out at once. Harry knew the incantation, had seen it done a few times before, but he'd never done it himself, didn't understand the theory behind it and now wasn't the time to be experimenting, the last thing he wanted was to muck it up somehow and leave them all incapacitated and at the wizards' mercy.

"So it'll be a fight." Steve looked weary, bloodied and beaten, but he wasn't yet resigned to lose.

Harry could only nod, there was no way around it. "It'll have to be. But there's only about ten men on this floor, it'll be tough but you can take them."

"And the rest?"

Harry huffed an anxious breath. "I'll keep them occupied."

"You're going to take on the other twenty wizards? Alone. You're going to die." That was Barnes and his every word was dripping with disapproval.

"I won't die. I'm going to keep them occupied," Harry reiterated. "I'll distract them for as long as I can to give you all time to make it away from here. Head for the closest occupied town, hide there, Grindelwald wants the tesseract but he's not so desperate he'll out the wizarding world to get it."

At least Harry hoped he wouldn't. Even Voldemort had been hesitant to outright attack the muggle world, and from what he knew of this decade's dark wizard, Grindelwald was meant to be smarter, more attuned to sanity than Harry's own dark lord had been.

"I don't-"

"Tell me how awful an idea this is after we've made it back to base. They'll be here soon you have wounded who need to fight."

The episkey Harry cast over it wasn't strong enough to fully heal the wounds on Morita's shoulder, but it stopped the worst of the bleeding and allowed some mobility of the arm. Jones was even easier to fix, a rennervate reversed whatever had brought him and he was upright if a little groggy in seconds.
"Once they're all dead give it a few minutes," Harry said as he pulled Kuznetsov's dead weight against himself with two arms around the man's chest. "Let the building clear then go. I'll keep them busy."

He disapparated before any of them could protest further, Peggy startled when he arrived in the tent, but he only dropped Kuznetsov in a sad little heap then left again, he would have time for explanations later.

The second time he apparated onto the facility's grounds was much easier than his first attempt, now that he'd seen the basic lay of the land he could direct where he wanted to wind up with a little more accuracy. He chose the west end of the building, there were no trees at his back, only open land and the base of a mountain, the wizards would come for him in the opposite direction the Commandos needed to go in order to get away. But first he had to draw their attention.

Harry had discovered all manner of explosive spells from his books, none that he'd had the chance to practice because of their sheer destructive power, but in theory he knew they would be a sight to see. But in a moment like this, a good old fashioned blasting charm to the west wall of the facility would always be his first choice. And if he put a little extra power behind it? Well, he needed to get their attention.

It took another wall coming down and the creative use of a few wind summoning charms for him to get it. It was only a few, eight or so of the near thirty wizards he knew to be in the building, but once they got started more would come.

Harry had hidden himself under another disillusionment by the time they arrived and had retreated away a few meters. When they came to investigate their backs were facing him and he took the chance to stun two of the men closest to him. The dual flashes of red didn't go unnoticed, the remaining six turned on his position in an instant, curses already flying his way. But the moment the second stunner had left his lips, Harry was already apparating to a new position, back to the wall he'd just blown up to take a few more explosive chunks from it. Then he set off a caterwauling charm deafening and obnoxious, and shot a few more stunners their way just to keep them on their toes.

His goal wasn't to fight, he wasn't trying to finally test the spells he'd been massacring dummies with on Grindelwald's men. He was only trying to make as enormous of a spectacle as he could, draw enough men out onto the lawn and away from the fight taking place in the labs. So he channeled the spirits of Fred and George and he apparated and he cast and he blew things up, creating noise and confusion and pure havoc until wizards were coming from all entrances, shouting over the noise, casting curses into the dark trying to blindly strike him down. Until Grindelwald arrived.

The disillusionment had been holding up much better than Harry had ever thought it capable. By then the men knew they were fighting another wizard, they could even track his general location by the sound of his apparation and the light of his spells, but where to aim their own curses had to be guessed and was often guessed wrong. There were too many of them for a *homenum revelio* to be effective and casting wildly missed every time because while they aimed high he kept crouched low to the ground. But when Grindelwald arrived they fell back, let their curses halt for a moment while they waited for their leader to make the next move. He swept his wand once in a great arching motion over the field and Harry's charm melted away.

Now would be the time to run. Apparate far away while he still had the chance. But it had barely been ten minutes, the Commandos needed more time if they wanted any chance at getting a safe distance away. So he stayed, he pulled his stolen cloak tighter against his frame and hoped the
sticking charm on his hood held tight.

"Where did you come from?" Grindelwald's wand, the elder wand, fell back to his side. He was comfortable and confident in the belief that Harry wasn't going anywhere. "And who are you fighting for?"

"I fight for myself."

The dark wizard saw through him immediately. "I don't believe that." He looked over Harry, at the trousers and plane shirt under his open cloak, not the usual wardrobe of a wizard, and came to a conclusion. "You're with the muggles. You're the reason they survived my men for so long. But why? How did they persuade you to fight for them?"

Harry didn't answer, Grindelwald wasn't interested in the answer, he just wanted to make Harry squirm, realize the hopelessness of his situation before he killed him. But he wasn't going to play the game. He'd already resigned himself to fight, all attention was on him and he needed to keep it that way a while longer. He was going to lose, he was going to die, but he wasn't worried about it. He would die and come back, or maybe his body would ignore whatever grievous injuries it suffered and just keep powering through. The details of the whole immortality thing had never been made clear, but Death assured him there would be no reaping of his soul and now was as good a time as any to figure it all out.

He struck first and he didn't hold back, the killing curse shot from his wand and hit the man directly next to Grindelwald. He fell and the others reacted instinctively. Harry rolled beneath the barrage, threw up a shield to block the ones he couldn't, then he leapt forward and got to work. He wasn't looking to cause mayhem now, he wasn't trying to lure and distract, finally, finally, he was using those spells he'd only seen on inanimate targets. It was awful and gruesome and there was so much blood. But he loved it, he parted souls from their bodies and the Heart sang.

He ignored the consequences of what he was doing, he let that worry fall away; if a wizard fell to his wand maybe they were meant to, maybe he was carrying out their destiny, not mucking up his future. He didn't know. He didn't care.

He lasted longer than he thought he would, he cut through whole swatches of wizards who struggled to land even one curse on his constantly twisting dancing form, but all it took was one, a lucky hex that split the bone in his leg and the tide shifted from his favor. Ferula kept him on his feet, but his mobility was done for.

A curse that reminded him too much of sectumsempra struck him in the chest and tore through cloth and skin and sinew like butter. Then another hit him like a punch to the gut and he fell back, breath knocked out of him. The fight was over, Grindelwald was probably moving forward already to finish it and he would finally see how much the Heart had altered him.

But then there was a series of sharp crack-crack-cracks and heads all around him exploded. The men surrounding him ducked down, shields went up and they turned to face the new threat. Fucking Steve and his team, who'd ignored the plan he'd suggested to save their miserable lives and jumped into a fight they had no hope of winning.

He let himself just lay where he'd fallen for a moment, choking on curses and blood with each shaky lungful of air, then he snapped a weak bandaging charm that would do nothing much against the wounds on his chest then stood back up. He threw a blasting charm at the cluster of wizards closest to him, they'd thought him dead already or close enough to it and hadn't had any reservations turning their backs on him. They died bloody, but he was already moving on, tossing
everything he had at these men, with no plan or finesse, only the mad drive to get their attentions back on him. Because he could survive this, nothing they could throw at him would keep him down, the Commandos couldn't.

"Haven't you had enough?" Grindelwald stepped forward, blocking a cutting curse aimed at one of his men's neck.

"My friends tell me I don't know when to quit." Harry's arm shook when he raised his wand, from blood loss or exhaustion or both, but his feet were planted and he was willing to go until they killed him.

Grindelwald smiled, he looked intrigued and maybe a bit impressed. "You're going to fight me? You'll die."

"That's all right," he spat out a glob of blood and maybe a few of his teeth with it. "I can take it."

He didn't stand a chance. Maybe at full health, after a good night's sleep and a rousing pep talk he might be able to stand against Grindelwald for a few minutes. But as he was then, half dead already, bleeding into the dirt and seeing double, it wasn't any sort of fight.

But he had to try, because Steve couldn't die. Bucky couldn't die. None of them could die.

Grindelwald side stepped his choking curse, ducked beneath his jelly legs, and batted away his bat bogey as if they were nothing. Harry's shield faltered when it came in contact with a hail of conjured arrows, one burst through and buried itself in his shoulder. He stumbled back just in time to avoid the blasting curse that destroyed the ground where he'd just been standing, but he caught on a body and he went down for the second time that night.

Grindelwald was over him in an instant, his lips formed a familiar curse and there was a burst of green from the end of his wand and Harry knew that that was a mistake. Because the wand in Grindelwald's hand was his. The mortal curse that bound it was still in place, but the fractured Heart the dark wizard held knew that one day it would be united and one day it would be his. And just as it had been both two years ago and sixty years from now, the wand refused to kill its master.

The killing curse struck him in the center of his chest, it stole the breath right out of its lungs and Harry swore he felt his heart skip a few beats, but then nothing. He didn't die. And in that moment of shock, because what else could Grindelwald do but gape at what should be impossible, Harry landed his first spell of the duel and threw him several meters away and onto his back.

He scrambled for purchase, used the men he'd bowled into to crawl back to his feet, but he didn't attack, because finally he was beginning to wonder who was really going to win. Because the if killing curse, the one curse that couldn't be blocked or beaten or survived, couldn't kill Harry, what could?

"Men!" His baritone roared over the fight, maybe amplified by magic, maybe by fear. "Fall back."

And they did. Immediately. The sound of disapparation harmonized with the sound of gunfire and in seconds they were gone and the fight was over.

The Commandos were thrown off guard, the wizard's had been winning, there had been no reason that they could see for them to retreat. But then their attention fell to Harry, the only moving figure in a sea of corpses.

Steve was the first to his side and used one gentle hand on his shoulder to halt Harry's attempts at levering himself to his feet. The wizard scowled at him, and batted at the hand as he did so.
"What the hell happened to going for safety?" he snarled.

"What the hell happened to not dying?" the captain snapped back.

Harry's scowl twisted to something more petulant. "I had him."

"Jesus Christ." Steve turned to Bucky, who'd fallen to his knees beside the pair only seconds ago. "Is this how you felt all those times I got in fights?"

Bucky huffed a weak laugh, but it was diminished by the overwhelming worry on his face. "Just about. Gabe, we're going to need you to put that medic training to use real quick here."

There wasn't much he could do; Harry had already splinted his leg and bandaged his chest the best he could. He broke off the shaft of the arrow, but the head buried in his shoulder would have to remain unless he wanted to risk making the damage worse. The rest of his injuries were minor in comparison, a few cuts and bruises to numerous and widespread to warrant the waste of bandages.

"I'll be fine," Harry muttered, trying to hide the way his breath whistled, maybe the blow to his chest had cracked a few ribs. "I'll patch up when we're back to base. Right now we need to move, they might be planning on coming back."

"Apparate back," Bucky ordered. "Rendezvous is a full day's hike away. We'll make it fine but you can go."

Harry shook his head. "I can't. Too tired, to hurt, I'll splinch myself if I try."

"I don't know what that means."

"It means I'll have to walk with you, at least until I can get some energy back."

"There's a little town," Dugan said, map spread out in front of him, "maybe about fifteen, sixteen klicks, west. We can head there instead of rendezvous, rest up, arrange transport."

"We could make that in four hours," Morita agreed. "Maybe five."

"We'll have to go in quiet," Steve said, but his agreement was writ all over his face, "this isn't friendly territory. If it's occupied we'll have to keep moving."

"HYDRA doesn't like to set up so close occupied territory," Gabe reasoned. "They hide among the sheep. Chances are, it's not."

"Then let's move." Neither Steve nor Bucky offered him a hand up, so Harry used a handhold on both of their shoulders to push himself onto his feet. He bit down on his lip when a wave of agony crested from his head all the way to his toes, breaking the skin in the process, but he managed to keep his moan of pain silent.

"I could carry you."

"I'm injured now, Barnes, but I'll curse you blue once I've recovered if you suggest that again."

Harry lasted a half of a kilometer, then his legs mutinied and tried to make his sorry state even worse by sending him spilling all over the uneven ground. He growled, terrifying as a schnauzer, when Steve scooped him up without so much as a 'by your leave' and carried on walking, but he knew he didn't have the strength to make it even the full kilometer let alone all fifteen. So if he wanted to get there before he died from blood loss, he'd have to suck up his pride and let the
supersoldier carry him.

There were worse places he could be, he supposed, as he settled in for the journey. He might be getting blood all over Steve's uniform but the stripes were garish anyway, he was improving it.

Without him slowing them down, they made the hike in the four hours Morita projected, even if everyone but the two supersoldiers panted and cursed the entire way. Threads of orange light were slowly trying to creep along the horizon by the time they made it to the town's edge, morning was coming, but there was no time for rest.

"Let's do a quiet sweep," Steve instructed before they broke the treeline. "Make sure we don't have any Nazi forces hiding in with the goat farmers. There looks like some kind of storehouse just past that hill, that'll be rendezvous. Harry you can rest up in there while we look around."

"You should stay with him, Steve" Bucky said. "He should have someone keeping an eye on him. And on the chance we do find some Nazi's crawling around here, your stripes'll give us away in a second."

"He's got a point, Cap," Dugan said.

"All right, Harry and I will wait. We'll give you until sunup to get back, if you're not I'm coming to look."

"Fair."

The structure Steve had designated as rendezvous had once been used to house goats if the smell was anything to go by. But it was warmer than being out in the open air and being there meant Harry wasn't stifling any sign of agony as he was jostled in Steve's arms. The entire hike had been torture, passing out from the pain in his everything would have been mercy, but he hadn't and he refused to slow their progress and put them in danger by putting words to his discomfort, so he'd suffered in silence.

"You haven't stopped bleeding yet." Outside, morning was just trying to creep over the horizon, but inside the shed was still near completely in darkness, Harry couldn't see anything and didn't think Steve could either. But he was a supersoldier, of course he could see the stain of red that hadn't stopped growing across Harry's torso yet.

"It's less now though." Harry's attempt at comfort was as weak as his voice. "I'll survive until we make it back."

"You hope."

"Has anyone ever told you your bedside manner sucks, Rogers?"

There was a rustle of fabric Harry interpreted as a shrug. "I've never had the chance to practice it. It's always been me in the bed."

"Not such a great feeling having the roles reversed, huh?"

"You were going to let them kill you."

"I didn't plan on dying."

"But you were. That was stupid."
"I suppose you and I aren't as different as I sometimes like to think."

"I'm not laughing," Steve's voice was sharp with anger.

"Neither am I." But Harry was, at the irony of this conversation. "I've heard the stories; you've been jumping onto grenades, into enemy territory with no backup, into fights you know you can't win, all your life. I've seen it. But it's always been because you had to, right? It was your duty. Your fight. You could so you did. You would never stand by and do nothing. Only when it's someone else's turn to do right, do you see the recklessness and the danger in what you do."

"We could have all fought, together. We did."

"No. You all almost died. They were going to kill you, Grindelwald was going to kill you."

"We've fought them before," Steve argued. "We've won and we could have again, you just needed to…"

"Sit back and do nothing?" Harry scoffed. "All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing. I refuse to do nothing."

Steve went silent and stayed that way for a while after.

Harry left him to his thoughts, he was exhausted and the thin cushion of hay he was resting on wasn't as uncomfortable as he might have thought. He could get some sleep, prepare for the next leg of their journey home, maybe even build up his drained magic enough to apparate them all back himself.

He managed half an hour of restless sleep. Only a half hour. Then something outside their little shed moved and Steve's reactive jolt to attention startled him back to full, unhappy consciousness.

He tried to look around, listen hard for whatever had startled the man, but his average human ears didn't pick up anything. "What is it?"

Steve silently unfolded himself from the floor and slid toward the closed entrance. "Voices."

Every now and then, around the entire perimeter of the little barn, the wood of the walls had warped and bent just enough to separate, allowing a way to see out and into the structure. Steve leveled his eye with one such gap, stooped down just enough to stand even and looked out into the slowly lightening countryside.

It was only a few seconds before he was quickly moving away.

"Wizards. They're casting spells around the barn. We need to go."

His body screamed in protest at his quick and rough movements, but Harry scrambled to his feet and across the little bit of space to try and see what Steve had.

There were less than before, maybe ten at most, but they all had their wands out and the sight of the man at their forefront made his stomach drop out.

His day had been long, awful, full of blood and death and all sorts of unpleasantness. And now it had just got worse.

"I'll have to apparate us out." Harry moved back to Steve's side, grabbed hold of his arm and steeled himself. His magic wasn't recovered, not near enough. But they had to move. "I'll drop you
off at town, somewhere close to the others and I'll keep moving."

Steve frowned down at him, he didn't yet understand how much everything had changed, but he would. "Why would you keep moving? If this is another plan to try and draw them away from us-"

"Steve," he only whispered, but the urgency in the one word stopped the captain in his tracks. "Steve. Those aren't Grindelwald's men."

"I don't understand."

Harry grit his teeth, breathed in deep to try and quell some of his panic. But all he could think of were the men outside, with their Auror badges and unspeakable robes, with the familiar face of Gawain Robards leading them.

"They're not Grindelwald's," he repeated. "They're mine."

He'd fought alongside Robards, he'd been there during the Battle of Hogwarts, fighting Death Eaters and helping to assure Harry's victory. He'd also been there the night Harry was lost to time, among the mob there to tear the wards from his ancestral home and drag him forward to answer crimes he hadn't committed.

And now he was here.

"They're from my home," he forced himself to speak steady, he didn't have time to repeat himself, Steve had to understand now. "They're here for me and for nothing good. We need to leave."

He understood. He still didn't know all that was happening, but he understood the urgency, Harry could see it, so he tightened his grip and disapparated. Tried to.

It was like hitting a wall made of pure magic, caging them in and cutting off their one hope of escape.

"Wards are up, we're stuck."

"We can keep them back then, just until the others get here."

"No." Harry hadn't let go of Steve yet, he rested all of his weight against the man for a moment, he knew he could take it, and he let himself think. Think of a way out. Think of a way they could survive this. Steve could survive this. He could only think of one.

He released him, moved back just enough, then said. "Stand by the wall."

Steve didn't hesitate, he trusted him fully, implicitly. Harry felt only one stab of guilt, straight through his chest, then he turned his wand on Steve. "Petrificus totalus."

Harry didn't let himself see the look of total shock on his friend's face when he carefully lowered him to the ground. A gentle tap at the crown of his head and the disillusionment washed over him, hiding his now silent and still form completely from sight.

Then he moved away, back to the spot he'd almost managed to find rest, he sat down and he waited.

They didn't keep him waiting long.

"Potter." Harry tucked his knees to his chest, dropped his face into the cradle of his arms at that familiar voice. How long had he been wishing to be reunited with the people of his home? How
long had he been pushing and working to get back? But not like this. "You're in there, we already know it, and we've already surrounded you. Please don't make this a fight."

Before, to save Steve's life, he'd been willing to fight, to the death. But now, to save it again, he knew he couldn't. So he kept still and quiet as the door to the barn swung open and the head auror stepped inside. He was flanked on either side by three wizards each, they all had their wands raised and lit, but they stopped short when they saw him.

"Merlin, you look a fright."

Harry shrugged his uninjured shoulder, carefully casual. "Turns out I don't get along with any dark lords, no matter the time."

Something tight and unpleasant crossed Robards' face. "Did you kill him?"

Harry shook his head. "He's not meant to die for another sixty years. And I'm not the one who's meant to do it."

"Good. One less mess of yours to clean up."

"Are you here to kill me?"

An eerie calm had swept over him and it unsettled them, he could tell. The wizards beside Robards shuffled nervously, but the man himself remained steady. "Of course not."

"To take me back then? For what? You can't fix what happened, only I can."

"I know."

Of all the responses he'd expected, that hadn't been one. "You... know?"

"You're our hero, the boy who lived." A smile of false adoration and mania twisted the auror's face into something awful, and Harry shivered. "We're here to bring you back, to get you to fulfill your purpose of saving our world one more time."

That was all Harry wanted. He'd been striving for the same thing since the start. But why did it feel as if Robards and he still weren't on the same side?

"I can," he tried to appeal, a tremor was trying to work its way into his voice. They weren't going to kill him. He didn't know what they were going to do and it made him afraid. "I can fix this. Go back before the fight at Hogwarts and stop the union of the Hallows. We can stop all of this before it even happens."

"No."

"No?"

"That's not the plan."

"What then?" Harry whispered.

"You've been gone a while. Things got worse, a lot worse." And yet Robards didn't sound angry, he sounded serene, he sounded pleased. "But then we met someone and things got better. Seeing thousands of our people die from plague and starvation and muggles is horrifying, but there was good that could from it."
Robards stepped closer, his silent shadows moving with him, and Harry pressed himself further into the wall, as far from him as he could get.

"In our time of dying, we realized that hiding is no longer an option. Even if we stopped the war, even if we repaired the wards and found solitude again, they wouldn't forget, and one day they would find a way to end us." He spoke with the gentle, quiet tenor of someone speaking a bedtime tale, and it worked because Harry was captivated. "So we must let our weak die, and those who remain will evolve into people that can end them. A people who will no longer cower in fear from those weaker than us. A people who will be powerful and plentiful enough to rule entire countries, continents, worlds, instead of the isolated corners of them."

"And how do you intend to accomplish that?"

"Through your help of course."

His terror and foreboding spilled over in the form of a tear, only one that cut a trail of cleanliness through the dirt and the blood that mucked his face. "I would never."

And Robards laughed in his face. "Well see, you don't have a choice."

The moved in tandem, conjuring coils of dark gray light to curl around his limbs. Harry grit his teeth as they yanked him forward, cruel in how little they cared for his obvious injuries, but he kept quiet and he didn't struggle.

"No fight?" Robards had the audacity to look disappointed.

"Would it do me any good?"

"No, but your Harry Potter, fighting is all you do."

And that said it all didn't it? Any other time, in any other place, he would have fought until one of them was dead. But he had more than just himself to think about.

"Not anymore."

"Good." He stumbled on his injured leg when Robards gave a leading tug to the binds trailing from his wand.

The unspeakables had been hard at work while Robards' was preoccupied; they'd hardened the dirt just outside where Harry had been hidden to stone and in its face carved a ritual all too familiar. There were runes different, and it was bigger, more complex, but the basis remained the same.

"The ritual your friend used to send you back was genius," Robards said when he noticed where Harry's attention had fallen. "But flawed. Luckily a few runic genius' survived your plague and were all too happy to work out those kinks."

Harry went willingly when Robards dragged him to the center, allowed the man to arrange him just so, and kept quiet when the unspeakables, one at each point of the runic shape, began to chant.

His stomach twisted even while he tried not to laugh bitterly at the irony of this situation. He'd wished for this, wanted it so bad it ached. He'd been willing to break his code and his morals and all that he stood for to get to it. And now it was here.

He was going home.
Chapter 14

Then

Strucker gave them the news of their lost savior turned downfall and the wizards were ecstatic, beside themselves with relief, exhilaration, anticipation. But there was trepidation there too.

Potter had been a source of awe for them since his start, he'd killed their dark lord at one, then again at seventeen with a borrowed wand and unwavering grit. Then he'd united what were arguably the most powerful artifacts known to their kind, mastered them as if it were nothing, and brought plague and war upon their people for it. And now they were expected to fight him, subdue him, and keep him contained until their world was put to right.

They were cautious when forming their plan to bring him in, overly so, but Strucker could find no reason to blame them. If the boy was half as powerful as they believed him to be there would be a fight on their hands, and that was without taking into account the organization he had at his back. Potter was with the SSR, he was working alongside Stark and Carter, Rogers and his Commandos, to go in unprepared would be suicide.

So they chose their best, debriefed every wizard and witch with care, and when they went back to the era of worldwide war, it was with the understanding that some of them might not be coming back. They were sure the fight ahead would be just as awful and bloody as the one hosted in the Great Hall of Hogwarts near four years ago.

It wasn't.

The group of wizards, led by the British head Auror Gawain Robards, touched down where they'd left, an outcropping of rocks at the seaside, far from muggles and wizards alike, they got their bearings, shook off the effects of the drain on their magic then apparated as one to their first destination.

See, finding the when Potter had fallen had been their toughest challenge, but it wasn't their only one. Where he was holed up was just as pressing of a matter and one that posed a challenge in its own right. The SSR, by nature of the sort of organization that they were, didn't have their address listed in the directory, and the exact details of any missions carried out in their name were vague. So they followed the history books, what little they explained, alongside newspaper articles archived for over half a century, and battle reports and plans with more redacted than visible all the way to a secret facility at the base of a mountain range that spanned much of Europe. They arrived several hours too late.

Their boots touched the ground and they were slipping in dirt churned up and turned muddy with blood. Some of it congealing, most of it still fresh and bright and red. The air stank of magic, the destructive sort that put all their hairs on end, and bodies were everywhere. Torn apart, blasted full with holes, burnt to husks barely recognizable as human. Potter was among none of them.

"Did he do this?"

The Auror who spoke was the youngest of the crew, but not at all lacking magical proficiency because of it. Robards had chosen him because he was only a few years fresh from Hogwarts, he'd walked the halls the same time Potter had. And even if they'd been in different years, and different houses, he still had a better idea of how he operated than the rest of them did.
"Could only be." Robards tried breathing through his mouth as he spoke, but it only made the stink of recently deceased bodies coat the back of his tongue instead. He closed his mouth. "With muggle help maybe." The corpse just left of his foot was plugged with muggle bullets. "But he was here."

"Some of these men were wizards."

Unease swept across their ranks when Scabbord, an Auror from the French division, retrieved a wand, snapped clean in half but still unmistakable for what it was, from a close corpse.

"What was he doing fighting wizards? This is a muggle facility."

Robards didn't have answers. The muggle Strucker had said Potter had aligned himself with a muggle military organization, one that, before this awful plague had hit, knew nothing of magic.

"Let's find Potter," he ordered, voice quiet and stern, but still more than enough to bring his men back in formation. "And we'll ask him ourselves."

The facility and its grounds were empty of anyone still alive, it was lucky only that Potter wasn't among the dead, unlucky that he was nowhere to be found. But that was what they had the Unspeakables for.

They might be close enough to narrow in on their wayward savior's location with the help of a bit of obscure (and perhaps a little dark) magic. Flakes of blood carefully scraped from where it had been smeared across the skull of a creature most of them hadn't even known existed was mixed into a potion of a deep umber color that was then poured right into the dirt at their feet.

They all waited, breath held in anticipation, then the head unspeakable, Fowler, began moving, following tracks only he could see.

"He went on foot?"

And that was a relief for Robards, if Potter had simply disapparated, there would be no way their potion and its magics would be able to find him. Not even the unspeakables could track magical signatures.

"He was hurt." The unspeakable whose name he'd never learned explained. "Badly. The blood he's left behind makes it that much easier to see. He's moving west."

They'd studied the area and all that surrounded it in depth before apparating to it, the map of the terrain was etched into the back of his eyelids. He knew Potter was headed for the closest bit of civilization, a little settlement where he was sure to find some way to contact his comrades. They had to get to him before he did or else he'd be lost to them.

He lifted their only map from Scabbord's belt and painstakingly worked out the coordinates for a spot just outside of where the little village would be.

"Let's find him quick and quiet and let's not make a mess when we do it," he ordered. "Potter might be hurt, but animals fight fiercest when they're wounded. Don't let him take you by surprise."

He recited the coordinates to his men once more, just to be sure they all had where they were going locked in tight, then he gave the order to move.

They disapparated in tandem, moving seamlessly through the space to land with less pomp than the average wizard. Rows of neat little houses and perfectly cut squares of farmland stretched before
them, too many for their few to search successfully for their boy-who-lived, but there proved to be no need. Fowler moved on sure feet through deserted streets and past silent homesteads until they reached a small farm, clearly empty and in poor repair.

Robards looked on the place with suspicion and more than just a little nerves. "He's here?"

"Around back."

The unspeakable led them to what had once been a barn or a shed of some sort; its doors were closed tight and there wasn't a sound from inside, but a smear of blood, bright and shockingly red across the wood confirmed they were in the right place.

"Give me some wards," Robards ordered, careful to speak even lower than a whisper. "Anti-disapparation, anti-portkey, and a few for proximity."

His team moved quickly, the wards were up in only a few minutes and finally it was time. Robards was the mission head so contact fell to him; he was nervous, near shaking with it, but he was ready for a fight. He moved forward until he was within touching distance of the little shed, and then he spoke.

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Now

Harry's second trek through time was markedly different from the first. It was deliberate and carefully controlled, the perfect example of how it was meant to go when compared to the mad tumble he'd experienced when falling back. This was the ritual done right. When they landed, he was still conscious, even if just barely; his injuries had gone long enough untreated and that short bit of travel, while smoother than he'd first experienced, still exasperated his wounds enough to have him biting down on his tongue until it bled.

It took him a moment to breathe past the agony and blink away the black spots that danced across his vision; long enough that the auror contingent grew tired of waiting and began dragging him forward and out of the room they had arrived in. He'd lost his glasses sometime during the tumble through, or maybe before, during the fight with Grindelwald, the world had already been so fuzzy with pain he hadn't even noticed their absence until now. But even without them he could tell they were somewhere he'd never been.

He got just a glance of the room they'd landed in, cavernous and empty with dark walls and a smooth floor, before he was being hauled into a long corridor without a single door marking its white walls and harsh fluorescent lights that stretched in either direction. There were men waiting for them at the end of the hall, another dozen to join their already numerous group, but these men were carrying rifles. Slimmer and more modern than anything he'd seen Steve and his team carrying, but still unmistakably muggle. As he stumbled along he could feel the press of their gazes on his back, open and curious.

"How long has it been?" Robards demanded of the closest man as soon as they drew close enough.

"Five minutes, if that," was the prompt reply. "The Baron went to do one last check before you brought him in. We're putting him in I4."

"Lead the way."

At the end of the corridor there was an elevator wide enough to fit the entirety of their group. There
were only three buttons on the panel; Sub-1, Sub-2, and one marked only with a star. They moved up to Sub-1 and out into a second corridor, just as white and harshly lit, but the wall to his right was made up entirely of glass, allowing him the perfect view into a room just as big as the first. It was a lab as far as he could tell, equipped with monitors and consoles and hulking equipment he could never hope to identify even after spending so much time learning from Howard. But the lab wasn't their destination. He was taken around the corner and shoved into a room that was all too familiar.

It was missing the mirror that usually took up all of one walls but the inconspicuous camera in the corner that blinked red to show it was powered on made up for its absence, and the two chairs separated by a cold slab of a table were hint enough. He was to be interrogated.

Robards shoved him into the chair facing the door but also the camera. Any other day he might have fought to remain standing, even if it was a fight he'd never be able to win, but his legs were shaking from the effort it took to keep himself upright and he was sure he didn't look at all intimidating as battered and bloody as he was. So he let himself be manhandled and didn't even protest the shackles that looped around his wrists and anchored to the floor.

Robards left without a word, likely retreating to wherever feedback of the camera was playing, but they didn't keep him waiting in the silence for long. Five hundred, eighty-two labored breaths passed and the door opened to allow in an unfamiliar man; his hair was buzzed short, nearly to the scalp, the hairstyle gave him a sharp, no nonsense sort of look that was only exacerbated by his ramrod posture and the strange monocle settled over his right eye. He was followed by a woman, entirely unremarkable in every way save for the bulky duffle she carried with her and who lingered by the door that hissed shut behind them. She remained there until the man, still silent, settled in the chair opposite Harry and gestured her forward.

The duffle bag was placed on the table and unzipped to reveal a whole assortment of first aid equipment. Up close, the nervousness in the woman's posture and gaze was evident, but her hands were steady as she began treating his wounds. They were numerous; ribs were wrapped, the gashes and punctures caused by spells stitched up and taped over, burns treated with salve and bandages, and all the while the man watched in silence.

Harry mimicked his silence, not making a single sound even as the woman punctured him repeatedly with her hooked little needle, dragging the thread unpleasantly through his skin without any offer of anesthesia.

After every break, bruise, and laceration had been sewn up and patched over she reached into her bag for a strange mechanical device made up entirely of a copper metal and formed in the shape of a half circle. He blinked at in confusion, mind slow in its exhaustion, but then she placed curve of the object around his throat and the missing half of the ring sprung from within it, clamping the circle shut around his throat. It was a collar. He jerked in his manacles, snarling with sudden rage, and the woman fell back against the table with a gasp of fear. The man however, remained still unmoved but he finally spoke.

"Settle. Conserve your energy." His voice held the hint of an accent, faint but there. "I have questions for you."

"Uncuff me," Harry demanded. "Get this collar off and you'll have all the answers you want. I've cooperated until now and I'll continue to as long as you do."

"I would like to." The soft placation only agitated Harry more. "I really would, but I have many employees here and I'd like to keep them safe."

"I'm not a danger." His beaten form was testament to that.
"Not now. But only because of that." One of the man's long fingers tapped against the base of his own throat, mirroring Harry's to refer to the collar they'd shackled him with.

The thing was tight, sitting flush against his skin, he wasn't sure he'd be able to worm a finger beneath it if he had one free. Where it met the nape of his neck a low, consistent buzz was emitting; he didn't know what it was doing but it made his head swim and something inside him roll with unease.

"Give it time, let everyone's settle. Then we can revisit the idea of getting that removed."

Harry didn't believe him for a second.

"Who are you? What do you want?"

"I am Strucker, a scientist, an innovator, when your world began to fall I offered my aid. The war I cannot do much for at the moment, I do not have an army to command, but this disease that's stealing your people's magic I can help with."

Harry was intrigued despite himself. "You have a cure?"

"Of sorts. I cannot stop the deaths, but those who live and lose their magic, I can fix. Return it to them."

"How?"

"You could call it a transfusion. Like the donation of blood, only it is energy, magic, that's being transferred."

"And what do you gain from this?" Everything about Strucker gave off the vibe of wrong, his words were hint enough and the men posted just outside the door with their rifles and utilitarian jumpsuits were telling enough. "You're not a wizard, you're muggle, you knew nothing of us until our wards began to fall. But now you want to help? And not just help us survive the plague and the war- Robards read me the act- they are planning domination, total domination over muggles. They intend wizards to be the top dogs and you're the one who put the idea in their heads. Why?"

"Because this is what my entire career has been working towards. I don't intend to see the muggles killed or dominated, I intend to see them evolved, but only with your help."

And he didn't like the way that sounded, not a single bit of it, but he burned with curiosity. "What do you want from me?"

"Answers, to start. These objects you united, the Hallows, how much do you know of them? Where do they come from? What can they do? How much have they changed you?"

"That's it?" Skepticism dripped from every word. "I answer a couple of questions, perform a few tricks and then I'm, what, free to go?"

"No." Strucker settled his hands delicately on the table top. "There would need to be tests, some of them would be intrusive. But it's for the betterment of all mankind."

And where had he heard that before? The wrong he'd been feeling around Strucker only increased as he stared down the man and his monocle and his too calm smile.

"And this is all your money and resources you're putting into this? Or do you work for a larger organization?"
"There is more than just me. We are collection, multiple heads, all of whom want our species to thrive."

And that was all he needed to understand. "You're HYDRA."

Strucker didn't respond, but Harry didn't need him to, he knew the answer with a certainty that just was.

"You spin a pretty tale, but whatever outcome you're looking for, it's not the betterment of all mankind. You won't get my help."

The man sighed, a bit beleaguered but not entirely surprised. "Well your cooperation would have made everything much easier, but it's not required."

The door at his back opened and a squad of Strucker's men entered to pull him from his seat.

"How are you still here?" Harry was full to the brim with horror, betrayal, and questions, so many questions. But that was the one he couldn't seem to shake. "Sixty years in the future? Steve would have died before he allowed HYDRA to flourish."

A bland little smile graced Strucker's face, the most emotion he'd shown throughout the entire interaction, and somehow it and the way it lit his uncovered eye was so unspeakably smug. "He did."

There was a burst of light from just outside the door, a rush of heat and the smell of ozone, and Steve's limbs fell loose once again. He shook himself from the pile of straw he'd been lowered so gently into and ran for the door, shield already drawn and ready to bash some heads in, but they were gone. The near dozen wizards in blood red and navy blue robes had gone and they'd taken Harry with them.

He didn't remain to investigate, the runes burned into the unnaturally hard ground meant nothing to him, and there was no sign of a single remaining wizard, so he took off in a sprint, inhumanly fast, as he pushed to get to the town his team had gone to find help in.

They'd been given until the sun was up to return and it was nearly there by now, so it was no surprise to find them all together, already halfway back to their agreed meeting spot. The Commandos, however, were plenty confused to see him.

"What's happened?" Of course Bucky would be the first to see how not right he was. Steve could feel his desperation constricting his lungs the same way asthma once had and could only imagine the sight he must look. "Did Harry get worse?"

He took a moment to collect himself, pull the cloak of in control commanding officer around himself because he needed to be in control. "Harry's been taken. Wizards ambushed us and they took him."

Bucky's face went tight with shock. "Grindelwald?"

"No. His own, he said."

"What does that mean?"
Steve shook his head, he still wasn't even entirely sure himself. "Did we manage to make contact?"

"We got through to base," Gabe said, always calm even in the face of crisis. "Phillips said there was no way he could get men in to pick us up so far out from rendezvous, but Stark offered to bring out his own craft. If we can meet him about four klicks north he'll be able to pick us up without being spotted."

"ETA?"

"He guessed around an hour, hour and a half."

Steve nodded, short and sharp, and started moving. "Let's go then." But then Bucky's hand was locking around his wrist, and he was looking up at him confused and scared and desperate for answers.

"Stevie," he kept his voice low, as if he were talking to a wild animal, imploring. "I-we need more to go on then what you just gave us. What happened?"

"They came from nowhere." His voice was hoarse with an unspeakable emotion, but he didn't bother clearing his throat, it wouldn't do him any good. "We tried to run, disapparate, but there were wards. I was ready to fight, but he wouldn't. He put a spell over me, kept me from moving, speaking, anything. I was stuck there, and all I could do was watch as they bust in and dragged him. He was so scared." Steve could feel his carefully constructed calm starting to unravel, he wanted to rage and panic, but Bucky was still holding him, his palm a warm, grounding presence. "And then he was gone."

He had to keep moving after that, he couldn't just stand there so close to where Harry had been taken. He needed to get to rendezvous, get back to base, and get to work finding and retrieving Harry.

Howard was there when they arrived, leaning suave as could be against the same plane he'd flown Steve out to Azzano in. He took stock of their group, exhausted and battered as they were, and noticed immediately Harry wasn't there when he knew he should be. His reaction to the bitter news was awful.

Peggy's was worse.

They touched down to camp and she was there immediately, pristine hair being ruffled by the motors of the plane and not seeming to care a lick about it. They disembarked but none of them could look her in the eye, not Steve or Bucky, not even Howard. And when Harry didn't get off the plane with them, her entire expression crumpled.

"Debrief. Now."

They went to Phillips' tent and they recounted all of the nights events blow by painful blow. The Commandos fell quiet when it was his time to recount Harry's capture, and he did so with careful efficiency. When he was done there was silence, the awful kind that stunk of defeat. That just wouldn't do.

"So what's the plan?"

Something pained passed over Phillips' face. "Captain Rogers-"

"Harry was taken because he was too injured to fight after he saved our collective lives in a fight
we should have been able to finish ourselves. So what are we going to do to get him back."

"Steve." That was Peggy, low and soothing, as if she could smooth over his reckless rage with just the power of her sweet voice. And maybe any other time she would have been able to, but not today. "I...I'm not sure that's a possibility."

Absolute betrayal washed over him. Steve had expected Phillips to be against mounting any sort of rescue mission, he'd been the one to deny a rescue of the troops in Azzano, he was a realist at the worst of times. But Peggy? She had a relationship closer than maybe anyone in the room with Harry. She said often he was like her sweet, younger brother, and not even she was willing to try and find him?

"No, listen to me, Steve. I, more than anyone here, want to see him back. I would mount my own rescue mission without hesitation if I thought for a moment I would be successful. But he's too far out of our reach."

"What does that even mean?" Bucky snarled.

"You saw the work we were doing," Howard said. "He's been trying to get home for over a year now, we've been manipulating his magic, doing all kinds of experiments on him just to give him a shot. Without him and his magic, we don't have a chance."

"I saw the ritual they used to get him home," Steve said, refusing to believe the inventor. "I can draw out every rune in it and we'll use that."

"Runes require magic."

"We can get you magic." They'd run into plenty of wizards so far, next time around they would detain one instead of killing them all. Getting him to perform the ritual would be a challenge but…

"Steve. It can't be done. It's not just the ritual, it's not just the lack of magic, he's gone. Gone where it will be decades before we could reach him."

And finally he faltered, because there was a quiver, probably unheard by anyone who wasn't a supersoldier, that broke Peggy's voice mid-sentence. The time he'd known her had grown longer than a year by now and- save for his brief stint with the USO- he'd worked with and under her for most of it. They'd seen some awful things together, done some awful things; watched comrades die, reduced to smoke and ash and nothing, witnessed the devastation of hundreds and thousands of families torn apart, displaced, wiped out in the fight. And never had he seen her cry. Not once.

But now the careful line of her eye makeup had begun to run as tears filled her eyes and he finally started to listen. Harry was gone.

"He's stubborn. Always has been from what I know. Too willful for anyone's good."

The team of Aurors had stuck around for the interrogation, for security reasons they claimed, crowding in to the observation room with the ICW representatives and his own men to watch the show. When it ended and Strucker joined them Robards, the Aurors' lead, was the first to offer his opinion.

Strucker only waved his hand dismissively, he sank down in the chair at the head of the long conference table, attention half fixed on the video feed of Potter who sat silent and withdrawn in
his chains and collar.

There had been so much talk of the young wizard. The ICW had suggested the possibility of bringing him in and it was as if the floodgates had opened. Potter was all the wizards knew to talk about; his history, the luck he seemed to wield like a strange power, the ruin he'd brought upon them. But meeting with him, sitting across a table from him and holding conversation, and Strucker found himself not at all impressed.

He was just a boy; beaten and bloodied, defeated and terrified and doing so poorly to hide it. There was no sign of the ancient power that had supposedly brought about his world's end of days; the collar went around his throat and suppressed all uses of magic immediately, just as if had all of Strucker's other subjects.

If there was some incredible power Potter had been granted, whatever or whoever had left him beaten down and so close to death had rendered it null. Or he was hiding it. Biding his time and waiting for them to show weakness before he struck. It would be up to Strucker to find out which before the boy was given a chance to strike.

"He won't work with us." Moreau, France's representative, had always been the cynic in their collective. "We've given him no reason to trust us, and that was before he knew we had allied with HYDRA."

These wizards thought so small. It was no wonder they'd been hurtling toward extinction before he'd offered his aid.

"What do we care if he doesn't trust? I had no need for it before, I certainly don't need it now." His magical allies remained still confused, so he elaborated, slowly and with care for the more dimwitted among them. "The interrogation was a gamble, a shot in the dark we didn't need to take but did because we could; we didn't funnel our time and resources into finding your boy hero so we might ask him a few questions. We don't need answers, we need his power, his longevity. Trust and consent are nowhere a requirement."

"Then what now? Where do we go from here?"

Strucker gave a cavalier little shrug. "The same we went with all the others. He'll need to be matched with the pods, acclimated to the crystals to prevent any overwhelm from its power, all standard procedure. Only with who you've sworn to be a more powerful host. If it is as you say, we'll draw the power for our entire army from him. Then our campaign against your enemies will begin."

And finally their hesitation and confusion had been erased, replaced now with anticipation and fervent excitement. "How quickly can we begin?"

They kept Harry in a cell, bare and a white with a sad little cot pushed in one corner and a hole in the floor in the other. He got two trays a day, with a bland mush he could only stomach after four cycles of starving himself and a break for fresh air or human contact never. All there was to do was sit with his back propped against the wall and count; the fraying threads at the hem of his pants, the cracks in the cement floor at the foot of his bed, the flecks of blood that stained his shirt and the bandages they hadn't changed since first treating him.

It was its own brand of torture, the monotony, it was no surprise men went mad in total isolation.
But he kept to his counting and kept out of his mind because he already knew if he fell in too deep there would be no coming back.

Steve was dead, or so Strucker had said, and he didn't doubt him because it made sense. They were sixty years in the future, of course Steve had passed on by now. But it was the way he had said it that drew him short, he spoke as if Steve hadn't died from old age or natural causes but in his pursuit against HYDRA. And Harry believed it, he could see Steve dying no other way. He just couldn't process it. Mostly because he wouldn't let himself think about it, not even for a moment. But even if he did, he'd only just been with Steve, he was a bit bruised up, exhausted and on edge, but he was whole and strong and alive. He'd been at his peak, surrounded by men who were the best at what they did, there was no way he'd fallen.

So he counted and eight tray cycles passed, four days by his best guess, before anything happened. He'd eaten his gruel, pushed the tray back through its slot, and was considering a pre-bedtime nap when the door that had bolted shut behind him that first day and not opened since swung open to allow four men, all toting heavy guns and serious scowls, into the cramped space. They didn't speak to him, barely even looked at him, they just yanked him to his feet, locked cuffs around his wrists, and dragged him out into the hall.

Harry had been too preoccupied with his misery to take in all of where he was being detained when he'd first been brought to his cells, but he was aware now and mapped out the route they took as carefully and inconspicuously as he could manage. His cell wasn't the only one, there were two rows of at least a dozen facing inward with a neat little corridor bisecting them at the end of which stood a door, heavy and metal with four different locks and two scanners to disengage. Outside of the cell block were the rooms he remembered being held in for those first few hours and just around the corner from those was the lab. He'd spent enough time working alongside Erskine and Howard to recognize one on sight, even if it was bigger and so much more technologically advanced than any either man had worked in before.

Strucker was at the center of the hive of activity occurring among the machines and pieces of equipment, conducting the flow of activity with a nod in the right direction and a short command in the other. He tracked Harry's arrival with a little smile, but didn't bother approaching until he'd been wrestled into a chair like one found in a dentist's office only scarier and held down with a restraint for every limb and a few more for his torso, just to be safe.

"You've healed well."

"Must be the gruel you've all been feeding me."

Strucker's smile stretched a little wider, he'd missed the sarcasm or else consciously chose to ignore it. "A special nutrition blend, everything a growing boy like you needs."

Harry let a mocking little smile thin his lips. "Your hospitality is unmatched."

"And it only gets better."

He wasn't lying. Aides with as much personality as nameless HYDRA goons were allowed buzzed around him like good little worker bees, adjusting blank monitors and arranging devices with ominous dials and numbers sketched across their faces. A sticky electrode was adhered to each of his temples and a little monitor attached to his pointer finger, while Strucker drew a rolling stool to his side, perching on its edge like a particularly inelegant crane.

"We'll be getting to know each other well these next few months you and I," he said, gentle and coaxing in a way that may have fooled anyone but Harry, who had spent much of his youth dealing
with Albus Dumbledore. "I see no need for there to be hostility between us."

Harry only snorted which tapered into a furious hiss when an aide stuck him right in the crook of his elbow with a syringe full of clear fluid. "I might agree if you weren't, you know, HYDRA."

"Our reputation precedes us then." Strucker sounded almost pleased, the sociopath.

"I met a few of your predecessors. We didn't get on very well."

"First impressions aren't everything."

"The second hasn't proved to be much better."

Strucker hummed noncommittally, he pushed himself along his wheeled stool to get a better view of the monitor closest to Harry and the information it was reading out. "Well unfortunately not everyone can be pleased. I'll warn you only once, you shouldn't be so swift in declining my offer of clemency. It's the only one you will receive." He spun a half turn on his stool, moving to face an aide lurking just out of reach. "How does he read?"

She responded immediately. "His ECG is irregularly irregular and the frequency of his EEG are slighter higher than normal, around fifteen hertz."

"He's anxious," Strucker concluded from that babble of nonsense, he settled a hand on Harry's knee, sweeping his thumb in a circular patter where it had landed. He was trying to comfort but Harry could only feel his tension spike at the unwanted touch. "You'll need to settle, sedation only muddies the readings."

"I must not have a thing for being trussed up and tested on. Who would've thought, right?"

"Give us a few moments." The aides all scurried away in an instant, moving just far enough away to no longer be within hearing distance but still close enough to be immediately at his side again when called. "Harry."

"HYDRA guy."

"Do you know what we're preparing to do?"

"Something incredibly unpleasant I suppose."

"Momentarily, perhaps," Strucker conceded. "But no, past the temporary discomfort and fleeting pain is something revolutionary. Right here, in this room and this moment is where our new world begins." Strucker leaned forward, closer to Harry, his face was open and curious as he spoke. "Why do you fight it? We want the same thing, we should be working together to reach it."

"Is that why you have this collar on my neck? Why you kept me locked in that cell? Strapped to this chair? Because you want us to work together?"

"You don't trust us. You've built this image of us in your mind, one where we're the villains to be fought and defeated. Until something can be done to rectify that we keep you contained, it is for the safety of my men and myself."

"And this?" Harry jerked the straps restraining him to the table, as a reminder of their presence more than an attempt at escape. "You haven't brought me here to be tied down and tested on in some act of self defense. You said before you needed my magic as transfusion and now you're going to try and take it, steal it."
Strucker waved away his accusations without a sign of remorse. "We're stealing nothing, only
drawing from a source to create a new power. If you survive, and you were chosen specifically
because you can, you will have lost nothing."

"That doesn't make what you're doing any less a violation of every basic human right I should be
afforded. I didn't agree to being held here and I didn't agree to any of your tests and I won't ever."

"Why would I care if you agreed to this? You're here, that is what matters."

"You must want it for something." Harry was no Hermione, he wasn't scarily brilliant or any good
at deductive reasoning, but he knew how to read a room and how to read a person's intentions even
better. "Otherwise you wouldn't have stopped your cronies in their preparations to have this heart to
heart where you insist we can change the world together. You need me and my consent for
something more."

Strucker smiled and he almost looked impressed. "Well, isn't it nice to see that not all wizards are
entirely oblivious? Your guesswork isn't exactly correct, but it's somewhere in the same vicinity as
correct. I need your consent for nothing, but if we could find some common ground, some way for
us to put aside our animosity so we might work together, we could achieve great things. You will
be useful to us as our conduit for only a short time, once it's run its course something must be done
with you. I'm only offering an alternative that doesn't involve continued imprisonment or death."

