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**Keep Your Enemies Closer**

by *Riddletobien*

**Summary**

Voldemort conquers wizarding Britain and discovers his human horcrux. Harry is allowed to live under the new regime. Attending a darker version of Hogwarts, he struggles with vengeful classmates, a strange connection to Dark Marks, and worst of all, Tom Riddle whispering inside his head. AU dystopia. Story is mostly gen, though praised for its gradual platonic intimacy between the two arch-enemies.

One reviewer says of KYEC: *I just found this story a couple of days ago, and I'm thoroughly gripped by it. I could barely stop reading in between chapters, but had to, of course, since your tale is already so deliciously long. The plot is thrilling and well thought-out, and your characterisations are spot-on.*
Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter, I do not make any money out of this.
Chapter 1

Keep Your Enemies Closer

Chapter 1 - PROLOGUE

He was stunned by the sight before him. He blinked and looked around again, but his surroundings stayed firmly in place.

What the hell?

Even before he'd opened his eyes he knew full well the company he would wake up in. He imagined Voldemort standing over his chained-up form, finally deigning to show up to see his mortal enemy for himself.

The walls of the cold and remarkably grimy Malfoy dungeon had been filling his vision for the last two weeks. But now he seemed to have landed himself on a luxurious sofa, among low tables and wide, sun-streamed windows. The high-ceilinged wall on his left was covered by dark brown bookshelves containing massive leather-bound tomes; glass cases in the same rich colour stood...
against the far wall with all kinds of gleaming items on them, above which hung a large painting of some lord or other.

Harry shifted into a sitting position, the soft fabric pleasant at his back. He noticed he was wearing his old cloak again. The forested land behind the windows didn't offer him any clues.

Had the Order rescued him at the last minute? But then, where was everyone? He should be in Pomfrey's care by now with the amount of injuries he'd sustained. A flash of memory ripped through him, sending a shock through his already adrenaline filled thoughts. Howling laughter… cutting ropes… ripping, biting skin.

And there had been no escaping… His fist closed around the armrest. No, he was not going to think about it.

Better find out what's going on then.

Just when he was turning to stand, the door flew open, freezing him on the spot.

"Mr. Potter." Lucius Malfoy walked in, and Harry felt a familiar numbing fear tingling over his fingertips. The grey eyes were coldly assessing as the man walked towards him. He held no other weapon aside from his wand that Harry could see, however.

"Our Lord is requiring your presence."

"Why have I been moved?"

"You will stay silent or I will make you," the elder Malfoy sneered, pointing his wand. Harry quickly judged that there was no point in resisting. He shakily placed his feet on the soft carpet and noticing the black slippers, slid them on. They took off at a brisk pace.

The small chamber led to a long passageway with countless dark oaken doors. So he was still in Malfoy Manor then.

Harry tried to ignore the various portraits of long-dead descendants, pale-skinned and blond-haired, looking on with interest as he passed. The corridor ended in a grand staircase winding down to the entrance hall, a symmetrical staircase leading down on the opposite side.

Most of the wounds he'd received had been inflicted on his upper body. Breathing was difficult, probably because of some not-yet healed ribs, and his back was still on fire. Under his robes he could feel tight bandages encircling his chest.

Lucius turned right and descended the staircase, through an ante chamber. He knocked once and opened the door to a spacious drawing room. The occupants turned towards them. Harry locked eyes with Voldemort immediately. He stood next to a burning fireplace, goblet in hand, his red eyes reflecting the glow of orange light. A corner of his lipless mouth curled upwards. Harry recognized the man next to him as Evan Rosier, one of the older Death Eaters.

"My Lord," Lucius bowed respectfully.

Voldemort spoke. "Hello Harry, I trust my Death Eaters have kept you properly entertained?" Harry glared at him, his mouth twisting.

Voldemort's smirk broadened. "Still with that spirit, I see." He motioned to the sofa next to the hearth. "Sit down." Harry did so slowly. Meanwhile his nails were biting into his palms.
"Leave us," Voldemort ordered his servants, his eyes on Harry. They bowed deeply and walked out, closing the door behind them. Voldemort took a seat next to him on the sofa, which made Harry's heart rate shoot up a notch.

Long white fingers took his jaw and forced him to look at the gleaming eyes. He wanted to resist what he knew was coming – but already the Dark Lord was tearing through his mind, his icy presence leaking through his thoughts. Images flew past his mind's eye, of Ron choking on poisoned mead, Hermione's disapproving stare as he showed them a creative curse from the Prince's book… Tom Riddle uttering "I mean, for instance, isn't seven…"

No! Harry thought fiercely. But suddenly the attack stopped. As he looked at the intricately carved ceiling he realized he had blacked out, with his head slumped against the back of the couch. He raised it slowly.

"Well well..." Voldemort whispered. His now-familiar snake-like face was very intimidating up close. Harry swallowed at the intensity of his expression. "Whatever would Dumbledore think, his favourite pupil using dark curses?"

Had he seen the Sectumsempra? It was the only time he could remember throwing a dark curse at someone. Harry shivered as he considered the question might just as well be a distraction, because who knew what Voldemort might have glimpsed in his mind...

"Your focus is weak. The Malfoy boy should have been dead," Voldemort commented. He stood abruptly and walked to the center of the room. "You may practice on me. Catch."

A slender piece of wood was thrown his way, and when he caught it he recognized the handle of the wand. His own wand!

The familiar magic running through the wood soothed him. Voldemort didn't consider him a threat, that much was clear. Well, he thought crankily, that arrogance would one day become his downfall. Trying to portray a calm he didn't feel, Harry strode towards the other end of the drawing room and took a position opposite the Dark Lord.

Voldemort was waiting, his face showing nothing of his thoughts. Maybe the test was to survive as long as possible. All he knew was that he had to keep Voldemort distracted. He pointed his wand and uttered:

"Confringo."

The Dark Lord stepped lazily out of the way of the blasting curse while murmuring something Harry couldn't hear. Harry's shield was not enough to repel the streak of red light and the world spun dizzyingly as his back hit the floor.

Something seemed...off. He was supposed to be doing something now. Right, he probably should... hit back. His sluggish mind searched for the words of the spell he had been studying for emergencies...

"Scindo cutis."*

"Protego," Voldemort responded and the curse was absorbed by his shield. When it disappeared however there was no one standing behind it. Harry felt a malevolent magic behind him and spun around fast. Not a smart move, as his momentum careened him and he lost all semblance of orientation. As the ground slowly started to rise up from under him, a firm hand clenched in his robe front and pulled him close, claws digging into the fabric.
He gave a pained gasp as his scar seared. His head felt like it might burn off any second. And something seemed to be moving underneath...

"What..." he began but was silenced by a hand creeping over his forehead. It felt cool to the touch and strangely seemed to ease the pain in his scar.

The energy surrounding Voldemort crawled around Harry, threatening. But as they stood like this, thoroughly creeping him out, the magic gradually changed.

No longer did it feel cold and sharp, like the metal of a blade ready to cut him at the slightest misstep: it felt inviting, alive and moving inside him, little electrical currents sparkling over his body. And he felt something in his scar responding, pulling it in, soothing, creating an almost meditative dynamic between them...

He floated in the feeling of wildness, of power and possibility. His eyes closed involuntarily. So pure it felt, surely it was not Voldemort's doing...

And then, just as abruptly, the energy left him as pain brought him back to the room.

Voldemort's palm had left his forehead to claw deep into his chest. It withdrew a moment later, leaving burning wounds which made him gasp to breathe. The man's arm shook in anger and he felt a chill going through him at the sight. If his rage couldn't be contained... he didn't want to think of what would happen next.

Then the Dark Lord uttered a breathy laugh, drawing back a little.

"So acquiescent, Harry," Voldemort mocked, calm again - the speed of his changing moods was dizzying.

Harry bristled - no one had ever accused him of that. A finger stroked his cheek. It felt forced after the violence from seconds earlier, like the man was stalling, scheming. Harry tried to get away from the touch, until finally the hand withdrew.

He felt his cheeks flush, thinking back to the earlier feeling of wildness, like alcohol or a drug. He worried uneasily what effect Voldemort's mad magic might have on his brain, so close to his scar. Harry avoided his terrible eyes. Voldemort's good humour was felt like a tingling along his scar.

"What happened?" Harry tried, talking to the man's black robes. "The magic, did it … combine?"

Voldemort's lips quirked. His eyes had now taken on a strange, intense gleam. It made Harry feel like he was missing something, like there was an undercurrent to things that he wasn't privy to.

Harry searched for another question to distract this most evil of wizards from what was surely about to happen. This was probably the moment were he had outlived his usefulness, he thought frantically. Before he could ask anything else, the Dark Lord's face morphed in disgust and he hissed in parseltongue:

"You may go little one, run back to that old coot."

Harry could only stare in disbelief. But surely, his own eyes saw Voldemort accio his wand and holding it out to him between spidery fingers. He took it with only barely shaking hands. Voldemort's eyes were focused on the wand while he whispered something - was he going to curse it?

The answer came when a force yanked at his stomach and in the next moment Malfoy Manor had
whirled out of sight.

Chapter End Notes

*To tear up the skin.

Yes, Voldemort is acting weirdly here: it was a test, and Harry passed... All will become clear soon!

Let me know what you think!
Chapter 2

Eccentric green robes that spotted yellow triangles on them approached in his peripheral vision and came to a stop beside his bed. Too late then. Holding back a sigh, he straightened slowly from the process of grabbing his bag and met the light blue eyes of the headmaster.

"Harry, my boy, it is good to see you up and about so soon already. Are you sure you do not need more time to rest from last night's events?"

"No I'm fine sir." His injuries were healing nicely, much to Madame Pomfrey's surprise.

"And thank Merlin for that. I am very sorry that we have been unable to find your location; some of us assumed the worst." Dumbledore's face tightened almost imperceptibly, whether from regret or remembrance Harry could not tell.

"That's alright Professor." He wouldn't say it wasn't. And he did understand.

The Headmaster conjured two squashy armchairs between the beds and gestured to one of them. "Please, sit down," he said with a warm smile. The moment Harry sat a tea tray sparkled into existence between them.

"Tea?"

"Yes, thank you."

Taking a sip of his own tea, Dumbledore surveyed Harry over his glasses. "I would like to ask you Harry, to tell me all that has transpired last night. Please do not leave out any details that might seem unimportant."

Harry took a swallow to calm himself, welcoming the scalding of his mouth. "I- I was walking back from the lake to go to dinner when I saw Professor Trelawney coming towards me. I think she came from Hogsmeade. She went into one of her fatalistic rants- I mean speeches and then suddenly she swung something at me; it must have been heavy because the next thing I know I'm in a dungeon cell." He trailed off to gauge the reaction.

Dumbledore's expression darkened. Harry jumped when Fawkes burst into existence next to him, landing on Dumbledore's shoulder. Dumbledore murmured something and then the phoenix was gone again, leaving behind one golden feather that was deftly snatched out of the air by a gnarled hand.

"She may have been Imperiused or impersonated." Dumbledore explained as if there had been no interruption. "I will order a search of the grounds for any traces of magical activity. The wards will need to be strengthened if that is at all possible—"
"But the wards, shouldn't they…?" If Hogwarts wards had failed…

"Yes, they should be able to expel any imposters. We will get to the bottom of this, Harry." He reached over to shortly grasp his shoulder in a gesture that was supposed to be encouraging.

Harry took another sip to stall. For the next part he would just go with the short version. The last thing he felt like was a shower of pity from everyone. Besides, this was war. These things were bound to happen at some point, especially if your name was Harry Potter. Fortunately the Death Eaters had done a good job of healing the whip marks and knife work.

He frowned, thinking on that. Why had they healed him anyway? He had probably looked awful, but wouldn't that please the Dark Lord? Of course the Death Eaters hadn't been able to resist their revanché: the Department of Mysteries debacle must still be fresh in their minds.

"When I woke I was in a large guest room and L-Lucius Malfoy walked in," Harry continued while avoiding the blue eyes. "He took me to Voldemort. I knew we were in Malfoy Manor because of the portraits hanging from the walls." He felt silent again.

"And what did Lord Voldemort want from you, Harry?"

"He… placed his hand over my forehead and he said he wanted to read my magical signature."

"Indeed."

"Yeah it was eh… really strange, like he was pulling at my magic."

"That is correct,"Dumbledore nodded. "A signature spell interacts with the persons' magic to explore their magical tendencies. For example a signature with a magical inclination towards charms may project a positive feeling to those with a natural affinity towards its lightness, or a negative feeling to those with darker inclinations, and it can be anything in between. It is important therefore for receiver and caster to have an intuitive grasp of one's own magical inclinations to understand the result of the spell."

He definitely had an affinity with Voldemort's magic then. Well, damn.

"Which makes me very curious as to what you experienced," Dumbledore clasped his hands, leaning forward.

Harry again looked away as if digging up a painful memory. "It… hurt." He thought back to the end of fifth year when Voldemort had possessed him. "I wanted to be anywhere but there, it felt like my skin was being flayed and…" he broke of abruptly. Remembering was like reliving it all over again, only the smaller version. He must have been convincing because a hand closed over his own and the Headmasters eyes creased with sorrow.

"I am so sorry my boy."

"But the strangest thing was, he let me go after that."

There was a moment of silence before Dumbledore stood abruptly, startling him. Pacing to the large windows, the old wizard looked out over the grounds, hands folded behind his back.

Harry stood as well. "It doesn't make sense, why would he let me go?"

"I don't know my boy, I don't know." Far-away eyes turned to regard him. However lucky Harry had been, the Headmaster didn't take it as a good sign.
A sudden thought came to him, something he'd wanted to ask that was now more important than ever. "Professor, is it possible for me to get training for this? So that I can be at least somewhat prepared next time something happens? When they came for me, I couldn't do anything. I was… helpless," he finished in a whisper.

"Hm. In light of recent events, I suppose that will be necessary. This latest breach of security is very worrisome. Time is plotting against us, Harry. I do not know what game Voldemort is playing at, but rest assured his obsession with you will only increase. The fact that he let you go is a sign that he is getting more confident, since he expects that he can whisk you away any odd time he wants." He paused for a moment, his eyes jumping back and forth between Harry's. "It needs to be someone with considerable experience and control in the more powerful registers of magic. You will need to work hard for this training to be of any use. I trust that you will commit yourself to the fullest of your abilities?"

"Yes, of course."

"Then I will contact Professor Snape at the earliest convenience."

"Snape?" Was that his voice going up half an octave? "Don't you think that he is - I mean, last year-"

"Professor Snape, Harry. And yes, I am well aware of last years unfortunate incident," Dumbledore said with raised eyebrows. "Professor Snape is an excellent duelist, however, and he has an impressive grasp on a wide range of techniques."

Great. Had he known that that would be on the table, he would have happily went on teaching himself. His expression remained blank but Dumbledore guessed his thoughts:

"I would very much like teaching you myself, but I think that Professor Snape will present you with a greater challenge to perform under more… stressful circumstances. Also," he went on while Harry's cheeks reddened, "he is intimately acquainted with the tactics of the enemy. He has been asked to train Death Eaters in the past. All the things you'll learn on a regular basis are very different from those of your classmates. It needs to be someone very capable, Harry."

"But maybe you could- "

"I am sorry to say that it will not be possible for me to teach you," Dumbledore spoke gently. "My reflexes are not what they used to be." He raised his hand and Harry saw the black blisters crackling over the skin. "I have to go now, Harry. I will contact you when I have received Severus' answer."

After Dumbledore had taken his leave, Harry stood unmoving, mulling over the answer to his question. Was that really the reason why he could not teach Harry? Or was there something more at play, something he did not want Harry to know?

Slowly walking towards the large double doors of the hospital wing, he was startled out of his thoughts by a bushy-haired girl threatening to topple him with the force of her hug, as shouts of "Harry, mate!" and "Oh Harry, you must be feeling awful!" cutting through the silence.

"Hey mate, you feel like playing a round of Quidditch outside?"

Harry looked up annoyed, interrupted from his readings. Ever since Dumbledore had received Snape's letter voicing his acceptance of the duty of training Harry (and Harry was not so naïve as
to think he'd had any choice) Snape had been heaping on him book after book on dueling techniques. Short terse notes like

Borrow from the library:

**Duelling for the Determined – Voltius Growldawl**

**Emerging the Victor: Duelling Techniques for the Advanced – Alberta Toothill**

**Dark Arts and Defence – Gustus Deterton**

were being delivered by a black raven every few days and he was getting cross-eyed from the amount of text that had passed under his eyes to the point that he was beginning to develop a permanent headache.

"You know I have work to do Ron," he sighed, moving one hand propping up his head to massage his sore neck. Ron took the seat across from him and tugged on the black tome.

"Dark Arts and Defense? What is the old bugger making you read now?" Ron scolded.

"He's not making me do anything. I asked for this."

Ron shot him a look. "And I suppose that includes wanting to work your ass off during the whole of Easter break?"

"Look, I'm not happy about this either. You go on with Ginny, I'll catch you guys later alright?" he pleaded.

"You better join us before dinner," he grumbled, before stalking out of the library.

Harry glared at the textbook in front of him. Snape knew he was not allowed to go anywhere during the holidays. That he would be stuck here with copious amounts of free time. He supposed he should be grateful that he didn't have this workload during term next to all the other courses he had to follow. In a couple of days Snape would be drilling him on the theory: the man had sneered in passing that he would "verify to what depths I will need to sink to not overexert your... capabilities". When classes resumed two training sessions would be scheduled every week, all under the cover of remedial Potions to prepare for his NEWTs, of course.

He sighed. Where was he? Oh yes, the chapter on tactics. Glancing at the assigned readings, he couldn't help agreeing with Ron's assessment that the book was rather ... wicked.

"This charm when aimed accurately, will cause the air behind the opponent to darken, making them turn to face this perceived threat. This will provide the attacker with enough time for a whispered curse to hit the target unhindered."

He was apparently going to be fighting the Slytherin way. Well, he smirked, this could prove amusing after all…

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When Harry rounded the corner on the seventh floor Snape was already there, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed and his wand tapping a rhythm against his shoulder. His eyes followed Harry as he walked to stand next to the Room of Requirement. The professor pushed from the wall and began pacing in front of it in the manner of someone taking a leisurely stroll. A door materialised and they walked through in silence.
"Well," Snape began the moment the door shut closed behind them (Harry heard several clicking noises), "how delighted I am to be assigned the joyful task of teaching you, yet again." His eyes flickered around the room, now more resembling a hall in size. "To what I owe this pleasure I do not know." Harry barely caught the whisper.

The sunlight coursing through the floor to ceiling windows on one side illuminated the opposite wall, touching shelves upon shelves of books and sinister looking objects. Abruptly he turned and Harry met his intense stare. Snape's eyes were two black voids and Harry felt as if his eyes would start to burn from looking at them too long.

"You are," Snape clipped, striding towards him, "an incompetent, undisciplined, spoiled brat, and yet I am supposed to make a halfway decent dueler out of you before the school year ends. So," the word was a hiss near his ear. "You will train, hard. There will be no cutting slack. When you are not putting your utmost effort into each session, you won't need to bother showing up again. And believe me, I will know… Do I make myself clear?"

"Crystal, sir."

Snape narrowed his eyes at that as if he were trying to decide whether Harry was mocking him or not. In the silence that followed Harry tried to stay calm, feeling very much like a prey on display. After half a minute of scrutiny Snape straightened, apparently satisfied. "Very well. We will begin by testing your grasp on the readings. What are the different classes of curses?"

Fortunately he knew the answer well, since the different classes were frequently referred to in the books. "Neurological curses. Conditional curses, endogenic and exogenic curses… and temporal curses I guess, although they are actually part of the conditional curses."

"And do you know why the temporal curses are defined as a separate class?"

"Because the study of these curses is very old and they make up a large part of the conditional curses."

"Correct," Snape allowed, his face void of emotion. Of course the optimistic streak could not last long and his next question had Harry scrambling for an answer:

"Which of the classes do you consider to hold the most dangerous curses to humans?"

"Ehm…you mean the Unforgivable Curses?"

One eyebrow lifted.

Harry plodded on. "Well, then I guess the neurological curses and for the Killing Curse… the endogenic curses?"

"Your guess is incorrect and you are obviously speculating," the Potion's master sneered. "Dangerous is not the same as Unforgivable," he said in his customary classroom drawl. "Many curses are as dangerous as the Cruciatus or the Killing Curse, which goes to show that you can never rely on the government to protect you on any significant level. For example, the Entrail-Expelling Curse will cause the victim to die at once, making Crucio look kind in comparison."

However, in order for this curse to work properly, a large amount of magical reserves is needed. As you should know by now, the de-materialising of an indeterminate mass is taxing to accomplish, since it constitutes an endogenic reaction requiring the forcing of energy out of the system. In a duelling situation therefore, it would be more effective to use the energy outside of the system. For example, the Decaputis Curse would be sufficient in this situation."
Snape proceeded to explain the advantages and disadvantages of various gruesome curses and in what circumstances to use them. Harry wondered if Snape seriously thought he would be using them. This was a different take on Defence Against the Dark Arts, he supposed - no, make that Dark Arts. He had always thought that, even ignoring the bad teaching over the years, the stuff they were taught was somehow lacking.

It was now obvious what had been missing this whole time: knowledge of the art itself. They always learned how to defend against it, but rarely did the teachers explain the workings behind a spell. That knowledge was very likely forbidden by the Ministry. Harry supposed he should be glad that the children of Death Eaters were not getting spoon-fed more curses in school than they'd already been taught at home.

He looked closely at his Professor. It seemed that teaching his favourite subject to his least favourite pupil had evened out the usual quick temper and snarky demeanour. Snape's voice was barely above a whisper but his gaze was intense and his posture attentive.

When Snape had drilled Harry to his satisfaction (and Harry was relieved that most of his answers were correct), he took out his wand and asked Harry to do the same. Snape placed some distance between them by walking to the center of the hall, his black robes swishing outwards as he turned around. One side of Snape's mouth curled upwards.

"There will be no need for decorum here, as bowing before your enemy in a real dueling situation would be very foolish indeed."

Harry thought about Voldemort's demanding push on his spine.

"The most important skill to harness when faced with an unknown and most likely powerful opponent, is the element of surprise. Taking the enemy unawares through the use of location, agility and knowledge may be your only chance of gaining the upper hand." While speaking, the long fingers of Snape's left hand made a caressing motion over his wand. "Remember that your adversary will be watching closely and waiting for you to reveal your aptitude to him, in order to predict your future actions. You should not give him any excuse to do so. I will demonstrate."

"Impedimenta Fragmentum" Snape said while flicking his wand in a wide arc.

A wide array of yellowish light came Harry's way at chest level and without thinking, he had flattened himself to the ground within a second, balancing his weight on the palms of his hands. Angling his neck upwards to look Snape in the eyes he saw his Professor looking back at him with a sour expression.

"As I expected, you just gave away a valuable skill, namely your agility."

Harry sprang up angrily. "What was I supposed to do? Just take it?"

Snape's lips thinned. "Regardless of the confidential setting of these lessons, you will address me as "sir" or "Professor" at all times, Potter!" he spat the last part.

"What was I supposed to do instead of avoiding the spell, sir?"

"Even when incanted silently, one can recognize the speed and colour of the spell as an Impedimenta, which is not too powerful to be blocked. Moreover, you left yourself in a very vulnerable position, one which I could easily use to my advantage."

"But what if it would be too powerful, sir? Wouldn't it be better to choose to avoid it if I do not know what it is?"
"Then it would be better to avoid it, yes, which is why you will be learning to recognise different types of curses on sight and the best way to counter them, in order to react accordingly. Remember, knowledge is power. I will now use a curse which you will try to recognize and block with the correct counter. Flagrata."

A nasty red spell sizzled his way and Harry knew it was a powerful one.

"Expelliarmus!" he countered. The spells met, then veered off in opposite directions. Some kind of ward shimmered in place, making them vanish before they could hit the walls.

Snape studied him. "You were lucky this time. Usually the Expelliarmus does not allow enough power to deflect the Flagrata." He lifted his wand and Harry tensed. "The following counter-curse is more reliable for the stronger curses and hexes." He swiped his wand in two diagonal slashes, incanting:

"Munio integer." A shimmering blue shield appeared for a moment, covering Snape's front entirely.

And so on they went, Snape demonstrating a curse, or jinx or hex (or even an ordinary charm to take Harry off guard) and Harry tried to come up with the best counter - which often proved to be an inefficient one. Snape would then show the correct spell and corresponding wand-movement, and gradually Harry began to see a pattern. He started to realise that there was not one specific counter for each curse, but that the characteristics of the curse would reveal what kind of counter would likely be most effective and cost the least bit of magical energy.

After Harry was thrown to the cold stones for the umpteenth time by the next curse, and feeling thoroughly wretched at this point, Snape sighed, lowering his wand. "That will be enough for today," he said, pinching the bridge of his nose.

Harry stood up with shaking legs, and seeing Snape remain unmoving with his eyes closed and head bowed, it struck him that Snape must be tired as well.

"Alright. Goodnight sir." He turned to leave when no answer was forthcoming. When his hand was on the door clink Snape called out:

"Do not forget to do your assigned readings, and I want a three foot essay on the benefits of the different characteristics of counter-curses and hexes."

"Yes sir," Harry answered warily, before walking out of the hall and closing the door behind him. When he looked back, the door was invisible once more.

Please review!
Chapter 3

Ron and Hermione had insisted on hearing all about his training the moment he entered the Common Room. When finally he rolled into bed it was already late evening. As he burrowed under the covers, the whispers of Dean and Neville's conversation a low buzzing his ears, sleep was evasive. With eyes wide open he looked at the sinister shadows bearing down from the canopy above him. He let the events of the day before play out in his mind, of the connection he had shared with the Dark Lord. His hand involuntarily went to his forehead, fingers tracing the ridges of his scar.

The burning had started then Voldemort had touched him and instantly the pain had ebbed away. It had been replaced by something alien, something exhilarating and frightening all at once… It must have something to do with the mysterious connection they shared. He remembered the wildness of the Dark Lord's magic in response to his own. It had felt…liberating. His cheeks reddened as the treasonous thought slithered to the surface. Anything had been possible in that moment. Was this what Voldemort felt each time he used dark magic?

What was Voldemort playing at anyway?

The scene kept pulling at him, making him toss and turn to find rest. After what seemed like hours of waiting, his brain finally caught up with his tired body and murky thoughts tided him over into sleep.

The long fingers before him viciously rumpled the letter into a tight fist. Little sparks flew over the trapped paper. Things would have gone so much more smoothly, he reflected.

"M-my lord?"

He flicked his wand towards the servant on the ground.

"Crucio. Remind me why I set you this task again, Antonin," Harry said in a bored tone

A throat-ripping scream answered him. Watching little flames lick at the letter in his opened hand, he lifted the curse after a minute.

"My lord, I- I can explain. They used Veritase-"

"What?" he spun around to face the man lying at his feet. Kneeling down he looked into his servants grey eyes and hissed:
"Legimens".

Behind Dolohov's irises a scowling goblin came into view.

"What does your organisation plan to do with our business activities?" rasped the creature.

"The Dark Lord will change the financial system into a closed one only accessible to those in favour," came the monotone answer. "The accounts of those opposing the new regime will be suspended-"

Suddenly the scene shifted and Harry was once again looking down at the bowed head before him. With a twist of the hand Dolohov was thrown against the damp wall, hands and feet splayed wide. His groan echoed loudly in the cave-like surroundings.

"Not only did you fail pathetically, you have now exposed my plans…" Striding towards the crumbled figure Harry felt the air around him warming pleasantly. He cut off the whimpered reply with a slither of tongue:

"Bend," only a hiss to the uninitiated ears, the magic came as a sensual glide through his arms, like a serpent climbing up his sleeve – and Harry would have gasped if he had any control over his mouth. The same ear-piercing shriek as before rend the air, only now Dolohov's body was bending backwards impossibly into the rough stone…

Harry was awakened by a hand shaking his shoulder roughly. His eyes flew open and he drew in a large gulp of air. Ron was standing over him looking worried.

"Are you alright?" he whispered urgently. "You were moaning. Was it," Ron lowered his voice even more, "your scar?"

Harry was grateful for the lack of light as he felt a blush creeping up his cheeks. He rubbed said scar. It was tingling. "Yeah."

Ron shuddered and sat down beside him. "What was he doing?"

"Torturing someone." At Ron's horrified look he whispered: "I know, I'll ask Pomfrey for more of that Dreamless Sleep potion tomorrow." Once, Harry had put Silencio on his bed and Ron had been very angry when he found out.

"You shouldn't take that stuff so much, you know."

"You're sounding like Hermione." Harry sighed. "I'm not using it every time, I just need to get some sleep once in a while." He sounded tired to his own ears.

"Alright mate, I'm just saying, don't use it too much," Ron said seriously.

"I know." Harry smiled, grateful for his concerned friend. Ron patted him on the shoulder and went back to his own bed. Harry's smile faded when he thought about what Pomfrey's response would be when he asked for his second Dreamless Sleep potion of this week.

When the Tempus spell showed 06:00 Harry stood up to go to breakfast.
Two hours later Hermione and Ron joined him at the Gryffindor table while Harry was absorbed in *Magicks of the Darkest Arts*. It was still quiet in the Great Hall with many people choosing to sleep late during the holidays.

'Good morning,' Hermione began, taking the seat next to him. "I heard from Ron that you had… *dreamed* again last night. I think you should-" she gasped mid-sentence staring at a page in Harry's book.

"*What* are you reading?" She looked incredulously at the drawings depicting various torture methods.

Harry memorized the page number before closing the book. "Something for Snape. He wants me to learn more about the Dark Arts, to understand them better. You already know this, Hermione," he said in a low voice.

"I know, but… isn't this taking it a bit far? Does Dumbledore know about this?"

Harry's glass of pumpkin juice refilled for the fourth time that morning and he took a sip before answering:

"He doesn't know the details I don't think, but he generally knows what Snape's up to". He searched her disapproving frown and tried to muster a smirk:

"Come on, can you imagine *me* getting into the Dark Arts? I can only assume that's what you're afraid of."

Ron grinned from across the table, gesturing with his sausage-filled fork: "All those secret Dark Arts lessons last year starting to pay off eh?"

Hermione scowled. "That's not funny Ron." She rounded on Harry. "I just think there are more… clean books to learn about the Dark Arts."

"I've got to be prepared, Hermione," Harry said. "And I'm not going to get that by reading *clean* books. I need to know what I'm up against."

Hermione huffed. "So according to that reasoning it's alright for you to practice the Dark Arts."

"No of course not! I need to know about them, to recognise them so I can learn to defend myself."

"It sounded to me like you were talking about using them."

"Fine," Harry said, exasperated. "What do I have to say to convince you? Obviously *Snape* is going to use them on me, but he'll sooner lend me his Potion's lab than allow me to practice dark arts on him."

Hermione's gaze turned sad. "I know. It's just that… you're playing with fire, you do realise that right? Something's bound to go wrong." She looked so worried that Harry felt himself melt inside. He put an arm around her and said in a gentle tone: "Don't you think that if anyone knows what the Dark Arts are capable of, it's me? I know what I'm getting myself into. I'll keep you updated on what we're working on, alright?"

"Alright," Hermione agreed, smiling for the first time. Then her eyes widened. "I almost forgot, I have that extra credit essay for Ancient Runes due next week!" She began eating her breakfast at a
brisk pace. Harry and Ron shared a 'typical-Hermione' look before Ron engaged him in an animated discussion of Ravenclaw's chances for the next game.

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Harry was proven wrong the next day, however: Snape apparently did want him to learn the Dark Arts. His first instruction after testing Harry on his assigned readings was for him to show his knowledge of dark curses. Harry lifted his wand but hesitated.

"On you?" He cringed inside at the stupidity of the question. Snape looked back disdainfully.

"Obviously".

His teacher took a defensive stance and waited for the assault.

Harry wracked his tired brain. He didn't know that many curses. There were plenty in his assigned readings but he hadn't tried them out. Those he did know came from the Half Blood Prince's book and were rather ugly, judging from the marks they left on the table he'd experimented on. Scindo Cutis – definitely not. There was one spell that hadn't damaged the table too much, he recalled…

"Sectumsempra". He slashed his wand through the air but before the curse had come halfway to it's intended target he was thrown back hard with a flick of Snape's wand. He craned his neck upwards. Snape's face was set in grim lines. He looked pissed off.

"Using my own spells against me, Potter?" he spat.

Harry scrambled to his feet, frowning. "What do you mean?"

His chin was caught in a vice-like grip. Snape's eyes searched his face. There was a moment of déjà vu as he tried to block his mind. An image of an old and battered copy of Advanced Potions Making shimmered into his vision and Snape released him with a shove.

"The copy. Give it to me." He held out his hand, palm upwards. Harry tried to decipher the expression on his face but only Snape's eyes seemed alive, glistening with a deep black colour. Harry walked stiffly towards his bag lying against the bolted door. He strode back with the book and shoved it into Snape's still outstretched palm.

Snape trailed his hands over the binding, eyes roaming the cover.

"Where did you get this?"

Harry's swallow sounded loud in the silence. "I- didn't have a copy yet when the year began, and Slughorn gave me this one to use."

"And you didn't have a copy, because I would have never allowed you in my N.E.W.T. class." Snape's eyes glittered maliciously.

"Yes," Harry bit out. "What's it to you anyway?" he said rather rudely.


"You? But- so all those spells-" he stammered.
"Indeed." Snape replied simply, a sneer taking over his face. "You're a fraud Potter. But you never deceived me. I think I will have a little chat with Horace after our lesson. All that Gryffindor fairness must be dying to come out, hm?"

The nails of Harry's hands were cutting his palms open. Staying silent was the safest course of action, he decided.

"I would have thought that the *Chosen One-*"

"Don't call me that." He just couldn't keep his mouth shut.

"Ten points from Gryffindor." An eyebrow lifted. "You will yet learn to show respect, Potter. Make that fifty actually, in case Horace decides to let you off easy again."

Harry gnashed his teeth. Snape's smirk widened.

With a wand gesture the book vanished. Snape briskly stepped away from Harry and turned around, bringing his wand up before him.

"More spells, Potter," he drawled impatiently. Harry didn't hesitate a second time.

"Ferveo cruorem!* This one he had not learned from the Half-Blood Prince.

Snape formed a shield in response but still staggered back a little from the force of the spell. Instead of getting annoyed or angry at Harry, he could have sworn that Snape actually grinned for a second while blocking the spell— but the expression was wiped away too quickly to be certain and then Snape was back to his usual defensive pose, eyes devoid of emotion.

"Another."

Although the start was promising, his next spells did not make any dent in his teacher's shield and the session passed with Snape flicking away his attempts with bored, minimalistic gestures and Harry feeling more and more like the incompetent wizard Snape thought him to be.

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The last week of Easter went by without incident. Harry was able to enjoy a bit of free time in between training sessions, which he mostly spend by sitting in the Common Room playing Wizard Chess and Exploding Snap with Ron and others from his year, Hermione sometimes joining in but mostly buried in a thick tome. Ginny didn't have any time to spare as she was busy cramming for her O.W.L. exams like the rest of her peers.

The feared conversation with Slughorn never came. Maybe it had something to do with the fact that Snape could not actually say anything when it was his book in the first place, Harry reasoned. Of course for Snape the whole point had been to provoke him.

When classes resumed Harry's homework suffered under his training schedule. He had taken to practicing the spells Snape had assigned him during study sessions. While Ron and Hermione were busy revising in the library he enclosed himself in his four-poster to perfect a wand movement or pronunciation. He figured training to stay alive was way more important than classes, though Hermione wasn't so sure about that. Something told him it couldn't hurt to wait a bit with informing her of the precise details of his training.
Defence Against the Dark Arts class was becoming more demanding. Snape, after sneering that they ought to be capable of incanting spells non-verbally by now, had them form dueling pairs. The winner of each pair would go on to duel in the next round. This made the lesson an impromptu dueling competition, which was welcomed with (carefully subdued) cheers by his classmates.

Harry first paired with Hermione. She used an Expelliarmus, which he sidestepped, then a Freezing Charm which he was able to bounce back to her, winning the duel. When she was back on her feet Harry gave her a pained smile and she returned it with good humour.

They stood to the side to wait for the next round. Harry watched Snape striding between the dueling pairs, correcting stances and un-cursing students. Snape would expect him to use specialised counters, he realised, the way he'd been taught. He fingered his wand thoughtfully. Now was as good a time as any to start.

The next round began and Harry tried to use counters that were most efficient against his opponents curses. In the beginning he felt a little unsure, which made him slow with his shields. But as he got into the rhythm of the duel the counters came to mind more swiftly. He met Lavender's Blinding Curse with a mirror shield which made her stagger sideways and lose her balance. The *Liquefactio Vestimenta* that Crabbe threw at him which would have melted his clothes against his skin, was neutralised with a Conducting Charm. The air around him became pleasantly balmy as a result. A shame Snape wasn't around to see it.

Finally only two duelists were still standing. Harry scowled when he saw who his partner was going to be. Malfoy, who he had seen steadily working through his less skilled opponents now strode over to him, eyes intent.

Harry regarded the boy before him coolly. Malfoy tilted his head to the side, studying him, a corner of his mouth curving upwards slightly. They stood like this for some time, holding their wands at the ready but not raising them. The Slyterins on one side of the classroom and the Gryffindors on the other gradually fell silent.

A Skin-crawling Curse was a hairbreadth from touching Harry before he thought to jump out of the way. Annoyed with himself he gave a vicious swipe with his wand but Malfoy blocked his curse easily, throwing back a Tickling Charm. Well, if he wanted to jerk around, fine by him.

"Pulmos moderatus!"**

A trickling of the curse managed to seep through Malfoys defence and he bend double, taking in large gulps of air. Harry took the opportunity to send a stunner his way but Malfoy spun aside and send back a low netting charm. His feet tangled, Harry stumbled and lost his balance. He hissed, feeling a sharp pain issuing from the back of his head and he realised he'd banged it against the stone floor. Groaning, he tried to sit up but the classroom spun around him. He let his head fall back slowly. Malfoy crouched beside him and bend over him with one hand on his shoulder, the other holding a wand to his neck.

"You lose, Potter," he wheezed. Harry felt a sensation of tiny needles attacking his body. Shiny black boots came to a stop on his other side.

"Mr. Malfoy wins," Snape announced. Cheers went up from one side of the room.

Malfoy's head moved towards his ear.

"You will all be losing soon," he whispered ominously.
The pressure of needles intensified and Harry shivered, teeth chattering. He tried to lift his wand but his hand came up empty. Of course Malfoy had to hit him while he was down, he thought furiously.

Fortunately Snape turned towards them in the next moment and Malfoy released him, straightening. The cold stings all over his body dissipated, but not the sinking feeling brought on by Malfoys words.

He felt the back of his head. His hand came back sticky with blood.

"Infirmary," Snape said from above him. An incantation lifted Harry from the floor and on to a transfigured stretcher. The nearest student who wasn't Malfoy was tasked with hovering him towards the infirmary. When was the last time he'd been in that boring-to-death place again? Ah yes, he thought moodily, that would be last week.

* Ferveo cruorem: my incantation of the Blood-boiling curse

** Pulmos moderatus: the lungs restrained.

All Latin phrases I made up, so it is likely that words and form are not correct.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

A/N: Remember that this is an AU of HBP, so it won't be following events from the book.

Please review!

Chapter 4

He felt a sharp pain as Pomfrey cleansed the wound and sealed it. She shook her head at him.

"It's always something with you Mr. Potter, isn't it?"

Harry looked up sheepishly. It wasn't his fault that his skull just had to fall on the platform's sharp edge.

"Now let me see those wounds again." Reluctantly Harry took off his shirt. The red lines criss-crossing his belly were the only reminders of the Death Eaters cruelty. Pomfrey's eyes narrowed as she felt along the indentations. "No scarring," she murmured.

She straightened when she was done. "It's healing well. You can go now Mr. Potter."

Harry jumped off the bed. Then he realised: "Ma'am? I was just wondering if you could give me some more Dreamless Sleep?"

Madame Pomfrey regarded him sternly. "I don't think that would be wise young man."

Harry's stomach tightened and he glanced his disappointment towards the white walls. "Yes ma'am."

Her expression softened. "I can increase your refill to two times per week, but that is the most I can do."

Het let the corners of his mouth tug upwards gratefully: nothing like a bit of Dreamless Sleep to take the edge off your personal torture session broadcast.

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Slughorn glanced doubtfully over the rim of Harry's cauldron. He gave a short shake of his head and went on to exclaim over Hermione's perfectly brewed magenta potion.

Harry stared sulkily at the slush-like substance that was supposed to pass for a blood-replenishing potion. While adding the glipher thorns he'd left the potion on open fire, when he should have turned it down to a small flame, or so Hermione had informed him.

Since the confiscation of the Prince's book, Potions class had gone downhill for Harry. At first Slughorn was bewildered over his sudden lack of Potions skills and reassured Harry that
had a bad day, but with each subsequent class Harry's status at the top of the pack dwindled further, until Slughorn apparently decided to ignore the matter altogether.

Hermione quickly put the dots together. She treated him to an endless stream of exclamations: he couldn't trust the Half-Blood Prince; hadn't he learned anything about books that concealed their identities; now he botched every potion because he hadn't learned the proper way of preparing the ingredients. Finally Harry snapped at her to kindly shut up about it.

Obviously he didn't tell her who the Half-Blood Prince really was. Hermione was already enjoying herself far too much; there was no need to add the fact that he had been drooling with admiration over Severus Snape.

As their teacher made his way back to the front of the class Hermione whispered: "Maybe you should ask Professor Slughorn for some extra tutoring."

Harry glared at her. "Have you noticed his opinion of my potions lately?"

Hermione capped the bottle on her sample. She vanished her potion and smiled hesitantly. "I could help you if you want."

He felt his lips quirk up involuntarily. "Alright."

Hermione beamed back.

"Please leave your samples at the desk as usual. Class dismissed," Slughorn was saying from behind his desk. Harry waved the contents of his cauldron away and placed his potions kit in his bag as everyone stood to deliver their brew.

"Mr. Potter, stay behind please. Miss Granger too if you will."

Harry put his bag down and waited while the class filed out. Malfoy gave him a rough shove as he passed, which Harry pretended not to notice. The last students closed the door and Slughorn floated the samples to the students' storage case. He then rotated his impressive girth to give them a generous smile.

"Ah, two of my favourite students! Miss Granger, how is that ambitious research project with Professor Sinistra coming along?"

"It's coming along fine, sir." Tiny spots appeared on her cheeks as she answered.

"And Mr. Potter, I hear you are quite the dueler in your Defence class!"

"Thank you sir." Harry hoped he'd get to the point soon.