Harry laughed and it was filled with bitter incredulity. "It sounds pretty, what you say. But that's
what your sort do isn't it? Dress the shit up in sweet perfumes and pretty disguises so we forget if
only for a second what you're selling. You want me to join HYDRA, commit to torture and
oppression and genocide. You should have talked more with those wizards you've allied yourself
with before you though to come to me, they could have told you that's the sort of thing I'm very
emphatically not into."

Strucker sighed, but he didn't look disappointed only a little exasperated. "Well, we will have more
than enough time together to see about changing that, won't we?" He waved his hand and the aides
were back. "But first we must make it through what is debatably the most rigorous part of our
procedure." A cap of a hundred electrodes was pulled over his head and his jaw was forced open to
accommodate the sudden intrusion of something thick and rubbery. A mouthguard. "Before we can
allow for any transferal of power you must be keyed into the unique energy of the pods in which it
will take place and for that we'll need an idea of just how much magic you'll be providing. Casting
a few spells in demonstration will work at times, but we find the raw, untamed sort to work best."

Harry jerked uselessly on the table, cursing low and vicious when a second syringe went into the
juncture where his neck and shoulder met.

"It's unfortunate a certain level of distress is required to give us access to such magic."

Cold crept along the fiber of his muscles, slow and radiating from the point the needle had stuck.
Where it touched his nerves went numb causing his limbs to fall slack and unresponsive until he
was unable to move at all, completely paralyzed.

"These next few days will certainly do nothing to aide your goodwill toward me," Strucker was
still speaking, but his voice and his words were warped by Harry's sudden and violent panic. "But
it is a necessary evil I am afraid."

The man stood and paced across the room, he came to a stop behind one of his many nameless
aides, one who was manning a large console bolted to the ground several meters away. He looked
over the man's shoulders to whatever controls were on the console, and said, "Start him at four-
Harry realized too late what was coming; the electrodes at his temple, the guard in his mouth, Strucker's ominous words should all have been warning enough, but it wasn't until the aide was flipping a switch and the lights above flickering ominously at the sudden buzz of electricity in the air that he realized. But then there was fire and he stopped thinking altogether.

He'd been under the Cruciatus before, more than a few times as a matter of fact, but something about this was different, worse. The pain was terrible, cold in a way he couldn't comprehend and localized to the space in his head, but not anything he hadn't experienced before. No it was the energy behind the pain and its cause that made it worse than anything he'd suffered.

The Cruciatus was a curse of passion, there had to be emotion poured into, anger, hatred, feeling. But there was none of that with Strucker and his men. Harry writhed on the table and they watched dispassionately, as if his agony were just another thing to be studied. There was something in the clinical coldness of it all that left him feeling devalued, less than human. And while some may argue it made no difference the emotion behind his torture, pain was pain, he couldn't agree; the difference was there for him and it was noticed.

When it stopped the aides were there again, shining concentrated beams of light into his dilated pupils and checking the strength of his restraints. Somewhere Strucker was speaking, collected as usual, but Harry could only make one of every few words out over the rush of blood in his ears. He understood the order to resume though, and this time at least could brace himself before the pain was there again.

He bit down on the rubber of the mouthguard until he was sure his teeth would cut right through, but he was intent on not screaming, not showing them any more weakness than he could manage. Even when his lungs constricted to the point where he could no longer draw in breath, he flailed and he gasped but he didn't even try asking for help. Maybe if he died or whatever it was he did these days he'd be spared going through whatever torture they had planned for him.

But then of course an aide was there, hands everywhere he didn't want to be touched, yanking at the fabric chafing at his throat, ripping loose the straps holding him down so they could flip him over, knock loose whatever was restricting his airways. But Harry's hand was freed and then he was reaching for the man at his side, because as he gasped for air something else was gaining strength in its place.

Around the oppressive weight of his collar was the slow tingle of a power kept repressed for too long. His magic. Something was seeing his magic negating the collar's work until he could feel it rebuilding his drained reserves. He didn't hesitate, it could be gone any moment, so he reached out, grabbed the aide and he pulled.

The pain had stopped, his lungs were loosening just enough for the spots that had been trying to blot out his vision to disperse, and the cold sweep of the paralysis drug had disappeared abruptly, but it wasn't enough, he was in distress and his magic reacted in the only way it knew how.

Howard had used mescaline to draw a reaction from his magic, intravenous drugs and severe hallucinations to stress him out just enough to see it react in his defense. They had never used pain, never even considered it, but of course it worked just as well as the drugs. Better even. His magic lashed out in his defense and it latched on to the first being it could find.

The aide screamed when the invisible force reached out for her and dug its claws in deep in a way his still partially bound limbs couldn't. It searched for the brightest spot in her being, even
tarnished with the horrors she'd been complicit in in HYDRA's name her soul promised to be a good source of restorative energy. So he tugged at it and he pulled, still too lost in the pain and disorientation of four hundred and fifty volts to the head to realize what he was doing until it tore loose in a way that wasn't meant to be, and flooded his aching body with a cooling energy that swept all the way down to his toes.

He fell back on the cot, little bit of magic expended, and the aide fell back onto the sterile linoleum. Her eyes were gaping wide but there was a blankness behind them Harry already recognized, he'd seen it before in a man he'd never been able to cure.

"Sedate him."

Harry didn't fight, the energy he'd put into that one act of defiance had left him totally drained, so when a second approached, needle of sedative held aloft he didn't even word a protest. He let it dig into the muscle in his bicep and within seconds the world was gone.

The procedure went like this; the collar Potter wore emitted low frequency shocks to disrupt the electrical pulses that allowed his ability to cast magic. To test the strength of his power, stressors were introduced and the shocks emitting from the collar lowered just enough to earn a reaction from his magic while still not allowing enough control to cast anything that might do them harm. They'd done it enough to know what results to expect, anything that might go wrong they'd encountered already and learned to deal with.

When they started with Potter all went as normal, the reaction from his magic was impressive, more powerful than most others they worked with but nothing too out of the ordinary. They gave him a short break to note down the first round of results and give the boy a quick reprieve, but when they began again it was immediately apparent that something was wrong.

The readouts on the machines spiked, higher than anything they'd ever seen, too high for the machines to get a proper measure of. Then he began hyperventilating, drawing in breaths too quick and too short for him to properly recover and when his aide went to help the boy whose lips were quickly turning blue, he attacked.

It happened too quick, Potter had her around the throat, not tight enough to even restrict her airways, but she went pale so quickly Strucker knew something else must be happening. The girl was looking down at Potter, her pupils were blown with what might be pain and an undeniable, primal terror. She wailed an awful, chilling sound and men were rushing from all over to subdue their wayward subject, but Potter let go on his own and as he slumped back onto his gurney relief spread across his young face. While the aide he'd trapped fell like a marionette without her strings and her face was blank.

"Sedate him."

Potter was unconscious within seconds, and the unresponsive aide carted away to be looked over while Strucker turned on all those who remained.

"Who can tell me what we just saw."

"That wasn't a malfunction." Unimpressed eyebrows drew down over his monocled eyes, but the aide who dared speak up didn't even falter. "We've performed this test enough to have it down to an art, and the inhibitor was lowered exactly as it should have been. But it's not foolproof, we
always knew it wasn't. If a greater energy were to run through it, the technology would fail. And it
did, that wizard was powerful, more so than any we've dealt with yet, the readings prove it."

And they did, they steady incline of magic was recorded perfectly on the monitors until there
EEG's had no longer been able to track the level of activity. It was impressive just as it was
baffling.

Strucker had considered the possibility that Potter was downplaying what he was capable of;
allowing the wizards to catch him, bring him back to this time, and HYDRA to hold him for so
long for some motive the Baron would have uncovered eventually. But this was something else
entirely, they had proof now that Potter was more than he seemed, much more, but it seemed as if
not even he could control it.

"Doctor List." Strucker's right hand stepped closer to his side, attention intent on him. "This is, I
believe, a development to be discussed with our allies in the ICW."

List nodded and left quickly from the lab while Strucker took another moment to survey the scene
before him. "Put him away for now," he nodded to Potter, still deeply unconscious. "Keep him
sedated until we can be sure he won't override the inhibitor the moment he regains consciousness. I
expect an update on our Lorna's condition once you have it in hand."

He left with those simple instructions and went in search for List, who'd retreated to the corridor
adjacent where a space to contact their wizard allies had been specifically set up. He was speaking
to a head floating sans body in green flames, explaining the mishap. Within the hour the room was
at capacity with representatives from each faction of the ICW, there to hear the story from them
directly.

"Where is the girl?" The representative for the US' community was the first to speak up once the
entire tale had been recounted. "The one he attacked?"

"Seeing our medical team, I believe, I hadn't yet got the chance to check."

"We'd like to know her condition."

It was a strange request, but not one he couldn't fulfill easily enough. A quick comm call down to
medical and one of their team was on his way to give a report on how the girl was.

She wasn't well.

"Complete brain death," Malakai, one of the leads in the medical team, was succinct and to the
point with his explanation. "We're recording no neural activity, no responses to light, sound, pain.
Whatever he did sucked the life from her and we have no way to tell if it's permanent."

"The soul." Malakai, and all the others, turned to Britain's ICW representative, the one who had
spoken up. "Not the life, he sucked the soul from her, and it is permanent."

"How do you know?"

"Because that's what he is, what the Hallows made him. A creature who deals in souls and death." Britain turned to Strucker. "We told you he was dangerous, we told you the misery he brought on
us and you didn't believe. You were amused. But now you see, he is capable of atrocities."

The wizard expected Strucker to be horrified, to balk from the creature he held in his home and
finally concede that he didn't understand half of what he believed he did.
But he didn't. No, Strucker smiled. Because this is where they were different, the wizards looked at Potter and saw an aberration, something to be feared and locked away. But he saw something more.

"No, not atrocities." The wizards took on a look of bemusement, he'd done nothing to hide the excitement in his voice, the awe. He didn't want to. They had stumbled upon something incredible in Potter, and if they could not see or realize then it was their own loss. "He is capable of miracles."

A/N: So I've been playing it kind of fast and loose with the timeline, just throwing shit down and hoping it all worked out in the end. Of course it didn't. So to fix my fuck ups I built a timeline following the order of past, present, and future events, I'll work on formatting it properly so I can put it on my tumblr for everyone else to see. But in the meantime the important thing to know is Harry went to the past at the very end of 2008 and was brought back January of 2012. It's been nearly three years since the Hallows were united and everything that's happened, specifically in the wizarding world, will start to become more and more apparent now that we're back in his time.
Chapter 15

The Commandos weren't the sort of team to carry out interrogations often, no they went in, got what they needed, and killed what they didn't. But they weren't above it. They were at war, there was nothing they would refuse if it meant moving even a step closer to winning. And afterwards they might not sleep so good, they might search for absolution at the bottom of a bottle, but they always took comfort in the fact they didn't enjoy the act, not in the way they'd seen some on the other side do. That hesitation and disgust was affirmation to them, of their continuing humanity.

But Kuznetsov was different.

They'd lost one of their own bringing him in. Harry wasn't even supposed to be there, he wasn't a fighter, he was a kid. But he'd been torn to bloody bits then dragged terrified and unwilling back from wherever he'd come and far from their reach while helping to retrieve the HYDRA engineer. It was only fair Steve and his team receive their pound of flesh through him.

But Phillips held them back, and Peggy, reluctant as she seemed, stepped in to help him because Kuznetsov needed no persuasion, the wizards had done the tough work for them already and he was willing to speak, to tell them anything they wanted if only to avoid that awful pain.

So they were sent away, still full of rage and nowhere to direct it.

"I need a drink."

They all did, but then they passed mess and Steve caught sight of pale blonde and bright smiles the same moment he did them. Ives approached without hesitation, that smile ever present but something like concern crinkling the corner of each eye. Steve was quick to step away from the others, moving in to meet him halfway.

"Start the first round without me," he told the guys. "I'll be over once I'm done here."

"Steve." Bucky looked entirely unimpressed but there was a weariness to him that let Steve know this was a fight he could win.

There was no question what (or rather who) Ives was approaching them in search of, but his men had been through enough that day and he was their C.O. He'd let them rest, drink their guilt away and he would handle the unpleasant work.

"It's fine, Buck. I can go a little longer, these guys can't and I need you making sure they don't get into anything they don't need to be."

He didn't look convinced, it was a weak excuse, but Bucky was just exhausted enough to go along with it and not make much of a fuss when he did. He led the Commandos away and Steve turned back to Ives, standing just a few feet away and patiently waiting.

"You look tired Captain," the smile was gone and the crinkles were deeper.

Steve tried for a smile of his own, but it pulled painfully at his cheeks so he stopped that. "I'll sleep when I'm dead."

"Hold off on that for a while, we've still got need for you. But I came by to see if you knew where Flash was? I haven't seen nothing of him since yesterday."
Steve faltered, he'd never written a condolence letter, hadn't even seen what one looked like before Bucky and Azzano, how was he supposed to tell this man his friend was gone when not even he was sure where he was gone to?

But he hesitated too long and then he didn't have to.

"Did something happen?" Pale blue eyes were locked on his face, unwaveringly intense as Ives searched for every nuance in Steve's expression even if there was no need, Steve had no intention of lying.

"Yes."

"He dead?"

Steve exhaled shakily. "No."

"Then what?"

"He was taken. Somewhere we can't send men to get him back from."

Ives looked stunned. He shook his head, slow and unsure. "He didn't do that. He wasn't soldier, he didn't fight."

"He didn't. But he could. He was special, could do things most couldn't and when we got caught in a tight spot, we called for help. And they sent him."

"And then he got taken."

He wasn't looking for a response and so Steve didn't offer one. His expression remained smooth, he was better at keeping hold of his emotions than Steve could ever be, but Steve still saw the furrow of anger between his brow, the tick of grief at the corner of his lips.

"Thank you, for telling me." His arms crossed his chest in a way that looked as if he were trying to hold himself up. "Probably wouldn't have ever know otherwise."

He turned then and left Steve to himself.

They didn't know what to do with him. Strucker and his people had been so certain their collar would work, that Harry could do them no harm as long as it remained fast around his throat. But they were muggle and mortal and they knew nothing about the Hallows.

So they went back to their original way of handling him; in his cell he couldn't harm any of them, couldn't tear their souls from their body, and so until they could find some way to truly handle him, it was there he would remain.

Harry, of course, had different ideas. Here was probably the best chance he'd ever be given to find some way free of these mad scientists and even madder wizards. Their collar didn't work, and while they all frantically worked to fix their awful mistake and find some way to keep him in their control he was left with same predictable rota of guards. If there was any a time to attempt a breakout it was then.

There were two cameras in his cell, set in opposing corners too high in the ceiling for him to reach. Their strategic placement meant there wasn't anywhere in his cell he wasn't seen, and the overhead lights remained at the same bright, unflattering intensity constantly so there was no hiding in the
dark. He couldn't try searching for weaknesses in the admittedly impenetrable looking door, or attempt digging his way out like they did in the old prison movies, he would be seen in an instant not to mention the floor was concrete. Which meant the only way he was getting out was if the door was opened from the outside.

He knew he could draw them into his cell; any display of defiance, kicking at the door, clawing at the wall, chucking his few belongings at the cameras would bring a team to him in minutes. But they'd be on guard, guns drawn and ready to subdue, he wouldn't make it a single step from his cell. So he'd have to put aside his Gryffindor tendencies for the time being, he was just as well suited for the house of the cunning, or so the Hat claimed, if he wanted out of this cell and out of this facility he'd have to prove it.

His evening meal clattered though the slot right on time. Harry was seated on the floor when it did, back propped against the wall and directly across from the door so that when that little panel in the door opened he made the briefest eye contact with the administering guard. He had pale eyes, a liquid brown near clear as amber, Harry recognized him as the most tolerable of all the guards he'd dealt with. He'd handled him gentle enough and he often offered a word or two of greeting when dropping off his meals.

The man wasn't kind or friendly or to be considered any sort of ally, he was still HYDRA, still holding Harry captive knowing full well he was to be experimented on against his will, but he was softer than the others, just enough that Harry knew he could take advantage.

He counted six hundred seconds after the tray hit the ground, silently, eyes closed and purposely relaxed. Then he pushed off of the floor, rolled into bed, and threw the covers over himself. No one watching him through the two cameras would think anything of it, he didn't always eat the meals provided and he slept often, it would be a few hours before they got suspicious. But he didn't need anywhere near that long.

It had to have been weeks by now since he'd been dragged to the facility, and most of those days were spent here, in the windowless room under its harsh fluorescent lights. He resembled a ghost because of it, any bit of color he might have received from the sun was gone now, the skin of his arms especially was near translucent. He could trace the deep blue of his veins up and down his forearms, track where they branched and merged and thickened. There was one spot just at the crook of his elbow where the vein was near as thick as his finger, he pressed his pointer down into it, focusing on the rush of blood under his touch. The he replaced the finger with the top row of his teeth and bit down into the soft skin of his arm.

He struck true, blood sprayed across the roof of his mouth immediately and began a sluggish trickle along the length of his arm. But it wasn't enough, the crescent shaped wound hadn't dug deep enough, so he fastened his jaw and bit down again, then again, then one more time until the gush of blood was enough to stain the blanket thrown over his head and pool onto the floor at the head of his cot.

Work done Harry fell completely still, barely even allowing his chest to rise and fall as he waited. It didn't take long. He lay in the semi-dark cast by the thin cotton sheet for not even two hundred whole breaths before there was rattling from outside his cell, beeping along the door, then it swung open. One set of feet entered, approaching where he lay with frantic urgency. Then a hand gripped his shoulder, pulled the blanket from over him at the same time as it rolled him onto his back.

Harry looked up, locked eyes with alarmed amber, then he struck. His uninjured arm swung up and the flat of his palm met the center of his guard's nose with unerring force, he felt the crunch of bone beneath his hand and the grind of it being forced back into the man's skull and he watched as
he fell back. Dead or unconscious but leaking blood everywhere.

There was another just outside the cell, one Harry had been too hasty to see with his own eyes but known to expect anyway. He was up on his knees before the first guard was fully on the ground, hand groping at the man's belt until it found the handgun he knew they all carried along with a whole other armada of weapons. He'd never held a gun like this before, let alone fired one, but he knew the mechanics and when he squeezed the trigger, aiming wildly in the direction of the exit, he caught the second guard, once in the knee and once more in the throat. The way his body fell, halfway in the cell, acted as a perfect stopper for the door that had begun swinging shut. Harry stepped over him carelessly, stopping only long enough to retrieve a second gun and a heavy bit of rectangular plastic programmed with his key out.

The cell he was kept in was one of a dozen, six spanned one length of the short corridor and another six sat opposite, and at their end was a door twice as heavy as the one to his cell. But there was a little glass faced box where the handle should be, and when Harry lifted his stolen bit of plastic up to it the red light it emitted shone green and the locks disengaged.

Harry took his first step out from the cell block and the ugly white lights overhead turned horror film red. He faltered, caught off guard by the sudden decline of visibility and half expecting an alarm just as awful as the Caterwauling Charm to go off. But instead there was silence.

At least a dozen lab workers and easily double the amount of guards worked on this floor; with so many bodies each performing so many tasks, silence was never associated with this level. Which meant the silence was preparation for his arrival; the scientists and lab workers had evacuated and the grunts and gun toters were posted up, waiting for his attempt to escape the building.

There were no exits on this level, no windows or convenient hatches, only the elevator up to the ground floor, where they all would be waiting. But Harry already knew this, he'd prepared for it and when he fully stepped from the cell block, guns raised in preparation for any surprises that may be waiting for him, he moved forward with focused intent. He stalked down the corridors cautiously but with no hesitation, making sure to check each corner before rounding it. He passed the row of interrogation rooms he'd first been introduced to Strucker in, pricklingly aware of the cameras tracking his every move, and when he reached the long corridor with one enormous, glass wall looking into the lab and the double door, freight elevator at its end, three guards were waiting for him.

Harry dove back around the corner a half second before they opened fire, narrowly missing the hail of bullets that met the wall right where he'd stood. Not bullets, darts. They had no plans to kill him, which was good for him because he had no such reluctances.

He had maybe ten bullets in each gun, less considering he'd wasted a few trying to take down that guard at his cell door, but he only needed enough to keep the three busy until he got across the corridor.

It only took eight, eight shots and he was across, ducking into the deserted lab. One more destroyed the sensor that operated their automatic open and shut, and a gurney hastily shoved against the double doors bought him a few extra seconds. By the time the three men managed to pry the doors open manually and stumble over the overturned gurney, he was already on the other side of the lab and prying open his escape route.

It was a chute, meant for the proper disposal of medical waste. He'd watched an aide toss their refuse in it the one and only time he'd been in the lab. It was completely vertical, a straight drop down to an incinerator that burnt away anything to pass through. But the chute was narrow and even with his shit upper body strength and weak legs all he had to do was press into the walls with
all four limbs and he was suspended a handful of meters over an incinerator prepared to melt him down to the bone.

Harry could hear muffled shouts from somewhere outside, the sound of equipment being overturned as the men on his heels rushed to the hatch. He groaned in quiet exertion as he used the unsteady grip his forearms had on the walls to lever himself higher in the chute, centimeter by painful centimeter until he was just clear of the hatch. It swung inward just as he stopped to give his aching arms some rest, the door blocked the guard who'd shoved his head into the chute from seeing his form dangling just above him, but he could still peer down into the darkness just as the furnace roared to life, sending a surge of heat spiraling upward.

Harry's grip suddenly got a lot more precarious as sweat beaded along his skin in reaction to the surge in temperature. The metal he was pressed against on all sides warmed past what could reasonably be comfortable but he ignored the tang of burning flesh, focused only on not plummeting to a certain, fiery demise.

Somewhere below him the chute door fell shut and the men inside were shouting, demanding the furnace be shut off. It would take only minutes for someone to make it to that lower level to try and recover what they assumed would be his flame grilled corpse. It would take even less than that for them to realize he'd never made it down there. He needed to be gone before they did.

Above his head there was a thin stream of light, barely anything to illuminate the chute but enough for him to recognize another hatch. It was an entire story up and his body was already beginning to tremble from overexertion, but he ignored his physical limitations and began to move. The metal dragged along the skin of his arms and the balls of his feet, but he grit his teeth and he shimmied higher and higher until his fingers met a notch in the smooth wall of the chute. The architect of the building had rudely failed to add a handle on the inside, but he dug his fingertips into that narrow break until his nails broke and bled and it finally lifted free.

He spilled out of the chute with an enormous gasp of relief, falling onto the floor of a tiny maintenance closet lined with shelves of cleaning supplies. He gave himself half a second to look around and conclude there was nothing in the little closet he could use, he'd ditched his guns before even jumping into the chute, knowing they would only weigh him down, but if he was careful, and he fully intended to be, he'd have no use for them. He was going to get out as quickly and silently as possible.

When Harry had been brought to the facility x-amount of days weeks months ago they arrived in a cavernous room at the very bottom of the base. The elevator he'd been dragged into had labeled that floor Sub-2 with Sub-1 (where Harry had been residing this entire time) the floor above. There'd been a third button marked only with a star denoting the final and highest floor, this floor he'd shimmied up the incinerator shoot to get to. He'd hoped it would be the ground floor, but of course that was too easy, the air still had the same stale, recycled taste of filtered basement oxygen and there were no windows in the drab space. He had an unknown amount of floors between him and freedom and barely any time left before they realized he hadn't been caught in the incinerator and came looking, so he pressed pressed his hand into the cool cement of the wall and he ran.

There weren't any doors to break up the corridors, only cameras posted every few meters along the endless, winding maze. The little time he'd bought himself was up, they were watching him, following every step and sending men along the best route to intercept him. He had to find the way out, and find it before they did him or all of this would be for nothing, he'd never get a chance like this again.

Somewhere in the deserted labyrinth of corridors a door exploded open and footsteps, dozens on
dozens of footsteps, drowned out the frantic patter of his own bare feet, and finally Harry found it, another elevator, smaller than the one in the lower levels. On the same wall there was a doorway marked with a little blue man running up crudely drawn stairs. He had no breath left in his lungs, his side was aching like he'd been shot, and the bottoms of his feet were raw and chafed from the ordeal he'd put them through, but he chose the stairs. Because he knew they were watching, new they had control over the building, and knew he couldn't afford to be trapped in the elevator like a suspended cage.

He took the stairs three at a time, stretching his tired legs as far as they would go, climbing level after level as below him a hoard of heavy boots chased after him. Each wall he passed was marked in chipping black paint with a number and a letter; 4B, 3B, 2B, until 1B and instead of another flight of stairs up there were two doors. One was solid wood, unmarked and windowless. The other metal, with a little window that looked outside. He could see trees, a stretch of undisturbed forest, and the sky. Ink blue and full of stars.

Harry threw himself at the door, it hadn't been used in a long time, it was rusted shut and fought his attempt to open it. But he threw himself at it again, putting every bit of strength he possessed and then some into the shoulder he rammed into the cool metal. They were a level behind him. Fifteen stairs below. He didn't stop to look, or even consider abandoning the stubborn door for the one to his right. No, he shoved again and it yielded.

There were more stairs, going down this time, the narrow metal staircase led to the dirt and the forest beyond. Harry ignored it, he clambered onto the railing meant to prevent the buildings occupants from a nasty tumble. He climbed onto the top railing, didn't waste a second to try and balance and he jumped.

It was better than flying.

Better than the swoop of his stomach when he kicked off from the earth, broom firmly under him.

Better than hurtling from impossible heights, one hand gripping that flimsy bit of wood while the other reached for the snitch just out of his grasp.

This fall was uncontrolled, there was nothing slowing him and the unstoppable force of gravity, but he knew when he landed, no matter how much it would hurt, he would be free. Because he could run and run and nothing would catch him. Years of Harry hunting, of being the smallest and the weakest and the loneliest had prepared him for this moment. All he had to do was land.

He propelled off the railing, spread his arms to slow the fall. And then. He. Stopped.

Two arms, impossibly strong wrapped around his waist and jerked him backwards. They hit the chilled metal of the staircase and Harry didn't hesitate before lashing out; his fingers curled into talons, his feet swung without accuracy but incredible force, his teeth latched onto anything within reach. He threw everything he had into clawing free because he was right there, he was breathing in his first breath of clean, fresh, outdoor air, he couldn't give that up. He wouldn't.

But there were too many. They grabbed his arms, pinned his legs, subdued him like a disgruntled kitten and when even then he wouldn't quit, they leveled one of their strange, metallic pistols at him and shot a dart into the meat of his shoulder.

It was over after that.

No one was amused by the near escape. Not Strucker, who had been asleep only a level above
when the boy had broken free. Or any of the wizards, who had been safely ensconced in their own safe houses only a floo trip away. But of them all Britain's ICW representative was most unsettled.

"We've said from the start he's willful, he's stubborn, he doesn't know when to give up," the man with his grey streaked hair, and robes thrown haphazardly over his bed clothes paced the length of the room with a hand atop his disheveled hair. "And you swore we had no reason to worry, you would keep him contained. That," he gestured wildly of the footage of the boy's mad dash through the halls, "does not look contained."

"Mistakes were made." Strucker's tone was carefully even, but any who dared take a look past the straight face he put on would see the agitation he was barely suppressing. None of the gathered wizards bothered. "Those careless enough to make them were dealt with accordingly. This will not happen again."

"But how can we be sure? How do we know for certain you can contain the likes of him?"

"You don't. But one thing you are certain of is that you are no more capable of holding him, otherwise we would not be having this conversation. He took us by surprise in that lab, he's more powerful than anyone in this room could have predicted. We've been taking steps to fix that but it took time, he saw an opportunity in that time and he took it."

Annoyed as he was at having his credibility questioned, Strucker was still impressed. Potter was alone in that cellblock for a reason, it was reserved for those of his subjects to be handled with the highest level of caution. All the others were kept in Sub-2. And yet still he'd managed to kill two of his men, free himself from his cell, and make it all the way outside. He'd been loose for an hour before his team of impressively trained operatives had managed to apprehend him. Strucker constantly found himself amending the impression he'd formed of the boy.

But impressed or not he couldn't stand for another close call. Not only did the wizards grate on every nerve he possessed when worried, but if Potter actually managed to escape there would be the end of everything he'd worked so long for. So he strapped the young wizard to a gurney, threw him back into his cell, and kept him on a round the clock drip of sedatives, too doped up to even notice the passing of time let alone be cognizant enough to plan another escape. And he kept him there until the supposed geniuses he paid too generously for how often they fucked up finally agreed on the best way to keep Potter and his considerable power contained.

They'd been working on the collar that failed, tailoring it to fit Potter specifically and the daunting data they'd recorded that day in the lab before the boy had gotten out. A new core needed to be fit in the device; if they wanted to cut off complete access to his magic the voltage of bioelectric scrambling electricity being sent up and through his brain needed to be increased. But it was a delicate thing finding just the right amount, too little and they'd see no change, too much and he could lose primary function in his brain.

It was there they were spending majority of their time, with no subject equivalent to Potter's magical strength, finding that sweet spot was more difficult than any of them had ever thought it might be. And working out the proper voltage levels wasn't all they needed done; the innards of the device needed to be rearranged, to allow room for a vial of nerve agent. The collar was programmed with a set distance Potter was permitted to be from his cell, if he crossed it, he'd be injected immediately. On the other side was a second vial, this one filled with a potent sedative fed to him every twenty-four hours. It wouldn't knock him out entirely, but it would keep him just sluggish enough to be compliant.

Then there were the tracking devices to replace, the increased voltage corrupted any they tried to implant. And then they needed to work on the anti-tampering failsafes. And the vitals tracker. And
the remote inhibitor to lower the voltage when they had need for his magic. There wasn't just one task to be done. But then Strucker made his impatience and his displeasure much more apparent, pacing through their workspace, peering over their shoulders, swiping through their formulas and ideas, and the fire beneath them really lit.

Potter was fit with the new collar three days after his near escape, they kept him on the sedative while they swapped out the devices, to save them all the stress and the fight he was sure to cause. Then they stuck him back in his cell, with an aide and two guards to keep watch over him, and let him work through the last of the drugs in his system.

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Harry's mouth was full of cotton, his tongue felt swollen and parchment dry at the same time, and his stomach was cramping. Not like he'd eaten something bad but like he hadn't eaten anything at all, and the IV line that lead to a clear bag of fluids hanging on a pole backed up that assumption.

He'd felt this way a lot pre-Hogwarts, when he'd spent days at a time locked in his cupboard and had nothing else to do but sleep. When they'd sedated him at the end of his disastrous escape attempt they must have said to hell with him and all the trouble he caused and decided to just keep him out of it for the foreseeable future. The fact that he was awake now only meant they'd resolved the problem with his magic and his once chance at getting away was gone.

It was crushing, that realization, but honestly it wasn't much of a surprise. Part of him had known he wasn't getting free; Strucker wasn't some amateur who'd snatched him off the streets for the hell of it, he was HYDRA and he had a whole army of HYDRA soldiers to back him up. Even knowing that, Harry wasn't at least going to try, and he'd made it further than he'd thought he would so he shouldn't sit around feeling bad for himself.

He was on a gurney on which he might have been strapped down once, but they'd been loosened since, one jerk of his wrists undid them completely and he was pushing himself upright. He had a few seconds to look around and find himself in the familiar space of his cell.

And then he was tipping over.

There was no reason to it. He'd just swung his legs over the edge of the gurney, planted his feet on the ground and then it was like someone was ripping it from right underneath him. He fell sideways, spilling painfully onto the floor where he lay prone for a second trying to regain his bearings. But when he tried to push his hands beneath himself, to lever his body off the ground it was as if the pathway from his brains to his limbs had been cut off because all they did was scrabble uselessly at his sides.

"Fuck." He was breathing too hard, and he was starting to feel a little clammy, but the threat of an oncoming panic attack wasn't what bothered him, he'd had enough of those these past few months to be used to the discomfort. No, it was the awful feeling of rising nausea that had him concerned. The last thing he wanted was to be stuck immobile in puddle of his own sick. And after the stunt he'd just pulled he wouldn't put it past the men watching him to leave him there as some sort of punishment.

"Don't throw up. Don't throw up. Don't throw up." He managed to get his left arm planted into the ground as he whispered frantically to himself. "Don't throw up. Don't throw up. Please, don't throw up." It wobbled precariously but he managed to push the upper half of his body off the ground just as he body betrayed him. There was nothing in his stomach, he'd been on the drip the past however many days, but his stomach still made a fantastic effort at turning itself inside out. Only after it had exhausted itself did he roll over to put a good bit of distance between him and his mess.
"Fuck you, Strucker." He pawed weakly at his throat and-yup, right there was the cause for his sudden weakness. The collar felt thicker, probably not enough for most to notice, but he'd spent hours toying with the thing out of boredom. He'd gotten used to the hum of electricity at the base of his skull, he'd learned to tune out the strange sensation, but he was hyperaware of it now and the way it thrummed so much stronger.

Had they really spent all that time working out how to suppress his magic just to turn up the collar's settings? Maybe they couldn't figure it out and so resorted to the next best option? Death magic was tricky business and not even he fully understand it yet. All he needed was a sign that it was still accessible, the curl of a shadow, just a whisper from Death and all the rest could be worked out later. He just needed to concentrate his fuzzy mind.

The tendons in Harry's neck bunched up as he focused on the hint of a stain on the ground just to the right of where he lay prone, someone had tried to clean up the mess he'd made of the guard but the spots where his blood had pooled still held a shadow to it. Someone had died here. Two someones. Past experience proved that it gave him strength, made the Heart inside him sing. So he focused on how it felt to watch that little girl in the car pass on. The wondrous feeling of holding Adalgar's soul on a tether and the horrified awe of controlling it with Claude.

Harry shuddered, spread his palm out in preparation…and then he threw up.

"He's taking longer to acclimate then we thought he would, but he's more than proven that our guesses regarding him are just that. Guesses."

Strucker sniffed disdainfully. "Some men can't handle their benzodiazepines."

They were forty-eight hours past the installation of Potter's new inhibitor and the boy had shown no sign of being able to access any amount of his magic. They'd dragged him out a few times to test his stress levels, try and coax some kind of reaction from him and his magic, but there'd been nothing. Mostly because he was too busy sicking up to lash out at them.

He wasn't taking well to the new collar, whether it was the drip of sedative being fed into his bloodstream from the left vial, the increased voltage of electricity surging through his brain, or a combination of both, they weren't sure. But anything that passed through the boys lips made a reappearance within the hour, and though he'd managed to move from the heap on the ground the guards often left him in to the bare cot on the other side of his cell under his own power, it usually took well over half an hour and more effort than Strucker honestly thought necessary. He would have convinced himself Potter was merely being dramatic, but the vitals the collar tracked showed a lower than average heart rate and his body was running cooler than it should.

His medical team didn't appear concerned, they were putting his body through much, it would need time to adjust. The worst they believed they might have to fear was a bit of dehydration, but if it ever got to that point they could always hook him back up to an IV for nutrients. HYDRA had long ago perfected an intravenous solution to keep their meta-human assets functional. But the wizards were scheduled to make a visit and if anything about Potter's upkeep displeased them he was sure to hear an endless bit about it.

"Set him up with a nutrient solution." The aides all exchanged nervous glances at Stucker's order, since the incident with their colleague and the unfortunate removal of her soul none of them had been at all eager to approach Potter. Even as out of it as he was now any task requiring being within a ten foot radius of him set them all out of sorts. But he had a job to do and allies to appease and if they couldn't muster up the courage to handle their most important asset then they're usefulness to HYDRA may need to be reassessed.
"And a shot of B2 if he looks to need one. I have no energy to put up with any whining from those wizards."

None of the ICW members were much fans of making house calls to the Baron's facility. The upper levels where they hid the true nature of their business beneath the front of a steel recycling plant was unrefined, too cold and too dreary for any of their tastes. And the lower levels, where the real work was conducted, was too foreign for any of their tastes; the stark white, electric lights, the strange monitors with their incomprehensible words and numbers, the host of labs and their confusing machines. And the cell blocks with the dozens of once wizards acting as an uncomfortable reminder of their less than moral actions.

Once they may have been able to get away with paying the facility a visit once every few months, but since Potter's arrival it seemed they were there near every week. And even though they had been the ones to request this particular visit, it didn't mean they had to be happy about it. But after how poorly Strucker had done keeping Potter contained, they needed to make an inspection of their own. For peace of mind.

They'd been given a tour of the building, to see firsthand the additions to security following the escape attempt and now they were being taken to Potter himself, to see firsthand the measures Strucker's team had put in place to ensure he wasn't going anywhere again.

"We've found through personal experience he's most powerful when under stress," Strucker explained as they followed him down the stretching corridor. "So we've put him through the gauntlet to test the effectiveness of his new inhibitor and he did nothing. The same electroshock that removed my aide's soul yielded no result, as did none of our more traditional techniques. He's entirely powerless until we wish otherwise."

"He could be faking."

Strucker offered Romania's representative a shallow smile. "He could be. Which is why I was so excited when you requested to see him.

"He doesn't like us, HYDRA, he'd heard many horror story during his time with the SSR no doubt, but he doesn't know us. You on the other hand, you're his people, he risked his life for you and you betrayed him. I suspect one look at you and he'd lose any control he might be holding on to. He'll become irrational, want to attack you, hurt you just as you did him. There will be no faking then."

Unsurprisingly, none of the ICW seemed very thrilled with the revelation.

"You'd let him kill us to test your machine?" Britain, always the first to speak up, looked outraged and terrified, prepared to turn back to that fireplace and return to the debatable safety of his country.

"Of course not," Strucker scoffed. "Even if the inhibitor fails and he is able to access his magic, the drugs we've been feeding him won't allow for much control. And this," he held up a thin device, near flat as parchment but with a screen like the monitors in his lab, "allows control of the mechanisms within his collar. He makes a wrong move and I will manually release the paralytics we've stored in his collar to stop any attack. You're perfectly safe.

"Moreover, we only need just a few of you to speak to him. His cell can't fit your entire team, four at most, myself included. The rest of you can view him through the live security feed we've set up."
"Which of us will it be then?"

"That is entirely up to you. However I will say one particular presence in the room would be a great help." Strucker's monocled gaze turned to Britain's representative, who spluttered in shock then nerves.

"Me? Why mine?"

"You come from his home, you were there during his war and its aftermath. There are things only you know, things only you could say to him to coax the perfect reaction from him."

"I didn't...I didn't know him very well."

"But you knew him."

"I will be there with you," Moreau volunteered, laying a hand on the frazzled man's shoulder. "We'll make sure it all remains in control."

The man still didn't look convinced, but he gave in with a slump of his shoulders.

"We have room for one more," Strucker reminded. "If we have another who would like to join."

No one did, but he'd expected no less from their kind.

"Doctor List will see you to the security wing then, where you can observe a safe distance away."

Then he turned and, flanked by the two ICW members and a member of security for each of them, headed for Potter's cell.

They'd bound him in preparation for the visit; thick shackles around the ankles and another set around the wrists that led to a chain bolted into the ground of his cell. Even without the chains he looked a sorry sight, pale as the walls with deep shadows under his unsettling eyes, slumped on his little cot he gave off an air of fragility that didn't match the destructive force that had torn a girl's soul from her body and killed two of his men in that very room.

His guards entered the room first and took up strategic positions along the walls, next came Strucker who Potter blinked up at without the burn of anger reserved just for him. The same for France. But then Britain entered.

His pale hands wrapped around the chains at his wrists, they rattled as they pulled taut at the bolt in the ground, the guards shifted uncomfortably, hands falling to their guns, but he wasn't looking to pull himself free only ground himself. Then he spoke, the first words said since he'd been woken, and it was directed at Britain.

"Mr. Diggory."

The man flinched, his hands wound in the long sleeves of his robes in a move that mirrored the boy's. "Potter."

"You're with them. You're one of them."

Britain's representative, Amos Diggory, looked away from the accusing green eyes, but only found Strucker's watching him curiously. "Not well, you said?"

"He went to school with my son."

"Until he died." Potter hadn't looked away once and Diggory was growing more nervous the longer
he did. "Are you here because of him?"

"I'm here because we need change. We're dying, hundreds of us every day."

"I didn't mean for any of this...."

He looked sad, begging to be believed, Amos almost fell for it before he shook himself straight.

"Maybe you didn't. But that didn't matter, something needed to be done, and this wasn't something you could fix."

"I could." Potter was agitated now, the chain he'd wrapped around his wrist jangled tellingly.

"I was. We had a solution and it was going to work."

"Not like this."

Potter fell silent, stunned, but there was anger there too, Diggory and he had a shared history, and maybe he hadn't thought the man capable of siding with HYDRA, but men did terrible things when they were desperate.

"Does your wife know what you're condoning?" he whispered. "I'm just a child, barely older than Cedric was."

The words had been spoken to cut, and it looked as if they had, Diggory was shaking but he wasn't frightened anymore.

"She's dead. Caught the plague and couldn't shake it. Same as your friends."

The little color in Potter's face drained away. "My friends?"

"The little Weasley girl was one of the first to catch it, wasn't she? One of the first to die too. Her mum wasn't long after. And the smart one..."

And now when Potter jerked against his chains it wasn't to ground himself, but to lunge forward, reach for Diggory and hurt him in whatever way he could. But as Strucker watched, there was no magic, not the smallest sight of it.

"What did you do to Hermione?"

"She needed to be contained."

"She did nothing wrong."

"We caught her performing a blood ritual to help a known criminal hide from the Ministry of Magic!"

"We were trying to save you."

"And what good were you doing? Near seventy years in the past? No, we have it well handled here. It's like you said Potter, you are a child, let us handle this mess."

"Handle it?" His voice was pitched high in disbelief. "By putting your trust in HYDRA? Do you even know what they are? What they've done? What they'll do?"

"Save us." Diggory spat. "That is what they will do."
Potter shook his head, awed incredulity widening his eyes. "You're arrogant. And you're blind. You deserve exactly what's coming."

"What?" Moreau stepped in then, cutting off whatever vitriol filled words Diggory had prepared for the boy. "What is coming? What is the purpose of all this destruction you caused our world."

He blinked over at the woman, surprised to recall she and anyone but himself and Diggory were in the room. "I didn't cause it." Was what he finally responded with. "I didn't want any of this. I fought to stop it, I sacrificed all that I had, and you proved that you deserved none of it."

"What is coming?"

"Your end. Lovegood said it already, you heard even if you didn't want to listen. It's coming and it's unstoppable, no matter how much faith you put in mad muggles, no matter the torment you put me through and the magic you steal, nothing can stop this. You'll die. And I won't."

He settled back down then, released his chains and rolled onto his cot until his back was facing the room.

"Feel free to show yourselves out."
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Warning for handwave-y science/magic. I don't have a clue what I'm doing but let's at least pretend Strucker does.

Potter's words struck the wizards deeper than they cared to admit. Pale as he was in that white room with those killing curse green eyes, he'd made the perfect omen of death.

Their death.

They fled Strucker's compound without much word to the man in charge and the next day a meeting with the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom had been arranged. It was with him and his domain that their trouble had started, if they could convince him somehow to end his vow of non-intervention and help in rallying his muggle constituents, the other world leaders might come around.

They weren't meeting with him because they didn't trust in Strucker's work, they had full faith he could deliver on all that he'd promised. But…it was good to have a backup plan, and if they could get the muggles to settle down, that was half their problem taken care of already. Even if only temporarily.

The Prime Minister didn't make it easy, of course, he was still bitter over that debacle with the dead muggles they'd been containing, even though they'd had nothing to do with that and it had been a whole two years since it'd happened. Setting up a meeting with him had almost been impossible, apparently he thought himself a busy man, but after weeks of denying them at every turn, he finally ran out of excuses and had to sit down with them.

He was less than welcome when they arrived, not even bothering to rise when the three representatives of the ICW chosen to attend the meeting flooed in, and he didn't offer them any kind of refreshment.

"This will need to be quick, I'm afraid," he blustered, not even waiting until they'd been properly seated before beginning. "I've a call arranged with my counterpart in Poland in less than an hour, some mess to do with your time, then. And it's our hope that by the end of this we can put to rest those very kind of messes."

Molnar, the ICW's representative for Hungary, looked prepared to snap a scathing response, but Diggory interjected before he could find his voice. "We'll be cautious of your time, then. And it's our hope that by the end of this we can put to rest those very kind of messes."

The Minister didn't look very impressed, but he at least still appeared willing to listen.

"We've come to broker a truce." Diggory continued. "This ordeal between our people is nasty and unnecessary, good people on both sides are being killed and we wish to see that stopped just as much as you."

"At least on that we can agree," the Minister sniffed. "I'm willing to listen."
"Our primary goal is to stop the violence and preserve our world's secrecy. It's been a challenge since the first fall of our wards, we've managed to restore them around our main hubs but the damage was already done. Your people suspect now that there is more out there than just them. Many of those who suspect are harmless, they're curious if not a bit wary. But then there are those like the task force -"

The Ministers hackles raised immediately. "They're not our doing."

"No, of course not," Diggory placated, quick to soothe the man's anger. "But they still pose a problem."

The task force had found their start after the dragon attack in Wales. The wizarding world's relationship with their muggle counterparts was about in shambles by then, the Prime Minister had refused to help them cover up the incident and cleaning up the aftermath of the attack without the muggle government's support wasn't a challenge the Ministry was prepared to deal with.

They'd done the best they could, sending the few muggleborns they had left in their employ to deal with the few bits of footage the muggles had managed to capture. And though there had been too many witnesses to obliviate in full, they did what they could, they altered the memories witnesses had of that night, and when the ones they couldn't obliviate spoke up about the dragon they'd seen dive from the night sky and set their countryside alight, the altered were there to sow doubt with their own corrected version of events.

The fabricated story was the one the papers went with; it was easier to believe an airplane fuel tankard had burst mid-flight, showering the homes below in molten rain before coming down in the center of their town, rather than an honest to god, straight from the storybooks dragon. Muggles wanted so badly for things to remain normal and safe they were willing to believe just about any story they were fed.

Or, at least most of them were.

Not all of the survivors of the attack were convinced. They'd seen the dragon, felt the primal terror of watching the beast drop from the sky and tear their homes down with a puff of its breath and no one could tell them otherwise.

They were the first members of the force.

When they started they didn't set out with violence as their intention, they only wanted answers, but then they found them and they liked none of it.

Decades of secrets, of lies, of careful coverups by their own government were carefully, tenaciously uprooted. They were convinced another world ran parallel to their own, most often it was carefully isolated and perfectly hidden, but the few times they met and mingled the results were disastrous. For them.

Those farmers who'd been attacked some few years back, not all had died, some had been taken and never brought back.

Then there had been that mess with the bridge. Only a few years old and snapped clean in two? Officials had claimed normal wear and poorly manufactured steel as the cause for the disaster, even when there was nothing to back the claims.

And old man Dirk could still be found in some pubs every now and then with stories of a beast much like their own disturbing his day at beach and puncturing his lilo.
The founding members of the force saw the truths behind those careful lies and they were enlightened. The wizarding world had always been precise in their coverups, but they'd been uniform, following the same pattern of response for every incident, and once one knew what they were looking for it was no challenge to find every point in history when their two worlds had clashed.

It was only natural that after learning all that they had these muggles would want to know more of the people who lived secretly alongside them, but all evidence pointed to their government being in on the secret, any queries would be swiftly and surely shut down. They would have to take matters into their own hands, and in times like these, where the magics the wizarding world had relied on was failing them, there had never been a better chance to do it.

Their first encounter with wizards had ended poorly. The wizarding couple had been just an addition to the rapidly growing number of whose household wards failed and outed their existence to their neighbors. The day was terrifying enough for them already, so when a mob of muggles arrived as they were trying to alter their neighbors memories and restore their home's secrecy, the panicked and they attacked and both sides were lucky to leave that day with no casualties.

Their next attempt at outreach went no better. Nor did the third, the fourth, the sixth, the tenth. After the dozenth the muggles concluded these people were not the sort to be spoken to and negotiated with, they were not the sort to be respectfully approached and gently questioned. No, they were to be dealt with with force.

It spiraled from there.

When they wanted answers, the force attacked. Grabbing vulnerable wizards where they could and running them off with violence when they couldn't. These people who had caused so many of their deaths and lied to about it afterwards couldn't be trusted.

Their numbers swelled in direct correlation with the amount of wizard sightings and while most incidents were harmless not all were. Some wizards weren't as willing to be run out of their ancestral homes by a bunch of hopped up muggles, they'd rather stay as that first couple had, try and restore their wards and clear the memory of themselves from their neighbors' minds. But it didn't always work and these strange people with their sticks and their mind meddling were met with fear.

By the time of this meeting between the factions of the ICW and Britain's Prime Minister the task force had swelled to a coalition of several thousand spread all over Europe and a few even in other continents, convinced that this world they still didn't fully understand needed to be dragged into the light and made to pay for the crimes they'd committed against their people. They were the parents and children and siblings and friends of those victimized by the wizarding world, they were angry and afraid, especially now in this troubling times for the wizarding world, and they were targeting every witch or wizard unlucky enough to stumble into their path.

"If they are allowed to continue as they are, these encounters between my people and this task force will continue to escalate past the few tragic casualties we've already seen."

"We'll see war."

Diggory bit down on his frown, they hadn't needed Molnar's input, he'd ordered his words carefully enough that the Prime Minister would know exactly what he was alluding to. But he held his tongue, because they had to appear a united front to the muggle, and just nodded as if the interruption had been planned.
"We have magic, powerful and destructive kinds, but you have weapons and technology we haven't even begun to understand. No matter who comes out that fight the victor, we'll both have lost."

And the Minister knew that, the wizards could see the agreement he was trying best not to display. "What do you want from this truce then? How would we work to stop this?"

Moreau was immediate to step in, of all the wizards present she dealt best with brokering agreements. "We'll need your aide again, active aide, in quelling all attempts at finding out more about our sort. This task force needs to be criminalized and dismantled with haste. And we ask you be on standby at all times in the case of another incident in which our wards should fail."

"And in return?"

"We impose stricter laws on our people, all contact between our two worlds will be limited past what we've ever done before. You'll no longer need worry about us crossing into your domain and causing trouble."

There was a lengthy pause in which the Prime Minister was silent, waiting obviously for something else to come. But then nothing did. "What else?"

Moreau and Diggory shared a confused glance. "What more were you expecting?"

"More than just your word that you'll keep away from us." For whatever reason, the Prime Minister appeared agitated. "By my count we've killed a few hundred of yours. But us? You've killed thousands of ours, and that's what we know of. I've no doubt you have every intention of doing as you say and cutting off interaction with us non-magic folk, but who's to say all of your people will so easily fall in line? We need assurance."

Not one of the wizards liked the sound of that. "Tell us exactly what it is you want." Molnar demanded.

"Receiving the same amount of respect I offer you would be a nice start. You've your man in my office," the Minister waved at the portrait hanging behind his desk, who froze comically mid nose scratch at being called out so suddenly, "and a way in whenever you want." The flames were still crackling a merry green from their arrival. "I want open communications between us both and a way for me to reach you whenever I have need."

None of that had been discussed, but Moreau knew those above her would think nothing of the request in exchange for the muggle's cooperation. "That's something I'm sure we could arran-"

"And I want embassies."

That stopped them all short, even the Prime Minister who hadn't expected for those words to come from his own mouth. But once they'd been spoken aloud, he found them to be to his liking and went with it.

"If we're to be sure you really will stop our worlds from mixing where they shouldn't, I want a team of my own men in your Ministry, to oversee the going ons and assure you're sticking to what was agreed."

"That would be somewhat counterproductive, wouldn't it?" Molnar grit, shocked by the gall of the man. "Muggles in our ministries."

"It's a common practice among our countries. It's good for continued peace and understanding our allies' cultures."
"Yes," Diggory agreed as he scrabbled for the most diplomatic answer. "But bringing muggles into our mix, especially in these uncertain times, would be…unusual."

"Well it's what must be done if we wish to come to that truce." And the Prime Minister spoke with such conviction they all knew there was nothing that could be said to convince him otherwise.

"Unfortunately that is not something we here can decide." Moreau spoke up before her colleagues, Molnar especially who was looking a little red in the face, could ruin the fragile calm they had between them all. "We'll have to take your counter offers to our superiors and allow them to come to a decision."

The Minister nodded and sank back in his seat, clearly satisfied with a job well done. "Take your time. But if you don't mind, it's close to time for that call."

"I've never met a man so arrogant."

Needle nose pliers, delicately gripping a strand of bright green wire between their teeth, twitched in a once steady grasp.

"How can he, that muggle, have fooled himself into believing he had any ground to make demands of us."

It had taken him so long to settle into that mindspace where there was nothing but him and the bit of circuitry he was, plate by plate, assembling.

"He's deluded. He's seen our temporary hardship and somehow convinced himself that it makes him above us."

But it was gone now. His careful calm shattered by the increasingly loud and ever uncouth wizards who walked through his halls without any kind of care for the delicate work they were doing. Strucker set aside his tools and replaced the protective set of glasses he wore with his monocle just as his magical allies brought their noise and not entirely welcome presence into his workspace.

"Meeting with the Prime Minister went well, I take it?"

None of the wizards looked particularly amused by the statement, but Strucker was much too irritated by the unscheduled visit to care much for diplomacy.

"We left with nothing achieved," Moreau confessed. "Only another matter for those higher ranked than us to squabble over."

"Pity." Strucker tucked his project away and turned to boot up a nearby monitor, he wouldn't find the quiet he needed to complete his work until the wizards had gone, but there were a few measures his head of security needed reviewed and he might as well finish some work. "Though I still confess to not understanding why a meeting for peace was scheduled at all. Do you not trust our work here?"

"We trust," Diggory assured, "but what's being done here won't be a quick fix. Even once we have the numbers we need, you said yourself it will take time to groom them into a force to be feared. We don't have time."

"Then you should have taken whatever deal was offered."

They looked outraged by the very idea. "What they want is beyond reason; embassies within our
wards, seats in our governments, to have a say in what we do.”

Strucker shrugged already bored with the conversation. "Well then I hope a few years of continued isolation proves to be worth your annihilation."

"Excuse me?"

"They will die, these men who seek to oppress you, but only in time. There must be patience. But if you can't manage that, if you can't stomach working alongside your inferiors for just a few years more, then you will not live to see this done."

Strucker hadn't made this alliance to waste valuable time educating men who were meant to be equals, and yet most his time seemed to be spent doing exactly that. Their magic was useful, yes, and their willingness to provide as many subjects as needed was appreciated, but he was quickly finding any virtues the wizards had were outweighed by their many, many flaws.

"How long exactly must we be patient?" Moreau questioned, her mouth was set in a deep frown but Strucker could see she was at least considering his words. "We've yet to have a real answer; a day, a time, an idea in when our sacrifice will finally pay off. If we're to break our most sacred laws, we at least deserve the right to know for how long we'd have to tolerate it."

"I don't have one to give you," Strucker shrugged. "A day, a time. This is not the kind of work that can be given a neat little timeline and a proper schedule to follow."

"Give us something. You've had Potter months and he's done nothing but rot in his cell and plot ways to escape your hold."

Strucker could feel the nerve above his left eye trying valiantly not to twitch. They were relentless, these wizards, if he didn't offer them something he wouldn't be rid of them for hours. "He's adjusted to the collar, finished with all that vomiting and moaning, we've begun the process of acclimating his magic to the pods. Give us a week, seven days down to the hour and he'll be ready for the first procedure. I can say nothing for how long the rest will take."

Diggory fished a battered old pocket watch from his ridiculous robes and took a moment to examine its face. "A week," he murmured, "I suppose we can do."

They didn't have much say in the matter, but Strucker allowed him a polite smile nonetheless. "Then it's settled." He was already turning back to the monitor, hoping against hopes they would catch the nonverbal cue to leave. "In the meantime you would do well to contact that Prime Minister and come to some sort of agreement."

They were gone after an hour and another few dozen questions, complaints, and demands. By the time the tail end of the last robe disappeared into their green fire Strucker was exhausted, so much so he couldn't bring himself to take back up the work he'd been forced to put on hold. He needed a menial task, something to keep his hands busy without much thought while his depleted energy reserves worked to replenish themselves.

The aides were in the main lab squabbling over who would be the one to venture into Potter's cell to collect their daily fluid samples. Their continued reluctance to approach their most important subject would have to be addressed at some point, but in the meantime taking blood from the flighty wizard was just the task he'd been hoping for.

Potter had always been one of many words; when he'd first arrived he was always quick to offer a snarky comment or a barbed statement regarding the morality of their actions, but now he preferred
to watch in silence.

Whether he was being fed or tested on or dragged from cell to lab to cell again, those eerie green eyes tracked the nervous forms of his minders. It unnerved his handlers and set Strucker's instincts on edge, the boy almost seemed as if he knew something, as if he were waiting for something. What it was, he couldn't say. Any hope Potter might have had of escaping should have been neatly done away with the moment they'd snapped that modified collar around his throat. But where all of Strucker's other subjects might have conceded to the hopelessness of their situation, they boy remained attentive.

In the end, it would be Strucker who had to root out what it was he had to be so patient about, it always was. It was fortunate that he excelled at stripping away the defensive walls and pathetic secrets his subjects liked to keep.

When he entered the cell, he didn't address the boy immediately, he took his time erecting a quick stand to set the case of medical paraphernalia onto. Potter didn't address him, choosing to watch him work in silence. But when Strucker held out a hand, a clear signal to come forward, he complied without question.

Maybe it was because of the armed guards watching him intently, maybe it was the forced calm the drugs were constantly feeding into his system, or maybe it was part of whatever strange plan he had cooking up in his crafty little head, but no matter the reason, it was strange seeing the boy so compliant when everything he'd been told and witnessed firsthand had proved he was everything but.

"The color's come back to your cheeks." Strucker kept his focus on his work as he spoke, collecting a thin strip of latex to tie as a tourniquet around Potter's thin arm, within seconds of his applying it, blue veins bulged visibly beneath his translucent skin. "That's good. We lost valuable time waiting for you to recover."

Strucker thought he might have seen Potter quirk something of a sarcastic frown, but it was gone just as quickly. And there was certainly no expression when he stuck the needle in the most prominent vein of his arm and began a steady pull of the plunger to draw his blood.

"What has you so quiet lately, Harry? Your minders say you speak nothing when they're around when before it wasn't often they could get you to keep quiet."

Potter looked up at him, and this close, even Strucker could admit there was something eerie in the way he watched. The green of his eyes were poisonous but there was a shadow of something in them, and his young face as a whole, that was unspeakably old.

He was too much of a professional to allow himself to become unsettled when the boy focused all of that attention on him, but he was still startled when he actually chose to speak.

"It just seems I haven't been in much of a mood to hold conversation. It's like you said, I was recovering."

So the silence hadn't been a part of some ploy to aid in his escape. Or maybe it had and now, face to face with Strucker, Potter was reevaluating that ploy. But that was something to be considered when he wasn't here.

"You've been well for days."

This time he really did see the boy smile, bitter edged and full of sarcasm.
"What is it you've been wanting to hear?"

Strucker set aside his first vial, full now with blood, and reached for a second one as he said, "Nothing of consequence, but I learned long ago that when men in your position go silent trouble is brewing."

"You'll get no trouble from me." Potter's free hand scratched idly at his collar. "I've been so effectively defanged."

"It shouldn't come as any kind of surprise when I say I don't feel at all assured."

He screwed the lid on the second vial and contemplated going for a third, but honestly they had more than they could need for their daily checks.

"But your cooperation thus far has been greatly appreciated. We all hope you might keep it up." He snapped the tourniquet from Potter's arm and made sure to add it to the rest of his collection of waste before folding his case and snapping the temporary stand closed. "Continue to rest, you've a big week coming up."

Harry watched Strucker and his two minions file out of his cell, quickly falling back into the quiet stoicism he'd taken on these few weeks past. It was only after the door sealed shut behind them that he allowed himself to slump into some approximation of relief. A hand fell to his forearm, where the skin was dotted with dark bruises from the countless needles he'd been stuck with. He wasn't sure what they needed it for, but every day like clockwork someone would come to collect a vial or two of his blood.

This was the first time Strucker himself had come to do it. Harry had assumed the man thought himself too important to waste time performing such menial tasks, so his presence must have had a purpose. He'd been looking for something in Harry and the things he said, he just wasn't sure what.

It made him nervous. Strucker made him nervous. Because of all the things Harry had faced, basilisks and dark lords and his own Ministry, he'd never encountered a man so focused.

Voldemort had been intense, obsessed, but years of fragmenting his soul and taking part in the worst sort of rituals had done him no favors. He was erratic and too easily controlled by his anger and while Harry would never say he was an easy opponent, he was at least a familiar one.

But Strucker, he was precise in everything he did. He was calculatingly patient and Harry just couldn't get a read on him.

It was because of Strucker his chances of escape sat so bleakly at zero, if Harry were being held by wizards, he was sure he could have found some way free by now. But of course the one time they chose to be competent in anything, it was when deciding on his captors.

But it was fine, he could be like Strucker, he could be patient, because Death had sworn he couldn't die. But his captors could, they'd grow old and weak, and their minds would grow old and weak. And he'd wait and comply, he'd follow every order they gave, be their perfect test subject until there came a time where they couldn't remember how desperately he'd wanted to be free, couldn't remember every measure he'd taken, and life he'd stolen just for the chance of it. They'd forget why their armed guards and their collars were so important and that's when he'd strike. He'd get out, he'd jump and this time no one would catch him.

It was easy keeping to his creed for the first week.
After the sickening side effects of the collar had worn off, his days fell back into the same routine they'd followed pre-breakout. He was fed twice a day, taken to shower every three, and otherwise ignored. The only change in the repetition were the blood draws.

Remaining on his best behavior wasn't any kind of trouble because most days he interacted with no one.

But then, after two weeks stuck between the same four white washed walls, seven days exactly past Strucker's visit, his solitude ended with the arrival of four guards, their big guns, and Strucker's very own second in command, List.

Harry had sensed something was to happen that day, something big. His blood hadn't been drawn for the first time since receiving the collar, and instead of his normal morning meal of hash, he'd been given a strange smoothie like drink that looked like spoiled milk and tasted about as good, but was assured held all the nutrients he'd need for the day to come.

His restraints had been upgraded from the simple manacles trapping his arms in front of him to a set around his wrists and a set around his ankles attached by a chain thicker than his forearm. It seemed even with his shiny new collar they still didn't fully trust him.

It was a challenge walking so tightly bound, the most he could accomplish was a sad little shuffle that had them all moving at half the pace they might usually be. And if he was exaggerating his difficulties just a little? Well the looks of frustration his guard tried to hide beneath their carefully stoic masks almost made him smile. He had to find pleasure where he could nowadays.

A bit of his amusement died though when, instead of turning into the lab like he'd expected, they went further down the corridor to the elevator. In all his time in the facility, the only places he'd been permitted access to was the lab and his cell and the little bathroom area he was taken once a week to shower. Any deviation from the little routine was going to be immediately met with trepidation.

The button for Sub-2 was pressed and they dropped a floor lower where their silent procession marched to a familiar room; the cavernous hall the ritual forward had deposited them. But it was no longer empty, filled now with what appeared like half the lab from the level above with a few additions.

Serious work had to have gone into moving the machinery, none of it looked very light, but then Harry saw the far wall, the upper half of which was actually a window looking into another room, and he understood the need for all the trouble. They were in an operating theatre of sorts, and in the room behind the window were dozens of men in robes to watch what proceeded.

Harry had done a good job distracting himself with escape attempts and magic repressing collars that turned his stomach inside out, but Strucker had told him the very first day he arrived that he was here for a purpose, there was no forgetting that. They wanted his magic, to take what they could and use it to restore power to those who'd lost it to the disease. And maybe Harry had assumed the man was all talk, magic wasn't a physical object, it wasn't something that could be collected and transferred from person to person, especially not by a muggle. And maybe that made it easy to forget, to ignore.

But Strucker shouldn't be underestimated, he'd learned that already, and if there was any muggle capable of accomplishing such an impossible task, he would be the one.

He met them on entry, smiling in a way that made Harry distinctly nervous. He'd learned from experience that when men like Strucker had something to be happy about, it was usually to his
detriment.

"Is that all of them then?" List asked by way of greeting, he was looking up, into the viewing gallery, with a moue of distaste on his thin lips.

Harry felt a prickle of amusement among all the confusion and dread building within him, if the wizards knew how poorly these muggles, their inferiors, viewed them, they would be outraged.

"Yes, their various leaders and entourages all accounted for, they didn't dare be late." Strucker turned his little smile onto Harry who did his best not to scowl in return. "Mr. Potter, welcome. We'll be heading this way."

Among the semi-familiar monitors and gurneys and unnamable devices out on the floor was a set of upright, human sized structures built on three sides with metal and the fourth glass that he was about eighty-percent certain he would have to go into at some point. They looked oddly like futuristic sarcophagi connected by some sort of glass tube.

It was all very unnerving and Harry could only feel his anxiety spike higher when he was pushed back onto a gurney only a few feet away from the devices and directly beside a second gurney that was already holding a thin man who looked about twice his age. He looked ill, or as if he'd recently been ill, pale and trembling and bearing a nasty ring of scars around his throat, but when he looked at Harry his face shone with hope.

Harry looked away, felt his hands clench almost involuntarily around their thick chain. Surrounded by clean pressed, white coated aides, the man stuck out sorely, they didn't need any interaction for Harry to know who the stranger was; he was the one to receive his stolen magic.

He looked away, could feel anger warring with disgust battling with a rising desperation build somewhere beneath his sternum, but he still tried to empathize. His own magic wasn't gone, only temporarily bound and it was still as if he'd lost a limb, months had passed and he had yet to adjust to the enormous feeling of loss being without it left. If instead of being blocked off it had been drained away, gone for good because of a disease never even seen before, there was honestly no telling what he might do. He might try and live with it (he had after all spent the first eleven years of his life not even knowing such a thing as magic was real), perhaps he could in time grow used to being without it. But it was just as likely he'd find himself sitting where the man opposite him sat. Willing to undergo some mad procedure to siphon the power he'd lost from another, especially if that other was, debatably, the cause of his loss to start with.

So there was understanding, mixed in somewhere among all that anger, but it didn't make this any easier to stomach.

"You look so serious, Mr. Potter." And as if his mood weren't foul enough, now Strucker wanted to engage. "You shouldn't. This is a good day for you, you're doing an enormous service for your world."

"Service?" Harry snorted. "That's what we're calling it? Should I expect some form of compensation then?"

"Let's see how well today goes, then perhaps we can have a discussion. Until then," he reached for a tray and came back with a sizeable syringe, "your arm if you would."

He'd only made the vow to himself to end all acts of defiance a week ago, but one look at that needle and his resolution to comply with all that they asked was already faltering.
"What is it?"

"A mild sedative only. To keep you calm until the end."

"The one being fed into my jugular isn't doing it for you?" But Harry held his arm out anyway, not seeing much reason in wasting his time trying to put up a fight.

The effect was almost immediate, and however mild Strucker claimed it to be, Harry could already feel his limbs going numb.

Strucker smiled at him and ran a hand over his head in a way that felt mockingly paternal. "Keep calm, this will be done quickly and it won't hurt a bit."

"I don't," Harry said around a heavy tongue, "trust you."

"Such hurtful words." He sighed, not a trace of upset in his expression. Then he turned away, moving his attention to the wizards gathered above as he accepted a microphone that fed audio directly into the viewing room. "We're prepared to begin if you'd like to find your seats."

There was a few moments spent shuffling about as they found their seats and settled in for the show.

"Our alliance has been a strong one thus far, you've given me every resource needed to succeed and in turn I've returned magic to those who thought it gone. But I believe it's past time I delivered on what I truly promised." He paused, no doubt for dramatic effect, and then, "Our army."

The wizards tittered in excitement and all the while Strucker continued on grandstanding and monologuing, but the drone of his voice faded into the background of Harry's mind as he just watched.

It was cinematic, the picture Strucker made; standing tall and overconfident as he spoke to a room of dignitaries and bureaucrats, all who hung from his every word, unwilling to miss a single moment of the miracle he was preparing to perform.

It was also a familiar one.

It had been almost a year since Brooklyn and the lab hidden beneath the little antique shop but the memory of it, even in his drug addled stupor, hadn't lost its edge.

The similarities between these two scenes, separated by over half a century, were as striking as the differences between them were. Back then, in that lab, he'd been a part, a willing member of the wonders to be created, no one in that room was there against their will. But here, even while the setup of fancy equipment, bespectacled scientist, and eager audiences were near identical, the undercurrent of fear rather than excitement was such a telling difference Harry ached with the desire to be back then. Because even sixty-six years in the past, with not a single idea how to get back home, he'd at least had some bit of hope.

The gurney beneath him jolted, and Harry realized that while he was lost somewhere in his mind Strucker had finished his speech and now they were moving. He was dragged to his feet, propped between his usual two guards who did most of the work supporting his weight, and (yeah, he'd guessed it), led over to one of the two capsules.

Inside the contraptions was a bit stuffy, which wasn't much of a surprise as he couldn't see any kind of proper ventilation inside the thing. But the capsule at least was narrow enough that he could lean against any of its walls to keep himself propped mostly upright. Next door, his fellow wizard was
being loaded up, then Strucker took a moment to talk a little more, and then finally something was happening.

An aide approached, decked in protective gear and clutching an oblong crystal so bright and blue it almost hurt to look at between a pair of forceps. The crystal went into the compartment beneath Harry's feet while another aide fixed a monitor to the tip of his pointer finger. He was tempted to rip it off, just to be petty and hold up this very serious procession, but his arms still felt like rubber and it would only earn him more distrust from Strucker and his men so it stayed in place.

The back hatch shut behind the aide, effectively sealing Harry in on all sides, and Strucker, the asshole, came around to knock on the glass.

"Any discomfort?"

Harry very maturely offered him a middle finger in response.

"Good." He turned, looked dramatically across the room then up at the wizards watching. "Let's begin."

On the other side of the room a series of commands were punched into a monitor. Harry's pod rattled to life and the temperature rose with almost no warning, then rain began to fall from the roof of his capsule.

It wasn't so bad, barely a light mist and it was warm, better than the showers he was offered any other time, but a shudder still traveled up his spine, rattled all his bones, and once it started he couldn't stop it. Within minutes he was soaked through and trembling worse than he ever had while living in a cardboard box in the middle of a New York winter, but it wasn't from cold, or discomfort. He wasn't entirely sure what it was. Couldn't find just one word to name the cause of this uncontrollable reaction.

Raw, was perhaps the closest. Stripped down. Vulnerable.

The tiny capsule with its glass face put him in the mind of a pinned butterfly behind the glass of a frame. But he wasn't just there to be admired as a pretty, dead thing, he was there to be used, to be harvested from and by people he'd once looked to as kin.

He'd grown up shunned and slandered by the muggles, when he'd found the wizarding world they were supposed to be his chance at finally belonging. And even in the times when the Prophet and the Ministry had found reason after reason to spit on his name it had never been so bad as before Hogwarts, because he had his friends, and his headmaster, and his magic. Now he had none, and now it wasn't just one profit seeking paper and one finnicky Ministry against him. Strucker had said everyone was there; world leaders, prime ministers, members of magical governments from all around, to watch as his magic was taken and given to another because he was no longer considered one of theirs.

It just took him being in this capsule, drenched in artificial rain and being watched from every angle to finally realize it.

He looked up into the viewing gallery, stared each one of them in the face the best he could until the fog that had begun rising from the compartment beneath his feet filled the entire capsule and clouded the glass.

The trembling changed into something else not long after that.

Harry had been inhaling the fog, not thinking it was anything more than a product of the humid
temperature in the capsule and the man made rain, but then it solidified in his lungs. It was like breathing something down the wrong pipe, only worse because while it was down there wreaking havoc in his airways, it expanded until it felt as if it were trying to burst from his chest.

And then, through no way he could explain, he felt it spread; thickening in his arteries, twining along his nerves, and injecting itself within his muscles. With every intrusion it felt as if the fog, or whatever it really was, was unmaking him, pulling apart every strand of DNA, not searching, but trying to change.

He gave up trying to stand straight, he fell to his knees and he clawed at his chest to get to lungs that wouldn't work. All the while his entire frame shook, spasming erratically as if trying to knock loose the intruder tearing him apart. It didn't do any good, of course it didn't, and meanwhile Strucker and his cohort and the most important men in the wizarding world stood by and watched.

He hadn't hated even Voldemort as much as this.

Maybe a minute passed, maybe an hour, then through the haze of blinding agony of having every cell in his body attacked, he heard Strucker speak, a command, and then something changed.

There'd been a buzzing in his ears for weeks, maybe even since he'd got here, that had become such a constant Harry forgot it was even there until it was gone. And then something new rose up to meet the foreign energy laying waste to his insides.

*His magic.*

He understood then, of course Strucker had lied, the "mild sedative" wasn't to keep him calm, it was to keep him so disoriented and weak he could do nothing when they released his magic. And he'd fallen for it, hadn't considered it to be anything less than the truth. But how else would they draw from his magic if it was kept repressed by the collar.

Under the brutal attack of his magic, the intruding mist fell back almost immediately, releasing its hooks from his muscles and when Harry heaved it spilled from his lips.

Upon its appearance it was no longer an unassuming grey mist, but black as slick and writhing in a way that appeared almost sinister. Harry watched the way it hung in the air around him disgusted just as much as he was fascinated, but then the hatch sealing the piping between the two capsules slid open and the pull of air coming from within vacuumed it from his capsule and into the one neighboring him.

He couldn't see what was happening, the metal sides of his pod obscured everything but what was directly in front of him, but he could hear the man's screams, could feel the impact of his fists or his feet or his body resonating between the two connected containers. When he stopped, the silence so sudden it was jarring, Harry was left to wonder if perhaps everything had gone horribly wrong.

But then he looked to Strucker, and he was smiling, and Harry's meager hopes were dashed.

"Very good Harry. So very well done." The baron crouched so they sat eye to eye. "Perhaps they weren't wrong about you after all."

Harry would have loved nothing more than to spit something cutting and cruel at the man, in this place where he'd had *everything* stripped from him, his words were his only weapon. But they stuck in his throat, couldn't push past the rush of air he drew desperately into his lungs, and all he could do was stare back with his hitching breath and inexplicably wet eyes.

"Rest now, regain your strength." He climbed to his feet, began to turn away, but not before one
last word. "We've one complete and just a few dozen more to go."

The wizards were waiting to meet him at the door, grins enormous as they shook his hand, uttered congratulations, and Harry gasped, a shudder tore through him, and all he could do was bow his head, fold into himself, because they would not see his tears.

Compliance, he forced himself to remember, show them compliance, deference, let them think he was defeated. But every last one of them was going to burn.
Kuznetsov's information took them to a facility in Lithuania that hadn't housed either of their targets in some time.

Maybe it was because the scientist's capture had made it back to Schmidt who took immediate measures to protect his weapon, or maybe the compound had only meant to be a temporary residence for the two. But no matter why, when the Commando's tore through the doors of the building and cut through the skeleton crew guarding the place they found no cube and no Schmidt to make any of the trouble actually worth it.

Their rampage through the facility was brutal, the Commando's were an efficient team, but they were only ever so vicious when it was personal. The defending HYDRA agents had barely any time to fire their weapons, and none at all to land a hit before being bowled over by a shield, blasted back by a hail of bullets, or thrown into stone wall by fists and steel capped boots.

They were devastated. Of course they were. And angry. They'd risked so much, sacrificed even more to get this location and it proved to be worthless.

Of course the men from above, the ones who gave the orders and kept well away from the actual fighting, didn't see it as such. Even if the cube wasn't where they'd hoped, Kuznetsov had still given them the location of a fully operational facility. Steve's team returned with coordinates of more compounds, blueprints of what lay inside, schematics of weapons, dossiers of agents, plans of battle, even cyphers to radio codes. It was marked a success even if the Commandos didn't fully agree.

And just to twist the knife even further, they were allowed only a day to lick their wounds and soothe their rage before orders came in for a new op. Another grab and bag just a few klicks south of where they'd lost Harry.

"I put up with about all the shit they can throw at us." Dugan was grumbling, he'd been grumbling for some time, but only recently had he raised his pitch to let the rest of his teammates hear his gripes. "And I don't bitch about it. But I draw the line at wet socks."

They'd been walking for hours, this far over enemy lines they had to be dropped miles outside of the mission start point to avoid being spotted, and most the trek had been through calf deep snow that left not a single one of them with a pair of socks not soaked through. Even Cap with his fancy red boots.

"That's a lie, Dugan," Bucky drawled from his spot at the front of their procession, right in his usual spot at Cap's side. "There ain't never been a day you didn't bitch."

"Fucker," the ginger snapped harmlessly. ",s not my point. All we do for them sonsabitches, least they could do is get us some good damn snow gear."

"Nah, but see if they did that there wouldn't be enough money for those pressed suits they like to showboat in."

"Bunch of meatballs, all of them. A man doesn't need a pressed suit to impress, just a nice hat."

"Meatball or not, they're smart enough to land the job that's got them back on home soil while we're the ones slogging it through kraut territory with the wet socks."
Dugan groaned just at the reminder. "Minute we put a bullet in Adolf's head and I'm back stateside you know what I'm planning to do?"

"Crack a beer?" Morita guessed.

"The second thing I'm planning to do?"

Jones rolled his eyes. "Tell us."

"Kick any man thinking he can tell me what to do. I'm done taking orders from these armchair generals."

"You'll just get yourself stuck in the can starting brawls you can't keep up with."

"Ain't no brawl I can't keep up with," Dugan exclaimed, mock outraged. "And I'm a whole hero back home, best pals with the Star Spangled Man, bulls wouldn't stop me if I was killing a man."

"Maybe try to keep away from the murdering anyway, my friend," Falsworth said with a pat to Dugan's shoulder. "Get your fill of it here, then go home and find yourself a cheap jane. She'll tire out that last bit of fight in you."

"Shit beer and corner girls?" Morita laughed. "A hero's homecoming."

"Well what big things do you got planned then?"

This was a favorite game of theirs, when the miles between mission start and rendezvous were long, when none of them could find sleep past the rumble of mortar and gunfire, or when they just felt themselves slipping into those dark moods all men on the front found every now and again, they took turns picturing their perfect day after the war. It helped just as much as it didn't. It kept them busy that last hour it took to find their start point, then they were unpacking the gear they'd need to get their guy and Steve was handing out orders.

"Gabe, Jim, get started setting up comms. Monty, keep an eye out to make sure they don't get here any sooner than they should, Dum-Dum, Buck, and I'll make sure there aren't any surprises hiding out." He cast a critical eye over the uneven, snowcapped landscape with all its perfect places for enemies to be hiding. "Let's make this quick and keep it sharp, fellas, we've got a train to catch."

Walden Murphy was thirty-six when his life ended.

He was secretary to the head of the office for magic relations and education, a regular at the Blind Pig, and founder of the Rhode Island Red Cap quodpot team's fan league. He didn't have any children or siblings, no wife or girlfriend or any significant other, and his parents had passed early in his life from a freak portkey accident.

He was well liked among his colleagues, even more so among his fellow bar patrons and anyone who knew him would describe him as charismatic, amicable, maybe a bit of a flirt but one with a strong moral code.

He was the one hundred and third wizard in the US to catch the aggressive variant of spattergroit.

He was one of the few lucky enough to survive it.

Eight months of aggressive treatment and he went home, healthy but unwhole, missing a part so integral he wasn't himself without it. He gave up on work, his league, his friends and he poured
every dragot he had into finding some way to return his magic.

Walden Murphy was thirty-seven when a former colleague came to him with an offer. It was insane, and maybe a bit illegal, but the Congress needed wizards like him, ones who'd lost their magic, to submit to trials and tests run by an organization none of them had ever heard of with the hope that they might be able to restore his gift.

He was desperate, had spent months searching and had no answers and not a single riel left to his name, so he agreed and spent a year after being picked apart and bled dry by a muggle who claimed his time would come.

He didn't believe, hadn't after the first month of white walls and demeaning tests, but he had nothing to go back to, with no magic he had no work and his friends probably thought him dead and the muggle, the scientist Strucker, didn't seem the type to let them go knowing all that they did.

So he kept his peace, did as ordered and said nothing when they took enough samples to make a whole 'nother of him and he waited until finally it paid off.

They caught the Boy Who Lived, the one who set this curse loose on their people, and he was told his time had come.

The procedure felt like what he imagined death would be like, but he woke after and he knew he couldn't be dead, nothing in his ordinary life had earned him paradise so the energy, the life, the pure power that vibrated his bones could only have come from Strucker's experiment and not ascension to the perfect afterlife.

He'd been an above average wizard before the plague, earned all Exemplary's on his SALEMs, but the feel of his magic after, it was greater, more powerful than anything he'd ever known.

"348."

He'd been given time to recover and to allow his body to acclimate to the new energy running through it, and now they were back in the room in which he'd been returned his magic. It had been cleared of the medical equipment and Strucker now stood in the viewing gallery rather than out on the floor, he'd been the one who had spoken the assigned number that was as good as his name into the intercom.

"You are the first to receive Potter's magic, prove to us it wasn't a waste."

Walden didn't think, didn't waste time worrying over the fact that he had no wand, he needed to prove to these men that he was worthy of their attention. He raised his hand, considered the most impressive spell in his arsenal, and cast.

He'd learned the patronus charm maybe a year out of Ilvermorny, and even if he hadn't ever managed forming it into a fully corporeal form, the ghostly image of a greyhound almost as tall as him was still an impressive sight. He didn't really have much cause to use it, even in those periods of war, the Congress didn't employ Dementors and Lethifolds were even harder to come by. The most use the charm got from him was when he wanted to show off, which was often enough that he knew how to cast it and knew how it was meant to come out.

But he cast the spell and instead of the silver mist that was most familiar, a creature torn straight from nightmares sprung into creation. It resembled only vaguely his hound, it shared the size of it, the shape, but where once it was formed from a cloud of silver, now it was made entirely from
shadow. Dark weaved the shape of emaciated ribs, molded bone thin limbs capped with incredible talons, and cut a narrow face with eyes that burned red and fangs that dripped shadow.

Walden shivered just to see it. Patroni were among the lightest magic to be performed, even when it wasn't cast in full corporeal form just being in the presence of his hound washed him in warmth. But the air around this creature was arctic and he felt nothing but dread.

"Most excellent." Strucker's voice broke his reverie and the nightmare apparition dissolved back to nothing. "What was the spell?"

"It was…" Walden cleared his throat to rid it of its tremble, "…it was the patronus."

There was a pause, then the quiet disturbance of the intercom being handed over to another. Walden looked up to find another man had joined Strucker at the glass, a wizard if his robes were any indication.

"No patronus looks like that."

"No," he agreed. "They don't."

The wizards were flustered and Strucker was irritated because he didn't know why. The magic 348 had cast was unusual, not the sort of spell they were used to seeing, but they already knew that would happen. His subjects were returned their power, but not in the same form they'd once possessed; they couldn't cast an endless number of spells as the wizard they once were could, but neither were they restricted to just one ability as their cousin species was.

They could perform a multitude of magics, more concentrated and powerful than any spell, but there would be some that was simply beyond their capability. No longer wizards, but mages he called them, skilled in one specific craft.

"Tell me why you are worried," he demanded of the wizards after too long spent in confusion.

"His spell," the usual representatives, Diggory and Moreau and their companions weren't present today, to observe 348's first display of power he had been joined by scholars and spell masters better able to understand the extent of the subject's abilities, "the patronus charm is what it's called, is a very light bit of magic, it's meant to protect, to elicit a sense of comfort and warmth. To foul it as his has been is unheard of, nothing we know of, no spell or ritual, is capable of twisting a patronus. Only that it would require a very dark, very dangerous sort of magic."

"Potter's magic?"

"That would be the obvious answer, but…Harry Potter was a known light wizard. He didn't dabble in the dark arts, for Godric's sake, he killed the dark lord with a disarming spell."

"But that was before he unleashed the curse on your world, wasn't it?"

The wizard with his bug like spectacles blinked up at Strucker, not yet following. "I'm sorry?"

"The artifacts he united, these Hallows, were gifts from death as the story says." He'd done his reading, delved deep into the tale of the Hallows and all the lore surrounding it to understand the best he could what he was dealing with. "And whether that's the truth of their origins, their history is one steeped in murder and the darkest of magics. When Potter united them, he took on their power, their blood soaked past, and perhaps it changed him, his magic."
The wizard nodded. "And now we've put that magic in the one down there."

"Yes." It was nice to see not all wizards were idiots. "When we took magic from our first donor wizard, the one gifted in transfiguration, the resulting mages could manipulate the form of any object around him. The mages made from the young lady with the proficiency in herbology had control of all that came from the earth."

"And now this mage, borne from Potter's magic tainted by the Hallows is capable of our darker arts?"

"No," Strucker said. In the story of the Hallows there was one constant in all of the brother's individual encounters, and even in the ones that followed. "Death." He reached for the spellbooks the wizards had brought for reference, flipping quickly through the thick pages as an idea began to take root. Then he spoke into the intercom, "348, cast Avada Kedavra."

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He was perfect.

Strucker had engineered truly powerful subjects, ones whose powers were so incredible and geared towards destruction he could weep from pride and uninhibited exhilaration. But 348 was something entirely different, something lethal and terrifying even while still untrained.

They worked with him a full day; pitching spells and suggestions for him to attempt until he was pushed past his limits. And when he'd done all he could accomplish alone, they brought in an opponent.

Before he'd received Potter, his wizard allies had provided Strucker with dozens of their own for testing; not just wizards struck magicless from the disease, but those who still held the ability to cast. He needed both in order to understand their magic, he'd told them.

Most who entered his lab expired through faulty experiments and their own weak wills, and the ones who survived were given the honor of donating magic to his mages. But in order to produce a sufficiently powerful mage he needed an equally, if not more, powered donor wizard. Not all who survived the experiments were powerful enough to donate, but they couldn't be released to live their lives in traumatized freedom, they'd seen too much of what he did and who he did it with to walk free, so he found another use for them.

Newly created mages needed to test their power, not just against inanimate objects but against something that could fight back. His leftover wizards, while not powerful enough to be donors were still wizards, still had access to their magic, and when thrown in a life or death situation, they still put up a hell of a fight. Throwing these wizards and a mage into a room and letting them fight it out was the best way to see just what his mages were capable of. And if the mage didn't survive the fight? Well then they had no place in his army anyway.

He never gave them a wand of their own, allowing the wizards their own perfectly matched weapon was simply asking for trouble. But he made sure the one they were given was at least somewhat compatible with the wielder, they needed to be of some challenge to the mages.

The wizard he brought in to fight 348 was capable of fighting with whatever he was given, he'd killed the last mage he'd gone up against with his borrowed wand, the only one to do so. Strucker was expecting one hell of a fight, and while he still expected 348 to win, he'd predicted the mage would have to put in work to see it done. But then he gave the order to begin, and the wizard wasted no time casting three curses (two bone breaking and a jelly leg hex he was told), and they didn't work.
The first struck 348 at his wrist, the second two in the center of his chest; he was thrown from his feet and even in an entire room separate from the two duelers they could hear his cry of pain, but the bones in his wrist appeared intact and where his sternum should have been caved in and his legs unresponsive noodles beneath him he was whole and surefooted. He was hurt, a vicious bruise was already beginning to take form on his wrist and he rubbed his chest with a grimace, but he should have been dead.

The wizard was stunned, but the expression of shock was the only thing he managed before the nightmare patronus took form and charged. His shield did nothing, it tore through it like wet paper, so he conjured his own patronus and Stucker finally got an idea of what the spell was truly meant to be. His was a bear, twice the size of the hound and shaped from seemingly insubstantial mist, but when they clashed it was with a resounding snarl that had absolutely nothing insubstantial about it.

Moonlight and shadow carved into each other, battling viciously to snuff the other from existence. The wizard was sweating, every bit of his focus and his magic were directed at the fight, he made the mistake of assuming his opponent was in a state similar.

But 348 had left his creature to finish the fight itself, and while the wizard remained intent on the two creatures in the center of the room, he melted from existence.

Strucker had felt the unfamiliar grip of panic when his subject had first performed that trick some hours ago; it was unlike the disillusionment charm the wizards viewing the demonstrations with him had claimed, there was some degree of visibility with that one, a telltale shimmer around the caster. This was like being draped in a particularly excellent invisibility cloak, the only saving grace was 348 seemed incapable of holding it for long, a few minutes at most before he began to fade back into existence. But in this fight, he didn't even need that long.

A quarter of a minute passed between his vanishing and his reappearance half a step behind his opponent. He reached around, plucked the wand from his hand and snapped it clean in two. The grizzly who'd barely been holding his own in the fight, disappeared the moment the connection was severed, and the hound was upon the wizard in seconds.

It inflicted no physical wounds, as solid as it may seem it apparently couldn't affect the corporeal plane. But the wizard still screamed.

Shadow dipped claws and canines burrowed into his chest, searching and tugging for a prize none of them could see. And the wizard beneath it wailed in the kind of torment none of them had heard before.

"Enough, 348."

The hound disappeared immediately upon Strucker's command, 348 fell back and the wizard curled into himself, alive and conscious, but shuddering with sobs and garbled words unintelligible to all of them.

Strucker turned to the wizards who were pale with what might be horror. "What are your thoughts?"

"He's horrifying," the wizard with the bug like eyes whispered. "He's incredible."

"Yes," he agreed, electricity burned his blood, shivered awe through his bones. "And he's just the first."
The wizards wanted hundreds. Strucker had promised them an army and so they imagined mages in the dozens, enough to lay waste to entire cities, to topple governments. And they would have it, Strucker hadn't lied, but there was danger in so many.

The mages Potter produced were a breed of their own, a form of deadly that frightened them all. To have too many would risk losing control. But more than that, they didn't need hundreds. A team of just five could be as dangerous as an army in the hundreds if one knew how to handle them properly. And he did.

So they worked Potter carefully, one mage a week until they had a team of six. The wizards complained, offered their opinion where it was not wanted, but he'd become rather adept at tuning out their moaning and when confronted with the sheer destruction of the six their protests lost their steam.

"What comes next?"

Strucker was back to working with his normal group of representatives, the useless lot but at least a familiar one. The job of reviewing the statistics gathered from their team wasn't a job the whole of the ICW seemed to feel the need to be present for.

"Next is direction." They were in his private office, reviewing mounted footage of their six puttering about their cells. "They'll need to be taught control, of themselves and their power if they're to be of use to us. The start of next month I'll have a few associates step in to aide in their training. If you have any from your end you think might be of some use, the floor is open to suggestions."

"I'm sure the Supreme Mugwump will want to send in a team of aurors to help in their training. Maybe even a few unspeakables." Moreau said. "Who do you intend to bring in?"

"Just a few old friends," Strucker said with a negligent wave of his hand. "HYDRA has produced some of the most formidable strike teams in military history, my allies have shown interest in handling this team from the start."

"But to begin next month, you said?" Diggory jumped in. "Why so long?"

"First we'll need to practice a little team building, and put in a bit of work to strengthen their allegiance to our fight." Strucker patiently explained. "Our six are formidable, we want to make sure that their goals are our goals and that it remain as such."

"Yes, well that is important." The wizards shared a look among themselves, none of them were exactly sure how Strucker intended to ensure the mages total allegiance but they could all agree they didn't want to know. "The matter of Potter will also need to be discussed."

Strucker raised a brow. "What of him?"

A short woman with oriental features and whose name he had never bothered to learn was the one to answer. "He's given us our army, outside of providing a spare or two, his usefulness has run out. It would be best to deal with him before he comes up with more trouble for us all."

Surely he was misunderstanding the implications of their words? Wizards were an outdated race, and sometimes their speech reflected that, perhaps something was being lost in translation. "Are you suggesting we kill him?"

"Humanely."
"That would be a waste."

"Perhaps," the woman agreed. "But Potter is a man who is irritatingly and unalterably good. He would sooner accept death than comply with us, especially after all we've done to him. To keep him around any longer than necessary is asking for disaster."

The others nodded, all mindlessly agreeing to disposing of the boy as if he were an old, worn out shoe rather than the greatest source of power any of them had ever encountered. He was astounded at times, by their incredible stupidity.

"This certainly is a conversation to be had," he kept mind of his tone, but only just enough to keep away the worst of his disdain, "but at a later time, I think. There's much more that needs to be done here."

The witch nodded, conceding easily to his request. "We'll leave you to your work then. Expect to hear from us soon on the wizards we wish to aid in training."

"I'll look forward to it."

They saw themselves out, which was just fine by him as his patience was already beginning to wear thin, while List moved to replace Diggory in his seat directly across from his own.

"Something tells me they're already set in the decision," List said.

"They're afraid of him," Strucker sneered. "Terrified. It's hindering their ability to think logically, and it is beginning to grow old." He paused, drummed a line of fingers along his desk as he thought. "But perhaps they were right."

List only looked interest. "Were they?"

"We have everything we need, usefulness has run out. Maybe it is time to move on."

And List wasted no time with protests, with needless questions and unasked for opinions, he nodded and he said. "What would you like me to do?"

"Take 348 to Sub-2, prepare him for a demonstration." He was already pushing himself away from his desk, moving toward the door. "I'll collect Potter."

"You're holding up remarkably well."

Harry rolled onto his back, looked up at Strucker who stood framed in his open doorway.

"Six procedures and still no sign of wear. It's impressive."

"I never was one to do as expected. It drove my professors mad." He pushed himself up into a sitting position, uncomfortable with the man looming over him as he lay on his mat. "Why are you here?"

"We're going for a stroll."

"It's only been three days."

Strucker smiled indulgently. "Not another procedure. We have things to discuss and I thought you might like to stretch your legs a bit."
Kindness was never offered without a price, but seeing something past his cell walls was tempting. He stood, let himself be shackled accordingly, then followed a half step behind Strucker from his cell and out into the hall.

"Where are we going?"

"Sub-2."

But that was where they took him for the procedure, at least for the very first time. "You lied?"

Strucker snorted a quiet laugh. "What need would I have to lie?"

They descended to the lower level, but rather than leading him onto the open floor of the cavernous room, they climbed a narrow staircase and exited into the viewing gallery that overlooked it.

Strucker settled into a seat closest to the glass and gestured magnanimously for Harry to join him. "I thought you might want to watch."

There was a woman and two men out on the floor; they were on their knees, a gun pressed to each of their heads.

Harry didn't sit, he moved closer to the glass to see the spectacle better. "What is this?"

"They wanted to run, not a punishable offense by itself, but then they attempted to organize their peers into running. That couldn't be forgiven."

"So I'm here to see what happens if I try to run again."

"No," Strucker offered him a soft, fond smile. "I've been told intimidation does nothing to deter you. You're here for a different sort of demonstration."

Another man entered, this one Harry recognized. He was the one from that first procedure, but he looked different, healthier than when they'd sat beside each other all those weeks ago. He was tellingly free of the cuffs that bruised Harry's wrists and he wore a collar, but it was a thinner, less serious version of his own. And when Strucker spoke to him, he smiled.

"We have a special guest today."

The three guards with their guns to the prisoners' heads holstered their weapons and stepped back from their kneeling forms, they marched through the door, into the hall, but before the last shut it behind him, he drew something from his vest and tossed it at their feet. Wands.

"Impress us."

The three dove for them at the same time Harry's magic thief attacked. He didn't have one of his own, but it was obvious almost immediately that he didn't need one. A terrifying hound, dark as Death's cloak, melted into existence and latched jaws around the first wizard's legs. While he screamed, the only witch faced Strucker's pet head on; she cast in rapid succession spells meant only to kill. But he marched toward her without an ounce of fear, ducking spells where he could, but when he couldn't he shook of their effects with a wince and kept coming. The wand fell from her fingers the moment his hand wrapped around her throat, she didn't try to fight him only wrapped her fingers around his wrist until they bled white.

Harry pressed impossibly closer to the glass, unwilling or maybe unable to look away from the horrible scene. The first wizard was dead, there was no blood to be seen, not a single open wound
on him, but the emptiness behind his gaze and the horrific way his face had screwed up and then *frozen* that way, confirmed even what he couldn't understand. And the woman, dangling from that iron grasp, was *rotting*.

Not in a metaphorical sense. Harry's brain wasn't forming pretty comparisons to describe the brutal beauty in which she was dying. No, her skin was literally peeling from muscle, bubbling with a sudden, unnatural release of gas as it darkened to foul green-tinged black with a ring of bleach white at the edges. And it was originating from where Strucker's pet had her by the throat.

The smell had to be awful, the feel of her flesh coming loose and necrotizing beneath his fingers even worse, but he didn't release her until she wasn't breathing, until the grip she had around his wrist slackened, before falling free altogether.

He dropped her then, her dead weight making an awful, brittle sort of sound, and he looked up at Strucker with *pride*.

"There's still one more."

The third wizard had disappeared, he'd cast a disillusionment while his opponent had been distracted and retreated out of the way of the carnage, but a glance at Strucker showed him not the slightest bit worried.

The dog like creature did a lap around the room, stopped in the corner furthest, and slammed headfirst into a shield. It dissolved on contact, but the protections keeping the final wizard from sight fell with it. He was crouched low to the ground, shoe in one hand and wand in the other. He'd tried to apparate, Harry guessed, but the wizards had prepared for that no doubt, and the portkey he was trying to create probably wouldn't work any better.

He knew it too, he choked on a wail of pure terror but he didn't pause in his frantic casting.

The corpses moved. The wizard with his unmarred body and the witch flesh peeling and blackened twitched grotesquely across the ground, their limbs flopping and flailing until a foot pressed into the ground, a hand levered them upright, and they were standing. Under *his* command.

Harry had seen inferi before, he'd been much too close to the things if he was being honest, and after he'd researched wildly to understand the awful creatures he'd encountered. He'd read enough to know that they couldn't be raised in a handful of seconds with no incantation spoken and no *wand*, not even Voldemort was capable of it. The process of raising a corpse was long and grueling, not one done in the heat of battle, and yet somehow this man had done it.

They moved forward on jerky legs, arms reaching for the wizard who had abandoned his shoe to cast every curse in his arsenal at them. But even when he hacked off limbs, blew holes through their chests, *scorched them with fire*, they kept coming. And when they fell upon him they tore into him as if they hadn't once been allies plotting a daring but ill fated escape together.

Harry turned away then, two wars and two dark lords later and he still couldn't fully stomach the
sight of carnage. At his back the wizard died and Strucker's experiment collapsed to his knees, exhausted but exhilarated.

"What did you do?" The words tore from his throat as if they were lined with barbed wiring.

"Oh no," a horrible satisfaction lit Strucker's eyes, "I can't take the credit for this. He is yours."

Harry shook his head, not the slightest bit interested in trying to solve the man's mad riddles.

"You are the source of his power, we drew from you to give to him. Your magic is rooted in death, and so his will be as well. All of theirs will be."

"Why are you showing me this?"

"Because when you first arrived in my care, I gave you an offer." Harry felt his stomach sink, he remembered. "To work with us, to be an ally rather than a prisoner."

"And I said no, I still do."

"Even if it costs you your life?"

He wanted to ignore the man, he knew his type, with their silver tongues and half-truths. He was better left ignored, but if he knew something….

"The wizards plan to kill you. You've given us our army and now they'll kill you to stop you threatening us any further."

Oh, was that it? He'd been expecting that from the start. "I'm not afraid to die."

"I believe you." Strucker sat forward in his seat. "But I'm not one to waste. I won't allow you to be killed."

And Harry believed him. Strucker was just the sort to have an unhealthy attachment to his toys, no matter the trouble it might cause him. "For what though? To keep me around in case you lose one of your experiments? In case you want more soldiers for your army?"

"Because I have more use for you than a magical battery. The mages you created are powerful, greater than any we've seen so far, and they're only copies. Cheap imitations of you."

The way he was watching Harry, so focused and fascinated, set his hair on end. "It goes against everything I am to dispose of that kind of power."

"What does that matter? What you want? The wizards want me dead, so I'm dead. You're smart, scarily so, and you have the backing of an incredibly evil organization behind you, but you're still just a muggle, and at the end of the day they'll do what they want because they can."

He'd been expecting anger, irritation at least, at the reminder of how little he could actually do against Harry's world, but Strucker only looked amused.

"Do you know who introduced the idea of the alliance between yours and mine? I did. I walked into your ministry, brought your people to their knees, and I told them I wanted of them. And they agreed."

"They gave me wizards, as many as I asked for, they gave me you, and in return them, I gave them magic. The kind they'd never thought themselves capable. I gave them an army, a small one," he admitted, "but powerful. Unstoppable, if we play our hand just right. And who is this army loyal
to? The ones who betrayed them, handed them off as if they meant nothing? Or the ones who gave them their magic back? Made them into gods? I intend to do great things with them and the wizards intend to stand back and reap the benefits of my miracles.

"It seems just as they said for you, that they've outlived their usefulness."

Harry clenched his jaw around the desire to gape at the man, then in an unknowing mimicry of Strucker's own words, he said. "You want to kill them?"