"Yes, yes," Slughorn nodded, wringing his hands. "You'll be interested to know I am well acquainted with none other than Rimbly Zanthus – you've heard of him of course."

"Ehm, not really"

"In any case," Slughorn waved it away, "he recently won the Birmingham dueling competition, and I'm sure I can persuade him to let you in on some of the techniques he uses." He looked at Harry questioningly.

"I- that would be great, sir, thank you."

"Excellent. Well, I won't be keeping you from your next class much longer. To get to the matter at
hand: I would like to invite you both,” - his gaze swept to include Hermione - "to attend an old tradition which I am as of this year reinstating at Hogwarts: the Vernal Equinox Ball."

Slughorn watched him expectantly. Harry studied Hermione from the corner of his eyes, who was grinning now.

"Really sir?" Harry hoped he sounded just pleased enough.

"I can't reveal any surprises of course, but I'll just say that a very interesting guest will make it's acquaintance." He gave Hermione a wink, who gave a shy smile in return. Slughorns' mysterious air suddenly turned brisk again: "Go along now or you'll be late for your next class."

They hurried out and through the dank dungeon corridors. As they rounded the corner to the entrance hall Harry wondered: "He didn't tell us the date."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "It's at the Equinox, silly. It celebrates the beginning of spring, when night and day have about the same length. This year it falls on the 20th of March I think."

Yes, he'd heard something about that. It used to be a wizarding tradition, long ago.

"Traditionally it's a coming of age celebration for young wizards and witches," Hermione echoed his thoughts. "The last time it was commemorated at Hogwarts was two centuries ago. It went out of fashion I believe. I'm curious what Slughorn is going to make of it."

"Knowing Slughorn it's most important goal will be to expand his collection of famous people."

Hermione laughed. "Probably. I can't wait to tell Ron!"

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Dinner that day was a quite affair. The owls dropping off evening editions of the Daily Prophet came bearing grim tidings. They forgot all about informing Ron of Slughorns' latest machinations when they saw the newest headline. As Hermione perused her – since this year blessedly Skeeterless – copy Harry sat down next to her and bend over the front page.

DEATH EATERS MURDER MINISTRY EMPLOYEE AND STEAL DOCUMENTS

Wednesday 12 March – This afternoon two Death Eaters disguised as employees were exposed in the Ministry of Magic, Department of Magical Cooperation. An observant employee whom the family wishes to remain anonymous, noticed the steady disappearance of classified documents, the specific content of which the Department refuses to disclose. Aurors speculate that the employee must have been notified by an alarm and confronted the imposters, who instantly issued a Killing Curse.

"They've both worked here for at least a year," Barabus Nigle explains, head of the Department for the last two years. "Nothing unusual about them, they brought in good connections, we made good deals. If it wasn't for that slip-up…".

The last months have seen a disconcerting increase in Death Eater activity leading to speculations on a growing Death Eater army. Amelia Bones of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement has issued a higher level of security for all Ministry Departments. A Ministry insider comments: "Definitely the work of You-Know-Who. This is a rough blow to the Ministry as well as our government partners."

"Voldemort," Harry muttered. "Why not say his name for a change?"
Hermione's hands fluttered on the pages. "Oh this is not good."

"Another killing on home ground," Ron commented grimly.

Hermione shook her head. "It's worse than that. Voldemort now has all kinds of sensitive information on the different magical governments that the Ministry trades with. Treaties, negotiations…"

The doors of the Great Hall opened and cut off Hermione's explanation. In walked a tall man in purple Auror robes, Luna Lovegood trotting at his heels. The student's murmurs died away as the Auror's brisk steps quickly took him to the High Table while Luna went to sit with her year mates. From across the hall Harry saw her getting hugs and pats from all sides.

His gaze swept back to the High Table where the Auror was discussing something with Dumbledore. The stranger nodded and walked back along the main aisle, his eyes intent on students left and right. Harry waited, expecting Dumbledore to make an announcement, but none came.

As dinner drew to a close Harry, Ron and Hermione waited in the great hall by the marble staircase. The mass of students filed out and climbed the different stairs up and down towards their respective dormitories. Eventually a teary-eyed Luna emerged. Hermione approached and Luna waved her friends off with a watery smile.

"Luna, what happened?" Hermione said as the four of them climbed the stairs towards Ravenclaw and Gryffindor Tower, clasping Luna's hand in hers.

Dwindling daylight shone through the first-floor windows and illuminated the tear tracks on Luna's face. Luna glanced between their faces. "My father died."

That stopped them short. Hermione's face crumbled and she pulled the orphaned girl close. Ron gave an awkward pat to her shoulder.

"I'm so sorry Luna," Harry said quietly when the girls straightened from their hug.

"Thanks, Harry."

Hermione took Luna by the arm. "Let's go to the kitchens and see if-"

"Touching," drawled a voice right behind him. Harry spun around, wand aimed in a heartbeat.

"Malfoy," Harry spat.

Ron and Hermione drew their wands as well, with Ron walking to stand firmly against his shoulder. Malfoy's frosty grey eyes glided towards Luna who was huddled against Hermione.

"Your father," Malfoy addressed Luna, ignoring the wands, "should've learned to keep his mouth shut if he knew what was good for him."

Luna regarded him calmly, apparently emboldened by the friends at her side. "At least everyone knows about your father now. Did he tell you how he tortures his Ministry colleges into submission?" She sounded genuinely curious.

"My father does no such thing!" Malfoy hissed. Harry's wand hand twitched with the desire to do serious damage.
A couple of Hufflepuffs passing by glanced towards their little group. Harry laid a quasi-relaxed hand on Luna's shoulder, his wand never straying from Malfoy's head. "No need to defend your father to us Malfoy," he said airily. "We are all familiar with what a sick, pathetic excuse of a man he is. Does he still need to crawl in front of the Dark Lord or is he allowed to kneel again?"

"Harry!" Hermione whispered behind him.

Malfoy's wand hand was now quivering with his fury. He swept it in an unfamiliar pattern and blue light flew towards Harry, who shielded just in time.

Harry met his eyes over the shimmering shield. "Don't get your knickers in a twist Malfoy, he asks it of all his slaves." He knew goading Malfoy in so public a place was not such a good idea, but oh, how very easy it was…

Movement out of the corner of his eyes drew his attention: Hermione was striding away with one arm over Luna's shoulder. She glanced back at Harry with a look of great disappointment.

Embarrassment coloured Harry's cheeks as he stared after them. Here he was, picking a fight with Malfoy over Luna's dead father.

"You know," Malfoy was saying through clenched teeth, "It's interesting that you're calling him the Dark Lord now. What's up with that, Potter?" Again he flung a curse his way without using an incantation. Harry's concentration had wavered at his words and a trickle of it slipped through his shield. His wand hand burned and he shook it to get rid of the feeling.

Someone clasped his shoulder firmly. "Come on Harry, he's not worth it," Ron whispered in his ear.

Malfoy gave a short laugh. "Did you know Weasley, that he gets off on it, getting trounced by me? Or my father, from what I've heard." He raised an eyebrow. "His whip is a wicked thing, right Potter?"

In the next instant Harry's fist made contact with the self-satisfied smirk. Malfoy fell to the ground and Harry went with him, brought out of balance from the blow. Before Harry could get his bearings Malfoy turned their positions around, straddling him by the hips. The air went out of Harry's lunges with a woosh.

"Confrigo!" Ron yelled behind them. In one fluid movement Malfoy switched his wand to his left hand while crushing Harry's to the ground with his right and shot a silent counter over his shoulder. "Incarcerous. Dormio."

The Slytherin's hands didn't waver from Harry's when he spoke. A thud sounded behind them.

"Now that that's settled…" Malfoy disarmed Harry's numb wand hand, throwing the wand out of reach. A menacing grin broke out.

As grey eyes bored into green, the pricking feeling came back, like needles scourging his body. The sensation shifted from cold to hot and back. Harry began to feel light-headed. This time it seemed as if pure energy was flowing through his limbs, crackling along his skin. He suddenly knew he could make Malfoy pay, he could destroy him, he could-

"Aaaaaaaaaahhhhhhh!"

Harry's eyes flew open at the high-pitched scream and found Malfoy's face screwed up in pain.
Malfy looked down at him with round eyes, then scuttled off, stumbling in his haste to get away. Harry noticed his arms were locked over his chest convulsively, his face stark white, his breathing heavy.

"Malfy," he croaked. He cleared his throat and sat upright. "What was that?"

"I- I have to go."

Malfy ran. Harry got to his feet and stared after him. What just happened?

He picked up his wand which had been thrown a considerable distance. He used it to wake Ron and both of them got rid of the bindings. Ron glanced around and smirked: "So, I guess you won huh?"

Harry rubbed his hair and nodded. "Yeah, yeah I beat him." He didn't know what the hell it was that he'd beaten the Slytherin with.

Ron noticed his dazed expression and pulled him along towards the kitchens, saying: "Let's go see them at the kitchens, maybe the house elfs have some butterbeer in store, eh?"

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Harry was still shaken from his weird fight with Malfoy the next Monday when he pushed open the door of the Room of Requirement for his two-weekly training session.

"So," Snape began without preamble. "You decided it would be a good idea to provoke Mr. Malfoy into a fight."

Snape snarled: "Have you absolutely no brains, Potter?"

Harry winced at the loudness of Snape's voice. A long finger sharply poked his chest.

"Every capability you have shown in that duel," Snape bellowed, "will be reported to the Dark Lord!"

"You really think that Malfoy-"

"Yesss," Snape hissed, sounding disturbingly like a Parselmouth. "If Draco knows, his father knows." He turned away from Harry with a shake of his head. "To waste my time teaching such an imbecilic brat…"

Abruptly all expression left Snape's face and his eyes changed back to unreadable black lakes. His voice took on its customary toneless drawl.

"Today we will be practicing grade three destructible spells."

A large crate was floated to a table that materialised in the middle of the hall. High squeaking sounds drifted from its content. Snape gestured and the flanks fell aside to reveal… a dozen grey squirrels.

Snape brandished his wand "Like this. Perditio Pectus."

Soon Harry realised that not everything could be practiced on one's dueling partner. A brown smoky beam emerged to envelop the unfortunate squirrel, whose squeaking reached a high pitch before it fell over, clearly dead.
The other squirrels were trying to run off the table, but an invisible wall held them back. Harry swallowed. "Is there something else we could use instead of animals, sir? Maybe plants or-"

A brow was raised in irritation. "Do plants have hearts, Potter?" Snape waited a moment before gesturing with a sharp motion for Harry to proceed.

Harry tried pointing his wand but the squirrels kept moving awfully fast. Which one should he choose…?

He heard Snape's impatient sigh next to him. "The gray squirrel is a plague all over England, Potter."

"But that's not-"

Snape's tone hardened. "I couldn't care less about your soft-minded opinion Potter. You're training to grasp the Dark Arts, not to win the local Gobstones Tournament. The spell, now."

With trembling aim Harry incanted the spell at the mass of grey before him. A warm flow of magic seeped through his arm, reminding him vaguely of a dream he'd had. While the sight of the squirrel keening over was worrisome, the effects of the spell were strangely soothing. It left him feeling rather out of his depth.

"Correct." A generous amount of disbelief suffused Snape's tone. "Once more."

Suddenly practicing the Dark Arts wasn't so exiting anymore.

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Lucius glanced up at him fearfully before looking down again.

"That is all?" Harry inquired, his tone deceptively light.

"Yes, my Lord," Lucius answered, bowing his head. Harry carded a hand through the blond tresses. He felt along the mark that bound his servant and yanked on it, hard.

Lucius choked off a scream.

His fingers snagged on a hair before they resumed their rhythmic carding. Well. This could prove to be interesting.

His eyes went to the gleaming ring on his desk. Ah, the boy… Hungry anticipation filled his chest and he felt the corners of his mouth widen into a smile.

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Harry awoke with a gasp. *Fuck.* That's it, he needed to tell Dumbledore. He felt a burn of betrayal as he glanced at the empty bottle of Dreamless Sleep on the night-stand: this marked the first time that the bluish-grey potion hadn't kept the visions at bay.

Shrugging on his pyjama top he softly made his way down the dormitory stairs and along the seventh floor corridor towards the Headmaster's office. Within minutes he stood before the massive wooden door with one hand poised to knock, having guessed the password for the gargoyle after a few tries (Skiving Snackboxes). He hadn't seen Dumbledore at dinner so technically the Headmaster could be anywhere - he was more gone than not nowadays. Murmurs on the other side of the door answered his question. Lowering his hand he carefully placed an ear
against it. The sounds remained illegible, probably because the door had a Muffliato charm on it.

Suddenly a voice spoke loudly against his ear: "Come in Mr. Potter."

He jumped back in surprise. Annoyed with himself he opened the door and briskly stepped into the office. His confidence faltered a bit when he saw who Dumbledore had been talking to: Snape was reclining in a comfortable armchair placed next to the Headmaster's. Two pairs of eyes were now staring him down, one lightly amused and one highly irritated.

Snape hastily shut the thick tome that lay between them.

"Hello Harry," Dumbledore spoke in a genial tone.

"Professor." Harry took the indicated chair in front of the massive desk. "I- uh," he glanced at Snape – "need to talk to you about something. But it can wait," he added, seeing Snape's glare.

"That's alright. What is this about, may I ask?"

Harry hesitated. Dumbledore's gaze turned grim. "Times are dire Harry. Whatever it is you need to say, Professor Snape needs to know as well. Since he is now mentoring you as much as I am” – Snape made a choking noise; Dumbledore continued as if he hadn't heard – "it is of the utmost importance that he is informed of all that is relevant to your health and progress, the same way you do with me."

Like the good soldier I am, Harry thought sourly. Dumbledore's eyes widened. Harry glanced away, face burning.

"Harry!" Sadness came through in the Headmasters voice. "Never think that. Is that how you believe I think of you?"

Harry studied the gold-and-red carpet at his feet. "No, of course not," he muttered. He felt a constriction in his chest at Dumbledore's wounded tone. He raised his eyes hesitantly. Snape's were flickering between Harry and the Headmaster, his expression blank.

"I'm sorry, I- I know I should share anything that may be important, especially after…” He shook himself. "Anyway, that's why I came to see you." He was relieved to see Dumbledore's composure loosen again.

He took a breath, letting it out slowly. "I had a vision-"

At the sound of Snape's fist slamming against the desk Harry jumped an inch from his chair.

"This is what I had warned you about," the Potions Master hissed, leaning forward over the large desk. "What I have been trying to impress on your dim-witted excuse for a brain Potter, to learn to close. Your. Mind! But no, Occlumency wasn't interesting enough for the-"

"Severus," Dumbledore spoke softly. At that Snape threw himself back in his chair, looking disgusted. Dumbledore waited a moment as if to see if Snape was going to behave, then nodded at Harry to go on.

"I had a vision about Vol-" – Snape hissed in warning – "You-Know-Who. He was torturing Dolohov because he had botched his assignment. I think he was supposed to infiltrate Gringotts, but it didn't go well. Yesterday I had another vision-"

Snape threw up his hands in frustration. "Well don't mind us Potter, please feel free to share any
news on the Dark Lord's activities when you feel like doing so," he sneered. He was gnashing his
teeth. Somehow Harry couldn't get rid of the feeling that his diligence in their training sessions had
gotten him a droplet of respect from the man this year - and that droplet had now evaporated.
Dumbledore was regarding Harry with a frown.

"He was talking to Lucius Malfoy," he continued, choosing to address the old desk. "He asked if
that was all the information Malfoy had. Then I saw a ring lying on his desk."

Dumbledore abruptly stood and walked towards a drawer situated against the wall of his office.
With a wand gesture he opened it and stared at its content. Snape had come to stand next to the
Headmaster and contemplated the content of the drawer as well. Harry saw the tips of blackened
fingers sticking out of Dumbledore's radiant blue robes.

"Is it the Gaunt ring?"

Both wizards turned towards him. Dumbledore's face had whitened. "Yes."

Harry felt sweat break out over his hands. "I thought you had it, sir?"

"I did. Apparently not any more."

Your feedback is a huge help to me, so please let me know if you like it or hate it, and why!
A/N on 05-30-13: I'm in the process of changing all the single quotation marks into double ones. The next few chapters still have single quotation marks. I'll get to them soon, but I figured that time spend on writing would be better than time spend on the style of punctuation, as I hope you'll agree :).

Chapter 5

Total silence clung to the office for a long moment. Even the portraits on the walls stopped their fake snoring.

'He will take action to safeguard his other horcruxes.' Snape eventually spoke up.

Dumbledore nodded. 'Most likely he has done so already.'

'But that's…' Harry began.

'Disastrous.' Dumbledore finished his sentence. The Headmaster swiftly retook his seat behind the desk and Snape followed. Dumbledore's eyes locked on Harry's and he felt the full weight of his penetrating gaze. 'During your capture, while Voldemort analysed your magical signature, he may have strengthened the hold of his magic over you in order to gain excess to your thoughts.'

Dumbledore spoke urgently. 'He cannot break the connection you two share, courtesy of unintentionally yielding a portion of his powers to you when you were a baby, but he may have reinforced it. That is why I must ask you to please allow me access to your mind, so that I can see what it is we are dealing with.'

Harry's blood ran icy. 'But then he must be watching right now!'

'Sit down Potter.'

Harry realised he had jumped out of his chair. He gazed down at Snape in horror. 'And you! You're doomed!'

Snape lips thinned at so much display of emotion. 'Calm yourself, Potter!' he spat. 'And Sit. Down.'

Harry felt all the energy leave him as he slumped back in his seat.

'If he had wanted to kill me he'd have done so already,' Snape drawled in a matter of fact tone, which conveyed he thought Harry exceptionally stupid not to have realised it.

'But you-

Snape's eyes flashed in warning. 'You are not the center of the universe Potter, and as such the issue of my being in danger or not is not your concern!'

'Severus, please,' Dumbledore said. He looked back at Harry imploringly.
Harry clenched his teeth and met the Headmaster's gaze. 'Alright.'

He felt a gentle push and suddenly Dumbledore was in his mind, sifting through his memories. It was not hard to think of his visions now that a horrible dread filled him. Scenes came to life of powerful magic flowing from white fingers, of minions cowering before him and grotesque forms drenched in blood. After a minute or so the Headmaster gently extracted himself from Harry's thoughts. Dumbledore heaved a great sigh and retook his seat.

'I found no evidence of any additional strengthening of the bond in your mind, or any residual foreign magic.' He tapped the tips of his fingers together in a characteristic gesture.

Harry held his breath. 'You're sure…?'

'Yes Harry, I am very familiar with Voldemort's magical presence.' Harry's shoulders sagged and Dumbledore gave a reassuring smile. Addressing Snape as well he continued: 'So, the situation is not as disastrous as I feared. I considered it highly unlikely in any case. You see Harry, while he has access to your thoughts he likewise exposes himself to you, since the connection goes both ways. And that is very unlike Tom. The bad news here is that we don't know what has led him to check the Gaunt home and find the ring missing.'

The adults shared a look and Snape nodded to an unvoiced inquiry.

'But I can still experience his thoughts,' Harry put in.

'Yes, but only sporadically,' Dumbledore said. 'I suspect you are privy to them only a fraction of the time.'

Harry frowned. Why would Voldemort let him through at all? Unexpectedly Snape elaborated, ignoring Harry's presence all the while: 'The bond must have strengthened to such an extent that the Dark Lord is not capable of blocking when he is most… distressed. Only his ignorance of such a dangerous weakness can be an explanation for this being possible at all.'

Harry rubbed his forehead. Great, this Dark Lord broadcasting thing just kept getting better and better.

'Does this mean that when I feel strongly about something…'

'It seems a shame now, doesn't it Potter, that you couldn't be bothered to learn Occlumency when it was offered to you?' Snape smiled thinly.

Harry swallowed the dryness in his throat. Snape was right. *Sirius. Your fault.*

'I understand that now sir,' he said, and tried not to see Snape's smirk widen.

Dumbledore's gaze flickered between the two of them. 'Professor Snape is correct. Eventually he will know of this development when a profound emotions of yours slips through the shields. Which is why it is very important that your Occlumency lessons with Professor Snape resume, Harry.' Dumbledore helpfully added.

That wiped the smirk of Snape's face.

'I am *not* going to attempt to teach that brat Occlumency again, Headmaster.' Snape's eyes were spitting fire at the headmaster.

*You didn't even try to make me learn,* Harry wanted to say. But in the end it didn't matter because
Harry hadn't tried either, had he, and that was what counted. Snape was a cruel git, and that was precisely why Harry was at fault: he should've known how hard it was going to be with this man, and studied harder because of it.

A silent conversation was taking place between Snape and Dumbledore. Snape finally glanced away.

'Very well,' Snape ground out, and Harry knew it had taken something out of the man. Probably that something was the thin, nearly nonexistent rapport that had once existed between them.

When Snape's eyes found his own he saw only hatred.

A day later Harry was sure he'd been deluding himself: that is to say, he now knew for certain that no understanding, however small, had ever been present between him and the Potion's Master Who Hated Him From The Beginning And Would For All Time.

It had been decided that in the training sessions Harry would also practice his Occlumency skills. Now the sallow-skinned man was sitting at the opposite end of the lone table, in the giant Room of Requirement, watching Harry.

Harry'd been shuffling his feet and carding his hair, but that had done nothing to change the statue-like regard he was getting. He decided to imitate Snape and sat frozen, only blinking his eyes.

And still Snape stared.

It was getting creepy.

'Legilimens'.

Harry jumped at the sudden change in their silent tableaux and a moment later felt the slam of Snape's powerful will on his thoughts. He tried to think of nothing but he might as well have imagined rainbow-coloured butterflies to ward off the Legilimens in front of him. Snape was inside his mind, seemingly consuming what was on offer. Images were flying past but he couldn't register them. It felt like too much blood was flooding his brain and the arteries would explode. Then one memory was pushed to the front, of him listening to Trelawney's voice in Dumbledore's office and the destruction of the headmaster's possessions.

'No…' Harry groaned. The pressure lifted. His surroundings were back and he felt the press of cold ancient stone against his cheek. Slowly he managed to find his feet. His shaking hands grabbed the chair and he lowered himself into it, not daring to look up.

'Potter'.

'Yes?' His head lifted of its own volition. Snape seemed to have sunk into an even deeper state of anger, the whites of his eyes clearly visible from a distance.

Silence fell over the hall. Then Snape again said:

'Legilimens.'

Harry thought fiercely of not allowing him through this time, which had been how he'd managed to ward off Snape last year. It was no use. Now Sirius was put on display and Snape took his time examining Harry's conversations with his godfather. Harry's stomach churned hotly at all that
Snape was purview to. An image of Sirius was telling him: 'D'you think your father and I would've lain down and taken orders from an old hag like Umbridge?' Another one looked at him coolly. 'You're a lot less like your father than I thought. The risk would've been what made it fun for James.'

Afterwards he was aware of the wet feeling on his cheeks. He set his jaw and straightened in his seat.

'Tsk tsk, no need for crying Potter, these are happy memories,' Snape said, his eyes gleaming.

'Don't,' Harry pleaded, and hated himself. 'You've won, alright?' he croaked. Scraping his throat he tried again: 'I was irresponsible and it's my fault that Sirius is dead. I know, alright?'

'What do I care that you 'know', Potter? What does the wizarding world care?'

'They care nothing,' Harry bit out. 'They only want me to be their weapon.'

Snape nodded, pleased. 'Very good, Potter. You are their weapon.'

'And don't you think it's unwise that you know the Prophecy now?' Harry cut in.

'Don't talk back to me,' Snape said in a low voice. 'As I was saying, you are their weapon and are therefore trained for an optimal performance, or as close as we are likely to get with the material available.'

Snape let that disparaging comment sink in before continuing: 'There is a bit of a problem here. Since we both know you will never learn Occlumency, I am not going to waste any more time on it. -' Harry opened his mouth but Snape went on '-no matter what the Headmaster says, I expect you'll agree that the endeavour is useless?'

Harry clamped his mouth closed again.

'Well then, we will continue the training in the Dark Arts. You may of course peruse the library and any questions you have on the subject you may ask.' Snape raised an eyebrow. 'But since you haven't bothered before…'

Harry felt himself flush red and clenched his hands in his lap. 'What do you want from me?' he asked, exasperated.

'That is where you misunderstand me. I want nothing from you Potter, nothing,' Snape hissed. 'But apparently, we cannot all get what we want, can we.'

Snape stood at that and gestured Harry to the middle of the great platform. Harry followed him with his fingers clammy around his wand.

That session Snape rode Harry harder than ever. Over the course of training the curses and hexes had gotten nastier and nastier; since Harry's tuning – adjusting shield to curse – had not yet progressed at the same rate as the level of spells, many got through and found something to damage. Snape also changed his attack in unexpected ways, sometimes throwing in a lower-class hex, sometimes switching to charms or transfigurations, conjuring creatures and sharp objects. No time at all passed before Harry was exhausted, but the Potion's Master kept at it until he could barely get on his feet for the next spell. When Snape finally stopped Harry's breathing was heavy and black spots had entered his vision. Snape seemed not to have broken a sweat.

'Next time seventh and eight chapter of Emerging the Victor. Go,' was all he said.
The library had eight books eluding to the subject, and two that had the mind magics as the main focus. Hermione was flashing her Restricted Section pass in front of Madame Pince while Harry stared at the grotesque pictures in *Magicks of the Mind*.

When performing Occlumency, insanity was right around the corner, apparently.

'So Snape has agreed to teach you again? Hermione asked on the way back to Gryffindor Tower.

'Yeah. He said that I first had to read up on the subject before he'd try again though,' That was kind of the truth.

'Sounds like Snape. Maybe I can help with revising?'

'Thanks Hermione,' Harry smiled. With her help maybe he could still learn *something* at least. He tried hard to hold onto his hope: that when he'd learned all there was to learn he could ask him again, and then maybe the Potion's Master would concede to teaching him. Or maybe baby unicorns would decide to start frolicking around Snape, Harry thought, while Hermione recited the password for the common room.

'Oi mate!' Ron yelled when they emerged from the portrait hole. 'Where were you yesterday?'

Harry blinked up at his friend.

'We waited for half an hour! And then when you still didn't show we finally decided to train without you.'

Harry closed his eyes briefly. Quidditch practice. With all that had happened after his latest foray into Voldemort's mind he'd forgotten all about it, when, being the team captain, he himself had scheduled the practice for that morning.

'I'm sorry Ron.'

Ron nodded briskly. 'You're sorry. Well, sorry wasn't much use when we were waiting in the cold for our captain to show up!'

Conversation in the common room stumbled to a halt.

Hermione pulled at Ron's robes. 'Come on Ron, not here.' Grumbling all the while, Ron let himself be lead to their dormitory. He bounced on his bed and crossed his arms. 'Well?'

'Look Ron, something happened last night. I… had a vision again.' Ron gaped and Harry winced.

'You didn't wake me?'

'Well, it was kind of urgent-

'So urgent you couldn't be bothered to tell me?' Ron said.

'Ron,' Harry tried for calm. 'I didn't tell Hermione either, I went straight to Dumbledore's office.'

'Of course. And did you two straighten it out?' Ron asked in a petulant voice.

'No we didn't. He knows, Ron. Voldemort knows about our plans for his horcruxes.'
Hermione gasped at that. ‘No…,’ she whispered.

Ron's face had slackened. 'Shit,' he said.

'Yeah,' Harry nodded. 'My thoughts exactly.' He lowered himself onto his bed opposite Ron's and folded his knees below him.

'Knows it from you?' Ron asked, gesturing to Harry's scar.

'No, and that's another problem. We don't know how he knows.'

Hermione perched on a window ledge between them. 'What will Dumbledore do now?'

'Well he's checked if Voldemort's in my mind right now,' (Ron's head jerked up at that) 'but he couldn't find any trace of him. Which is a huge comfort,' Harry chuckled darkly.

'So, Voldemort is going to get all his Horcruxes back, I guess?’ Ron said.

'I think so.'

'What does Professor Dumbledore say Harry?’ Hermione put in.

'He didn't say anything more about it. I guess he'll leave his personal speculations between him and Snape.' Harry said sourly.

'Well, Snape is in a good position to check it out of course.'

Yeah, I suppose,’ Harry grumbled. He was left out of the important discussions again. But maybe it was for the better. He was becoming a reliability, that much he could see for himself. He would listen to the adults this time. Not listening was getting people killed.

He felt a hand on his back and Hermione spoke softly next to him. 'Harry, we are here for you. The Order knows what they're facing this time, they're prepared for anything.'

'Very reassuring Herm,' Ron said. Hermione punched his arm.

Harry looked warily over at Ron but his frown was worried. If only they could be having their fight about Quidditch, Harry thought, instead of comforting each other over an upcoming war.

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The Vernal Equinox Ball was rapidly approaching and Harry, trying on his dress robes in front of the full-length mirror in the dormitories, saw the length fell an inch short. Seamus rummaging in his trunk behind him, looked up and chuckled.

'Let me guess, Slughorns' party?'

Harry nodded. 'Well one inch isn't going to be noticed. You're going too?'

'Nah, I'm not invited. Let me see.' Seamus turned to inspect Harry's outfit. 'You always need to stay on top of fashion Harry, being the chosen one and all.'

Harry punched him on the arm. 'Cut that out, I'm not going to buy new ones'.

'Who said anything about buying? I got a whole collection here, just rotting away. Let's see,' Seamus began unceremoniously unloading his trunk, taking out all kinds of odds and ends in the
process. 'Here you go, I've got you some lovely black ones-,' Seamus held up aristocratic-looking
robes with a hundred buttons at the front, 'or mysterious dark-greens, goes great with your eyes, or
this dashing blue one, certain to win the attention of the ladies-;' He stopped at Harry's questioning
look.

'Me mom sends them every year, expects me to win a competition or something.' Seamus
explained, shaking his head at the thought.

Harry decided to go along with the kind gesture. 'Okay… well the black one seems nice.'

Seamus held said garment up in front of Harry, then switched with the green one. 'Nah, you should
take this one, goes great with yer eyes.'

Harry gave an eye roll at that. 'Hm. Hey, it's got snakes all over it! Does your mom thing you're a
Slytherin or something?'

Seamus laughed. 'Well she thinks that's were the power is, so it doesn't hurt to suck up to it.'

'That's…'

'I know, I know,' Seamus gestured soothingly, 'just take it, alright?'

'Okay,' Harry looked from the dress robes to his friend. 'Thanks man.'

'No problemo, make the Slytherins panick a bit, hm?'

Harry threw the robes over his bedside. 'Sure, I'll throw in a bit of Parseltongue for the heck of it.'

Chuckling, they made their way down to the next class.

Friday afternoon. Spirits were soaring in anticipation of the Equinox Ball which would commence
in a matter of hours. Or at least some spirits were: Harry took one look at Ron sitting down next to
him in their last class of the day (Charms) and knew that his friends spirits were rather plunging
into a nose-dive.

'You know it's just going to be some boring officials listening to their own voices,' Hermione
whispered, sitting down next to Ron.

'And firewhiskey and delicious snacks and everyone all fancy-like,' Ron muttered back.

'Ron, I'll sneak out some food alright?' Harry put in. 'Last time we couldn't wait to get away, with
all the Slytherins sucking up to Slughorn's buddies,'.

Ron looked like he hadn't heard. 'S'pose you're taking McLaggen again huh?'

Hermione frowned. 'Of course not! Look Ron, he was an a–'

'Everyone put their paper on the desk? Good, we'll be starting with colour-based charms today,'
Flitwick was saying, and Hermione made a spurt to the front of the class with her copy.

'Ron-'

But Ron just shook his head. As Flitwick started the lecture Harry imagined he heard a grumble at
his right with something along the lines of 'to think that I almost died in his office...'
Things were a little tense after that between Ron and Hermione. Nothing Harry hadn't seen before of course, and he decided to drop the issue for now.

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'Harry, Harry, you made it!' Slughorn emerged from out of nowhere at his first steps from the entrance to shake his hand, reminding Harry of Lockhart as well as Slughorns' last Christmas party. With one arm around his back the sizable man led him through several smaller rooms to the main dancing area.

This part of the castle seemed to have turned into a garden overnight: white rose tangles were twirling around the large support pillars and flowers of all colours graced the small round side tables. People were bowed over in conversation with their forearms on the deep blue tablecloth. Most were holding glasses of what looked like champagne.

Apparently fitting his newly borrowed dress robes had made him late: the party was in full swing, with couples chancing elaborate moves on the gleaming dark wooden floor. The crowd consisted of mostly upper years of all houses. The adults stood in clusters on the other side of the ballroom floor. Slughorn deftly guided him through the crowd on the sidelines towards the back where wizards and witches in expansive dress robes were mingling. Harry looked around for a friendly face (fortunately no partners were obligatory this time) but Hermione and Ginny where nowhere in sight.

'So Harry,' Slughorn began, shoving a glass of punch into his hand, 'Our soon-to-be Auror eh?' he winked. 'I have some people here I'd like you to meet.' He stirred Harry towards a group of mostly wizards who were looking around rather than drinking or talking. 'You already know Kingsley of course,' Shacklebolt nodded to Harry, who nodded back. 'Gramzar Rospam, who leads one of the Auror teams' Slughorn went on, gesturing to a man of Indian-like descent.

'An honour to meet you Mr. Potter,' Rospam said in a low tone as Harry shook his hand.

'And here we have Armando Moore,' Slughorn rambled out another Auror position. Harry took the next hand on offer and that was when it happened: a feeling of aversion swept over him so strong it was akin to hate. Harry gazed up into the face of a black-haired men with sunken cheeks who looked like he hadn't eaten well in months. The hand enclosing his held fast. Harry tried not to give anything away of the horrible feeling that the man was giving off.

'Mr. Potter, a pleasure,' the man said in an airy tone.

'Thank you,' Harry managed, trying to pull his hand back without anyone noticing. But the wizard folded his other hand over Harry's and smiled, indifferent. 'Please tell me if this is too forward,' he began, taking a step closer while Slughorn was engaged in conversation behind them. 'But the relationship between Albus Dumbledore and you has always fascinated me. Would you care to share, what exactly is the essence of the bond between you?'

'Ehm,' an indefinable panic was taking up residence in Harry's stomach and he tried to extricate his hand again, a little firmer this time. Moore tightened his hold and Harry cried out, managing to turn it into a strange high cough. The man's eyes which were studying his intently, suddenly widened – nearly unnoticeable but for the small distance between them.

'You were saying?' Moore went on, all the while cutting of circulation under his overlarge sleeves.

'I-, I'm-, sir could you please stop squeezing my hand?' The edge of his vision showed him that they had somehow managed to stray away from the crowd.
A strange little smile skirted over the wizard's face. 'I've also wondered about your relationship with that other powerful wizard,' he whispered, sounding a little out of breath.

This was a Death Eater, Harry was certain. It wasn't what he was saying that made him sure, but the sickly feeling against his skin, which had gotten stronger the moment Moore's left hand moved over Harry's. The underside of the man's left upper arm felt cold against Harry's fingertips - the exact same spot where the Dark Mark would be…

The man's nostrils flared and he removed his hand, clenching the left one into a fist against his side.

Moore's eyes held incredulity as he said: 'See you around, Mr. Potter.'

He turned and walked away in a brisk pace. Harry stared after him. It was almost like… like he had done something to the man to stop the conversation. Like Harry had activated the Dark Mark.

His heart was trampling against his ribcage. No. That couldn't be it, right? Harry contemplated the scene from seconds ago: the sudden tightening of the muscles, the unconscious urge to conceal the arm...

He'd seen *that* reaction before. When Voldemort called through the Dark Mark. The screams would turn especially shrill when the spidery fingers touched the skull symbol - the Mark would become visible and then slowly start to blacken…

'Harry? You all right?'

'Hm?' Ginny stood next to him in a sparkling yellow dress, looking lovely out of place in a sea of blue and black. 'Yeah, sure.'

Ginny followed his gaze. 'Who is that man?'

'Armando Moore. You know him?'

Ginny shook her head. 'Come on, Slytherins are coming this way.' She tugged on his dress robes.

A cold feeling rushed his chest as realisation struck, making him stumble a pace. A Death Eater. There was a Death Eater in the Auror Department.

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What do you think? Please review!
Harry glanced back over his shoulder while Ginny led him over the dance floor. Kingsley was gesturing animatedly with the Indian-like guy, nearly spilling his champagne in the process. Clearly he was none the wiser.

'Hi Harry!' Eddie Carmichael from Ravenclaw clapped his arm while heading for the drinks. 'Did you know that Rimbly Zanthus is here?'

'Yeah, Slughorn told me,' Harry said absently. He had to be absolutely certain before he went to Dumbledore, he mused. He thought he'd seen all the signs, but what if he were wrong? Harry straightened. He had a theory to test, and Snape would be his test subject.

'Oy!' He felt a punch on his arm.

'You haven't heard a thing I've been saying, have you?'

'What?' Harry turned to see Ginny's deep frown. 'Sorry Gin.' He smiled sheepishly. 'Have a lot on my mind.'

Ginny raised an eyebrow. 'Don't we all.' Coolly she turned her attention towards Zacharias, who was busy regaling everyone with the misadventures his dad and Slughorn had experienced in their time at Hogwarts.

Harry sighed inwardly. 'Ginny?'

'Yes Harry?'

'Would you like to dance?'

Ginny's frosted expression thawed a bit and she said: 'Well, alright.'

It might not be his favourite pastime, but sometimes, a gesture was needed. When the dance ended – a slow English Walsh which Harry barely remembered the paces to – he gave Ginny's hand a kiss, making her blush. He extricated himself and, staying clear of the ever present social niceties that threatened to bear down on him, he hunted for Hermione. He spotted her at a table with Zabini, who did not seem bothered by his Muggle-born companion. It was well known that Zabini shared Malfoy's prejudice against Muggle-borns. He looked bored actually, scanning the crowd and taking constant sips of his butterbeer.

'Potter,' Zabini nodded as Harry approached.

'Zabini,' Harry responded with a raised eyebrow. Hermione gave him a nudge. 'He was getting sick of Astoria tailing him,' she said by way of explanation.

Harry followed her gaze and saw a fourth or fifth year Slytherin girl with brown tresses reaching all the way to her middle. 'Ah'.

'So, Potter,' Zabini began, 'made any interesting new connections over there?'

Harry could feel his eyes narrow. 'Yes, interesting is a word for it.'
Zabini smiled coolly, undisturbed by Harry's attitude. 'Boring, isn't it? It's what we high-ranking purebloods have to go through all the time, shaking the dusty grownups' hands.'

Harry refrained from pointing out he had no such status. A waiter approached with sparkly red glasses which he offered to the table. Harry took one and sipped: an explosion of strawberry filled his senses, making him blink.

'Good, right?' Hermione said, taking a nip from her own red concoction. Harry could see the little strawberry seeds dancing in his glass, freshly pressed; he couldn't get used to the strong burn of alcohol, though.

'Yes, very. You know, I think I know her from somewhere,' Harry muttered while staring thoughtfully at the long-haired girl.

'She's Daphne's younger sister,' Zabini said, also switching to the red stuff. This time Harry could clearly hear a slur in his voice.

'Say Zabini, don't you need to find your buddy Malfoy?'

Zabini scowled. 'He's not my buddy.' He looked surprised at his own tone and amended: 'Well, I mean buddy, that's just so Gryffy.'

'So, where is he?' Harry asked impatiently. He hadn't forgotten about Malfoy's strange behaviour as of late. The blond had thoroughly ignored him. Since their encounter in the halls Harry hadn't gotten drawn with him for any duels or assignments – both Slughorn and Snape loved to pair them and observe the fireworks – probably because Malfoy always managed to sit at the opposite end of the classroom.

Zabini looked sober enough when he tilted his head in annoyance. 'You know he isn't a member of the Slug Club Potter.'

'Didn't stop him last time Slughorn gave a party.'

Zabini took to scanning the crowd again. 'Yeah, well I haven't seen him either, so…' He looked at Harry suspiciously. 'What's with the obsession, Potter?'

'Just curious,' Harry said offhandedly. Zabini kept staring so perhaps that hadn't worked.

Harry waved his hand in nonchalance. 'Archenemies you know.'

'Didn't peg you for the gay type,' Zabini drawled.

'What?' Harry felt his cheeks grow warm. 'Why would you think that?' he asked, honestly bewildered.

Hermione giggled. Zabini's black eyes held fleeting confusion before they were blank once again. 'Something he said…' he murmured.

Harry put his drink down. 'What did he say?'

Zabini looked like he regretted speaking. 'Nothing Potter,' he said in a cool tone. 'Well, as much as I appreciate the inter-house loving, I have to be off.' Before Harry could get a word in, Zabini made his way through the dancing pairs. Harry tried to follow him to see whether Zabini had seen Malfoy in the hallway but Hermione grasped his dress robes.
'Don't. You know it won't end well if you're going after Malfoy again.' She raised her eyebrows to emphasize her point. Harry was reminded again of their all-out attack in front of Luna and ducked his head.

'Yeah you're probably right.' Harry grasped his glass tighter as another jolt of remembrance brought a burning to his stomach that had nothing to do with the effects of his drink.

April came around and brought with it milder weather. With the O.W.L. examinations next week the fifth years were holed up in the common room and the library, revising. The sixth years did not have end of year exams, but they were expected to turn in an in-depth literature study or experiment of their choosing for each of their upcoming N.E.W.T. subjects. Teamwork was allowed, although solo projects would be rewarded with relatively higher grades: unsurprisingly, Hermione worked alone.

Harry and Ron were becoming increasingly pessimistic about their chances of receiving a passing grade for Transfigurations. They had been working on a spell that transfigured objects inside-out and reversed the order of the layers of materials present in the object. Earlier in term the class had tried the spell out on bonbons and apples, which were respectively defined as two- and three-layered transfigurative objects. Harry had come up with the idea of turning a tree trunk inside out. Their working hypothesis was that although the trunk consisted of many layers, these layers were only different through time and not material, and so the only layers that the spell would detect were the xylem and phloem layer of the outer and inner wood. They therefore expected that the spell would only transfigure the bark layer inside-out and that it would not reverse the order of temporal layers of the wood itself.

That was the project in theory. In reality, the tree trunk in front of them had not changed one way or another since they had begun testing two lessons earlier. It didn't help that Ron was shooting not-so-subtle glances towards Hermione sitting on his left, and that Harry was deep in thought about the dark tidings of the heading article of the Prophet that morning: the Minister of Magic, Scrimgeour, had been killed in his office along with several high-placed politicians and assistants, who'd all been present for a meeting. There had been a shocked silence in the Great Hall after the owls had flown in and dropped the news.

But that wasn't all. A certain Mr. Moore had told the reporters that Mr. Potter was now 'needed more than ever as a model of hope and resistance against the dark', and that he should 'take his responsibility as their saviour seriously' and help in the fight against the Dark Lord. The Slytherins of course had a field day taunting him whenever possible, although Malfoy hadn't talked to him once. This bothered Harry somehow, although he didn't let it show. He got some raised eyebrows from the other Houses, but they mostly worried about an impending take-over of the Ministry, and kept their thoughts to themselves.