"I want you to kill them."

And didn't that stop Harry right in his tracks? "I'm sorry?"

"You must hate them. They told me the stories, how you sacrificed your childhood, your family, your life to save them all from the dark lord their world created. Then before his bones had even begun to rot, they're at your door and they want your blood. You were lost to time because of them, forced into another war and then dragged back here before you were ready. Killing them is your due."

"But they dragged me here, to you, who's imprisoned me and *used* me, stolen something that was never yours to touch."

Strucker nodded, he didn't even *try* to defend himself. "And I would change nothing. Because I am here, performing these atrocities, not from malice or greed but because I want my people to live, more than that, I want them to *thrive* as the greatest versions of themselves that there can be. And to do so, some must suffer, but it is all."

"For the greater good."

"So you understand."

Harry shrugged. "I've heard this speech before. But I still don't understand what it is you expect of me? To kill your allies and then join your little army in taking over the world?"

"Not join, *lead*."

Harry laughed at that. "*Lead it*?"

"They are six incredibly powered individuals, equal to each other, inferior only to you. None of my men could control them and none of their own has the advantage they'd need to keep them in line for long. They'll follow only someone stronger than themselves."

"How do you know?"

It was Strucker's turn to laugh, like Harry was something *cute*. "This is what I do. I know because I've done this before." He gestured to the experiment below them, who still sat on the ground, catching his breath. "Subject 384 is powerful and driven and he's *loyal*, I could raise him up, mold him into an effective leader, but for this team I don't want just effective. I want perfect. Only you would be."

"And why would you think I would *ever*…?"

"Because the asking is a courtesy. I can *make* you, but there would be a mess and I would much rather save us both that trouble."
"My consent is not a requirement," Harry parroted words the words Strucker had taunted him with probably a dozen times over, and the man smiled.

"So you are capable of learning." He stood, gestured for Harry's rota of guards to join them again. "Take some time, think on it. We'll speak again in the morning."

In the quiet of his cell Harry did exactly that. It wasn't that he wanted to, but what else was there to do in the solitude? And once he started, well he couldn't exactly stop, because really he had only two options; submit willingly or submit painfully, because he had no doubt Strucker could do exactly what he promised.

Neither option was one he particularly liked, but there was one that was at least a little less awful and hadn't he endured enough pain already?

The fact that he was even considering made something like shame curl in his chest. This was HYDRA, actual Nazis. They and Voldemort were kin, with their shared ideals and ruthless methods of upholding them. If his friends were here to see him, caving to the honeyed words of one the organization's most influential members, there would be disappointment. Hermione would weep. Ron would rage. And Steve would be so ashamed.

But that was the thing, the one unfortunate truth that had led him to this one awful moment. They weren't here.
Chapter 18

Harry thought he knew where to go from there. It was a terrible choice, the one he'd been given, but not a very difficult one when it came down to it. The Dursley's hadn't done shit for raising him but his friends, his mentors, his family had instilled a set of morals not so easily broken by backstabbing wizards and a literal Nazi. He would choose what was right over what was easy. Always. And he was prepared for the consequences that would come after.

But then the wizards came.

It was before his first meal, the night guard was only just switching out with their relief when an entire contingent of the magic users stepped through the fireplace. Aurors and unspeakables and the team of representatives Strucker had been working so closely with marched through the halls, men on a mission. They came to Harry's cell and when the guards blocked their entrance, Robards was there with an unforgivable for each and a command to follow.

"Open the cell, then make sure we are not interrupted."

With serene expressions they did as ordered, a swipe of the keycard unlocked the cell then they took up posts along the corridor, guns poised and backs to the wizards.

When they entered, Harry was still seated, legs folded to his chest, arms rested on his knees, and chin settled atop it all. It was like before, in the barn, when they'd come to take him back, take him here, only this time he wasn't afraid.

"You're here to kill me."

Diggory looked grim, Robards mean, and the rest uneasy.

"We aren't-"

Harry cut off Cedric's father before his words could fully form. "That wasn't a question. You've taken everything you could from me, you've used me and bled me dry and now you've come to dispose of me. Who'll be the one to do it?"

"I will."

Despite himself, Harry smiled. "You, Auror Robards? I guess I can't say I'm surprised. You've treated this all so personally."

The greying Auror grimaced. "None of us are getting any satisfaction from this. Not even me," he said. "Even with all the destruction you've caused, you're still only a boy."

"And you did much to stop the dark lord," a lovely witch with an accent as thick as Fleur's stepped up to Robards' side. "We haven't forgotten that."

"So as thanks you'll offer me a quick death."

"A dignified one." Robards countered. "You think we've bled you dry? These muggles won't be done with you until you've given every bit of blood, flesh, and bone to their cause. You've nearly destroyed our world with your carelessness, but without the magic you've given we wouldn't have a chance to rebuild. We're thanking you by giving you a painless way out."
Harry's smile grew wider and wider and he laughed. It felt ugly and cruel and the wizards flinched away from him. "You haven't done anything," his voice was tinged with a hysterical sort of frustration, because they never learned. "There's no rebuilding. I've told you before you're done. Your world, your people are finished, and everything you do from here on is only making it worse."

He wanted to carry on, to rage and scream at these men who were fools, because at one point he had wanted them to succeed, he would have given his life willingly to stop the destruction of his world. But in taking the choice from him they'd damned themselves, he couldn't help them. More than that, he didn't want to.

But before he could spit his rage at the wizards, Strucker arrived, with twice the guards and an anger as ugly as Harry's twisting his face. The rattle of gunfire started up in the halls as the imperiused muggles followed their orders. The aurors at the back raised shields for when their guard inevitably fell, they wouldn't hold for long, but it would buy Robards the time he needed.

He drew his wand, a frown cut deep into his face but his hand didn't shake.

"How will you do it?" Harry stared the Auror dead in his pale eyes. Tension wound knots in his stomach but he still couldn't find the fear that should be there when facing the end of a wand. Death had said he couldn't die, and he didn't doubt him, but if he proved to be wrong... well, that wouldn't be so awful. "An AK? What if it doesn't work?"

Robards swallowed thickly, and Harry found his first sign of uncertainty. "Will you stand?"

"Of course." Behind them, the last of the wizards' defending guards fell and Strucker's men moved forward, weapons now aimed at the shields barring them entrance. Harry rose and tucked his hands neatly behind his back.

Diggory cleared his throat, he looked heavy with guilt, but not doubt. "Would you... would you like to say anything?"

He didn't really, he was never one for dramatic gestures. But then he looked over their shoulders once more, at the muggle men working furiously to break through the shield and Strucker, who stood amidst them all, so still but furious in a way Harry had never seen. This was not something he would forgive. "I hope," he said softly, "for your sake, that this works."

There was a sound like lightning impacting the ground and the shield crumbled, but it was already too late, Strucker rushed into the room and a familiar green light washed over Harry.

"What have you done?"

None of the wizards paid the furious muggle a glance, they were been consumed by the sight of Potter and how still he was. They'd spoken of this in depth, discussed and debated if it truly was the best course, but the fact that they planned to kill the Boy-Who-Lived didn't seem like a reality until it was actually done.

Months of captivity in this underground facility had left him all pale skin and bird bones, his body had barely made a sound when it hit the ground.

"This was a matter we agreed merited further discussion."

Robards was the first to recover, he hadn't worked closely with Strucker but he did not like his tone. "It was. And it was decided that putting the boy down was our safest option."
"Do you realize what you have wasted? He could have been of so much more use."

"Yes," Moreau agreed, never one to be outdone. "But you have your mages, and they will be just as useful."

"Not nearly." Strucker ran a hand over his head, this was the least composed they'd ever seen him. "We are meant to be allies. Equals. That requires a certain degree of trust between us, but you've broken that trust and spat in my face while you did it."

Moreau was unfazed. "Trust can be earned again. This needed to be done and you were not ready to see that."

"Leave. Do not return until you are called."

They could have argued, for the principal of it really, this muggle had no right ordering them about. But their work was done, and they would all benefit from some space, so they did. Robards flicked his wand, levitating Potter's body for transport.

"Leave him." Strucker demanded. "There are tests we need to run, then he will be disposed of."

Diggory shook his head, ready to protest. "That's not-"

"Earn my trust." The words were more snarl than human inflection. "Leave him."

Moreau made the choice for them, they had no use for the body, perhaps conceding to this simple demand would appease the muggle somewhat. "We'll await your call, Baron Strucker."

The body was lowered on his cot and the wizards left, escorted by a good dozen of his guards, just to make sure they didn't get any further ideas.

"This is unfortunate," List said, kneeling at the boy's side to check his vitals and confirm that, yes, he truly was dead. "We had such plans for him."

"We should have killed them once we had our last mage. It was arrogant of me to keep them around any longer." Strucker heaved an enormous sigh. "There's nothing to be done for it though, three forty-eight will have to be enough."

"What do you want done with the body?"

"Samples." Strucker hadn't argued for the boy's body because he had any real plans for it, it was the principal of the matter. "Whatever you can think to collect. And perhaps a final EEG, to see if all traces of his magic have gone upon death."

"And after?"

"We begin our work." Strucker turned, left the room without another look lest his fury rear its head in a way he might regret later. "They've lost their lead but the mages will need to be strong nonetheless, our time with the wizards is through and the split will be messy."

If he was being honest, part of Harry didn't expect Robards to cast the curse. It was murder, simple as that, and these notoriously light wizards had balked at such an act even when they were at war facing Death Eaters happy to eviscerate them without a thought. So when his wand lit that telltale green, and his lips formed the worst of the Unforgivables, Harry was mildly impressed. Not all wizards were the simpering cowards Fudge had been, and it was nice at times to be reminded of
A room of white didn't wait for him after. And a reaper didn't come to collect his soul. The curse hit, there was a moment of disorientation, then he was outside, with dirt between his bare toes, fresh air filling his lungs, and a sea of trees reaching higher than he could see. And in the shadow of two of the leviathans, stood Death.

"What a mess you've made, quark."

Harry didn't move from where he stood, not in a rush to do anything in case it broke the beautiful illusion and he found himself once again in that awful cell, but he at least turned so he faced the entity fully, and he offered him a smile.

"I hadn't ever thought I'd be happy to see you," he said. "Where were you? I called."

"Beyond your reach."

"You couldn't hear me? Was it because of the…." Harry touched his throat and found it free of the collar he'd grown used to. "They bound my magic, but how? They're muggles, mortals, and I'm supposed to be your equal."

"You should be," Death agreed. "But you weren't when they caught you. You spent so long suppressing my Heart, fearing it, that you denied the very thing that made you my equal. Without it, you're just another mortal. Easily bound, easily contained."

"But I wasn't." Harry thought grimly to the awful procedures he'd endured with Howard to force the magic of the Hallows to manifest. "I accepted them."

"Not in their entirety. You wanted their power so that you could separate them again. You didn't want to be my equal, you still don't."

He had nothing to say in response to that because it was true. "So will you reap my soul then? Take the Heart back?"

"I won't. I can't."

"But you said…"

"You aren't yet. But my Heart has already taken root within your magic, and no matter how much you tried to ignore it, tried to let the link between you and it atrophy, you would have eventually succumbed to its power."

"And now that I've lost all access to my magic?"

Death looked grudgingly impressed. "Whatever those mortals have done to dampen your magic has equally affected my Heart. It is from your magic that it draws its strength, without it it's progress is slowed significantly. But it is still an object of immeasurable power, it adapts and it grows stronger every day."

Harry perked up at that. "It would grow strong enough to negate the collar that's stopping me from accessing my magic?"

"It's the heart of the universe, even if just a fragment of it. No mortal is strong enough to bind it forever. Your world learned that well enough. As you are now, bound and weakened, it will be a few decades or so before you've reached full power."
Just like that, all the wind left his sails. "A few decades?" Of course that seemed like no time at all to an entity as ancient as death, but Harry hadn't even been alive a few decades. To have to wait that long in Strucker's hands, with all the horrible things the man had planned...it was unthinkable. He could certainly do it if there were no other option, he was immortal as far as he could tell, but what state would the world be in when he finally escaped? Would it even be one he wanted to continue to live within?

Death shrugged, entirely unperturbed. "My Heart was used up by the Mad Titan, destroyed until only a sliver of it remained, then it was fragmented into three even tinier pieces and separated for centuries, and now it is bound to a mortal who has no desire to use it to its potential and who has had nearly all access to his own innate power suppressed. It's only understandable it might be a bit slow in allowing you the full use of its power."

"And if I weren't?" Harry asked just a touch desperately.

"Weren't...what?"

"Bound? Weakened? How long would it be then?"

Death looked intrigued. "Not long at all. A few years. If even that. You have a way free from your restraints?"

Not free, but Strucker wanted him to lead his army. To fight for him and HYRDA. Harry had intended to refuse, to do everything in his power to keep the man from being able to even force him into fighting for him. But if he were to fight for him, Strucker would have to allow him some access to his magic. If he could suffer under his rule for a few years he could be free.

"It would not be so easy," Death said when he relayed the idea to him. "It would work, yes. With access to your magic my Heart would grow stronger much quicker, but you would not come out untouched."

"I have seen into that man's soul and he is wicked. He will unmake you, strip away all you believe in, all that you are until you are no longer the man who stands before me now. Is that something you're willing to sacrifice for your freedom?"

Harry wasn't entirely sure it was. He'd given up so much already, too much, and now he was expected to give up more? And for what? An eternity of loneliness? Of watching what few friends were still alive wither and die, watch his world crumble under the curse he unleashed and be chained to a deity who seemed indifferent to his existence most of their time together? It wasn't worth it.

"Kill me." He looked at Death, sure in his decision. "Take your Heart and reap my soul. You said the only way it might work was if we were both in agreement and you said there would never be a time you didn't want to take my soul. So do it."

"No."

Harry was stunned into total silence. Had he heard the being right? Had Death just said he wouldn't reap him or had he just heard wrong?

"We are no longer in agreement. I don't want your soul."

No, that was exactly what he had said.

"Are you...you're joking?"
"Between you and I, this is the most fun I've had in eons."

"This is a game to you." Harry was quickly getting over his shock and moving on to fully fledged anger. "I'm suffering miserably and all you can think of is how much fun you're having?"

"One day, when you're as old as I am, you'll look for amusement in whatever you can and you won't feel guilty about it."

Harry crossed the space between them and reached for Death, he was too deep in his anger at that moment to realize he'd never made such a move before, they'd shared contact before, but Harry had never been the one to initiate it, and never out of anger.

"Reap me."

Death smiled, or as close of an approximation of a smile the being was capable, full of sharp teeth and endless mirth. "No."

The landscape around them shifted, no, it rotted. Harry felt his anger burn bright and cold and the dirt beneath him churned with decay, the trees withered and curled into themselves, turning soft and white with rot, all the while Harry's gaze kept locked with Death's infinite black.

"Reap me."

"Look at you, quark. So powerful, so much potential." Something in his expression softened and Harry felt suddenly wrongfooted. "I won't, not because it amuses me but because I do not waste."

Harry's breath caught in his throat, maybe it was intentional, or maybe Death had no idea what he'd done, but his words were a direct repetition of Strucker's from just the night before and he did not like it.

"But more than that, it won't work. Once I said that it might, but the Heart is fond of you. Even now, weak as you are, you create such beautiful destruction, it won't be rid of you so easy. There will be no reaping because my Heart would never allow it."

"So I have no choice then. I'll suffer and there's nothing you'll do about it."

Harry almost flinched when Death folded a hand around the one Harry still had locked around his wrist. "No. You'll endure." The entity had never sounds so kind as he did now. "It feels like cruelty in this moment, but you will be all the better for my refusal. You are not meant to die, quark. You don't see it yet, you don't want to, but you were meant for things much greater.

"But first you will suffer, you'll be unmade, stripped down and cobbled back together into something not quite you. But you will be all the stronger for it."

"Please." Harry's anger had fled, leaving him desperately tired. "I just want to rest, I just want to see my friends, I just want to be happy again."

"One day. You will, I swear it and so much more, but first you must face these trial and you will overcome them."

Harry wanted to argue, to plead some more to just try, try and take the Heart, he would endure the pain if there was just a chance. But Death was set, and part of him knew he was only speaking the truth, begging for what he would never have would only lessen him in Death's eyes and prolong what was already sure to come. So he bowed his head, forced back his tears of frustration, and nodded.
"I will."

"You will what?"

"Overcome."

A cold hand touched his cheek. "Yes you will. Now quark," the hand slid higher until it rested above his eyes still screwed shit. "Let's begin."

Harry woke on a table, cold and metal, with the familiar bright white lights of the lab hanging above him and two aides and Strucker's second command hovering around him. He sucked a greedy breath into lungs that had been deprived off oxygen too long and the three around him fell away, going as pale as the entity he had just left behind.

Harry groped for his left arm where a dull but centralized pain was throbbing at the crook of his elbow, and found a syringe hanging unattended from a vein. They'd been collecting blood samples, and others from the look of the vials lined neatly on a tray beside him, before he'd woken from death and scared them halfway to it.

"Alert the Baron." Harry's head felt stuffed full with wool but he was coherent enough to hear List's strangled words and turned his head just in time to watch as one of the aides ran from the room and away from him.

A light shined into one eye, then another, then a finger pressed into the juncture of his throat, searching for the pulse Harry could feel rabbiting beneath the tight press of his collar.

"You were dead."

He blinked up at List, still trying to see around the spots dancing across his vision and offered him only a half formed smile in response. What was he supposed to say? And then Strucker was arriving, and all need to respond was forgotten.

"Doctor List?"

"He was dead. No neural activity, no pulse, no oxygen intake, the first of rigor was setting in." Well that explained why he felt so stiff. "He was dead. But he's not anymore."

"Could we have been mistaken? There are curses that can mimic death…"

"We saw the light, it was green, and he said the words; Avada Kedavra. We weren't mistaken."

Strucker moved closer until he stood directly over Harry, he was so close Harry had no choice but to make eye contact. "You've come back to us."

It took a moment for his vocal chords to cooperate, an after effect of the rigor List had mentioned, and his voice still croaked even when they did. "The Killing Curse never worked on me. It was my legacy, if you remember."

"So I've been told." A fascination Harry did not like lit Strucker's face. "Why is that, I wonder."

Harry tried to shrug, an awkward feat considering he was still prone. "A mother's love, I suppose."

"Doctor List, what do you see?" Strucker spoke to the man lingering a few steps behind him but didn't break eye contact with Harry.
"Nothing we haven't seen before. He's running cooler than normal, but everything is working as it should."

"Then this is a very fortunate turn of events." Strucker put a hand at the nape of Harry's neck and another at the small of his back and helped him to sit upright. "And how are we feeling, Harry?"

It was a misleading question. Strucker couldn't care less that Harry's bones weighed like cinderblocks, or that his heartbeat couldn't quite find its usual rhythm. Harry knew exactly what he wanted to hear, and to eventually get what he wanted, he would have to give the Baron this.

"It was as if it were easy for him." The aching rasp of his throat lent a pitifulness to Harry's performance he might not have been able to achieve on his own. "I didn't have a wand, I didn't try to fight him, but he killed me anyway. And he didn't hesitate when he did it.

"I saved them. My family gave their lives for them. And in thanks they've subjected me to this torture and then they killed me when I wasn't any use anymore."

"They're not your friends." Strucker's spoke so softly, so soothingly, the hand still at his neck was bracing, almost comforting. "They're not your people. We can be."

Harry wanted to curl in on himself, to shake himself free of Strucker's touch and return to that peaceful place after death, because he had done it, Strucker believed him and what came now would be terrible. But he had promised Death, and that was not one to be so easily broken, so he looked Strucker dead in his eyes and he said. "I want to kill them. Let me kill them."

And when the man smiled, like Death, Harry saw his wicked soul. "You will."

"He's keeping secrets. I don't trust him."

Strucker and List stood side by side, watching as Potter was prepared to be moved from the lab. Keeping him exposed in the open room with its glass walls wasn't a risk they were comfortable with. Strucker had banished the wizards with orders not to return until he called for them, but they were a stubborn group and on the chance they decided to make an ill advised appearance Potter could not be seen.

"You would be a fool if you did," Strucker said, addressing the concerns his second had voiced "and I know already you are no fool, Doctor List. He shouldn't be trusted. He's submitted only because he has no other option, but the moment he is presented another…"

"He'll betray us."

"He will."

"So we'll do away with that last bit of defiance?" List looked to him for approval. "The conditioning of the mages worked remarkably well, we could have him sit the same lessons as soon as tomorrow evening."

Strucker hummed in disagreement. "Too mild. He'll require a much firmer hand."

"Fenhoff's methods?"

"I was thinking more along the lines of Zola." Strucker felt himself smile at the understanding that dawned upon List's face.
"If we're all he's ever known, he won't want to fight us," the scientist whispered. "A brilliant idea. I should contact our brothers?"

"At once." The last restraint tightened around Potter's ankle and finally the procession from the lab began to move. Strucker stayed put, simply tracking Potter's move and the grim, determined set of his jaw. He was glad the boy was not yet quite broken, he would need that fire to take on the full force of his world. "And tell Pierce…this one will be a challenge."

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A/N: Finally, finally we're getting somewhere! I know these past few chapters have been angst, exposition, and more angst, and don't get me wrong there's still going to be more angst, but we're finally going to see something come out of it. And trust me, I've been just as eager to get to this point as you all.

In other news, Endgame is here sooooo I might actually die and we'll never see anything more of this story. It was nice knowing you all.
HYDRA had created something beautiful in the asset. A man of strength, ruthlessness, unflagging obedience with none of the bull headed, inconvenient, free will most of their other agents were plagued with. The fist of HYDRA, their own personal boogeyman was perhaps the greatest thing they had ever created.

But he was still flawed.

None of the current heads had had any hand shaping him into the weapon he was, most hadn't even existed then. And while Zola was an innovator, nothing short of a genius, that had been seventy odd years ago, they had evolved since then. The asset had suffered through innumerable rounds of upgrades and reconditioning, but the groundwork, the years of conditioning Zola had put into creating him, was not so easily changed and so parts of him remained imperfect.

They wanted a blank slate. An asset as formidable as the soldier but with none of the preexisting conditioning. They'd hoped they'd might find that in their wolfpack, the seven created from Stark's serum, but they were as unstable as they were fearsome and keeping them on ice until they could figure out the right balance was their only course of action. But now they had Potter.

Pierce had been delighted to receive the call. HYDRA heads didn't make it a point to convene outside of their biannual meeting very often, but Pierce would never pass up an opportunity to make his mark on a new asset, and Strucker would never pass up the chance to let him. He wasn't so prideful as to deny that Pierce was the best of them when it came to stripping a man down to a perfect, obedient weapon.

They would clash heads, it was inevitable when putting two men of their status in the same room, but Strucker would endure that and worse to make sure Potter's conditioning was done right.

The man arrived with two others in tow, "associates" he called them, "experts in their fields" (though what those fields were he wasn't entirely sure) and immediately requested to speak with Potter. They'd reviewed the footage sent over, looked over his files, but they couldn't get a good gauge of his character until they spoke to him personally.

He allowed it, of course, and watched as they questioned the boy on tops Strucker himself had already gone over with him once. He was cooperative; he answered every question promptly and (as far as they could tell) truthfully, and insisted that all he wanted was to kill those who had wronged him.

And yet when Pierce and his cohorts stepped out, they didn't look convinced.

"There's more to what he's saying."

Strucker smiled, it was funny the man thought they didn't already know that. "Why do you think we called?" he said. "You're here to rid him of that last bit of defiance. Can it be done?"
"Of course." Pierce acted surprised he even had to ask. "He's already done the hardest work for us. He wants to see those who wronged him suffer, those words I believe, and in this desire of his he's given us a common cause, a common enemy. We can build the rest around that."

"He has a stubborn will, that boy," one of two of Pierce's companions said, a woman with perhaps the sharpest cheekbones and palest eyes Strucker had ever seen. "But he's not our most challenging. Not nearly."

"You've had experience in this sort of work?" There was a bit of a bite to his tone, but Strucker didn't no this woman, didn't trust her despite being vouched for by Pierce (that was probably all the more reason why he didn't trust her).

"Extensive experience," Pierce assured. "Dr.'s Iravani," he gestured to the woman with her sharp features and she gave an acknowledging dip of her head, "and Gordon," then to the man at her side who barely cleared Strucker's chin but stood twice as wide, he inclined his own head in a bored, arrogant sort of motion, "have been with me nearly a decade. Thanks to their methods, our soldier remains operational and fully compliant rather than on ice with his counterparts."

"We consider ourselves experts in mindwork," Iravani said with a smile sharper than her cheekbones. "We haven't yet met a man immune to our methods."

Intrigue crept forward to stifle Strucker's irritation. "Explain them. Your methods."

"There is no cookie cutter regiment," Gordon explained in a voice deeper than his stature belied, "For each man different steps need to be taken."

"And for him? For Potter?"

"We begin small," Iravani said, "we begin simple. I said he has a stubborn will, but not an unbreakable one; to break it, break him, requires some patience."

There had always been a carefully kept routine to Harry's days with Strucker; two meals a day, at least one lab visit in between, and lights down at what he guessed was probably around nine. It was rare these constants changed, and when they did, it was never for anything good.

When a man in a nicely pressed suit, perfectly parted hair, and a smile like a shark's came to visit him in his cell, Harry knew his routine was about to see the worst kind of interruption.

The man looked at Harry like he was a fascinating puzzle or a meal or both and Harry hated him on sight. But the two that accompanied him, a man who looked like Fudge but carried himself like a Malfoy, and a woman with eyes as dead as an inferius', they scared him. Because while the man in his shiny shoes spoke to him, questioned him on matters that were none of his concern but that Harry answered anyway in his new spirit of "cooperation", they sat and they watched and they barely even breathed. They were planning something, those two, and he knew whatever it was he wouldn't like it, not one bit.

The day after, he wasn't taken to the lab at the usual time and that unnerved him more than he could say. He'd just come back from the dead on their table, and they were just leaving him to his own company? He'd expected tests and trials and interrogations, not quiet.

He spent the day wound tight with anxiety; after the ordeal of being outright murdered and coming back under HYDRA's watch, then undergoing some creepy interview with the man who'd never bothered to introduce himself and his two eerie bookends, he needed something, anything to happen.
So when, only a few hours after his second meal, they chained him up and hauled him from his room, he was almost relieved. Because at least now he knew what was coming.

They didn't go to the lab like he'd half expected, and not down to Sub-2 as his second guess would have been. No, they went up and Harry's gut clenched. The last time he'd been here, so close to the surface was during his horribly fated escape attempt, and now they were taking him willingly? Fresh air and freedom were still a good six levels up but this was the closest he'd ever been brought.

He hadn't know where he was going the last time he'd been on this level, all he remembered was a mad dash through unmarked, doorless halls. But his guards most certainly did. They marched him confidently down the twisting maze until they came to an ominous corridor with just one door at its very end.

They swung open the steel monstrosity and unceremoniously pushed Harry into the room beyond. He hadn't know where he was going the last time he'd been on this level, all he remembered was a mad dash through unmarked, doorless halls. But his guards most certainly did. They marched him confidently down the twisting maze until they came to an ominous corridor with just one door at its very end.

They swung open the steel monstrosity and unceremoniously pushed Harry into the room beyond. They managed only one good look around the room, it was barely twice his height and built in a perfect, uninterrupted circle. The single wall and the floor beneath were lined with a thick, padded material, softer than the concrete he was used to but still firm enough not to be considered too comfortable. At the very center of the room was a hole, barely larger than his fist and directly above it, installed in the roof too high for him to even attempt to reach, was a spigot of some kind.

Then the door swung shut and he was left groping in total darkness.

He dropped carefully onto all fours, then back into a precarious sitting position where he forced himself to calm down, to drain the tension from his shoulders and do his best to just breathe.

This was it. This was the start of his promise to Death, he just knew it. There was no reason for interrupting his carefully kept schedule, dragging him from his room with no reason or explanation, and dumping him in this dark, quiet hell. He was about to be broken, stripped down, and torn apart. But it would be worth it, it would be for something because he'd been promised his life back, he'd been promised a life even better and it would be worth it.

I will overcome, he'd told Death, and he would. He would. Because he wanted to be done with all of this, to be done with the pain and the misery and the constant aching fear, but the only way from it, the only way out, was through it.

The resolve didn't stop him from shaking, from gulping down the sour taste of panic. But maybe it helped a little.

They gathered, just the four of them, in small room Pierce had requested be set up just for them. It was only a few doors down from where Potter was being kept and had been set up with audio and visual feed streaming live feed from the dark room. They couldn't see much, even with the night sensors they'd put on the camera but they could hear Potter and his frantic attempts to keep himself calm.

"Isolation has a fascinating effect on the human mind and body," Iravani said, eyes fixed on the shadowy image of Potter sitting with his back against the curved wall. "In small doses, like almost anything else, it's beneficial. But too much of anything and the toll it takes both physically and mentally can be profound. The isolated will find themselves dealing with a weakened immune system, rising blood pressure, degradation of verbal and mental skills, hallucinations."

Though he would never admit it, Strucker hung raptly from every word of Iravani's confident
explanation. Her controlled tenor allowed for nothing less.

"The added element of interminable darkness will disrupt his circadian rhythm, impair his ability to discern time and only destabilize him further."

"It's taken some only a few hours to begin showing increased paranoia, anxiety, and auditory and visual hallucinations," Pierce said, his experience on matters such as this showed itself through the easy confidence of his tone.

"And we'll be keeping him in for longer, I presume?" Strucker asked.

Iravani and Gordon shared a quick look. "Significantly longer."

"Thirty hours is the standard breaking point. We'll be keeping him in there for thirty days."

It took less than half an hour before Harry was completely disoriented. The room had been built in a circle on purpose, to mess with him, because no matter how far and how long he walked he could never find where he'd begun and where he ended. And it didn't help that the inside of the door was padded with the same material as the floor and walls, and it had been done so well he couldn't even find the seam where hinge met wall to give him some kind of marker.

In the darkness, he couldn't see anything, not even his own hands held centimeters from his face. It made navigating the room, no matter how small it was, a precarious endeavor. So he stopped moving, found the closest wall he could slump against and posted up there until someone came for him.

No one did.

Hours, days, weeks, he had no way of counting, passed and he saw no one. Food, the same mush he'd always eaten served in a soft-shelled canteen, came only when he slept. He tried to stay away awake, to see who controlled his food, to see another human being, but as long as he was conscious they didn't come. They waited until he passed out from hunger or complete exhaustion before stepping in.

Water came from the spout he'd first noticed attached to the roof, and waste went into the hole below. And that was all. No visits from Strucker, no sessions with the lab techs, or meetings with men with mouths like sharks. Just him and the dark and the silence.

He slept and woke and those became his new days. He couldn't see the sunset or the moonrise, couldn't even see the overhead fluorescents dim as they'd had in the cell he was beginning to miss so much. So he counted his sleep cycles; every time he closed his eyes to dark and opened them to the same dark, he counted another day gone.

Three cycles passed before he began to see things. It started with luminescent arcs of light so much like spell fire that did nothing to light his surroundings but still left scorching trails behind his eyelids.

Eleven passed and he swore he could hear the eerie patter of feet skittering in the dark around him.

After twenty one he could feel a heavy, malignant presence hanging over him, watching him, he wasn't alone in the dark anymore.

And on the fifty-sixth someone began to laugh. It wasn't happy, not the mirthful sound of a joke well told, but the mad cackle of cracking sanity. It rose and it swelled and it crescendoed until it
was an awful, shredding scream that was all he could hear. It drowned out the sounds of his own ragged breathing and quiet sobs.

"My name is Harry James Potter," he gasped from neglected vocal chords. The wavering quality of his words weren't even audible over the cacophony, but he spoke anyway because he needed something to ground himself, something to focus on outside of the horrible, unceasing noise.

"I was born July 31st, 1990."

Someone was watching him, a face in the shadows visible only when those lights, the lights that burned his eyes, cracked and burst overhead just like Fred and George's Catherine wheels.

"My parents were Lily and James."

He didn't recognize the face. It wasn't one belonging to any of his friends or any of his enemies (although he'd made so many the past few years he couldn't say for sure that was true). But it was there to do him harm, he knew it was.

"They died...protecting me, October 31st, 1991."

The longer he looked, the more faces he saw. The first true thing visible in this horrible, dark hell.

"I lived with Petunia, Vernon, and Dudley Dursley until my eleventh birthday..."

They were silent, none of them were the source of the screaming. The lurked just barely visible in the shadow. Watching. Judging.

"...when Hagrid, my friend Hagrid, found me, told me I was a wizard, and took me away."

He felt close to gouging at his ears. Banging his head against the wall. Anything for even a moment's peace. He hadn't thought he'd miss that awful, deafening silence until he discovered there was something much worse.

All it took was that half second and he'd lost his train of thought, he couldn't even remember what he'd been saying or where he was going with it. So he took a deep, choking breath and he started again, "My name is Harry Potter. I was born July 31st, 1990..."

"Thirty days? It won't be too much?"

"It will be just enough." Gordon said with conviction.

"Thirty days of total isolation and he'll have no will to fight. Not an ounce of defiance left in him," Iravani explained. "All that will be left is need. Need for light, for company, for touch."

"And then what?"

"Then," Pierce stepped in, something anticipatory in his eyes, "we give it to him."

An eternity passed. Infinite sleep cycles. Too many to count, too many to track. The screaming stopped, eventually, and he was glad for the silence for only a while before the weight of it became so immense he was sure he would sink right through the floor underneath it.

On those days he filled the silence with the sound of his own voice; listing every spell he knew,
recounting the passages of Quidditch Throughout the Ages he'd read through enough times to have committed to memory, shouted out every potions ingredient Snape had ever made him memorize. And sometimes he screamed. Sometimes he filled his lungs until they were fit to burst and he screamed and he screamed and he screamed, until he was sure his lips were blue from lack of oxygen.

Sometimes someone shouted back. Someone else here with him, lost in the darkness he couldn't see past. He'd never met them, never even seen them, but he could hear them sometimes, shuffling along, muttering words he couldn't always make out. He'd tried reaching out, speaking to the stranger in the dark, but he never got an answer. He didn't stop trying though, it had been years since he'd seen another person, had someone to talk to, he would never give up on his companion in the dark.

HYDRA didn't like that though, if he talked too long to his companion, they'd punish him. Stretch the hole in the center of the floor until it was so wide he had to stand pressed against the wall tiptoed and straining on the barely half foot of space left around the edge of his room. He didn't know what would happen if he fell in, but the air was bitterly cold inside and at the bottom he could hear a sound like bells but indescribably sinister.

He'd stay balanced there for days, perched desperately on the tips of his toes until his legs ached and shook. They always drew it back in just before he fell over, as if they could sense his limits, were testing them, but one day they might push too far and move too slow and in he'd go.

"Goosegrass, hemlock, bat wing, bezoar."

Maybe one day he'd fall in on purpose. How evil could bells really be?

"Boomslang, eel eye, pond slime, rue."

It would serve them right. He wouldn't die of course, no matter how deep the hole was or what was actually down there. But he was sure it would be quite the job fishing him out, and anything that inconvenienced HYDRA was a win in his books.

"Rose thorn, shrike spine, gillyweed, nettle."

He spent a serious moment considering the idea. Maybe a moment too long because then there was an awful shriek worse than anything his ears had ever been subjected to and then his eyes were burning. He curled in on himself, head tucked between his legs and arms folded over his face to block the white fire. But something wouldn't let him stay tucked protectively for long, he realized with a surge of elated confusion that someone else was in the room with him, several someones.

They were pulling him out and into the noise and the light and it hurt but he didn't make them stop because the dark was gone and he could see, he could hear, and he wasn't alone anymore.

They were speaking, an order of some sort, but the sudden shift from total silence to the cacophony of voices, footsteps, harsh breaths and the hundred other ambient sounds around them had him too disoriented to focus. Someone grabbed the back of his shirt and began dragging him Godric knew where. He tried to get his feet under him but they were moving too quick for his atrophied muscles to keep up with and before he could even muster the strength to force himself, they were in another room and he was dumped in a chair too straight backed and unyielding to ever be considered comfortable.

Someone was speaking, near as loud as the screams had been, numbers repeated over and over and over. He tried to make sense of them, focus long enough to understand what was supposed to be
But then it didn't matter, because then someone was touching him, a hand to his face, running through his hair and he pressed into it eagerly, desperately. Because the touch, the first he'd had since being subjected to that dark hell, was so comforting, more grounding than it had any right to be.

The touch alone brought words to his lips, the first to form since being dragged into this awful, painful light. "What's happening?" his lips quivered around the hoarse plea. "Why am I here?"

Something warm met his cheek, not a touch but an exhale, someone was close enough that their breaths mingled, their cheeks touched, and the voice that spoke into his ear was clear enough to cut through the racket of the room and the fuzz around his own brain.

"You're here to feel again."

The blow came from nowhere; right in the center of his nose where delicate bone protruded. He was choking on blood in an instant, too busy reeling from the shock of the sudden violence to even feel the pain right away.

"You're here for penance."

The voice chanting over the loudspeaker cranked its volume impossibly louder, the numbers chanted a disconcerting but persistent rhythm. And now the men, with their dark clothes and masked faces barely visible through Harry's streaming eyes, were chanting along with it.


Harry gasped uselessly which only had him choking even worse on the blood inflating his lungs.

"Three hundred to hunger. Six hundred to this conflict between our worlds. And the rest, the seventeen hundred others, to the disease you caused."

One of the masked men wielded a baton, thin and wicked fast that struck any and everywhere with strikes that stung like bee stings and left bruises lingering deep beneath his skin.

"Less fell to your dark lord in his first year of terror."

Another controlled the leathers holding him to the chair, pulling them tighter and tighter until his fingers began to go numb.

"Seventeen years spent defying a mad wizard only to become the one to destroy your world."

In the dark he'd craved interaction, human interaction, and contact more than he'd ever wanted anything in his entire existence. And now here it was and he wanted nothing more than the dark he'd been lost in.

Strucker was neither convinced nor impressed. "Senseless violence has never been my preferred method."

Iravani almost looked offended. "Nothing we do is without sense. Every move, ever blow, every
They carried on for hours, by the end of it he was one quivering mass of contusions.

He'd checked out sometime after the third hour. Even with all the horrors he'd endured in the war, constant pain edging on torture, hadn't been something he'd experienced at length. So after a while he just shut down and drifted off somewhere a lot less unpleasant.

He came back to himself only when his chair was tipped backward and his entire world upended. The men laughed as he stared immobile up at the ceiling while his blood seeped into the concrete.

Somewhere near his head there was the familiar sound of heeled shoes pacing the floor, he had just a moment to think painfully of Peggy, before the perfectly arched shoes came to a stop just to his left and he was looking up and up and up into the face of the woman with the dead eyes.

She didn't say anything so neither did he, and they remained there for a long moment eyes locked and neither willing to back down. He could barely see from one swollen eye or through the blood trickling into the other, but he blinked through the fogginess brought on by too many blows to the head and held that stare.

She looked away first, to the masked man who'd led the beating and she said. "Take him back to the dark."

"It won't be easy or quick. This isn't something to be done in a handful of weeks, we've seen the kind of man he is and he won't break easy. But we have nothing but time"

"Through the numbers, the mantra, we remind him of every mistake he's made, every life he's cost and the destruction he's caused, all because he chose wrong. And while we do we assault him with the pain and the fear until he associates free will and thinking on his own with the violence he's been subjected to. We can strip away his defiance, but only he can willingly hand over his free will."

It wasn't silent in the dark room anymore. The voice with the numbers spoke to him the moment the door locked shut, and Harry knew it was real, knew it wasn't in his head like the screaming and the faces and the stranger in the dark had always been. They were doing this to torture him, to never let him forget all the things he'd done wrong.

*Three thousand six hundred.*

The wizarding world was small, maybe a few hundred thousand across the world and he'd caused the death of nearly three percent of them. Sure, statistically that didn't seem like too much, but for someone who wanted to have caused the death of *no percent of them*, it was staggering.

*Three hundred to hunger.*
How horrible did they, actual magic users, have to be living to die of hunger? Off the top of his head he could come up with at least a dozen ways to conjure, summon, or transfigure his way into getting some kind of meal. What state did they and their world have to be in for his people to literally starve to death?

*Six hundred to the conflict.*

When he'd left there had been rumblings among the muggle world regarding their existence. But they were past that now, if there was enough conflict for near a thousand of them to have been killed in the fight they were *far* past that.

*Seventeen hundred to the disease. The disease he had caused.*

Ginny had died from the disease. Mrs. Weasley had died. Because of him.

For days he laid right where he was, gasping around the constant throb of his injuries and choking on his own guilt. He laid there until the door opened and he was dragged back out into the light. And it started all over again.

"So, yes, there will be violence, there will be *torture*, it's gruesome and perhaps a little distasteful, but it is never without sense. Our results have more than proven that."

Gordon grinned, so proud, so pleased with himself. "We haven't yet found a man we couldn't break."

But Strucker's doubts were only fueled. "He'll be of no use to me then. I want a soldier not a broken boy."

Iravani laughed in a way that was not at all kind. "And you will. The breaking is very much a part of the plan. It's just like that one saying, surely you've heard of it? About the omelette and the eggs?"

Days didn't exist anymore. He lived and breathed and existed off the cycle of the room and the chair. The chair was constant pain, grinding on bones long since bruised and broken, but it was the *days* *weeks* *months* in the room that he dreaded the most. In the chair he knew what to expect, could prepare himself for the pain he knew was coming, but the room was erratic in the nightmares and oddities and outright horrors it threw at him.

A part of Harry knew it wasn't real, it was the darkness and solitude messing with his mind and what it perceived. But the rest of him couldn't care less. It *felt* real, and in the end, honestly that was all that mattered.

"And after the breaking comes the real work. The hard work."

"To break his bones and crush his spirit takes no work at all, your men seem to find fun in it even. But then he needs to be healed, reshaped, rebuilt *just* the right way. And that requires delicacy."

"Kindness." Iravani elaborated. "From you. We'll do our worst, leave him at his lowest, no end, no respite in sight, and just when he's at the *cusp* of being pushed beyond what we can fix, you're there. With a cool drink, a soft touch, the first he's felt in months."
There wasn't always pain, in the room with the light and the chair. Not the traditional sort at least. There was variety, to keep him from getting too comfortable, too used to the routine of the torture. Sometime there was a rope around his neck and body pulling counter against it. Sometimes there was a cloth over his face and a bucket of water. Other times there was a precise cut along his ribs, his calves, his palms and salt rubbed cruelly into the open wound.

But the worst was then they just left him, tied to the chair and alone.

At first it had been relief, any break from the pain was, but then his eyes flickered shut for just a second and there was a sound like a foghorn and a jolt of electricity along the bottoms of his feet jerking him back to painful awareness.

And that's how it went for seven days, any sign of him drifting from consciousness or trying to sneak in some kind of rest and there was the noise and the electricity until the creatures he knew existed only in his head, created from the dark of his cell crept into the overlit room, until voices without bodies whispered horrible, sinister things to him, until he'd rather the pain, the torture, over this long sleepless, existence.

He'd never begged before, not when they ran open flames across his palms, held his head under water until his lungs held more water than air, or even threatened to take a few fingers. But a week without sleep and he was begging the open air, the closed door, the black camera with its blinking red light to please just let him sleep.

And when he was ignored, as he knew he would be, he figured the pain couldn't be any worse than this so he shut his eyes, willed sleep to come and when the electricity tore through the soles of his feet he shut them tighter. They would either stop to avoid killing him or keep going until the pain knocked him out, so either way he won.

"That'll be enough of that."

The electricity cut off and he spluttered around a mouthful of blood, he'd bitten his tongue sometime in the indeterminable time of electrocution, and the entire world was tilted on a fuzzy axis. He blinked heavy, tried to force the room to stop spinning, a herculean feat that took so long he almost forgot the voice who'd ordered the electricity to stop in the first place. But then Strucker stepped the rest of the way into the room, just a few feet from where he sat, and stopped to observe.

Harry couldn't remember the last time he'd seen a reflection of himself, sometime long before HYDRA he was sure, however long ago that was, but he knew he had to look an awful mess. He felt about as solid as a ghost, and the bits of him not caked in blood was about as a pale, he was shivering as if coming down from a bad high and the bruises and lacerations on every available surface of his body probably weren't doing him any favors.

"Please." It hurt to speak after all the screaming he'd done, but this was the longest he'd gone in anyone's presence without there being some kind of pain, he needed to speak to someone who might listen, even if this was the man who'd put him here in the first place. "Baron Strucker, please, let me sleep. I'll go back to the room, to the dark for however long you want me to and they can rip out my toenails and cut me some more right after, but please please please just let me sleep."

"You've blood on your chin."

He had blood everywhere, why the bit on his chin- spilled over from his split lip and bitten tongue-was of any interest he couldn't even try to guess. Hadn't the man heard him?
"Strucker-

"Quiet now, we'll be all right."

The cloth they'd used to cover his face while they waterboarded him was still in a damp heap in the corner. Strucker collected it, folded it into a neat little triangle, and swiped it across his chin. It came away bright red.

He looked at the stained cloth, then up at the strange man *cleaning* him in a way that was almost gentle, and he burst into tears.

"Please, please, please, please, please. Take all the magic you want, make as many mages you can count. Just stop hurting me. Stop hitting me. And let me sleep. I'm begging. I'll do anything. I swear it, I swear." He shouldn't cry, it hurt his broken ribs and aching lungs, but more than that, it gave them power. Because before this, he hadn't cried, hadn't begged once, sure he'd screamed, he'd passed out, and thrown up, but he'd endured the torture while spitting every ounce of his hatred at his tormentors.

Crying, begging, made him look weak, made him look *broken*.

But maybe he was.

"Then we'll return him to his regularly scheduled torture, break him a little more, push him a little further, and then you come back, with more kindness, more comfort, and more sweet words to whisper in his ears.

"You'll be a source of comfort, the only light in a very dark existence, and when you begin reiterating what's been said all this time…"

"*The Hallows were united because of you.*

"*The wizarding world is falling because of you.*

"*So many have lost their lives because of you.*"

"…he'll listen."

"I only wanted to save them."

There were two chairs in the dark room, a basin of cloudy red water, and there was no pain.

Strucker sat in one seat, pristine shirt sleeves rolled up to avoid a mess, while he mopped the mess of crusted blood, caked in dirt, and dried up tears from his face. His other hand held a thermos, filled with cool water and topped off with a straw that he periodically held up to Harry's lips to drink from.

"From Voldemort. The Hallows. I only wanted to save them."

Strucker hummed a quiet noise while he dabbed at a wound just behind his ear that stunk of infection. "But you did, didn't you?"

"From one. Not the other, they wouldn't let me. Instead they brought me here."
"Because you need guidance."

He didn't know what that meant, so he sat silent and waited for Strucker to elaborate. He did.

"You're a boy, one with only the best of intentions, but still just a boy. You did your very best saving your world from the dark lord, and you did succeed, but you brought the Hallows together when you did and you brought an even worse terror with them. And now they're dying."

"But I only wanted to save them."

He had to understand that, it was important Strucker understood. He didn't know why, but it was.

"I know. And I want to save them too, and so do the people I work with. We all want the same thing."

His head felt weighted when he shook it. "No. You want to hurt. You did hurt. Me. Why?"

"Penance. So many people are dead because of what you did. The pain is your penance."

"I'm not a bad person. I'm a good man."

Someone had told him that once. Someone a lifetime ago, in a time when he was maybe a little lonely, but rarely in pain and surrounded always by people he hadn't even realized he'd grown to love until it was too late.

"A good man, who's caused terrible pain."

"You'll tell him that he himself is not bad, only the things he believes in and it will be a relief, because all he needs do is shed those beliefs and he can become someone good."

"Now the power is in his hands, only he can cast aside his wrongness, accept the truth we speak, the good we want to see done in this world, and the moment he does the pain ends."

He smeared a thick healing paste over the cut behind his ear, pressed a plaster to it and moved on to the next. All the while speaking in that quiet, steady tone. "But you're learning. Because you're smart and good. You can change."

He wanted to. Harry wanted that. "How?"

"By trusting me."

"It won't last. He'll recover his mind, heal from the pain and he'll go back to distrusting me as he's done from the start."

Pierce shook his head, infuriatingly confident. "His body will heal. But his mind, we'll leave that right where it is. He's just broken enough to be malleable, the right combination of words and he'll believe in anything."

"How is that done? Keeping him just broken enough?"

"You'll continue working with him for a while longer, build the relationship, that misguided trust in you. Meanwhile double his daily dosage of benzodiazepines, add half a milligram of scopolamine, and consider the addition of an opioid of some form."
"Fentanyl is always a winner," Gordon pitched in helpfully.

"What purpose does the opioid serve?"

"Something highly addictive to add just another crutch in which to make him dependent on you."

"We'll carry on for another few months, to make sure it really sticks, and then we put him in the chair."

The protests were immediate, he was willing to trust the mad scientists this far, but he'd seen the effects of the chair firsthand, putting the boy through it would result only in all of the time they'd put into him going to waste.

"No one but your soldier is built to survive the chair."

Before he'd perfected the curriculum for his more recalcitrant mages he'd tried the chair and been left with vegetables and corpses.

"You have too heavy a hand for such delicate work," Iravani said, seeing straight to the root of his doubts. "But we've spent decades perfecting this method."

"A few sessions of controlled voltage, spaced out over the course of a few weeks, and he'll survive with the functions we want intact. We're not looking to create the clean slate the asset was, your boy will retain his own mind and that bit of humanity we could never regain from the asset, but he will be wholly and unshakably loyal to you."

"The chair will muddle up his short term memories, events of the past year or two at most; he'll remember the pain the dark the terror but he won't remember who subjected it to him. He'll remember your kindness, your guidance, his adoration for you and all you stand for, but not that it was you who ordered his remaking."

Strucker said to trust him and he wanted to, he really did.

The baron was the only kindness he knew, he was gentle with him, cleaned his wounds, and when he was with him there was no pain. But he hadn't forgotten who the man was, what he stood for, what he did and was doing. He was HYDRA and HYDRA was a bad mix of Grindelwald's terrifying military cunning and Voldemort's remorseless culling of those considered lesser. They were the absolute worst of the two dark lords with motives that weren't near as clear.

Even if they hadn't been holding him hostage, torturing him for the past however long and experimenting and stealing from even longer before that, he'd seen the atrocities they took part in during his time with Steve, all in the name of the betterment of human kind. The greater good. And the last time he'd trusted a man who lived by such a creed he'd ended up uniting the artifacts that put him on the road to this miserable existence.