Harry for his part was bewildered by Moore's reminder of his 'duty'. He could only guess this was some kind of revenge for him inadvertently touching his Mark. He went cold at the thought that Voldemort must know of his little trick by now.

He was jolted from his musings by a voice coming from behind him:

'So Potter, what are you still doing here?' the person whispered. 'Aren't you supposed to save us all?'

Harry turned around and saw a grim-faced Zacharias. He had been working on an exotic-looking bird, but now had his hands under the table: Harry could guess where his wand was pointed at.
'You know what I think Potter?' Harry's heart rate increased at the sudden dark tone. 'I think that you're the reason that You-Know-Who killed my brother, is what I think.'

'What are you on about?' Harry tried to put calm in his voice.

'You've seen the Prophet article.'

'Yes.' Harry remembered hearing Zacharias proudly telling Ernie Macmillan about his brother's career at the Ministry, as assistant to some prominent figure.

'If you're supposed to vanquish the bastard, why haven't you done so already? I guess nobody important enough was murdered, huh?'

Harry felt a grimace take over his face.

'He killed my godfather!' he whispered back, loud enough for some heads to start turning their way.

'Yeah well, he kind of asked for it with going after Bellatrix. My brother didn't do anything, he was only—'

'He asked for it, did he?'

'Well the man did have you for family,' Zacharias sneered.

Harry's limbs were tingling strangely. His fingers grasped the narrow wooden handle of his wand. There was a loud buzzing in his ears, drowning out all other sound. A nasty hex from Snape's sessions was on his tongue and before he knew it, Zacharias yelped at the impact and twisted to protect his crotch. Zacharias' own curse was cancelled by the shield Harry quickly threw up.

'What in Merlin's name!' McGonagall was at Harry's table in a second. They stopped to look at her, Zacharias still twitching with the pain from the hex.

'Mr. Potter, cancel that at once!' and Harry did. Zacharias straightened, panting harshly.

'Detention for the both of you. And 50 points from Gryffindor for the use of such a spell.' Harry looked away from her stare. He wondered why anyone could still care about points now.

'Mr. Smith, do you need the hospital wing?'

'No ma'am,' Zacharias said, obviously still in pain.

'Suit yourself. Back to work everyone,' McGonagall glanced around in disapproval before heading to the front of the class.

Zacharias remained quite throughout class, but Harry could feel his gaze burning a hole in his back the whole time.

Harry was on the ground, gazing through a hallucinatory haze. The spell responsible was used by Aurors in the field to demoralize and confuse their opponents. Snape had helpfully supplied this information before subjecting him to it with clear relish.

Harry was a little bit more than confused at the moment, however: the jagged pieces of towering ceiling which were slowly coming down, would certainly squash him before he could reach the shadowy figure possessing his wand. As he burst into a sprint the creature raised its head and two
glowing red eyes became visible. He screamed but his speed propelled him forward and both solid boy and otherworldly being toppled to the ground. Harry fought to escape the shadow's weight, but the creature pushed his shoulders down, demonstrating huge black claws like dinosaur teeth. Harry was startled when the wraith touched it's forehead to his own. This close Harry could discern no nose or mouth from the floating black mass, but most shocking where the eyes consuming all of his vision. Millimetres away from Harry's own, they burned his pupils until he felt a wet slimy substance glide down his cheeks and he couldn't see anything, he was blind…

'Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!'

The wraith was gone and he was on the ground, trampling thin air. He touched his face with shaking hands. He wasn't quite sure if he'd find empty sockets for eyeballs, no matter the evidence to the contrary. Relieved to find the two appendages still there he scrambled up as Snape strode towards him, the corners of his mouth turned down in disapproval.

So far, Harry hadn't managed to find an excuse to touch the man's robes, let alone slip a hand up his sleeve. Today's subject was neurological curses, so he couldn't realistically start a physical fight either. Unless…

'What about hand combat, sir. Will we be doing that at some point?' Harry asked flippantly as if continuing an interrupted conversation.

Snape's head tilted at the change of subject. 'No Potter, why do you ask?'

'Well,' Harry swept the cold sweat of moments before away from his forehead. 'If I lose my wand, I don't want to be completely helpless, right sir?'

'If you think a fist-fight is going to help you in such a situation, you are deluded Potter,' Snape said, bored.

Harry gritted his teeth. 'But you yourself have also fought the muggle way, when you were… younger.' Harry finished lamely as he saw Snape's features tighten.

'You will address me as sir, Potter. And do not mention your atrocious violation of my pensieve!' Snape hissed, taking a menacing step closer. Harry realised this wasn't going anywhere.

'If that was your worst memory sir, I would happily trade it for mine.' He almost couldn't believe his own daring. But what was at stake was more important than Snape's already hopeless opinion of him. 'At least you had two parents growing up, so excuse me for broaching that touchy subject-

'Why, you…' Snape whispered, never a good thing. Snape raised a hand as if to hit him, or strangle him, but then he chuckled once and lowered it again. 'What are you playing at Potter? Itching for a fight, is that it? Man to man, hm?'

Harry fidgeted, hoping Snape would be irritated enough to humour him.

'Oh I know, it's those tedious teenage affairs. That Weasley girl dancing with McLaggen.'

Harry said nothing.

'More muscles I suppose,' Snape idly mused, eyes gleaming sadistically.

He later wondered about his own sense of self-preservation. As Snape turned to go Harry whacked him on the head with a fist, something he hadn't planned to have gone quite as well as it did. Snape's head bent and he lost his balance for a moment. Rage took over Snape's face as he spun
back and swung an uppercut, but Harry had learned from his uncles worse moods and stepped to
the side just in time. The Potion's Masters' next blow was so fast Harry only felt the impact. He
bent over from the pain burning in his stomach. Snape tried to hit him again but Harry managed to
block it, and the next one.

Snape withdrew then but Harry managed to twist one arm to the side and then to Snape's back, a
move he'd seen Dudley use before with his gang. Snape tried to wrench away and Harry stumbled,
off balance, before he was able to tighten his grasp. As he did so his hand snaked a few centimeters
further up the trapped arm.

Snape went rigid at the same time that Harry was caught in a malevolent, icy magic. It spread from
his hand through his whole body. It was a gut-clenching feeling, robbing him of breath. He used to
think he had some idea of how capable a wizard Snape was, but here was magic that dwarfed his
own. Though it did not consume him like Voldemort's, it was a formidable presence.

Knees wobbling, he carefully let go of Snape's arms and took a step back. And another. He became
aware of his trembling fingers and wrapped his arms around himself tightly. He kept his head
averted, afraid of what expression Snape was wearing now.

'Crucio'.

Harry trashed wildly in the grip of the spell. The sudden onslaught of molten agony ripped a
scream from his throat. Harry wondered with scattered thoughts how he could have misjudged this
man so. Much later, when he was able to think straight again, he would realise the obvious: Snape
was a servant of Voldemort. Loyal or not, he had been drenched in the ways of the dark form early
on. It remained an undeniable part of the Potion's Master. The Dark Arts, he'd learned in these very
sessions, had a way of leaving marks over time on their conduits in mental and magical ways.
Whether Snape had really abandoned the dark side Harry couldn't tell, and that realisation
frightened him, more than the pain clawing his insides.

But crap was all the thought he could manage as he shrieked and scrabbled at the floor,
instinctively trying to escape his own body.

The curse was lifted after some indeterminate period of time. A ghostly echo of it still flowed
through him. He drew a shaky breath and glanced up from his curled position on the floor.

The visage above him was a study of rigid lines. Snape's face held an unhealthy pallor. Their gazes
locked in the awful silence of the Room and Harry dared not look away.

After some tries Harry managed to remain standing. Snape said nothing as he observed Harry's
struggle.

Harry's eyes were drawn to Snape's wand hand, which was trembling wildly in a tight fist. Snape
abruptly spun on his heel and walked, fast-paced, to the great wooden doors of the Room, which
opened at his approach and closed behind him with a resounding boom.

Harry had managed the painful trek up to the 7th floor when Hermione met him halfway to the
portrait hole.

'Harry!' she exclaimed upon his slow movements. She took in his state with a worried expression.
'You need the hospital wing.'

Harry shook his head and grimaced at the tremors he couldn't surprise. Hermione lend her arm for
support as Harry stirred them back towards the portrait hole. 'Just another session with Snape,' he said, and a hoarse laugh escaped him.

'Still Harry, I think you should-' but Harry held up a hand to stall her anxious babbling. 'Leave it Hermione.'

They silently made their way through the common room and up the boys dormitories, with Harry trying to not be obvious about needing her help. He sank slowly onto his bed as Hermione fidgeted nearby.

'Harry, your eyes are bloodshot.'

Yes Hermione, Harry thought of saying, that is a trademark of the Cruciatus Curse. The nerve endings tend to get a rough treatment.

'I think you should tell Dumbledore,' Hermione went on.

'Why is everyone always going on about Dumbledore?' Harry growled, annoyed with his hands, which wouldn't stop shaking, and with himself for never thinking his actions through to their consequences.

Hermione looked hurt at his outburst. He sighed and rubbed his hair back viciously. 'Sorry Hermione, it's been a long evening and I'm taking it out on you. I just need some rest, please.' Hermione appeared to understand as she quietly closed the door behind her. Throwing off his shoes he burrowed under the covers, hoping to settle in for a long sleep and determined to think of nothing at all.

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The following morning at breakfast the ghostly pain had not quite gone away. At least the shaking had stopped. As Ginny took a seat beside him she said to him: 'Dumbledore said to tell you he wants to see you after breakfast, at your convenience.'

Ron gave him a suspiciously soft punch. 'So you can skip the Growling Gispigus this morning! Lucky you mate.' He gave an exaggerated shudder at the prospect of their next Herbology class. Hermione had probably informed him of last night, although he hadn't mentioned anything.

As everyone took their leave to their respective classes Harry walked up to the Headmaster's tower. He started rambling of sweets to the gargoyle, and was let in on Lemon Drops (someone really ought to tell Dumbledore to change his system of passwords). As Harry took the offered seat Dumbledore regarded him with a light frown. Luckily Snape was nowhere to be seen. Harry then saw the sword of Gryffindor resting in marvellous splendour on the Headmaster's desk, which took his thoughts back to the end of second year.

'Harry,' Dumbledore began, sounding tired. 'You know why you are here?'

Harry nodded, still staring at the gem-encrusted sword.

'How did you discover this effect you have on Voldemort's followers?'

Harry proceeded to explain about the events at the Equinox Ball and his mission to prove his suspicion by touching Snape's mark. He decided to leave out Snape's reaction to his impudence for now, feeling uncomfortable mentioning it.

'We are aware that Mr. Moore is a Death Eater, Harry,' Dumbledore answered his question. Harry
sat back in surprise. He hadn't thought of the possibility that the Order knew there was a spy in the Auror division. 'Oh,' he breathed.

'I understand how strenuous these training sessions are. The years of animosity between you can't be shrugged of easily,' Dumbledore said in earnest sympathy, 'but it is important that you understand that you cannot, should not, instigate a fight with a Professor, whatever your feelings towards him. Professor Snape is a teacher at this school, and he should be respected for that.'

Dumbledore shook his head. 'Now is the time to grasp firm our alliances, not alienate them, Harry. They are our most important advantage over Voldemort.'

Harry gritted his teeth. 'He started this, back in first year, when he didn't even know me.' He then grimaced at how childish he sounded.

'Nevertheless, this does not excuse your behaviour. I ask that you apologize to Professor Snape for your actions, Harry.'

And what about Snape? Harry thought. As Hogwarts was not in the habit of exonerating teachers who cast Unforgivables on their students, Snape must have kept that part to himself. Harry felt strangely relieved. In the best-case scenario Snape was not allowed to continue their lessons, and then what could Harry possibly ever gain over Voldemort? He put on a properly chastised expression and murmured: 'I understand, Professor.'

'Furthermore,' Dumbledore went on, 'I want you to give me your word that you are not going to attempt to activate a Dark Mark again. Voldemort may have already caught on to this connection. If he does, he will find a way to use it to his advantage.'

'Professor, how does the Dark Mark work?'

Professor Dumbledore studied him a moment. Harry thought perhaps he'd been too forward and hastened to explain: 'I mean, if I accidentally brush against a Death Eater in a fight, I need to know what is happening, right?'

Dumbledore seemed to agree with this, as he answered: 'The Dark Marks are a network of interconnected mind-links, forged through a powerful neurological curse. As the creator of this curse, Voldemort commands the network: he is the spider at the center of the web, as it were. All links tie back to him under conditions of his choosing. As you know, his touch causes the Mark's to burn and summons his minions to him. It also allows them to pass any magical wards he has put in place. His minions however, can only use the system in order to contact him, if he wishes it.

'In the past, the spells on which the curse is based were used by witch and wizard covens, located far away from the magical communities. The coven network could be used to warn all within of impending danger, for example. It also symbolised the loyalty to the coven. All members of the network held equal rights; all users were 'servants' as well as commanders of it. Voldemort has warped this old magic into a terrible new form.'

'So… somehow I've been tapping into this network, because of my connection to him?'

'Yes. And as with all things regarding your scar, I am not sure how this came about. It may simply be an already existing part of your connection, that you were as of yet unaware about.'

Harry nodded: he had gathered as much himself. It was daunting how little even Dumbledore knew about the nature of Harry's connection to his most feared enemy.

'Well then.' Dumbledore brought his hands together in renewed spirits. 'On to the next issue of
concern, which I wanted to discuss in our session this week, but why wait for time to pass. As you can see, I have brought the Sword of Gryffindor out of its retirement, as it were. It plays an important role in our effort to destroy Voldemort's Horcruxes. Can you guess what this role is?'

'To destroy them, sir?'

'Correct,' Dumbledore nodded. 'I have come to realise ever since you pulled the sword out of the hat, that it has the ability to absorb into it only that which makes it stronger.' Dumbledore waited for Harry to catch on.

'The basilisk poison! It can destroy Horcruxes,' Harry exclaimed, sitting upright with renewed energy. Dumbledore smiled at his enthusiasm. 'Indeed, indeed. So here we have the perfect weapon to take with us on our quest. I want you to have it Harry. I want you to train with it, get a feel for its balance and strength.'

Harry blinked in surprise. 'You mean, practice sword fighting?' He did not like to think how his next training was going to go when Snape was allowed to attack him with a sword.

Dumbledore gave a nod and explained: 'You see Harry, in no circumstances must this weapon fall into the wrong hands. Although Voldemort will not guess as to its actual worth, it is still best that you carry it with you at all times.'

'It seems a bit large to carry with me all the time,' Harry remarked.

Dumbledore chuckled. 'Its size will be reduced by a spell. It is a very complicated one, considering I had to manoeuvre through the Goblin magic in which the sword is saturated. Only recently I managed it, through a connection of mine, which is why I could not give it to you earlier.'

Harry nodded, pleased that the Headmaster was not holding out on any information this year.

'Here we go,' Dumbledore stood and positioned both hands over the sword. He weaved his wand into intricate loops, murmuring strings of Latin. Sure enough, the sword started shrinking until it was the size of a sickle.

'If you agree Harry, I have taken the liberty of making a special pouch for you. I have placed some wards on it, protective ones which I also use myself.' The Headmaster's gnarled hands put into his a small arrow-shaped black leather pouch on a metal string. In it he placed the tiny sword. The pouch remained as flat as if it were empty, about two inches in size.

'Now in order to use it, you only need to pull it out and it will grow to normal size. If you touch the pouch again with the sword it will shrink back. Only you can use the sword, Harry.'

'Thank you sir,' Harry said, awed by this cool gift.

Dumbledore's eyes flashed with mirth. 'You're welcome my boy. Now off to the next class you go, or I will be in for a stern lecture from Professor Flitwick.'

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Transfigurations continued to be as challenging as ever. He and Ron had now managed to make some of the bark on the trunk disappear. Although they didn't know whether it had actually gone into the trunk or just vanished, Professor McGonagall took it as a good sign of their progress, which she told Ron in a reassuring tone. Whenever she needed to address Harry she did so with a cool edge to her voice, not having forgotten Harry's pain-inducing hex on Zacharius.
The rumour of their fight had gone through the school in no time at all. Harry knew that if he'd been in his right mind, he would never have used something so obviously harmful: a skin rash would have been just as satisfying. As it was, he had seen Zacharius along with Ernie Macmillan throwing hateful glares his way. This disturbed Harry: Ernie always greeted Harry warmly since last year's D.A. meetings.

After enduring their passive-aggressive regard in Transfigurations, Harry felt famished as he sat down with Ron, Hermione and Ginny for the evening meal. He'd just reached for a plate of green beans when the big doors of the hall slammed into the walls with two resounding bangs and his hand froze in midway.

Everyone fell into a fearful silence as black-robed figures, their wands aimed, spread out towards the walls and proceeded to walk along the length of the hall. So many of them came through the doors, that they encompassed the four House tables as well as the high table in mere moments.

Harry stood up with his wand ready. Death Eaters regarded them from all sides and many teachers had risen from their seats. Hermione gave a vicious tug on his robe, which surprised him into sitting back down again.

A quick glance showed him that all Gryffindors had their wands out at least, although they seemed frozen in shock. Then his sight narrowed as a red-hot iron wedged itself into his forehead - at least, that was how it felt like. He forced his hands to hold still and not touch the enflamed skin – they'd surely be watching for that. A low moan escaped him nevertheless. He heard Hermione next to him whisper a notice-me-not charm.

The soft click-clack of boots sounded loud in the vast silence of the great hall. Harry looked up and was witness to a horrible sight: Voldemort strode leisurely along the tables towards the teachers. His narrowed red eyes slid down the rows of terrified students for a moment, then he focused his attention on the figure moving in front of the teacher's table. Professor Dumbledore regarded Voldemort calmly, as if his arrival was no more than expected. Harry could feel Voldemort's revulsion as a different, duller pain through their connection.

'Tom,' Dumbledore said. Harry could not make out Voldemort's expression as his back was to Harry. The painful grip on Harry's scar tightened however, and his eyes watered.

Voldemort took on a dueling stance and spoke: 'Time for old relics to step aside, Dumbledore.'
Chapter 7

Please share your thoughts on this story and push that button at the bottom of the chapter! Now onto the action.

Chapter 7

The smallest sound easily carried over the numbing silence – if there had been anyone in the Great Hall not frozen in place by Voldemort's words.

The Dark Lord lifted his wand and the students gasped.

'Fear of death holds us back, Tom. Our ability to love is what makes us strong,' Dumbledore explained, as if talking over tea.

'No Dumbledore, that is what makes you weak,' Voldemort spat. Harry could see Dumbledore's wand was loosely held by his good hand and wished he would grip it tighter.

Voldemort cackled a humourless laugh: in the blink of an eye he had shot a curse and Dumbledore had drawn a shield. That was apparently the cue for the teachers to start dueling the black figures along the walls. The students joined in as well and Harry turned towards the Death Eater closest to him. He or she was ready for his debilitating curse and shot back a disemboweling hex. Harry managed the right block. Now more than ever he was grateful for his training.

As they continued to exchange dangerous curses, Aurors charged in at the front, flooding the scene. The element of surprise allowed them a couple of clear shots before they were noticed. Bolstered by this, Harry spun to the side and let loose a burst of bees from his wand. The Death Eater used a water block. As he or she swatted them away from his neck, Harry's disarming curse struck dead-on.

Harry quickly looked around to find his next target. The pain in his scar had abated a little: he couldn't decide whether this was a good or a bad thing. Further along the table Hermione was holding her own against a large bulk of a man. Harry hurried to join her, dodging nasty stray spells as he went. Together they managed to disarm the man a moment later. Harry then saw a Crushing Curse approaching from the left just in time: he had to put all his energy into a matching shield. As he looked up Hermione had disappeared again.

A swirl of robes near the Gryffindor table where Harry stood announced the next masked figure. This opponent was agile and apparently had a thing for burning hexes: Harry barely managed to hold his own, feeling the drain of so much spell work in such a short time. Hermione came out of nowhere and crumbled to the ground next to him. He tensed in shock at the sight of her face screwed up in pain. That was when he felt a burning pain streak his shoulder. The force of it threw him off balance and before he could check on Hermione, someone pushed him roughly down. He rolled onto his back quickly, groaning as he crushed his burning arm in the process. In the next instant his throat met digging wood and he stared up into the cold grey eyes of Lucius Malfoy.

He brought his hand up but an Expelliarmus wrenched his wand from his grip. Malfoy smiled and
leaned down, shoving a knee into his stomach. Hermione's notice-me-not charm seemed to have stopped working. Or, Harry thought with a clenching feeling in his stomach, its' owner had stopped breathing.

'Potter.' Malfoy's gaze roved over Harry's face, as if wanting to commit every detail of it to memory. Harry looked around in a panic to find Hermione, but Malfoy's wand dug deeper in response. Sparks of magic burned at Harry's neck where the wand touched and he hissed in pain.

Malfoy suddenly removed his wand and pressed it to the skull and snake tattoo on his forearm. As Harry stared at the flesh that was slowly blackening, he realised something. With a growl he pushed upwards: Malfoy's split-second surprise gave Harry just enough time to clench a palm over the Mark. Malfoy cried out as Harry experienced the now familiar sensation of the others' magic whirling outwards and meeting his. Trying to focus all his willpower on the Mark, he imagined a tunnel of magic connecting this Mark to all the others. He thought fiercely of his hate as a living force, and of pushing this force into the network of Voldemort's servants.

Screams rent the air on all sides; Malfoy fell while clutching his arm, eyes clenched shut and appearing in great pain. So were others: MacNair, who had been flooding his surroundings with salvos of molten lava was now on his knees, and disarmed by Tonks in the next instant. Harry watched as Bellatrix, holding her opponent under great pain, now began to shriek herself. Finally his eyes found Hermione not far-off. She was unsteadily getting to her feet. Harry's knees felt weak with relief.

'Accio wand.' It slammed into his hand from only two meters away.

Harry wanted to step towards her, but he didn't dare let go of Malfoy's Dark Mark and his connection to the network.

Then a voice bellowed in anger, drowning all other noise: 'Enough.'

Abruptly the flow of magic through his hand stopped, the connection cut off like one would switch off a Muggle light. The pain in his scar reached sickening proportions and he threw up. But his stomach was empty, leaving an acid taste in his mouth. He opened his eyes. The spots in his vision slowly disappeared. Malfoy was no longer next to him. Everywhere Death Eaters came to their feet. The fighting struck up again, more vicious than before.

A streak of black came his way and he blocked, the correct counter on his tongue without a thought. He followed the direction of the spell with his eyes and saw Voldemort striding towards him, his pace un hurried. People from both sides hastily stepped out of his way.

Harry swallowed. Just think of it as another training session.

Voldemort's wand twitched and this time the curse was the yellow one of the Cruciatus. In the next moment a shadow jumped in front of Harry and was squarely hit, falling to the ground with a yell.

'No!' Harry shouted as he recognised Ginny. Voldemort was upon her now and with a slicing motion of his empty left hand, she skidded over the stones, blood emerging from her face and neck before she was out of sight.

With difficulty Harry managed to turn his focus to the man in front of him. Avoiding Voldemort's gaze, he thought:

'Sectumsempra.'
To his surprise the wordless incantation worked, something he hadn't been able to manage in training (which had delighted Snape at the time). But Voldemort lazily stepped aside, undeterred. Harry saw his sparkling red eyes clearly as he drew nearer.

\textit{Perditio} Harry thought fiercely, and a wall of blue emerged outwards. Voldemort blocked it almost as an afterthought. Crossing the last meters separating them, he chuckled as he came to a stop in front of Harry.

'You have been taught well, little one,' Voldemort said.

Harry froze midway into his next attack. He instantly regretted his moment of distraction as with a flick of his wrist, Voldemort slammed Harry against the nearest wall. Sickening pain went through Harry as the side of his head struck solid stone. He slid down and blinked up at the whirl of black that filled his vision.

Voldemort lowered himself to one knee beside him, his cloak settling around him like drifting shadows. Harry's wand was extracted from his closed fist as pale fingers found his chin, turning his head to meet the deep red eyes. Harry's scar seared as if a flame was being held against it. He avoided Voldemort's gaze as he willed his churning stomach from heaving a second time.

'It is time to face reality, Potter. The teachers have all been killed or incapacitated, as have the students.'

Harry closed his eyes for a moment in horror at these words. With slow movements he managed to sit upright, the hold on his scar lessening somewhat. The adrenaline in his blood was making him feel light-headed.

He refused to believe Voldemort's slippery words. But as he jerked his gaze around, he noticed most fighting had stopped; Aurors and teachers were being disarmed or had their arms strapped to their backs by large chains. It was clear that the numbers had been against them from the beginning. Harry's breath hitched as he saw bodies of students and grownups alike, unmoving on the cold stones.

This couldn't be real.

\textit{Hermione, Ron!} He glanced behind Voldemort and met the gazes of students observing them warily, trying in vain to find the faces of his friends among them. With a jolt he thought of Dumbledore: had he surrendered or...? His chin was squeezed painfully and Harry was forced to look back. Just like the wraith he'd fought in his training session, he thought irrelevantly.

Voldemort's teeth bared into a joyless smile. Harry shivered as the pain in his scar turned into a pulsing warmth.

He couldn't believe this was happening. Voldemort was taking over. The Order had lost. Harry felt like he might faint.

Voldemort moved closer and whispered in his ear: 'I see that you have finally learned to want to cause pain.' Harry couldn't mistake the approval in his tone, or the tingling pleasure skirting over his scar. It made him want to scrub it off there and then with soap.

The Dark Lord stood abruptly in one fluent motion and Harry was released.

'Lucius,' Voldemort hissed, his eerie eyes still on Harry. Harry slowly took his feet with the support of the wall behind him. As Voldemort had implied, Malfoy himself wasn't all that steady either as
he made his way over to him.

The Dark Lord whispered something, in response to which Malfoy skirted an unsteady bow. The blond-haired Death Eater proceeded to grasp Harry by the neck and place into his hand something cold and metal-like. In the next moment the both of them were whisked away from the Great Hall in a whirl of sounds and colours.

How he hated portkeys, he thought as he looked around warily. They were in an underground dungeon. Harry recognized it at once: it was the same one where he'd been— he broke off that thought.

His paces echoed loudly in the quite of the cave-like surroundings as he observed their familiarity. The glistening of the walls, the ever-present cold clutching at his robes… He was back in one of his old nightmares again. Right down to the man who– Harry pulled at his hair in nervousness. He had to stop thinking about that.

Next to him Malfoy laughed, twirling his wand casually. 'What is the matter, Potter? Are your accommodations not satisfactory?'

Harry clenched his jaw, trying to calm the panic that was stubbornly squeezing his lungs. Malfoy first had to get permission from Voldemort before he could do anything to him. This thought helped a little to release the tension in his shoulders.

Pacing the well-known parameters of the Malfoy dungeon he turned his back on the man and reflected on the battle. What would happen now? Would Voldemort kill all his friends outright? And how did the duel end between Voldemort and Dumbledore? It figured that the Headmaster must be dead, or at least in very bad shape for Voldemort to be able to get to Harry. Voldemort had been none the worse for wear, which did not bode well.

A hand fell on his shoulder and he jumped, stopped in his pacing. He berated himself for his distraction: although Malfoy couldn't do anything, he wasn't a man to be overlooked for a second. Harry's empty wand-holster felt like an itch in his hands. Malfoy pressed up behind him, his hand moving towards his neck, stroking his jaw line.

'Remember the last time, Harry?'

Harry wrenched free from his hold and stumbled backwards. He hated how Lucius Malfoy always managed to reduce him to a trembling wreck.

'Remember that feeling in your mark, Malfoy? Do you want to feel it again?' he said in a threatening tone. 'Because that can be arranged.'

Malfoy's lip curled. 'You cannot intimidate me, Potter,' he sneered haughtily.

'Yeah? You're wondering how I did that, though, hm? Imitating your master.'

Malfoy seemed to cloak himself in haughtiness. 'Be glad of your little moment of glory, Potter, because it will be the last one you'll ever see.'

Malfoy's left hand clenched into a fist at his side then, and Harry could feel it too: a powerful magical force nearby. Harry narrowed his eyes blocked the impressions of the physical world. Voldemort's magical signature was like an aggressive, icy change in the air. In that other world of magical energies, it seemed to Harry as if the Dark Lord's magic was holding Malfoy's in a tight
grasp, as if a hand were clenching down on a small object. Then the magical hand wrenched and Malfoy inhaled sharply. The Manor's owner threw a disgusted look Harry's way before Disapparating with a bang, echoed by the indifferent walls of the dungeons.

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Three days went by with no change in his surroundings, except for the clatter of a plate of food and a glass of water near the door in regular intervals. Someone had kindly lit one torch on the wall near his sleeping cot. His frayed nerves had been somewhat soothed when no blood-lusting Death Eaters had marched through the door the moment Malfoy had left. After three days of nothing but waiting, though, he was bored out of his mind. And exhausted. The fates of all the people at Hogwarts left him restless. Sleep was a thing of the past now. Constantly he was reliving the sight of all the bodies in the Great Hall, or Ginny's agonized face as she skidded on the ground.

Fingering the chain around his neck for the tenth time, he stared into the flames of the torch. The image would be burned onto his retinas by now. This meant he would be able to see nothing in the darkness for over a minute.

The Death Eaters hadn't known about his poach because they weren't able to see it. Harry had been wondering when the time would be right to draw the sword. Dumbledore had said its use was to destroy Horcruxes: he hadn't said anything about Harry defending himself with it (his throat tightened whenever he thought of the Headmaster). Therefore Harry had decided it should only be used as a last resort: its abilities were too important to risk its capture. He had to wait until he could escape and start hunting down the pieces of Voldemort's soul.

A clang announced the arrival of a visitor and Harry sprung up, regretting his foolish staring because indeed, he hadn't a clue as to who was approaching. As the figure came into the torchlight Harry looked down at his small visitor.

'HARRY POTTER SIR IS NEEDING TO COME WITH TODDY,' said Toddy, the house elf of the Malfoy's and Dobby's replacement. The nasty blue stains on his right cheek betrayed that Toddy hadn't gotten any better treatment than Dobby had before him. Toddy had been nice to him the last time Harry was here: he'd cleaned Harry's wounds and brought him water at night when the occupants of the house were all asleep.

'Hi Toddy. How are you doing?'

Toddy's large ears flapped as he shook his head repeatedly. 'Toddy is not allowed to talk to Harry Potter sir. Harry Potter is coming with us.' And Toddy snapped his fingers.

Harry blinked at the onslaught of light where the elf's magic had transported him to. It was coming from large windows at the end of the large chamber they had arrived in. The sunlight reflected in the three crystal chandeliers that hung above the prominent dining table in the middle of the vast room. Conversation stumbled to a halt at their arrival. Harry's stomach burned as he recognized many of the figures seated at the dark wood.

As Toddy tugged him towards it, he was momentarily distracted by his surroundings. He hadn't seen this room before. Either the Malfoys had two dining halls, or he was in a different place altogether.

The house elf gestured for Harry to take the only empty seat available about halfway down the table. The high-backed chair shoved Harry tightly to the table edge, where he stared at the golden rim of the goblet in front of him.
Hushed conversation resumed. Harry felt a jolt as he glanced up: Bartemius Crouch was studying him with a lopsided grin. To Crouch's right sat a witch Harry didn't recognize, followed by Macnair and Yaxley. Next to Lucius Malfoy further up the table and on Voldemort's left side, was Bellatrix Lestrange. She smiled as well when his eyes reached hers and raised her glass to him in a silent salute.

These were the Dark Lord's most devoted, the infamous 'Inner Circle' Harry supposed, honoured with a place at the conqueror's celebration feast. A quick count told Harry that 12 seats were occupied. Most Death Eaters openly stared at Harry, verifying the symbol of their Lord's success. It was no doubt as Voldemort had intended.

'My loyal followers.' Voldemort softly began. All whispered conversation was silenced as suddenly as if Voldemort has used a silencing spell on the table. 'Our goals have been achieved. At last we will bear the fruits of what is rightfully ours to inherit.' His eyes glided slowly over every attentive face as his voice rose in volume. 'I have delivered a new era of pureblood rule, in which magic will claim its rightful place, and muggles will fear us for the gods we are!' Voldemort fell silent and this was the signal for the Death Eaters to exult over their leader with fevered cheers and raised glasses.

Voldemort's lips twitched. 'Let us eat.'

Similar to the custom in Hogwarts, the huge dinner table was at once filled with all kinds of familiar and exotic delicacies: roasted lamb was found next to foie gras, exotic fruits freshly cut glistered in deep bowls, Harry smelled spicy rice dishes and he even spotted a serving plate filled with sushi, which somehow struck him as thoroughly Muggle although it probably wasn't. He dejectedly loaded his plate with the nearest foods. Voldemort's speech had robbed him of his appetite, but he didn't want to add to the attention he was already getting.

'Say Potter, how does it feel to be a witness to our Lord's ascension to power?' Rockwood said next to him.

'How does it feel to be sitting three chairs removed from the Death Eaters who actually matter?' Harry shot back. Crouch snorted.

'Watch your mouth Potter, you know nothing about me,' Rockwood hissed.

'Oh don't blame Potter for your demotion in our Lord's eyes Augustus,' Crouch said. To Harry he elaborated in a helpful tone: 'Don't mind him, he's in a snit because his last mission was, shall we say, a disaster.' He shot Rockwood a grin, who looked annoyed.

Harry focused his attention back on his plate, hoping to discourage any more attempts at conversation. Unfortunately, Rockwood's dented ego needed more sustenance. He casually leaned towards Harry while snatching a bowl of rice and whispered in his ear: 'We're not done yet, Potter.' The rough-bearded man slowly sat back and picked up his fork, engaging in conversation with the witch next to him.

The reassuring tone made Harry's spine tingle. He willed himself to shrug if off and continue eating as if he hadn't heard. Suddenly a hand was laid over his own and he jumped lightly at the contact. He scowled as the owner of the hand, Crouch, smiled and said: 'I know his type Harry. I can protect you, if you want.' His thumb was making slow circles over the back of his hand. Harry snatched it back as if Crouch was contagious.

A cackle of laughter sounded to his left and Bellatrix winked at him. Harry felt another unpleasant coldness crawl down his back as he looked at her. Her eyes widened at his inadvertent stare and she licked her lips slowly.
Right. Harry swallowed, determined now to keep his attention on his food.

The evening dinner was a leisurely affair. After plates were cleared and vanished they were replaced with a wide selection of desserts and casks of liquor along the length of the table. Drinking glasses sparkled into existence in front of Harry. He poured for himself a dark brown liquid, sniffing the spicy content. As the less formal part of the evening began, all tension seemed to dissipate from the room. Harry heard a piece of classical music start up behind him. Chairs were shoved back as one after the other, witches and wizards stood to mingle around the salon tables. Harry took a sip of his drink and grimaced at the heavy taste of alcohol on his tongue. Dumbledore would not have approved, he thought randomly.

The table had nearly emptied; aside from two witches discussing the merits of revoking the laws for underage magic, only Voldemort remained, conversing with Snape on his right. As Harry looked his way Voldemort caught his gaze and gestured towards the seat Bellatrix had vacated. Harry hoped he had smoothed away any expression as he steeled himself to close the gap between them. He slowly lowered himself into the seat on Voldemort's left. His right hand twitched as he felt the urge to grab his absent wand.

The Dark Lord searched Harry's face for a moment then said: 'Severus.'

Snape drew from his robes a small vial which he placed in front of Harry. Harry glowered at the man. At that moment he almost hated Snape more than Voldemort himself. Of course the Potions Master would be right at home as Voldemort's right hand man, Harry thought darkly. At least with Voldemort you knew what you where in for, somewhat.

'Drink, Potter,' Snape said.

Harry glanced around, unconsciously seeking escape. His eyes widened: where moments before the hall had teemed with people it was now deserted.

'A privacy wall Potter,' Snape drawled across from him. 'The host activates it when he or she wishes to withdraw from social nuisances.' It seemed this was another pureblood custom Harry didn't know about.

'Potter.' Harry couldn't manage to suppress a flinch at the proximity of Voldemort's voice. Feeling a warmth come to his cheeks at his own jumpiness, he glanced back down at the vial and set his jaw. Desperation tried to set it's claws into his lungs again.

He could not get himself out of this one. There was no Hogwarts leeway here, no place for acting the Gryffindor. He had to let go of that Harry. He would have to present an inscrutable front and not let any emotion surface, to at least have a hope of surviving here. There was something to be said for Draco Malfoy's aloofness and arrogance after all, he thought wryly. Among these snakes power was the currency, and the lack thereof was gobbled up just as eagerly.

The opaque vial was cold against his fingertips; it gave no hint of the colour or substance of the potion within. 'What will happen if I take this?' he asked the tabletop.

A nail scraped his cheek and he flinched again. His eyes caught Snape's for a second, who looked a little tense himself.

'It will not inflict any damage,' Voldemort asserted as if Harry was an object he had an insurance on. The long pale finger lifted his jaw. As Harry stared into the red irises Voldemort did not breach his mind as expected.
In this frozen tableau they sat for some time. The silence impressed upon Harry the futility of refusal. Harry threw back the vial and swallowed. The thick substance tasted earthy, of roots and spices. After a minute or two in which the men watching him didn't move a muscle, Harry felt his head becoming lighter and lighter as if any moment it would float away from his body. Then blackness seeped in and the room tilted violently on its axis.

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Lord Voldemort stood before a huge slab of grey stone. The body that lay across it was enveloped in a black cloak. Only the face of the figure could be seen from underneath the fabric if one looked closely, the hood of the cloak pulled up around it. Voldemort approached the head of the figure and stared down for some time. At last he drew back and strolled away. At the vault-like entrance he turned briefly to flick his wand, activating the charms that kept the room at a constant temperature of minus 273 degrees Celsius.

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Night found Voldemort reclining in a leather-backed fauteuil, a glass of Chianti red on the table near his elbow, an old tome across his lap. The light was low, the hearth nearby cold. He was scanning pages with near-inhuman speed. At last he set the book aside, annoyance making his mouth twitch. He stood and wandlessly noxed the light. The elegant play of his robes was unnoticeable in the darkness as he made his way over the landing to the second door on his right.

This door opened onto a library with rows upon rows of bookshelves. He stalked the shelves for a moment before he apparently found his subject of interest, as he pulled out several books in one section and floated them into a stack. Something drew his attention in the corridor opposite as he peered through the now considerable gap in the shelf. One eyebrow went up and he walked around his corridor to the next, his wand drawn.

'Oh, it's you,' the figure in the next corridor said. The man previously rummaging through a shelf slowly turned towards him. The only remarkable thing about him was that he appeared to be a ghost or otherworldly being, permeated as he was by a translucent light. His face was handsome, with a straight nose and strong jaw line. Shock flooded Voldemort's expression before he managed to mask it. The being in front of him laughed.

'Yes, it's me.' The sound coming from it's transparent lips was like an echo of a normal person's voice.

'You,' Voldemort responded in a dangerous low tone.

The being lifted an elegant eyebrow.

'You,' Voldemort continued, 'will go back from whence you came.' This was clearly meant as a threat.

The ghostly man turned back towards the shelves. 'I think not.'

'You hold no power here.'

At this statement only the being's eyes moved to lock with his. He gave an eerie smile. 'I will, soon.'

'How did you--'

The man apparently knew what was being asked because he broke in with: 'I got bored.'
Voldemort's fist shook around his wand at this.

'There was nothing to be doing or seeing,' the ghostly figure explained, turning around again towards Voldemort and leaning casually against a shelve, his arms folded. 'You have made that quite certain.'

'It was necessary!' Voldemort hissed. 'Surely you must understand that!'  

'Oh I do. I understand your cowardice.'

Voldemort looked outraged at this. 'Cowardice? Insurance, you mean!'

'There were many ways to ensure your… safety, but you had to take this one. Robbing me of all the fun.'

'I had thought this was not possible in the first place,' Voldemort returned icily.

'And what will you do, now that you know?'

Voldemort stared at the ghostly man for a moment, before abruptly turning around and stalking towards the library doors.

Condescending echoes of laughter followed him out, and the being shouted after him: 'Still a coward!'

______________

What do you think? Let me know!
Let me know what you think!

Chapter 8

He sat up – or more accurately, made the attempt sit.

Harry's clamber to consciousness had been a trying struggle. He had emerged from the murky depths of an ocean, it felt like; an ocean that consisted of fog instead of water. It seemed that every time he started to get a first inkling of awareness, or an indeterminate worry gripped him, strong claws of invisible merpeople pulled him down again, and the sense of purpose scattered like so much water vapour, untraceable in the vast foggy surroundings. It was like being on the verge of sleep, not remembering or understanding what you were thinking about before you slipped away into dreams. And then the cycle started again.

In this particular one though, he had surfaced to an understanding of reality that stayed firm, despite his own doubts. A reality that apparently included not being able to straighten his back.

Harry tried using his arms for leverage but they did not support his weight and he fell back with a grunt. He swallowed and felt a knot of anxiety burn his stomach. His eyes were drawn up to the elaborate wooden carvings that sprawled upwards to a dark blue ceiling.

'Mr. Potter, sir,' a small voice said near his elbow and Harry jerked his gaze down. The owner of the voice was small as well. Nevertheless, the sight of his visitor chilled him.

Except for the large eyes and ears that signalled a house elf disposition, its entire face was wrapped in black cloth, making the creature look like a ninja in one of Dudleys cartoons. His black towel reached all the way to the ground, covering his or her feet, and he wore a slim green band off one shoulder.

'Y-yes?'

'Me is being Tadders, sir. Me is going to show Mr. Potter to dinner, sir.' The elf sounded friendly enough.

'To dinner?' Harry thought but said: 'Nice to meet you, Tadders'. He tried again to find his bearings, but the effort was fruitless and he slumped back against the sheets. 'I'm afraid I can't go with you. I'm, uhm… a bit indisposed at the moment.'

The elf drew a bottle from his robes and handed it to Harry, as if in response. Harry took it and sniffed. Potions was not his strong suit. He had no idea what he was smelling.

The elf then rubbed its large-fingered hands and said: 'It is being for your muscle fatigue, me is instructed to tell you.'

Harry hesitated. He had just woken unharmed. It was unlikely that his captor or rescuer would off him at this point, he decided. Swallowing the contents of the potion, he grimaced as after a minute or two, his muscles started to cramp everywhere. With his second attempt he managed to remain in a vertical position. Clamping the bedpost he tried to stand. He ignored his wobbly legs and took two steps, before keeling over on the carpet.

Immediately the elf was at his side, whispering a Weightless charm while snapping its fingers.
With the elf’s aid Harry managed to stand and eventually walk slowly towards the door, although it felt really weird not to feel his feet hitting the ground. Glancing down he saw they were bare, and that he was wearing non-descript black robes.

As they walked along the landing, the theme of lavishly detailed carvings continued on walls and ceilings and even around the paintings of beautiful landscapes. Harry studied the elf next to him, which he now knew to be male.

'Where are we, Tadders?'

'In Masters' Mansion. Through here, sir.' The elf took a left turn, leading them onto an even longer landing. This one ended in a sumptuous stairwell sprawling to the ground floor at what must be the back of the mansion: Harry could see a glimpse of the garden before they entered the next spacious room.

'Who is your master?'

'I is not allowed to speak of that to Mr. Potter, sir.'

Harry nodded his understanding. Another snap of the elf’s fingers and a set of double doors opened to what Harry supposed must be the dining room. He looked in and froze, feeling the blood rush to his head.

He had seen this room before. It was where he had dined with the Death Eaters – where Voldemort had forced him to drink one of Snape's concoctions. He frowned, thinking on that. They'd eaten, he had undergone the sneers and suggestive comments of the Death Eaters. What happened afterwards?

A small hand gently shoved him in the back. Woken from his contemplation, he obligingly strode towards the end of the table laden with food. After some deliberation he chose the chair right of the one set for dinner – that had been Voldemort's place earlier. The dishes immediately accommodated by rearranging themselves hastily towards the new configuration. Harry stared blankly at this assiduous demonstration of the tableware, before shaking himself.

Pumpkin juice sprang into existence near his elbow. He was very thirsty all of a sudden. He hesitated with the glass at his lips. He didn't like the idea of not knowing anything about his position here. All the same, it still remained illogical for Voldemort to poison him slowly through food, and not be around to enjoy it. Besides, that wasn't his style.

Remembering his resolve to become more Slytherin, he decided to make the most of his circumstances and tuck in. *Yeah that must've been a very tough decision, wasn't it?* his Gryffindor side spoke up tauntingly.

Although the beef with crisp vegetables and mashed potatoes was delicious, after a few bites he started to feel nauseous. Tadders was back immediately.

'Please do not eat too much of the food at once, Mr. Potter sir.'

'Yeah, I got that,' Harry replied, gripping his stomach.

The elf bowed low. 'I is wanting to suggest a walk in the gardens for young Mr. Potter, to settle down his stomach.'

Harry glanced up toward the large windows. The sun was still high, beckoning towards a fresh summer evening walk. He let his gaze slide to Tadders standing at his elbow.
'Am I allowed to walk the grounds?'

The elf nodded vigorously, making Harry think: *they do nothing halfway, do they?*

'Yes Mr. Potter sir, excepting leaving the grounds, which is not being possible for Mr. Potter sir.'

He pulled at his ear as if upset by that.

Harry snorted. 'So I suspected.'

He stood. 'Al right, could you show me the way?' He knew he'd gone past the garden entrance, but having crossed through so many rooms and chambers, he didn't remember the way back.

Tadders eyes widened at this request in obvious pleasure, and he proceeded to walk him down two floors towards the French doors he saw earlier, his black blanket billowing around his feet. Harry wondered why Tadders wasn't more like Kreacher with being in the employment of the darkest wizard in a century. Although Harry didn't actually know whose manor this was.

Outside the air was heavy with flowers and the dusk songs of birds. Harry breathed it all in and sighed, wanting to suspend his worries for a few moments. Already the pressured feeling of too much food was receding. He took up a slow pace and randomly chose one of various paths, resolved to let his impressions be the only guide to his thoughts for now.

The wildness of nature had clearly been encouraged here: the gardens held to a nonexistent pattern of all kinds of shrubbery and trees overhanging rough and wild-flowered terrain. The garden path gave no hint of the lay of the land, twisting and turning, intentionally or not lacking any grand purpose to things. At regular intervals a beautiful panorama could be seen beyond, and Harry could get a glimpse of a waterfall or forest meadow, inviting the wanderer to explore this new vista.

Which was how Harry came to a stop under an old tree, standing alone in the centre of a field of grass. He had found it walking through a dense group of spruces. It was huge and baroque-like, a mammoth of its species. It had a girth as wide as a cars'.

He loved old trees. An ancient-looking beech grew at the playground in Wisteria Lane. Harry could remember fond memories of his childhood scaling the rough bark, climbing his way to the canopied crown. This particular one was an oak and flush with summer's green foliage. If he were to climb it, however, he would first need a ladder, just to be able to reach the branches.

He was in no state to climb anything now, though, so he choose to sit himself against it. He gazed upwards along the bark and dwelt, as he'd done so often, in the feeling of falling into an endless suspension of branches. He felt along the rough terrain with his hands – and jerked them quickly back in shock. The moment his fingers had touched the bark, all experience of the outside world had left him – there was only the huge body of the tree. It was, he thought after a moment, as if his conscious had taken leave of his body for a moment to travel elsewhere.

Catching his breath he sat upright. Carefully, he reached back with his palm to touch the wood. Once more he was catapulted away from his surroundings – into the ancient being that was hundreds of years old; a vast, deep system of roots reaching tens of meters into damp soil, juices of life slowly being pulled upwards by tight channels along a sprawling network of branches, towards thousands of carefully wrought twigs and leaves, and from there pulled away, vaporised back into thin air. Unimaginable numbers of wood ants and other tiny creatures crawled its wooden surfaces and inner walls, providing access to healthy minerals; much higher, a number of bird nests created a soft steady pressure against his many-legged branches, protecting the birds against higher order predators.
Harry opened his eyes. He had fallen from his perch against the tree and was now on his stomach in the grass. He felt very sleepy all of a sudden. He closed his heavy eyelids, breathing in the earthy smell of summer around him. It had grown cold and, blinking his eyes open with effort, he noticed that the light of the sun had disappeared from the clearing.

Oh well, he didn't feel like going into whomever's house it was. Satisfied with this reasoning he pillowed his head on his arm and slept.

He was woken roughly by a wide-eyed Tadders, frantically pulling on his arm.

'Mr. Potter sir is not to go from the path. No, sir, not at all.'

'Hmm. Hm?' Harry jerked upright and felt in the grass for his glasses, until he saw Tadders holding them out in front of him.

'Oh, thanks.' He scrambled up and immediately had to be grasped by the elf again: apparently his legs were still not cooperating. Before he was aware of it happening, his surroundings faded away with a snap of Tadders' fingers and they were back in the bedroom where he'd woken up. Tadders slowly let go of his arm.

He was very tired, Harry thought. The ticklish feeling of a cleaning charm came over him then, and he flushed as he glanced down at black pajamas.

'Mr. Potter is needing to go sleep, sir;' the elf said softly.

Some of the fog of sleep had left Harry's head by now. 'Does your master live here?'

'I is not allowed to say, Mr. Potter sir.'

'Are there other people in the house besides me?'

Tadders shook his head. 'I is not allowed to say, sir,' he repeated.

'Of course not,' Harry muttered. Back in the mansion, all his worries crept up on him again. He sat down heavily on the bed. What had happened to Ron, Hermione? How long had he been out, was Dumbledore alive? What was Voldemort doing? He didn't know, and not knowing felt worse than knowing the exact details of their horrible situation. His eyes drooped again and he rubbed them with his knuckles.

At least he would be able to fall asleep now. He just hoped his sleep would be dreamless.

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He woke feeling rested. As he wondered about this, he felt guilty. The memories of the battle cleared the residual sleep from his limbs. For what felt like the umpteenth time Harry saw them in his mind – Justin Flinch-Fletchy fallen and surrounded by Death Eaters, getting kicked repeatedly in the head… the desperate expression on Hermione's face… Ginny….

Ginny. He closed is eyes. He let his mind go back to that drifting feeling, when he'd felt like he was swimming through fog. He imagined himself back in that strange otherworld and clung to that image. At some point he noticed his slowed heartbeat and even breathing. He sighed in relief: at least he could still manage some basic Occlumency.

He moved slowly as not to strain his muscles, which had decided to be slightly more cooperative. In the dining hall the same sight met him as the day before: only this time breakfast was spread one
Harry sat and ate, thinking that he needed a strategy. A good start would be to explore his whereabouts.

Just like the Malfoy Manor, this one was huge. Rooms after rooms sprawled from long and luxurious landings, some of which opened at his touch and some of which stayed firmly closed. The mansion consisted of two stories and probably an attic, although he couldn't manage to open any of the doors leading up to it. Most rooms were used as storage for all kinds of items: on the ground floor alone he'd stumbled onto a coin cabinet, a collection of exotic vases (he tried to break one to use as a weapon, but apparently they'd been made Unbreakable, just bouncing off the floor), a room full of fabrics cut into all kinds of forms, as well as a two-story deep indoor greenhouse, which was situated at a nook of the manor. It smelled terrific of heavy flowery scents and he decided to explore it thoroughly later. One hell of a rich bastard must be living here, he considered. Someone with a collector's craving.

The second floor held no such flagrant displays of wealth, though. The rooms were fewer and larger, austerely decorated. Most held areas to recline and to read, perhaps for the more trusted guests, with small tables, thick black leather couches and fauteuils near the fireplaces. Harry encountered several restrooms with small windows looking out on the gardens, interspersed by chambers he was barred from entering: he gathered that these were most likely the master and guest bedrooms. A large part of the second floor was taken up by the inaccessible glass walls that looked out onto the greenhouses. Harry felt a moment of vertigo as he looked down on all the greenery from above.

A door next to it led to another main area of the mansion: the library. The tastes of the occupant well matched Harry expectations of what a high-ranking Death Eater would want to read. To his surprise and delight, he was able to peruse any book on the shelf he wanted to. The worst of the blackened and burned-like covers he avoided, for fear of getting cursed, although he couldn't resist perusing some of the titles, like "Mind Spells for the Wicked" and "Kozlov's Guide to Strengthen Thy Magick". He choose one of the couches near the fireplace, that stood at the opposite wall and far away from the books.

He hadn't noticed the time until Tadders sprang into existence in front of him, making him drop his book in his lap. Tadders pulled at his long black cloth and said: 'Is Mr. Harry Potter sir wanting lunch?'

Harry unfolded his legs and stood. 'Yes I would.'

'Tadders is being able to bring lunch to Mr. Potter sir, if he so prefer.'

Harry grinned. No harm in sucking up to the house elf. 'Great, thanks Tadders.'

Tadders' eyes, the only visible feature of his face, widened at this praise and he was gone and back in an eye blink: lunch sprang into existence on the reading table. It was tuna and roasted vegetable sandwiches with pumpkin juice, and Harry ate with gusto.

When Harry was full and reclining in the much-too-comfortable couch, he felt a twinge of unease. With all the exploring and the delicious meals he could almost forget what was important: he was a prisoner. One moment not spend escaping was another moment wasted. There was a war going on. People were dying, maybe Ron was being tortured right this second and what was he doing? Exploring the library because it was interesting. Pathetic.

Placing the books on the couch arm, Harry proceeded to walk out and down the large stairway to
the front door. From there he crossed the entranceway towards the high and fearsome-looking brick property walls, which stretched to the left and the right as far as the eye could see.

There was no entrance. The driveway just stopped at an unremarkable spot of wall. There must be a trick to making the entrance appear, Harry thought, just like in Diagon Alley. He took a step towards the bricks and touched one.

At once a sharp pain burned into his scull right above his eyes. He stumbled back and fell, clutching at his scar. Although he was used to this kind of pain, he wasn't used to it getting stronger and stronger. He squirmed on the ground, the grind of the driveway digging through his robes. He closed his eyes and tried to be as still as possible, only wanting to get through it. Finally the pain vanished and he breathed out slowly.

He stood up and strode back towards the mansion, not looking back.

During the rest of the day Harry had a pounding headache. He asked Tadders for a Headache Cure potion, but he felt no different after taking it. Deciding that he was done with scheming for the day, he had a quiet evening of exploring the different rooms and studying the strange items.

'What the…?!

Harry had been immersed in a huge tome on the best use of curses in broom-to-broom combat, but was jerked out of his readings by a low hissing near the hearth. There was a huge snake in front of it, basking in the warmth of the fire. It lazily tasted the air in Harry's direction with its forked tongue. Harry jumped out of his seat and scrambled backwards. Usually he was not afraid of snakes, but this one…

'Hm,' the emerald-green snake said after some tongue-studying. 'The young one is back.'

'What are you doing here, Nagini?' Harry hissed.

If snakes could laugh, it would be a hissing sound. 'The more logical question is, what is the young one doing on my Masters' territory?'

Sectumsempra Harry thought and willed the magic towards the snake. Nothing happened, of course.

'Touchy, hm?'

Harry tensed as Nagini winded her way towards him over the dark green carpet. 'Since you speak my language, I will be lenient and tell you why I am here,' she hissed while closing the distance between them. 'I have been asked by Master to oversee your person in his nest. You are not to leave it.'

'Yeah, I got that already,' Harry snarled, tired of hearing he wasn't allowed to leave. The snake now flickered its head over Harry's robes and he felt frozen to the spot.

'Go back to your chair.'

'Why?'
'We can talk easier.'

Nagini backed off a bit. Although Harry was tempted to make a run for it, he sensed that she would catch up to him in seconds. So he sat down again, holding his book in front of him like a shield. Glancing around he couldn't find her with his eyes, which made him very nervous. Then he felt a presence glide over his neck.

He gave a startled yell. All his muscles went rigid under the pressure of the reptile's body. Nagini hissed again in amusement. She wound herself around his abdomen and shoulders, finally stilling with her head on the couch arm.

Ignoring her, he thought of his hate of all things Voldemort and shaped in his mind: *Avada Kedavra*. The snake tensed, which caused him to be squeezed tightly by her scaly body.

'Do not–'

'- it won't work, you just said so yourself!' Harry interrupted her.

Nagini gave a final warning squeeze. *'I am annoyed, human. It is not wise to annoy me.'* She drew upwards until they were eye to eye, reptilian to human. A swirl of red could be seen at the corner of Nagini's left one.

A heartbeat went by as Harry berated himself fiercely. What was he thinking? For all he knew she was channeling Voldemort!

'I won't do it again,' he assured her.

'Good.'

'Will you tell me when... when he is here?'

Nagini flickered her tongue at him. *'No. Do you wish for him to come right now?'*

'No!' Harry gave a loud hiss, then tried to dampen his tone: *'No that's alright, I don't need to see him right now.'*

'Hm. Put on more fuel.'

'What?' Harry looked around, bewildered.

'For the fire!' Nagini squeezed him impatiently.

'Oh, right.' Harry waited for her to climb off of him, but she appeared to be right at home on his shoulders.

'Alright, here goes...' Harry murmured to himself. Standing very slowly, he walked towards the basket holding a supply of firewood and placed two fresh pieces in the flames. Nagini sighed contentedly and Harry shivered, shuffling back towards the fauteuil and lowering himself carefully into it. After a moment she uncoiled herself and settled back in her spot before the fire.

Harry went back to his book. His attention wasn't on it, though. A horcrux was near, lying in sight. She had to be killed, and he was in the unique position to kill her.

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That was easier said than done. First of all, he had to find a way to kill her without his wand. While
staying clear of her deadly fangs. While Voldemort could be witnessing his act from out of her eyes at any moment.

Everyone thought he invited trouble like a magnet, but actually, it was trouble that always managed to find him. People just assumed that he liked these kind of situations, that he wanted to be in danger or something. Harry shook his head at his rambling thoughts as he began a search in the library for books that could be of any use. He found many books on how to keep snakes in the impressive Dark Arts collection, but not on how to kill them. Now that he thought about it, ways to kill snakes didn't seem like Voldemort's favourite kind of reading.

Maybe there was a potion that required a freshly killed snake? Harry looked around and soon discovered the potion's section. He perused all the entries that could possibly be relevant. Finally he found a passage on snakes in a book on ingredient salvaging. It said:

- fresh snake, all species: relevant parts must be cut or the snake body killed less than one hour before use. In potions allowing for magical interference: incantation Serpenconcido. W. m: fluent motion consisting of diagonal left-down / inner wrist circle to the right / diagonal left-down. In potions not allowing magical interference: use a sharpened object twice the snakes' length. Standing clear, cut off the head. Beware: if the snake be poisonous, a professional snake killer must be hired.

Great. He just happened to have a mightily poisonous snake on his hands, and no wand to kill it from a safe distance. Slamming the book with a huff, he stood and paced to the creature in question, dozing and oblivious. The fire made her scales gleam in beautiful colours, ranging from bright green to deep metallic. He had to do this, he thought to himself firmly, trying to squash his nerves. He didn't think his period of solitude in the manor would last very long, or his courage for that matter. It had to be today.

Walking with purpose through the many rooms and chambers, he began a search for any sharp and long objects that could help him. His host wasn't so stupid as to provide him with obvious weapons, unfortunately. After about an hour of finding nothing, he decided on a different tactic: were there any objects in the manor that he could disassemble into something useful? Gazing around with this in mind, he soon found something suitable: the wooden curtain rails on which the dark green curtains were hung inside of every room. And which, incidentally, demonstrated fancy sharpened spikes at both endings.

He decided on one of the smaller ones, lest he wouldn't be able to carry it later, and pulled a chair close to the windows. Standing on the upholstery he was just able to reach for the curtain rail. Harry's shoulders sagged in relief as he discovered that it lay loose on its holders. He pulled the rail up and let it fall from its perch, accompanied by the dull sound of fabric touching the ground. Harry then pulled the long rail clean from its curtains and balanced it on one hand. It was long alright; about two meters in length. He clasped the rail like a spear and set off towards the library in search of Nagini.

His luck was holding: she was still sleeping the day away, her long body curled in on itself with her pointed head resting on top of it. He came to a stop as near as possible to Nagini's body. Harry's right hand became slippery around the dark wood of the rail.

It was now or never. Gripping his new-formed spear with both hands, Harry slowly lifted it above his head, one pointy end in line with her head.

He flung the spear down.

Nagini had sensed the movement of air apparently because at the exact same time that his weapon
was about to strike home, she moved her head fractionally, making him miss his mark by inches and causing the the rail's end to pierce through her neck instead.

He heard a loud hissing noise before he was struck to the ground by a vicious slap of scales on skin. He felt two cold points at his neck. The snake's fangs sunk in deep, almost like they were falling through butter instead of skin. It was over before he knew it. He blinked slowly as Nagini's head hovered into view.

'Too bad for you, young one.'

Warmth was gushing from his neck. Already he felt a sharp pain following in its wake and rushing throughout his body.

He reached for her. 'Nagini.' His arm felt weirdly disconnected as he lifted it. His scar started to burn again, a pain that paled in comparison to the venom's agony. He gasped as he looked into her eyes and saw that their colour had shifted completely to red.

Nagini spoke, but he heard Voldemort's voice:

'Foolish boy,' the dark wizard said from her mouth as well as inside his head. 'I suppose the venom will be a fitting punishment.'

The meaning of the words cut slowly through his fogged brain. A low sound of pain escaped him then. Nagini was hissing again, probably laughing at him. Voldemort chuckled softly as well, an itch in his scar.

Something else clambered for his attention: his heart was now trying to push itself from its place between his lungs. He felt for it, trying to keep it in place. Glancing upwards he was struck by the strange sight above him: the fire was outdoing itself with the colours on the walls; blue, purple, red, gold… He laughed at that. Voldemort and Gryffindor colours! He frowned then, as that thought troubled him in some way. He tried to push away from the ground, but his arms had stopped working: they just lay next to his chest, unmoving. Neither were his legs, actually. He blinked down, thoroughly bewildered by this turn of events. Then he remembered the snake. The beautiful, gleaming snake. There was something about the snake. Nagini. Yes, Nagini. His forehead itched and he tried to rub it, remembering too late that his hand was somewhere else now.

With great care he lay his head back on the ground, not wanting to lose it as well. But then he noticed that his eyes were also in on the conspiracy: they had decided to introduce a great, expanding blackness. His heart comforted him, by slamming harder in reassurance of its existence. Harry smiled, grateful for this kind gesture. He tried to convey to it that, although its' efforts were much appreciated, they were both obviously fighting a losing battle. Gradually it slowed down in response, having gotten his message.

More excitement in the next chapter. Please tell me your thoughts!
Hermione looked over at the portrait on the opposite wall as she shook out the cramps in her wrist. It was empty now. The only things moving were the flames in the rough-painted hearth. She wished she had a hearth of her own to warm the room. She felt cold.

Putting quill to paper, she started in on the next sentence.


She stopped to rub her arms again. The window had an Imperturbable charm on it. These weren't the dungeons. Still it was cold. Was it her imagination, or had Hogwarts itself changed, somehow? Snape's reign as headmaster had proven to be very different from Dumbledore's, certainly.

Tears sprang to her eyes as she thought of the old Headmaster in battle, his half-moon glasses knocked away, his wizened face bleeding into his white beard. But at least he had gotten away.

Ginny hadn't been so lucky.

Closing her eyes for a moment, her quill found the paper again. It wouldn't do to dawdle.

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The world had narrowed down to a simple waiting for his obedient heart to stop its beats. Only his brain was left, and perhaps his lips, his eyebrows if he tried hard. He almost managed to lift one of them as he noticed that the pain in his forehead changed to a growing pressure. Was this last bastion of observation finally going to be squashed out of existence, he thought with clinical detachment. He couldn't decide whether he liked this turn of events or not, so he simply observed, which was the only thing left to do anyway.

Because of this keen awareness of his mind, Harry noticed the subtle change from pressure to presence, one that was now trapping his own awareness firmly. It was not unwelcome exactly, but it did make him feel cornered just a bit. He sent a question towards his unexpected companion, and then he screamed, surprising himself.

*Pain.*

So much pain – it was back, the agony from earlier, but it was different from that, the pain went somehow deeper than before, more all-consuming…

Apparently his ears were back as well because they protested fiercely against this high inhuman shrieking he was producing. He felt his own awareness grow weaker as the others' grew stronger, until he was only an observer of his body, as opposed to a participant.

From one moment to the next, the entrapment of the intruder suddenly changed to a gentle cradling and he was able to feel around himself again for his own thoughts. This perception of his own existence was stimulated by the foreign mind surrounding his own, until he could manage to feel anger at its violent actions.

A prickling warmth floated towards him along with a *tsking* sound.
'Really Potter, it's not as bad as all that,' the being – Voldemort! – whispered inside his mind. 'You should feel honoured. You have just received a taste of immortality.'

Immortality?

'Yesss... No one gets to tap into that and live. But for you I will make an exception.'

Harry shivered. The unspoken words 'this time' were a loud silence for the space of a few seconds, a vast, frozen emptiness inside him. He was suddenly very aware of his position on the ground, and the intimate grasp on his mind. The drawback of understanding again was trying not to think of anything. Which was impossible, of course.

A tendril of magic prodded him again and he sneezed in reaction to the sudden, invigorating feeling of power imprinted on him.

'Hm. You entertain me, little one. So few of them do these days.'

He flushed as he realised that Voldemort could read him like an open book, registering Harry's intake of breath at the surge of magic inside him. Now feeling much more awake, he snapped open his eyes. With annoyance he observed his shaking arms in front of him. He curled them against himself, not wanting to look at them. He waited for whatever it was that the creature in his mind wanted.

The presence left. Harry gasped in a deep breath, feeling like he'd been submerged all this time and was only now able to draw air into his lungs. His gulps soon turned into sobs. Projecting calm onto himself he managed, after only a little while, to suppress his urge to cry. It took a huge effort though, and he felt empty, like a Dementor had just left the room.

He didn't know how long he lay there, just breathing in the quiet of having his brain to himself again. After an indeterminate amount of time he realised that Nagini was nowhere near him. He had probably taken her back to let someone tend to her wounds.

Something small and black drifted above him and fell into his lap. He sat and glanced down, throwing out an arm for balance. It was a letter written on black paper. Harry rolled his eyes as he saw the signed V at the bottom. Of course Voldemort had to have black stationary.

It said:

_There will be a Celebratory Ball held in my honour on the 25th of May, which you shall attend. I require you to be presentable. Someone will come for you this afternoon at one to take you to a tailor. I advise you not to do anything foolish._

_V_

He yelled in surprise as the paper burst into flames, leaving only ash behind. His arms started trembling again and he scowled, folding them against himself. He tried to stave off his desperation, but couldn't quite help himself.

Why did he always have to feel like a _puppet_ to everyone else? To Voldemort he was a puppet. To Snape, definitely. What about that other powerful wizard? Dumbledore did not _treat_ him like a puppet, that much was true, but still he felt like one. Or was it just too much exposure to a select group of powerful individuals? He thought back to Dumbledore's careful instructions this year, their companionable forays into Voldemort's past. He then realised how dangerous these thoughts were and quickly backpedaled to safer waters.
So then. Someone was going to take him to a tailor? He shouldn't be so surprised, actually: Voldemort had a flare for the dramatics and for appearances. He snorted. Let him read *that* thought. Maybe it was another pureblood thing. Harry considered. Not having had the gold-spooned upbringing of say, Draco Malfoy, he didn't care about what other people thought of him, or of what he looked like. Although, that was not quite true. He *did* care, but not to the extent of dressing himself up in order to impress others. Actions decided peoples' thought of you, not appearances, surely. Although he supposed a Slytherin would disagree.

He looked over at the old clock on the granite mantelpiece above the hearth. To his astonishment he saw that it was now eight thirty in the morning. A whole night had gone by without him noticing. Although, he had not really been present to observe the passage of time. He had no clue as to how long he'd been in this strange not-awareness of self, until that awful moment when Voldemort had taken over.

He considered this at length as he made his way one floor down towards breakfast. By taking over, had Voldemort removed the venom from him? Maybe it had something to do with their shared blood. Harry shook his head as he sat down, the table once more filled with delicious scents. He'd probably never find out what precisely happened last night.

After breakfast, he decided to take a stroll through the gardens. He wisely kept to the path this time, not wanting to disappear into another strange world when his appointment was due in just a few hours. He found that nature always soothed his nerves.

Harry reentered the manor calmed and refreshed. He took his first bite from a sandwich when he heard a bang of Apparition behind him. Putting the sandwich back and turning around, he saw a young woman standing behind him of average height. Blond hair hung around her round, pleasant-looking face. As he stood and went towards her, he saw that her blue-grey eyes were sharp and deep-set, and they were telling a frosty tale. Her wand was out and pointed at him.

'Mr. Potter,' she nodded at him. He inclined his neck in response.

She held towards him a piece of rock that seemed to be made of granite.

'Come.'

'Wait, I need to get my – never mind.' Coat, he was going to say, but he didn't remember having seen any of his things; the cloak he was wearing was not his own. He reached for the granite.

She pulled the hood of his cloak over his face before saying in a cold voice: 'No unexpected moves. Here we go.'

A hook reached around his navel and they were both transported to the starting point of a busy and famous shopping district: wizarding Diagon Alley.

Harry decided that if an opportunity presented itself, he would make a run for it. But only if he had a fair chance of escaping. Now he timidly followed the woman through the throng of people, watching carefully all the while. He was surprised by how lively things were. He'd have thought with Voldemort's takeover that the streets would be deserted. His heartbeat suddenly slammed in his ribcage as he remembered the date of the ball: 25th of May. What date would it be now? Apparently there was some haste to making him presentable, so the 25th couldn't be too far off. He knew he'd been out for some time, but come on, was it *May already*?

'Ehm, ma'am, could I ask you a question?'
'No questions,' the witch immediately returned. Harry sighed.

A bell chimed and he looked up as a door in front of them opened and a customer stalked out, a large parcel under his arm. They entered and were immediately accosted by Madame Malkins.

The witch next to him (she hadn't told him her name) spoke up, her wand now unobtrusively in her sleeve. 'Good day, Madame. Let's see, he will need: two sets of working robes, three sets of dress robes and a mantel. Show us your finest quality please.'

Madame Malkin didn't need to be told twice. She bustled around, showing the witch different types of colours and cuts. Harry was told to sit on the measuring chair. He blinked as they argued over what he was going to wear, right down to his shirts and underpants. After Madame Malkins had taken her measurements he was urged towards the back of the shop, where he was ordered to put on the items that the witch was holding out for him. She was paranoid enough not to let him close the curtains. Slightly uncomfortable he proceeded to remove his cloak and other garments (who's they were he had no idea). As he glanced up to place them on the cloth hangers next to his head, he noticed her gaze on his chest, her cheeks reddening as her eyes snapped up to meet his. He quickly averted his eyes, an idea starting to take shape.

One of the loose pants he was ordered to put on had a strange metallic clasp at the front, which did not appear to have any mechanical purpose like a muggle belt button would. He saw his chance and, putting on a puzzled expression, asked: 'What am I suppose to do with this?'

The witch approached and entered his cubicle. 'What do you mean? Oh, that's a tightening clasp, it fits itself to your size if you order it to.'

He watched her from under his lashes and shifted, subtly broadening his chest. Frowning, he asked: 'Could you show me?'

'Very well,' she said, coming up to him and gripping the clasp with her left hand, still careful to keep her right sleeve out of reach. She was very close now. Behind her Harry could see that Madame Malkin was already engaging a new customer at the front.

He bent towards her while stroking her hand with two fingers, trying to remain unthreatening, his mouth now nearly touching her right ear. She was breathing shallowly. Almost unwillingly she turned her head, eyes drawn to his.

'Mr. Potter, I know what you're- '.

He kissed her, swallowing her words.

Even though she was about to imply that she knew his plan, she still froze in shock. He remained as passive as he could, not pulling her towards him, just moving his mouth on hers. As she drew in a breath past her surprise, he took advantage by slipping in his tongue. He hoped he looked like he knew what he was doing. It had been a while since he'd kissed a girl – a year in fact. She sighed, though, and he felt her right arm, the center of his awareness, loosening at her side.

Still stroking her left hand with his right, he estimated the position of her wand arm, then in one fluid motion, managed to snatch her wand from her right sleeve. Turning it around quickly in his hand, he sent her a soft _Expulsio_, which flung her into the right cabin wall. He threw a _Stupefy_ after for good measure.

He glanced back over to watch for any movement at the front: Madame Malkins was still talking to the customer, her hands full of differently coloured robes. Perfect.
He pulled on his robes over the now formfitting pants and spelled it closed high-up to cover his chest. Twirling the wand around himself as though about to throw a lasso, Harry spoke a Disillusionment Charm. He watched in satisfaction as his arm took on the colour and texture of the wooden cubicle. He had removed his shoes and was now only wearing socks, but he didn't dare take the time to put them on. As he discovered to his satisfaction, the socks gave him the advantage of keeping his footsteps silent as he hastily crossed towards the door. Madame Malkins kept up her talk, but he noticed that her customer followed him steadily with his eyes, making him swallow nervously.

Out the door he burst into a sprint. His feet were taking him directly towards Weasleys Wizard Wheezes'. His heart sank, however, as he saw its colourless appearance and the boarded up windows. He took to the side of the street, thinking quickly. Here in the heart of London he could think of no safe place to hide, except for Grimmauld Place. He turned around and ran back the way they'd come, pushing over passersby in his haste. The thrumming of his heartbeat was now pulsing in his ears. He watched all around him for any suspicious activity, but it was hard to tell with so many black-robed wizards and witches about.

Finally he reached the dilapidated entrance to the Leaky Cauldron. Taking a moment to catch his breath, he opened one of the double doors and snuck in. His eyes had to adjust to the sudden dark atmosphere before he could see the back entrance. He glanced around again before making his way around the bar and towards his ticket to freedom.

Just before reaching his destination however, he was struck by something in the back that made him fall to the ground. Rolling to keep his attacker in sight, a curse was on his lips, but he hesitated.

The person who had cursed him was Tom. Tom the bartender, who could now see clearly whom he was attacking: the Disillusionment Charm had come off as the spell had hit. Only then did Harry realise he'd forgotten to pull up his cloak. Several wands were now pointed at him from all angles. However, if he'd thought that being Harry Potter would help win the sympathy of this old acquaintance, he was wrong: Tom's eyes were expressionless as he gazed down at Harry.

There was a plop and a tall man materialised next to Tom, also holding his wand at the ready.

'I'll take it from here,' the man told Tom in a low voice, who nodded his agreement.

'Tom!' Harry started, desperate now. 'What's going on? Tell me!' But Tom only watched him in silence. The stranger next to him grasped Harry's arm in a vice-like grip that would leave bruises later. The man then pulled him up and against himself with commanding force, before Disapparating the both of them away from the dank tavern and Tom's emotionless stare.

Harry's feet slammed on what felt like uneven ground to his unprotected feet, but what was actually just gravel. A magical shield appeared and shimmered behind them before it stilled back into nothingness. Looking around, his first thought was that they must be back at Malfoy Manor. Then he noticed the driveway was much smaller than at the Malfoys. He braced himself before gazing sideways at his captor. The man was firmly build, of Asian descent. He had a long scabbard strapped to his right thigh. The man started to walk up the driveway, not looking back to see if Harry would follow. Harry noticed his stolen wand was missing. The stranger must have taken it from him mid-Apparition.
The man glanced over his shoulder then, expectantly. Seeing no way out, Harry followed. The gravel was tearing at his socks. Hundreds of tiny rocks that scratched and blistered his feet, but he couldn't spare them any attention. He noticed he was trembling again, unable to stop the panic from sinking its long claws into his chest. First his attempt to kill Nagini, now his running away - what would they do to him? Harry could no longer be sure of anything: all that he knew of the world had spun on its head since Voldemort had taken over.

Unexpectedly, the man now walking next to him laughed.

'Scared, Potter? You should be.' His eyes twinkled, belying his words.

A gothic-like structure loomed above them. Gods, Harry thought, were all wizarding homes this old? Didn't they need some kind of reconstruction once in a while? He scowled at his own tired ramblings, then quickly blanked his expression.

The black doors opened to let them through towards the large stately foyer, which included dark winding stairs that ended in fierce-looking gargoyles. Harry began to feel like he was on a tour of the Great Wizarding Mansions of England, or something. He grinned lightly through his nerves before again smoothing his expression.

Another door opened before they touched it and a woman turned towards them in what appeared to be a drawing room. Her face was dark-skinned and very handsome. Harry realised that she reminded him of Blaise Zabini. He decided this must be his mother. The woman was dressed regally in dark purple and struck a casual pose, a glass of red wine in one hand, her wand in the other.

'Mr. Potter,' Mrs. Zabini nodded and gestured with her wand hand for Harry to come further into the room. Harry moved towards the oval dinner table, all the while keeping both of them in his field of vision. He felt his jaw drop as Zabini proceeded to sketch a low bow towards the stranger that had caught him.

'Mr. Watanabe, it is a pleasure to receive you in my home.'

Mr. Watanabe bowed as well, though not as low as Zabini, Harry noticed.

'The pleasure is mine, Angerona, I assure you,' he smiled charmingly. She straightened with elegant dignity from her low pose and send him a frosty smile, gesturing behind her in the direction where Harry stood.

'He is in there.'

'Thank you,' Watanabe said. 'I will be back shortly.' He proceeded to walk towards the door to Harry's right, pushing Harry in front of him. This door again opened without touch to admit them to a long, bright gallery that probably served as a parlour, with splendid views of the grounds. Gold lining surrounded the paintings that decorated the walls and ceiling. Sculptures of all kinds of human forms stood at regular intervals. The splendour of it all was such that it took Harry some time before he spotted Voldemort, sitting behind a large desk in the middle of the gallery, perusing some documents with a pencil like any normal person.

It was a disconcerting sight. Voldemort wasn't doing anything so ordinary as office work, right?

Voldemort's eyes shot up to meet his and Harry's inner ramblings stumbled to a halt. There was far too much empty space between the two of them, Harry decided.

Watanabe came to a stop next to him and now bowed as low as Zabini had earlier.
'Well done, Takumi,' Voldemort said in his trademark soft tone.

Watanabe straightened from his bow.

'I will be next door if you need me, my Lord.'

Voldemort put down his pencil. 'No, stay for a moment.' He stood and walked past the desk, coming to a stop in front of Harry, his wand out.

'Legilimens.' Harry had no time to put up a defence: Voldemort was in his mind at once. The force of his will was pointed, clearly looking for something specific. Soon he found what he was looking for, and the scene at Madam Malkins played out in Harry's mind. Although he knew what was coming, Harry felt himself grow red as the Dark Lord viewed Harry's seduction in the cubicle. Harry was released. He forced himself not to take a step back.

'I can appreciate a Slytherin move when I see one, Potter. Though perhaps you'll remember that I specifically warned you not to do anything foolish.' Voldemort's spidery hands crept around Harry's neck at the last word, and he squeezed.

'Are you not provided for? Are you not grateful for the meals, the clothes that I allow you?' With every couple of words the pressure on Harry's windpipe became more severe, until he was fighting to breath. 'Do I not allow you access to a library of invaluable knowledge?' Harry began to feel lightheaded. His hands automatically scrambled for purchase on Voldemort's fingers, trying to wrench them away. The pain in his scar came back then, white-hot, and he wondered where it'd been earlier.

'You do,' Harry tried to say, any defiance forgotten, but only a scratching sound left his throat. Most of his vision now consisted of black spots. His knees were growing weak: only Voldemort's hands squeezing the life out of him were holding him upright. However, the words had somehow gotten through, as the Dark Lord let go.

Harry fell like a sack of potatoes. He gasped in air, breath after painful breath.

'Then why do you insist on behaving this way?' Voldemort spat in a venomous hiss. In sharp contrast to his aggressive manner, he waited in silence for Harry to get his breath back. Harry raised himself to a sitting position, but didn't trust his legs to stand.

'Why are you doing all this for, then?' Harry retorted, now thoroughly done with this game or whatever it was that Voldemort was playing. He regretted his outburst immediately. If Voldemort had decided to give him a whole mansion to explore, why in Merlin's name would he question it? Voldemort had a point: he wasn't being tortured, was he? 'I-I don't understand,' he stammered, confusing sufficing his tone as he stared at his folded hands.

'Your understanding is not required. But I will enlighten you anyway.'

Harry's jaw dropped for the second time that afternoon as he saw Voldemort lower himself to one knee in front of him. They were now on eye level. Harry quickly closed his mouth.

'You, young one, belong to my treasured spoils of war,' Voldemort hissed in Parseltongue. 'I will parade you in front of all those weak-hearted fools of the so-called 'light', so that they might learn an important lesson: my will shall be done, and all will bow to my vision of a prosperous future for wizardkind.' A hand shot out to touch Harry's right cheek, where the slapping of Nagini's sharp scales had scalded his skin. Harry was very aware of the Asian wizard standing nearby, observing everything.
'A lesson that I will enjoy teaching you as well. Crucio.'

Harry screamed his already burning throat raw. The curse seemed to wring all the muscles of his body into a tight, painful mass. But Voldemort held the spell for only a few seconds. There was a fierce pressure behind Harry's eyelids and he blinked a few times to clear them of it.

'Try to learn quickly, little one,' Voldemort hissed, the words sounding ominous. He stood, and Harry did so as well on shaky legs.

'I introduce to you Takumi Watanabe, my right-hand man,' Voldemort proceeded in a normal tone, as if nothing untoward had happened. Harry slid his gaze over to Watanabe, who was staring at him in fascination. Great, Harry groused inwardly, just the kind of attention he wanted from Voldemort's right-hand man.

The man gave him a small bow, surely a sign of respect. Harry didn't know how to respond, so he decided to just incline his head. Really, what was it with the Death Eater etiquette?!

'He will be your guard in future outings and not, I should hope, as easily manipulated as your first.'

Harry flushed, looking away from Watanabe. Voldemort gave him a thin smile while Watanabe forehead creased in a small frown.

'You will also see him on other occasions, the nature of which will become clear to you soon. Now,' he stepped close again, lifting Harry's chin with one finger. 'Do try not to harm my dear Nagini in the future. If I sense one damaged scale, a friend of yours will find himself without a head.'

Harry felt all the blood drain from the surface of his skin as his stomach clenched painfully. He nodded his understanding, bowing his head for good measure.

'Good,' Voldemort said coldly, the word like ice skidding over glass. He walked towards the windows, hands folded behind him, which reminded Harry bizarrely of Dumbledore.

'Takumi,' Voldemort's voice still cut the air like frost, 'take Potter back to the manor.'

Whose manor? Yours? Harry wanted to ask: he wanted to ask all kinds of questions, but if ever there had been a right time for it, it definitely wasn't now.

'Certainly, my Lord.' Takumi walked over to Harry and drew him into his arms. Harry couldn't quite get used to the intimate feeling of side-along Apparition with his enemies. There surely was another way of transportation invented just for these situations...

Takumi's grip tightened and the visage of Voldemort at the tall windows whirled out of sight.

Don't worry, Snape will be back soon!

Let me know your thoughts!
Chapter 10

His clothes arrived the next day. Harry stared at the rich fabrics and colours that were spread out over a round table in the drawing room. His thoughts turned to the witch who guarded him.

He’d asked Watanabe what would happen to his guard as they strolled back towards the manor the other day. The man shot him a sharp glance before turning his gaze back towards their destination.

"She will be dealt with as our Lord sees fit," he'd stated.

"What does that mean?"

"Tortured, killed or spared depending on whether she is an asset."

Harry swallowed against the nausea climbing up his stomach.

"Actions have consequences, Potter," the man remarked. After that, the rest of the walk had passed in silence.

His dress robes were a dark green, just like the ones Seamus had lend him for Slughorn's party, now a lifetime ago. They were nearly identical, but these had silver-thread snake patterns framing the borders. Which reminded him unpleasantly of Nagini. At her arrival this morning she had ignored him. She had slithered up the curved banister, probably to reclaim her favourite spot in front of the fire.

A sudden flash of insight froze his hands on the soft fabric. Dumbledore had given Harry the Sword of Gryffindor. He'd handed him the weapon with which to kill her!

Harry slapped a palm over his forehead and grimaced, feeling like a complete fool. How could he have forgotten their last conversation? He hastily touched at his neck to feel for the pouch. He felt a jolt as his hands encountered nothing. Voldemort must have removed it, he thought despairingly while his fingertips touched the sensitive skin. He couldn't remember checking for the pouch earlier: had he worn it during his stroll through the grounds, or when he fell asleep under the strangely sentient tree?

As Harry gathered the different robes and shirts, he admitted to himself that he'd forgotten because of the awful events proceeding it. The battle at Hogwarts had put Dumbledore's last lesson out of his mind completely.

Harry took the curving staircase towards his bedroom. Upstairs he dried his eyes on the pile of clothing in his arms, annoyed with himself. Carelessly throwing the clothing on his bed, Harry cast off the borrowed robes he'd been wearing for several days now and picked out a black set of robes and pants. They felt very soft and light, hinting at expensive quality.