He'd trusted Dumbledore wholly, took on the man's ideals as his own and held him up as the symbol of what was good and just and right, and because of it thousands were dead. Maybe not directly by his hand, but undeniably because of him. Being asked to do so again, to trust a man whose words were so pretty and persuasive but who's actions were more horrible than even those of the dark lord who resembled more monster than human by the end, was terrifying.

But there was a difference in the two. Dumbledore had been a good man, he'd truly wanted the best for all, but he lied and he omitted and he manipulated.
There were no pretenses with Strucker; he and his organization had ordered the deaths of thousands and they didn't once try to deny it. They fought alongside men on the wrong side of the greatest wars in their history and they gave no excuse. They hurt him; beat him, cut him, drove him insane with the dark and the voices, and they looked him in the eye every time they did. And it was because they had no shame, no doubts. They were committing the worst kinds of crimes but it was for the betterment of all, what they were working towards was good and right, and they wouldn't hide.

And it appealed to Harry, that open honesty, he'd been dealing in half truths and deceptions his whole life, knowing the exact sort he was working with made it easier to swallow the bitter truth of their disgusting actions and see to the root of their intentions.

He wasn't a hero. A mother's sacrifice, a decade of misadventures, and a duel thrown by a wand's shaky loyalty didn't make him worthy of such a title. But he wanted to do right, to fix the awful things he'd unintentionally done to his world, and Strucker wanted the same and more.

"Trust me," Strucker had said.

And he wasn't sure he should but he still just might.

And then he was taken to the chair, where freezing lighting tore through his brain and what was and wasn't became a muddy, tangled mess he couldn't even start to unwind, and suddenly he couldn't remember the meager arguments he'd been clinging to to begin with. He couldn't remember anything but the paternal way Strucker held him as he shook through the agonizing aftershocks and how he whispered to him that soon he would be better, soon he would be whole.

And he trusted him.

"He'll sit in the chair only three times. A week between each and once he's sat his third session, no more pain, no more darkness or isolation, he'll be moved to somewhere warm, cozy with soft sheets and three square meals and you'll let him heal."

"And then it's done?"

Iravani gave a little dip of her head. "The hard part is done, then comes the fun."

"The fun?"

"You'll introduce your beautiful, loyal weapon to your army and you'll bring us another step closer to seeing HYDRA's work finally done."

Potter was the focus, the shiny new toy Strucker and all his cohorts were so excited to play with, but the other projects didn't fall to the wayside, his six weren't forgotten. They were doing this all-shaping Potter into the perfect soldier- for them after all.

So while Strucker worked with the secretary and his two mad scientists, the training of the six fell to List. When Potter was through cooking they needed to be ready. And they were.

Nine months of working at their individual strengths, their cohesivity as a team, and further entrenching them in their loyalty to HYDRA and they were a terrifying, efficient unit.

Three forty-eight, the first mage born of Potter's magic, had stepped up as de facto leader despite their attempts at keeping them all as equals. List had tried to quash that in its early days, but
Strucker had encouraged him to let it be; three forty-eight was powerful, driven, and entirely devoted to their cause, he would make an excellent placeholder. He wouldn't give up his spot as number one so easy when the time came, but they expected it, they wanted a fight.

Potter's first test as a reformed man was to be introduced to the mages he would lead. The team's reactions to his introduction to their tightly formed dynamic, and his response to what was sure to be open hostility and defiance would be the first of many trials to prove once and for all how firmly the months and months of condition would stick. And if anything went wrong, if the conditioning hadn't quite taken yet, the mages were the best chance of subduing him.

They were put through their normal schedule for the first part of their day, and after second meal they were directed to the space they held joint training and made to wait until Strucker's arrival.

He came with Potter in tow; he'd been given weeks to heal and fatten up just a bit, but he still looked like a bare wisp of the man he once was and nothing at all like the confident, intimidating figures of the mages. Convincing any of them that this ghost like boy with his haunted green eyes and slight figure was to be the one to command them would be a challenge, and Strucker was so looking forward to seeing it.

"Mages," he stopped just inside the door and Potter came to rest a half step behind him, hidden but not hiding in his shadow, "you're attention please."

The response was immediate, all six fell into a perfect line before him, arms crossed neatly at their backs and feet planted at shoulder width in perfect parade rest. He smiled, pleased.

"I haven't been witness to your training in several months now, but I've heard only the highest praise. I'm proud of your progress and your dedication to this cause."

None of them so much as twitched, but the air around them all became distinctly pleased.

"In the time you've been making such fine progress I've been working on something, someone, as a gift for you." Strucker reached back, he placed a hand on the boy's shoulder and gently propelled him forward. "You are all familiar with Mr. Potter, both the cause behind the loss of your magic and the source of your new power. He donated his magic to make you what you are, six powerful individuals devoted to righting the hierarchy, and now he's donated his life and his body to our cause as well. We've spent these last months helping him understand what he always knew to be right and now he is ready to join you, to lead you."

There was still work to be done in teaching them to hold their stoicism, but the mages reactions were still much less extreme than he'd been expecting. Jaws dropped, their eyes lit with confusion and fury, but none of them spoke out against him.

He smiled again, approving this time, then he took a step back so he now stood closer to the door and Potter at the front. "Take time, get to know each other, acclimate yourselves to the new hierarchy. I'll be back."

Then he left small, fragile Potter in the room with the hulking mages who were quickly shaking off their disbelief and descending into something much more aggressive. And as he walked up the flight of steps to the small viewing room above, he slipped a remote from his pocket, pressed a button at its center, and for the first time in over a year, released the entirety of the boy's magic.

The eyes of the room's occupants bore into him like sharply headed drill bits, but Harry gave them absolutely zero of his attention. He moved across the room, away from the line they were still
arranged in and wandered along until he found the mats no doubt used for sparring and settled with crossed legs onto the nearest one. Standing for too long still wore at his slowly rebuilding stamina, and they'd walked a long way here from his rooms a level up. Only once he was comfortable and his fluttering pulse had settled did he finally turn his attention on the six his magic had created.

None on them looked alike, they'd been plucked from across the world is what he was told. They were mostly taller than him, much more solid, though that came as no surprise, and older, with the youngest looking being the last female in the line. He'd guess mid-twenties, still several years older than him.

"What are your names?" His voice had healed from all the screaming he'd been doing, but it was soft on instinct, harmless if it could be made into a sound.

They stirred, shared uncertain, disgruntled glances with one another, before settling their attention on the first in their line. He was a handsome man, well built and oozing confidence, and when Harry looked at him he saw a hound of shadow and a woman with her flesh rotting from the bone. But then he shook his head and the images left. Strucker had said the hallucinations would subside with time and the best way to deal with them was to ignore them entirely.

"Why?"

That was a curious question. He squinted his eyes at the man and plucked at the bandage that wrapped around his wrist and up the length of his arm, covering his more stubborn to heal wounds. He must be the one who'd taken over the role of leader in his absence, Strucker had warned him of the possibility before they'd even entered the room, and told him in no uncertain terms that defiance of any kind among his troops was to be nipped in the bud immediately.

"I can't always give you orders as a group, can I? So I'll need your names when it comes to addressing you individually, or we can use your subject number. Whichever, it doesn't matter to me."

"Or an alternate solution;" the man countered, "you won't be getting any of our names, because you won't be giving any of us orders."

Harry quirked an amused little smile. "That's not a solution. And not an option. Unless you intend to defy the baron's orders." And he wouldn't like that at all.

"We're loyal to the cause and to Strucker. But to earn our trust as a leader you'll need to prove you won't be a liability on the field," the man's eyes flicked over is unassuming form, mocking. "You'll fight me to earn our trust. I don't think anyone's survived me yet, but the baron must see something useful in you."

"No." Harry reached into the pocket of thin cotton pants and from it drew a wand. It wasn't his, the smoothed wood of the handle hadn't been worn by his own hand, but it was compatible enough. "There's no need for any of that. Accio."

The man's feet shrieked across the floor as he tried to brace himself against the pull of the spell, but Harry had thrown enough power behind it that fighting was useless. He stumbled and collapsed under the momentum, and Harry used his half second of disorientation to reach out and grab onto his chin. "We won't fight, Strucker won't be happy if I kill you. But an example needs to be made."

The mage grabbed his wrist, tight enough he was sure there'd be bruises left behind, and from the point of contact there was a surge of power; dark and deadly and very familiar. Harry laughed, ignoring the way his skin should be curdling and decaying under the dark magic.
"That's mine," he said. "That magic came me from me, it'll have no effect. It won't hurt me, it can't." He dropped his hand from the mage's chin to the front of his shirt, bunching the fabric into his curled fist. "The same can't be said for you."

There'd been a man once, with crooked teeth and pale eyes and screams that were loud; Harry had reached into him, drew on something not easily- or ever- seen by the human mind and he'd nearly killed the man for it. Left him in a state that was debatably worse.

The second time he'd tried was better; he'd been in control, knew exactly what he was doing but he was hesitant, afraid. He hadn't wanted to do it, but knew it was necessary.

Now, his third time reaching into a man and touching his soul, he wasn't uncertain, he wasn't afraid, because he understood now that some had to hurt and suffer and die so that they could remake the world for those left. There were things more important than the comfort of one when the lives of millions were hanging in the balance.

And that made it easy, it made all the difference, because all he did was touch the mage, barely brush the exposed skin at his collarbone, and then he was burrowing past cloth and skin, sinew and bone to his soul.

He could have sunk his claws in then, torn the soul to shreds or pulled and pulled and pulled until something snapped, but Strucker had stressed to him the importance of these mage's loyalties and though securing it through fear would be easier, working for their respect would hold tighter. So instead of mutilating the man beyond what could ever be fixed, he let him feel the weight of his magic, let him feel the shadow of the agony he could put him through if he were feeling just a little less benevolent, then he gentled the touch of his invading magic, allowed it to soothe instead of hurt.

"Strucker chose me to lead you for a reason."

The mage's entire body was locked tighter than his own had been after dying and settling into rigor, but he shook like a flutterby bush. He wasn't aiming to harm, but the feel of a foreign magic pressing into his soul must have been overwhelming no matter how gentle Harry was trying to be.

"It wasn't to be ironic. Or to test you."

None of the others moved to their leader's defense; they were all of the same kind, born from his magic, they could feel it at work in the air and had no interest getting closer.

"It's because I'm the best parts of what you were before and what you are now. I'm a wizard, with full control of all of my magic. And I'm something else, the something that made you."

He was crying, the mage, fat tears that he didn't even seem aware he was producing. Harry loosened his hold just a little, Strucker wouldn't be pleased if he broke the man.

"It was good of you to take up my place while I was learning. You kept the others in line and in order and it is appreciated, but I'm here now and if we're to fulfill our noble goal you will have to trust me."

Harry finally drew back, released his hold on his soul and watched as he slumped forward, nearly prostate before where Harry still sat, cross legged and entirely too calm.

"So will you?"

He mumbled something, unintelligible around the heaving breaths he was gulping in.
Harry leaned forward until his chest was pressing into his knees and he was nearly nose to nose with the mage. "Will you?" he repeated, voice unflinching and just daring him to say no.

"Yes."

"Good." He ran a soothing hand through the man's sweaty blond hair. "Good. Now, we can start again. Your names. Please."

Tao Fen was from China. Angel Escribano from Mexico. Eva Cadigan had lived just a town over from where the dragon had struck in Wales. Iola Braun had graduated Hogwarts six years before Harry. And Mihaela Petkova would have gone to Durmstrang if she hadn't been schooled from home. While their fearless, former leader, Walden Murphy, had attended Ilvermorny clear across the world.

The six mages were from all over, most hadn't even walked the same grounds as the others, but they were here now and something scarily like a team. And there was another similarity, Harry had noticed, one that had passed Strucker unnoticed.

There were no purebloods among them. Or even halfbloods with pure ancestry "tainted" by fresh blood like he himself was. The halfbloods among them were from smaller, blended families, while the muggleborns among them were many. It couldn't be a coincidence, he was convinced it wasn't even if he couldn't see the reason behind it yet.

Maybe the disease had struck the ones with the oldest blood, the blood closer tied to the atrocities the wizards were being punished for, harder. Killing them outright while allowing those with fresher blood some chance of survival, even devoid of magic. Or maybe the purebloods were simply too proud to work alongside Strucker, Harry knew how they thought, knew they considered muggles automatically lesser no matter how brilliant they really were. Or maybe the purebloods were just really shit at hiding from the muggles hunting their kind down and had all been offed before Strucker could offer his alliance.

Whichever reason he wasn't sure, but they were his team now, he'd have time to find out.

"You did well." Harry met Strucker in the viewing room above the training floor after becoming properly introduced to his team, and the man was quick to offer a congratulatory hand on his shoulder and a praising word. "I'm proud."

He beamed, inexplicably pleased by his mentor's praise. "They're a good lot. Strong. Loyal."

"You doubted?" Strucker smiled, but there was a challenge behind his words, a test. But one Harry already knew all the answers to.

"I did, once, but not anymore."

"Good boy." The squirming, happy feeling in his gut only amplified when Strucker's hand moved from his shoulder to the nape of his neck and used its hold to bring their foreheads together. Their lips were barely inches apart when the older man whispered, "Hail Hydra."

And Harry held his intense, pale stare and he whispered back. "Hail Hydra."

"You'll be his savior, his mentor, his one guiding light. What you speak will always be truth, your beliefs nothing but just and right, he'll never question you, never doubt you. He'll be everything you asked for and more."
But with their confidence came a warning. "What we'll do is not easily undone, but those with wills like his have proven…unpredictable at time. He is, first and foremost, a weapon, mistreat it, neglect your duties in maintaining it, and he will misfire on you."

"That won't be a problem." Strucker remembered the pure adoration in the eyes of the boy who had hated him with all of his being not even six months ago. He remembered the way he had so easily stepped into his place at the head of the mages and still turned to him for approval immediately after. He remembered the unshakeable surety in his voice when he'd whispered their organization's words and Strucker felt sure.

The boy was his.

When Bucky fell, there were no more thought of after. No dreams of what would come and what they would do after the war. There was no after without him. He fell and so did any hope of building something beyond the war.

No one was surprised when the mission on the Valkyrie ended the way it did. They had seen the resolve in his eyes long before he'd stepped onto the plane, a world without Bucky Barnes was one Steve Rogers had no interest living in. The plane went down and Steve welcomed the dark, craved it even, and so he got it, for seventy years.

But all good things end. The SSR cum SHIELD fished him from what should have been his final resting place, shook him from his sleep, and shoved him into a world he no longer had a place in.

Seventy years in the future. He'd gone down knowing only Bucky was gone and came back up with every single person he'd ever known dead or close to it. He'd missed everything; the end of the war, their victorious homecoming, the reunions with their loved ones, the start of their families, the birth of their children and grand children and great grandchildren, and their peaceful passing onto the next life.

He should be with them. He wanted to be with them. But suicide was a sin and lord knows he'd already done enough to make the man above consider blocking his entrance through the gates, he didn't want to make it worse.

So he did what he did best and fought on. He took the books and the articles and the reels catching him up on history from SHIELD, went religiously to their recommended head doctors, and tried his best to ignore how in this loud and bright and awful future, he felt more alone than the entire seventy years he'd been entombed in the ice.
A/N: So a small change you might notice, I cut the amount mages from eleven to six, seven including Harry. It just seemed a bit overkill having that many and I could barely remember all of their names so I could only imagine it might be for you all. I believe I corrected all instances of the team being counted as having eleven members, but if I slipped up somewhere don’t hesitate to let me know!

They were in it for the long game, the scientists and soldiers of HYDRA. The work with the mages meant something, might finally achieve something, but it would only remain that way if they kept patient. Uncountable hours had been put into making those mages into the most terrifying weapons their organization had ever seen, and uncountable more were to go into the meticulous execution of their plan of systematic destabilization and destruction.

But then aliens came to earth and the world was introduced to its first ever team of superheroes.

The extraterrestrials wreaking absolute devastation throughout the American city were unnerving. The god that commanded them even more so. But it was the team of enhanced individuals with their flying suits, control over storms, and star emblazoned shields the were cause for not just concern, but alarm.

A group like that would be the first to try and stand against HYDRA just for the principal of the matter. They would fail, there was no other outcome when going against the mages, but others might and there would be others. Because teams like the Avengers had the troubling ability to gather admirers, and with admiration came mimicry. Other superhumans, inhumans, would start getting brave ideas and come crawling out the woodwork and soon they'd have an epidemic on their hands.

So a slow, drawn out dismantling of the world's political infrastructure from the inside out might not be in the cards anymore. But HYDRA could still have their fun, and they could make sure the social climate wasn't one any inhuman would want to out themselves in while they were at it. And the mages, of course, would be the driving force behind it.

Strucker's new team had been incredible from the very start, easily putting the best of their strike units to shame even with the little more than half year they'd been training together. But under Potter's command, they were something else entirely, something unnatural. They fed from his power, growing more powerful just from being in his vicinity. And he, when he was allowed to cut loose and show the breadth of his abilities, was terrifying. Absolute, inescapable death.

He made them better, and the months and resources poured into making Potter what he was had all been proved worth it. It was time now they moved past drills and simulations and finally allowed them to do what they'd been made for.

"Mages." Strucker spoke and the team fell into line perfectly and immediately. "I've done my best to keep you within these walls as long as could be allowed, sheltered and safe while you grew into your abilities. But our enemies have not had such a luxury, they've remained active-worse, they've grown brave. Our absence, while vital to your growth, has left our allies in a very precarious position. It's time now to do what it was you were created for. It's time to make HYDRA proud.

"We have a mission."
They grinned, excited and eager to finally put the months of training and preparation to use. All but Potter, who kept his stoic, yet attentive expression. It was to him Strucker spoke.

"It is an unpleasant task, what I am about to ask you to do. But one that I would never ask unless it was absolutely necessary. Mission briefings will be found in your quarters. Take the night to prepare, we leave in the morning."

Strucker left without offering any further information and immediately the mages were buzzing.

"Morning," Eva from Ireland sighed, full of awed anticipation the moment Strucker had gone. "Morning we'll be going above ground."

"I can barely remember what unrecycled oxygen tastes like," Iola said, sharing her enthusiasm.

"It almost doesn't even matter we're being sent off to kill people. I'm just happy we're finally going to be of some use."

Angel agreed with a nod of his head. "And if it's the task force as the Baron hinted, they deserve what's coming for them."

"Let's break to look over these briefings," Walden suggested, stepping in before the others got too off track. "Reconvene in an hour. At yours?" He posed the question to Harry, who'd been observing the conversation with a veiled sense of amusement up until then.

He nodded. The personal quarters he'd been assigned were larger than any of the others had, large enough to fit their whole team comfortably; they liked to mutter about favoritism, faking it was a joke when they all knew it was absolutely true.

"An hour should do it." He started for the door and they all followed his unspoken cue. "I'll leave the door open."

The briefing was a manila envelope about as thick as a particularly interesting issue of the Daily Prophet. It had been left on his bed, at the base of his pillow, in a move that might be considered an invasion of privacy if they weren't all well aware already that they weren't much more than privileged prisoners with unusually long leashes.

Immediately, he pinched his thigh at the errant, bitter thought not at all becoming of a loyal HYDRA agent. His mind did that sometimes, wandered off onto ridiculous, rebellious tangents; the remnants of the troubled, misguided beliefs he'd held before Strucker helped him see the right way of things. The intrusive thoughts were worst when he was alone, without Strucker's kind presence there to remind him why he fought.

The first page of the briefing was the mission objective; a neatly typed, clinically worded, half page order to "neutralize all threats to their work" while also "ensuring no witnesses or loose ends remained unaccounted for." Just another way of phrasing sanctioned murder.

After were photos. Pages and pages of blurry, far off satellite images of a two-story building sharing a sidewalk with a grocers and a used bookstore, but there were also closer, perfectly rendered images of the interior, taken with a well concealed cellphone or an impossible to spy bodycam.

It was a recruiting office, the next typed document informed, a repurposed community center now used to evaluate potential task force recruits. No persons of interest were inside the building, and as far as they knew, no sensitive or at all useful information was stored within. The personnel running
the place weren't fighters or strategist, they were paper pushers and physicians, no one who could be considered a threat to HYDRA's rising regime. And yet choosing to hit this particular location was an ingenious tactic. An ingenious scare tactic.

Because of their low perceived threat, there wasn't much by way of security, a rota of fresh faced guards there to pay their dues before moving on to the big fight, alternating shifts throughout the week with no more than two ever there at once. It would be child's play for Harry and his team to get in, do their work, and leave before reinforcements could even think to be called.

*It was genius.*

"A lot of people are going to die."

The edge of the briefing pack, where Harry was gripping the paper as he read, crumpled under the sudden clench of his fist. He looked up, gaze locking with endless black, as the figure previously on the peripheral of his vision slunk ever closer.

It was a man with eyes like twin voids of space and something so unmistakably gleeful on his gaunt face.

Harry had been stalked-no, *haunted* by this apparition since being let out of the dark room. Some part of him recognized the man, some long-forgotten memory that squirmed farther from the forefront of his consciousness the harder he worked to grasp it.

"By your hand. By your power. I'm looking forward to seeing the effect it might have on you."

Just the sight of this creature who only looked like a man sent unease down Harry's spine because he knew something, something important, something Harry had forgotten.

"How do I know you?" Of all the questions the phantom and his cryptic words elicited, that was one of the less pressing ones, but still the one that beat all the others through his lips.

He did know this man, knew him like a newborn knew their mother. Instinctually. Only this connection was frightening and foreign and…*incomplete.*

"How much of these past months do you remember?"

Harry shook his head, bit his lip. Very little was the answer. Strucker had always been very free in admitting that, in the time he'd fought against the truth of HYDRA's ideals, they'd had to hurt him, hurt him bad, bad enough his mind blocked out the memories to save itself from the trauma. Nothing of the months he'd spent in Strucker's facility could be fully pieced together, all he had were fragmented moments and the overwhelming feeling of pain, *agony*, total despair. Before that, his mind and memories were hazy, as if they'd happened years and years ago rather than a few months, but they were still there. Erskine and Peggy, Ives and Howard, Bucky and Steve, they were all there. Ans this man...he was there, in a library, in a park, in an old dreary house, but the actual memory of these moments eluded him.

"Why don't I remember you?" He answered the question to his question with another question. "You've been with me longer than HYDRA, longer than I've forgotten, but I don't know you."

"You do," the apparition said with a quirk of his lips that couldn't really count as a smile, "but I think you might have been angry with me, or felt so passionately about my existence and the impact I've had on your sorry little life you wanted to forget. It was no trouble at all for your brain while enduring all that trauma to comply."
"That sounds…stupid."

"Well, I never claimed you were smart."

He bristled for only a minute before letting the slight glide right off his back and getting back to the matter at hand. "How do I know you?"

"That is not for me to divulge."

He huffed in irritation. "Then who? No one else can see you!"

"It was you who caused this mess, and so it will be you to clean it up, quark."

Harry didn't know what that last word was, he was sure it was an insult, but the way the man shaped it, it almost sounded like an endearment.

"I don't like you."

"See now, you're already well on your way to remembering if you've already recalled that important and oft repeated fact."

Harry really didn't like him.

But then there was a knock at his door and, directly contrary to the sour thought, he felt a sudden surge of worry that the apparition would disappear once they had company, but he just gave Walden a curious look as he entered before moving to sit at the foot of the bed, well out of the way.

"You didn't need the whole hour?" Harry asked in place of greeting.

"Neither did you," Walden noted, nodding to the closed briefing packet,

"There were a lot of pictures," Harry shrugged. "What do you think?"

"I think a lot of people are going to die."

"That's what I said."

"We're going to kill them," Walden said. "And it'll be easy."

"The first time maybe," he agreed. "And the second. But it won't take long for them to predict where we're headed next, and then it won't be so easy anymore."

Walden didn't look even a little concerned. "They'll still die," he said. "It'll just take longer is all."

Harry couldn't help a snort of laughter. All of the mages had that same, dangerous overconfidence and it wasn't entirely undeserved. They'd run through hundreds of drills and scenarios and always they and their stolengifted power were unstoppable, no matter the opponent or the weapons they wielded. But Harry had experienced firsthand just how cruel muggles could be when afraid, and just how resourceful they could be when properly motivated. If they kept to this belief that they were unbeatable, they'd be beaten all the sooner.

"They're easy to underestimate, muggles." He told the other man. "But none of us would be here if
they didn't know how to put up a fight."

It was Walden's turn to snort, but at least he held off on any further comments about how easy it'd be to carve through the muggles' forces. And then the others were arriving, one after the other until the decently sized room didn't have an available surface left to sit and his and Walden's conversation was completely forgotten.

Harry moved to the edge of the bed, bracketed on one end by the still present apparition and by Fen on the other. He was one of Harry's preferred companions among the mages, in a team of outspoken alpha male and females Fen preferred to exert his strength in a quieter manner, racking up his kills in the simulation with neat efficiency while the others, still caught up in the magnitude of their new gifts, put new means to the term overkill. And in the early days, when his position as team lead was still being questioned, Fen didn't. He accepted the shift in the hierarchy without complaint, quicker even than Walden had.

"Did anyone else notice," the man on Harry's thoughts spoke up once settled, cutting through the white noise of idle conversation, "that this briefing is missing something I'd think is important? A location."

Harry had noticed. There were photos of the recruiting center, even ones of the street outside, but there was no address, no clue on what city or province or country it was located. But he'd let the curiosity go before it could even fully form because he remembered how once when he had questioned he'd hurt.

He pressed the pad of his finger into a scar that ran the length of his arm until the skin around it went white. That was the thing about Fen, he held Strucker in high regard, respected him as he should, but he wasn't mindlessly devoted as some of the others were, he questioned. And Harry worried.

"The Baron must not think it important information," he sounded calm to his own ears, even as he scrambled to head off this line of thinking. "We won't be the ones flying the plane after all."

"But what of contingency? If something were to go wrong and we were separated? Lost?"

"Then we stay lost, until we are found."

They all had a thin band of metal wrapped around their throat, a constant reminder of just who they belonged to and that there was no getting away.

His finger pressed harder into the scar, soon it would go from white to a splotchy, bruised purple. He shouldn't think thoughts like that, thoughts as if they were owned, as if they had been forced to follow the doctrines of HYDRA. They were here because it was right. He pressed harder.

"It is a little weird," Angel agreed, just a little hesitant to add his opinion to the mix. "We should be fully informed going into this mission."

This was a dangerous thing they were doing. Critiquing the plan. Critiquing Strucker.

"It's not something we should concern ourselves with," he sounded firmer now, trying to make it clear that it was time to move on to a new topic. The warning in his voice wasn't heeded.

"They're right though," Mihaela said, "it is weird. I think we're just wondering why."

"Yours is not to question why." The words tore from his throat, sharper than he'd intended and the others went quiet. He'd never raised his voice, never had reason to.
Harry was shaking, nearly coming undone at the seams. He'd questioned once and he'd hurt. It was there, a hazy thing on the edge of his mind; the memory of burning, of choking, of being cut and feeling the drag of salt through wounds, of water filling his lungs and electricity tearing at the soles of his feet. He remembered the screams and the pain and how it had ended when he'd stopped questioning. How Strucker had been there, kind and comforting, a reprieve from the nightmare. He had been the one to give him these mages, made them his to command, his to protect.

Bone white fingers curled over his shaking hand, and he realized how cold he'd gone when he realized he couldn't feel the chill of the touch.

"Quark, you don't look well."

He dragged a breath through his nostrils, looked once at the ghost of the man he didn't know, then let it out through his mouth in one silent whistle. The mages were watching him, he watched back as he said, "We are soldiers." He stopped to reevaluate then corrected with, "We are gophers. Here to do as the Baron commands, when he commands without question. Do not speak on doubts you may have of him or the things he does. Ever. Am I understood?"

Slowly, one by one around the room, he got nods and soft words of affirmations.

He responded with a nod of his own and a nearly silent sigh of relief. "Good." The freezing hand still rested on his, he subtly dislodged it when he reached for the briefing packet laying abandoned just behind him. "Now, eighth page of your packet there's a picture of the main lobby…."

They were wheels up before the sun rose, on their way to a location no one on the flight crew disclosed and no one on their team questioned. Strucker wasn't with them, still asleep wherever he lay his head at night, but he'd sent four men in his place, strangers Harry had never seen among the guards or agents around the facility. Backup or escorts or babysitters, he didn't know what to call them, but he knew anything he or his mages did would be reported directly back to Strucker and he knew they weren't pleased with their task.

"Have any of you ever even been in a real fight?"

Harry looked up from where he'd been working to maneuver the various straps on his harness into something resembling comfortable and met the eyes of the soldier directly across from him. He'd phrased the question to include their entire team, but the look on his face made it very clear he was really only addressing Harry, the assumed weakest link in their numbers.

"I'm asking only because our approved weapons for this op are next to nothing," he gestured to his belt where Harry picked out only a single hand gun and a few knife sheaths, "if it breaks into a fight-which it always does- we're relying on you and whatever freaky powers that scientist gave you. But from what I've heard around, you've all been down in that basement since the baron cooked you up in his lab."

Harry slid the thick buckle of his harness down readjusting the fit of the straps across his chest, all the while keeping eye contact with the soldier across from him. "We've seen enough."

He leaned forward, the leather of his seat creaking in protest of the movement. "How much is enough?"

"Worse than you have." Angel spoke up before Harry could, which was very much appreciated as he was already tired of entertaining the suspicious stranger. "Battle, bloodshed, war. Long before
we were 'cooked up' in the Baron's lab."

There was a throaty chuckle from one of the other soldiers, mocking in his disbelief. "Ain't none of you seen war."

"No?" Soft spoken Mihaela had an unusual bite to her voice as she rolled up the long sleeves of her shirt exposing thick, shiny scars coiling along her forearms. They were too much like ones he'd left on Malfoy's when he'd attacked him with an unfamiliar curse in the boy's bathroom not so many years ago. "Even before the task force and the slow discovery of our world, we've been dealing with the sort of evil your worst couldn't even fathom. And this one," she gestured to Harry with a sharp tilt of his head, "he's been fighting them since he was in diapers."

"We've never heard a word on any of these evils."

"You wouldn't have," the condescension in Walden's voice was very poorly hidden. "You're muggles."

Bored with the turn he could feel the conversation taking, Harry returned his attention to his harness- there was one strap cutting into a scar on his shoulder that was still just a little too tender- while keeping only half an ear to the carefully played back and forth of the two sides. They were quickly devolving into a 'my team is the toughest' battle in which he wasn't sure exactly who was winning, and after a half hour listening to the verbal sparring he was too bored to bother trying to keep up any longer. Instead his focus turned inward, a knot had formed somewhere in his gut the previous night and it had only grown worse since then. It wasn't excitement, that much he knew for sure, but it wasn't fear either, rather some kind of weird mix of the two. The whole flight he concentrated on trying to loosen the weird tension, but when they landed on the tarmac and stepped into the early noon sun it was still a heavy pit in his stomach.

"We're about a half hour drive out," one of their escorts explained as he ushered them into an unmarked working van already running. "Just a couple miles into the city's center."

None of them bothered with a response, for the first time since leaving the facility all of Harry's team was absolutely silent. They were finally remembering, it seemed, that this wasn't a vacation, they were here to kill.

For the entire car ride, they sat close, shoulder to shoulder, adjusting the unfamiliar cut of their clothing to distract their shaking hands. They were all dressed identically, in modern styled robes similar to something the Aurors might wear; a lightweight cloth that fell just to the back of their knees, opened in the front from the waist down for optimal movement, and colored a red so dark it was almost black. There was no way they might be mistaken for muggles. But, Harry thought, that might be exactly the point.

"Two minutes out!"

Iola beside him shifted, looking almost nervous, and Walden gave a breathy, anxious laugh. As the car turned down a side road, juddered over a few potholes and began to slow, Harry leaned forward, looked over each of his mages, and did as he so rarely did and broke the heavy silence.

"It was fun, running drills and playing along to the simulations," he said, he was only just loud enough to be heard over the purr of the engine and crunch of gravel beneath their tires, but he had everyone's rapt attention nonetheless, "we were untouchable, unbeatable. But this is the real world, the real fight, and it's time to pay our due.

"The Baron is relying on us to spread HYDRA's message, to show our strength and our power, and
in power there is no fear. So bottle away the nerves that are making your hands shake and your teeth chatter and save it for your own time. He said no witnesses so we will leave none, he said no loose ends so there will be none. Yes?"

Iola's knees stopped bouncing, Walden's grin grew back to the steady, maybe too confident thing Harry had gotten used to, they were among the loudest shouting their agreement.

Harry stood from his seat just as the van rolled to a halt, he pulled his hood over his head, hiding his face in unnaturally deep shadows. The locks disengaged and his team all mirrored his movement until they were seven unidentifiable figures. The two doors at the back of the van swung forward, Harry stepped forward, but before he jumped down to the unevenly paved ground he said, "Hail HYDRA." And six voices echoed the call back to him.

They went in through the front, pushing past civilians who looked them over nervously and scurried away in fear when they spotted the guns on their guards' hips. Nothing about them was subtle, it was all too clear that whatever their purpose inside this building was nothing good. But that was exactly the point: to be obvious and exaggerated and impossible to ignore.

The inside of the building looked almost like the reception area of a doctor's office; uncomfortable looking chairs lined the walls, side tables with magazines dispersed throughout the room, and a pretty well coifed woman behind a desk to greet them. But then there were posters on the walls, pictures of men snarling like wild animals and women with unkempt hair and cackling smiles. Wizards.

Bold red words bracketed the unsettling images, the same phrase meant to conjure fear: "Keep this horror from your home. Join the fight."

They weren't even trying to hide what they were getting up to in here.

"What the hell is this?" Harry's righteous fury faltered as a man, who appeared well into his fifties but was still big and broad and just plain mean looking, stood from one of the handful of chairs in the little lobby and addressed their strange group with a suspicious anger. "Who the hell are you people?"

He had a hand on his hip, where they could all see the impression of a gun, and the men around him- more recruits waiting to be called to the back- shifted a little nervously but looked encouraging. At his back Harry could feel the guards tensing in anticipation, but now facing their targets, his team was remarkably calm.

"Walden?"

Harry didn't have to even phrase the request before the man was nodding, they'd gone over this and every other possible scenario enough times he knew exactly what Harry wanted.

"You got it, boss."

Walden made it two steps forward before the man was drawing his gun and leveling it at his chest, but the mage didn't falter and just behind him, Harry flicked his borrowed wand and the gun went skittering across the ground to land at his feet. He followed up with a body bind, to curb any fighting before it could begin, and then Walden was on him.

No one moved, the man closest was only three seats down but it was as if Harry had cast the bind over the whole room; they all watched as Walden moved in on the man, got so close to him their faces were scant millimeters apart, and then he breathed out just as the man opposite him inhaled.
There was a collective recoil from every muggle in the room, their guard included, when the strong, outspoken old man withered. Gray invaded the flushed red of his face as his skin dehydrated, silver flecked hair went white and wispy as cobwebs, and his eyes sunk deep into his skull. He croaked once, a painful sounding attempt at protest, and then he dropped with a brittle, hollow thud.

From the corner of his eye, Harry spotted movement, the receptionist was reaching for something beneath her counter, a weapon or an alarm he wasn't sure. But then Mihaela was there, grabbing her wrist and yanking it back into view.

"Please don't," Harry told her, his tone mild. "We've already killed the one, I'd like to avoid a second so soon. Put her on the floor."

The woman grunted in anger as Mihaela yanked her from her seat and pushed her to the ground just in front of her desk.

"Thank you, now the rest of you, join her down there please."

No one moved.

The four men and two women left remained rooted in their seats, too terrified or too defiant to follow the directive. And while Harry didn't blame them at all for the act of defiance, they were on a tight schedule. He made a show of raising his wand, of swishing it over each and every one of their heads, and enunciating every syllable of, "Imperio."

It was immediate and effortless. Six sets of eyes went blank and when Harry directed them once again to find a seat beside the receptionist they did without hesitation.

"Stay there, don't move." Not a muscle twitched and Harry turned away from the captive muggles, satisfied with their obedience. "How quickly can we gather up the rest?"

There was a moment where no one answered, his team seemed to be attempting to shake themselves from sort of stupor, then Walden spoke up.

"Two floors, five rooms, no more than twenty marks?" he said. "Fifteen minutes, at most."

"Good," Harry nodded. "Iola, Angel stay here and keep an eye on this lot, but have your sentries circle the building, make sure no one tries to get in or out through the back end. Walden take Eva and Mihaela and round up anyone in the exam rooms. Fen and I'll cover the second floor." He spared their guard a quick glance before putting their existence out of his mind, let them divvy their ranks up however they wanted. "Fifteen minutes, bring everyone you find back up here."

The corridor behind reception branched off into two directions; to the left were three rooms fashioned after a sterile exam room where potential recruits underwent their mandatory physicals. To the right, a set of stairs leading up to the second level and the offices where interviews were conducted. Two of the four guards followed in Harry and Fen's footsteps as the cautiously headed up the stairs, they kept well back as they began a careful sweep of the offices but were still close enough where they couldn't fully ignore their presence.

The first office was off the stairs and twice as big as Harry's quarters back at the facility, but it was crammed tight with file cabinets neatly labeled with words and abbreviations that meant nothing to Harry. It was also completely empty. No one was hiding under the desk, behind the door, or in the cramped supply closet attached to the room and the windows looking down onto the street were sealed so tight he was pretty sure they hadn't been opened since the space was built.
The next office was just the same, identical down to the row of filing cabinets and just as empty. And so was the next. And the one after. And the last, there was no one.

"I don't get it," Fen said, scratching at the back of his head. "Briefing said these offices are always in use. Did they slip out the back while we were rounding out the others, do you think?"

"We would've heard them though, right?" Harry asked, pacing the length of the room. "The stairs were right there, there's no way they could have made it past without being noticed."

"So they're hiding."

Harry hummed thoughtfully, agreeing. "They missed something in the building layout. A space to hide or escape." If it was the latter they might really be in trouble, but if it were the former… well then it wasn't a problem at all. "Homenum revelio."

The spell reached as far as down the stairs and back into the lobby, alerting Harry of the presence of his team and the muggles they had and were rounding up with apparent ease. And then there were the two HYDRA agents waiting for them just out in the hall, Fen at his side, and…six other presences, registering just to the left of him. But there was no one, just the same row of filing cabinets lined neatly along the wall as were in every other room.

But looking at them now, they were just barely bigger than the others, almost as tall as Harry and twice as wide.

"Anything?" Fen asked, voice just below a whisper.

Harry answered by crossing the room and tugging at one of the drawers, it was stuck tight, not made to be opened.

"Here."

He ran his fingers along the seam of the cabinet, looking for a button or a mechanism or something to crack open the hiding spot. And he found it, on the outer edge from of the drawer just above his head, but before he could click it and swing the door open, there was a series of sharp cracks and he stumbled back, pain tearing through his shoulder.

"Protego." The shield sprung from his wand just in time to block another volley of bullets, these ones aimed slightly more accurately at his head.

The cabinet detached from the wall itself, and from a cleverly hidden crawl space leapt two men with their guns leveled at his head.

Harry huffed in muted pain, they'd shot him. The nerves all the way down to his fingertips were throbbing, with the flat of his shoulder being the central point of agony, but if he'd learned anything the past few months, it was how to compartmentalize pain.

Blood dripped from the end of his wand and before the two men could let off another round of useless bullets, he'd sent their weapons flying across the room and them crumpling under suddenly jelly-like legs.

"The rest of you out. Now." Harry snapped through gritted teeth. Immediately four more men spilled from the space, none were armed and they were all dressed in the neat button ups and pressed slacks of desk workers and pencil pushers. None of them were a threat.

"This is all of them?" Fen asked.
"Yeah, six is all the spell showed." A wave of his wand bound the six just as he had his captives downstairs, another and they were all floating in an ungainly procession behind him. "How long have we been up here?"

"Ten minutes maybe?" Fen grinned. "Think we beat Walden?"

They didn't.

"It didn't even take us a full five to round 'em up," Walden bragged. "Thought it'd take you two less."

"They had a secret room to hide in, spent most of our time figuring that out." Harry explained exasperatedly. "The actual rounding up didn't take but a minute."

He settled his catches just beside their first group from the lobby and took a moment to assess their numbers. Walden's earlier estimate had been just a few off, there were twenty-four bodies all together, mostly potential recruits with less than half being the building's staff.

"Line them up along the walls, two rows."

Harry stood back, mindful of his still bleeding shoulder, and watched as his team hastened to drag the muggles into formation.

"Now what?" Iola asked.

"Now," Harry fingered the wand that wasn't his, "now we send our message."

The twenty-four captives were in the perfect spot, seated on their knees just below two of the worst propaganda photos, the snarling wizard and the deranged witch, and just in view of the camera mounted on the wall and it's blinking red light.

"You're going to kill us?" asked one of the guards from the office, maybe even the one who'd shot Harry.

He nodded.

"Why?"

"Retaliation. You killed ours, we kill you."

"But we haven't killed anyone," said another, one of the recruits rounded up from the lobby. He was young, tall and thin, and trembling like a flutterby.

"Not yet you haven't," Mihaela sneered. "But what else would you be here for?"

"We just want to make the world safe."

"And joining a genocidal cult is the way to do that?"

"Enough," Harry cut in, they'd already been here too long. "No one forced you into this building, this was entirely your choice. And as I learned very quickly growing up, there are consequences to every choice you make."

"Please."

He'd started crying, great heaving sobs that left no room for false bravery or dignity, this was
a kid and he was terrified. Something in Harry ached; he wanted to scream, to run away, to leave. Instead he raised his wand, and aimed it right between the boy's eyes.

The curse wouldn't come.

The words wouldn't form and he felt stuck.

But then a chill swept along the back of his neck, and there was another presence, pressing into his back, along every line of body, supporting him, holding him up. A hand wrapped around his wrist, steadying him and his barely trembling wand.

"It needs to be done, quark." He shuddered at the silken voice spoken directly into his ear. "You made me a promise, and this is part of keeping it."

He had, hadn't he? So long ago, or maybe not so long, he'd made a promise in a decaying forest to this man.

"I will..." he couldn't remember the promise he'd spoken that kept this apparition tied to him, but even in not remembering, he knew it couldn't be broken.

"You will."

He breathed in deep, in tandem with the chest at his back, felt resolve stiffen his spine to steel. "Avada kedavra."

The ride back was silent.

The chatter from earlier, the almost comfortable back and forth between the mages and guards, it was gone. No one could think to speak, probably couldn't even find the words after what they'd just done. They'd walked from that building painfully aware that of the twenty-four men and woman who'd previously occupied it, none were still alive.

Some had gone quietly, some had begged and pleaded like the boy Harry had cut down, and some had tried to fight, tried to struggle free from their bonds and away from the curses and nightmare creatures tearing their ranks apart even though they knew it would do no good.

None of them walked away unphased; not always cheerful Iola or unflappable Fen, not stoic Mihaela or even Walden who always seemed so eager.

But Harry was more than disturbed or unsettled or whatever the others were feeling. The killing had left an awful feeling in his stomach, but worse than that was the feel of something crawling under his skin, worming along the sinew of his muscles, in the channels of his magic and leaving him feeling distinctly...changed. He didn't know how, couldn't find the words to describe how other he was left feeling, but it was there and unignorable. It had something to do with the apparition he knew, and whatever promise he'd made him. If only he could remember what it actually was.

But that would have to be a thought for another time, later that night, he hoped. But right now the van was pulling into the shadow of the plane they'd come in on and it was time to move.

They'd taken the longer route back to the private airport, to shake any potential tails, it was a long enough ride Harry's legs had started going a bit numb but it didn't excuse the way the world tilted the moment he was standing on the tarmac. If it weren't for Angel and the supportive arm he looped around his waist, he would have faceplanted right then and there.
"Shit." Fen appeared at Harry's other side, aiding Angel in keeping him on his feet. "I didn't even remember, he got shot. He's still losing blood."

"We've got first aid on board," one of the guards said, giving Harry a quick once over. "Let's load up and we'll get the bleeding taken care of."

He would have preferred to walk under his own power, but he felt a little like he'd fallen victim to a jelly-leg jinx, so Harry allowed the help of his team just this once. They were exceedingly gentle as they helped guide him to the same spot he'd reserved as his own for the flight over. The HYDRA agent was less so. He cut through the thick fabric of his outer robes and the thinner undershirt he wore as a second layer with the knife he'd kept on his belt, then started prodding at Harry's shoulder with about as much compassion as the lab technicians he'd gotten so used to.

"No bullet and he's got an exit wound through the back," the man declared after a few tense minutes. "Best I can do while we're in the air is disinfect and bandage it for you. But we've got some clotting sponges so you at least won't bleed out."

"Oh what a relief." Harry's only slightly slurred mutter dragged into an equal parts furious and agonized hiss when the agent doused both sides of his shoulder in an antiseptic that bubbled and burned upon contact. He grit his teeth though when the man shoved thickly padded gauze over the wound and taped it down with non-too gentle hands, refusing to show any further sign of pain.

"That should hold until we land." A hand towel, dampened from a water bottle, was dropped into his lap. "Clean yourself up, we don't need you staining the leather."

Harry bit down on a scowl, but accepted the towel nonetheless. The tacky feel of old blood on his chest was starting to bring back some not so great memories.

The moment the HYDRA guard was through, Fen was there, taking the spot he'd just held kneeling just in front of Harry. "I should have said something sooner," he said, the perfect picture of apology. "I don't know how I forgot."

Harry shrugged his good shoulder as he methodically scrubbed at his skin. "To be honest so did I. I got so caught up in...everything, it didn't even register after a while."

"I'm not sure how that's...." Harry gave the now completely ruined towel one last sweep over his chest before tossing it carelessly to the side. It hadn't done that great of a job cleaning up the good half liter he'd bled, but it wasn't so thick anymore as to obscure the silvery scars mapped across his skin.

Fen noticed them immediately.

"These...these came from the dark lord?"

Harry hummed distractedly, a little light headed from the blood loss, as he looked down at what Fen saw. He remembered only pieces of what happened in the bright room, of his 'reeducation', but the scars he'd been left with told a pretty clear story; patches of skin raised and unnaturally shiny from burns, silvery lines of precisely drawn knife cuts, thin, barely visible rings around his wrists, his throat, remnants of a rope pulled too tight. He'd been a very difficult student to teach.

"This one is," he said in answer to Fen's question, prodding at the jagged scar snaking up his forearm, a remnant of Wormtail's crude knife handling skills. "This is the one that raised the dark lord from the dead. But the others...they're a little more recent."

"Who?"
They'd drawn the attention of the others, they were watching, silent but attentive, as they took in the sight of him. But he didn't know how to answer, not without causing another million rounds of questions.

"A year ago, HYDRA and I were on completely different sides," he finally decided on. "I had ideas, beliefs that were very, very wrong. They fixed me."

"This was HYDRA?"

Harry grabbed Fen's chin, forcing him to lock eyes, that same frightening intensity he'd wielded the previous night when reprimanding his team was back. "They fixed me," he repeated. "And now I don't question. Ever."

And finally they understood what he'd been trying to tell them this entire time.

"And neither will we."

"My dear boy, well done."

Strucker was waiting for them when they landed, a look of incredible pride and triumph written all across his face. He took Harry's face in his hands the moment he was in reach and looked down at him with a smile that made that feeling in his gut twist.

"You've made me so proud. Done so well for us all."

"But still it's nothing compared to what you've done for us."

The Baron leant forward, pressed a firm kiss to the crown of his head. "You continue to exceed my expectations. I heard you were hurt?"

"Only a bullet," Harry shrugged. "It barely bled."

"I'll have someone come to take a look, we wouldn't want to risk infection." Finally he turned away from Harry and cast a look at the rest of the mages waiting several steps back. "Today was a great success. Clean yourselves up, get something to eat, and rest. Debrief can wait until tomorrow."

He patted Harry on the cheek once more, and then he left them to meander to their quarters on their own time,

"He's right," Harry said after a half a moment of silence. "Today went well. It was difficult and messy, but we did HYDRA proud and it'll get easier every time."

They nodded, convinced for now, and followed him dutifully from the hangar and down the corridors. Once he was finally in his own quarters, he all but dove for the shower; the water pressure was shit and the temperature lukewarm at best, but he still nearly cried in relief as he finally began scrubbing viciously at his skin.

As red swirled between his toes and down the drain, Harry deliberately kept all thoughts away from the recruitment center, away from the group of people, most strangers to each other and how they'd huddled together in their final moments. Didn't think of how so many had tried to plead for the sake of their loved ones, their spouses, their children. Like the receptionist, who'd trembled and cried, but looked him in the eye still, told him her name (Enid), that she had a husband (Markus) and a daughter (Lana, not even a year old) and then fell under the jaws of Angel's hairless, pointed eared hound. He kept away from the thoughts of how their blood looked, seeping into the cracks
between the tile or of how many of them hadn't died right away, but lay as gaping, soulless husks before their bodies had simply given up. And he most definitely didn't once think of how this hadn't been any kind of fight he knew, this wasn't an evenly scaled battle, just another facet of war, this had been a massacre. One none of those people had at all been equipped to defend against.

When he shoved his face under the weak spray of water it was with the intent of scrubbing away the grease and grit that weighed down his hair, not to wash away any evidence of tears.

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A woman was waiting when Harry shut off the shower. She was familiar in a way that all the unnamed agents and doctors and scientists and nurses floating around the facility were. She'd healed him before, more than once, and judging from the case she'd set up the end of his bed, she was here to do so again.

"The wound is on your shoulder?"

Harry nodded and slipped his shirt just low enough for her to see the gaping hole in his shoulder unimpeded.

Her hands were cold and her touch rough, but his mind was far off and he barely felt the uncomfortable tug of thread being pulled through his skin. Before he really knew it, she was repacking her kit and reciting the aftercare instructions he was only halfway listening to.

"Stitches should start dissolving in a week. Try and keep them dry for twelve hours and covered for at least twenty-four, don't pick at them and don't tear them."

She left quickly after that, as if she were uncomfortable being alone in a room with him. But he had more reason to be afraid of her than she did him. He'd turned over the borrowed wand when they'd first arrived back at the facility and the safety band around his throat had reactivated almost the moment they'd boarded the plane hours ago, preventing any reckless use of his magic. She had all the power.

It was still early, there weren't any clocks in his room, but he'd seen the time on the digital watch the nurse had worn; barely past seven in the evening. Several floors up the sun was only just now starting to set, but his little cot in the corner was starting to look really inviting. He'd done a lot today; left home, traveled for hours, and helped in the exhausting job of cleaning up the filth ridden world, he deserved an early rest.

But then someone knocked at his door.

He didn't groan like he wanted to, or shove his head under the pillow and pretend he hadn't heard, there was no telling who was on the other side. No, with slow, disgruntled steps he shuffled over to the door and threw it open. It was Walden. He'd showered and changed, in one hand he carried a covered tray and the other a thermos.

"You didn't make it to mess before they packed up."

Harry blinked once in exhausted incomprehension. Then once more for good measure.

"I brought you dinner," Walden elaborated, giving the tray a little wiggle.

They stopped serving the last meal at seven, and Harry had known that when he lingered for way longer in the shower than necessary. He didn't have the appetite for food right now, or conversation, but it seemed both were at his door whether he liked it or not.
"Right, thanks. Um, did you want to..." he gestured to the room behind him, silently hoping Walden would decline. But of course he didn't, he gave a little nod and slid past Harry into his quarters for the second evening in a row.

"I already ate, but I thought I might keep you company."

They'd come a long way from the snarling, defiant animosity they'd had at the start. Walden had fully accepted him as leader and proved repeatedly that he trusted him in the position. But they weren't friends, none of them were, and they didn't keep each other company.

And yet Harry nodded anyway, gestured to the only place to sit in the room, the foot of his cot while he clambered closer to the top. Walden sat slowly and watched as he peeled back the clingfilm on the top of the tray; it was some kind of stew, surprisingly well flavored with tender chunks of meat and cooked vegetables, poured over a brown rice. Harry poked at it halfheartedly, waiting for Walden to speak and get to the real reason he was there.

"And I wanted to ask you something."

There it was.

"Confess something."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." Walden twisted awkwardly so that he was almost fully facing Harry at the head of the cot but still had his feet planted on the ground, as if he were ready to run at a moment's notice. "After today and your," he gestured at Harry who didn't know what he was referring to at all, "I just... I volunteered for this."

Harry blinked. And he waited. And he waited some more. But that couldn't be the confession? He'd already known that. Sure no one had outright told him but he knew none of the mages were here by force. That was a good thing, their loyalty to HYDRA hadn't been bought or inflicted, so why did Walden look so worried?

And as the silence grew longer he grew even more so, mistaking Harry's lack of response for anger. "I'm a half blood," he said, almost tripping over his words in his haste to get them out before Harry could stop him. "But barely. My mother's parents were no-maj and she married a history teacher. I knew of magic growing up, saw it around the house and had my spurts of accidental magic. But I wasn't a part of that world, their culture until I went to Ilvermorny and then- and then it became everything. It became my whole world, the thing I built my entire existence around. So to lose it, I lost myself. I was destroyed.

"But then the Congress was telling people it could be reversed, we could be fixed and I didn't hesitate. I didn't know what I was signing on for, or with who, only that I had a chance of having my magic returned and, at the end of it all, that was the only thing that mattered. I put up with everything- the muggles knowing our secrets, them keeping us locked down here where they could test us and experiment- with the hope of what it would all yield. And when I found out that it was your magic we would be taking from, it felt right, it-it felt like justice. You'd caused this misery, it was only right you sacrificed your own magic to make it right.

"But now I'm not sure, now I don't know."

The world was shrinking and Harry felt a horrible dread. "What are you saying?"

"That this," and when Walden gestured again, this time between the both of them, Harry knew
exactly what he meant, "this doesn't feel like justice."

"You're having doubts."

"I don't think I ever believed."

"Murphy," Harry hissed. There was no camera in his quarters, not one he could see anyway, but he knew they were listening, watching. They always were.

"I didn't know." He powered on, ignoring Harry's visible anger. "When I volunteered they said I would get my magic back and in return I would help protect our world. I expected a fight, prepared myself to kill in defense of my people, not to line them up in neat rows and execute them."

"What difference does it make where it's done? On the battlefield or in the lobby of a recruiting center, are they any less dead?"

"There's no honor-

"Since the rise of the task force they've killed thousands of us unprovoked, broke into homes, raided safe houses, attacked schools. They've killed women, children, our elders without discrimination. Do you think something like honor has crossed their minds even once?

"I don't like killing either, none of us take joy in it. But that anger you had for me, the blame you put on my back was right. We're here because in fighting that last war against Voldemort, I was like you, I was weak and naïve and held onto the childish belief that I didn't have to kill to win. If I had been smarter, more ruthless, and done what needed to be done, none of us would be here right now.

"This is hard, it's horrible and ugly, but it is necessary."

He took a long, deep breath, the day had been long and he was so tired. But he needed to say this, needed to save Walden from the same pain he'd endured.

"You saw what happened to me," there was no anger in his voice now, he was gentle, soothing as he hit his point home. "What needed to be done for me to understand. It was a hard lesson, but I learned. And one I endured so you don't have to. Listen, hear me, what we're doing is right."

Walden didn't respond, maybe he didn't know how to, Harry had certainly run out of words. So they sat together, silent and contemplative until eventually the older man stood up, nodded once, and just left. Harry's little monologue had gotten to him, he knew it had, he just wasn't sure in what way. But he would eventually, one way or the other.

It was early still, probably barely past seven, and the tray Walden had brought in was still mostly untouched, but Harry was ready for the day to just be over already. He shut the too bright lights off, leaving just the single emergency light glowing faintly in the corner and tucked himself under the sheets.

He was asleep with minutes. The deep sort that didn't allow for dreams and fears to creep in and interrupt his rest; he was exhausted, drained physically, emotionally, magically, and only a long, uninterrupted sleep could heal him.

He got six hours and then the alarms started wailing.

Once, before his reeducation, Harry had tried to run. He couldn't remember much of it, mostly
hazy images of blood staining a white sheet, a cramped space and a horrible heat below him, his bare feet slapping against freezing concrete. But the thing he remembered most, that stood out clearly in his memory, was the silence. He'd been expecting an alarm, a deafening, wailing to announce the urgency of his pending escape, but there hadn't been anything. This godawful caterwauling that had torn him from his sleep was exactly what he'd expected.

The door to his room locked from the outside, for his own safety, so he couldn't poke his head out into the hall to see what was causing the chaos, but it had a window and through it he could see the corridor outside and the doors of his teams' rooms where they were pressing their faces to their own windows.

There wasn't really anything to see, for what had to be at least five minutes not a soul passed in front of their doors, and they couldn't hear anything past the shriek of the alarms. But then a group was approaching from the end of the corridor, and at their head was Strucker. He unlocked each of their doors with more haste than usual and before they had all even fully stepped into the hall, he was speaking.

"An attack has happened in the night," he didn't strain to shout, and yet Strucker's words carried effortlessly over the alarm. "The task force struck several wizarding hubs all at once, the death toll has still not yet been counted but it climbs even as we speak. Our wizard allies, in their understandably heightened emotional states, have intruded upon the facility, we believe they're looking for you. I think it best we meet them before they cause any further havoc."

They nodded, agreeing without question, but Strucker didn't lead them to the rampaging wizards immediately, instead he turned to Harry.

"They think you dead." This was clearly news to the rest of his team, but neither Harry nor Strucker paid them any mind. "Let's keep it that way for a while longer. Keep out of their sight, but stay close, I'm sure I'll have need of you before the night is over."

The baron extended a hand and in it was the pale wand meant to replace his own. He accepted it, wrapped his fingers around the worn handle right as a familiar current skittered from the base of his skull and down his spine. It was the feeling of the collar around his throat deactivating, of his magic being released.

He wasted no time with a verbal response, layering a disillusionment spell on top of a notice me not over himself as he stepped out of his place in the line he and the mages had formed.

Strucker turned his back. "I'll give you the word," he said, not even a little concerned that Harry was armed and completely invisible just behind him, "and when I do, I'll need you to act quickly."

"Always."

It was easy tracking the wizards, their magic had knocked out most of the cameras posted up in the corridor, but they'd left a trail of bodies- mostly stunned our bound- in their wake. All they had to do was follow the breadcrumbs and they found the group of furious wizards, one floor up wreaking havoc in the research wing.

Harry recognized them, they were the same group who'd cornered him in his cell, shot an AK at his chest, and called it mercy. Diggory was there, and so was the Auror with the greying hair and stone face, Robards.

Strucker had forgiven their actions once, but Harry had a feeling he wouldn't be near so lenient this time around.
"Gentlemen," the baron drawled, unimpressed tone cutting through the discord with little effort. "Ladies. It's late, or early, and last I checked we had no meetings scheduled."

The wizards paused in brandishing their wands threateningly at the skeleton crew that patrolled the halls in the night and switched their focus to Strucker.

"This is an emergency assembly," snapped a woman with an accent thicker than Fleur's, Harry vaguely remembered meeting her alongside Mr. Diggory just after his attempted escape. "We've been attempting to contact you all evening."

"I'm afraid past midnight we don't have anyone attending to the fireplaces. What is this emergency?"

"Don't pretend you don't know. We've worked alongside you long enough to know how well informed you are, always."

Strucker almost looked flattered. "The attacks," he said obligingly.

"Yes, the attacks. Two villas loaned to us from old blooded families for refugees, the offices of the New York Ghost, three clinics, and a thestral reserve, all attacked and burned to the ground. We're looking at deaths in the hundreds."

"The cause of these attacks?"

"Retaliation," said one of the men flanking the French woman, he spoke with a British accent and wore auror robes even though Harry didn't recognize him. "A vigilante group of wizards hit one of their recruiting offices, killed the whole lot of them and this is their response."

"And so you've come here, in the dead of the night to…what? Vent your troubles?"

"We've come for the mages."

Strucker smiled a not quite smile and said, "Is that so?"

"We've been cooperative," Mr. Diggory said, "we've given you all that you asked for and yet have seen nothing from it. The muggles continue killing us and we can do nothing, there are too many of them. But those mages could make all the difference, so we're taking them."

"It was our magic put into creating them," added Robards, "they belong to us. We'll take them by force if we must."

There was a ripple from Strucker's side of the crowd as they all reached for their weapons. "The alliance—"

"Fuck the alliance," the head auror crossed the few meters of space between them and pressed his wand to Strucker's throat. Immediately every gun trained on him. "We might not be enough to take on the task force, but we brought plenty for you and your men. We are the true power here, muggle, it's time you understood that."

The point where the wand was digging into his throat warmed dangerously from what could only be a slow build up of magic, but Strucker only smiled wider, full of vicious teeth. He pressed in closer. "You have no idea what true power is." Their eyes remained locked, but when he spoke again it wasn't to Robards or any of the silent wizards. "Allow me to fix that."

They hadn't discussed it, but that was Harry's cue, he knew it, knew Strucker couldn't resist a
dramatic one liner.

Just a thought and the disillusionment and notice me not unraveled and he was there, just beside Robards who tensed in surprise.

That was the only reaction he was able to express before Harry's wand dug into his ribs and he cast, "Bombara."

There was a horrific spray of blood and shattered bone fragments and Diggory, who got the worst of it right in the face, screamed in horror while the others fell back.

They took a moment to just stare, jaws slack as they realized who had blasted the auror's ribcage into nonexistence.

Diggory gulped, the blood dripping down his cheeks already forgotten. "Shit."

"That," Strucker said, "is a surprisingly accurate summation. My boy, kill them."

All of the intruding wizards had come expecting a fight, they'd known Strucker wouldn't submit easy and prepared for the very eventuality. They were all fighters and good ones at that, but Harry had not been created to lose. A dozen wands were up, trained at him with curses on the tips of their wielders' tongues, they never got the chance to cast them.

Once, lifetimes ago, the man with the hollow cheeks and two eyes like coal had told him that their existence, their magic was rooted in death. Being in proximity to it lent them strength, power. And Harry had been in proximity with a lot of death today. The blood of the slain auror was splattered all up his forearms and the expressions of the dying muggles he and his mages had slain were still painted on the back of his eyelids every time he blinked, the collar around his throat was off, his magic was loose and he felt powerful.

He dropped his wand arm, tucked the useless stick of wood into the back of his pants and he unfocused. The shadows in the already dim hall went darker, reached farther into the light and something in them stirred.

Every one of his mages had a twisted, corrupted version of a patronus, the same creature as the original spell but deadlier, with claws and fangs that mangled souls. Harry thought he knew what his would be, but the creature that slunk from the shadows was not Prongs made vicious with cloven hooves and sharpened antlers but a beast straight from hell. It had a tail longer than he stood tall, a body of pure muscle, and nine, serpentine heads.

A hydra.

It lumbered forward and the wizards shrank; their wands stayed up, turned in the direction of the enormous beast but Harry saw more than a few trembling grips. When it growled, a low, hissing sound, there was a whimper. And when it struck, they screamed.

Spellfire lit the hall as the wizards threw the most powerful, most destructive curses in their repertoire at the beast and watched as the shadow it was formed from consumed the light. The nine heads struck with terrifying speed, snatching a wizard in each jaw and digging through flesh to find the soul beneath, and while they fought and failed, Harry approached.

The first wizard he reached didn't notice him until he was almost on top of him, but he still reacted quickly enough to throw a bright purple curse right at his head. Harry batted it away as easily as he'd once blocked the little foam projectiles Dudley had liked to shoot at his head, it met the ground to his left instead and left a scorching crack in the concrete. He wrapped a hand around the
wizard's throat and within seconds rot had consumed his entire body.

The next wizard he didn't even have to touch, he twisted his wrist and the tether that connected him to the plane of the living was uprooted and he dropped.

The three after were dragged down and torn apart by their comrades who'd fallen under the hydra's fangs only to be reanimated with just a twitch of Harry's finger.

Until…until then there was just one. The French witch who'd never been outright cruel to Harry, but who had stood by and been an active witness in his misery; she was drenched in blood, hers or another's he didn't know, she'd lost a shoe, and her neat updo was in complete disarray. She was stuck between him and the shadow hydra, but she glared with no fear and opened her mouth no doubt to say something witty when a curse shot from behind Harry and cut a gaping hole in her throat. She fell, dead on impact, and Harry spun around to face a shocked Mr. Diggory. He'd obviously been aiming for him, but he was shaking, could barely keep hold of his wand.

Harry swept his hand in the man's direction and a cutting curse to the front of his legs brought him to his knees. At his shoulder, the nine heads of the hydra rumbled, but under Harry's silent command it remained still. He wanted this kill for himself.

It had only been a few hours since he'd sat before Walden and told him that he took no joy from the killing, and already he was proving himself a liar. But this one was different, this one was personal.

To his left, Strucker approached, stepping over mangled bodies and pools of blood until he stood at Harry's side.

"Behold." Diggory didn't twitch at the word, spoken softly yet so full of awe, he didn't tear his gaze from Harry. Not once. "True power."

Across the room, standing at Diggory's shoulder, Death grinned, a horrible thing too full of teeth and malice.

And Harry grinned back.

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**A/N: Happy new year all! I'll see you next decade.**
Waking up seventy years in the future was kind of like the first time Steve and the Commandos had run an op outside of the states. It was some little town in Estonia, he couldn't even remember the name of it now, where a few HYDRA operatives had been spotted sniffing around. It was an easy job, barely took two days, and one of the few they were allowed actual accommodations.

In those early days there hadn't been much of a need for secrecy, they hadn't done enough to be recognized on sight by just any HYDRA agent, and (with the exception of Dum Dum) they didn't look much like a stereotypical soldier, so the SSR was able to put them up in the only inn at town without too much worry of them compromising the mission. It was the downtime spent in the inn and walking through the town square that Steve found himself comparing the future too.

Estonia in the mid-40's and New York at the start of the twenty-first century weren't at all alike in any way but the deep sense of not belonging that they elicited in Steve. The air in that little countryside town had smelled so different from what he hadn't ever paid attention to back home, the people- even the ones who spoke English- spoke with a dialect too strange for him to always follow, and even the familiar foods, breads and fruits, staples that could be found anywhere in the world, tasted different.

And it was just the same in this weird future where cars didn't fly and people didn't live underwater. There was so much, too much, different. It was the worst kind of culture shock made even worse by the fact that this wasn't a temporary thing, there wasn't a home to return to after a long trip overseas. This place, this now, was forever.

But the one thing that hadn't changed even after almost a century was Steve's own ability to cope by distraction. Work was the easiest method, if he could find some job, no matter how small, to throw his entire focus and every bit of his energy into, he would be all right.

And luckily, an alien invasion had just wrecked what felt like half of Manhattan so there was plenty of work to be done around the city.

The cleanup was a harrowing job; the debris of an entire block of buildings jammed up most of Park Avenue, one of the enormous whale like creatures-Leviathans they were being called- was still draped over a half crumbled skyscraper several hundred feet off the ground, fires from exploded gas mains, detonated alien grenades, and crashed hovercars still burned unchecked, and the corpses and remnants of hundreds of said aliens and their varying weapons were scattered throughout the city. Laying about for any average Joe to make off with.

Stark had purchased some kind of damage control unit to help with the cleanup post battle and it was with them Steve worked most closely with, even if it was more a formality than anything else. He met with the coordinator only twice a day; once in the morning to check the grids to find which zone he'd be working in that day, and once in the evening to confirm a bit of fallen debris or poorly placed weapon hadn't done what seventy years in the ice and an alien invasion to boot hadn't been able to do. He was alone most of his days, shifting rubble and clearing building in the zones labeled too dangerous or unstable to be approached without significantly more manpower than the restoration crew already had. And it was nice, the work kept his mind occupied just as he'd intended, and by the end of his day he was always just worn out enough to sleep without dreams.

It wasn't a foolproof plan, the constant work. Being alone so many hours gave his mind plenty of time to wander, and while usually focusing on removing scorched debris in just the right way to keep from bringing it all down on his head was a suitable distraction, every now and then he got
caught in a task dull enough his thoughts had nothing to do but venture into dangerous territory.

It was always the people that his thoughts went back to; the Colonel, the Commandos, Howard, Peggy, Bucky. They were gone, dead most of them but even the ones still alive weren't the men he'd know once.

And Peggy, god she was the worst of them. Beautiful even ninety years gone with lines carved deep in her face and those once immaculate victory rolls gone white and wispy, but with a memory he was told that failed her at irregular intervals. He hadn't gone to see her yet, couldn't bring himself to do it, even though he knew too well that with every day gone was another of the few she had left wasted. And lord did that thought hurt, because once she was gone, that was it, the last person of his time gone. Then there'd be no one, no one who'd been there with him, no one who'd he'd shared moments and memories with. They'd all be dead.

Some of those deaths he'd seen with his own eyes and relived every time he closed them. Some of them he'd only had the reports and battle briefings on. And some he didn't know, hadn't seen, couldn't confirm but they-he'd been lost, taken right from Steve's care, and after all this time and uncertainty, dead was the only state in which he could be.

There was blood in his hair.

He couldn't see it, wouldn't have been able to even with a mirror, the dark of his hair hid the red of the ICW's innards too well. But there was a lot of it, enough that it dripped down the back of his neck, seeped into the collar of his sleep shirt, trickled its way down his spine. He wanted to shiver from the sensation of it (and shiver for other reasons too) but any movement on his part would translate as weakness and they were in dangerous company.

"I thought we were clear on how things were meant to proceed."

Strucker was two paces ahead of him and as animated as Harry was stoic as he bickered with a wall of digital screens.

"We put a great amount of work deciding our timeline, and when it was approved you had nothing to say against it."

"I have no excuse," Strucker gave a cavalier shrug, too relaxed considering the events that had led them all to this room. "Tempers were hot and when I gave the order, I didn't expect my boy to be quite so…efficient."

Every eye fell on him, present and computerized, and Harry met the gaze of the one closest to him without shame.

It hadn't even been an hour, the bodies of the wizards and witches he'd slaughtered hadn't even begun to cool and somehow Strucker's fellow heads had already received words of the spontaneous turn of events and coordinated a video conference to hear the whole of it straight from Strucker's own mouth.

They weren't pleased with what they heard, it was an impulsive command the Baron had given and one that was sure to bring about some kind of consequence.

"We expect they'll retaliate?" one of the computerized faces said, a woman with a face too soft, too gentle for the organization she helped run. "Unless you managed to kill their entire ranks?"

"There are still a few of their organization lurking under rocks, waiting for safety to come around
again. But I don't think them to be any reason for concern, they've been spread too thin already with the continued attacks of the task force which, after our hit on the recruiting center, are sure to increase exponentially.

"They can't fight two wars, not with their limited manpower and surely plummeting moral, and though they are cowards, they're not all idiots. The wizards will direct their resources toward the task force. To just about anyone they do appear to be the bigger threat, by the time they realize the error in their decision they'll be dead."

"That doesn't mean your actions are without consequences," spat the screen directly to their left, the man within known only as the Sheikh. "We are a collective head for good reason, to take such action without consulting the rest of us undermines each and every one of our positions."

"And yet there are times when a decision must be made in that moment, without chance to consult my colleagues. I'd hope you'd have the same faith in my decision making as I do yours."

There was a pause, then a third, a squirrely man with thick, black framed glasses, the Banker, said. "This union wouldn't work without such trust, but the step you made was a big one, the impact it has on all we've planned is enormous."

"Not so much as you'd think," Strucker refuted. "Cutting ties with our allies in the ICW had always been intended, and though we hadn't planned it quite so soon, we all were already very aware that there was no way a separation could be successfully imparted without a little violence.

"We continue exactly as planned, but now with a bit more hurry. My mages are ready, I blooded them just yesterday and they proved themselves twice over."

"My own asset is on standby," a man, aged well with pale blonde hair and eyes like two ice picks said. He was familiar, Harry had the feeling he'd met him before, but he kept his jaw tight and his gaze forward and he didn't allow an inkling of a reaction. "He hasn't been out in the field in a few, I'm sure he'd be eager for a mission."

"What of your reserve team, Baron?" the woman said.

"Strong and prepared for fieldwork. I've not sent them out yet but for this sort of job they're more than ready."

"We'd planned for the State of the Union," the Banker chipped in, "but if you intend to make a move sooner we would need to find and alternative, one equally as televised."

"That'll hardly pose a challenge," the familiar man said, "Ellis is a peacock, he's always finding a reason to get in front of a camera."

"There's been talk of a memorial to be held at the capital," the woman said. "To honor those who fell during the invasion."

"How soon?"

"A month from now, the death toll is still being counted. It'll be broadcasted nationwide, and of course Ellis will attend."

"A month then." Strucker hadn't yet lost that manic energy that had prompted him to order the deaths of his wizard allies, and this conversation only seemed to be worsening it. "A month and then we strike."
When the wizards they'd sent to retrieve the hoarded mages didn't return, Supreme Mugwump of the International Convention of Wizards, Babajide Akingbade, knew something had gone horribly wrong.

They'd been handpicked by the heads of each magical province, the very best aurors, hitwizards, and duelists to go and collect the soldiers they'd been promised. Casualties had been expected, they knew the force they were going up against, but for none to return?

"Should we send in the reserves?" asked the patriarch of the Macmillan family and one of close Akingbade's advisors. "They were meant to return near two hours ago."

"Give them a while longer," Akingbade said, striving for calm he didn't feel, "we knew this wouldn't be a quick or easy job. These aren't our usual muggles."

Perfectly timed, the fireplace at the head of the room roared green. The entirety of the ICW held their breath as they waited to see who crossed through. A moment passed. And then another. Until finally just one figure came tumbling from the flames.

He was hard to recognize at first, on the ground and curled up into himself as he was. But the red of his robes gave him away as one of the British aurors.

"Hemmings?" Macmillan had stood from his seat and leaned over the partition that looked down on the center of the room. He clearly recognized the auror. "Hemmings, where are the others?"

The man, no boy, he couldn't be much older than Macmillan's own son looked up and the entire room flinched. His robes held a dark shadow to them, but it wasn't until he revealed his ashen face that they realized it was blood. He was drenched in it, nearly every available bit of skin stained red, making the whites of his wide, terrified eyes stand out even more prominently in his face.

"Dead. Dead, they're all dead."

A tsunami of whispers swept the hall, then fell dead when Akingbade held up his hand. The boy wasn't done.

"I-I pretended, he killed Mullin and I hid under his body and he didn't see me, he couldn't find me. And the rest they fought and they tried and they died and I hid, I hid for so long." He tripped over a hiccupping sob, folded in on himself for a moment, but then he kept going, as if he had to get the words out. "He didn't see me. I thought I was safe. But then they found me, pulled me from under and I thought...I thought they would kill me, feed me to his monster. But they left me alive, pushed me through the fire so I could tell you..." He trailed off, body rattling from the force of his terror so hard he couldn't push out the words.

"Tell us what?" Akingbade prompted.

"The deal's off."

Macmillan had gone as pale as the boy. "The deal..."

"Is off. The mages belong to them now. If we try to retaliate, we'll meet the same fate as the others."

"They'll send the mages to kill us?" the man gaped. "They're wizards, our people, they wouldn't turn on us."

"They're his. They belong to the baron."
"We'll send more men this time. Twice as many. Triple."

"No," tears cut rivulets through the blood on his cheeks. "They'll die, and then they'll send him to finish the rest of us."

"Him?" Akingbade hadn't missed the nameless "him" the traumatized auror kept referring to. "Who is him?"

"Potter."

Directly opposite the rush of sound Hemming's first words had caused, this one sent a blanket of silence across the room.

"Harry Potter is alive, and he's angry."

There was something wrong with Harry. Something deeply, intrinsically wrong. Because he'd just slaughtered over a dozen men and women (some who he knew had family, children), he'd torn them free from their limbs, sicced his vicious shadow monster on them, stood even now soaked through with their blood and he just felt cold.

Numb.

Nothing.

The commotion that followed the attack had finally died down, the heads of HYDRA had shelved the rest of their strategizing for a more reasonable hour, and Harry was finally given permission to return to his quarters to wash away the blood tugging uncomfortably at the tiny hairs on his skin.

That should have been his immediate priority, scrubbing down in the cramped shower cubicle with its odorless soap and lukewarm water. But he made it to the privacy of his quarters and his whole body sort of just locked up right there in the center of the room, as if now that he wasn't operating under the scrutiny of HYDRA and all of its heads, the link between his brain and his limbs shut off. He fell into a half kneel, half sit as his ability to stand fled just as quickly; his legs folded up beneath him, his back slumped against the edge of his cot, and his hands fisted on either side of his ruined pants.

And he stayed there.

For hours maybe, because that's what it felt, even if he had no way to measure the time within the four white, windowless walls of his prisonhome. And where before he couldn't shake the intruding faces of his victims, now he couldn't even picture them. Because whatever had laid waste to that highly trained team of wizards and ICW delegates hadn't been him.

It had been his hand, his wand, his magic but he'd been led, possessed, by an energy and a power that was terrifyingly foreign even though he knew exactly from where it came.

"It worked."

There wasn't a chill to herald his arrival as there'd been before, Harry just looked up and Death was there.

"You can feel it, can't you quark? You nourished it, fed it the souls of those who wronged it, wronged you, and now our Heart does as intended."
His magic was bound, the collar reactivated before Diggory even hit the ground, but he still felt it, something not quite his magic vibrating in his bones. He'd told Hermione once that there didn't exist words that could describe it, that it was like trying to explain color to someone without sight, song to someone who couldn't hear sound. Words, as fleeting and meaningless as they could sometimes be, just weren't able.

"It's changing you, slowly, piece by little piece, but it's there. I can see it."

Harry quivered, just the once, the movement starting at the base of his spine and rattling all the way up to his clenched teeth. And for a minute he showed his hand, that awful feeling lurking just at the edge of numbness. Not guilt for the lives he'd taken or even the pride he should by all rights be feeling for doing HYDRA proud, no it was terror. Because he knew what he'd looked like drenched in those wizards’ blood, knew what his allies saw when they'd looked at him, and it shook him to the marrow. Because the gore spattered image he'd become was the exact antithesis of everything he'd ever tried or wanted to be.

Death circled around Harry, came to a stop just before him, then knelt so they sat nearly level with each other. Harry wanted to flinch when he placed a cool, dry hand at the back of his neck, but the energy that required was more than he had.

"Release, quark. It's all right." The man, the entity, sat so close their foreheads nearly touched and their exhalations mingled between them. "Push it out, scream and rage and break something, there is no room for judgment between us. Not any longer. After all this is a time of mourning."

"What?" The word barely existed Harry had said it so quietly, but as close as they were Death still heard. "What are we mourning?"

"You." He flinched, but the hand at his neck didn't allow him to go far. "We mourn Harry Potter for he's dying at last."

There was that terror again, eeking through the cracks of his numbness, but finally there was something else. Anticipation.

"Let him go, let him end. And once he has, what's left of you will finally be worthy of calling himself my equal."

Harry's hands, still tangled in the fabric of his trousers, clenched until he felt the prick of his fingernails along his palms, that feeling rattling his bones was growing so strong it burned.

His collar was on.

They'd turned it back on before he turned it on them. They hadn't forgotten, he'd felt that awful contraction at the base of his skull when his magic was abruptly cut off from him.

*His collar was on.*

But he felt warm, not from the unreliable air conditioning unit he couldn't control, but from something inside him. And along his knuckles, across the top of his clenched fists, magic danced.

Steve hadn't had much contact with the Avengers post alien invasion. Thor had gone off world to deal with Loki, Barton sent off to recover from his brainwashing misadventure with Natasha to keep him company, while Banner and Stark were rooming together up in Stark Tower. Fighting off a hoard of aliens and the disgruntled god that led them was a great bonding experience, but it turned out they didn't have much in common outside of that.
So a visit from Natasha while he was dislodging the wreckage of a two hovercar pileup from the roof of the Helmsley Building was a surprise. Even if not an unwelcome one.

"They have machines to do all that for you now, you know." It was like she appeared from nowhere. If he didn't know any better, he'd think she could teleport, but he knew from experience even that made a very distinctive sound. "No need to do all the heavy lifting yourself."

"Elevator's down and we're thirty stories up," he said around a grunt as the main body of one chariot finally wrenched free of the bit of roof it'd caved through. "This was quicker than waiting for them to put together a rig. How did you get up here?"

"Walked same as you."

He cast a dubious look over her choice of footwear and completely unruffled appearance, then shook it off just as quick. If anyone could walk up thirty-five flights of stairs in a pair of heeled boots and not lose a single curl, it'd be Natasha.

"You come up all this way to chat?" he asked, focus already shifting to the next chariot, it'd been torn in half by something and he couldn't see the other half anywhere nearby.

"There's a job."

"I've already got one."

"It's big."

Steve paused a familiar trickle of dread starting in his gut. "Not more aliens?"

"Worse actually." She circled around so they were face to face. "How much do you know about the wizarding community?"

It was like a punch to the gut, the reminder of their existence. Outside of the stray, half formed thought, he didn't try to linger on the memories of wizards and magic and the boy who'd introduced him to it all. There was too much grief to unpack there, and it had already been established that Steve's preferred way of coping was by not.

"I feel like you already know." He crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back on the half wall that protected any rooftop visitors from a thirty-story drop. "So why don't you tell me?"

Natasha quirked a little half smile. "Unconfirmed reports say they were working alongside HYDRA with the intent to double cross. The Commandos encountered them on the field a few times and remain the only force to return from such an encounter with all your men alive and intact," she recited. "There's no concrete evidence, but from your unprecedented success against wizards of HYDRA and a few redacted files, we suspect you might have worked directly with one or more at some point during the war. Close?"

"Expectedly. SHIELD has allies in the wizarding world?"

"Not for lack of trying. They're very insular, almost impossible to get a man in. Or at least they were."

Steve didn't like the sound of that. "Were?"

Natasha's head dipped to the side, she looked genuinely curious as she said. "You've been awake now almost a month. You haven't picked up a paper? Looked at the news?"
"I was a little caught up processing the whole waking up in a new century thing, and then there
were-you know- the aliens and their aftermath to deal with."
"Maybe pick up a paper on the way home tonight. Or has anyone shown you the internet?
Google?"

"I've got a working knowledge." He shrugged. "You said you have a job so what's it got to do with
the wizards? You want me to be your man in?"

"Were, remember? There's been some...upheaval among the wizards, they're not so much a secret
as they used to be."

Work on the crashed Chitauri vehicles completely forgotten, Steve moved closer to Natasha so as
not to miss a single word. "What does that mean?"

"Almost four years ago there was an incident. The official story was an agricultural community
somewhere in England was attacked by a couple of gangbangers, the casualties on both sides were
high, both groups nearly wiped out. The farmers who survived received healthy reparations and
their attackers locked away for good."

"Okay," Steve said, already sensing the 'but' sure to follow. "What's the real story?"

"The farmers were wizards. They'd been working that land for decades, hidden under serious spell
work that kept any of their neighbors from knowing they even existed. But then the spells failed
and the farmers in the surrounding area found a plot of land bigger than all of theirs combined right
where it hadn't been when they'd gone to sleep that evening. They went to investigate, the wizards
tried to drive them off their land, and things got out of hand.

"The ending stays the same, the wizards die and take most of their attackers with them." Too
casual for the morbid tale, Natasha hopped up on the half wall Steve had been leaning against, not
even sparing a glance to the steep drop right at her back. "That was the start of their exposing. The
first recorded event of their secrecy spells and wards failing. But it didn't stop, didn't slow down.

"It started in England; entire homes and city blocks appearing from nowhere, encounters with
suspicious figures in robes that always ended violently, a dragon flying over Wales. Word spread
and then footage got out and the government couldn't keep covering it up.

"The conspiracist got ahold of it, started doing some digging and found decades of coverups where
non-magicals were injured, had their minds meddled with, or outright killed at the hands of
wizards. They formed a coalition with the intent of uncovering the truth and forcing measures into
place to keep those without magic safe from this new sect of humans. It grew out of hand."

"Things of that nature usually do," Steve scoffed.

"They call themselves the Task Force of Traditional Biological Preservation, they started off
mostly harmless with a few hundred in the British Isles but four years from their start and they're in
the thousands. They have recruiting centers on nearly every continent and they're hunting wizards."

That dread in his gut was only getting worse, this was a story that was too familiar. "For what?"

"Registration, regulation, control is what they claim. They want to make wizards easily
identifiable, restrict where they live, where they cast. But this isn't a sanctioned government entity,
the only rules they have are the ones they impose upon themselves and there's no accountability
among their ranks, things get out of hand very easily and people on both sides end up dead.

"SHIELD has done their best to clean up the mess but this task force is proving surprisingly
difficult to snuff out and the wizards had been evading every offer of aid we extended. Turns out they'd made an alliance already with another entity, but it went bad, really bad from the sound of it, and now what's left of their government has come begging us to help fight enemies on both sides."

She was drawing it out on purpose, withholding that one last piece of information. "Who was the other entity, Natasha?"

Her eyes darted across his face, searching for something. He didn't know if she'd found it, but she gave him his answer anyway. "HYDRA."

Steve threw his head back and sighed.

HYDRA.

*Of fucking course.*

There were four wizards waiting for them back at SHIELD's New York headquarters, all dressed in pressed shirts and neat slacks rather than the robes Steve had been expecting. They were exceedingly polite, standing upon Steve and company's entrance and introducing themselves with firm handshakes all around. There was Babajide Akingbade, the wizard in charge, his right-hand Ernest Macmillan, and delegates from the American and Japanese ministries, Herron and Iko.

"You've met Director Fury," Maria Hill, Fury's new deputy said, taking over introductions as they took seats around the table. "We're joined by Agent Romanoff and Captain Rogers."

"Agent Romanoff, Captain Rogers," Akingbade acknowledged with a nod of his head. "We truly appreciate-"

"I'm sorry but you said Captain Rogers?" Herron cut in before her boss could get too deep into the pleasantries. "As in Captain *Steve* Rogers?"

"The one and the same," Steve confirmed.

Akingbade frowned, not bothering to hide his confusion. "I don't understand the significance."

America's delegate fluttered her hands nervously before folding them on the tabletop in an attempt to control herself. "Captain America, he fought in the muggles' second world war. But you were meant to be dead, have been for decades."

"I was found in the Arctic sometime around a month ago," Steve explained, only mildly put off by her strange behavior, "buried in ice and in some kind of stasis. I didn't think the wizarding world knew much of me."

"Most don't," Macmillan said, just as bewildered as Akingbade. "But you seem familiar with us?"

"Captain Rogers was brought on to work with you as he's dealt with wizards in the past, worked with one even," Natasha stepped in. Steve had given her, Fury and Hill a brief rundown of his encounters with magic on the way in to this meeting. "Of anyone in SHIELD he knows best what to expect from your world."

Understanding Steve didn't get washed over Akingbade's expression. "That must have been some sixty or so years ago? Sixty-four?"

"Closer to seventy."
"Who was your associate in the wizarding world? Out of curiosity."

Steve frowned, unsure of the man's sudden interest. "A dead man, like all the rest. Like I said it was close to seventy years ago and he was taken before the war's end. I doubt you'd know him."

"Yes, of course," Macmillan said. "Forgive us, we don't often here of our kind taking an interest in muggle wars, let alone aiding in them. Call it professional curiosity. But to the issue at hand."

Natasha nodded. "Your soured alliance with HYDRA."

"That exactly," Iko said. "We put our trust in them and during this...tumultuous time in our society, their betrayal is devastating."

"Why did you?" Steve asked evenly. "Put your trust in them? I've heard SHIELD offered their help during the early days of your crisis, but you chose the Nazis."

"We were ignorant," Akingbade said. "The wizarding world is far removed from muggle history, we didn't know the sort of men they were. And they came to us at our most vulnerable, offered us what looked like salvation, and we, in our desperation believed them so easily. He was good at it, their leader, at hiding what they were and what they'd done."

"Dressing the shit up in sweet perfumes and pretty disguises," the words sounded too bitter to be Herron's own, even as she said them. "He made it very easy to miss his true intentions."

Well, that did sound like HYDRA.

"What was the deal?" Hill asked. "What did they offer that made you jump into that alliance without doing any kind of homework on these people?"

"A new breed of wizards."

That was an answer absolutely none of them had been expecting. Even Natasha's carefully blank expression faltered long enough to show her surprise. "Excuse me?"

"Our magic is failing, you've seen this," Macmillan said. "The wards keeping us hidden and safe are falling and letting in the likes of this task force who are proving to be a threat. But what you haven't seen is the sickness. It's a plague, incredibly infectious and deadly. Casualties are high and the ones who do manage to survive lose their magic. We had no cure, not even the start of the solution, and we were dying; projections showed at the rate we were going our entire population would be wiped out in just a lifetime.

"But then Strucker came, walked right into our Ministry and he had a girl. She'd been a victim of the disease, survived but lost all ability to cast magic, but he'd fixed her, made her stronger, more powerful than an we've seen before. He had a solution to the greatest threat to our people and all he wanted in return was to study us, understand how our magic worked. How could we refuse him?"

"So what went wrong?"

Herron shrugged. "Nothing at first. We'd been working together for years, peaceably we thought, but then just a few months ago we began running into delays, new problems every day. They needed more wizards, more magic, more time and all the while the plague and the muggles were wiping us out. We went to them for answers and when they had nothing but excuses, we began talking off pulling out."

"That was when they attacked," Macmillan said. "The wizards whose magic we helped to restore,
mages we call them, attacked us on their orders and wiped out the contingent we sent to renegotiate our alliance. They kept one alive to deliver the message that the alliance was broken.

"After, we could no longer reach them, the ports of communication and travel between us went dead. We suspect they've all been destroyed."

"So from what I'm gathering," Hill said slowly, "you spent years working with HYDRA, breeding-in your own words- a type of wizard more powerful than any you've seen before. And once you'd helped engineer an entire team of these...mages, they betray you, slaughter your men, and cut off all means of reaching them. Right so far?"

"So far," Akingbade sighed.

"And now you've come to us, after the worst of the damage has been done. Seeking aide in exchange for...what?"

"Your continued existence. We didn't see what he was before, the evil that man and his organization were capable of. But we do now and we're afraid because, with those mages, he can do anything he wants and no force on earth can stop them."

Natasha and Steve exchanged a loaded look. Not even three weeks post Loki and they were already looking at a new world-ending crisis.

Hill braced her hands on the table and let out one quiet, weary sigh before pulling the notepad she'd left mostly untouched closer to herself. "We're going to need a lot more intel. Starting with HYDRA, name every single person you ever had contact with."

"Just the two in charge, Strucker- Baron Wolfgang Von Strucker, and his second in command Dr. List. The rest were medics, lab assistants, guards, we were never introduced."

"What of their location? Strucker did his work in house, right? And you had access. Where was it? As exact of a location as you can manage, please."

"We don't know."

Maria looked up from her notes. "You don't know?"

"Our two locations were connected via a magical travel network, floo, we spoke the assigned name of our locations, in this instance 'Strucker's Lab', stepped into the fireplace, and were transported to the connected fireplace."

"Fireplace," Maria repeated blankly. "You walked through fireplaces."

"It's a very common means of magical travel," Herron said defensively. "In most cases the addresses of each fireplace connected to the floo network is recorded by the Department of Magical Transportation. But as part of our agreement with Strucker, we were to leave no record of his exact location."

"And this never struck you as suspicious?"

"He had his secrets, so did we."

"Okay." Hill tapped her pen on the face of her notepad, the only sign of her frustration, before moving on. "Tell us more about these mages. How many had been successfully created by the time of the betrayal?"
"Twenty at the least. Most considered failed, but his last six showed promise."

"Failed how?"

Iko hesitated just a moment before answering. "In order to restore their magic, we drew from the power of healthy wizards, volunteers, like a transfusion of blood. It gave them the ability to draw on their innate ability to cast but they were changed, they took on the magical qualities of their donor. Say for instance the donor was particularly good at herbology-"

"Magical botany," Macmillan supplied before the question could be asked.

"...then they had some degree of control over plant life. If the donor was a potions master the resulting mage could manipulate the chemical makeup of plants, animals, humans. The transfusion took the innate magical ability of the donor and amplified it in the mage."

That sounded pretty familiar to Steve. "Good becomes great," he murmured, mostly to himself.

"Those sound plenty dangerous to me," Natasha said. "How did they constitute as failures?"

"Because they had just the one skill, more powerful than any spell like it, yes, but before our abilities were varied, near endless even if they packed less of a punch.

"Strucker suggested we find someone of old blood, whose magical lineage could date centuries. He believed that their magic would be more potent and so would offer a wider variety in the mages. We were able to find one such donor and from him came our six successful mages."

"But...?" Natasha prompted, sensing there was more to what they were saying.

"But the power was dark, deadly." Iko's voice was hushed as she spoke. "The donor's magic was rooted in death and when it went to the mages..."

"Bad became worse," Steve murmured.

"Exactly. They kill, they rot, they destroy. Their power is catastrophic."

"And the donor? He's still with Strucker so he could make more of these mages?"

Herron shook her head. "There's a limit to how many mages can be made from one wizard, like a blood transfusion, taking too much will kill the donor. Most other donors couldn't produce more than five, to try anymore would kill him."

"But they could try to find others like him?" Hill wondered. "What do you know about this donor? Do you have a name? Where he came from?"

Macmillan made to respond, but Akingbade beat him with a firm, "Nothing. All donors were pulled from a pool of volunteers, we knew none of them."

"Whole lot of nothing your giving us," Fury said, speaking up for the first time since the start of the meeting cum interrogation. "You expect us to do anything with the little you're offering?"

"He's dangerous," Macmillan said, desperation tinging his tone.

"Yeah, Strucker's dangerous, most HYDRA members are."

"No, the donor." The other three wizards gave their colleague sharp looks, but he ignored them, focus entirely on Fury. "The kind of magic this donor has to possess in order to create those mages
is dangerous. Strucker might not be able to use him to create more mages, but he will still find some way to utilize him."

There was a long moment where no one spoke, Fury remained reclined in his seat sizing up Macmillan, searching for cracks.

"All right," he finally drawled, leaning forward to fold his arms on the table "let's negotiate."

There was a lot to think about after that meeting with the wizards. They didn't have much knowledge to offer, but what they did was damning. And with New York still cleaning itself up after the world's first alien invasion, the last thing Nick Fury wanted to be dealing with was the threat of a joint Nazi/mutant-wizard attack.

Days like these made that pipe dream of retirement so much more fucking tempting.

"I heard we had some high-profile visitors this afternoon."

Without even having to think, Fury was drawing the S&W from the folds of his trench coat and leveling at the motherfucker stupid enough to break into his private office.

At the other end of the barrel, Secretary of the World Security Council, Alexander Pierce, lounged in his seat, sipping at his finger of whiskey unbothered.

"Oh, it's this motherfucker." Fury tucked the Smith back in its holster and plucked up the glass Pierce had already poured for him. "Insight's lost your interest already?"

"It's been put on hold for the time being," Pierce shrugged. "A few new developments have come into play."

Fury snorted into his drink. "Fucking wizards."

"So it's true then? They accepted your offer?"

"Only after handing over the magical equivalent of the super soldier serum to a supposed to be extinct Nazi organization."

Pierce's nonchalant front was betrayed by the sharpness in his ice blue eyes, he was interested. "Sounds like a story."

Fury sunk into his seat with a sigh, there were only two people he'd ever allowed to see this unguarded, bone weary, human side of him. One had been skewered by an alien staff and the other sat across from him. "How much time do you have?"

"However much you need," Pierce crossed his leg over the other, getting comfortable, but his gaze never wavered from Fury. "Tell me everything."

A/N: Ya'll we did it. We stuck through all that doom and gloom and now it's time for... the good stuff.
"They told him everything?"

At the front of his skull, just behind his eyes, Strucker was forming a migraine. He'd risen for the day not three hours ago and it was already shite. He was back on a video conference with his fellow heads, Pierce having been the one to call it with some unfortunate news. Their betrayed wizards had wasted no time at all running right into SHIELD's open arms.

"Not everything. Their version of events are predictably skewed, and they purposely omitted a few key details: Potter's identity being the biggest."

"For what reason?" Hale wondered.

"They want pity, and it'd be very hard to gain any such thing if SHIELD knew the wizards were complicit in bringing in the boy."

"Complicit," Strucker laughed. "They led the charge."

Pierce shrugged, unconcerned with the semantics. "Either way, they don't know about him. Or what we plan to do with him."

The Banker looked surprised. "You still want to go ahead with the attack?"

"Why wouldn't we? In enough time I'm sure this alliance could be some cause for concern, but what can they do in a month? Everything they know- which wasn't very much all things considered- they've either already shared or chose to keep to themselves."

"SHIELD knows we haven't died off, they know we have the mages, and they know we plan to do something with them. And that's all. Now is not the time to get nervous and start second guessing ourselves."

"The Secretary is right," the Sheik said. "Let them squirm, there's nothing they can do before it's done."

Pierce nodded his thanks. "We keep to it. So tell me, how close are we to fully prepared?"

"We're in the final stages," Hale reported. "The security plan for the memorial service is coming in today, I have a man on standby to make any amendments needed and swap out the original before it's distributed among secret service."

"I've a shipment of gear scheduled for drop off the end of this week," the Banker said.

"And a few additions to your armory the week after," added the Sheik.

"My reserves are headed to Cardiff in the morning for their first blooding." Was Strucker's own contribution. "And my main unit to Romania to stir the pot a bit more. We want the Task Force just on the edge of frenzy in time for the service."

Pierce smiled, beyond pleased. "Travel and lodgings for the big day have been arranged. We'll be just on the border of the city but still well out of the way of the fireworks. I'll have the itinerary
distributed end of day."

"Shall we sign off then?" The Banker asked. "Reconvene in a week's time?"

There was a ripple of agreement, a few polite partings, and then the screens all around him went dark.

Strucker stood there in that moment, in the quiet, soaking every bit of it in because now they were in the final stages, and there was no more time for rest or quiet. From here on it was going to be constant planning, moving, acting until...until it was done. And after actual centuries of plotting and preparation, HYDRA's goal was finally going to be seen through.

Walden had never been afraid to admit that Potter scared the shit out of him. Looking at him at first, he didn't seem like one to instill fear, he was skinny and short and maybe those haunted green eyes were a little unsettling, but he wasn't anywhere near intimidating enough for someone of Walden's stature to fear. The others certainly didn't.

Seeing Walden brought to his knees that first day had earned Potter a healthy bit of wariness from the mages, and watching him fight on the mats, just the barest fraction of his power free, helped skew that wariness to the side of cautious respect. But nothing- not even witnessing Potter executing those muggles in the recruitment center, or slaughtering the best men the ICW could put together with no wand and a shadow patronus to haunt their worst dreams, could scrounge up more than bit of awe.

And he could understand why. Potter was meant to be on their side. Whatever Strucker had done in the months between their rebirth and his official addition to the team had made him wholly loyal to the Baron. They didn't fear him because they were sure HYDRA had beaten the threat out of him.

But Walden knew better, Potter had touched his soul and the connection had not been one sided. He'd felt the weight of his magic, how powerful it was, how ancient and it was not the sort to be pushed down and controlled for long. Eventually it would tear free from its constraints and turn on the ones who'd tried to control him, just as it'd done the aurors.

He could see it already, the change in Potter. He still looked to Strucker with unreserved trust and adoration, but when the man wasn't around there was confusion too. Maybe even a bit of uncertainty. And more than once during training, he hesitated just before the kill, not enough to cause suspicion, but Walden was looking and so he noticed.

He knew eventually he would have a choice to make, a side to choose. He could help the boy who had caused his life and world so much ruin, or he could regain his position as number one and lead HYDRA into their glorious future.

A tough one for sure, and yet when it came time to it the choice was a surprisingly easy one to make.

Harry's team was sent out to kill again two weeks after the first job and this time around went markedly better than the first. The task force had upped security after the first attack, enough so that it felt more like a slightly unevenly matched fight rather than the straight massacre the last had been, but it was still a fight that ended in their favor. Not to mention Harry wasn't shot again which was an enormous plus in his book.

Meanwhile the mages made from the donors who'd come before Harry were sent out on their own
op the week before. By all rights it was a success: their marks were handled accordingly, none of their own were injured, and they made it out without casting any suspicion on HYDRA, but Strucker was still less than pleased with their performance.

Soft, he called them, because when the begging started (as it always did) the mages had shown hesitation, one even apologized to the women who pleaded to be weakness among HYDRA's ranks could not be allowed. So he tossed them to his favored team, told them to 'toughen them up' and that they had a week to get it done.

However Harry had all of zero interest in coaching the baby mages on how to get through a mission with some degree of dignity, so he fell back and allowed his second in command to take the lead.

"Our first was hard too," Walden tried commiserating with the nervous looking team. "The way they were all lined up in rows, powerless to do anything- to even try to save their own lives. It wasn't what I thought it would be. But to show hesitation, doubt, compassion is to show weakness, and weakness is the antithesis of HYDRA."