He walked over to the wall-length mirror and looked at his reflection. His green eyes stared back listlessly, dulled with exhaustion and fear for his friends. The silver-black collar of the robes couldn't quite cover the darkening bruises around his neck, the result of the Dark Lord's punishment.

His eyes widened as he noticed a strange silver gleam on one cheek. He stepped closer and tilted his head towards the light. It covered part of his left cheek, subtly, just a touch lighter than his own
It felt cold to the touch. That was where Nagini had slapped him.

Then he noticed his chin-length hair. It was much longer than he remembered it being. Indeed, it nearly behaved itself today. He bit his lip in thought. Clearly more time had passed than he'd been aware of.

A sudden, overpowering frustration send his magic tingling along his skin, yearning to be released through a wand. He was sick of being kept in the dark, not knowing whether his friends lived or died and not being able to do anything about it. A crackle sounded and he whirled towards the source: behind him the fire which the elf had kept burning in spite of the mild weather, had taken on a life of it's own, curling outwards over the mantle and turning purple in some places. He gaped at the sight for a moment before closing his eyes and reeling in his emotions. When he opened them, the fire was down to a normal hearth-enclosed size.

Remus Lupin sniffed, his sharp hearing picking up the sounds of a rabbit shifting in the undergrowth on his left. His stomach was hollow with hunger. He didn't feel like eating rabbit, though. Straightening from his crouch, he saw lights in the far distance beyond the mass of trees. He turned and stalked that way. At this point the forest appeared as a deeper blackness in the starless night. Nevertheless, the roots of the trees and the foliage were clear shapes to his sharp eyes, and he manoeuvred deftly towards the forests' edge.

The lights turned out to be the streetlights from a small village. A man stepped out one of the houses nearest to where Remus stood and, grasping a broomstick, took to the sky. He flew along the village edge and out of sight.

Remus stood still, thinking on what to do next. Should he knock on one of the doors and ask if they had any leftovers from the evening's meal? Most houses were dark. It was unlikely that they would invite a stranger in at this hour.

"Allan!" he heard the sudden cry from the house that the man had exited earlier. A woman burst out of the door and up the streets. She ran around the corner to the open area of grass where her husband had taken off earlier. "Allan, you forgot your..." she sighed then, realising he was gone.

Remus could smell the beads of sweat on her brow, under her armpits. He licked his lips, the thrill of the scent sharpening his nails. His shoulders loosened. His mind focused, empty of thoughts.

Harry dreamed. It was raining. A flag was waving in the wind, slathered and dripping with raindrops. It was black and had a skull in the center, a snake squirming from its mouth. Harry looked down and Ron did the same, smiling a grim smile.

"That's how it is now Harry. No more Gryffindor, no more houses. Just this." Harry saw a skulled badge the size of an orange on his robes.

Harry grabbed his arm. "How are you doing Ron? Is everyone alright?"

Ron shrugged. "What do you care, you're not here," he said without inflection as if it were that simple. Maybe it was.

"I'm sorry Ron, I'm going to find you as soon as I can!" Harry squeezed, trying to convey his determination.
Ron shrugged him off and walked away. Harry tried to follow, but the figure of his best friend became smaller and smaller in the distance, until he disappeared completely. Harry stopped and looked out over the lake, thinking maybe Ron had gone in. Something was pressing down on his head, tightening like a huge rubber band was wrapped around it. His hands felt nothing there. He tried to concentrate on the water; he was certain that Ron had disappeared into the waves.

The water's surface stilled. It was now a glassy reflection of the sky. A rotting, moulding arm stuck out, then another and Harry's eyes snapped up, avoiding the horrible sight.

He was standing in a small boat. Dumbledore stood on an island in front of him, his beard awash in green light. Harry's heart stumbled a beat, though his face betrayed nothing of his turmoil.

"Dumbledore." Fury swelled inside him like a beast of unstoppable strength. His wand slashed the air and Dumbledore fell back off the island, disappearing into the greedy limbs. Harry's eyes were pulled towards the green light. He flew, landing in the spot where Dumbledore had stood earlier. His large fingers were gripping the edges of a basin and he looked down. Water filled about three-quarters of it. He whisked it out of existence with a gesture.

The push and pull-like sensation in his head eased as he stared at the locket that now appeared at the bottom of the basin. He slowly pulled it out, feeling for something more than the metal against his fingertips but finding… nothing.

He pried the locket open with delicate fingers and stared at its content. Inside was a small piece of paper. His eyes slid over the writing then closed tightly, though not before Harry had read the last line:

_I face death in the hope that when you meet your match, you will be mortal once more._

Harry woke. He was lying on the library couch, whose soft appeal had drawn him into closing his eyes earlier that afternoon. A moan of pain filled the silence of the room. The band around his head had tightened.

Locked inside Voldemort's rage, he could only lie very still while his brain felt on fire from his scar. His stomach rebelled but he managed to ignore it as he turned all his thoughts to the softness of the fabric under his cheek. He stroked the cushion that lay against his stomach, feeling hundreds of tiny hairs bending under his fingertips.

Then wind rushed past his face and he opened his eyes. Voldemort stood in front of him, only two paces away.

Harry yelled in shock, a guttural sound.

Voldemort studied his prone form with narrowed eyes. "Get up," he said.

Harry pushed away from the couch. His agony was making him sluggish apparently, because Voldemort hissed again, his rage now slithering out from under his cool exterior:

"Get up!"

He had drawn his wand. Harry held up a placating hand and sat, then carefully stood.

Voldemort did not throw a curse as Harry half expected. Already his mind was being wrung out, as the Dark Lord squeezed from it scene after scene of Harry's lessons with Dumbledore.

"NO!" Harry shouted and whirled his head. Voldemort grabbed his chin, making him look into
those terrible eyes again. Harry felt his legs freeze to the ground and at the same time, his knees locked in place. When Voldemort's wand touched his temple his eyelids opened wide, beyond his command.

Harry's stomach burned as the Dark Lord looked in on his conversations with Dumbledore, whom the wizard in front of him had so carelessly cast into the Inferi's arms. Not a single detail did the Dark Lord find uninteresting. Harry hissed as the band around his head tightened impossibly. Voldemort's Legilimency hadn't hurt like this when he'd been captured earlier in the year. But then Voldemort had been in a congenial mood and it had felt weirdly pleasant.

Better that they were back to this, Harry thought, instead of that creepy congeniality. It was actually a relief, to associate the Dark Lord's nearness with only pain again.

Voldemort's face was set in grim lines when after several eons, he released Harry. Harry's knees unlocked themselves and he fell back onto the couch. Voldemort's magic hung heavy in the room. It scourged the exposed skin of his face and hands.

He bowed his head to shield it from the blaze. When he glanced up, the man was gone.

Harry stood in the shadow of the staircase at the back of a rectangular hall in Malfoy Manor, fingerling the olive in his cocktail glass.

He was bored as hell. Ever since he came to understand that the ball was adults only (except for him of course) and that there were no classmates from Hogwarts in sight, he'd decided to make himself as sparse as possible.

The waiter from earlier approached once more, silently offering to exchange his empty glass for a full one. He nodded his thanks and the man continued on his way, expertly dodging the dancing pairs towards the loudly babbling crowd that surrounded the dance floor on all sides.

What was his purpose here again? Oh yes, parading as Voldemort's treasured spoils of war, or some such nonsense, he thought sourly. Well, if he had to stand and look pretty he wasn't going to do it sober, he groused to himself and took another healthy swig of burning sugariness.

Every once in a while a witch or wizard would come up to him to make conversation. It was clearly a pretence to study him up close. He made it a game to parry their questions with his own until they left in a huff – though not before making a few choice insults, which only amused him more. It did make him wonder, for the first time, what the papers were telling the public about him.

Earlier he was astonished to see Professor McGonagall in the crowd. He yearned to speak to her, even if only in coded language, but to do that he had to step away from the shadows: he hated the stares of the Death Eaters who would follow his every move.

As he thought on this dilemma, it was solved by McGonagall striding over, her gleaming black heels clicking loudly on polished wood.

"Mr. Potter," she said, sounding relieved.

"Professor!" Harry's whisper was fierce with emotion.

McGonagall's hand touched his arm briefly. "How have you been, Potter?"

Many heads turned their way. Harry was keenly aware of how this must look: Hogwarts' former
head of Gryffindor House and member of the Order of the Phoenix, conversing with Harry Potter. He fully expected one of the guards to storm their way over, but no one interfered. Harry suddenly didn't care about the stares, now that he could speak to a friend.

"Alright, actually. They haven't harmed me or anything." McGonagall's gaze turned disbelieving when her gaze flickered down, lingering on his neck.

Harry rubbed it unconsciously and felt his cheeks grow warm at what she must be thinking, seeing the blackening bruises. "Oh, that. Yeah, I eh… got into a bit of trouble."

McGonagall smiled warmly. "As is your usual penchant. Well, I'm glad to know you at least retain some of your rebellious nature," she said with a raised eyebrow. Harry grinned. His smile left his face in the next instant, as he thought of all he wanted to ask.

"How, how is…" he croaked, trailing off. He found he didn't dare to know.

Pain flit across McGonagall's face for a second before she answered: "Everyone is as well as can be expected. Have you been informed of- " Harry shook his head. McGonagall sighed. "I see." She studied the glass of red wine in her hand for a moment before continuing, the music in the background loud behind them. "Professor Sprout has been killed, as has Professor Vector, Professor Burbage and Alastor Moody. Several students from Gryffindor and Hufflepuff as well-"

"Who?" Harry interrupted. McGonagall gave him a handful of names, most of which he didn't recognize, except-

"- and Miss Weasley."

"NO!" Harry uttered in a loud whisper. He squeezed his eyes shut, not wanting to tear up so near the crowd.

"I'm so sorry Potter," he heard McGonagall say. He felt strange, lightheaded. Clasping the marble pillar next to him for support he caught her eyes and forced out: "Continue, please."

McGonagall's lips were very thin. She went on in the same low tone, with her back to the curious crowd: "Remus is missing, as is Albus."

Harry thought back to his dream of the cave, but decided this wasn't a good time to explain. Since he wasn't absolutely sure that Dumbledore was dead, he didn't have anything new to add.

"Potter." McGonagall's tone was urgent now. "Don't lose that spirit of yours, do you hear me? Not for anything."

His spirit. It was something Voldemort seemed to like about him as well, apparently: Still with that spirit, I see. He was jerked from his musings by McGonagall's hand over his. "Harry," McGonagall went on in that same intense tone, "I know everything must seem bleak now. As to Hogwarts and its students, don't trouble yourself. I can assure you that I am still allowed to teach, and so I am able to keep an eye out. I have known Vol- him a long time, since his childhood. We were classmates in another lifetime. If it is the least I can do, it is to assure you that I am not afraid to speak my mind near that man, and that I will do everything in my power to protect the students, as well as the remaining teachers."

This time Harry's eyes did tear up a little from the swell of feeling, both from her sure tone and the courage in her words.

A small smile played around her lips. She deliberately closed her eyes in an extended blink of
assurance.

"How come you don't say his name?" It struck him as very un-McGonagallish.

"There is a curse on the name. If you speak it you may trigger a search party."

"Why?" Harry said, bewildered.

"Because anyone daring to speak his name is a threat to him. Don't use it Potter. Call him something else. I'm sure you can come up with something appropriate." Her brows raised again and he smiled despite himself.

"Professor, I also wondered: why are you here?"

"You mean, why am I allowed here? It is because I am a member of the Wizengamot."

"Really? There is still a Wizengamot?"

"Yes. If nothing else, the Dark Lord is a traditionalist. He values the old customs of wizardkind."

When Harry thought about it, it made sense. Just like Voldemort was a hoarder of trinkets, he hoarded wizarding culture as well. He also noticed something else: McGonagall spoke of Voldemort in the same knowing way that Dumbledore had. It then struck Harry how short the time of peace between the wizarding wars must appear to her.

Harry suddenly remembered something about Dumbledore's Chocolate Frog card. "Who is the Chief Warlock now?"

"It is not yet decided. Since the war began it has divided the Wizengamot as well as the wizarding world at large. He has chosen not to interfere in the process of choosing a new Chief Warlock. It will portray him as a generous and law-abiding ruler in the media, you see."

McGonagall was cut short by the sound of a gong that reverberated to all corners of the building. It appeared to originate from the back of the vast room, where a string quartet had been playing. The musicians had already left the stage: it was now empty except for the instruments.

Voldemort appeared in a flurry of black in the middle of the stage. If it was Apparatition, he hadn't made a sound.

Harry felt nervous, standing so close. Their last encounter was now two weeks ago. He still shuddered to remember the hatred he'd felt as Voldemort attacked his mind.

The gong stopped, making the silence absolute. Voldemort studied his subjects for a few uncomfortable seconds. Then he spoke:

"Witches and wizards, friends and honoured guests." Harry heard him as clearly as if the Dark Lord were standing next to him. "I am pleased to see you all present at this festive gathering of our world's great minds."

Voldemort looked around as if taking in the splendour of guests, of crystal chandeliers, marble columns and rich green table cloth. "You represent all the talent and power inherent to wizardkind. I therefore count on your dedicated efforts to shape our new administration into something worthy of your ruler." A glass sparkled into being in his left hand. He raised it in a toast. "To talent and power."
The crowd watching him in awe raised their glasses as one and repeated: “To talent and power.” Voldemort drank, and so did everyone else. Harry remained unmoving, clinging to the shadowy banister. As Voldemort’s glass lowered, his eyes suddenly shot to Harry’s for the span of two seconds, before turning back to the crowd. Harry shivered, feeling cold through his thick dress robes.

Voldemort disappeared into a back door then, a servant on his heels. The musicians took to the stage again. Dancing pairs trickled back onto the dance floor as they started in on a jazzy rhythm.

"Well Potter, I have to go mingle with the guests,” McGonagall said, then whispered: "Actually, gather information." Harry nodded that he understood. McGonagall straightened and turned her heel, giving him a wink before departing.

A crystal structure of the solar system stood just past the hall’s entrance to the right. Instead of a sun, it had a slender pillar in the center. This was the only part of the structure that touched the ground, while the bodies of planets and their moons floated around it in nothingness, like balls of glass. The planet Jupiter was about the size of a baseball.

It was beautiful. The planets glowed a soft blue inside while the moons held an orange colour, which made for a strange but pleasant combination. The structure was also very educational, he found. In the time of an hour, he had noticed that where the earth’s moon had moved only a few centimeters, one of tiny Mars’s had already traveled about one eighth of the planet’s orbit. A smile tugged at his lips as he realised this model must be a replication of the solar system in real time.

His stomach gave a small twinge of envy for Draco's privileged upbringing. He then silently admonished himself for this pathetic bout of self-pity.

Harry noticed his glass was empty again. As he looked around to find the waiter, he was surprised by how quiet it had become. The dance floor was empty. About a third of the guests now remained. He couldn't see McGonagall anywhere. She must have already left, he thought with a twinge. Or maybe the next portion of the evening was reserved only for special guests. In any case, it was very suspicious that wherever he looked he saw Voldemort’s servants.

The Dark Lord had come back into the room and was now talking to a small group of followers. Or more likely instructing them, Harry considered as he looked at their submissive stances.

Unfortunate timing made him catch sight of Armando Moore. To Harry's horror, Moore had seen him as well and proceeded to briskly cross the expense of empty floor towards him. As the Death Eater drew near, immediately the sticky, sickly feeling Harry had felt at Slughorn's party returned. This was another reason why Harry preferred to stand as far away from the crowd as was still appropriate. The range of magical flavours and moods that bled through the Marks of Voldemort's servants, packed as they were in such numbers, was disconcerting to say the least.

Moore came to stand just a little too close for comfort, a gloating sneer splitting his face and making his hollow cheeks stand out.

"And how have you been, Potter?" Creep Creep Harry's mind was screaming as he replied: "Fine."

"They must like you if they let you out, hm?” Bending close to his ear he whispered: "Too bad your little trick can't help you now."
Harry made as if to grasp at his arm. "You want to try that?"

Moore scowled although he did back off, holding his left arm back for good measure. "You're pathetic Potter. All dressed up as the Dark Lord's little puppet… I hope for your sake that you'll still be entertaining a year from now, but knowing the Dark Lord…” he trailed off meaningfully.

"I'll be sure to mention it to him," Harry retorted, just to be annoying. Sure enough, Moore's face twisted at the suggestion of such casual acquaintance.

If Harry let his eyes loose their focus, he could just make out the irritated prickling of Moore's magic under his Mark. Now if he could just get to it without actually touching it…

"You're a lowly half-blood Potter. You're not fit to dirty his shoes." Moore shrieked a laugh. "And you'll feel it Potter, oh how you will feel it, now that the true blood has triumphed, how you will be- "

"He's a half-blood too, did you know?" Harry cut in airily.

Moore went quiet for a moment. "What did you say?"

"I said: Your precious Dark Lord is a half-blood too!" Harry said, much louder – loud enough to make a dent in the noise of conversation, he noticed with a jolt.

Moore was struck speechless, as if he couldn't believe Harry had dared to say it again. Then he moved, quick as a spider, and before Harry could see so much as a wand wave he was down on all fours. His eyes were burning from a sticky substance that blurred his vision. Gradually a flaming pain made itself known. It burned all over his scalp as he felt something slide down his left ear. Taking off his bloody glasses, he felt himself grow sick as he saw – crystal clear to his near-sighted eyes – what appeared to be a bloody rag with black hairs on the other side crawl over his left cheek. It fell to the ground with a sickening slap. Both his ears were wet now, as was his neck.

He threw up all the drinks of the evening in two large heaves.

Harry sank back on his heels, stunned. The silence rung like the gong earlier in a fierce not-sound made by hundreds of guests. Harry gasped as humiliation lodged itself into his lungs. His fevered mind could dwell only on the horrible stillness around him, even though his skinned scalp was agonizing. He must be unrecognizable by now, just a bleeding head…

Moore however was not done. He now had the attention of the crowd, and he was going to put it to good use.

"Not so smart now, eh Potter? Be glad I left you your little brains.” He laughed at his own bad joke. Then his voice went grim and he uttered: "Ad vulnus sentactus".*

Harry shrieked – shrieked until his throat was hoarse as small knives dissected him from the outside. This was nothing like the internal scourging of the body as caused by the Cruciatus, but it was bad all the same.

In the seconds of torture that crawled by Harry was sure that his skin should be riddled with puncture holes. He dared not open his eyes and accidentally see his body. He drew himself inwards, trying to will his mind to give the pain a place somewhere. But he couldn't focus, it was too all-consuming, it needed to stop...

Then above him: a burst of magic, a dull slap of body against stone, and the pain retreated a little.
He opened his eyes and saw he was lying on his back. Behind him someone screamed. He bent his head carefully to see what the hell was happening.

Without his glasses his sight was too blurry to discern his saviour. However, the blurriness brought the servants' magic into stark reliefe. Something was different. Then he realised – a ghostly feeling but it was there: the links were pulsing, active. They blended together, an ocean of magic clenched viciously by the tight rage of the wizard standing over him – Voldemort.

"Severus," Voldemort hissed.

Soon a second blur of robes joined the first on his other side. Large hands carefully lifted him into a sitting position and a bottle touched his lips.

"Blood-replenishing potion," Snape whispered and Harry swallowed. Something was softly pressuring his head, a spell most likely. His glasses were placed in his hand, cleared of blood. Harry hurried to put them on and raised himself to a sitting position.

Moore's figure was pinned to the wall. Voldemort had his wand out and was in the middle of a curse. Moore however didn't move a muscle. Then, after a while, blood started to drip slowly from his nose onto his lips and the ground.

The Dark Lord flicked his wand and Moore fell over, eyes round and glassy.

The silence now had a sinister quality to it. Wizards and witches nearby watched them out of the corner of their eyes while they pretended to drink their glasses. With his awareness heightened, Harry sensed the change in the magic thrumming under their Marks: it had gone restless, afraid. Pure self preservation, he supposed, must keep their teeth clenched while their Marks burned underneath their fancy clothing. No one wanted to draw attention to himself in Voldemort's current state.

Harry carefully felt at the damage around his head, deciding to ignore the dark wizard as much as possible. The pressure he had sensed earlier was in fact a bandage. The rest of his body felt like it had been hung over a fire. He avoided looking at it, afraid of what he would see.

Voldemort turned his burning gaze on the room, and Harry's eyes were unwillingly drawn back to the Dark Lord.

"Potter is mine," he stated in a glacial voice. "He is not to be touched."

As he spoke, his magic pulled on the Marks for emphasis. Many wizards and witches hissed or groaned in pain.

_His, am I?_ Harry thought affronted. His body had tensed at the word. He willed it to relax under the stares. Considering everything that had happened, it wasn't important enough to get angry over. Although the wordings were different each time, the people around him were simply telling the truth: his only use was to be Voldemort's symbol of victory, and nothing more.

Voldemort appeared calm as he strode over to Harry. Snape hooked a hand under Harry's arm and pulled him up. Harry had to lean all his weight on the older wizard to remain upright. His new position had the disadvantage of putting him right in Voldemort's space. He backed into Snape, scared of the wizard's simmering ire.

Voldemort's jaw was clenched, unnoticeable from far away. His eyes lifted to Snape standing behind Harry. "You have access."
Snape gripped firmly at Harry's shoulders. A silent exchange took place between the tall men. Voldemort's eyes were narrowed. Up close, Harry could see the small movement of his pupils from left to right.

Then Snape said: "My Lord," in a parting tone.

And for the umpteenth time, Harry was pulled into a Disapparation.

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Snape spoke a cleaning charm and then forced another potion into him. He tersely ordered Harry to go to sleep, since that would activate the healing properties of the potion.

During their slow trudge up to Harry's room, while Harry had to give Snape directions on where his bedroom was, he accidentally got a look at his own bleeding torso and legs. The green dress robes now where a drably grey colour.

At this rate, he wouldn't last till the end of the year.

He wanted nothing more than to rest. Still, he was afraid to close his eyes. In his rage Voldemort's mind was close to his own again, a persistent pressure against his scar. But sleep pulled him in, regardless.

*to gash the sense of touch", conjoining the words sensus and tactus – I assume that throughout the ages, the feeling of a spell may remain while language may shorten or simplify.

Please review!
Chapter 11

Harry woke to an itching feeling all over his chest. His skin felt tight and still burned with a ghostly pain. As he sat upright he noticed bandages all over his body from his legs up to his shoulders. Part of his head was swathed as well. Only his hands and feet hadn't been hit by Moore's curse.

Not being able to stand the itching, he scratched his belly.

"Potter!" Harry jumped and turned towards the sound. Snape sat in a chair at his bedside. Snape. At his bedside.

"Stop that," the crooked-nosed man snapped. Harry scowled back. Then he remembered how angry he was with Snape for just taking the winning side and leaving the rest to rot. He braced himself to take a lunge at the man while he still had the higher position, but Snape whirled his wand.

"Don't. Move." Snape stood and shook his other hand from his long sleeves. Harry flinched but Snape only touched the bandages around his head. He then made a circular motion with his wand and Harry felt the bandages come off, layer after layer. The white fabric had an intense red colour. Snape twisted a wrist and the soaked bandages disappeared.

Harry felt at his scalp. The surface was eerily smooth under the wetness of blood. He swallowed hard again as he stared down at his now red-tipped fingers. Was he still bleeding?

"The curse to your head is temporal of nature," Snape said in a terse tone, answering his unspoken question. "It will keep bleeding."

Harry met his eyes in horror, then averted them quickly. Snape was not going to get anything out of him.

"Since the performer is dead, it may take some time before I find the correct counter." Snape sounded bored and matter-of-fact, like he'd rather be doing anything else than talking to Harry. "Therefore, another blood replenishing potion." Snape dangled the bottle in front of his face. Harry took it, careful not to touch Snape's hand. He kept it towards the light at arms length, studying the deep red colour with a frown.

Then with all his strength he hurled the open bottle towards Snape's head. Snape was not nearly fast enough and the bottle hit him magnificently in the eye. Snape snarled,
staggering backwards. With a loud *thud*, the bottle struck the ground and rolled away. It was still whole, unfortunately.

"YOU IDIOTIC BOY!" Snape had a hold of his arm and pulled him up to eyelevel painfully. His clothes were drenched in potion. One eye twitched in unsuppressed rage while the other was turning an interesting purplish grey.

He didn't care what Snape would do to him. In fact now that he thought about it, he *wanted* Snape to punish him: maybe if he hurt him enough Voldemort would kill him as well…

But Snape, staring into his eyes, squeezed hard through the bandages and hissed: "Oh no Potter, when I punish you I assure you the Dark Lord won't care." He gave Harry a sneer that trembled at the edges. Meanwhile he couldn't feel the fingers of his trapped arm anymore.

"You foolish, *foolish* boy!" Snape went on and he threw Harry from him, against the wall beside the bed. Harry groaned as his sore body slammed against stone and his head snapped back painfully. Snape slunk over, giving Harry a sneer of disgust. "Not only are you careless, you are lethally stupid! And I do mean that quite literal, Potter."

Harry swayed, drained of energy. Disturbingly, he felt wetness sliding over his temples and onto his collarbone. He threatened to fall over but Snape kept him upright with a large hand against his shoulder. He almost regretted spraying the potion over Snape's robes.

Snape raged: "Calling the Dark Lord a half-blood in his presence, in public no less! What *precisely* where you thinking at the time?"

He kept mum. Snape shook him. "Tell me what happened."

Harry lifted his chin, baring his teeth. "Traitor," he spat.

Snape lifted a brow mockingly. "It is time you knew how the world really works Potter," Snape drawled. "Holy Potter, the Chosen One looking down with his clean nose, condemning the rest of us mere *survivors*."

"I am a survivor," Harry returned, momentarily forgetting his resolve to stay silent.

"No," Snape said, the word drawn out in emphasis, "You have not survived, you have observed from the sidelines while others did the dirty work. You don't know the meaning of the word, Potter."

Harry scoffed. *Whatever, Snape.*

"So righteous in your delusions," Snape whispered in a hiss.

"What is going on here?"

Harry and Snape both froze at the sound of the third voice. Harry wondered how he could have missed the dark form standing in the doorway. Then he realised it was because of his slowly darkening vision, which crept along the corners of his sight.

Snape turned towards the Dark Lord, careful to keep his hand on Harry's shoulder. It was now streaked with red trails. The Potion's Master bowed his head. "My Lord."

"Why is he still bleeding?" Voldemort said sharply.
Snape straightened and said: "I apologise my Lord. Potter was being wilful as always. I was convincing him to co-operate."

Voldemort walked over and stopped to study Harry. It made Harry's scar flare up again painfully. The pain increased briefly as Voldemort touched his scalp with one finger. He then rubbed the blood that came off between his thumb and forefinger. His eyes slid from Harry to Snape. "Did you do this, Severus?" he asked in a light tone, but nobody was fooled.

"No my Lord, it is the result of the curse."

Voldemort's face sharpened. "You disappoint me Severus, chatting away while the boy is bleeding out."

Harry secretly delighted in the speed with which Snape's face paled. "Apologies, my Lord. I was in the process of – "

"You refused to give me the blood replenishing potion," Harry spoke up and both men turned to him. "You –" Snape began but Voldemort interrupted dangerously: "Very Slytherin Harry, but you are lying." He glanced at Snape's soaked front and drew his own conclusions. "How much time to make another one?"

Meanwhile Harry carefully rested his head against the wall, not wanting to appear weak. He scowled at the ceiling. Apparently he had overestimated Voldemort's willingness to torture his servants, or perhaps Snape specifically.

Snape was saying: "- at Hogwarts, it will take twenty minutes, but it is faster than brewing."

"Go," Voldemort said. Snape backed up, then turned and vanished.

Harry wasn't aware of having closed his eyes. He snapped them open as it dawned on him that he was alone in a room with Voldemort. The Dark Lord was standing close, having taken Snape's place with a hand on his shoulder. Voldemort's eyes were narrowed in concentration as he held his other hand with the palm flat against Harry's left temple. He winced but his scar only gave a small twinge.

Voldemort then uttered a cutting curse. Harry froze, but he felt nothing. Maybe he was too drained to feel anything? After several panic-filled seconds he noticed a slow pulse of warmth where Voldemort's hand was splayed against his head. A minute passed with the both of them standing in this frozen tableau, Harry in a mixture of consternation and fear. His dizziness gradually faded, his thoughts becoming clearer. Harry blinked: the blackness was gone from his vision.

The pulsing pressure stopped and Voldemort retreated his palm. Harry could see it bleeding from two deep parallel slices. There was something about that, but he was too sluggish to trail the thought any further.

He felt some of his strength returning and pushed from the wall to stand a little straighter. Without warning, Voldemort then slapped his bleeding hand over Harry's forehead.

Harry had to grasp the wall for balance. His breath hitched as power, pure power shot into his brain – or at least that was what it felt like. Slivers of pleasure shuddered through him. The sheer depth of magic made his eyelids flutter and a groan slipped from him as sparks danced over his scar. Voldemort's malevolent magic was like sitting in front of the fire with fingers frozen from a cold day outside: excruciating, but vitalizing.
Yet it was more pleasurable than mere warmth, scourging him as it renewed his magical reserves. It was then that Harry understood the appeal of the Dark Lord. Later he would be horrified. Now though, his weakened body eagerly absorbed the energy.

Voldemort pulled away. His eyes sparkled with satisfaction of some kind. Harry tried to take a controlled breath as he felt himself flush deeply. He avoided Voldemort's eyes and tried to measure the distance between his enemy and the door.

The Dark Lord whispered: "Now that you are feeling all better… Crucio."

The familiar agony ripped through him again. Harry's screams increased in volume as the seconds, or perhaps a small eternity, crawled by. After an indefinite amount of time he was aware of the soft carpet under him and opened his eyes. Voldemort stood over him, hatred sharpening his face. Harry's scar felt as if a flame was being held against it. He clenched his teeth tightly to not make a sound.

"That word," Voldemort said. "If you ever utter it again Potter, inside or outside my presence, I shall torture you for a long time, with a method that still allows you to function, and no one will know of your agony. Is anything about that unclear?"

Harry trembled trying to imagine what Voldemort was saying. "No, sir."

"No, my Lord."

Harry's teeth gritted, now for an entirely different reason. For fuck's sake, he wasn't going to… Then his eyes caught Voldemort stroking his wand in a decidedly menacing way. He willed his jaw to loosen after a beat. "No, my Lord."

Voldemort sneered, unimpressed. "I shall have to think of a suitable punishment for your incessant cheek."

His fear was back, having come out of nowhere to squeeze his chest. Harry noticed his fists were balled and deliberately relaxed his hands. He refused to show his frustration with this man, with this situation.

The muscles in his body protested fiercely as Harry took his feet. Questions danced around in his mind yearning to be answered, but he knew that this wasn't a good time. When will it ever be a good time with this monster? Harry thought dejectedly.

The Dark Lord's face was a frightening sight and so he quickly looked down again. A bit of humility never hurt. Voldemort's wand dug under his chin however, lifting Harry's eyes. He raised an eyebrow and stated: "My house, Potter."

With that Voldemort silently Disapparated. Only after he was gone did Harry realise he had answered the question at the front of his thoughts. How he wished he was a skilled Occlumens!

Harry shakily lowered himself to the bed. Of course this was Voldemort's house. It made more sense than a Death Eater keeping Nagini. Was it Little Hangleton? For that matter, did Voldemort have several mansions? He found this fitted neatly with his image of the self-important man. If his servants already possessed huge ancient mansions, what was a Dark Lord to do?

He let out a snort at the thought. Then all humorous traces vanished and pain overtook his face again. His thoughts turned, as they so often did these days, to Dumbledore. He and the Headmaster
had painstakingly discussed Voldemort's past and motives, but at no point had they spoken of the practical issues that Harry needed to know in order to try and kill the guy: Voldemort's hideouts, his manpower, his army's weaknesses and theirs… But of course, that was Order-level material, not something to bother the Chosen One's delicate ears with…

Harry stared at the blue canopy of his bed, his thoughts in a turmoil. Voldemort had granted him access to his own home. He hadn't seen another soul here in the meantime. No Death Eaters were allowed in, perhaps. But why not dump him in a cell and have done?

If he was certain of anything, it was that Voldemort's behaviour towards him was altogether off. Before Voldemort had punished him he had seemed… Harry frowned as he thought of the word. Considerate. In some twisted fashion. Voldemort had given Harry the energy to keep standing, before torturing him.

Was Voldemort trying to make Harry feel grateful towards him, for not making his life the living hell that it could be? Harry could imagine how dispiriting that would be for the public, if the Chosen One were to cower and grovel before him grateful for his mercy. Or was he rubbing it in; that however cruel they made him out to be, Harry's situation proved they had no ground to stand on? Harry rubbed absently at a dark bloodstain on the grey sheets. However unlikely it seemed – the guy had murdered his parents, not something Harry could ever grow to overlook – this was Voldemort they were dealing with: Master Manipulator extraordinaire.

Harry's frown deepened as he wiped away some stray blood drops near his eyes. But then, should he just put up a fight against everything? That didn't seem like healthy behaviour at the moment. It depended on the situation, he supposed. On what Voldemort asked him to do. Meanwhile, he would stay vigilant. He would remember Ginny skidding over the stones in the Great Hall, dead because of this bastard. He would abide his time…

He wasn't aware of having balled his fists again until he heard Snape's voice:

"Still going to fight me, Potter?"

Harry relaxed his pose on the bed, not wanting to show he'd been taken unawares. Snape proceeded to give Harry his second verbal trashing of the day. Now is as good a time to start as any, Harry thought and bowed his head in fake reticence. Snape huffed at that, maybe from Harry's lack of reaction and thrust another bottle of the blood-red potion at him. It was almost as if he dared Harry to repeat his earlier stunt, but Harry drank dutifully. Snape proceeded to wrap his head in fresh white bandage, then left without another word.

Only two days passed before Snape was back, with the antidote this time. Finally his bandages could come off, and stay off. His itchiness had increased, so Harry was gratified to give his bloody scalp a vigorous rubbing, all under the dismayed eye of the Potion's Master.

Snape threw Harry a couple of brightly coloured Identificator spells which confirmed that the bleeding had stopped. Harry saw that Snape, just like the Dark Lord, was in no mood to answer questions. He had to try though, since it might well be a while before he saw another soul in this place. Harry used his best boy voice and asked for a Daily Prophet, but no polite enquires got him any response. Snape remained stonily silent, only raising an eyebrow at Harry's obviously fake performance.

Snape turned to leave after telling him in a disgusted tone to take a bath. Harry bit his lip, the now familiar claws of anxiety sinking into his stomach; this continued state of not knowing anything of
the outside world, of the plans of the new government, of how his friends were faring. In his
desperation Harry felt through the ghostlike connection for Snape's Mark: a reflex he wasn't aware
of doing until it was too late. Snape spun with a snarl halfway through his walk towards the door.

"NO Potter." Harry suddenly felt like a giant's hand was squeezing his chest. He couldn't breath.
"Your death wish at the hands of the Dark Lord is of no interest to me. Leave me out of it."

Harry was on his knees by now, wheezing to get the air that he could past his windpipes. Snape
made a slashing motion and Harry was released, gulping as he gripped his chest. "What… do
you… mean?" he wheezed.

"Even you can't be so thick as that," Snape sneered.

Harry braced his lungs for another sentence: "He doesn't- "

But Snape cut him off bitingly: "He will, if he hasn't already." Actually, Harry suspected it since
the battle of Hogwarts, but he wasn't going to admit it to Snape. Instead he heard himself laugh
hollowly. "What do you care?"

"Don't flatter yourself. I merely can't bear to watch as you endanger others because of your
stupidity and incompetence. This is not a game, Potter." The last was said in a furious snarl. Snape
then turned abruptly and stalked off.

"Don't you think I know that?" Harry yelled after him but Snape was already out the door, leaving
Harry to slam his palm on the floor in frustration.

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About a week later (he wasn't keeping that close a watch) Harry was eating a healthy breakfast of
toasted eggs and pumpkin juice when a dark shape moved into the dining room and his utensils
clattered to his plate.

"Good morning, Mr. Potter." It was Takumi Watanabe, Harry realised with some relief. Harry
stood and abandoned his plate as the wizard made his way over. Watanabe folded his hands behind
him and gave a deep nod, or small bow, which Harry returned.

"I trust you have recovered from recent events?"

Harry felt a tinge of warmth spread over his neck as he considered this graceful man must have
seen him vomit all over the ballroom floor, in front of a hundred guests.

"Thank you, sir. Yes I'm fine."

To Harry's utmost relief, his magic had done its oldest trick again: just like that time when Petunia
had cut off all his hair, it had grown back overnight despite the injury to his scalp. Better yet, it
was now back to its old familiar length, sticking up every which way.

"Mr. Moore was an affront to our manners of conduct," Watanabe remarked. Harry almost asked:
You mean your manners of torture? but shut his mouth just in time. He didn't want to get on the
wrong foot with this man, especially since he appeared to respect him for some reason. Watanabe's
English had a slight foreign accent. He must not originally be from around here, Harry noted.

"Today is the first day of your summer courses, Mr. Potter, which you shall attend as per the Dark
Lord's wishes. I am here to escort you." He held out an arm for Harry to take.
"Summer courses?" Harry echoed. "You mean Hogwarts is open for the summer?" He felt something swell in his chest at the thought.

"No, this is only for a select group of students. It will not be held at Hogwarts," Watanabe explained and Harry's heart sank. It sounded like something for Death Eater kids.

"Sir, could you tell me what they're about?"

Watanabe gave a tight smile and held up his arm for the second time. "All will become clear in a moment."

Feeling he had no choice but to obey, and also slightly curious, Harry took his arm. Again he was enclosed in the muscled arms. He distinctly remembered that such contact was not necessary for side-along Apparation. Apparently it was a precaution of his guard, a sensible once seeing as Harry had managed to escape before. It left him jittery and uncomfortable.

Luckily Watanabe quickly led go as they landed and started to walk up the driveway.

"Potter?" Watanabe looked around as Harry had stopped abruptly, staring at the too familiar sight of Malfoy Manor in the distance. He shook himself and took up pace again, catching up to the other man. There was nothing to it. He just had to be careful not to let Mr. Malfoy catch him alone. During the Ball he'd managed to avoid him, but with only a couple of students between them, that might prove tough.

He felt Watanabe's thoughtful eyes on him as they proceeded up the front steps, but ignored him. Inside the manor, Watanabe gave Harry instructions to the great chamber situated at the end of the great hall, reachable by an artfully hidden staircase and a small door. He then left Harry alone to walk up the ground floor hallway to their left.

Harry passed a hand through his hair, feeling naked once more without a wand, before proceeding towards the opposite direction. As he walked along the length of the great hall Harry spared a glance for the Fancy Solar System, as he had come to call it, which shimmered brilliantly in the harsh midmorning light from the tall windows.

He took the stairs and placed an ear to the old wood of the door. He heard a cheerful murmuring of voices, all of them distinct but muffled through the door. He opened it, careful no to make a sound.

Harry snug a peek around the corner. The walls of the great chamber were hung with brightly coloured tapestries of friezes illustrating various adventures of mythical creatures. Combined with the embroidered ceiling the effect was striking.

Harry lowered his gaze to the room's occupants. There they all were, about fifteen of them, talking and laughing like they hadn't a care in the world. Actually that was somewhat true. But Harry didn't have to like it. Composing himself, he pushed away from the wall and walked over, his posture relaxed, his steps firm.

"Hey guys, Potter is here." It was Zacharias Smith, baring his teeth in a feral grin. Everyone turned to regard him. Harry tried to hold his confidence tight to himself as he went to stand just outside the circle of his classmates.

Pansy Parkinson next to him made a show of examining him from head to toe, looking disgusted. Someone boomed a laugh and Harry turned towards the sound. It came from a stocky boy about his own age whom he'd never seen before.

His English had an East-European accent as he said: "Be nice everyone. He's already lost so
much." The group tittered. He stared at Harry with a simpering smile, and Harry felt a chill along his spine. Without knowing his name, he had made another enemy already.

He let his eyes unfocus, taking a brief moment to fall into himself. Some of them definitely had the Dark Mark, Harry thought, though he couldn't point them out individually. At least four of them, he estimated from the jumble of different sensations, which included Malfoy.

He looked over at the boy in question. Malfoy stood in sullen silence, looking bored, hands folded over his chest. Harry had expected him to be his usual arrogant self, with his classmates having come to his giant of a house and all.

Zabini slid his gaze from Malfoy next to him to Harry. Then he stepped into the circle and to Harry's surprise, clapped him on the shoulder.

"That's tough man," he murmured. Harry realised he was referring to his situation in general. The silence had returned, all eyes on the both of them. Harry quirked the corner of his mouth like he had seen Snape doing and said just as quietly: "Thanks."

Then a deep voice cut through the silence: "Everyone, take your seats." Before Harry turned around he already knew who it belonged to: Lucius Malfoy.

While suppressing the urge to run for the door, Harry looked to where the elder Malfoy was gesturing. Simple wooden chairs had materialised, taking up about half of the chamber's floor. Their circle broke up as everyone picked a chair.

Malfoy's steel-gray eyes slid over the assembly. "I see many acquaintances of my son's and a few new faces." He tilted his chin. "Welcome all, to my humble abode." Someone chuckled and Malfoy's mouth made an almost-smile. Harry wished he could see what Draco's mood was now, but he was sitting at the front row.

"You have come here at the request of non other than our wonderful Lord himself. He has generously allowed a few promising witches and wizards of sixth and seventh year, as well as some post-graduates, the opportunity to study history as it is happening.

*Blah blah blah*, Harry thought. Malfoy went on with fervour: "Such an exiting time to be young!" He smiled coolly. "You have been chosen to attend this summer school because of your purity of blood, your skills, and your status as members of our prominent families. Therefore you should feel very honoured."

Somewhere next to Harry a hand went up and Malfoy's eyes snapped towards the interruption. "Yes, Ms Calloway?"

"Why is Potter here, sir?"

Malfoy stared at her for a beat, then said almost kindly: "Would you like to criticize our Lord's decisions?"

The hand faltered before descending. Harry heard the click of her throat swallowing in the silence. "No, sir."

Malfoy lifted his eyes, dismissing her. "I will begin this class with a question: what is the use of a Mudblood?"

A beat passed, then several hands were raised. Malfoy pointed and Ernie Macmillan answered: "To serve us." Harry felt a ball of betrayal in his stomach. Ernie, a former member of Dumbledore's
Army, was apparently only too eager to choose the winning side. He wondered which of the three requirements Ernie had met.

"In what way?"

"By… by obeying the pure-bloods, carrying out the simple, more demeaning tasks?"

Malfoy gave a nod and said: "That is part of it, yes." He looked around, but all other hands had lowered.

"No one?" Malfoy took up a stroll at the front of the improvised classroom and spoke: "Aside from their natural status as servants to those of purer blood, their second purpose in our society is more essential, at this time. It is this: they are uniquely qualified to facilitate the separation of wizarding and Muggle societies."

Malfoy led that sink in for a moment. "Throughout the past decades Mudbloods have proven vital in this regard, as has been demonstrated in the separation of the Asian wizarding societies of China and Japan. I shall explain."

Malfoy twirled his wand while he walked. His famous cane was absent at the moment. "Most Mudbloods have relations in the Muggle world, while pure-bloods do not. Furthermore they are able to blend in when pure-bloods would not manage this nearly as well – ignoring for the moment the revulsion this would cause the average pure-blood. Mudbloods 'speak the language' of their Muggle and Muggle-born brethren, as it were. As such, they can identify other Mudbloods within the Muggle world and detect disruptive factions."

Malfoy proceeded to outline the recent changes in the affairs of state and the new system of law and legislation. If this were a normal Hogwarts class, and a year earlier, Harry would have been hard pressed to pay attention. As it was he sat riveted in his chair. Finally he would get to know what was going on.

And what was going on was a depressing affair. The ball of heat that hadn't really left Harry's stomach seemed to expand as he listened to the plans of the new regime. Muggle-borns were to have a lower societal status than half-bloods or pure-bloods, as Harry had feared. For example, Muggle-born children weren't automatically allowed to attend Hogwarts. They had to pass several tests, the nature of which Malfoy remained vague about. If they passed them, they were allowed to attend some of the classes depending on their strengths. There were other classes they were never allowed to attend.

As for the adults, those who had shown exemplary behaviour and aptitude in their work would be allowed to continue what they were doing, give or take a few exceptions. Most Muggle-borns who had been covering positions of influence were asked to step down (asked, such nice words Malfoy used). Muggle-borns were prohibited from membership of the Wizengamot and the International Confederation of Wizards, as well as from representing any level of government in any way, be it in politics, Quidditch, or an international duelling competition. Several of these laws had already passed the Wizengamot, which made Harry wonder if there were any resistance left anywhere.

But Malfoy had saved the worst for last: Muggle-borns were forbidden from living alongside Muggles. Though Malfoy didn't go into any detail Harry knew what this meant: families would be torn up and Muggles would be banished, or worse. A new fear erupted in his stomach as he thought of Hermione. She must be alive, he told himself firmly. Otherwise someone would have come to taunt him about it. But, other than that…

Malfoy proceeded to sketch some of Voldemort's views on foreign relations, which would be
largely economic of nature. The finer points of foreign politics would be explained in their other class of the summer, he told them. He ended his lecture with a call of names and a list of assigned readings. Most of them were abstracts from newspaper articles. A bundle of articles sparkled into being on each desk. Malfoy gave them the date of the next lesson (in nine days), then dismissed them.

Harry was glad he had taken a seat at the back, closest to the door. As he stood Malfoy's voice rang out:

"Not you, Mr. Potter."

A leaden feeling sunk into Harry's knees as he stood next to his desk. He hadn't thought his overall anxiety could increase any further, but it now did, stretching to previously unimagined heights. Merlin, Harry thought to himself, I can't be as afraid of him as I am of Voldemort, right? He folded his arms over his chest in an unconscious display of nerves. He can't hurt me, not any longer. Voldemort had said so himself: he is not to be touched.

The others shot him smug and interested glances on their way out. The door closed behind the last student and Lucius Malfoy sauntered over, his right hand still twirling his wand. He stopped in front of Harry's desk and tilted his head. "Well Mr. Potter, how did you like my class?"

Malfoy's eyes shown with a familiar, predatory gleam. Harry felt his heartbeat clamber up into his throat.

"It was interesting, sir," Harry responded, adrenaline urging his limbs to attack or run.

Malfoy's wand came up to touch his Adam's apple. "Good. Now, I have a task to fulfil." Malfoy gestured with an arm. "If you would follow me?"

Harry knew from experience how Malfoy could word a question politely but hate it when Harry talked back. And so, having no clue what this was about, Harry said nothing as he followed the man towards a writing desk in the corner.

Malfoy's nostrils were slightly dilated as he ordered: "remove your shirt."

"What?" Harry said automatically. The man's brows raised slightly. "Potter…"

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to whip you, Potter."

Harry took a step back. "Why?" he croaked out.

"Must I repeat myself?" Malfoy scolded, but his eyes were alive with pleasure. "Our Lord has ordered me to." Harry stared at the wall blankly for a moment. From the corner of his eyes he saw that Malfoy drank up his expression.

Harry started to tremble and furiously tensed his limbs to still them. He was sorely tempted to scourge Malfoy's Mark again, but Snape's words from earlier held him back. He couldn't gamble on it. Besides, it was per Voldemort's orders that Malfoy was doing this.

And suddenly Harry knew what this was about: the 'suitable punishment' that Voldemort would be doling out. It was now a week after that miserable, bloody day.

With hands that had turned sluggish, Harry threw off his light outer cloak. Malfoy tsked and
hovered it towards one of the desks. Harry quickly disposed of his shirt, then turned back towards the other wizard.

Malfoy's eyes roamed over his chest. Harry felt himself flush as he wondered what he had often wondered: whether Malfoy's intense treatment of him was a cover for something else...

"Bend over the desk with your hands splayed."

Harry flushed even more, then berated himself. He briskly turned around and braced his hands against the dark polished wood. Malfoy placed himself right behind him. His thoughts congealed into a blubbering mass of fear then, making him forget all about his embarrassment. Flashes of Malfoy's earlier treatments, back when he was first captured, didn't help matters as his legs started to tremble again violently.

"Ssssh," Malfoy was whispering soothingly into his ear, a hand stroking his back. The familiar large black whip materialised on the desk. Malfoy switched his wand to his left hand and took it, tracing it over Harry's flesh.

Oh god, oh god…

The first strike took Harry's breath away in a beat. One of his hands slipped, slick with sweat. He tried to loosen his shoulders, knowing it would lessen the pain, but it was impossible. The wait for the next strike was awful. Then it came, overlapping the first in a diagonal line and Harry squeezed his eyes shut. Malfoy continued, relentless, and soon Harry felt the skin on his back burst, liquid dripping out. He was yelling now, shrieking with every hit, writhing to give the pain a place in his mind, but even while he was doing this, the next strike would tear his will to pieces.

After ten or so strikes Harry started to sob. After fifteen his legs gave out. He fell painfully on his knees, hands coming up to protect the back of his head.

Then, unexpectedly, Malfoy threw the whip to the ground. He was breathing heavily from the exertion. Harry stayed motionless, heaving in silent sobs. He felt Malfoy crouching next to him. His chin was grasped, his head turned towards his tormentor. Malfoy touched Harry's wet cheeks with a smile of satisfaction. Harry's face twisted with fury as he tried to pull away, but Malfoy wouldn't let him, continuing to absorb Harry's agony in a detached manner.

"Lovely," he whispered, then stood. Harry heard him walk around the desk towards the door behind it, heavy boots clacking on the floor. It closed and Harry was alone.

He grasped the desk to pull himself up, but his knees buckled and he lost his balance. As he fell down again his back stretched painfully and he gave a shout of pain, eyes tearing anew.

Stop sobbing like a baby, he scolded himself but it was no use. His back was hurting like hell, as if someone had branded it with hot iron. He fell back against the foot of the desk, the sobs tearing at it as well, worsening the pain.

He looked around at the beautiful tapestries around him, trying to concentrate on the story they were telling. Then he saw Draco standing in the doorway opposite, wide-eyed.

An obliterating, animalistic rage took over Harry's expression and he screamed, incoherent with fury and pain:

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

The door slammed into Draco's face with a bang, powered by wandless, wordless magic. It had
suddenly come to whirl around Harry, dense and wild.

Harry tore all his nails over his scalp and screamed once more at the graceful figures on the walls.

Review please!
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Here's the next one. Many thanks to my beta, The Lonely God With a Box. Enjoy!

Chapter 12

Harry jerked around as the door opened, but it was only Watanabe come to return him to Voldemort's manor. Although the wizard was wearing boots, his steps were soundless. Harry once again tried to stand and this time managed it with the support of the desk. He hadn't the energy to reach for his clothes. He set his jaw defiantly, refusing to feel embarrassed: he'd had enough of that for the day.

Watanabe stopped and gave his trademark bow of the head. Then he took an unusually hesitant step closer. "If I may?"

"What?" Harry snapped.

Watanabe's lips firmed in disapproval. "Heal your back."

Harry passed a hand through his hair. "Right. I'm sorry, I - "

"That's alright." He lifted his wand and waited for something. Finally Harry's slow brain got the hint and he turned around stiffly.

"This will go better if you try to relax."

Harry huffed a breath and did so. As Watanabe murmured a healing spell the wounds seared something fierce, like being whipped all over again. Harry let his thoughts drift and tried to focus on the weird, filling sensation of being the sentient tree, back at the grounds of Voldemort's manor.

When Watanabe spoke again Harry emerged from somewhere deep in his mind. He looked over his shoulder at Watanabe, who gave a small smile. "It is healed. You can put your clothes back on."

Harry took that in, then traced a hand over his back. There were ridges on it sensitive to the touch, but the pain from before was mostly gone. He briefly closed his eyes. "Thank you."

"You are quite welcome. I shall find a scar-removal potion to sent you… unless you wish to impress the ladies?"

Harry ducked his head to hide a blush and quirked his first grin of the day. Watanabe returned it warmly. "I think I'll choose the scar-removal," Harry said. He picked up his clothes and put them on, relishing being able to move normally again. They walked back to the manor's wards in amiable silence.

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Harry closed his eyes against the glare of the sun, the wind ruffling his hair every which way. He
had taken next weeks readings outside, but the lovely weather was distracting.

If this were like any other summer, he'd be well on his way to taming the garden's summer growth by now, at his aunt and uncle's. His muscles would complain fiercely from the heavy work and long hours, and he would enjoy little of the luxury of the balmy summer days. Which is why at Hogwarts, Harry had taken to going outside on good days whenever he could, visiting Hagrid or just taking a stroll by himself, away from the oppressed feeling that the castle sometimes gave him.

But high summer was really something else, Harry thought. It was almost as if the world only consisted of these grounds. No houses or buildings ruining the landscape, just this endless stretch of meadow, wildflowers, wayward boughes of the hazel and white-flowered apple trees. As was the case everywhere on the Dark Lord's property, nothing seemed to have any particular magical purpose or plan in this part, which he loved.

Yesterday he had taken up a methodical search for the sentient tree but it was no use: he couldn't even find the section of forest that he'd strolled through at the time. Now he wondered whether some sections of the ground weren't actually shifting around at certain hours of the day, like the stairs did at Hogwarts.

Harry opened and closed his hands with his palms up, enjoying the shifting dapples of sunlight.

Yesterday's events were the second reason why the - admittedly very dry - legislative texts couldn't hold his attention. That terrible moment when he realised Draco had been gleefully spying on his father's work, and when Harry had retaliated with wordlessly and wandlessly summoned magic.

He wanted to do that again.

He missed his wand terribly. Especially the everyday acts of magic that came with it. He would have to get used to living without a wand. That was a sour brick to swallow.

The general feeling of helplessness had only increased, reaching its peak yesterday as he realised Draco had been a silent witness to his weakness. The magic that had flourished from his rage had taken away this horrible feeling, if only for a while. And so, bolstered by this, he vowed to himself that he would and could learn to make due without a wand.

When Harry reluctantly opened his eyes again, it was to stare at his stack of books on advanced and wandless magic from the Dark Lord's library. His mind made up, Harry ignored the nearby essays and opened the thickest tome first.

In Defence Against the Dark Arts last year they had begun to practice wordless magic. But wandless magic was an almost mythical thing: Harry had never even heard it whispered about at Hogwarts or beyond. Was it too wild to teach, too dangerous to trust to children who had not yet come into their magical prime?

Magic was something that young wizards and witches exhibited naturally, yet it was confined to a wand from the age of eleven. From then onwards, it was like the ability had never existed in the first place. This struck Harry as strange when learning to practice magic without a wand seemed more secure and independent. It was just one of those unfathomable traditions of the magical world that he would never understand.

He was curious to know when the tradition of wand-use had begun, and why. With an extensive library at his disposal he could find out. And so it was with an until then absent focus that he propped up the heavy book onto his heap of readings, to spare his still stiff back, and started in on the introduction, which described Merlin's efforts to encourage the use of wandless magic in his
"So Potter," Parkinson said, "what's with the posh?"

He was back in the great chamber of Malfoy Manor before the start of their second lesson on national politics. Watanabe always took care to have Harry a precise and damnable fifteen minutes early.

Harry examined her question in his mind and came up blank. He shot her a puzzled look. Seeing this, Parkinson's eyes roamed his outfit in response.

Harry glanced down at himself and his pitch-black quality robes with the shimmering green stitches. When he'd put them on this morning he had wondered if Voldemort perhaps liked to impose his own fetish for Slytherin-green on Madame Malkin, but decided that was unlikely. It was far more likely that with her real client in mind, Malkin had wisely decided not to use any Gryffindor-ish references in the making of his new wardrobe.

Harry straightened with a raised eyebrow borrowed from Snape's repertoire (Snape's cantankerous behaviour was turning out to be quite useful) and just stared at her. If she was going to clarify, fine: otherwise he couldn't be bothered. This made Parkinson raise a brow of her own. "I'm referring to the wannabe-Slytherin look, Potter."

"If it is the quality of my clothes that you are actually referring to," Harry taunted, "then I am afraid I must leave you in ignorance."

"That does narrow it down, I guess," she returned thoughtfully. She went on in a whisper: "Is it Mr. Watanabe? You're staying at his place?"

"Maybe," Harry said flatly. He could actually come to enjoy this edgy Slytherin-speak. It must be exhausting, being a member of that House, he mused. His mood soured when he noticed that Malfoy junior was staring at him, again.

At his arrival a few minutes earlier he half expected a round of jeers as everyone would express their opinion of his torture, but they were all being their normal dismissive selves towards him. Conversations had briefly dipped as he walked in, before the exited babble struck up again and he caught flairs of summer adventures and love conquests.

Harry was much relieved, until he had noticed the burning intensity of Draco's gaze. When he wasn't talking to someone he was looking at Harry. Harry figured it could only be a matter of time until he would drop the bomb. He should have known Draco would prefer the dramatic flair, he grumbled. Like a sword of Damocles, Draco's behaviour did little to help him avoid thinking about last lesson's incident. Although Parkinson proved unexpectedly useful in taking his mind of things.

"So, what have you been doing this summer?" he asked her to distract himself.

"Wouldn't you like to know. Yours must be very exiting, or so they say… may I?" Parkinson lifted a hand. Harry let a frown of confusion seep into his expression.

"Your cheek, how did it get that way?"

"Oh that." Harry rubbed the offending item. "A bit of eh, dark magic."

"Really?" She was still holding her hand close and Harry rolled his eyes in assent. She touched it,
then snatched back her hand quickly. "It's cold!"

They were interrupted by the girl whom Harry knew as Ms. Calloway. She whispered something into Parkinson's ear. Harry could just make out the beginning of her sentence in the movement of her lips: *maybe you shouldn't*…

He sighed inwardly. Great, now he was also contagious, apparently.

Harry turned as someone touched his arm. It was the studious sixth year Ravenclaw girl who had been sitting to Harry's right. He remembered how she studiously wrote down everything Malfoy had been telling them. She had a pretty face with blue-grey eyes and mid-length brown hair.

She gave him a tight smile. "Hi. Don't mind them, they're always such groupies."

"Oh, I'm used to it."

"They must have some kind of problem with, you know, the Dark Lord's number one enemy being allowed into their *privileged* summer school," she said in low conspiring tones. The way she stressed the word 'privileged' made Harry like her already.

"Yes well what can I say, I'm just that dangerous."

She giggled then stretching out a hand: "I am Narda Montbelliard, by the way, nice to meet you."

Harry shook it. "Harry Potter. Likewise" She giggled again airily, nothing like the annoying sound that so many girls made.

At that moment Lucius Malfoy came through the back door, telling everyone to take their seats. Harry felt a shudder start at his neck and making its slow way down his back. He once again took the seat furthest from the makeshift stage. Narda sat down next to him. They shared a smile before she took out her quill and paper again.

Malfoy senior started in on his next lecture about the definitions of darker and lighter magics and the importance of allowing both into the daily lives of wizards and witches. He explained the differences between the two, both rumoured and true, and how their perceived separation had come about – Harry remembered this from one of Binns' classes. He relaxed when it was clear that Malfoy wasn't going to spare him a second glance.

Malfoy proceeded to stress the importance of intent and how it coloured the effect of a spell on the opponent. Both light and dark magic, Malfoy told them, could be used to cause destruction as well as to heal and repair. Harry was slouched in his seat by this point: he already knew all this from Snape.

What Malfoy said next made Harry's eyebrows climb up his forehead. "In essence, it boils down," he was saying, "to the foundation of magic, and in fact our very existence: the changing of matter. Since the beginning of time, energy arranges matter in a process we call entropy." It was probably the most scientifically-Muggle word Harry had ever heard pass a witch's or wizard's lips. To hear the aristocratic blond say it was like watching the wrong play. He looked around to see whether anyone had noticed, but saw only frowns and bored looks. Of course, he thought to himself: there were no Muggle-borns present.

"Energy tends towards an equilibrium," Malfoy went on. "If it is localized, it will disperse and spread out. Without magical interference, the natural dispersion of energy causes processes to have a tendency towards a more disorderly state, or higher entropy."
Malfoy took up his pacing along the length of the beautiful wall tapestries. "I shall attempt to give you a rough explanation of what entropy is about. For example, imagine we invest energy into building a castle with just our hands. When it is finished, the building blocks are more orderly, and so our work has made their entropy decrease. In time, without maintenance, and thus with no energy added to the system, our careful arrangement of the castle's interior and exterior will fall into disorder – and in the case of our castle, ruin. Randomness increases as the elements spread the energy to all parts of the system. The entropy of the once-castle has increased.

"Magical beings are capable of disrupting these laws of energy and thus, of entropy. Both light and dark magic cover the spectrum of entropy, although lighter magic tends more towards a decrease of entropy in that which is changed, and darker magic towards an increase."

Malfoy stopped to observe the class. "This is not what many former Ministries for Magic would want you to believe. 'The Light' to use the annoying cliché, have seen every magical inclination towards a state of higher entropy as prove of its destructive nature. This is in fact why many spells we feel to be light, are not classified that way, as they dwell in the higher end of the entropic spectrum. It does not matter that they can't actually be used in any Dark Arts practices. The Ministry-imposed rigorous distinction of the past centuries between dark and light, condemn the Dark Arts as 'evil' and deadening, as inhuman, when in fact you can now infer from my explanation that it is light magic which most goes against the laws of nature."

Malfoy made a graceful turn and his boots went back to their crisp clicking over the polished wood. "I tell you all this so that you may appreciate how deeply entwined the both of them are. So-called 'light' and 'dark' are sides of the same coin, both covering the whole range of entropy. To conclude, it is the intent of the wizard that decides whether an act is harmful, and by which he is to be judged: not the ministry-defined order of magic.

"For those wanting to know more about this subject and its practical application, I refer you to the class of Elemental Magic. As of this year, the class will be re-instated in the curriculum of the sixth and seventh years." Malfoy smirked. "I will confess to some jealousy, as it has not been taught at Hogwarts since the year of 1824."

The last part of the lecture managed to pull half the class out of its uncomprehending stupor. Harry snuggled a peek to his right. Sure enough, Narda was bowed over her paper. She had a weird way of writing, making gaps between the largest part of the sentence and the last word on every line. He held back a frown as he read one part: imagine we invest energy . want didn't make any sense. Going down the line of isolated words, a spasm made him drop his quill: they had arranged to make a vertical sentence:

I want to help you leave.

Leave, as in escape? Was this for him? Harry watched from the corner of his eyes whether anyone was paying attention to their corner of the room, but the whole class was now awake and attentive. Malfoy was giving a summary of the classes of hexes and curses that had been legalized, as per the Wizengamot conference of last June – several students were grinning at the news.

Harry looked back and caught Narda's intense gaze. She hadn't looked up from her writing. Gradually a second sentence formed: be early for next class to discuss outside. Narda straightened. Harry gave a nod towards his desk to let her know he understood. He turned his attention back towards the lecture, heart beating fast now,

Malfoy's tone had become stern: however, he said, the loosening of magical law would bring with it an increase of responsibility. Therefore higher-level curses, among which the Unforgivables,
were to be regulated. Based on the caster's magical ability, a Commission of Spell-Use would decide whether the witch or wizard was allowed to use it. Which was why everyone wanting to practice above-standard spells would have to submit to a test first. If they passed, the spell would be added to the list of authorized spells on their magical papers.

By the end of the lesson Harry's head felt rubbery from all the information. Not wanting to dawdle, he was at the door in no time. To his immense relieve Watanabe already stood waiting on the other side of the door.

Only when they were back on the Dark Lord's grounds did it hit Harry: Draco had had plenty of opportunity during the lesson, but not once had he mentioned Harry's punishment.

Arthur Weasley was thinking on how best to embezzle the Muggle pictures that Merbough had brought in as evidence when the door slammed against the wall, causing it to sag a couple more centimetres in its unstable hinges.

"Tell him," Yaxley was saying, red-faced, pulling a witch into the room roughly. "Tell him what it is you had in your house."

Arthur stood and rounded his desk. "Broderick! Is this really necessary?"

Yaxley squared his jaw, turning to Arthur. "Alright I'll tell him. This woman has had an electic time device in her room."

Arthur slid his gaze from Yaxley's imposing figure to the frail and round-eyed witch in his grip, then clarified: "You mean a clock."

"A muggle clock."

Arthur trailed a hand over his mouth in thought, then said: "I see."

"Yes. So, it's an official-"

"No I'm afraid not, we just changed that last week," Arthur interrupted. "Eclectical clocks were found to be too mainstream to classify them as Muggle objects." It was a gamble but one he was confident he would win: Yaxley had never taken a close look at the precise items on the ever-changing list.

The taller wizard shoved the witch away as if she were contagious. "Is that so? Ah, but it doesn't matter, because I know she conveniently removed it before the time of inspection, which constitutes suspicious behaviour." A nasty smirk curled one corner of his mouth.

Arthur turned to their silent visitor. "Ma'am, could you tell us why you removed the clock?"

The witch got that hopeful look in her eyes, the one he hated. "Of course, sir," she said in a strained voice. "I wanted a normal wizarding clock, you see. I just need to know how my sons are faring, I don't really care about the time. So that's why I replaced it."

Arthur nodded in grave understanding. "That certainly does not constitute a breaching of the law," he assured her. Turning back to Yaxley, he said: "I don't think we have anything to go on here, Broderick."

Yaxley's face tightened. He heaved a sigh, then rudely gestured the woman towards the door. She
hastily left, shooting Arthur a grateful look as she closed the door.

Yaxley's eyes were narrowed as he regarded Arthur. He nodded curtly before briskly turning his heels and stalking from the office. Arthur slowly lowered himself into his office chair, the tension of the encounter having triggered a muscle pain in his lower back.

He jumped up immediately, too edgy to sit, and crossed the small space to once again repair the ramshackle door of the office that was designated to the Assessor of Muggle Affairs.

Harry had asked Watanabe if he could drop him off half an hour early before the next lesson – he met this girl, you see – and Watanabe had agreed. Their third class in national politics arrived a week later. Harry stopped halfway up the path towards Malfoy Manor to give Watanabe a pointed look.

"I'd like to walk the rest of the way alone, if that's alright with you."

Both Watanabe's eyebrows rose meaningfully. "Ah. There is a lady to be met."

Harry decided this would be a good time to led his nerves show. He avoided Watanabe's eyes and moved his legs with the jumpy air of impatience. Watanabe stilled him with a touch to his shoulder. "Good luck," was all he said, before walking back to the wards. Harry felt lucky indeed: he'd expected Watanabe to stay at the Manor as he had during the other classes.

Harry hurried towards the doors, hoping to spot Narda near the entrance. She was seated on one of the lower steps, elbows on her knees, the palms of her hands touching as she watched him approach. They greeted each other and Harry sat down next to her, hoping fervently that Malfoy wasn't looking from one of the windows.

"So," Narda began, "What do you think of Mr. Malfoy's class?"

Harry shrugged. "It's fine, you?"

"I find it very informative. By the way, have you heard? Watanabe's class is in just a week and a half, isn't that exiting?"

Harry studied her expression, wondering what she was getting at. "Sure."

Narda caught the look and sighed. "I miss doing wand work over the summer. Just one more year to go, I guess." Harry got the underlying message: I can't use magic for a silencing spell. He nodded in commiseration. "That sucks. And I'm never allowed to use my wand again," he said with a twinge of self-pity.

Narda turned towards him in surprise. "No! You'll be allowed to use it someday, right?"

Harry grimaced. "I don't see that happening anytime soon."

Narda frowned, then said: "Anyway, about Watanabe's class. I heard we're taking a trip right the first lesson. We're going to be present for a session of the International Confederation of Wizards in Zurich!"

Switzerland, Harry thought fast, was a great country to get lost in. Like its Muggle counterpart, it had been a neutral territory for centuries. Voldemort wasn't likely to get a lot of cooperation from the local authorities, even if he was a Dark Lord. If Harry remembered Binns' lectures correctly,
the Swiss held close relationships with the goblins. They represented a large part of the magical population, due to Switzerland's geography which mostly consisted of mountainous areas. At least here in the United Kingdom the goblins wanted nothing to do with Voldemort's regime.

"Great, I've never been to the continent," Harry said, mindful of possible Eavesdropping spells. "I'd love to see some real mountains."

Narda grinned. "Me too."

They stared at each other for a moment. Harry wanted to discuss her offer, but there was the risk of someone listening in – even though there was no one around and all the windows were firmly closed. Well, he considered, he'd managed to get close to a girl under false pretences before…

Harry gave her a shy smile, then moved to tuck some stray hairs behind her ear. She shifted closer, having gotten the hint. Harry bowed his head to hers until they were touching cheek to cheek.

Then he whispered in her ear with a hand covering his mouth: "Why do you want to help me?"

Narda turned her head to whisper back: "I'll tell you when we've escaped."

Harry's mouth met her ear again to say: "It's very risky. If they found out you helped me…"

Narda drew back to nod her understanding. Her eyes suddenly narrowed to a fierce stare. Her lips touched his temple in order to say: "I have to get out of here."

Whatever the reason was, her drive to leave was tangible. Harry knew any further explanation would have to wait for a safer time and place.

"Switzerland is our best shot," he whispered and felt her cheek move against his in a nod. "You're better off trying to escape on your own," Harry continued. "I'll be guarded constantly by the teacher."

Narda bowed her head so that her long brown hair swung in front of her face. "All the more reason I should accompany you, I think. Their attention won't be on me."

Harry felt a surge of anger at her words, but it quickly died down. She was right, plain and simple. She was just being frank about it, which he could appreciate. If it increased her chances to escape together with him as her trouble magnet, he couldn't begrudge her that. After all, his chances remained the same whatever she did – which was to say: very slim. But he had to try anyway. He didn't know when or if there would be another opportunity like this one.

She frowned and he realised he'd been silent too long. "So, we'll see each other in Switzerland then," Harry continued in a normal tone. "I don't know when I'll be able to see you after that – they don't allow me out much," I'll let you know when it's time."

Narda smiled. "That's alright, I'll keep an eye out for you." I shall watch for your signal.

Satisfied with these preparations, they chatted on about inane things like summer and the changes in the wizarding world. Harry was surprised to discover he didn't mind the farce of intimacy. As well, the lovely weather made him forget about everything, and in the end they were only just in time for class.

Harry jumped as he turned around from closing the great double doors after another study session.
outside. Two loud heartbeats later he realised that the black creature in front of him was in fact Tadders, wrapped all in black up to his pointy ears. The last time he had seen him was something like a week ago.

"Mr. Potter sir, the presents for Mr. Potter's birthday are being placed in the dining hall." The elf bowed and was gone in the next blink.

Harry stared incredulously at the spot where he left. It was his birthday? Was it already the end of July?

People managed to send him presents here?

Harry's feet quickly took him to the dining room, where indeed two presents lay on one end of the table. Lifting a card off one parcel, he recognised Luna's signature. The other one was from Hagrid.

He started with Hagrid's card which said:

Dear Harry,

If you happen to get this: happy birthday! Blimey, 17 years already, an adult! I hope this gets to wherever ye are. Can't be quitting our tradition just because (here the writing was crossed out a couple of times) someone's got a broomstick up their asses! They better be treating ye all right, or I'm making them pay.

Your feathered friend wants me to say hi. I can't say where I am but I can tell ye he is right at home here, with Fang and the other birds. We're all thinking about you, Harry. We will see each other again soon, even if ye might be all locked up now, don't you worry about that.

Here's something already yours, but it's important to hold onto.

Hang in there kid.

Hagrid

Tears had sprung to his eyes: while reading, Hagrid's voice sounded clear in his head as if the man were standing right next to him. Harry shook himself and ripped the cream-coloured paper off the parcel. His old family album was inside. A picture had been added on the front, of himself, Ginny, Ron and Hermione in a snowball fight. Colin Creevy had made it last Christmas, Harry remembered.

His fingers drifted over the moving photograph, marvelling at the sight of all of them together and carefree, just a few months ago. He opened the album and gazed at the familiar pictures of his parents. He had been adding photo's to the back, of his friends and family. One photo where he and Sirius studied the Black family tree now felt even stranger to him with all the time that had passed.

He carefully laid the album down on the table, then pulled Luna's package closer. Her note said:

Hi Harry,

I hope you're birthday is as happy as it can be at the moment. They probably don't allow you many presents because they want you to be miserable. Don't be, alright? It's important that you keep thinking positive thoughts.

I hope my present can help with that. I thought you might need some luck. Therefore I have enclosed a book that when you read it, will hold off all the dark gnarbles that Voldemort and his
Death Eaters are sending into your brains.

Stay alert! I'm certain that I will see you soon.

Luna

Harry smiled as he read the title on the golden background. It could almost pass for a Muggle book: 'Seven steps to a lucky way of life. It all starts with the mind.'

He took the presents to his bedroom, all the while wondering how the hell they had gotten through the wards. True, they were harmless, but it seemed unimaginable that Voldemort would have let them directly through to Harry.

Ron and Hermione would know as well not to sent anything potentially dangerous, or the chances were zero of him getting it. Perhaps their post was being monitored, he mused. On the bright side, that meant that wherever they were, they were probably together. That thought bolstered him. With his sister dead, he was afraid of what would become of Ron if Hermione weren't near.

That night before turning in, Harry decided to take a look at Luna's book. As he turned towards the nightstand, he noticed it was gone. He searched the room, thought of all the places he could have put it, sighed as he came up with nothing, then called:

"Tadders!"

The elf plopped into existence, bowing low to the carpet. "Good evening Mr. Potter sir. Tadders is not being allowed to answer- "

"Yes, yes, nothing about the manor or the wards," Harry waved the elf's speech away. "I wanted to ask you about the presents I got today. One of them is gone. Do you happen to know if someone took it?"

"No sir. Master is not being home today."

Harry felt an eyebrow rise. So Tadders could talk after all? "And when will he be back?"

Tadders ears drooped. "A week or so, me is not knowing the precise date and time. Tadders apologizes for this." Tadders' eyes, the only feature visible of his appearance, had widened a bit.

"No need, Tadders," Harry hastened to reassure him. "And thank you." After another low bow the elf took his leave.

Harry wracked his brain for other possible ways his book might have gotten lost. He took a second look around his room for good measure. As he did so, he spotted something glistening on the dark green carpet. He crouched near and found it was a small glass bottle. The glistening came from the contents inside. Holding the potion close to his eyes, he noted it had a pure golden colour.

Acting on his suspicions, he carefully opened the tiny lid. It smelt like the perfume that Ginny used to put on. His stomach gave an awful wrench. He quickly put the lid back on. This confirmed it: this was Felix Felicis, the 'Liquid Luck' potion. It looked like it had fallen from the nightstand.

He glanced back to Luna's letter. I thought you might need some luck. He felt his good mood returning as he stared at his present, awed.

He watched as the movement of the bottle over his palm caused the molten gold to slowly shift inside. It took six months to make and was notoriously difficult to brew. When and how she'd
pulled it off, Harry could only guess. This could be his chance to escape. The night left him deep in thought, unable to sleep as his mind raced with the possibilities of freedom.

The August day of their first class in foreign politics seemed determined to remain just out of reach, but then, still unexpectedly, it arrived. Harry had put on as much clothes as he could without it becoming obvious: three underpants, three shirts and two sets of robes (both summer wardrobe, winter robes would be a bit inconspicuous). He put an extra pair of boots into a small rucksack that would reasonably fit in for the trip, and stuffed them with four pairs of socks, mindful of Dumbledore's advise that "one can never have enough socks." He'd also tried to search the manor for things that would be useful without a wand to use, but as could be expected, Riddle's manor proved a bad place to look for them.

Like every other time Watanabe was there to escort him to his lesson. Rucksack slung over one shoulder, Harry grinned to see him as they offered each other a nod-bow outside the entrance doors: Watanabe's calm presence had grown on him.

"Why don't we need to leave the wards first?" Harry wondered.

Watanabe gestured him over for Apparation and Harry moved closer. "They are of a different type than the Malfoy's. I have a clearance from the Dark Lord to Apparate inside."

Harry tilted his chin to still be able to see the tall man's face. "You're the only one, right?"

Watanabe turned him around to hold him firmly and Harry rolled his eyes, unseen. "Brace yourself, this will be a long journey," was all he said.

The pull of Disapparation was vicious. It seemed to take longer than usual. The wind that slapped them on all sides scourged Harry's face. Finally they landed and Harry stumbled a pace before righting himself.

He looked around. They had arrived on a forested hill. A few classmates were there already, silently taking in the surroundings. The view was breathtaking: below them a huge city lay sprawled in the afternoon sun, a wide, glistening river cleaving it halfway through. A handful of tiny-looking church towers stuck out the wire of crooked and twisting alleyways.

Apparating all the way to Switzerland must have been quite tiring, but the man didn't show it. When everyone was present, Watanabe began: "Good afternoon, everyone. Today we are invited to witness the fourteenth meeting this year of the Security Council of the International Confederation of Wizards, which has its headquarters here on the Zurichberg. To be a visitor here is considered something of a rarity and an honour, which means I expect you all to be on your best behaviour."

He studied his attentive audience to let this sink in for a moment, then continued: "As you probably know, the Security Council is the most powerful organ of the seven. It is charged with maintaining peace and security of all the official magical races. The Council is concerned with the safety of human and non-human populations even though it is run entirely by humans."

"Now, the building behind me," Watanabe gestured with a long-sleeved arm – there was nothing to see but trees, "only materializes to those who have walked towards it for the uninterrupted period of seventeen minutes and thirty-four seconds. As you should know from your history lessons, the walk symbolises the 'Walk of Peace' made by Crachatan in 1372. Can anyone tell me what Crachatan did?"
Silence was his answer. Watanabe sighed. "I see nothing has improved in Binns' class for the last fifty years. Very well. Let's walk and I will explain." He turned around to lead the way through the trees, the class following behind him.

Harry slowed down a bit in order to pull up the rear. Narda fell in line alongside him, shooting him a furtive look. Harry's fingers became clammy around the bottle of Liquid Luck in his pocket. He cursed himself inwardly. Now was the perfect time to take the potion, but Narda proved an unforeseen problem. With the new possibilities of Felix Felicis occupying all thoughts of today's escape, he'd somehow completely forgotten about their agreement, or about the fact that she would be watching his every move.

Indecision gnawed at him: was it better to not say anything, take the whole bottle himself and hope his luck would include her escape? He was afraid he didn't know her well enough to still be wishing it when he was under the potion's influence. But he couldn't back out on their agreement now: it was simply too late and too risky to inform her of any change in plans, when the rest of the group was just a few paces away. Besides, he wasn't that cold a bastard.

Covering the bottle with his hand he lifted it to his mouth, careful to take precisely half its content. He then gave the potion to Narda, who widened her eyes at him. Take it, he mouthed. Her lips firmed a moment before she quickly knocked back the other half.

A sense of utter contentment came over Harry then. Narda send him a questioning look but he shook his head: now was not the time to escape. After a moment, Narda conceded with a solemn nod.

"Crachatan was a powerful wizard from this city, although his country of origin is unknown," Watanabe was saying in a loud voice at the front. "He is famous for stopping the Fourth Latin-Germanic wizarding war, by persuading both powers to cease the fighting long enough to come for talks in neutral territory. He's been known to have said: 'Let both parties at least fight out their grievances verbally, before there is no more Europe to remember them.'"

Harry noticed that the trees were slowly thinning. Soon they had left the forest behind, with only bare earth under their feet and the occasional weed.

"At the time both armies were equals in power and suffering heavy damages," Watanabe went on. "As Switzerland had been an old friend of both parties since the time when the first quills were put on paper, both the Latin and Germanic people decided to humour Crachatan."

The horizon was now an endless plain of barren earth, as if they had arrived in a desert. Something was distorting the air in the distance. Gradually, Harry saw the contours of a rounded building taking shape. Small parts of it came into being everywhere to form pieces of the structure, like a jigsaw puzzle in progress.

"So it came to be that representatives of both enemy territories met here in this city. Crachatan managed to seat them around one table, although there was nothing to indicate any reconciliation. The decisive move of the war came when on the second day, Crachatan invited both representatives for a tour of the Emperor's palace along with a walk through the Court Gardens. He had appointed himself as a chaperone for the occasion. It has been said that, although both representatives remained stiff-lipped throughout the tour during the walk in the Gardens, which took seventeen minutes and thirty-four seconds, their moods thawed. This walk would finally lead to both parties signing a peace treaty, with Crachatan as its witness."

As they neared to a distance of some 100 meters, the puzzle of the building was finally complete. It was a solid glass structure, rounded on all sides except were it touched the ground, though the
roof appeared flat, not dome-shape. They came to the rounded entrance gate, which held sliding doors. Harry saw that the transparent glass obscured nothing of its inner workings: left and right evenly spaced offices stretched out, their occupants busily at work.

The inner-walls were made of a dark wood which, as they walked inside, obscured the view of the offices. They came to a sun-soaked, eye-shaped atrium with two corridors leading off it. Foliage reached towards the roof on both sides of the visitors desk, obviously content in the greenhouse-like environment. Watanabe conferred a minute with the wizard behind the desk, then led the way up the left corridor. It ended in a pair of lifts. He eyed the size of the group. "We'll take both lifts. First floor, everyone." Watanabe gestured for Harry to accompany him into one. Narda followed along with most of the Slytherins.

The sight that met them on the first floor was quite impressive: the wooden cubicles were absent here, giving them an unobstructed cross-sectioning view of the building's huge circular size. Four long conference tables divided the vast space like the four points of a compass. Comfortable furniture was randomly scattered along the all-round windows with views on the bare earth below.

A second layer of rounded walls in the centre held the only partitioned section of the floor. The diameter of the central chamber was about a fifth of the building's. It held a rounded table of dark-wood, large enough to seat about forty to fifty people. It was surrounded by the visitors' section, which was three rows deep with chairs.

"It is strictly forbidden to use magic on this level of the building. Believe me, you do not want to know the consequences," Watanabe said darkly. They walked through one of the two open entrances and along with the class, Watanabe settled into the visitors stands.

The pleasant buzz inside Harry's head told him to take a chair in the back alongside an aisle. Narda chose precisely such a spot, apparently thinking the same thing. Harry sat down behind her. Only a few other visitors trickled in as they waited for the delegation to arrive. Fifteen minutes later, wizards and witches in black robes with conspicuous red bands decorating their sleeves walked inside in groups of four and fives. All of them were middle-aged or older.

One white-haired wizard had a dark-blue band alongside the red one. Watanabe, seated between Smith and the East-European boy, explained: "The red bands on their robes stand for the red line which is drawn along the table." Now that Harry looked more closely, he saw a red line making a circle of paint on the table's surface. The line began about an arms' length in width from each seated wizard or witch. With a ritualistic-looking gesture, every member reached out a hand to place his or her wand behind the red line after they sat down.

"This is the red line of disarmament, beyond which each member must place their wands. The line symbolises the peaceful nature of the talks. It also prevents any verbal escalation from becoming magical. There is a shield in place to prevent the members from reaching for their wands when Council is in session. The wizard with a second blue band is the Supreme Mugwump, who leads the session."

The last wizard took his place along the round table and Watanabe fell silent. The supreme Mugwump stood and opened the meeting, affirming that all 37 member states of the Security Council were present. He continued in the same officious vein for a while before getting down to business. "We shall proceed with the first issue of this meeting: the situation of refugees in the United Kingdom."

His withered head peered a moment at the notes on the raised desk at the head of the table, then glanced around. "Ambassador Romble of South-America would like to address the-" The Mugwump broke off suddenly. Everyone saw why: one of the wands behind the red line was
moving wildly as if executing some complicated dance on the table. Its owner scowled and raised his hands to show he didn't know what was going on either.

"Eet ies probably Durant again. Toujours ses jeux..." the owner of the wand grumbled. He reached over the red line for it, apparently forgetting about the security system. There was a metallic ringing as the invisible shield was activated. The man was flung from his seat by the backlash, skidding halfway over to the visitors stands.

Murmuring broke out over the assembled as the wand stopped its weird dancing: it was now smoking from its tip, frozen in midair. A few of the council members had risen from their seats, wary. Watanabe stepped over from the stands to say: "Mr. Seidel, if I may offer my service in this matter?"

The Mugwump hesitated. Harry knew what he was thinking: in order to lower the shield he had to adjourn the meeting. Watanabe took another step towards the table and held up a raised palm, ready to utter a wandless incantation.

Then the wand exploded in a white flash.

Three things happened in quick succession: the shield gave off another ringing sound, longer than the first; a high-pitched alarm sounded; then both entrances to the glass chamber filled with blue-robed wizards, storming in with their wands raised.

Red streaks from two different directions caught Watanabe completely by surprise. The two Stunners hit him simultaneously and he fell in an awkward heap. Around Harry the students were coming to their feet. Some had their wands out but no one dared to cast anything.

Two of the blue guards hurried over to their section and bustled them off to the exit. "Go," one of them said gruffly. "Take the lift and wait outside the building."

Harry had a sudden urge to do exactly as the man suggested. He and Narda were the first to take a lift down. As they passed through the ground floor corridor, they both knew not to hurry. In minutes they were outside. Harry estimated the others were taking the elevator right about now. He caught Narda's eyes, who nodded to his unspoken question. Simultaneously they broke out in a run towards the direction of the sun.

The potion in his system assured Harry that he was on the right track: the brightness of the sunlight would be blinding to the guards on the first floor, and no one on the ground floor would find their running remarkable. Even though he felt confident, it was still a relieve to see the first trees spring up around them. Narda was outrunning him, so he focused on making miles. In no more than ten minutes they reached the hill. Looking down Harry saw this part of the mountain was dappled with quaint white-painted houses.