"They told us we were failures," a young woman with hair like a Weasley whispered. "That we wouldn't ever be needed outside the lab. We're not meant to be killers."

"Neither was I," Angel said, then gestured to Iola who sat on the sparring mats behind Mihaela, weaving braids into her dark hair. "Or her." He pointed at Harry, leaning against the far wall, shoulder to shoulder with Fen. "Or him. But we signed ourselves to HYDRA, they gave us our magic back and in return we're whatever they need us to be."

Harry bit on the corner of his lip, suppressing a smile. He'd gotten through to his team that day on the plane, they hadn't questioned any of Strucker's methods since. The smile went away on its own though, when his gaze darted over to Walden. Or, at least, most of them hadn't.

Nothing had come of the man's treasonous confession whispered that night in Harry's quarters, but a lot had happened the past two weeks, and there was no statute of limitations on wrongdoings within HYDRA.

"I understand that," admitted another of the reserves, a man nearly twice Harry's height and completely bald despite being relatively young looking. "I accept it. But I don't have to be happy about it."

"None of us are," Harry sighed. He was the head of his team, he shouldn't leave them to do all the work. "We're not here because offing muggles is fun." There was a scoff from the other side of the room and he quickly amended that statement. "Okay, well, Mihaela is. But the rest of us are here because we have a debt to pay. This is us paying it, we step out that door we're HYDRA, nothing we do can reflect poorly on them. And weakness reflects the poorest."

"What's your debt," a small woman with a surly face who Harry remembered was named something flower themed asked.

Harry raised a brow. "My what?"

"Your debt. You didn't lose your magic, so why are you here fighting for HYDRA?"

He considered for a moment, mulled over the question. "Atonement," was what he finally settled on.

"What does that mean?"
"I'm the reason you all are here," Harry shrugged. "Or haven't you heard? I caused the wizarding world's armageddon. I caused all of those deaths, caused you to get sick, lose your magic. I'm here to atone for my sins."

"I don't believe you." That was the last of the reserves, a boy maybe a few years older than Harry, who spoke with the same brogue as McGonagall. "I know you, we went to school together, and I saw how you were every year fighting off one evil or the other to keep the rest of us safe. And the battle, against You-Know-Who, I was there. You were willing to die for us, people said you did. You wouldn't have tried to wipe us all out after going through all the trouble of getting rid of the dark lord.

"So what was it really? How did all of this," he gestured to the room at large, but they all knew it went even further, "happen?"

The reserves weren't the only ones listening closely anymore, his team had stopped slacking off to move closer, hear whatever answer he contrived. But Harry didn't know what to say, HYDRA knew nothing of the Heart and if they got even a whiff of the real source of his magic...what?

What would happen? It would be a boon, wouldn't it? Any loyal HYDRA agent would have already revealed their connection with Death so it could be used toward their greater good. And he was loyal.

Strucker had made sure of it.

"I was a kid," he said finally and everyone leaned in closer. "I hadn't finished Hogwarts and I wasn't exactly the best of students even while I was there. To go against a wizard with the breadth of power and experience the dark lord did, was a death sentence. And I wasn't ready to die.

"So I dabbled in magics I shouldn't have, the kind I didn't understand, and it destroyed me and the rest of the world right after. But we're not here to cry over my mistakes, we're here to correct yours."

He drew his wand, felt the telltale rush of his magic releasing, and he pointed it at the ground before him. He didn't know a spell to conjure illusions or create golems, but he wanted a dummy, a little girl with a gap tooth smile and blue dress, and that was enough. He didn't incant, but she was there.

He surveyed the four reserves, searching out the weakest link and settled on the tall, shiny headed one, Crane, he privately decided to name him, because he had the lanky legs of one and he couldn't be bothered to learn his real name. "You," the man twitched and Harry read it as the weakness it was. "Kill her."

His eyes grew huge, unnatural in his pale face. "I don't..."

Harry shook his head, uninterested in any half-baked excuses. "Kill her." He said again, and this time his tone left no room to argue.

Crane's eyes darted around, frantically searching for sympathy or aid or something among his comrades, but none so much as met his eye for fear of being called out next. He wilted, sensing the pointlessness of trying to argue, and muttered. "I'll need a plant."

Harry flicked his wand again, the concrete at his feet cracked open and writhing vines spilled across the floor.

"How do you want me to..."
Harry shrugged, the *how* couldn't matter less to him. "Dealer's choice."

He moved then, so that Crane and the girl stood facing only each other and watched.

The vines twitched, slowly unfurled, then crept from the cracks in the concrete. They were awkward at first, while Crane worked to secure control, but their jerky motion quickly evened out, turned into a slither too much like that of the mascot of his once rival house.

The little girl laughed when the vines reached her, tried to pet them as they twined up her twig like legs. That lasted right up until they crawled around her waist, curled up her stomach, and began their slow constriction around her little chest. Crane's face was scrunched into something strained and unpleasant, his entire body shook. It was easy to see why Strucker had been displeased with this team's performance.

It was over quickly, once the vines reached her neck, they pulled tight enough to snap and she dropped. Crane's entire body crumpled into itself right after and the vines fell away, he stared at the tiny corpse with eyes near full, as he panted and shook like he'd just ran a long distance.

There was quiet for a minute, as they all took in the sorry state of Crane, and then Harry said. "What did you see?"

Red rimmed eyes darted up to his face and Crane's mouth flapped open and shut. "W-what?"

"As you did it, what were you seeing?"

His brows drew down, confused and angry. "A girl. She was a little girl."

"Wrong." Harry moved in so he stood just over her corpse, then reached out to nudge it with his toe. It crumpled to dust under his touch. "She was nothing. Dirt. Dust. Do you cry when you sweep up the dust bunnies beneath in your bed?" He didn't bother waiting for a response. "Next time you face those muggles, remember her and remember they're just the same. Dust. Dirt. Nothing."

He flicked his wand once more and the dust reformed into the perfect image of a little girl in a blue dress with a gap-toothed smile.

"Do it again," he ordered. "And this time, don't *cry.*"

They each took a turn, the reserve team, each with their own golem to face. The Weasley look alike, killed a man with a stooped back and kind smile eight times before she could do so with no expression. Harry's own school mate, who he took to simply calling Hogwarts in his head, took nine tries cutting down a woman heavily pregnant. The small woman Harry decided looked like an Ivy due to her poisonous demeanor and abilities, needed only two to handle a golem exactly identical to herself.

It took *hours.* By the time they were done, Harry's team had retired to the training mats and his wand felt hot in his hands. They were tired and cranky and emotionally wrung out, but the job was done, not a single of the reserves so much as flinched when cutting down their opponents.

How they'd do when faced with an actual, living breathing person was yet to be determined, but he'd done his part.

"They're really going to send us out then?" the short woman said as Harry's team began to rouse, sensing the end of their session closing in.
"They've something planned," Harry said. "Something big. It'll take all of us to get it done."

"Do we know what?"

He shrugged. "I suppose they didn't see it as information pertinent to our success." He bit down on his tongue almost before the words were fully formed. That sounded almost too much like criticism. "They'll tell us what we need to know, when we need to know it. Until then rest up, keep working at this, Strucker said you'd have a week to be ready so...be ready."

He left then, not bothering with an official dismissal, but the guard posted up at the door stopped him before he could make it far and gestured Harry follow him with a tilt of his head. He led him up to Sub-2, to Strucker's office where the man already waited, tinkering with what looked like an older version of Harry's collar while on the wall across from him a screen broadcasted video of the training room.

"It looks as if things went well," the Baron said, peering up at him over the rim of his monocle for just the part of a moment.

Harry shrugged. "They at least won't cry next time. With more work they might even be able to get through it without their hands shaking. We'll get it done in the time given." He hesitated. "A week, you said?"

"And some days," Strucker confirmed with a little nod of his head. "They're curious about what I have planned next for them."

It wasn't a question, they both knew already he'd seen and heard it all. But Harry nodded anyway. "They are. We are. But not knowing won't make us any less effective."

"You wouldn't be in charge if I didn't believe that." Strucker set the collar to the side, finally allowing Harry the full force of his attention. "But there's no merit in keeping you uninformed. After all, there are no secrets between you and I."

His agreement was immediate. "None."

He almost missed it, but for just a moment the corner of the Baron's mouth ticked up in amusement, appreciation, he didn't know. "We have a job, the job, the one you all were created to carry out."

"What will you have us do?"

Strucker didn't bother with any long pauses or any other theatrics. No what he had to say was dramatic enough all on its own. "You are going to kill the president of the United States."

Slowly, Harry sank into the seat opposite Strucker. "Why?"

He shouldn't question, shouldn't challenge, but this was big, and Strucker smiled, not angry though he should be.

"Because you're ready. And it's time we made our play."

"And killing the president it will..." he paused, grasping for some explanation to make this all make sense. "Weaken the government, throw them into turmoil?"

That was HYDRA's whole thing, chaos for the sake of order, but Strucker shook his head. "Not as much as we'd like. Killing him will cause some panic, maybe a little bit of fear, but these
Americans are used to death, it does not shake them as it did once. No, the killing itself won't be what pushes them toward turmoil, it will be the motive behind the assassination, the people behind it."

"I don't understand."

"We've been starting wars for decades; feeding lies, gassing fires, crafting enemies, and we've learned so much from the art.

"This organization is capable of starting, finishing, and winning wars through sheer power and fear. The thing is, fear doesn't last, it's temporary. But respect? Awe? Love. They last forever."

He looked at Harry, living proof of his words, and could barely contain his exhilaration.

"Men have been slaughtering masses, sacrificing their children, submitting their very freedom to the will and wraths of their gods since their creation. It's part of their coding, an intrinsic piece of who they are.

"But as their species did, so too does their conception of gods evolve. No longer is he one man or creature or entity, formless and immaterial. No, now gods wield lightning and suits of gold and shields of stars, now gods walk among us.

"And this here- killing Ellis and all that follows, will make us gods worthy of the bloodiest religion."

Strucker was mad. A reason to worry all on its own, but more than that, he was conniving and ruthless, entirely immoral and absolutely brilliant. He was everything Tom Riddle would have been had he not lost his sanity and that little bit of humanity to seven fragmented pieces of his soul.

Harry left the man's presence robbed completely of words, still trying to process the precise steps to world domination that had been laid out before him. Trying to work past the equal parts terror and awe elicited by the baron's no-nonsense delivery of a plan that would lead to mass genocide.

And thanks to his distraction he didn't even notice the hostility radiating from the single guard escorting him to dinner until the man decided to do something about it.

"Not everyone is convinced."

Harry's attention shifted from his silent turmoil to his surroundings and the people occupying it so quickly, he almost stumbled over his own two feet. His guard didn't slow their brisk pace or even turn his head to fully acknowledge Harry, but he was squinting at him from the corner of his eye, a little frown turning down his mouth.

Harry was quick to mirror the expression. "Excuse me?"

"I was here when they brought you in. And when you killed my friend in some attempt to run."

That was new. The escape attempt he knew, but had he really killed someone while trying? Even when he pushed, all he could remember were hazel eyes and the taste of blood in his mouth. Had he bit someone…to death?

But that couldn't be right, because the crescent shaped scar on the inside of his forearm was shaped suspiciously like his own teeth. He'd bitten himself.
"Your old allies, they told us that you were stuck in your beliefs, couldn't be shaken no matter how sweet the deal, and you proved that truth time and time again.

"Any time there wasn't a guard in your mouth or a needle feeding you sedatives you were spitting and cursing anything to do with the baron, with us. I watched you steal a woman's soul. Sucked it right out of her when she was only trying to get you breathing again, just because you could."

No that wasn't true. He remembered her, the lab aide who'd been the first to try and help him through a breathing fit during his...re-education? No, this had been before. He couldn't remember what he'd been there for, but he remembered her face and how strangely gentle her hands had been before he'd wrapped his own around her throat. But it had been an accident...self-defense. One or the other, so many of his memories involving the lab were spotty, but he knew he hadn't hurt her (taken her soul?) out of malice.

"Now you're trying to sell me the fact that all it took was a few weeks isolation and a couple beatings and suddenly you're...reformed? One of us? Like those words 'Hail Hydra' don't choke you every time on their way out."

And that was just another thing he only had pieces of, his re-education, but he knew it wasn't quite so mild as the guard made it seem. There'd been darkness, endless darkness, and pain in his ribs, his throat, his feet, everywhere. And fire. Cold, white fire tearing through his synapses.

"No. I don't buy it."

Harry stopped, right there in the middle of the hall, and the guard was forced to jerk to a halt too or else risk letting him out of grabbing distance. He stepped forward, right into the guard's space until the few inches height difference between them was glaring. Just the tip of his nose brushed the man's jaw as he stood on the tips of his toes to speak directly into his ear, and the words hissed in the millimeters of space between the two of them were as easy and sibilant as the S's that curled from Lord Voldemort's tongue.

"Hail Hydra."

He didn't move away, he maybe even pressed a little closer just to make the man sweat a little.

"It took more than a few weeks in isolation and a couple beatings to brand those words and their meaning into my core. But hail Hydra.

"I broke and I bled for my right to say those words. I'm Strucker's most valuable asset, his precious one, he believes with every atom, every particle, every quark of his being that I am his man and his alone because it was his hands that broke me, that shaped me into this thing I am now. To consider for even a moment that every piece of me is not devoted wholly to him implies that in some way he failed. And the baron does not fail. To suggest such a notion would mean what?"

The guard didn't answer, but Harry didn't really need him to, the question was mostly rhetorical anyway.

"Death. Now I personally, have no fear of death. What about you?"

The man's eyes, darker than soil after a storm locked on to his own, unflinching. But the second question left unanswered spoke what he refused to say.

"You are. Even if you tried to say otherwise. Everyone is just that little bit afraid of the unknown and what bigger unknown is there?
"Now all of that is just to say: buy it or not, makes no difference to me, because you're not an idiot and you've got some degree of self-preservation- it's that fear of death thing. So, you'll doubt in silence. You won't ever put your suspicions to words anywhere near the baron so as to keep your head connected to the rest of yourself. But you'll be watching. Always. For that one moment of inarguable proof. But until then…'

"Hail Hydra," the guard spat from between gritted teeth.

Harry smiled and he finally pulled away. "Hail Hydra," he agreed, then he turned opposite of the direction they'd been headed, and began marching without a look back, sure his guard would keep pace. "Let's skip mess and go on right to my cell, I've decided I'm not hungry anymore."

They didn't speak again the whole walk, didn't acknowledge each other when Harry broke off from the man's side to step into his cell. When the door swung shut and sealed itself behind him, Harry went straight for the shower, stripping as he went and not even bothering to wait for the water to go from ice cold to its usual lukewarm before stepping into the stall. He crowded under the showerhead and only when he was sure any sound he might make was muffled by the sharp patter of water against tile did he finally call for Death.

He was there in an instant, standing under the spray with just a scarce few centimeters between him and Harry. But where once he might have flinched back, tried to cover himself and preserve his modesty, Harry stood stone still.

"What did Strucker do to me?" He was careful to speak low, the bathroom was bugged he was sure, but if he kept his back to the room and his voice lower than the noise of the shower no one would hear a thing.

"You'll have to be more specific. I'm afraid he did much to you."

"My re-education. I remember moments scattered in between, but the important bits…the fire burned them all away."

Death studied him, didn't blink once even as water ran down his face. Even under the downpour some mystic force kept him dry and as perfectly composed as always. "Fire?"

"It's cold." Harry swept a hand through his hair, pushing the soaked strands out of his eyes. "And made me lose...everything. What was it?"

"Why do you ask now?"

He opened his mouth to answer, but a sharp shake of Death's head made him pause, he wasn't done yet.

"You've had these questions a while and you knew always that I had the answers. But you never asked, never wanted to know because you knew that that lab-grown loyalty he forced on you would never hold to the truth, and you couldn't get what we needed done if you didn't have it. So why do you ask now?"

"He said," Harry cleared his throat sharply, "that he didn't believe a couple weeks in isolations and some beatings were enough to have really reformed me. And everything that I know about this place is-it's clouded, it's some vague memory I just can't quite grab hold of, but the before, before the lab and Strucker and HYDRA, that's all crystal. And I remember how strongly I believed in my own convictions because I'm stubborn, I always have been. And he's right, being kept locked up in the dark was how I was raised, punches and knife wounds and whatever else they did to give me
these scars shouldn't have been enough to shake me. If anything it would have made me hold
tighter to what I believed.

"But I'm loyal. I believe in HYDRA, none of this is faked. So where in all the pieces that were
forgotten is the moment that I chose to abandon everything I fought and died for in order to
embrace the ideologies of HYDRA?"

"Did you?"

Harry blinked rapidly, trying to fight past a surge of confusion and failing. "Did I…?"

"Did you abandon everything you fought and died for in order to embrace the ideologies of
HYDRA? Or has this been one long game?"

"A game?" This had to do with the decayed forest and the conversation they'd had while there. But
even though he remembered all of Death, he couldn't remember that. All he knew was: "We had a
deal."

"We had a promise. I told you they would break you, that was always part of the plan, but you
made me a promise. You might have forgotten it, but I still hold you to it. So I ask again, did you?"
The answer should be easy. He'd just said that he was loyal, none of the fervent admiration he felt
for Strucker or the bone deep belief that they were on the right path was faked, but….

He had Death on his side, a primordial entity with power that could wipe the earth clean and he
hadn't said a word of the connection to Strucker.

Walden, his own second in command, had outright said he wasn't sure he believed in what they
were doing, but he still hadn't reported him for re-education.

The collar they called a safeguard had malfunctioned, he'd had access to his magic for that fraction
of a moment, and yet he hadn't submitted a request for maintenance.

And always he was haunted by that little voice in the corner of his consciousness, sneering at
Strucker's fatherly gestures, deriding every move and choice Harry himself made, questioning the
methods and morality of HYDRA.

So no, the answer wasn't as easy as it should be. But neither was it some Newtonian equation and,
despite what Snape might have had to say, he wasn't a complete idiot.

And Death was waiting.

"No," he whispered. "I didn't."

"Of course you didn't. These mortals are good at what they do, anyone else would have been theirs
already but-"

"But I'm not just anyone."

The look that crossed Death's face was one Harry had seen so little on him it took a moment to
place it as pride. "Exactly right. You bear my mark, wield my power, their absolute worst couldn't
break you."

And that was a nice thought, but… "I feel broken."

"No, quark. Not broken, just…fragile. You're weak, vulnerable as a baby bird, but only because
you're young still. Give it time, continue to grow, to feed and soon you'll be deadlier than the winged beasts that devoured the livers of gods."

"How? How do I get away from all this?"

"You'll play along a little longer, you'll do what he asks, and you won't give that man any reason to doubt you until we're tearing his soul from his chest."

That was probably the easiest thing Death had ever asked of him. He nodded, dashing water from his eyes, and said. "I can do that."

One week, three days later, they went to America.

Strucker moved with an army; the mages and the reserves, another dozen guards for safety, List and his posse, and a whole team of aides and orderlies they might run into on the road.

It was a miserable trip; eighteen hours spent four to a row with nothing but the backs of the military standard, beige seats in the row ahead to keep them entertained. By the time wheels touched down even the most stoic among their ranks were wincing as they shook out sore limbs.

Ground transport was no better: armored, box trucks with bright red letters that spelled out GARDA on their sides. And there were only five, parked in a neat row alongside each other and expected to carry the two hundred of their cohort.

"Lines are there," Harry sighed, already dreading squeezing himself into the windowless vehicles but gesturing his team in their direction anyway.

They stepped into place behind the reserves, who'd already gone through the check-in process and were being packed neatly into the first truck. But at Harry's turn to board, the aide in charge gave an apologetic little smile and shook her head.

"You've been reassigned, Convoy Three." She said, consulting the tablet tucked in the crook of her elbow. "Last minute change, approved by the Baron."

Harry shook his head. "I don't know…"

"Convoy Three," she repeated, pointing toward a fleet of personal vehicles parked in their own row. "Strucker's car. Bennett, would you…?"

In the queue just beside theirs, a guard with a head shaved clean but a set of heavy brows taking up much of the empty space, grunted in irritation but stepped out of line.

"Where's he going?"

The aide gestured again. "Strucker wants an escort."

That earned her a chest rumbling snort full of mocking amusement. "The dozen guys flanking his vehicle's not enough? He's got to have his boy on him too?"

"He's high value," the aide shrugged, "I wouldn't blame him." She looked just about done with the conversation, already checking her tablet for the next name. "Could you just escort him for me? I've got another thirteen to load up and we're meant to be first out."

"Well come on then."
Harry didn't rush to follow the grump, he took a second to look over his team, (though what he was checking them for he wasn't even sure) before reluctantly moving on. He kept a few paces back, whatever Bennett had against him he wasn't the least bit interested in hearing about it.

Strucker was already waiting in his vehicle when they reached him, window rolled down to watch their progress across the tarmac. When Harry pulled into sight, he offered a warm greeting and reached for the door handle. "Ride with me."

List was already in the passenger's seat, so Harry had no choice but to slide into the back just beside Strucker.

"This will be a quick ride," the Baron said, "we are close. The trucks' arrival, however, will be staggered, we can't have too many on the road at once, and I'll need at least one mage at my side when entering such dangerous waters."

"Do we not trust the Americans?" Harry wondered.

Strucker allowed him an indulgent smile. "It's not that we don't trust, but every man we are about to meet believes himself to be the most powerful in the room. With you at my side, I know that I am."

Harry imitated the smile while he let his cheeks flush red, just like anyone might when being complimented by one of the most powerful heads of HYDRA.

"Though I do admit to slightly ulterior motives for getting you alone one last time. There's a matter to be discussed."

And just like that, his false smile slid from his lips. "There is?"

"An unpleasant one, but necessary. Regarding loyalty."

Harry felt the bottom drop out from his stomach. Had Strucker heard him that day? He'd thought the water had covered all, but if there was a listening device inside the shower stall it's possible it could have picked it up. And even if anything Death had said couldn't be picked up, his one side of the conversation was still plenty damning.

"Whose?" he forced the one syllable to remain steady even while his heart thumped in his chest, he didn't know what Strucker knew, and until he did he would continue to play innocent.

"A mage's, I don't know the name…"

"Subject 348," List offered.

But that was..."Murphy. Walden Murphy," Harry said and Strucker nodded.

"That's the one. He came to you? Expressed doubts."

Harry almost heaved a sigh of relief, of course he wasn't talking about him, Strucker would never suspect him of being disloyal. But even while the knot in his stomach eased, another was forming in his throat, he'd been waiting for the other shoe to drop on Walden for a while now.

"He did," he confirmed. "Some weeks ago, after the recruiting center. I handled it."

"We heard." Strucker gave him a quick pat on the hand. "I only bring this up now because this is Murphy's home, his people, if anyone were to falter now it would be him. I know that I don't have
to tell you out of anyone how little we can afford any mishaps."

Harry rarely made eye contact with Strucker, remnants from his days facing master Legilimens, but also because it aided in his act of complete subservience. But right now, when the lives of one of his own was potentially on the line, he took the risk. "There will be none," he said, voice like steel. "Any uncertainty among mine has been squashed, I made sure of it."

"And should that same uncertainty rear its head when he's faced with the leader of his home country…?"

"Then I will handle it."

Another indulgent smile, another pat on the hand. "Good boy."

Just a few minutes later they were turning off the motorway and down a street that looked no different from the cities Harry had seen decimated in the Blitz. Husks of buildings, with their metal insides gaping and exposed and windows exploded all around them like crushed diamond, twisted toward the sky, huge gouges were torn right through the concrete street exposing their burst and gushing pipes beneath, and there was red everywhere, spattered across the side of buildings, reflecting off the metal of abandoned cars, pooling on the cracked asphalt.

Harry pressed closer to the glass, horrified but morbidly interested. What had happened here? This couldn't have been wizards, Strucker or anyone would have at least made mention if the tension between the magical world and muggles had gotten so bad. But that meant something else had done it, and though whatever it was had done it, and though whatever it was had long since passed, the weight of the widespread destruction and death it left in its wake was incredible. It made him shiver just to feel it. He couldn't see them, still cut off from the majority of his magic, but he still knew, shades and reapers alike lingered in the destruction.

"What did this?" He hadn't meant to speak, but his curiosity burned and fortunately Strucker was in an agreeable mood.

"Aliens."

Harry felt his mouth fall open and didn't even try to hide it. "Aliens."

"An army of them, tore a hole in the sky and destroyed the city."

Aliens. And none of them had thought to clue him in on their existence and apparent hostility?

"Someone stopped them?"

"They're called the Avengers. They are not on our side."

Of course they weren't. Why would the defenders of the human species against actual fucking aliens be on their side?

He didn't ask any more questions. And soon enough, they were pulling into a car park attached to the back of what looked like an abandoned emergency clinic.

A woman was waiting for them, young with a warm smile that did surprisingly well covering up the fact that she was a Nazi. The moment Strucker had unfolded his full height from the back seat, she was on them, hands outstretched and every last molar on display.

"Baron Strucker, welcome. I hope the flight in was comfortable?"
Strucker returned the uncomfortable grin, effortlessly charming. "Especially so."

"Fantastic, sir. Secretary Pierce is aware of your arrival, he's been overseeing a few last-minute arrangements, but he should be arriving-"

"Wolfgang!"

From a door that blended too well with the gray concrete of the walls, the man Harry knew even if he couldn't recall from where emerged. He was just as Harry knew he would be, as stately and dead eyed as an MP, with that subtly slimy air that made him entirely untrustworthy. His shark tooth smile took up too much space on his face as he reached out to clasp hands with Strucker.

"Welcome to America."

"It's been some years," Strucker said. "Since the-

"-Strasberg incident. I remember, most fun I've had in decades." Pale eyes turned on Harry. "You're escort for the evening?"

Something unpleasant slithered down Harry's spine, even as the man, Secretary Pierce the woman had called him, gave him an approving nod. "You look well, Mr. Potter."

"My care under the Baron is unparalleled." Harry said, not a trace of inflection in his tone. "We're eager to get started."

Those creepy eyes crinkled at the corner from the spread of his grin. "A man with a mission. I like that." He turned then, and abruptly headed back through door from where he'd come. "I'll give you the tour. Banker and Hale have been occupying the two lower levels the past few days now, and when the Sheik arrives tomorrow evening, he'll join them. You and I share the penthouse with all of its amenities."

Inside was about what Harry imagined it'd be; outdated linoleum and blue tinged fluorescent lights. Though the room's themselves had been gutted and refurnished with computer monitors, corkboards that covered entire walls and laid out detailed plans beyond Harry's comprehension, one room even held nothing but meticulously stocked and organized weapons of just about any variety. It reminded him a lot, actually, of the SSR's space in London.

The top level, Pierce's "penthouse" was much more like Strucker's setup back at base, rooms full of lab equipment he couldn't identify and neatly dressed aides bustling about.

"The asset is being stored on the northern end of the building," Pierce explained as they weaved their way through the commotion. "He's being woken now to ensure he's alert for tomorrow's drill, but we expect no trouble. A space on the south end has been converted to store your mages and the whole of the third floor for the rest of your men. And for you, just down the block you've a room reserved at the-"

"I'd like to keep close to my men."

Pierce raised a brow but really didn't look all that surprised. "We left aside a space off of your main lab for any equipment you brought along with you. If you'll give us just an hour we'll have it converted over to a space you'll be comfortable in."

"A cot and a place to hang my jacket would be more than enough. I'm a simple man."

Just then, another voice cut in. "Is that right, Baron Strucker?"
Harry watched fascinated as Strucker's whole demeanor took on something sour even while he kept up his veneer of shallow pleasantry. The one responsible for such an interesting reaction was a woman with soft brown hair and impeccable posture, Harry recognized her from the video wall, one of the heads of Hydra though her name escaped him.

"Lady Hale."

And there it was. Thank you, Strucker.

"You look very well. And your lovely Ruby?"

The smile Hale offered Strucker was tight and entirely insincere. "'Thriving.' She gave Harry a slow look over. "And this is your mage? He's much smaller than he appears on the screen."

*Rude.*

"Small but mighty I believe is how that saying goes." Pierce said, purposely oblivious to the tension between the two. "We're putting a lot on that might."

"Everything," Hale was quick to correct. "We're putting everything on it."

Harry held their gazes for only a few seconds each and that was all he needed to hear what wasn't being said; he was to perform and perform well or there would be consequences. And not just for him but Strucker as well. This was to be the job to end all others (or so the Baron had claimed), if Harry or any of his team failed to play their part flawlessly it could prove disastrous for all of Hydra's plans.

Which was the last thing Harry wanted.

Obviously.

It took the mages two hours to make the twenty-minute drive to the clinic, by the time they arrived Harry had already been relieved for the evening and claimed the best bunk in their communal cell.

He didn't bother rising from where he was reclined against his thin pillow when they filed in, that long flight and the encounter with Pierce and Hale had exhausted him. "What took you so long?"

Walden groaned and threw himself onto the bunk just beneath Harry. "We took the long route, it wouldn't do for us to be followed after all."

"Hm, sucks. Really it only should have taken maybe half an hour."

"What did Strucker even want you for anyway?" Angel groused.

Harry grinned at him. "He likes my company."

"Don't lie, you're a moody little bastard," Mihaela said. "No good in anyone's company."

The best response Harry could muster was the silent, one fingered kind. Even if it was a little true she didn't have to call him out on it.

The members of the reserve team tittered nervously, unsure of their standing among their close-knit ranks, and Harry was too worn out to waste time soothing their nerves. Now that his team was present and accounted for, he could finally give in to the fatigue weighing his bones. Trusting their individual abilities to work out their own unwinding rituals in a way that wasn't too noisy, he
flipped over until he was facing the wall and threw his blanket over his head.

He slept like a baby. Too well for someone knowing what was expected off him in the next few days. But the day had been demanding and the ones to come would no doubt be even more so, so he slept like a man with a conscience and refused to feel bad about it.

And a good thing he did too; their cell had no windows, but when the overhead lights went from a soft, ambient glow to the full, eye searing force of a small sun what felt like just a few hours after shutting his eyes, something deep in his bones just knew it was well before sunrise. He and the mages rolled from their bunks with weary sighs and quiet groans, but they were fully dressed and at attention when, just fifteen minutes past their abrupt awakening, the thick metal door locking them in for the night swung open.

Five guards, all armed, stood on the other side, looking about as pleased as any of them to be awake right then, but they kept absolutely silent as they herded Harry and his team down the corridor and around the corner to what looked like what had once been a staff break room but had been rearranged for a presentation of sorts with even a projection screen set up at the head of the room. Once they'd all found seats among the tables arranged in the center of the room, the guards turned and, still completely silent, marched out of the room.

"Is this where we're taking meals?" Eva wondered. "Do you think I'll have time to rest my eyes, just for a few minutes?"

No such luck. She'd barely finished speaking before the door was opening again and the heads of HYDRA filed into the room. Harry knew them all by name (or their preferred title) by then; the Baron, the Sheik, the Banker, Hale, and Pierce but there was an extra with them, walking close behind Pierce like a particularly intimidating looking shadow.

He was kitted out in all black; heavy combat boots, pants with at least a dozen pockets (probably used for storing weapons), and a matching sleeveless t-shirt that displayed one flesh and blood arm with biceps bigger than Harry's head and one arm made entirely of gleaming silver. Dark hair fell into his face, curling around his ears, and stopping just at the edge of an angular mask that covered the entire bottom half of his face.

Harry hadn't ever seen someone so intimidating, but for all the danger he exuded there was no doubt that he was just like Harry. He could see it in how the man kept Pierce always in view, always within reach, in how Pierce didn't spare him a single look but seemed hyper aware of his position in relation to him at all time. But what really gave it away was the muzzle (because there really was no other word for it). The uncomfortable looking accessory molded to the bridge of his nose and extended past the curve of his chin and jaw. At first glance it looked like just a very serious mask, but the perforations across the front (air holes, Harry's mind supplied for him) and the complete absence of any kind of claps or release made its true purpose very clear. He was a tool, to be used and never heard.

The sight of him made something in Harry go cold. Of course he knew he couldn't be the only one, an organization like HYDRA couldn't possibly exist for so long without picking up its share of unwilling participants. But to be confronted with what he could have become had it not been for Death was something he never could have prepared for.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, he was aware Pierce was speaking, but the implications of this man's presence were too consuming for him to bother listening. It wasn't until Fen, seated to his right pressed a sharp pinch to his leg that he was forcibly tuned back in, just in time to hear Pierce introduce the man simply as "The Asset."
No name. No rank. Only the Asset. Harry wanted to laugh as he realized that perhaps he'd been lucky in winding up with Strucker. To the Baron he was a useful, but also favored pet, with Pierce he would have been a nameless, voiceless weapon.

"He'll be providing long distance aide," the Secretary continued, completely unaware of Harry's distraction. "Specifically in keeping any response teams occupied until you've done your work."

"I'm sorry sir," one of the reserves, Crane as Harry had dubbed him, spoke up softly. "But what is our work?"

A look of inexplicable amusement took over Pierce's professional demeanor. "Wolfgang's kept you all in suspense then?"

"Just a bit of healthy anticipation," the Baron shrugged. "It keeps them sharp."

"Yes, it does. Let me just…" He patted down his suit jacket, searching out a little rectangular remote that brought the screen at his back to life. A few moments were spent fiddling with the controls before an image of a church took over the screen. It was grand building, with its intricately latticed, pale grey stone and arching spires it wouldn't look out of place in the wizarding world.

"This is St. Joseph's Cathedral. It's a historic church, been around almost two hundred years, and tomorrow it will be hosting the family of those lost in last month's attack."

From the corner of his eyes, Harry saw a few of the reserves shift in confusion. They'd been just as sheltered as him and knew nothing of the apparent alien invasion that had hit just a few weeks ago. Neither did his mages of course, but they'd long since learned to keep stone faced no matter what was thrown at them.

"During this memorial," Pierce carried on, ignoring the reserves, "President Ellis will be speaking."

The image of the cathedral was replaced with a handsome older man who wore a kind smile and grey at his temples.

"He's the job." There was a pause, for dramatic effect. "You're to kill him."

That earned the room a round of ragged gasps and incredulous looks from the reserves, Harry even caught Iola's brow twitch. But the one Harry was watching (and who Harry knew Strucker was watching as well) was Walden, but the man didn't even blink. He kept his gaze on Pierce, unshaken and completely attentive.

"Can we ask why we're to kill him?" the reserve who could pass as a Weasley asked. She flinched when Pierce fixed his cold gaze on her, and barely kept herself from attempting to become one with the plastic of her chair when it stayed there.

"No," the man said after a loaded pause. "You can't. Here's how we're going to do it…"

They spent four hours being briefed. Honestly it was a very simple plan, but one that allowed for no mistakes. One mistimed move, one slip up and they were all dead.

Well, all but Harry, but they didn't know that.

They were released for their morning meal only after every aspect of the job had been outlined in painstaking detail. But they were allowed only an hour before being herded to medical for an overall wellness check and for a whole gamut of samples to be collected. They weren't told what
the samples were for, their bodies were property of HYDRA after all, but HYDRA had never once tried to hide where their priorities lay. On the chance that one of them was killed, they were sure to want as many samples as possible to prevent their work from being entirely lost.

And after that it was on to the lower levels where one of the two mess halls had been reconfigured to run drills in preparation for the real thing.

Strucker had brought along every man familiar with working with his mages, but apparently Pierce's own STRIKE team had been the one's assigned to working strategy with them. And Harry could imagine no scenario where this was done purely out of good intentions.

"They're the best HYDRA's got," Fen informed the team the moment they'd been told who they were going up against. "Shumpert, the American guard from the early days, it was his favorite thing going on about how he'd almost made the cut for STRIKE."

"A couple guys in mess had a lot to say about them," Angel added on. "You guys were probably too busy sleeping in your gruel, a guy named Rumlow's their team lead and from what it sounded like, they work a lot with the Asset. Like Fen said, the best HYDRA's got. The guys were actually wondering how we'd face off against them."

"And they must not have been the only ones," Harry concluded as he pulled a heavy, padded vest over his head. Rubber bullets had been authorized for the drill, not nearly as lethal as the real thing, but still capable of doing plenty of damage without the proper padding.

Mihaela snorted, her face twisted in a subtle, outraged scowl. "Not that it'll be a fair fight."

A few of the others murmured in quiet agreement; there was no way this would be considered a real fight, the collars on each and every one of them remained turned to the max and would remain so until they stepped foot in that church. The clinic was in too central of an area for any of the HYDRA heads to want to risk releasing the destructive force of their magic, even to practice. So these technically were considered dry runs meant only to familiarize themselves with the formations and defensive tactics of the president's protection detail while working out their own strategy.

"How are we supposed to defend ourselves without even a little magic let loose?" Iola asked.

"We're not meant to, that's what this is for," Harry gave the straps of his headgear a pointed tug. "This is tactical. We're learning the secret services' movements and we're planning out our own."

"On top of practicing grace under fire," Walden added.

No one looked at them, but they all knew he was referring to the still soft reserves.

"It'll be good for us," Harry carried on. "So that the first time we do this isn't the day of the actual job."

"It's just," Eva sighed, "I bruise so easily."

It was a reluctant, though careful not to show it, group of eleven mages that entered the converted mess hall. From what Harry could remember of all the photos they'd been presented of the interior of the church, the dimensions were off, but it had otherwise been made into a passable reconstruction of the interior. Row and rows of pews lined each wall, with a wide aisle cutting a path down the center of the room and leading up to the raised podium at the head of the room.

The STRIKE team had found seats among the pews while waiting for them and didn't seem at all
inclined to stand upon their entrance.

"Thought y'all were never going to show up with how long you were taking," one of the men said, making a show of reclining even further on his pew.

Harry ignored him for the idiot he was and scanned the group of men for the one in charge. It wasn't hard once he knew where to look. He was the only one standing, propped against the first pew in its row with everyone in his vicinity subconsciously angled in his direction.

"Rumlow?"

A semi-interested gaze flicked over him from head to toe, he didn't shift one foot. "You're Potter?"

Harry moved forward until he stood directly across from Rumlow and his men on the opposite side of the aisle, behind him his mages fanned out into the pews, adopting the STRIKE team's casual demeanor.

"From all the talk we'd been hearing, I thought you'd be bigger."

The dig might have hurt more if Hale hadn't already tried it on him just the day before, or if he was still that moody fifteen-year-old who took everything personally, but instead he offered the man a brittle smile. "Strucker says you're to walk us through a few dry runs, help us tighten up our formation, figure out our battle plan."

"That's what we're here for." Finally he pushed himself away from the pew, from his back pocket, he pulled out a map and a marker that he shook out and placed between himself and Harry. "You familiar with the Sanctuary?"

Harry gave a short nod. The inside of the church had more than a few side halls and antechambers, but the main area of the church, of which the pews and podiums were a part, was called the Sanctuary. They'd spent a good portion of that morning's brief pouring over the blueprints of the church until they had committed every nook, side room, and exit to memory, including the Sanctuary.

"Good. Maximum occupancy of the building is three thousand, but we're looking at a crowd of around half that. Ellis is scheduled to take the podium half an hour into the service at fourteen hundred, and he'll have a perimeter of fourteen secret service around him at all times."

As he spoke, Rumlow's team moved to mirror his words; one man took up place behind the podium while fourteen men arranged into a wide circle around him.

"There'll be another five in the ambulatory right behind the podium, waiting to aide in leading Ellis through the crypts and out the backdoor to safety. It's close quarters back there, so once he's off the podium and in that room we've lost our chance."

"Keep him on the podium and in front of the cameras," Eva summarized. "Easy."

"Not so much as you'd think," Rumlow corrected. "You've got fourteen men on Ellis, five in the back, and a wall of another ten in the front row keeping the crowd back. But those are just the guys in uniform.

"There's going to be one hundred and fifteen plainclothes servicemen mixed up among the crowd watching for potential threats."

Angel whistled low. "They could be a problem."
"Yeah, not so easy now. The eleven of you will have to identify those one hundred fifteen plainclothes guys, make it past them and the ten at the front, in the fifteen seconds it'll take Ellis' personal detail to get him from the podium and through the door to the ambulatory."

"And the crowd," Walden tacked on. "It'd probably be too much to hope that once things get hot fifteen hundred people would stay quiet in their seats."

Rumlow nodded in agreement. "There's that too."

Harry looked around the room, at the hundreds of pews on both sides and the long walk from the entrance to the podium. It was a challenge for sure, and it was Ron who was the master strategist not him, but he'd been quidditch captain all of sixth year and he'd been a good one. He knew how to direct troops, how to anticipate enemy movement.

"I could kill him from my seat," he said, mostly to himself. "Me alone. I could cave in the roof above his head, conjure a wall of fire, shoot an AK from across the room. It would be easy. But we're doing this in front of the crowd and the cameras because our heads want a spectacle." He reached over to Rumlow, plucked the marker he'd been using to mark the map from his hand, and turned to march in the opposite direction of the podium.

He stopped at the seating closest to where the doors would be. "I'll be here in this pew, when we're cued to start I'll move first." The marker in his hand was not the size of a wand, too short, too thin, but it would do for now. He raised it, sighted down it until it was aimed directly at the agent posing as the president. "I'll immobilize Ellis, hoist him up out of his servicemen's reach and away from the line of fire. Now there's no fifteen second window to worry about, he's not going anywhere. I'll have maybe five seconds after casting the spell before the twenty-four servicemen up front have me identified and targeted to be put down.

"But I could have the ten closest to me under the imperius curse and opening fire on the fourteen on the podium in three."

The declaration was met with a long moment of silence, heavy with confusion and probably a healthy bit of disbelief. Then Rumlow asked the question it looked like the whole of the STRIKE team was wondering. "How?"

Surprisingly it was Crane of the reserves to answer. "The imperius curse is mind control, it strips the victim of their free will and makes them entirely obedient to the caster. But to cast it on ten people, doesn't matter if they're muggles, it's-"

"Possible." Mihaela interrupted. "He's done it before on twice as many, on our first job at the recruiting center."

"You can control minds?" a man just to Rumlow's right asked, he looked disturbed by the revelation, and from the looks of it, so did much of STRIKE.

"There are limitations," Harry shrugged, unconcerned, he wasn't here to make them feel safe. "A strong will can resist the curse, even fight it off entirely. But those are much harder to come by than you'd think." He let them consider that for just a moment before carrying on. "Anyway, at this point I've established myself as a threat. Those hundred and fifteen plain clothes servicemen will be forced to act.

"But I expect they won't all be seated right at the end of the aisled, they'll be mixed in among the crowd. My main unit will form up behind me; Walden, Mihaela, and Angel at the back." Without even being directed, his mages joined him and fell easily into their directed positions. "Eva center
right, Iola center left, and Fen taking point with me. We'll put down any who intercept our path to the president up front, meanwhile our reserves will work crowd control."

Rumlow was back to looking incredulous. "Four men keeping a crowd of fifteen hundred subdued?"

"Is easy when you have magic on your side. Those two," Harry gestured to Crane and Hogwarts, "specialize in herbology- plant life. The Baron ensured each pew held an arrangement of peace lily's and pothos."

"Thick roots and trailing vines," Crane said in that nervous way he spoke. "Very good for restraint, but plants move slow."

"Our imperiused servicemen will work as support in keeping anyone who slips out corralled. Meanwhile she," Harry pointed to the Weasley, "will be on doors and windows. Her gift is transfiguration, she'll shape all exits into just another stretch of wall, so no one is in or out until we're ready." Then he turned to Ivy, the last of the reserves. "And she will keep our restrained crowd docile."

"My donor was a potions master," the reserve explained to the STRIKE team before they could ask. "I can manipulate a person's chemical composition. One on one I could kill or control, but on a group this large the best I could do is tamp down their adrenal response, keep them calm and less prone to fighting their restraints."

Harry gestured to the aisle stretching before him. "It's a straight path to Ellis after that. No one to fight us, no one to take him and run."

"And after he's dead," Rumlow asked. "What's your exit strategy?"

"We let our fifteen hundred hostages go, whip them into frenzy then send them out every door, every exit in an uncontrolled stampede. In the time it'll take first responders to get control over them, we're already out and under disillusionment charms. No one would see us, so no one could stop us."

Harry waited, for another question, another objection but Rumlow seemed fresh out.

"It could work," he eventually decided on. "It's a good plan, but there's room for error. The few of you going against those numbers? Some of you will probably end up dead."

"To see HYDRA's work finally done?" Harry said. "It'd be worth it."

Rumlow grinned a nasty thing. "All right then, kid. Let's get in position, it's time for our first run through."

The padded gear was shit at protecting them. There were no broken bones or shattered eye sockets at least, but by the end of their session Harry felt like one giant contusion.

"You think they'd go easier on us," Eva moaned, poking mournfully at a bruise that covered her entire stomach. "We're supposed to go out in a few days, what good'll we be injured?"

"Order only comes through pain," Angel mocked, and every last one of them groaned. Fuck Rumlow and his insane HYDRA philosophies.

"We did good work today though," Iola said, trying for encouraging. "I think we'll really be able to
pull this off."

The thought didn't elicit as much good cheer as she'd probably hoped. How could it when success meant hundreds of people were about to lose their lives?

But there was no helping that, and even less point dwelling on it, so Harry quickly took the reins and rallied his men. Their day wasn't over yet, not even close, there were more meetings, then mess, then fittings for uniforms that looked just the same as what any of the other mourners might wear but moved and breathed like the robes they'd worn on their two previous incursions.

Once that was through, it was back to their cell where sleep allowed them just a few hours respite before the lights came up and it was morning all over again.

Strucker had promised them an easy day, no running drills with STRIKE or long sessions in medical, but it didn't save them from sitting more briefings. Nearly the whole day was spent rehashing the same mission plan they'd gone through twice over just the day before until they were all certain they could recite it forwards, backwards, and in Cyrillic.

But the last few hours of the day, that sweet spot just between the last briefing and lights out, were theirs to spend and Harry had plans. And they involved finding himself a shower because being anywhere in proximity of any of the heads made him feel just gross, then a meal, then the solitude of their cell where he intended to have one last conversation with his team on what to expect the next day.

Their escort for the evening (because even now HYDRA didn't trust them to roam free) was waiting for them just outside the makeshift war room when they were finally dismissed for the evening. Four of the men Harry barely recognized the faces of, but two he knew much more personally; Bennett from the airstrip and his confrontational escort back from Strucker's base, Coleman was his name. Harry had managed to keep far from both men since each encounter, but his luck was clearly out.

"Session went well then?" Bennett asked, deceptively casual.

"Well enough," Harry said shortly, trying to parse out the motive behind the seemingly innocent question. Their escort never made conversation, especially not friendly conversation. They weren't colleagues. They weren't equals.

"Well that is a comfort," Coleman smiled wide and insincere as he got their procession moving. "Big day's not even two days off, we excited? Nervous? Having any doubts"

"None so far."

They swung around the corner and Bennett fell into step directly beside him, forcing Harry to stand shoulder to shoulder with both him and Coleman.

"None?" His laugh boomed down the deserted corridor, and a big hand clasped down on Harry's shoulder. "Big man! But no, see I like that, the confidence. It makes me…makes us all feel a whole lot better. Because, understand, this is a big thing that's about to happen, that you're about to do, the kind that shapes history. But the only way it's going to work, is if we're all on the same team."

Harry stopped right there in the center of the hall, and pinned the man with the coldest stare in his considerable repertoire. "Do we need to have this conversation again?"

His mages were immediately on guard, reading the danger from his tone alone, and the reserves (miracle of all miracles) were only a half a second behind.
But none of guards reacted, Coleman just kept on with that big, dumb smile and said, "Maybe just one more time."

The cold burn of an electric pulse starting at the center of his collarbone and radiating out to the end of every limb was a familiar pain, but one Harry would never get used to. His entire body locked up and curled into itself, but then someone had a handful of the back of his shirt and was hauling him through a doorway he'd sworn was closed only a few second ago.

His feet slid precariously over what looked like tile and he careened forward until his face met a cold, smooth wall. He spluttered around the sudden gush of blood running down the back of his throat, while somewhere above him it began to rain in great freezing rivulets that made it almost impossible to breath.

A muffled beat pounded in his ears and somewhere behind him there was shouting. But Harry was focused on just trying to breathe.

"This is familiar, right?" That was Bennett in his ear. The asshole. "The water in your lungs. The blood on your teeth. The pain everywhere. You've gotta remember it, those long days we spent together, the way you cried so hard we didn't even need to waterboard you, they way you begged."

Harry bucked, but there were hands everywhere; around his wrists, locking them behind his back, at his throat, in his hair, yanking his head back so he took in the full force of the downpour.

"After a while you weren't even human anymore. Just pain. You couldn't speak through it, couldn't think, your world began and ended in it."

Harry spluttered what he'd hoped would be a really foul curse, but just sounded like he was gargling a mouthful of water.

"I want you to remember what it felt like under that bright light, tied to that chair, remember what we did to you. Then ask yourself if any betrayal is worth that. Because if you fuck up, if this job doesn't go off without a hitch, you're back in that room, in that chair, with us."

"Quark."

Harry's eyes opened, he blinked past the sting of the freezing water and found himself nose to nose with Death, an awful parody of the last time he'd seen him.

He looked…angry?

"Be calm," he said, "these men can't kill you."

Harry nodded, a tiny thing with his hair still caught in someone's clutching fingers. He let his shoulder's drop free of tension and stopped trying to breath. Overhead, the fluorescents shut off, flickered rapidly, then turned back on.

Bennett flew backwards.

Harry didn't move, his hands were still locked behind his back, but the man whose feet had just half a second before been firm in their stance, lurched backwards, scrambling for purchase on the wet tile. Just like Harry he fell until he found the wall, unlike Harry it was the back of his head that made unforgiving contact, and when he went down, he didn't get back up.

The water gushing from the showerhead went abruptly scalding and the remaining hands fell away in an instant, but Harry didn't flinch. He turned on a dime, lashing his hand out and found
Coleman's throat.

There was a rustle of several weapons being drawn and aimed at him, but Harry kept his eyes on Coleman. He could have broken free if he tried, a shake of his head and Harry wouldn't have been able to keep hold, but he didn't move to breathe.

"Take Bennett," Harry rasped around a lungful of fluids. "And you'll wait for us outside."

Coleman didn't move because Harry didn't, for one long moment his hand stayed locked around his throat, almost like it wanted to just keep squeezing, before reluctantly it released and the man took a slow step back.

"Grab him," he ordered quietly. "Let's go."

They cleared out quick enough only to be replaced twice over by the mages.

"What the fuck?"

Harry shrugged in response to Mihaela's snarled question and began gingerly prodding at his nose. "You guys okay?"

"They held us at gunpoint, wouldn't let us through the door, but they didn't touch us." Fen reported, deceptively calm. "What was that?"

Quickly deciding his nose wasn't broken, Harry moved on to checking his wrists for bruising. There was a lot. "They don't trust me."

Crane sputtered incoherently "You used m-"

Harry's hand slashed through the air and he went silent immediately, recognizing his near error just in time.

"-their own tactics against them." Walden filled in before the silence could grow too long. "Just what they deserved too."

"Let's forget it for now. They're paranoid morons who gave me a nosebleed, but I've got plans for the evening and like hell I'm going to let those morons ruin them. Besides look at the bright side," he spat out a mouthful of blood and watched as it was immediately swept up in the still running water and down a drain built right into the floors, "we found the showers."

He watched as his team shifted uncertainly, none of them wanted to drop the subject, but neither did they want to disobey.

"Won't they go to Strucker?" Angel worried.

"Doubtful. They don't want him knowing what happened here because then he'd want to know why."

But Angel seemed in a mood to argue. "We still don't know why."

"Now isn't the time."

Harry's control was beginning to fray, they could all hear it, so Iola stepped in.

"Just for now then," she agreed tentatively, her hands were shaking and her eyes were a little too bright but she stood firm between him and Angel. "But those things they said...."
"Great. Scrub down." Harry left the shower stall splattered with his blood and still running and found a fresh one tucked in the farthest corner. He dragged the curtain shut and flicked his showerhead on, but waited until the room was filled with the sound of ten other showers going before he turned to face Death.

"I hope this isn't going to become another one of your habits, peeking on me in the shower."

He received a flat glare for his trouble. "Are you hurt?"

Harry raised a brow, since when did they ask after each other's wellbeing? "No more than usual."

"Still, I plan for them to pass on to a place of great suffering once their time comes."

Harry beamed, Death was getting soft on him. "I'd like that very much. And thank you, I was panicking, you helped."

"Yes, well you did most of the work yourself." Death gestured vaguely at his hands which still hummed vaguely with the feel of magic. "We're very close now."

Harry looked down at the two appendages, still shaking slightly. "Will they be enough?" he asked. "Ellis and all his men?"

"More than."

Harry smiled wider, the easiest one he'd offered since winding up in Strucker's care. "Well, I suppose I'll see you then."

A hand touched his face, just for a moment, swiping through the blood that ran over his lips and down his chin. "Tomorrow, quark."

Bennett was gone by the time they reconvened in the hall, replaced by another nameless goon who met Harry's curious once over with a look full of disdain. Another of Coleman's posse of non-believers then, but he didn't feel like a threat, and none of the others did either. For tonight at least they'd been subdued.

Harry didn't bother letting them in on where they were headed, he was sure they wouldn't let him get far, just began the long march down to mess and felt himself relax bit by bit the closer they got.

Okay, the night hadn't started out at all as planned, but they were headed back on track now; a quick bite of whatever pre-mission meal the kitchens had thrown together and then they'd be on their way to the security of their cell door locking behind them. He could power through his aches and discomforts long enough to get there.

"Harry."

Or maybe just a little longer than that.

Harry clamped his teeth around a sigh of pure frustration at the sight that might them at mess. Strucker stood just off the side of the entryway, he'd clearly been waiting and Harry didn't even need to guess why.

"Go on ahead," he murmured to his team, who'd faltered at his back when they noticed Strucker. "Grab me a tray, hopefully this won't be more than a few minutes."

Angel hissed something too low for Harry, who'd already broken off to join Strucker, to hear. But it
didn't sound kind. He'd deal with the man's confusing attitude later, but right now…

"I'd just been headed in for a meal when I thought of you, and just a few things we've yet to discuss before tomorrow." Even though the baron was speaking to him, his eyes followed the five guards herding his team through the doors, taking in their faces, the names sewn onto their chests. "I know I promised these last few hours would be yours, but would you spare just a few minutes for me?"

"Of course." His voice was still hoarse, would be for a while if his past experiences in waterboarding meant anything, and Strucker noticed, Harry saw the minute shift of his expression that told him as much.

"The electric failsafe in your collar was triggered," the Baron said and Harry nearly sighed from relief. He didn't want to be having this conversation at all, but it was here, there was no avoiding it, and he was relieved at least that Strucker was getting straight to it instead of forcing him to endure however long of small talk, "but only senior officers have access to the controls. Was there trouble?"

"A few of the guard had questions," he was careful to keep his hands away from his wrists and the sleeves covering the ring of bruises on each. "They wanted to make sure I didn't lie."

"Do I need to assign punishments?"

"No," Harry looked up at him easily. "I handled it."

Strucker's smile was vicious, but the hand he ran through Harry's hair was gentle. "Good. And tomorrow? Are you ready?"

"Eager."

"And your team?"

"They're nervous, but the good sort, they've been at their best these past few days."

"I've heard. Pierce says his STRIKE team was very impressed. Keep at it a day longer. Once tomorrow's done, we'll be one step closer to conquerors."

They split off right after that, Harry to where his own team already waited, his main unit and the reserves split between two nearby tables, and Strucker to a table where, for the first time yet, the heads were all assembled.

"Tonight's supposed to be a special meal," Iola said, before he even had the chance to ask. "A celebration supposedly. Even the heads seem able to loosen up so long as it's the eve of their organized apocalypse."

The back of Mihaela's boot found her shin hard enough to jolt her in her seat. That was the exact kind of talk Harry was always shutting down. But then there was a loud clatter from the kitchen, and any further conversation was shelved as the kitchen staff began toting out wheeled carts of covered platters that looked nothing like their usual simple meals.

Clear across the room, Pierce stood in unison with the food's arrival. He was barely above average height, only just clearing most heads in the crowd, and the deviance from their normal mealtime had everyone talking a little more animatedly than usual, but he stood and it took only seconds for the entire room to go silent. No cleared throat or wine glass required.

"I don't have a speech planned," he told the room. "I was never good at giving them and none of
you want to hear one anyway. But I want to take just a moment," he closed his eyes and drew in a deep, exaggerated breath, "to take this in. Because it's been a long journey, lifetimes were spent working to get us to this very moment. And tomorrow, all of HYDRA's work will be coming to fruition.

"So tonight, we'll indulge a little. We've earned it." A ripple of agreeing cheers ran across the room. "And tomorrow, we get back to work."

Pierce sat down to a mess of hooting and clapping and fists banging on tables, and the kitchen staff uncovered the platters; whole roasted chickens, stuffings and sides and breads still warm and buttered, it was like being back at Hogwarts. But none of the mages went for it, almost like they were reluctant to take the offering. So Harry made the first move, pointedly scooping a heap of roasted potatoes onto his plate while keeping eye contact with Angel sitting right across from him.

"Go on, eat."

A clatter went around the table, as the mages slowly obeyed in reaching for nearby platters.

Everyone but Angel.

"I've plans for this evening, remember?" Harry purposely kept his face pleasantly blank as he reached out, spoon heaping with another round of potatoes, and dumped them onto Angel's plate. Their table was tucked in an out of the way corner, with the table the reserves had taken up sitting between them and anyone else, but he was facing out into the room and there was no telling who was watching. "Shower, then we eat, and af-"

"Fuck your plan."

Angel's plate slid across the table in tandem with his muted hiss. Walden and Eva on either side of him immediately moved in until they sat shoulder to shoulder, blocking the room's view of the table.

"Fuck these-these fucking…these fucking," he shuddered harshly. "They were talking about torturing you, they were laughing and talking about how they were going to do it again if you betrayed them. As if you're not the most backwards-ly loyal-"

"I'm not."

Everyone at the table fell absolutely still.

Harry felt something tremor so violently inside himself, his teeth rattled. He hadn't meant to speak. Especially something like that. But his throat ached from the way he'd choked on that water, his wrists and his nose and half his face throbbed with every pull. And he was angry. He was always so angry.

Angel's righteous fury was nothing compared to his, it was childish, it was insulting. What right did he have? The volunteer? They'd all gone through some form of conditioning, sure, but not like his.

"They destroyed me. You heard what they said in there, I was nothing. Inhuman. They scraped out every bit of me, watched as I bled it out on to the floor, and you're absolutely right, those fuckers laughed."

His face didn't change, he kept up a placid little smile as he reached for a cut of chicken even while inside he was spitting.
"They will get every last bit of what's theirs when it is their time. Until then, we stick to the fucking plan and we eat."

Angel's plate slid back across the table, pushed by an unseen force. This time he took it.

"Why are we doing this?"

Harry spared a glance to Eva, the one to speak, but let the silence drag on to hear what else she had to say.

"Do any of us believe in this?"

"I just...I wanted it back..." Mihaela choked on her words, but Iola was quick to pick it up for her.

"My magic," she whispered. "My life. But I hadn't understood..."

Harry's lips pressed into another thin smile. "What it would cost?"

"Then why are we doing this?" Eva spoke quietly, but for once Harry was sure no one was listening, the noise of the hall would have rendered bugs even in this corner useless. "Those men did nothing to us, but we're supposed to go and kill them anyway."

"What would you do then?" Harry asked, and it wasn't mocking. He genuinely wanted to know.

"We could...we could fail on purpose. Block off the doors just like planned and get the president and all his men to listen, to help."

"They'll arrest us," he pointed out, "find us some remote, government facility to lock us in until they're absolutely sure we've truly defected."

"That doesn't sound so bad," Iola said tentatively. "Better than this at least."

But Harry was already shaking his head. "Iola, love, this building we're in, it's government property. These soldiers, the STRIKE team, they wear military patches; army, marines, NYPD. And Pierce, what do you think he's Secretary of? The Baron? The Sheik? And tomorrow, we're not breaking into this incredibly exclusive event, we're walking in, we've been invited. Why? How?"

A slow horror was dawning over Fen's face. "Because the government is HYDRA."

Harry shrugged. "Maybe. Hopefully not all, they might just have their... pieces. But it's enough that we wouldn't know whose care we would really be turning ourselves into. And it would really suck if we outed ourselves as traitors to the cause in some half-assed attempt at defecting."

Walden's stare on his face was unwavering. "But you have a plan to whole ass it?"

"Not at all. I plan to wake up tomorrow and kill the president of the United States."

"Why?"

Harry took a bite from his plate, involuntarily his gaze flickered in the direction of the heads' table just as Strucker looked up at him. The baron gave the glass of blood red wine in his hand a small tilt in his direction and Harry smiled radiantly back. "Because it is the only way."

"Harry please," Angel all but begged. "What does that mean?"
"It means that you need to trust in the plan. And don't question."

Two simple directives, they'd heard them a thousand times before, but the faces that looked back at him were so conflicted.

"I don't understand you," Fen said. "I heard the stories about you, we all did; the brave, selfless, sacrificing boy hero. But here you are telling us to slaughter hundreds of innocent people tomorrow and not question why."

"One hundred and forty-four." Harry corrected as he bit into a roll, used the crust to sop up a puddle of gravy. "Though if we can manage, it might only be half that."

"But to do so means they win."

"They won't."

"I trust you," Angel whispered, though his wavering voice might have implied something different. "But this killing, it doesn't come easy to me. I need to understand."

Harr could at least sympathize with that.

"After the war," he said. "I spent a lot of time agonizing over what I could have done differently to have kept so many people from dying. It's only now that I understand every last one of them was necessary. Some had huge, obvious purposes; my mother died so that I could live to kill Voldemort. But some seemed pointless, wasteful.

"I had a classmate get shot with a killing curse right in front of me, just because he was in the wrong place in that moment. A spare. For years his death haunted me, the pointlessness of it, but the truth is, that was my first real understanding that Voldemort did not care who we were, how young we were. We were all fodder for his plans of a new world order. It was then, even if I didn't realize in the moment, that I got it; I had to kill him, or nobody- but especially I- wouldn't be safe.

"And it's horrible. I'm sure most people would say it's unfair that he died so I could be motivated. But if I hadn't, how much longer would it have taken me to accept that truth? How many more Cedric's would there have needed to be?

"Tomorrow those men we'll be facing, they're innocent, they've done us no wrong. But we'll kill them anyway, because their deaths have a purpose. And somewhere in the future, somewhere near, a thousand lives over will be saved because theirs weren't."

He sat back in his seat, plate empty. "I'm still just the same boy you heard of in those stories. Stupid and reckless and willing to sacrifice everything, for those lives. Even my humanity.

"But in order to make all of this worth it, just please, trust me."

Angel nodded, immediately. He was shaking Harry could see, and he'd lost every drop of color in his face, but that waver was gone when he spoke. "I do."

Harry cried that night.

Silent and still. He lay in his cot, biting down on his tongue and regulating every breath while trails of salt soaked up his pillow.
He was the worst kind of liar.

The seven of them left dinner that night shaking and terrified for what was coming, but motivated. He'd done it, he'd convinced them, and it really would be for something. HYDRA couldn't have him or the Heart anchored to his soul, to wield it even through him could lead to untold devastation.

But that wasn't why he was so ready, so eager to walk into that church tomorrow and slaughter those men. Sure saving all those lives was a plus, but the only thing he wanted, and all he'd been fighting for since he'd made Death a promise in that rotting forest was to be free. And he was so close, because the lives the Heart would devour tomorrow would be exactly what he needed to see that done.

It would start a war, the wizards would probably be annihilated. But honestly, fuck them. He'd warned them, said over and over that this wasn't the way, all it would lead to was their deaths. But no one wanted to listen to the boy they'd used up and tossed aside.

Fuck them

They'd brought this all on themselves.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I know I say this a lot. But this was the hardest chapter I've ever had to write. And the fact that it ended up so long… Suffice to say it was a bitch and I hated it and I really, really hope it reads well and that the overall pacing and scene composition made sense. (Please writing gods, have mercy on this writer)

I feel like HYDRA's plan at this point is pretty clear, but if not the next chapter will spell it all out for us at last. And for the first time since this story has been published, the next chapter is actually fully written! I'd originally planned and written it as part of this chapter, but during the edit I really felt it worked better as its own chapter, I plan to tweak it just a little more, maybe add another scene and then it'll be up. So this time when I promise not to have another five month gap between chapters, I can actually keep to it!

Also fun fact, Chapter 22 is exactly 22 pages! Second longest chapter of this story and it would have been longest if I didn't cut out what will now be #23.
A/N: I know, this is one of those miracles they speak about in the [insert religious text of your choosing here], an update not even a month after the last one? But I was really excited about this one.

Dina Whitfield, one of the higher-ups in the presidential advance team and Olympic gold medalist in stressing her own self out, decided to regret every career choice she'd ever made when she found herself at five in the morning standing in a cathedral that looked like it should be haunted, discussing the merits of potted plants with one of her fifty volunteers.

"They're gross," Lane, the daughter of one of Oregon's former senators and aspiring first-lady said as she poked at one of the potted plants in question. "They don't even look real. We should just take them out, we could do it quick. Ian could help me."

Another volunteer who Dina just went ahead and assumed was Ian shook his head as he walked past, never even breaking stride. "Nope."

"I could do it quick."

"Lane, honey, no," Dina sighed, "We've got too much to do and even though you're right," and she was, the trailing, waxy leaves dangling over the sides of each pew looked out of place in the otherwise immaculate venue, "changing them out is not life or death. Leave the plants, you can help me in the back."

"What's in the back?"

The president wasn't the only public figure appearing at the memorial; a few semi-famous singers were scheduled to perform tributes, what felt like every politician in the borough of Manhattan, and some award-winning poet, and they all had accommodations that Dina and her crew were in charge of making sure didn't interfere with Ellis' comfort and safety.

Lane at least was more than happy with the aspect of the job that required poking through each of the guest's assigned areas.

"Are the Avengers supposed to be showing up at all?" she asked.

"We had them on the guest list, but the powers that be vetoed it, made it explicitly clear that none of the Avengers were to attend. They never gave a reason why, but we all could guess."

It didn't take but a second for Lane to put two and two together. "Because this service is honoring all the people they didn't save?" Her face screwed into an expression of indignation. "That's stupid. If it wasn't for the Avengers none of us would be here."

Dina shrugged, she didn't disagree but..."When the Secretary of the World Security Council says the superheroes shouldn't get an invite, we heed their advice."

"I know but...still, superheroes," Lane breathed. "Who could have guessed this would be the world we're living in? Aliens and superheroes? And you've heard the rumors too? Of witches."

Dina laughed at the very thought. "Don't believe everything you read online, Lanie. Those task force guys are a bunch of nuts right up there with the tin foilers going on about crop circles."
"But Miss Dina look where we are, what we're doing, and why. Those tin foilers turned out to be not that far off."

And, well, she wasn't wrong.

Alexander stood in the center of a whirlwind of coordinated chaos, the only motionless figure in a crowd of HYDRA’s finest all working in perfect tandem to prepare for the greatest day of any of their lives.

In just an hour Strucker's mages would be in a van on their way to St. Joseph's, and in another, their entire world would be changed. But for them to make it through their task with no trouble, the soldier would have to complete his own.

He was being prepped as Pierce watched; already dressed in his tac gear and boots, but still reclined in The Chair with the paneling of his left arm opened to reveal the wiring beneath. His usual dead-eyed stare was fixed somewhere in the middle distance, blank as always, but there was a furrow between his brow that made Pierce worry. That look meant the Asset was thinking, and that almost always led to trouble.

"Soldier."

Steel grey eyes locked on him in an instant, a lesser man might have shuddered under their intensity.

"Do you understand the importance of this mission?"

"High priority." His words were barely a rasp. Super soldier or no, being kept in that cryo chamber for years at a time had led to atrophy in his vocal cords, an affliction not helped by their habit of putting him in a muzzle while awake.

"Highest priority," Pierce dragged a chair forward and settled in so he sat knee to knee with the asset. "This day is the first of our final campaign for humanity, the first battle of the last war. Your part in it is essential, without you there will be no victory."

He received one slow blink in response.

"Clear your head, you weren't created for thought. Heed my orders alone and your work will be done. We're clear?"

"Understood."

"Good." Pierce pushed away from his chair and turned his back on the asset. "How long until he's ready for travel?"

"Now, sir." The paneling on the shining prosthetic latched shut and the tech used a nearby rag to wipe away excess oil.

"His opiate levels are low," another tech reported, "he'll need another dose of Fentanyl before departure and the EEG is showing signs of increased neural activity."

"He's healing," Pierce concluded. "He's been awake too long. Do we have time to wipe him?"

"Yes, of course, it wouldn't take more than a few minutes. But he's always off-kilter for some time after, and if he needs to be at his best..."
Pierce sighed, he knew that, of course he did, but he'd hoped. "We'll have to send him out as is then, it's a risk but no bigger than attempting a wipe now. Increase his dosage, we just need to get him through this last job and this won't be a worry any longer."

The Asset had been awake for two days, eleven hours and there'd been no mission.

It was coming, he knew this because the handler with the (wrong) pale hair and (wrong) blue eyes had been to see him twice and both times he'd spoken of glory and purpose and all kinds of things the Asset had not been programmed to understand. But two days was still too long for no mission and no chair and he was degrading already.

There was another, not a handler but important still who wore one round lens over his eye and had a shadow who made his programming glitch. He saw the shadow and could smell gunpowder and campfire, could taste smooth cognac and blood on his teeth, could hear words whispered in a language he didn't know and rounded vowels dragging with grief.

*He's gone.*

*There's no finding him.*

*He's gone* but he's here.

The Asset and the shadow, they'd known each other once, before they were these two unnamed things. But the Asset had always been this and there was nothing of the shadow in his memory banks, so it was a malfunction. It had to be.

He needed the chair, the chair fixed all things. But first, there was the mission.

He was to kill (he was always to kill), but this time there was no target, only a directive: keep the ones called the Avengers from reaching St. Joseph's cathedral just long enough for the job within to be completed.

He didn't know what the job was, what these Avengers were trying to reach or protect, but that had never mattered before, he had his orders. And on day three, hour eight out of cryo, they finally pulled him for prep.

They put him in attire meant to blend in- the heavy black boots and dark pants remained standard throughout just about every mission, but they traded their favored jacket with all of its straps and leather, for a lightweight shirt with sleeves long enough to cover the silver of his arm, and a tactical vest that left most of his sides and belly open. It was substandard protection for a task of this scope, he could carry only one Sig in the single, concealed holster on his vest. But the soldier was resourceful, he'd get it done regardless. And the exclusion of one bit of gear made up for any other inconveniences.

The muzzle didn't "fit in", so it was replaced with a plain, black balaclava to pull over the bottom of his face. It was stuffy having that bit of cloth clinging to his face, but he could open his mouth, let his jaw hang, stick his tongue out between his lips and no one could tell the difference.

The whole look was still a little militant, a little obvious, but they said tensions were high in the city, that he'd fit right in where they were going.

There were others, STRIKE with a few from the team brought in by the shadow's handler. They were to act as his assist, to create maximum chaos, maximum casualties. But he was to lead the charge.
"All right boys," Rumlow rallied as they set off, shoved in the back of van stripped down of everything but the two front seats. "We've got our orders, we know the plan; get in there, kick the hornets' nest around, then fall back so the soldier can do his thing. Any of you get caught, you better use that false tooth because I'm not risking going toe to toe with Rogers to bring you home."

Rollins with his slicked-back hair and close-set eyes laughed. "That's all you've got for us?"

"Well if you don't know the way of things by now," Rumlow shrugged, "there's not shit for me to say to you."

"How long are we supposed to keep them busy for, anyway?"

The team lead consulted a binder tucked under the seat of the driver. "Fireworks are scheduled to start fourteen hundred sharp, those mages say they can be out in under half an hour, so we're looking at about that same time frame."

"Under half an hour with just the few of them?" Kemper, STRIKE's most recent addition, looked as if he didn't know whether to be skeptical or awed. They'd seen the work those mages had done, seen the confidence with which their head spoke, but there was still just eleven of them, and half of them looked scared out of their minds.

"Yeah, well the kid says they can do it."

Kemper went so far as to cross himself just at the mention of the mage's leaders. "Strucker's pet," he gave an overdramatic shudder, "that kid gives me the creeps. There's something not right about him."

This seemed like news to Rollins. "How do you mean?"

"I don't know what it is…he's normal, doesn't act any different than the others but just being near him…"

Surprisingly, Rumlow was the first to agree with him. "Yeah, kid's not right. Pierce handled his reconditioning, he told me all about what they did to him, how some of the stuff surpassed what they did to the soldier. But he's still human, he talks and thinks and smiles. And the way he looks at the Baron- it's like he loves him. Trusts him."

"You don't think they're…?" Rollins made an obscene gesture with two hands.

Rumlow shrugged. "Half of Strucker's guys seem to think so, but I don't know what to make of it. All I know is he's creepy."

The shadow, this was the shadow they were discussing, just the thought of him and green eyes made the glitches start up. But the Asset knew how to prioritize: the mission first, then he would figure out the mystery of the shadow.

"And here we are boys." Just a few minutes and the van was pulling into a lot just opposite the side of the street where an enormous crowd was already congregating. There had to be at least a thousand and more showing up every second. Some people were dressed lightly, clothing fit for the sweltering summer day it was looking like it was shaping up to be, carrying signs over their shoulders. While others made the soldier look right at home dressed as they were in similar gear in some shade of black, gray, or charcoal.

And dispersed among the crowd were volunteers in bright, yellow shirts with megaphones pressed close to their lips as they shouted directives into the crowd. They were moving in less than fifteen
minutes, starting their trek at Bryant's Park and marching all the way to the streets surrounding St. Joseph's cathedral and the dozens of news trucks already parked right outside.

The Soldier kept one eye always on the volunteer in her lime-colored shirt closest to them, taking note of everything she spoke, but the same couldn't be said for the rest of the team. Most of STRIKE hadn't even climbed out the back of the van yet, simply hanging around with the back double doors wide open while they waited for the word to move. At least they looked no different from plenty of the other protestors waiting all up and down either side of the street.

Somewhere near the front of the van, the soldier heard Kemper addressing one of his teammates, and instinctively redirected his focus to what was going on inside the vehicle, even while he kept up his subtle watch.

"What are these guys even supposed to be protesting anyway? These some of those anti-Avengers nuts we been hearing about?"

Another voice, unfamiliar spat a laugh around the shell of some seeds he'd been chewing on since they'd packed into the van "Wouldn't that make our job easier? No, this is another attempt of the middle class rising up to curse the rich. Most of the money coming from the relief funds they've put together for the city is going towards fixing up the skyscrapers and the banks, you know the buildings owned up the big guys like Roxxon and Sherwin Holdings, instead of the smaller businesses that really needed the help."

"So same shit they've been complaining about since capitalism was born?"

"Yeah well, what else have they got to do to fill their time?"

There was a quiet laugh from inside the van, mean and self-assured and the soldier kept watching, tracking the woman in her yellow-green shirt. Her sneakers were caked in mud, dirt dusted the fabric of her pants all the way up her shins, her hair was pressed flat instead of pinned up, and the way she darted quick and self-assured across the uneven ground made him think a pair of sharp heels would never be a part of her uniform. But he watched the way she rallied everyone she passed, drawing their attention with the quick wit shouted through her speaker, and all he could see were victory curls and stockings with seams.

But then there was a sharp whistle from between Rumlow's teeth and the soldier was headed back for the van, heaving himself into the back and the cover it provided. A bottle was pressed into his hands, unmarked glass filled with equally clear liquid with a strip of cloth shoved through the neck and sticking out like a wick. He knew there should be gasoline or a high proof liquor in the bottle, that's how these worked, but it didn't smell like gas or rum, but something sharper, acidic that burned his nose on the inhale. And the careful way Rumlow handled it spoke volumes.

"This should be enough to take our man down. But we've only got the one, don't waste it."

The bottle was tucked into the only available pocket he had inside his jacket, and that seemed to be enough for Rumlow who gave a sharp nod then turned to look at his men.

"All right boys, let's go start a riot."

Harry stood on the sidewalk before St. Joseph's cathedral, Mihaela on his arm and unfamiliar muggles pressing in on all sides, and he felt absolute calm.

It'd taken months (or had it been years?) of the most dehumanizing humiliations and the most primal sort of terror but he was here. He'd made it.
The end.

The muggle verifying RSVPs smiled as she took his, she was pretty, soft auburn hair cropped short at her chin and a gap that lent character to her smile, but her eyes were glazed over. He'd made sure his notice-me-not was so strong the memory of his face would be lost to her the moment he was gone.

Once their invitations had been verified, they moved toward the doors leading inside. He leaned in toward Mihaela as they moved, as if whispering something only to her, so all any cameras from up above saw were two dark heads bowed together. And then they were into the cathedral, walking through that short, arched entrance into the cavernous hall.

Their spot was the third row from the back, right at the end of the pew, as Harry slid into his seat, he swept a finger along the hanging vine of a pothos. For good luck.

"There are so many more than I'd imagined," Mihaela murmured, black eyes sweeping over the entirety of the hall so that Harry honestly couldn't pinpoint to what exactly she was referring.

The people? They'd known the exact number attending: one thousand, six hundred and thirteen. But seeing them all there, crowded in the room and entirely oblivious was a whole other thing.

Or maybe she meant the cameras because there were many. A good dozen, most aimed at the podium but a few occasionally sweeping the crowd, and surrounded by glaring lights.

Or it could be the secret servicemen; inside, outside, walking along the aisles, standing at every exit.

But whatever it was, whether it was one or all or something else entirely, they were ready. They could handle it.

The memorial started with a song.

Harry vaguely recognized the woman as one of the more mature artists Petunia followed religiously back before...everything. She sang beautifully, deep, long notes that warbled through the church's enormous space like an Augurey's song.

After that a poet who didn't actually recite any poetry spoke a few solemn words in introduction and then him, President Ellis stepped onto the stage.

He was larger than the picture of him showed, bigger even than some of the servicemen walking alongside him; his shoulders were broad, capable. But the one thing the photo hadn't misrepresented was the warmth in his smile. There was nothing false in the way he looked at the crowd, he genuinely wanted to be there, to help these people through their difficult period of mourning.

Harry couldn't look away, but then Mihaela took his hand and he had to.

"Are you scared?" she whispered, barely heard over the thunder of the crowd's adoration for their president.

He shook his head. "No. Are you?"

"I'm excited."

That stopped him short. Determined, was something he'd expected from her, focused. But excited?
"Why?"

"Because I trust you." She smiled easily, there was no tension anywhere on her, no fear. "I trust the man you are. I'm excited to see what you have planned for us."

Harry couldn't speak, overcome with some unspeakable emotion, but she didn't need him to, just squeezed his hand one more time then turned forward to listen as the President began to speak.

In between his new career in alien carcass disposal and working to coax any useful information from their new allies/refugees/the wizards, Steve had finally taken up Stark on his offer for room and board in his tower. He had an apartment of his own, courtesy of SHIELD of course, but he didn't trust the organization as far as he could throw them (especially after that whole stunt with the nuke) and figured their kind offer of a fully furnished apartment back in his old neighborhood had to have some kind of ulterior motive. Like listening devices sewn into the lining of his couch.

No, at least until he was comfortable enough in this new era to do some apartment hunting of his own, Stark Tower was probably the best place for him. And being out of Brooklyn and away from all those painful reminders of what he couldn't have any more would probably do him good.

There were still drawbacks, the roommates being the biggest.

It was really only Stark, Banner, and him living full time in the tower. Stark had extended the invitation to every Avenger, but Thor had returned to Asgard with Loki immediately after the invasion, Barton had muttered something about a place in Bed-Stuy and keeping it safe from tracksuits (?), and Steve wasn't sure Romanoff even slept, let alone required a whole place for rest. But they still came through often enough that it felt like they lived there.

Now being a perfect case.

"How is it that we are five superhuman individuals who have literally saved the world once before but not one of us is capable of putting together anything edible?"

Barton had stopped by to pick up an upgrade on a set of explosive arrows Stark had promised to have done for him, but that'd been early that morning, and since then he'd had two breakfasts, a snack, and was still hunting for food. He seemed to need just as much as Steve and his super-serumed metabolism.

Banner who'd taken over the whole of the breakfast bar with data and articles for another paper he was writing didn't even look up from his work to respond. "I told you before, there's red bean curry in the fridge."

"By edible he means pizza," Natasha said from her place on the couch, she had the tv playing news coverage of some event going on in the city, but most of her attention was on the polish she was applying to Stark's toes while he slept and/or lay dead across the majority of the sectional after a seventy-three-hour bender in the lab. "That's the only food group he acknowledges."

Steve looked between the two in bemusement. "I've been out of commission for a while, but I'm pretty sure they haven't given pizza a group of its own."

"It deserves a whole pyramid, not just one lousy group," Clint shouted, head stuck deep in the fridge. "Bread and cheese and meats and fruits, it covers them all."

"Fruits?"
He pulled his head free, blond hair sticking in all directions, long enough to nod sagely. "Tomato sauce."

"Just have JARVIS order you a pizza then," Bruce suggested. "I promise we don't have any tucked away for you."

"Olives, pineapple, and ham!" Natasha ordered; Stark didn't even stir.

Clint looked properly scandalized. "None of those things belong on a pizza. Except ham, but only in bacon form."

"I like pineapple on pizza," Steve protested.

"Of course you do, your palate is shit. I heard you guys boiled everything you ate."

And well, that wasn't a lie.

"Whatever you get, make it quick, I won't have an appetite once this memorial starts."

For the first time in what might have been hours, Bruce looked away from his work. "Is that what's on? I'd forgotten that was today."

"Memorial?" Steve questioned.

"For the victims of the attack," Clint explained, finally giving up and swinging the fridge shut. "They've made it into this huge production, there's performances scheduled, and the president is even supposed to be there."

"We weren't invited?"

He shrugged. "Maybe. I never checked, sitting among the grieving family members of the people I couldn't save isn't really my idea of a good time."

Well, when he put it like that…

"JARVIS put in an order at the place you introduced me to last weekend. Four pies; two mushroom and sausage, double chicken and spinach, one pineapple with ham, bacon form." Steve paused, looked over his waiting team. "And for you guys?"

Harry knew every nuance of Ellis' address from start to finish; every word, every dramatic pause, every breath between had been drilled into his memory so that he knew exactly when to move.

It started with a dramatic opener:

"Here and now, we reside in the most extraordinary of times."

Before moving on to the real heart of it:

"We've met gods, encountered aliens, seen heroes return from the dead, witnessed creatures that defied all logic, all fantasy. But nothing has left me more in awe than those here in this city, in this room."

HYDRA had helped to write it. Pierce himself had slipped in a few suggestions through his rats in the president's speechwriting team. But Harry sat still long enough to hear it.
"Just a month ago, we as a people were challenged. Everything we thought we knew had been taken, shaken, altered at its core and we were left with a broken city, broken families, and some of us believed that even we ourselves were broken."

These here were the last words Ellis would speak, and they were good ones. Harry figured he owed him as much as to listen.

"And yet here we are. Here you are. Carrying on, rebuilding, healing and I am in nothing short of awe at the resilience of these people.

"They thought they would come here and subjugate us, that we would kneel so easily at their feet, that we were the weaker of the species, but there is nothing weak about these people here who have endured the worst of horrors and experienced the greatest of loss and come through thriving."

Ellis' composure slipped just that little bit; his overbright eyes swept across the hall and the congregation who'd only minutes before been solemn and subdued now stood and thundered their agreement.

Harry felt his heart speed up at the sound, this man was adored, revered, he was one of the good ones. But that didn't change the fact that time was nearly up, just a few more words to go and nothing would stop it. And really he didn't want anything to.

"We had no special suits…"

His hands got the chance to shake just the once before he clenched them tight, forced them into stillness. This was it.

His boots shifted forward, planting a little firmer on the ground.

"…no magic hammers or superhuman serums."

He moved forward, sliding off the pew. The notice me not cast over himself and the ten other mages fell away right as his hood pulled over his head, familiar, comforting.

"It was just-"

A horrible, grinding shriek cut Ellis off right at his peak before his mic shut off completely.

Harry stepped into the aisle.

No one noticed him at first, he was easily missed in the mix of residual excitement and mounting confusion and he didn't waste the advantage; his wand slipped easily from its holster and it took no time to aim.

"Levicorpus."

Ellis went down hard, his face only just missing the edge of the podium when his feet were yanked out from under him and up above his head. The spell hoisted him well over ten meters into the air while down on the ground, his servicemen reacted just as they'd hoped they would; half the force formed a circle just below where the president dangled, while the remaining spread along the perimeter of the podium seeking out the threat.

He wasn't hard to miss then, even among the event staff and additional security standing along the aisle, he was sure he made a very distinct figure. Entire face lost deep in the shadow of his hood,
hands clad in leather the color of old blood, and holding what was unmistakably a wand.

They didn't hesitate to raise their weapons to him but were still just a half of a second too late, Harry's wand had already fallen the half-inch he needed to readjust his aim and was sweeping along the row of their first line of defense.

There wasn't a single moment of hesitation, not even a fraction of a second where he wondered how or if he should even be able to do this. He just cast.

"Imperio."

The glazed over eyes, blissed-out smiles were immediate, and the command was right after.

"Kill them."

The first crack-crack-crack of gunfire was all the permission the audience had been waiting for to go ahead and panic, but Crane and Hogwarts had already set to work. Trailing vines had grown and stretched until they carpeted the ground, winding over feet and around ankles, turning the already narrow space between pews into a pileup of tripping, thrashing bodies.

And then Harry's team was at his back and by his side, slipping into place like they were made for it. And the reserves stood in place, steady, and confident in the plan.

He cracked his neck, readjusted the grip on his wand, and got to work.

Steve really hated to admit it, but he was starting to agree with Clint. It was a controversial opinion, allowing pizza its own pyramid, but sitting among the wreckage of the four pies he'd consumed all on his own, he couldn't find a single point to argue.

Meanwhile, Clint was back in the kitchen, foraging through the remaining stack of boxes for a spare slice. Bruce had relinquished his control of the breakfast bar to accommodate their impromptu team lunch and moved to sit beside Natasha, while Tony had woken sometime just before the pizza had shown up, and, after splitting the requested olive, pineapple, ham with Natasha, scrunched up against the arm of the couch so she could finish his toes.

Steve was full and sluggish, happy to listen as the Iron Man tried to school him in the history of some cult singer from the nineties (with helpful commentary shouted across the room from Hawkeye), while in the background the very same singer crooned a sad melody to a cathedral full of mourners. He didn't think he'd felt so content since before Kuznetsov.

"Yes, it's overplayed, overdone thanks to the stupid movie about the boat," Natasha hissed when Tony nearly had her painting his knuckle with all of the moving around he was doing, "but that first ten seconds, with the flute. Iconic."

"I don't know," Bruce hedged, "that cover she did, of Natural Woman back in the '90s…"

Tony booed and lobbed a throw pillow at his fellow scientist's face.

Steve figured now would be a good time to cut in. "You know, not that it makes much difference to me either way, but with all the talking you guys are doing, I haven't actually heard the lady sing."

"Irrelevant," Tony waved away. "Just take my word on this."

Steve snorted and leaned back as Bruce goaded the inventor into another mini-rant. He watched
with half an ear as the singer on the television was replaced with an older, handsome woman that spoke a slow eulogy that doubled as an introduction in a voice rich as bittersweet chocolate. And then the president was stepping up to the mic and even Stark tapered off to listen.

"Rumor is he was censored pretty heavily," Clint said, voice pitched just low enough not to disrupt the rousing speech Ellis was giving. "He wanted some leeway in what he could say, but the writing team insisted on him going a specific direction, didn't want to upset their donors."

"How do you even know that?" Natasha snorted, to which he shot her a mock offended look.

"People talk to me. I'm approachable."

"No, of course you are, it's just-"

"Um, guys…"

Steve's focus shifted from the distraction Natasha and Clint's exchange was causing to Bruce, the only one with eyes still on the memorial. Ellis was shouting into the microphone something about *enduring* and the crowd was on their feet, cheering him on. He had a camera at his back, set up a few good yards behind him, and high up above his head, so that it looked down upon him and the entire hall. They could see everyone and thing in the hall, including the figure that had caught Bruce's attention.

It was a man- Steve guessed from his stature and build- standing all the way at the back of the hall, just barely at the edge of the camera's field of view. There was nothing distinguishing about him only because he was covered from head to toe; a dark shirt with a collar that crept high up his throat, an understated pair of trousers, and a well-tailored jacket that hung open to his knees. Simple, all black that at first looked no different from the mourning attire just about everyone else was decked out in. But the weave of his shirt and trousers were strange, a breathable material meant for a wide range of motion. And the flare of his coat, it's perfectly tailored fit, and the heaviness of the fabric despite the sweltering temperatures outside spoke of an article of clothing meant more for function than simple fashion. And then of course there were the gloves, a dark, red leather, shocking in the sea of black, and the hood that engulfed his entire face in an unnatural shadow.

Steve took in the threatening sight this figure made in the half a second between his appearance and him drawing a familiar weapon. A long, thin stick of wood that he flourished in a confident grip.

"Avengers."

He didn't need to say anything more than that, they were all up, all moving. He raced down the hall, up a back flight of stairs to the level his rooms were on and through to his private living room. The shield was right where he left it, propped up against the side table beside the couch.

He was back down in the communal area in less than half a minute, still in the flat gray workout set he'd been walking around in all day because he already knew shimmying into his complicated battle suit would take more time than any of them had at the moment.

Stark was behind the bar, crunching on the ice from the remnants of a drink while he attached a set of metallic bands to his wrist, Clint had retrieved the experimental arrows he'd initially come here for and was working through a series of stretches with Natasha, while Bruce was standing off to the side, waiting patiently.
The television was still broadcasting video from the church and it was absolute chaos, he caught the rattle of gunfire, the starburst of spellfire, and the sight of strange, dark creatures tearing into men. But then he forced himself to look away, to focus on his team and getting control of the situation.

"Where are we going?"

"Fifth Avenue," Natasha reported as she handed him a button-sized communication device to stick into his ear. "St. Joseph's Cathedral."

Tony was already moving to the open doors leading out on to the balcony. "I'll go ahead, see what I see."

Disassembled pieces of the suit flew around the side of the tower and began fitting themselves around his form, but Steve didn't stick around to watch, already stepping onto the waiting elevator. JARVIS, very aware of the urgency of the situation, took control of the elevator's speed and dropped them in what almost felt like a controlled fall to the underground garage in a matter of seconds.

Natasha flipped open a panel on the wall and grabbed a key fob to toss to Steve. "Take his Triumph, we'll ride behind you."

He had no trouble finding the bike, kicking it to life while Natasha, Bruce, and Clint climbed into a sleek coupe a couple of spaces down.

"Fifth Avenue, just past the Rockefeller center," she shouted over the roar of the engine, "We could make it in ten."

Steve shook his head, kicked off the ground. "I say five."

He tore out of the garage and heard the screech of tires behind him, he pulled onto the street just as Tony swooped over their heads.

"This isn't the attack of a discontented voter," he told them, voice coming through the comm loud and clear and a little breathless "we're dealing with someone other than human. He's done something to the church, removed all the ways in and out, and turned them to stone."

"Not just one, this is a team," Natasha said. "I've got Fury on."

There was a moment while the connection established, then the Director's weary voice spoke right into his ear. "Rogers."

Steve cut the bike into a sharp turn, he caught the sight of a few surprised looking pedestrians as he leaned forward and pushed the bike as fast as it could go. "I know."

"Okay. Cryptic," Tony snarked. "Please explain."

"Not enough time. But yes, Stark, you're right, these individuals are more than human, with a skill set similar to Loki's."

"What does that mean?" Bruce asked, sounding very much like he didn't want to know the answer.

"Magic," Steve answered for Fury. "Powerful, deadly magic. These guys are dangerous."

"Hold on, Cap, you know these guys?"
"Not enough time," Fury repeated, cutting off Clint. "We've got a count of eleven, seven active combatants, four seem to be keeping the crowd in control somehow."

"The president?"

"Alive for now. He's out of harm's reach, but also his servicemen's."

"And they're trying to get to him?" Natasha asked. "Just the five?"

"Yes," Fury said grimly. "And they will. Rogers summed it up pretty accurately: they're dangerous."

Steve grunted, not even a little happy to be right. "How much time do we have?"

"They'll be done with the servicemen in I'd say another six minutes."

"We can be there in three."

"Right around the corner, I passed over some kind of protest," Tony told them. "It's a big one but they're staying off the streets so far, we should be able to squeeze by."

But that proved to no longer be true. Steve turned the corner into a snarl of backed-up cars and thousands of bodies filling the gaps between. It seemed they'd been marching in the direction of the church, the spires of which Steve could just see in the gaps between a few buildings, but a police line had formed-they were stopping anyone from passing with an aggression that was met equally by the massive crowd.

Natasha hissed furiously over the comm. "Fuck. Stark do you see a way through?"

The crowd roared when Ironman passed overhead; some were cheering, seeming happy to see him, but he still had to dodge more than a few wildly chucked bottles and even a few shoes. "There's a bit of space between the two far left lanes, Cap should fit through no problem. But no car's getting by, you'll have to backtrack, re-route to-"

He saw a flicker of orange just from the edge of his vision, the glint of sunlight off glass, then a bottle collided with the side of his helmet. Flames swept across the surface of the suit and the force of the explosion knocked him opposite of his repulsors and out of the sky.

He tucked and rolled, a well-practiced maneuver that sent the suit careening into the asphalt but not through any human bodies which he counted as an automatic win. He lay there for a moment, absolutely stunned while JARVIS voice garbled over the suit's speakers, but then it and his retina display flickered out.

There was no way that was just any old ordinary Molotov, a bit of gasoline in an old gin bottle couldn't take out the Mark VII. But then the crowd all around him engulfed him entirely and he stopped thinking about that really quick.

Steve watched Stark go down and get swallowed up in the crush of bodies horrified. The explosion went off overhead and everyone panicked, protestors and drivers hopping out of their vehicles all ran and pushed and trampled in every direction. And at the end of the street, trying to remain a strong presence between them and the cathedral, the line of cops screamed at the hysterical protestors, beating them back and setting off canisters of smoke into the mass of bodies.

"Stark do you hear me?" Steve scoured the street for any sign of red and gold. "Did anyone see
"Where he went down?"

"Rogers," Fury's voice snapped him to attention, sharp with barely contained urgency. "We're nearly out of servicemen in there."

"We're not getting through this," Natasha said, "and they've got us blocked in behind now too. Go ahead of us, see what you can do."

He didn't waste time arguing. She was right. "I've got room for one more on the back."

"Take Bruce."

"Bruce?"

"They're tearing through the president's guys no problem, so maybe we need someone with thicker skin."

Steve couldn't argue with that logic. He waited the handful of seconds it took Bruce to switch vehicles then redirected the bike to maneuver to the edge of the chaos.

"Good luck, have fun," Clint said and he bothered with no more of a response than a quiet snort.

Wizards, he was heading in to fight wizards most likely allied with HYDRA.

Seventy years and really nothing had changed.

It took eight minutes.

Eight minutes and all exits were sealed off.

Eight minutes and the one thousand, six hundred and thirteen mourners, forty members of the press, and thirty-eight surviving service members were rounded up and compliant.

They had not gone easy, the president's detail; all of Harry hurt, he was sure at least one rib was broken. Iola had taken several bullets for Angel that would have killed him, but left her only shaking from a bit of blood loss. And Hogwarts was dead, throat torn open by a bullet, but Crane hadn't faltered and neither did their plants.

The servicemen had been relentless, coordinated, and motivated, they knew what they were fighting for, even if they didn't know who, and they knew what it would mean if they lost. But that still meant little in the face of Harry and his Heart who was hungry.

Eight minutes, seven seconds after standing from that pew, the last body dropped and Harry's hand burned. Actually burned. The handle of his wand was blistering, searing the skin of his palm and sending smoke curling up from his grip. He was sure if he cast another spell the whole thing would go up and flames would consume him whole.

But there were more spells to cast, more work to do, and the president was waiting.

He was careful stepping over the twisted corpses spread all up and along the aisle and he took the stairs leading up to the dais slow as he considered what was left to do.

Ellis hung at the height of the room like a particularly appealing bit of bait; his face was starting to turn blue from the pressure his organs were putting on his lungs, but he still looked properly defiant as Harry began a slow circle below him. The shark to his bait.
Somewhere beyond his focus, a siren was wailing, something outside shook the stone of the church, but the creeping arrival of a familiar presence at his back kept him slow, serene. Death draped over him, as perfectly fit as his father's cloak once was.

"Mmm," the entity rumbled, low and anticipatory right in Harry's ear. "That feeling rattling your bones, what is that?"

Harry didn't waste a response; he didn't need to. Death already knew the answer.

My Heart.

His wand slashed above his head and Ellis fell down, down. A half a meter from cracking his neck on the ground Harry caught him and lowered him gently the rest of the way. He didn't bother binding him, even when the president slowly got his feet under him.

"Okay," Ellis said, his voice pitched to sound soothing, placating, his hands went up too, as if to ward off a frightened animal. "You've got my attention."

Harry cracked a smile. "Apologies, Mr. President, that's not what we're here for."

"Then what?"

"We have a point to make."

He forced the man back down on his knees, aiming his wand at the ground and pushing until an invisible force buckled Ellis' legs from under him and pitched him forward.

"One that your kind seem to be intentionally missing." Harry stopped at his back, looming over his shoulder; he grabbed the back of his head and pulled until Ellis was stretched as far as he could while still on his knees. "Again and again."

There was a spot, right below where his jaw met his throat, where his pulse was visible, pattering quick as a rabbit's. Harry placed the point of his wand there and said. "Finish it."

Ellis kept still, he didn't understand the order.

"The rest of your speech," Harry elaborated. "Finish it for us."

He dug his wand in, just to show how serious he was, and beneath his touch, Ellis began to tremble. He didn't look afraid though, and that little bit of defiance he'd been hanging on to had fled the moment his knees met the dais. He only looked resigned now. And…sad.

"This won't help," he whispered. "Whatever you want, whatever it is you're trying to prove, this is not-

"Will I have to imperius you as well?"

Ellis was a world leader, the president of the country, he knew wizards, had been introduced to MACUSA right at the height of the war in Britain, and so knew exactly what an imperius did.

"Let these last few moments at least be yours."

That did it, Harry watched the president's shoulders drop barely a centimeter as he gave in.

"We had no special suits." He didn't have a microphone this time, so Harry made sure to amplify his voice so that these last words would reach every corner of the hall, and (most importantly) be
picked up by the cameras, still set up, still broadcasting to the entire country and further. "No magic hammers or superhuman serums. It was just us; humans doing our best and finding that it is more than enough."

Ellis raised his chin and there was that defiance, back again as he looked directly into the cameras, speaking with all the fervor of a man who knew this was it.

"We found that there was no force too great, no enemy we couldn't fight back, no horror we couldn't overcome. Our unity surpasses whatever powers any superhuman, any wizard, could possess, it is our might. United we are unconquerable."

Harry smiled then (because how could he not?) a gleaming, gash of white disrupting the dark inside his hood. Ellis had gone off script there near the end, but it worked, better even than anything Pierce could have planned. It was a call to action, a call to war, and if the muggles watching adored him even half as much as those within the church did, it would be answered. Death had said this much would happen, and he'd cried and he'd raged at the unfair truth of it. But the Heart demanded it's due; first pestilence, then famine, now it would have its war and Harry was okay with that. For the first time since their unwilling union he and the Heart were of the same mind, they were in agreement.

Because it turned out that Amos and Robards, that pretty french woman, or any of the ICW he'd slaughtered weren't enough. Because they weren't alone. These were a people who'd looked to him as savior nearly from birth, expected a child to play their hero, a boy to save them all, and who condemned him when it still went wrong. When his youth and inexperience brought along a power worse than Voldemort, they'd refused to see their own fault, but were happy to condemn just him. They'd handed him over for torment and inevitable death as if his entire being and purpose hadn't revolved around saving them. As if he wasn't one of them.

The wizarding world was rotten to its core, it needed cleansing, and he and the Heart were happy to see it done.

Killing Ellis needed to be a spectacle, not just the attack on his men, but the actual act of ending the man's life. He couldn't use Avada Kedavra, it was to clean, too dignified, and he needed these people foaming at the mouth. So he went back to simpler times and the hexes he'd learned with the singular intent to help protect his muggle allies fighting their muggle war and he chose the worst of them.

But before he cast. Before Ellis rose up into the air again (higher than even the levicorpus could manage) with a spine of blackened wood turning blacker with blood torn through his chest and gripping so tight he hung there, suspended like a horrible mockery of christ. Harry leaned forward so he was just scant centimeters from the president's ear and he said to him and the world watching.

"Magic is might."

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