They should split up, he thought just as Narda said: "Let's separate."

"Yes," Harry said, and gave her a quick hug. "Be careful. I'll try to find you when I can."

"You too," she said with worry in her eyes, then skipped downwards along the incline. Harry ran a hundred paces before descending as well. He crossed past houses and small footpaths that dug into the mountain at regular intervals.

At some point his chest had begun to feel tight. He touched a hand to it, wondering whether that was supposed to happen now. Harry stumbled over a rock in surprise when a light burning seeped into his scar. His momentum made him loose his balance and he tumbled downwards. Luckily
there was a house right in his path to stop him from falling further. As he slammed into it, he felt the impact deep in his bones. He waited to catch his breath, then took to his feet.

Annoyingly, breathing was becoming difficult. His scar seared more fiercely and he coughed hard. He wished fiercely that it was just Voldemort being torturous with one of his servants again.

Pops of Apparation sounded. Harry, still coughing, looked around wildly but saw no movement among the trees. Thick cords suddenly wrapped themselves around his hands and feet. He fell on his back. The pine needles layering the forest floor cushioned the impact.

As he twisted his head to search for his attacker, his eyes met a horrible sight: Bellatrix Lestrange had come to stand over him, a void of blackness against the bright blue sky. She held him at wand point. Her expression was wilder than usual. Her knuckles were white, though her wand arm did not shake.

"I got Potter!" she shouted. She studied Harry's sprawled form, then her mouth formed a grizzly smile. Her voice took on a sing-song tone: "Wittle Potter is in a bit of trouble again…" She pushed back her sleeve, and moved her wand to touch it to the pulsing Dark Mark on her forearm.

To clarify: you may wonder why Harry wouldn't try to Apparate. He's never been outside of the United Kingdom, so that's the only place he can Apparate to. And since his Apparation lessons of last year hadn't been finished, 'risky' wouldn't begin to cover it.

I know the Muggle equivalent (United Nations) has a quarters in Genève, but I just didn't feel like having the both of them in the same city.

Review! I would love to hear your thoughts on this story: what do you like, what don't you like?
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

**Chapter warning:** suggestion of non-con slash in this chapter- no, there won't be any slash parings in this fic nor will there ever be, but that doesn't mean Harry won't be thrown around a bit (no, it's not Voldemort).

I'm aware that in canon, Voldemort forbids Muggle-borns from entering Hogwarts. However, in this AU Voldemort has put in place some sort of caste system, in which Muggle-borns live to serve those of the 'true blood'. Magical power and intelligence also play a role here aside from a witch or wizard's blood status, as was explained by Malfoy in chapter 10. Although blood purity is still the decisive factor here in deciding your fate.

A/N. Thank you for all the kind reviews!

Chapter 13

Harry stumbled through the dining hall doors as Bellatrix shoved him in the back. The huge wall to ceiling windows showed that dark clouds were crowding the skies. After the sweltering heat of the past week, there was thunder in the air.

He'd been kept in the Malfoy dungeon again, without food or water. It was probably the last vestiges of his twisted luck that made him have to wait just one day and night before the Dark Lord was back, and he was being escorted to Voldemort's manor, weakened but otherwise fine – Malfoy senior had been nowhere in sight, thank Merlin.

Voldemort stood next to the dinner table with his back to them, remaining unmoving at the click of the door closing. Harry's scar was quiet except for a dull pain behind his eyelids.

Bellatrix went to her knees. "My Lord, I bring you Potter."

"You have Lord Voldemort's gratitude, Bellatrix," Voldemort declared.

Harry thought he could see Voldemort's hands working on something. Bellatrix looked up from her crouched position. Harry heard her drawn-in breath. "My Lord, thank you," she said eagerly. He looked away from her excitement, disgusted.

"You may go," Voldemort said in a near-whisper.

"You may go," Voldemort said in a near-whisper.

"Certainly, my Lord." She stood, throwing Harry a last lopsided grin, which settled uncomfortably in his stomach. After the door closed silence took over, like a heavy perfume that spread and tainted the air.

Voldemort was still intent on whatever it was he was holding. Curious, Harry edged closer, skirting the wall to see around the Dark Lord's broad-robed shoulders. As he drew level with the man's right side, the long table now between them, he noticed Voldemort's left hand held a blood-stained wand; his right hand, covered completely in freshly gleaming blood, rubbed at the red colour with a
Harry felt a chill spread through him as he stared at the sight.

Voldemort stopped his polishing to inspect his work against the light from the windows. Harry wondered how he thought he'd get it clean with only a dry cloth.

The Dark Lord suddenly turned his head to watch him. He noticed Harry's gaze on the wand and his eyes turned back to the red stains still present, trailing the item through his fingers.

"I usually try to avoid that," he remarked.

And the stare was back. After a moment, his bloody right hand went into his robes to pull out a second wand. He held it up between two fingers, leaving red fingerprints against the pale wood. "Yours works like a charm."

Harry's stomach knotted at the sight of his beloved wand in the red claws. He took a step forwards before stilling himself forcefully.

Voldemort smiled at this, holding both wands loosely. He then tapped Harry's wand to his own, which immediately reverted back to its former pale wooden colour.

"Better suited to murder than torture, though," Voldemort continued airily.

"What?" Harry burst out. "You used my wand for... for killing?!" One of his hands grasped at the back of a nearby chair to keep himself from trying to snatch it from him, nails sinking into the soft leather. His scar woke up to a burning pain.

"It is quite rare to find a spare nearly as compatible as one's original wand. Many don't bother getting one."

Voldemort flicked his wrist and Harry was thrown backwards over the table in a burst of pressure, pulled towards the man standing at the other end of the table. His head and back skidding over the wood painfully, his arms flaying to find something to grasp. He came to a stop close to Voldemort, who looked down on his splayed form with hard eyes.

Then an icy feeling spread through his limbs, and they became unmoving at his sides. Harry had never felt more vulnerable as he did then.

His eyes appeared to cut through him like sharp rubies. "I understand Severus better now," he murmured, as if contemplating. "You really are incapable of obeying the simplest of orders. Tortura."

The casual Parseltongue caused a thousand creatures – snakes – to start crawling over Harry's body. They were undeterred by his clothing and bit him everywhere, rupturing the skin with tiny teeth. Harry twisted and turned within the restrains of his frozen hands and feet. He gave a cry of surprise as one managed to bite his mouth. The little bastards hurt!

"Stop!" he hissed but they took no heed. A bunch of the invisible creatures started to work together to make a hole into his stomach, it felt like. Harry swatted at them, but they were simply too many to fight off.

Voldemort watched his movements with a detached gaze, as if studying the behaviour of a disgusting but rare specimen. Harry looked up to see his broad-sleeved arm lift.

The effect was like stirring an ants' nest, as the writhing of the snakes increased tenfold. They were now on a mission, slithering upwards over his neck, onto his cheeks and into his hair. He cried out
in terror as they reached his eyelids. He was sure that the ripping sensation on his ears was going to cause permanent damage. One slid into a nostril and he shrieked again, terrified. Would they decide that while his skin tasted good, his brains would taste even better?

Irrational with the pain then, Harry howled, slamming his head repeatedly against the wood.

All of a sudden the ghostly touches disappeared. His nose felt normal and uninhabited. He could move his limbs again.

Voldemort took hold of his collar and pulled him upright. When he let go Harry was held in an invisible grip of scourging dark magic. Harry sunk his teeth into his lips to keep from groaning in pain. He touched a hand to his stomach, which felt weird and sticky with blood.

Without warning Voldemort fisted a hand in Harry's locks and yanked hard. Harry hissed as his face was forced upwards.

The Dark Lord's ire was fearsome to watch up close. His casual manner did not waver, however. "Three layers of shirts, I see you came well prepared. Care to guess what usually happens to those who intentionally thwart me?"

The aura that oozed from the wizard bit into Harry's sore wounds like salt. Harry shook his head with the smallest of gestures, it was all that Voldemort's grip allowed. Their eyes met and he was drawn inwards, pulled into the narrowed pupils. What he saw there made his mental presence recoil. But Voldemort held his mind in a ruthless grip, forcing him to keep watching.

He was looking down from a high vantage point. He saw himself, nailed against a dungeon wall, skin lacerated, right hand cut off, two large hollows where his eyes had been torn out of their sockets, making his face appear skull-like. There was a bloody gash between his legs that ran up to his navel. Every breath appeared to be an agonizing exertion.

After the horrid scene had extended to the point where Harry could have counted the number of gashes in his skin, Voldemort released him. Harry swallowed against the dryness in his throat. He hurt everywhere. He bowed his head, not wanting to see that awful face.

"It would be quite… *unbecoming* a symbol of the light."

Harry nodded, absent-mindedly studying his layers of shredded shirts, the bitten and bleeding skin underneath. His thoughts were a panicky storm, numbing him.

"I have been very lenient with you, Harry. My patience has run out," Voldemort whispered.

The silence stretched wide in the large dining hall. Harry lifted his head, imagining the other man's wand already in the air, imagining his death. But Voldemort didn't move. The grip on Harry's head tightened.

"Lucius' earlier treatment of you clearly hasn't made the right impression." Harry silently disagreed - the sound of the man's name was enough to make his back twinge with remembered pain.

With a gesture of the Dark Lord's blood-crusted hand, a side door opened. The sound of footsteps could be heard, a slap of skin on stone. Harry tried to turn his head and Voldemort let him. He had to close his eyes for a moment at the sight before him.

It was Narda. She had been thrown on the floor by Lucius. She was naked up the waist, her back completely lacerated and bleeding profusely. Malfoy came to stand at her side and knelt. His eyes widened fractionally as he took in the scene. But Harry couldn't spare a thought for him.
"Narda!" he said, tugging at Voldemort's grip to get to her. Voldemort released him and he nearly fell from the table in his haste. He crawled towards her, too weak to remain on his legs. She was hunched over on her knees, her hair blocking the sight of her bowed face. The long brown locks were stained dark at the ends.

"Narda?" he said softly. Narda looked up and Harry drew in a surprised breath. Her visage was blue and beaten, both her eyes blackened. Her gaze was unfocused. Without meaning to he glanced downwards, his eyes drawn to all the red, and saw that her breasts were bruised and bleeding.

Harry scrambled to unsteady feet, fury giving him strength – and launched himself at Malfoy.

Lucius had the disadvantage of being on his knees with his head still bowed. He was taken completely by surprise. He fell over on his back, wand clattering to the floor as Harry slammed against him.

Harry got in a weak blow before deciding that with the strength he had, his windpipe would be a better choice. Malfoy responded by yanking at the bloody shreds of Harry's shirts to pull him forward and off balance, then reversed their positions, rolling on top of him. After a beat his wand was at Harry's temple.

"Release me," he said hoarsely. His wand jabbed hard into Harry's cheek. Harry only growled and squeezed harder in response. Malfoy muttered something under his breath. Harry's grip slipped and his arms slammed over his head. He tugged at them but they remained stuck to the floor.

The whole exchange hadn't taken more than ten seconds. Malfoy was straddling him, crushing the wounds painfully. He then shifted his hips and Harry froze, his thoughts melting into a pool of silence. A strange sound left Harry's throat then. It reached his ears as if from far away.

"Go, Lucius." The voice said coldly.

Malfoy straightened and pushed away from Harry's stretched out form. He looked not at all like the composed head of the Malfoy family then, his hair in disarray around his face. He gave a short bow and croaked out through his bruised windpipe: "Of course, my Lord."

The doors closed. Harry focused on the blood roaring in his ears.

"Crucio," Voldemort said – but it was Narda who shrieked. Harry pushed himself upright with an immense effort.

"You see Harry," Voldemort went on conversationally, "Something that's apparently still difficult for you to grasp, is the fact that your disobedience affects others as well. Take Ms. Montbelliard for example. I reward my loyal servants."

Harry drew in a deep breath. He had been wrong earlier. This was what it felt like to be helpless. He could only observe, hands balled into fists on his knees, while Narda's shrieks became higher as she twitched in the confines of her body.

"Do I have to start picking off all your friends one by one, before you'll listen?" Voldemort sounded like he honestly wanted to know the answer.

"Stop," Harry whispered, then louder to be heard over the noise: "Stop it!"

Voldemort's eyes turned his way for a second, then back to his victim. The sharp smell of urine filtered over towards them. Narda was now under the curse for at least two minutes. Harry knew that her sanity would slip away any moment.
He spread his hands in surrender. "I understand, okay? I'm not allowed to escape or others will die. I get it!"

Voldemort continued as if he hadn't heard, hissing now: "This is what happens when you disobey me."

Harry, quite desperate now, yelled above the now inhuman noise: "Stop, please!"

Voldemort considered him for a moment. The shrieking stopped. Narda was still jerking slightly, as if held under an electric current.

Harry felt Voldemort's weighted gaze by the prickling of his scar. "I shall spare her, this once. Remember that Lord Voldemort is merciful."

The statement echoed ominously in the heavy silence. The Dark Lord snapped his fingers and Tadders appeared. "Take her back to her parents," he ordered.

Tadders bowed and clasped one of Narda's twitching arms, before the both of them disappeared.

Voldemort tsked. "Harry, Harry. What am I going to do with you?" But the coldness in his tone was gone.

Harry clasped his trembling hands against himself, remaining silent. He was reeling from the fact that against all odds, Narda was going to live.

Voldemort murmured something and Harry flinched. Then he saw the bite wounds on his arms shrink and close, leaving behind only irritated, reddened skin. The searing pain of his wounds started to dull to a throb.

Voldemort had moved to take a seat at the window-side of the table and gestured to the one next to him. Harry forced his feet to close the distance and hoped he held all emotion off his face.

Although Snape's betrayal had been a low blow, his hatred for his arch-nemesis was still greater. It was sharper and fresher than the simmering loathing he felt for the Potion's Master.

He hissed as he lowered himself into the seat. He bit his lip forcefully to still his reaction. The snakes had also managed to attack him down there, he realised. It seared and burned. Voldemort had probably been deliberately sloppy in his healing.

"I need something from you, Harry." Voldemort studied him intently. "You see, I've been meaning to get back dear Bella's rightful Black family estate, but apparently it had completely disappeared off the map – until I realised it had been turned into the Order's nest, courtesy of one Sirius Black. Being mercifully dead, he wouldn't have left it to you, has he? How… convenient."

Harry's hands twitched in anger at Voldemort's casual mention of Sirius. His mouth became dry with fear. He couldn't give up the location of the Order's Headquarters!

"Answer me, Harry." Voldemort's tone was light but the threat was clear.

"He left it to Remus Lupin," he said. He squeezed his eyes shut then at the knifing pain of Voldemort's displeasure.

"Don't lie to me."

Harry cradled his forehead and wondered how long he could hold this out. Voldemort took his silence for admission, apparently (he really needed lessons in acting):
"Then you will invite me in, won't you?"

Harry's hands became clammy with sweat. It was all good and well that Dumbledore was the Secret Keeper, but if the owner of the Most Ancient House of Black were to invite the Dark Lord in... Harry swallowed, met the narrowed pupils. "I can't," he said in a desperate tone.

He could have hit himself: since when did a simple refusal hold the man off?

"Summon the house elf." Voldemort's eyes had narrowed dangerously.

Harry shook his head, denying the situation. Pain flashed across his left cheek and he realised he'd been slapped.

"Summon him, now," Voldemort growled in a low tone.

Harry squared his jaw. "No."

One round of torture, coming up.

Another slap, so hard that it threw his face to the side.

"I won't be asking again, Potter," Voldemort said softly. "Your choices are easy. The deaths of your friends, or a few uncertain ones?"

Harry closed his eyes. He should have seen that one coming. It infuriated him that Voldemort was right. If Death Eaters were to barge in on the Order, they would be met by qualified wizards and witches, all of whom knew what they were fighting against. The Order would stand their own. It was the risk of war they were willing to take.

On the other hand, he could let Voldemort kill his friends at Hogwarts or in their homes like pigs for slaughter.

That was no choice at all, really.

"Alright," he whispered. The corner of the Dark Lord's mouth twitched and a wave of foreign pleasure tingled over his scar. Harry scowled, rubbing it vigorously. "Would you mind not doing that?" he exclaimed, forgetting himself for a moment. But Voldemort's only reaction was to curl his lips further. And the buzz in his head increased.

Harry straightened and yelled: "Kreacher!"

Kreacher appeared in a bundle of ragged cloths, bowing low. "Kreacher is here at your master's service," he croaked. He continued to mutter under his breath: "A master who is unworthy of my mistress house, yes he is, a mudblood, we do not want him- " Then he caught sight of the Dark Lord seated next to Harry and went abruptly silent, blinking his big eyes repeatedly.

"Kreacher," Harry said to get his attention. The elf turned slowly towards him. "This is... the Dark Lord. You will welcome him into the house-"

"- and he shall be your new master," Voldemort finished smoothly. Harry scowled at him. "And he shall be your new master," Harry repeated.

Kreacher's eyes widened impossibly and he started to tremble all over his tiny frame. Paper and pencil appeared before Harry. After a moment's hesitation, he wrote down the address of 12 Grimmauld Place. The Dark Lord snatched it up to read, then stood.
"Now take the Dark Lord with you, Kreacher." Harry ordered. The elf was wringing his piece of clothing nervously. He probably knew about the man's reputation. "The Dark Lord shall not harm you, I promise," Harry assured him. This time it was Voldemort's turn to sneer.

"If the elf obeys, that is."

Kreacher gave a jerk of his head before touching the back of Voldemort's hand with one finger. Then they were gone.

Harry wrecked his brain for how to let the Order know the Headquarters had been breached. He couldn't come up with anything that didn't need a wand. He put his head in his hands and stared at the pattern of dark wood, feeling sick with himself. Already he ached for the home that would never be the same after this.

Time's passage proved fickle. Harry didn't know whether it was just a few minutes or half an hour later that Voldemort returned. Harry gasped as his head felt on fire again. He'd come to hate these encounters with the Dark Lord for just that reason alone: it was as painful as it was dizzying, to constantly be swept up in Voldemort's megalomaniac moods.

He stood as the Dark Lord strode up to him, and masked his own confusion. He thought Voldemort would be pleased, at the least. Maybe the Order had managed to kill all his servants?

"How did it go?" Harry asked, his stomach in knots, then wondered at his own sanity.

Voldemort's anger was right below the surface as he watched Harry for a moment. No facial muscles moved, but Harry's scar was a precise radar.

"Only the Fletcher scum was present. But I have patience."

Harry tried not to show anything of his relieve. He had the weirdest feeling that the sheer amount of annoyance he was sensing from Voldemort came from something else than the scarcity of occupants.

"You shall be enrolled for your seventh year at Hogwarts," Voldemort stated suddenly.


"Manners, Potter," Voldemort said slowly, pushing a warning pain through the link.

Harry winced and bit his lip, before trying again: "Why, my Lord?" It took something out of him to say it; perhaps it was his liver or spleen, but the pain in his scar dissipated.

Voldemort grasped his chin – Harry was starting to wonder if Voldemort had some kind of obsession with faces in general, or just his.

"I want you to become familiar with the workings of my new empire," Voldemort hissed, sounding almost like he was speaking in Parseltongue. "You are an example of the Light's submission for those rebels who still think to oppose me. And you will work hard. Hogwarts does not allow mediocrity any longer." A nail pressed into Harry's chin.

Harry snapped his mouth closed. He knew it couldn't be what it appeared, when dealing with Slytherins. "Will- will I be allowed to see my friends? My Lord?"
Voldemort tilted his head a fraction. "You may, provided that you do not disappoint me."

Something suspiciously like hope started to bubble in Harry's chest, threatening to spill to the corners of his mouth if he didn't watch out. He was going to see Ron and Hermione again!

"Your behaviour shall be exemplary from now on." His nails dug harder, drawing blood. "I have grown tired of your cheek. If it is not, I shall be pleased to rid the world of one of your mediocre friends. We can start with that Mudblood of yours."

His heart hammered fast against his ribcage. The bubble inside him dented a bit. "I understand, sir." He gritted his teeth at the painful rebuke in his scar. "My Lord," he corrected.

Was it possible, he wondered, to cut the cursed thing out and still keep his scull intact?

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Watanabe stood at the doorway into the library. Harry hurriedly closed the tome he'd been reading and walked over. The man appeared unharmed, he noticed with relief; that turned into something else, something that gnawed at his lungs when he saw the cold look in the wizard's eyes.

Watanabe didn't bow or greet him otherwise. He silently raised his arm to hold something out to him.

Harry glanced down and recognised his own holly wand, which was being offered handle-first. It still held Voldemort's red fingerprints from earlier. Harry gaped at it. He chanced a glance upwards, but Watanabe's expression remained edged in stone. He took the wand carefully, as if it were made of glass. Warmth spread up his arm as the wand immediately recognised his magic, like an old friend. Harry closed his eyes a moment to savour the feeling. It felt a bit off, though. He'd wonder about that later.

Watanabe spoke, his tone businesslike: "You can hardly continue your classes without a proper wand. However, if this leaves school grounds, I shall immediately know about it." The tall wizard held on to the wood a moment longer. He raised an eyebrow. "Do not make him regret this."

"No sir, I won't," Harry stumbled over the words in his surprise.

Watanabe finally relented his hold and took a step back. Only his eyes seemed to be alive. Harry felt his insides crawl at the disappointment he saw there.

"Sir, are you-"

"He has been remarkably lenient with you." Watanabe said, cutting off Harry's compassionate query. Then he Disapparated, leaving Harry to stare at the empty doorway for a long time.

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Harry decided he'd better use his time before Hogwarts started well. He figured this year just might turn out a little tougher than the others. And so he reacquainted himself with his wand. After all, he was now of age in the wizarding world: he could utter all sorts of spells and not be caught out. This gave him a wonderful feeling of freedom.

Aside from studying, he now spend the largest part of his days practicing the spells they had been going over in Snape's training sessions. Hours on end he threw hexes and curses at the boundary wall, the sun at his back, revelling in the feeling. He was surprised that his shields had only grown stronger during his wand's absence.
His feverish dedication of course had nothing to do with the fact that he wanted to stop thinking in
general, about anything, be it Narda's condition, or Watanabe's flat words, or the punishment he
had received for letting his ward escape. Though he found no clues as to what it had been, this in
itself was more worrisome than any visibly evidence.

After all he was well aware by now of Voldemort's tactics of invisible torture: it still hurt when he
sat, in fact the pain there had become worse over the last few days. Bathroom breaks were a special
kind of torture now. He worried about the wounds having possibly been infected.

He'd tried hunting the ground floor rooms, with their weird odds and ends, for lotions, or even a
secret potion's laboratory and stores, but found nothing. The toiletries in the bathroom adjacent to
his bedchamber were the closest thing there was to any kind of personal comfort, but he doubted
that soap was going to help.

And now, a week later, Watanabe had yet to show up to escort Harry to his next lesson. Harry
caught himself worrying about the man.

He must now be missing out on the remainder of his summer classes, but there was no one around
to inform him if he did. The guilt he felt was awfully familiar. Whatever the situation, Harry could
always be trusted to get the wizards and witches looking out for him in all kinds of trouble

The slightly weird feeling that his wand gave off distracted him from his dark musings. It must be
its interim owner, Harry considered. He shuddered to think what results a Priori Incantatem would
produce. He hated the fact that Voldemort had meddled with it, actually killed with Harry's own
wand. It was a deep-rooted betrayal and it wouldn't go away. He found that no matter how many
spells he produced with his wand, the strangeness of it never left from his wand arm. It was a
disorientating feeling, like the one you got when you thought you had reached the end of a stairs,
only to stumble when there was still a step to go.

His theory was confirmed by the ease with which all manner of dark spells leaped from it. Lighter
spells, in contrast, now took more of his energy and concentration than before. This annoyed him
even further. When he used a mending charm on his spell-singed robes, it didn't work as
impeccable as it used to, leaving small tears in the fabric. Heating up his old tea pot left the pot
cracked and the tea cold. He had decided to ask Tadders for a fresh pot instead.

As the days of August slid by, Nagini sought him out more and more. She was probably bored
without her master around. She had forgiven him his earlier slight, apparently, and would come up
to him at all hours of the day to ask weird and disturbing questions ("Are you my master's son? You
smell like him") or to tell him about something she discovered ("A nest of chickens has hatched
near the forest's border. My belly is very full now. Go and sit in front of the fire so I can rest on
your soft limbs."), while Harry would explain to her the workings of the spell he was practicing, if
she asked.

She comforted him, in a strange way.

On September first, which to all appearances was turning out exactly like any other day (he was
keeping track by counting off the days from their trip to Switzerland), Tadders appeared before
him. He was in the middle of studying a bronze, worn wizarding coin in what he'd come to call 'the
coin room.'

"Tadders is here to bring Mr. Potter to Hogwarts, sir."

"What, right now?" Harry asked, carefully placing the coin back into its blue silk holder.
Tadders nodded, cloth-covered hands clasped in front of him. "Tadders is having your belongings ready in your dormitory."

Harry blinked. Now that he was finally allowed to be rid of this place, it all seemed to happen very fast. "Okay, thanks."

"Mr. Potter is being welcome, certainly," the elf murmured, head bowed shyly. Then he stretched out a black-clad finger and in just a wink of a second, they stood right next to a huge four-poster.

Its sheets were green.

"Till we meet again, Mr. Potter." The elf bowed. Harry turned around and bowed his head as well. "Bye, Tadders."

The elf was gone and Harry slowly turned back to study the bed. It had silver linings. Glancing around, he saw that all six beds had green and silver sheets, the walls having stretched to accommodate the extra inhabitant. Six, five Slytherins and him.

Tadders must have gotten him confused for a Slytherin.

"Tadders!"

The elf was back immediately. "Yes, Mr. Potter?"

"Sorry to bother you again, but I've got the wrong dormitory. I would like you to move my suitcase to Gryffindor Tower. Do you know where that is?"

Tadders tilted his head. "This is being the correct dormitory, sir, as ordered."

"By Vol- by him?" Harry stumbled – he was determined to keep to Professor McGonagall's advice not to use the name.

"Of course. Does Mr. Potter wish to confer with Master?"

Harry swallowed. "No, that's alright. Thanks, Tadders."

After the elf had left he led himself sag onto the covers. He would be staying in Slytherin. That must mean that Slytherin would be his new House from now on, for his entire seventh year. He rubbed tiredly at his hair, then his eyes. That… was precisely the sort of thing that the Dark Lord would come up with.

A year of living with Malfoy, of sleeping next to Malfoy.

He contemplated asking Dobby to help him move. But if Voldemort found out… He'd rather keep on the wizard's good side as much as possible, if there even was such a thing, and this was not a battle worth gambling Hermione's life over.

He sighed, sinking backwards into the soft cushions. Unbelievable. Did Voldemort want to drive him insane? Did he want to punish Harry in a more permanent fashion for his attempted escapes?

Likely. Then again it was just as likely that he'd had this in mind all along. Of course Harry Potter wasn't going to be allowed to live in rebellious Gryffindor, House of the traitors. Where he could stage a rebellion, where many would be eager to assist him with another escape attempt. Where Ron and Hermione might not even be allowed to live anymore. He slammed his head back once. Ugh, he was so naïve.
He had to come to grips with the new situation, and fast, before the Slytherins would be storming in and sniffing him for weaknesses. This delusion that he would somehow get his old life back was never going to happen. Hermione would never be considered a full citizen again, Ron would always be a blood traitor. And he would always be the Boy-Who-Lived-To-Fail.

Harry had gone up to the Gryffindor common room to wait for his classmates. The Fat Lady, though glad to see him, refused to budge. He didn't mind, perfectly content to wait on the floor in front of her portrait. He asked her how things were going in Hogwarts but she shook her head, finally demanding he be silent.

Harry had wanted to call on Dobby, starved to see a friendly face, but held himself back at the last moment: he didn't know whether Dobby was at Hogwarts or somewhere more sinister. Or if the elf was being watched, or he himself for that matter. He needed to get a lay of the land first. And to do that he needed Ron and Hermione.

It had been the trio's tradition, along with that of most other students, to wait for each other in the common room before they descended together for the beginning of the year feast in the Great Hall. Although Harry didn't know if they were allowed to be at Hogwarts at all this year, he couldn't prevent his heart from beating fast against his ribcage in anticipation.

Murmurings at the far end of the landing indicated the arrival of the first students. Harry stood and hid behind the statue next to the portrait of a fierce lion standing on his hind feet.

Gryffindors from all years (except of course the firsties, who'd be crossing the lake in boats) came up to clog the space in front of the portrait. One of the newly appointed fifth-year prefects greeted the portrait and uttered the password (dragon wings). Gradually the common room filled. Squeals of laughter could be heard through the open portrait hole.

Peering through the lion's limbs, Harry was glad to see so many of them and in such high spirits. He estimated that at least most of the Gryffindors had been allowed back for another year.

Then, unmistakably, a familiar redhead.

"Hey! Ron!" he whispered harshly as Ron was about to climb through. Ron backed off. Seamus behind him frowned in confusion.

"I forgot something, you go ahead," Ron told him, waiting until Seamus had gone inside. He looked around for any intruders but he and Seamus had taken up the rear, and they were alone. He then turned towards were Harry stood and a smile broke over his face. "Harry," he whispered back.

Harry for his part felt his mouth fall open in shock. He was drawn in a fierce hug before he could get his bearings.

He closed his eyes and held tight to his friend, while the much taller Ron cupped his head against his collarbone. Ron shook against him, drawing in shaky breaths.

Harry drew back to study him at arm's length. Up close Ron was a real sight to behold: his face, deeply tanned by the sun, was covered with bruises of various shades and colours. His cloths were tattered: the sleeve of his right arm had been completely ripped off, revealing a muscled arm that was covered in large scar tissue. A knife-like cut ran all the way from his cheek into his hairline, barely healed.

"Ron, what have they done to you?" Harry exclaimed.
Ron shook his head, tears still gliding over his cheeks. "Not here. Come, I know a place."

He proceeded to walk the length of the seventh floor landing, glancing over his shoulder. Harry followed. They turned the corner, ignoring the stairs downwards. Ron suddenly went up to an inconspicuous bit of the huge tapestry that covered one wall of the next corridor. This part led to the Headmaster's Office and was seldom used by the students.

Ron trailed his fingers over the fabric, then stopped and stretched his little finger and thumb in a practiced move. The tapestry fell back to reveal a hidden corridor beyond.

"Nice," Harry commented before following him inside. It was completely dark, but Ron was already moving.

"Lumos," he said and a chandelier sprung to life above their heads, illuminating the bare surroundings. It turned out that what he thought was a corridor was actually a bare, square room.

Ron tilted two rickety chairs that stood in the corner into the circle of light and took a seat. Harry carefully lowered himself into the other one.

"I imagine I know Hogwarts better than even you, now," Ron said with a wink.

"So you've been here all this time?"

"Yeah," Ron said, studying the walls. "Yeah, I've been here." His tone was off.

Harry touched his arm to get his attention. "Ron, I'm so sorry."

Ron ducked his head. "Yeah, me too."

"How are you?"

"I'm- I'm good. We're, well we're trying to get used to it, but... Everyone is a bit touchy now. Mom is taking it real hard. She's grown a bit… fanatical with everything. Dad's trying to cheer her up."

He raised his eyes to meet Harry's. "But what about you, Harry? You guys were… " he trailed off.

Harry closed his eyes a moment, his expression crumbling with pain. "I- I miss her," he confessed. After a long moment he managed to compose himself. Ron had his face buried in his hands. They both sat silently for a while, sunk deep into their own thoughts.

"What happened?" Harry said to distract himself.

Ron straightened. "Oh you mean this?" He gestured with a hand over his face. "That's me being stupid, I guess."

Harry looked at him pointedly when nothing more was forthcoming. Ron stared back with a haunted expression.

"It's Hermione. I've been trying to find her - they're keeping her somewhere, I don't know where." Ron's eyes were round and fearful as he went on in a rambling manner. "I saw her, Harry, a week ago. Some scum Death Eater was escorting her, here at Hogwarts. I tried to talk to her, to find out what they were doing to her but- "

"Hang on a second," Harry interrupted. "Let's start at the beginning. After the battle, what did you do?"
Ron chuckled hollowly at that, startling him. "Nothing, we did nothing. We were allowed to just continue our studies like it was any other day."

Harry felt relief flood through him. "So he didn't capture anyone?"

"Oh You-Know-Who took the teachers alright, for questioning. You probably know that Dumbledore escaped?" Harry nodded. Ron stared at him grimly and continued: "They were tortured for information on his plans and whereabouts. Or at least that’s our theory, since not all the teachers who had survived the battle got back and Professor Flitwick was in the hospital wing for weeks. He’s fine now," he added at Harry's worried look. "Professor Sprout was killed in the battle, though."

Harry nodded that he knew this.

"Everything was chaos. Parents came to take their children home. The Slytherins strolled around like they owned the place. The school closed not long after that, because the staff had decided there were not going to be any exams due to circumstances."

Harry's body was strung with tension. Finally he would know what had happened over the summer.

"Me and Hermione, we thought that we'd be killed or punished because of you, you know. So we were prepared to run for it, but we were left completely alone, like all the others. It was strange. Guess he got his most important prize already, huh?"

"I guess." Harry didn't think it a good time to point out that their lives were used as leverage for Harry's good behaviour.

Ron scraped his throat. "The day after I got home, we held G- Ginny's funeral. We kept it small. We were all there, Bill, Fleur, Charlie…"

"Percy?"

Ron set his jaw at hearing the name. "Yeah, him too. He didn't say anything though. He didn't allow mum to give him a hug, the git. He just patted her shoulder. Other than that he was silent. He was gone right after."

Harry took that in, trying and failing to understand how anyone could shun their family.

"It all got a little tense from there. Everyone was jumpy, but we didn't want to get back to what we were doing and leave mom and dad alone. But mom was insistent, she said she'd expected us to all get jailed or worse, and that we're lucky we're not being targeted by the Death Eaters. And so she would be fine knowing that, she said. So we all moved out again."

"I went to Hogwarts because I wanted to stay with Hermione," Ron went on. "She couldn't go home. The Muggle-borns are not allowed to leave for the holidays, you see. It's because of the new bullshit laws. They state that Muggle-borns are to be separated from their parents. So, for the whole summer they were set to work here. Well, me too because I decided to stay."

Ron shrugged then, which for some reason made Harry's chest ache. "It wasn't all that bad. It was just maintenance to the castle, the grounds, the greenhouses now that Professor Sprout is gone. Some of us were instructed to work on potions for the potions stores and the infirmary. Sometimes Snape was there, Hermione told me." He gave a light shudder. "Glad I didn't take Advanced Potions."

"The Carrows were giving out the orders. They were… harsh, in the beginning, but we found that
if we did our work they kept off your back. We all got to stay in our dormitories. So it was me and Dean in ours. After a few weeks though, some of us got separated to go and work somewhere else. Hermione, Justin, a few from the other Houses. All upper years."

"Wait, Dean is a half-blood, right?"

"Yes, but he can't prove it. You know that his father left him at an early age? And he was a wizard."

"Right. Sorry, go on."

"As I was saying we were separated, and they never returned to their common rooms. Apparently they are being held somewhere else now."

Harry could see how Ron would go berserk at the news.

"That was about three months ago. So when I saw her again the week before, I asked her what was going on. The guard told me to shut up. Then she started crying and he shook her, he shook her real hard, Harry. That's when I punched him in the face. His retaliation was a bit heavier than I had estimated."

Harry snorted. Ron smiled. "Yeah, apparently he's some high-up hot-shot, and he didn't like that his nose was bleeding all over his precious pure-blood cloths."

Harry shifted self-consciously, hoping Ron didn't notice the gleaming stitches on his own robes. "Why haven't you asked someone to heal your bruises?"

"We're not allowed to have wands now."

"What? You mean they've taken all of your wands? Why?" Harry exclaimed, affronted.

"Well, there is this crappy new system of wand papers, something about needing to get a licence to practice spells... They were kind of vague about that."

"Oh that's right, I heard about that," Harry said, annoyed with himself. "You have to prove you can master a spell before you're allowed to use it. I guess because there's no one to test you on your magic, you're not allowed to use it at all for now. I expect you will get your wand back though, when classes start."

Ron's eyebrows had gone up towards his hairline. "Really? Where did you hear about that? For that matter, where have you been all this time? McGonagall told us you were safe and sound thank Merlin, but..." he trailed off with a frown.

Harry scrubbed at the back of his head, looking away from Ron's gaze to gather his thoughts.

"I've been locked up at his manor."

"Shit!" Ron burst out. "At You-Know-Who's? What did he do to you? Scratch that, why are you still alive again?"

Harry chuckled. "He hasn't been around much, fortunately. As to why I'm still breathing, well... I'm to be some kind of symbol of his victory, that's what he told me. So he showed me off to everyone important at some fancy ball thrown in his honour, about two months ago. I need to, what was it? Be an example of the Light's submission. And I've been attending a summer school for all the" – he made air-quotations marks with his fingers – "promising young witches and wizards' of our
generation at Hogwarts, and some graduates as well. We learned about the important changes that are taking place under the new administration."

Ron's face had wrinkled in distaste from Harry's words.

"I tried to escape, twice," he confided to Ron with a rakish grin. "I'll tell you the details later."

"Merlin's balls." Ron swallowed hard, eyes round. "What happened when you got caught?"

He thought of Narda and the grin slid off his face like melted butter. "I got punished," he whispered. "And someone else, the second time."

"Who?"

He really didn't want to go into that now. "I'll tell you later."

"Alright," Ron agreed quietly. Then a grin burst through. "So, both of us back at Hogwarts, how about that!"

It was an obvious attempt to change the subject, but Harry was grateful for it. "It's still hard to believe," he told Ron, shaking his head. "I kind of suspected they would allow me back, I guess. If I'm to represent the failure of the light, what better way to rub it in then to have me on display here at Hogwarts, right? But I didn't want to get my hopes up."

"Hey! You're not a failure, you're a survivor," Ron said firmly.

Harry heard an echo of Snape's words at Ron's remark. "I don't know, Ron."

"You don't know? Of course you are, we all are! And we're not going to just take this! Already there is an underground resistance going on. They're busy right now, making plans. The Order is-"

Harry hastily threw up his hands at the sudden dangerous turn of the conversation. "Ron, he has already Legilimised me once, a few weeks ago. He can do it again if he suspects something, or whenever the hell he feels like it. I don't think it's a good idea to tell me this, all things considered."

Ron clapped a hand over his mouth. "I, I didn't think…" to which Harry's response was a raised eyebrow which clearly said: no kidding.

His friend gave him a playful push at that, laughing. Then Harry jolted in his seat as Ron suddenly sprung up. "The Feast! We have to hurry." Ron wandlessly waved out the chandelier – Harry was going to have to ask him about that – then the both of them stormed out. They took the stairs downwards at a firm pace, encountering other stragglers along the way.

Portraits all around them greeted him warmly. It felt like he was home again. But Harry knew that things were different now. This wasn't like any other Hogwarts year. This was the first year of Voldemort's reign, and Harry had been kept alive to remind everyone of Voldemort's superiority. His presence here proved just how insignificant a threat he was to the power that Lord Voldemort wielded.

But Ron was right. He was not going to just take this hands down. Even if things were dangerous now, that had never stopped them before. This was a castle full of like-minded spirits, and most of them were repulsed by everything Voldemort stood for. They could use that.

Most importantly, he had his best friend back. And through some kind of divine miracle Harry was allowed to use his wand again. He twirled it happily for a moment, enjoying its warm feel. Next to
him Ron gave an appreciative noise, which got Harry to start in on the details of how he got it back.

They continued to chat warmly all the way down from Gryffindor Tower to the large double doors of the Great Hall.

Thanks for reading
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

I'm sorry this chapter took so long. My writing got delayed by vacation and real life, and also a couple of scenes took several re-writes before I was happy with them. Now I have more time on my hands, and I'll be starting on chapter 15 this week.

Thanks for waiting, and enjoy!

Chapter 14

Harry and Ron slipped through one of the side doors and hurried over to the Gryffindor table. A hush descended as he sat down next to Neville, who greeted him with a smile. The silence held for a moment before exited babble struck up. People pointed towards him, some even going so far as to stand to see him better.

He wondered what the rumour-mill was saying about him this time.

Neville grimaced in commiseration: "It's like the Chamber of Secrets all over again, huh?"

"Yeah, somehow I'm not surprised."

"Where is Hermione? Everyone else is here," Ron said with a frown, taking a seat across from Harry. Then his face broke into a grin as he looked over Harry's shoulder. "Hermione!"

"Hi Hermione," Neville said.

Her face was drawn and tired as she sat down to Harry's right. "Neville, good to see you." Her eyes found his. "Harry!" she exclaimed and gave him a hug, before studying him at arm's length. "Oh Harry, we've been so worried." Her eyes were suspiciously shiny.

Harry grinned back reassuringly. "I'm fine, 'Mione."

Hermione bit her lip. "We though Volde-"

"Don't say the name," Harry said hastily. "They keep track of who uses it."

"I wondered why you were calling him 'he' all the time," Ron remarked before his gaze slid back to Hermione.

Hermione's hand flew to her mouth as she took in the redhead's features. "What happened to you, Ron?"

Ron's ears reddened. "I'll tell you later."

Hermione's lips firmed at that. Then she turned to Harry. "So how have you been?"

"Fine." Harry ducked his head, just as reluctant to continue. He didn't want the whole of Gryffindor to know where he'd been staying for the summer.
Ron reached over the table to clasp Hermione's hand. "Later," he said again with a wry smile. Hermione wisely nodded.

Dinner suddenly sprang into existence, lacking the usual pronouncement from the Head Table.

They had missed the sorting, then. When was the last time he'd actually been around to see it? Harry thought with a twinge.

He took a look at the teachers sitting up front. There were many unfamiliar faces. Sibyl Trelawney was engaging professor McGonagall in what appeared to be a very one-sided conversation. Professor Flitwick was looking uncharacteristically grim. Snape was right in the centre sure enough, seated in the throne-like chair that used to be occupied by the Headmaster he had so thoroughly betrayed. Harry clenched his jaw at the sight, feeling his anger boil to the surface.

"So 'Mione, how are you? Where have you been?" Ron asked, distracting Harry from his vengeful thoughts.

"I'm- I've been fine." Hermione said in a soft tone. She gave a self-depreciating smile. "My hands are cramped though, from writing all summer."

At their puzzled glances she elaborated: "They had me do Muggle-born administration. I process the results of how each Muggle-born performs on the Ministry-issued magical tests."

Her gaze turned suddenly steely. "And where they will be working. If their scores are deemed sufficient, they're allowed to go back to their jobs, but most of them are forced to relocate. Just one of the zillion law changes since the beginning of summer."

"Relocate where?" Harry asked. Dean, sitting nearby, was watching them with slightly narrowed eyes. His face was as tanned as Ron's.

"Wherever they can be most useful to the pure-blood population. Or I should say," she said with a nod towards Ron, "the rich and influential pure-blood population."

"But wait a second, I saw that guy hit you," Ron said. "just a week ago. I thought you were... in trouble" he ended quietly.

Hermione was silent a moment, considering. "I noticed that most of them did not get successfully through the testing and I became suspicious of the criteria they used. I mean, I assumed they would honestly measure someone's competence in their area of expertise, right?" Her eyes flashed between Ron, Neville and Harry.

"But when they allowed me to sit in on a testing, I discovered it was all just the same old arrogant discrimination. Of course I should have realised immediately that it's all a cover, an excuse to get Muggle-borns away from influential positions." Her head shook slowly as she said this, as if she couldn't quite believe the turn of events.

Ron was quick to put a comforting palm over the back of her hand. She didn't seem to notice.

"Why do they bother showing up then, if that's the case?" Harry asked. Dean, sitting nearby, was watching them with slightly narrowed eyes. His face was as tanned as Ron's.

"Because otherwise they don't get their wand papers, and without them, they're not allowed to use a wand."

After a moment she straightened, as if shaking off a disturbing dream. Ron's hand drew quietly away.
"I saw you after, when they escorted me back. Oh Ron, is that how you got all those nasty cuts, from Landers? He's really dangerous, Ron. You shouldn't have punched him."

"I'll remember that next time someone hits you." Ron said sarcastically.

Harry snorted. After glaring some more, Ron's lips twitched. Then they were all grinning like nothing interesting had happened in the meantime, the sense of familiarity like a warm blanket.

Hermione however couldn't stay smiling for long. "It's awful. Thickness has set up this Muggle-born Registration Commission, whose goal it is to track down all Muggle-borns – that's how they all get their summons for the testing –"

"Who's Thickness?" Harry wanted to know.

"Pius Thickness, the new Minister of Magic? You didn't read the papers?"

"I didn't get them where I was." Voldemort probably got them wherever the man had actually been staying over the summer. Or perhaps he was a nocturnal creature, who only ever read the Evening Prophet.

Hermione's mouth turned down slightly. "Of course not, stupid of me. Well," she continued primly, "you haven't heard about the new laws then? Muggle-borns have to sever all their connections to the Muggle world: family, friends, homes… And that's on top of getting fired from their old jobs. Everyone below the Hogwarts age is transferred."

"Transferred where?" Harry asked.

To Zemers Institute, which is all I know of the place." Her shoulders were hunched and she was looking overall miserable.

Harry noticed from the corner of his eyes that most people had now moved on to other things, although he still got the occasional long look.

Ron asked, his mouth full of shepherd's pie: "Where have you been staying?"

"Here, actually, on the sixth floor by the upper terraces. I had to stay in my quarters. I managed to sneak down when I heard the students arrive." She pulled close a tray of green beans and began to heap some on her plate.

"You were here all this time?" Ron exclaimed, affronted.

"Yes, but I wasn't allowed to go anywhere. I tried, but all doors were locked and all the passages led back to the sixth floor."

"You must be looking forward to class even more than usual this year, then," Harry teased in an attempt to lighten the mood. Hermione frowned, however.

"I'll probably be missing at least some of them. The work is still piling on. Besides," she said with heavy sarcasm, "I first need to prove that I possess the required magical level."

"Well, no problem there," Harry with a grin.

Hermione angrily hit the table with her fork. "You guys don't get it, do you?" she fumed. "It doesn't matter how capable I am at spellwork, they'll judge me however they feel like!"

Harry, Ron and Neville, who was quietly watching the proceedings, all sat frozen in their seats,
Ron with his mouth hanging slightly open.

Hermione viciously stabbed a bean to her fork. "Of course you're all of the 'true' blood – no ambiguous wording there by the way Mr. Riddle – and won't have any problem getting into all of your classes."

Harry waved. "Hey! Half-blood here."

Hermione regarded him levelly. "Half-blood status is were the line is drawn of what is considered 'acceptable trueness of blood'," she said as if quoting a regulation, which she probably was. "Though," she went on, "I haven't a clue why you should be allowed back. Aside from the fact that we should all be dead anyway."

A sudden bang interrupted Hermione's dark words. Silence rang around them as everyone looked towards the front of the hall. The source of the noise was Snape, who had come to stand in front of the teacher's table, wand raised and smoking. He lowered it slowly.

The man's sharp eyes trailed over the four tables. He spoke: "As the Headmaster of Hogwarts, I welcome you to a new year. Now that we've all been sufficiently fed," – Harry hadn't finished half his plate – "I would like to take this opportunity to inform you of recent developments at this school that are relevant to your education.

"Firstly, I would like to welcome a few new teachers to our staff. I present to you Gaius Finch, who will be teaching the new class of Elemental Magic, which is optional for third year and above." He gestured towards a man sitting two places to the right of the headmaster's chair. There was a polite applause, which the man did not acknowledge in any way.

"He a cousin of Snape or something?" Ron whispered and Harry huffed a laugh.

The man looked positively bat-like. His long gleaming black hair, contrasting sharply with his pale pallor, was pulled back tightly, accentuating his high cheekbones and Roman nose. He even looked bored.

Snape went on. "I also welcome Alecto Carrow, who shall be teaching Muggle Studies, and her brother Amycus Carrow, who teaches Dark Arts to the first through fifth years." Alecto and Amycus both stood a moment to give bows.

Harry turned to see Hermione's whitened face. "Dark Arts," she echoed in a whisper. "He's not even trying to keep up appearances." He knew she wasn't talking about Snape.

"As well, I would like to welcome Nathalie Terrence, who will be teaching Herbology." Another smattering of applause as a tall witch sitting next to Flitwick and wearing an orange-striped hat smiled warmly.

"Secondly, there will be some changes to the way this school is run, which will take effect as of now." Snape went on in his customary drawl. He studied his audience for a moment, beetle-black eyes gliding over all four tables. "Hogwarts can pride itself on being the oldest magical school in Europe, with a rich legacy and numerous distinguished alumni throughout its existence.

"Especially in the case of such an age-old institution, we must be watchful not to become stagnant in our reverence for traditional values. Self-criticism is a vital part of staying relevant through changing times, and it is something that the Board of Governors in the past decades have been reluctant to do. In light of recent events, a re-evaluation of Hogwarts' educational policy was therefore deemed appropriate. As a result of this evaluation the Board has decided on a few
changes to the school's policy."

Harry noticed he was squeezing his fork rather hard, making it tremble. He relaxed his grip and focused back on Snape's words.

"This change concerns the system of House points, which has been abolished."

Outrageous murmurings broke out at this announcement. Harry heard loud whispers of "What?" "No way!" He kept his eyes on Snape, who naturally looked perfectly unmoved by the disturbance.

After a minute of this the hall gradually quieted. Another minute passed as everyone waited. Snape showed no sign of continuing, and people began to fidget.

"Yes," he said softly all of a sudden, fake sympathy dripping from his voice, "that must be a shock."

A lecturing tone entered his voice: "The system of House points, while encouraging House unity, is ad-hoc, arbitrary in nature and vague in its parameters. It lacks a consistent way to measure a student's abilities. In order for promising pupils to grow to the best of their abilities, unhindered by their less talented classmates, a system of Term Assignments has been put in place instead, which objectively measure a student's intelligence and magical prowess.

"Students with a total of three excellent Term scores this year will be rewarded with extra tutelage of their choosing in the next. For the current seventh years, this means a letter of recommendation and higher chances of getting into an Apprenticeship after graduation.

"Unlike the normal day-to-day assignments, an excellent score on the Term Assignment is not only a personal achievement, but also counts as an accomplishment of the student's House as a whole. At the end of the school year, each House's excellent scores are tallied. The House with the highest average per student wins the House Cup."

Harry glanced quickly at his best friends to see their reactions. Ron was looking bored, staring at his empty plate. Hermione was regarding the new Headmaster with a slight frown.

"Naturally," Snape said, "there are no more points to be earned at Quidditch."

"Are we still allowed to play?" someone from the Hufflepuff table called. Snape's eyes flickered to the boy in question.

"The next person speaking without permission shall get the first detention of the year. To answer your question, yes, well-behaved students are allowed to play." The boy had shrunk in his seat and was now nodding to the table.

"All the practical details shall be explained to you in class. You are dismissed," Snape said abruptly, then turned and stalked off through a back door.

The silence held for five seconds, then the hall filled with the noise of hundreds of students standing and taking their leave.

Harry rested his head in his palm, digesting Snape's words. He tried to think of what lay behind, the way Hermione had told him to do two years ago, following Umbridge's horrible speech.

Snape was probably acting on Voldemort's long-standing plans for Hogwarts - they must have met with his approval, in any case. The new strategy spoke of academic ambition, but also of something else.
It was the element of fun, Harry realised after considering it for a moment, that was being taken out of the equation. He shared this thought with Hermione.

"The message is clear," she agreed. "He is rebuilding Hogwarts in his image. You know, this is probably what Riddle envisions his school years to have been like, had everything been perfect. But really, this is quite narrow-minded of him."

Ron smirked. "What, we're forced to study harder and Quidditch doesn't matter any more, and you don't approve?"

Hermione scowled. "Of course I don't."

Harry made a hand gesture to encompass the whole of Hogwarts. "If you could change the school system, what would you do?"

Hermione opened her mouth, then closed it. "Well, I wouldn't focus only on the smartest students and ignore everyone else, for one thing." Two red spots formed on her cheeks. "I mean, we're all smart in a different way, that's the point of all the Houses –"

Ron interrupted her with a loud snort and Hermione glared at him. Harry put a hand over his mouth to cover a laugh.

"Well, I'm glad you both see something funny in this, because I can't," she said scathingly.

"Oi, Gryffindors, hurry up!" a voice called behind them then.

Absorbed as they were, they'd all been ignoring the exodus around them and now found themselves the only ones left sitting. Harry stood. His eyes found Pansy Parkinson, regarding them coldly. She waited as if to see if they obeyed, then turned to look for other stragglers before joining a Slytherin classmate.

Hermione shook her head and started walking to the double doors, Harry and Ron falling into step beside her. "Pansy as Head Girl. No, I don't think the general quality of this school has improved."

They ascended the grand staircase, and Harry's legs suddenly turned leaden.

"Guys."

Ron and Hermione halted when they noticed he wasn't with them. Harry cleared the dryness in his throat. "I um, I'm supposed to stay with the Slytherins."

"What?" Ron exclaimed, which made the heads of passers-by turn. Harry winced and waited for them to move on, which they slowly did, wide-eyed and whispering.

"His orders, I think."

Ron stood horror-struck. Hermione grimaced in sympathy. "I suppose it makes sense," she said. "I don't think we'll be able to do any scheming on the you-know-what's, with me probably gone from the common room as well."

Rons eyes widened some more. "Not you too."

Hermione shrugged one shoulder. "My trunk hasn't moved. Maybe I'm allowed back now that classes start, we'll see." But it was clear she didn't believe it.

Ron turned back to him. "Don't tell me: you're staying with Malfyoy?"
Harry bit his lip. "Yeah."

"You should go Harry," Hermione urged, "quickly, before you'll attract attention."

"Don't know how that could happen," Harry dead-panned. He rubbed at his hair, feeling exhausted from the day. "Alright, see you tomorrow, I hope," he groused before clasping the rail behind him. As he hurried down Ron softly called: "Put wards on your bed, Harry." Harry gave a wave to show he'd heard, then took the path to the dungeons.

When after many turns and dead-ends he finally managed to find the right stone wall to the Slytherin common room, his mood had deteriorated to a quiet rage. He walked in right in the middle of Slughorn's speech. When Slughorn noticed the shift in attention, he turned his wide figure towards the source.

"Harry, my boy!"

Harry couldn't suppress a cringe. A few people laughed nastily. Slughorn gave a tolerant smile, slapping Harry on the shoulder, before blessedly releasing him again. Harry stiffly went over to a spot far in the back.

Slytherin's common room was a low-ceilinged, dungeon-like room with gothic underwater windows, through which filtered a greenish light that shifted on the stones as if alive. The floor was covered in backed black and dark green button-tufted sofas. The low ceiling, dark tapestries and skulls on the mantelpiece in the corner all gave off a vaguely menacing atmosphere.

It was hard to imagine that high above their heads, millions of litres of water were squeezing down on the age-smoothed stones.

Harry gritted his teeth as he felt the intense scrutiny of the others crawl over him again. He fixed his eyes on Slughorn, determined to ignore the staring girl sitting forty centimetres away.

"Where was I... ah yes of course. This youthful branch of the Society for Magical Excellence can provide a promising start of one's career, certainly. Membership is allowed from the age of seventeen. However, the Excellentia is members-only."

Harry wanted to roll his eyes at hearing the name, feeling like something slimy got stuck in his throat.

Slughorn turned in a half-circle to encompass the whole room. He winked quasi-conspirational. "But as they say, talent will out. I might be persuaded to put in a good word for a promising student or two."

The man rubbed his hands briskly. "Now then, for the first years curfew is at eight, which means you will be finding your beds in about ten minutes." Small mutters of protest could be heard from the youngest occupants. "I don't have to tell the older students when they must be inside, hm?"

A few of them chuckled at this for some reason. Harry scanned the faces around him. Only a handful of them he really knew: all the seventh years of course, and a few sixth and fifth years beaters and chasers (Slytherin wasn't known for allowing lower years to try out for the Quidditch team). He couldn't wait to blunder through that social minefield.

Actually, what was the point? He'd be rid of the whole lot come May. Hopefully. Should he be allowed to stay that long.

Slughorn made his goodbyes and stomped out. Harry turned to make his way to his dormitory, but
stopped as he realised he had no clue where it was. Which way had he come down again earlier?

Something jolted his shoulder painfully. Looking up he saw Nott sending a smirk over his shoulder before the seventh-year sauntered over to one of the popular spots near the fireplace.

With a conscious effort Harry relaxed his shoulders. Standing still in the Slytherin common room was a bit like having a giant sign on your head saying 'easy prey'.

He would just try a passageway and see if anything looked familiar.

A few steps into the first one he found nothing recognisable - but perhaps that was because he hadn't watched were he was going in the first place. His luck was with him however, and he found familiar ground on his second try.

Behind the relative safety of the dormitory door he kicked off his shoes and threw off his robes carelessly, before practically falling on his bed. He was happy to discover it was just as soft as the one he had in Gryffindor. He shut the drapes, then took off his glasses with a heartfelt sigh to rub his aching eyes.

The drapes flew open.

Harry scrambled to put his glasses back on. Draco Malfoy was standing at his bedside, looking like he was asked to clean a dirty cauldron by hand. Harry tried to look suitably unperturbed.

"Oh great, it´s Schizo Scarhead. I know we´re close Potter, but did you have to put your bed next to mine?"

Malfoy's petulant tone made Harry's aloofness vaporise. "The bed was already here when I arrived, Malfoy," he spat. "Believe me, I'm just as glad as you are about this."

But Malfoy was bending to pick up something up from the ground – the robes Harry hadn't bothered to hang up. He unconsciously shivered as he was reminded of another place, and another Malfoy.

Draco rubbed the fabric between his fingers, studying it with a crease between his eyes. Then he let if fall.

"A few words of advice to you Potter, since you're obviously as thick as ever: don't go with the Gryffies. Mingle."

"Mingle? What do you mean mingle?"

"Quod erat demonstrandum."

"What?"

"That means forget it," he drawled, turning away. "Merlin knows why I bother." He then proceeded to rummage in a huge dark-green trunk that sat beside his four-poster.

Harry shrugged and closed the drapes. After a moment's hesitation he threw up a sticking and a silencing charm.

It took a long while before he nodded off.
The tone had been set the night before and so, nearing the Slytherin table at breakfast, he was prepared for the day, or as prepared as he could be. Harry didn't know what bothered him more: the Slytherins that sneered or stared. For a moment Harry considered sitting down at the empty table end closest to him, but then he briskly crossed the width of the hall towards the Gryffindors, Malfoy's advice be damned.

His friends greeted him warmly as he sat down. Ron was looking as fierce as ever, with a huge cut splitting his face.

"Looking kind of roguish, Ron," said Parvati, sitting down next to him.

Ron inclined his head. "Why, thank you."

"So, what's the story?"

"It was a Death Eater that did this," Ron said proudly. He proceeded to regale Parvati with a tale of manly strength and courage, which apparently included an all-out sword-fight.

Harry turned to Hermione. "Did you sleep in Gryffindor Tower?"

"I did. I didn't have my trunk though. It's still on the sixth floor."

"Why don't you ask Dobby to move it?" This reminded him to go and visit the kitchens when he had the chance.

"Of course I did. He said it wasn't allowed."

Harry waited, but she remained silent. "And did you ask why?"

"He wouldn't say. He was terrified when he saw me. He said he would get punished just for talking to me!"

"I'll help you then," Harry offered. "We'll meet at your quarters after class is finished."

He frowned, thinking about the day ahead. Was he supposed to take classes with the Gryffindors now or with the Slytherins? It was not like he had been re-sorted or anything. As if summoned by this thought, McGonagall appeared with the time-tables. Harry studied the one that was handed out to him, which was for all of seventh year. The schedule reached only as far as Tuesday.

He quickly understood why there were just two days jotted down: each class of their first day consisted solely of magical tests and not much else.

It was a harrowing experience for everyone, students and teachers alike. The Gryffindors and Ravenclaws began with Charms, where Professor Flitwick nervously told them to come to the front when their name was called.

There, an examiner stood, and as Flitwick explained, "Ms. Diana Cammon is here to test you on your abilities at charms casting."

'Brown, Lavender' was first. She strode up to the woman confidently, who gestured and they both left through a side door.

Everyone remained quiet. Flitwick set them all to the first spell of The Standard Book of Spells Grade 7. Harry was glad to have something to do besides counting down the last names.
Each couple of minutes a student was called to the other room.

Finally it was Harry's turn. In the small back-room the woman sat on one of the spare desks, the rest of them shoved against the wall.

"So, Potter. Show me the Skurge Charm." She flapped her long red hair back and gestured to a corner.

There, to Harry's surprise, Peeves was floating. He was even more surprised when the poltergeist didn't say anything. Upon closer inspection Harry saw that a black shadow of some kind hovered over his mouth. He looked angry, though.

They had learned the spell in second year. The incantation was obvious, but he had forgotten the wand movement.

Harry swallowed. "Alright... Skurge." As he said the incantation he waved his wand in a vertical motion.

Nothing happened. The woman wrote something down. Harry's shoulders slumped and Peeves grinned; although his mouth was covered, his eyes crinkled maliciously.

"The Banishing Charm." She held up a blade of grass.

"Depulso." The blade of grass vanished and Ms Cammon made a note.

She gestured. "Weld the desks together."

Harry thought a moment. Did she want him to actually turn them into one object, or stick them together?

He considered that actually melting them would be considered a transfiguration, strictly speaking. He went with the most powerful sticking charm he knew. Looking up after the fifth desk was joined to the others, he saw her making a slightly longer note.

After performing two more charms she was satisfied. As he walked back to his desk, he felt it had gone well enough.

When Ron, the last one called, got back from his testing his face was red and he looked chagrined. The ball rang soon after. Harry decided to ask questions later. Since Ron hadn't taken Potions as an elective, it was just him and Hermione making their way to the dungeons. The Slytherins soon joined them.

The five-minute wait in the hallway was enough to brew trouble.

"Potter, we thought you'd died," Milicent Bulstode said, her voice thick with disappointed.

"Nah, see those fine clothes?" said Nott. "That's not Potter's style, is it? I think someone has got themselves a pet project."

Although not true, Nott's insinuations were entirely too close to the mark for comfort. Harry tried to keep his expression disinterested but felt his cheeks grow warm. Hermione had gone a little pale.

"Say Malfoy," Nott asked casually, "has your father said anything?"

Malfoy, who had been throwing superior looks Harry's way, shook his head.
"Hm," Nott stroke a non-existent beard. "I'm thinking a high-ranking Death Eater – yes, a reward for their efforts in the war. You won't have to wait long, then," he told Bulstrode with a smirk. He studied Harry as if he might be of possible value in an upcoming auction.

Whispers broke out on both sides. Harry meanwhile, used to this kind of attention, had found his calm and raised an eyebrow. "Perhaps you haven't considered the possibility that Voldemort" - everyone flinched – "considered me too valuable to kill? I talked to him recently, have you?"

The whispering dwindled into a deep silence that pushed against Harry's ears. Nott's and Bullstrode's eyes had widened.

Too late he realised he'd said the forbidden name. He glanced around, half expecting Death Eaters to spring from the dark corners to apprehend him, but the shadows stayed quite unmoving. His glance did show him the Gryffindors were now displaying looks that ranged from disapproval to abject horror.

Oops. That had sounded a bit... weird, coming from him.

He threw back his shoulders and brushed imaginary dust from his robes.

If they wanted to be principle about every little thing, fine, but he was the one who had to sleep in the enemies lair at night. He couldn't afford such sentiment. It had gotten pretty simple: first, survive, second: don't get your friends killed.

Nott was throwing questioning looks at Malfoy, to which the other boy shrugged.

The doors flew open then, and Slughorn's considerable figure filled the entrance."Come in, come in," he muttered.

The frozen tableaux broke and both sides hurried to find the best spots.

Again there was an unknown person standing at the front. As the class settled down, Slughorn gestured: "This is Mr. Eldar Donras, a gifted potioneer. He is the inventor of the Girding Potion, among other great successes. Well, I will leave you all in his capable hands, then." Slughorn sat down behind his desk and started to open a bottle of ink.

The small speech didn't exactly boost Harry's confidence. Potions was a weak point for him. But then again, he thought with a wry smile, there was no use in trying to get into the Auror's program any more.

Hermione nudged him and he looked up quickly. He had missed the beginning of the instructions for the potion they were brewing. Oh well.

The lesson went downhill from there. Last year without the help of the Prince's – no Snape's – book, Harry's talent in potions turned out to be pretty much non-existent. And without Hermione to correct him where he went wrong the result was that in five minutes of work, the potion that was supposed to be a lightly bubbling midnight blue at this stage was now a frothing brown.

Harry dumped it into the sink and started over with fresh ingredients. The examiner meanwhile did not react in any way to Harry's scurrying around the classroom.

When the bell rung after a ridiculously short amount of time, the examiner told them to finish the step they were currently at – he would know if people smuggled – and to put a small amount of it in a flask, to leave with their names on their desks.
Outside, Hermione pulled her hair back from her sweaty face. "I think the bastagalm has to be soaked for just two minutes, but I'm not sure. I hope it won't affect the colour too badly if it was supposed to be soaked longer-"

"Hermione, I didn't soak anything."

"Oh, well..." Hermione gave him an absent-minded pat on the shoulder. "you weren't at that stage yet, so it doesn't matter anyway."

"Thanks, I feel so much better now."

Someone brushed passed him and whispered: "Enjoy her while you can, Potter." It was Nott, who gave him a wink in passing.

Harry's wand was pointed at the back of Nott's head in an eye-blink. He heard Hermione as if on the other end of a tunnel.

"Let him talk, Harry. Nothing they say could be worth getting into trouble for. Not now." He felt her hand close over his fist.

He lowered his wand and relaxed his muscles. For a moment the old House rivalry had sparked in him the excitement of a duel, the desire to set his magic against another's which he had not felt in months, and all the troubles of the outside world had faded.

But honestly, he attracted trouble like a magnet. Best to not entice it any further – who knew what the punishment would be with Snape as Headmaster? He shook himself before wordlessly starting off towards lunch.

The murmur of voices grew louder as they ascended the staircase, and reminded him of something.

"Hermione, did you keep any Daily Prophets from the last months?" He had to know what it was he was dealing with, after the confrontation in the dungeons.

"Yes, I have some, I'll show them to you later."

"Thanks." Harry looked sideways and saw her face had turned worried again.

"That bad?"

Hermione shot him a look that told him not to sound so surprised.

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The afternoon seemed to drag on endlessly. Either waiting nervously for his turn to be tested or worrying about how he had done after, Harry pretended to do the assigned readings the teachers dealt out to keep them occupied. Only Hermione was able to stay concentrated, making notes while not showing any outward indication that she was nervous. Perhaps she was just too irritated by the whole procedure to be bothered.

Everyone agreed that it was rather cruel to spring a whole day of examinations upon them when they hadn't had time to practice the whole summer. Harry and Ron tried to get some clues out of Hermione on what they could expect from each class, but she told them she had only been involved with processing the results, and besides the testing was different for adults because their tests were only about the magic they performed for their jobs.
Herbology which they had right after lunch went well, because Harry was sitting next to Neville. Aside from his brilliance in the subject, Neville was also a good partner because of his patient way of explaining (when the examinator's back was turned) where Harry had done something wrong.

Professor Terrance had introduced herself, before allowing the examinator to run the class. Harry felt a sadness come over his friend as the class progressed, and knew he must be thinking about their old teacher, who had died during the battle.

After Herbology came Transfiguration. The Ravenclaws and Gryffindors got an everyday object on their desk, which they were told had been changed through various Transfigurations. Their task was to get the object back into its original shape. This meant using the correct cancellations at the correct times: if you cancelled a dead-alive transfiguration before figuring out what the objects' shape after the transfiguration was for example, you ended up with a very strangely-shaped animal. Harry got as far as four cancellations before he got stuck. He glumly watched the others, most of whom were already in their sixth or seventh cancellation.

After an hour of this they were told to transfigure their objects (and beings) back to how they found them. Harry had gotten his fountain-pen successfully reversed to a small ever-spouting fountain, but he couldn't remember the Transfiguration for changing metal into rubber. In the end he had to settle for handing in a sweating rubbery fountain, instead of a waddling rubber duck.

At dinner Harry felt thoroughly wrung out. He was also secretly relieved. So far no one had commented him on his choice of classmates, or dinner companions. Suddenly ravenous, he ate until his stomach complained.

Meanwhile the rumour-mill whirled around him. Everyone now seemed to wonder why Harry had meetings with the Dark Lord. The Gryffindors joined in heartily this time, not caring that he sat just a few paces away. He was therefore glad to escape the whole lot to go to Hermione's quarters and get his hands on some Daily Prophets.

Ron went with them, also curious to see where Hermione was staying. It turned out to be a bare set of rooms: a table and chairs, a few bookcases and a fireplace took up the tiny living room.

The Daily Prophets lay in a pile on a desk placed beneath the window of her bedroom. Ron and Harry waited as Hermione moved the pile to the rickety dining table. Harry set to it with nerves fluttering in his stomach.

Wizarding villages horror-struck over werewolf attacks.

_**By Zemlas Lorrobob**_

*18 May 1996* – A wave of werewolf outbreaks has petrified several villages for the last two days. Lone werewolves were spotted at night prowling the edges of Grantham, Sleaford and Newark-on-Trent. Two citizens have been killed through blood loss from savage wounds. As well, seventeen cases of turned family members have so far been reported.

Aurors were quickly on scene to assure the public. They started a hunt, though without results so far. In the meantime people are advised to...

Ministry achieves breakthrough in negotiations with vampires.

_**By Brenda Bells**_

*7 July 1996* – Three rounds of negotiations between representatives of the vampire communities in the United Kingdom and the Ministry, have ended in a mutual agreement, which has met with...
satisfaction from all parties involved.

The agreement resulted in a broadening of the Guidelines for the Treatment of Non-Wizard Part-Humans to include a section on the authorization for vampire covens to settle in Muggle and Wizarding towns. The Society for the Tolerance of Vampires was "ecstatic" about the results. Chairwoman Amaranda the Bloodless: "Although we hoped for such a breakthrough, we never...

Harry's eyes drifted away as he tried to imagine vampires getting a Muggle village as a playground for their bloodthirsty needs. He closed his eyes for a moment, rubbing his forehead before glancing down for another headline, only to find his own name glaring back at him from the Showizbiz section.

The many faces of Harry Potter
by your trusted reporter, Rita Skeeter

14 June 1996 – Harry Potter, although world-famous, remains somewhat of a mystery. Hero of the so-called light while also a competent curse caster, Mr. Potter is a wizard of many faces, a paradox of seemingly incompatible traits. This begs the question: who is Harry Potter really?

In Mr. Potter's second year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry it was revealed that the famous wizard speaks Parseltongue, the ancient language of snakes. This news has shocked the wizarding public, leading many to change their opinion of him as a symbol of the light, as well as to question whether Gryffindor is still the best House for him.

Throughout the ages, the language has been a trademark of illustrious dark wizards. Parseltongue is a talent that Mr. Potter shares only with our Lord himself, and could possibly have been a factor in His merciful decision to allow the young man to continue his education at Hogwarts, this reporter speculates.

Mr. Potter's penchant for danger and rule-breaking have made him the subject of much controversy, reaching its peak in Mr. Potter's fourth year. At the start of the Triwizard Tournament the famous boy-wizard managed something that up until then had been considered an impossible feat: fooling the Goblet of Fire. But then again, as our faithful readers know, when it comes to the Boy-Who-Lived the impossible is merely to be expected.

Mr. Potter's adventures have delighted as well as worried his classmates over the years. Ernie MacMillan, a year-mate and good friend of Mr. Potter's: "You never know what he's going to do now. One year he saves someone from a dangerous troll, the next year it turns out he's the Heir of Slytherin! That's what I like about him, I guess. With Potter around there is never a dull moment."

Mr. Potter is currently living at an undisclosed location for the summer and was not able to respond. He will begin his seventh and final year at Hogwarts in the fall. Fans are wondering what the famous wizard shall do now that the Dark Lord has claimed his place as righteous ruler of Wizarding Britain. Whatever Mr. Potter's plans, we can expect an interesting school year.

Harry lowered the newspaper, staring unseeingly at the walls. So this was what Malfoy meant: according to the article he was quite the two-headed Janus. Skeeter had really outdone herself.

"Well?" Hermione said beside him. "It could have been worse, I think. This is the only substantial thing she wrote about you, other than a side-line mentioning you were seen at the Celebratory Ball." Harry nodded along while he munched on Skeeter's motives.

As if reading his thoughts Hermione said: "I think she was just trying to come up with a reason for why you should be allowed to live. It's clear she still has no clue." She smiled strangely then, and
tilted her head. "Actually, do you know why you're not six feet under? And by the way... who gave you those robes?"

Ron opposite him narrowed his eyes at this. Harry shifted self-consciously, suitably distracted from the article. "I'm not sure actually," he answered, avoiding her second question. He explained what Voldemort had told him.

Hermione nodded. "On the surface it seems an effective political move for his part. He's killing two birds with one stone: this way he will be seen as the reasonable ruler who is merciful to his enemies, while at the same time demoralizing the Order and other light sympathisers, with their symbol of hope now firmly being moulded in his hands."

"I'm not being moulded!"

Hermione looked serious. "Don't forget he is a master at manipulation, Harry."

"Have you gotten the memo, 'Mione?" Ron put in, incredulous. "The guy killed his parents! Harry's going to mould him into a pile of ash, first chance he gets!"

"However true that might be," Hermione said dismissively, "that isn't my point. What I was trying to say is that on the surface it seems to be a good move; however I don't believe for a second that he would be satisfied with anything other than seeing Harry dead. It has been the paramount drive behind his strategy since his rebirth. And since when has he been concerned with people's opinions?"

Harry felt like an ice-cube had been dropped down his back. Her matter-of-fact tone called to his own vague sense of unease. It was true that, being the mortal enemy in the Prophecy, the only one with the power to defeat the Dark Lord and all that, allowing him to live for whatever reason seemed very uncharacteristic of the Dark Lord.

He hadn't been willing to point out the obvious, though. His lips twitched as he imagined how the conversation would go. 'Sir, I would just like to point out that the Propecy says I'm the only one who can defeat you, so isn't it wiser to kill me, you know, just to be sure?"

"Well," Harry said airily to break the heavy tension in the air, "As long as his plans include allowing me to breath, I'm not going to complain about it."

Ron chuckled. Hermione still looked a little glassy. Harry knew that look: there was a mystery here, and she was going to get to the bottom of it. He felt strangely comforted.

"Let's get your trunk up to Gryffindor tower." Harry spoke a feather-light charm and Ron and Hermione both froze.

"What?"

"You can't use your wand outside of class. Professor McGonagall said it was absolutely forbidden."

"Oh." He couldn't remember her saying this. He regarded his wand, which made him think of the bloody fingerprints that had been almost impossible to remove. He stuffed it hastily back in his sleeve. "Well, I don't think illegal feather-light charms will be at the top of their priority list."

He lifted Hermione's trunk, which weighted about as much as a Bludger. They walked out into the corridor and took one of the moving staircases towards the seventh floor. Although Harry tried to keep the trunk balanced, a heavy clanging could be heard as the stuff inside shifted and tumbled.
"Hermione what do you keep in this thing, a suit of armour?" Ron asked.

"My books and just some things I found lying around." She blushed as Ron and Harry stared. "Well I'm going to put it back later, of course," she hurried to assure them.

"Now I'm curious," Ron muttered.

After entering the portrait hole, Harry passed it to Hermione (and then realised he could have skipped the chivalrous attitude with such a light object) and she trudged it up to the girls dormitories.

As always happened with crowds nowadays, the noise around him changed. Harry gave a deep sigh and with a nod to Ron, escaped quickly for the stairs.

On the first step he froze. He was supposed to be sleeping in Slytherin.

Annoyed he turned back, then hesitated. He'd just have a quick look around his old dormitory.

As he opened the door it was immediately obvious that nothing had been moved: it all looked just like last year – including his own bed standing to the right of his favourite window. He shoved the drapes aside to discover that the bed had been made, and from the crispy smell of fresh laundry, hadn't been slept in.

He spared a thought for his trunk, which would undoubtedly become the victim of Slytherin scrutiny. He had warded it though, and anyway, if someone really wanted to get in they could just try at it any time he was in class.

Mind made up and tired enough despite the early hour, he heartily burrowed under the covers.

And dreamed.

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Excitement burned in his chest as he glided along the brightly lit corridor. The offices on each side buzzed with activity. Witches and wizards walked between them, crossing each other like crawling ants and brushing his robes, their sweaty scents twitching his nose. Small paper airplanes soared overhead, adding to the sense of chaos.

A flicker of irritation made him stroke his wand. His eyes met those of a witch and a pile of folders fell from her slack arms, spreading wide over the marble floor and quieting the volume around him. His fingers stilled again.

The hallways cleared as he glided past gleaming wooden doors engraved with silver nameplates. He emerged into a wide open space filled with rows of empty desks. Facing the desks was a mahogany door. A large, round eye with a bright blue iris had been set into the wood. It gazed blindly upwards, frozen. The plaque beneath it read:

*Dolores Umbridge*

*Senior Undersecretary to the Minister*

*Head of the Muggle-born Registration Commission*

The door opened as the wards fell to a complicated gesture of his hand. Inside, lace draperies, doilies and dried flowers covered every available surface. Felines followed him on the walls as he
approached the desk.

The woman stood and now backed away towards the fireplace, her eyes wide in her toad-like face. "Mr. You-Know- my Lord," she squeaked, fumbling her wand with stubby fingers.

A large golden locket swayed gently over her chest. Embedded in the gold was an ornate letter "S" inlaid with small green stones. They glittered strikingly where they caught the sunlight.

He forced his eyes away in order to study her small, pudgy form. "You have something of mine I believe, madame Umbridge."

She stiffened, her neck craned far back in order to see his face. "Indeed, my Lord? Of course I am most honoured to-

A swish of his wand made her drop down hard on her knees, cutting off the horrible sound.

He stretched out a hand. The locket flew to him. It was cold, but warmed quickly in his long-fingered grip. The magic shivered through his palm and up his arm until the pulsing life within matched his own heartbeat.

"Crucio."

The pink form below stretched and bend. He put up a silencing charm as an afterthought, then hung the chain around his neck.

The movements of the woman on the ground soon lessened to small twitches. Another wave and the curse was cancelled. Her flew up to meet his.

Legilimens.

He was quick to find the deep recesses of her brain, already sluggish from terror. But something distracted him. He became aware of a dull throbbing sound in his ears. After a moment he realised it was his heartbeat, which now slammed a quick pace in his chest.

His racing blood drew his magic out to crackle over his skin. A sudden impulse to force all of it on her, to rip away her sanity, made him lose his concentration. Irritated by this emotional urge, he drew away and moved to gather the wild energy needed to perform the Killing Curse.

The tip of his wand already glowed an intense green when a snippet of memory made him halt.

I must not tell lies.

His hand was busy writing something down. The ink on the parchment, he noticed, was the same red colour as the wounds. The memory felt at once familiar and not, like a déjà vu.

The boy.

The moment he knew whose memories he was seeing, a figure behind the desk confirmed it:

"That’s enough for today, Potter."

He put down the cursed quill and bent to gather his bag. When he looked up there was an unpleasant burning in his stomach, spreading to his limbs. His hands, concealed behind layers of
fabric, shook and he was feeling... light-headed.

"See you tomorrow, Professor."

Voldemort was grudgingly impressed by the boy's calm, polite tone. Having seen enough, he extracted his consciousness from the woman's mind.

She still lay were the curse had dropped her, her eyes bloodshot, her lips now a bluish colour.

Despite the headache that was emerging at the back of his scull he smiled. Umbridge, watching him with frantic eyes, made a strange high sound.
Chapter 15

Lupin groggily emerged from unconsciousness to the sound of a low drum, or bang.

The harsh light from a lamp in the ceiling threw the surrounding white walls into stark relief. He was shackled in to the rough stone, long black chains that dug into his ankles and clanged when he moved.

The sound of water running. The smell of damp fur. Another bang.

He jerked when his eyes found the source, still half-blinded by all the white around him. He was not alone.

The sound was that of a body of being thrown against the door in mindless repetition.

"Hey." His voice was hoarse so he tried again. "Hey! Stop that!"

The female werewolf turned and stalked towards him. Then she growled, flashing long teeth.

He returned the favour, standing to loom over her. He noticed that both their chains were long enough to walk all the corners of the cell.

Lupin explained, though he knew she wouldn't understand: "We have to stay low until we know the situation."

This was a very human penchant of his. Despite the... baseness of the last weeks, a part of him still hoped for some kind of civility, or at least a connection.

She had taken a step back and now stood watching him in silence. He noticed she was wearing only rags, which clung to her gaunt figure.

With a high creaking noise the cell door opened inwards. A huge man walked in and Lupin swallowed.

A fresh streak of blood was running past Fenrir Greyback's jaws as he gave his captives a menacing smirk. He turned to the woman and growled: "Narpea?"

She nodded while slowly backing off further. Then his eyes zeroed in on Lupin.

He clapped his hands and stalked close to him, so that lupin could smell as well as feel his rancid breath. "Remus, my boy!"

In contrast to his cheerful tone a hand shot out to close around Remus' windpipe. Remus scrambled
at it with long nails. The back of the hand was soon bloody, but Greyback didn't seem to notice.

"Finally I am reunited with one of my oldest children. It's been too long," Greyback breathed. He flashed two crooked rows of bloody teeth.

Lupin was now wrestling with the strong arm in earnest: his lungs were starting to hurt from the lack of oxygen. "I'm not your-"

Greyback's right arm threw him across the cell. Lupin's body struck the floor with a dull thump. A moment of disorientation followed. Lupin scrambled with clumsy limbs to stand, but then five sharp nails sunk into his left cheek and jaw.

"You sure about that?" The warm breath against his ear sickened him, as did the hand stroking his hair. "Guess I have to remind you."

When Lupin felt the jaws locking around his bare shoulder, ready to close, he screamed, rearing backwards. The energy behind his sudden fury was such that it knocked Greyback off him. He stumbled to his knees and feet, making a dead run for the door.

The growl behind him turned his legs to jelly but, incredibly, he made it out the door, taking the first turn he could find.

"You bitch!"

Something tripped him and he fell, skidding painfully on his stomach. The hand was back, fisting his hair to yank his head back cruelly.

The sound of quick footsteps coming closer, then a deep voice that was painfully familiar. "Greyback! Move off him!"

The pressure on his body lifted.

"You were supposed to wait for me before getting the prisoners, as you well know."

A boot was shoved into his side, which made him turn on his back. "I just couldn't resist this one," Greyback jeered, grinning down on him.

Kingsley was a fine actor: his face remained unmoving, showing no recognition whatsoever.

"Get up," he commanded, sounding almost bored. Lupin did with one arm held tight over his painful chest.

"I will take this one then, since you can't seem to behave. You get the others. Don't dawdle."

Greyback let out a low rumble, but Kingsley had drawn his wand, a hard look in his eyes. He still enjoyed some kind of rank, apparently, because Greyback stalked off without a word.

"Come." The wand was now pointed at Lupin, who stared at Kingsley in disbelieve. Kingsley gestured with his wand, impatient. "You don't want me to force you, do you?"

Lupin silently shook his head, eyes wide. Shoulders slumping, he started off towards the direction Kingsley indicated.

Harry woke to someone shaking him. He looked up to see the blurry shape of Ron standing beside
his bed. He shoved his glasses on, blinking against the bright sunlight from the window.

Ron was looking puzzled. "Harry, Malfoy is standing at the portrait hole. He's looking for you."

"Huh?" Harry stared at him for a moment, feeling like he was forgetting something. "Right."

He rubbed his eyes, then frowned. He'd had another vision, but he couldn't quite remember what it had been about. Voldemort had been at the Ministry. A pink room... Umbridge, of that he was certain, but what did he want with her?

He shook his head and bend to gather his robes and shoes, since he still had on his clothes from the night before. They were quick to descend the curving stairs towards the common room. Outside, Malfoy was standing with folded arms and a look of vast annoyance in his eyes.

"What the hell are you doing here, Potter?"

"What do you mean? I -" 'Live here,' he was going to say, but then he remembered.

"Yes, you what?" Malfoy drawled. "You're not allowed to sneak out at night."

"Oh? Are you my babysitter now, Malfoy?"

Malfoy taunted, although two spots of colour appeared on his cheeks: "I shall have to report you to the headmaster."

"What?" Harry blurted. "You're keeping track of me for Snape? Why?"

Malfoy just smirked.

Harry's hands became clammy where he'd stuck them inside his robes. He quickly browsed a mental list of all he'd discussed with Ron and Hermione up till now. But he was certain that Malfoy couldn't possibly have heard them in the Great Hall from so far away.

Malfoy studied his perfectly trimmed fingernails. "I might be persuaded to keep quiet about this."

Harry rolled his eyes when Malfoy remained silent. "What do you want, Malfoy."

Malfoy's eyes flashed greedily. "There have been some fascinating rumours about your summer. For example they say that the Dark Lord keeps you around as a gift to one of his Death Eaters. Or that you were given the Dark Mark. That you were tortured in the Dark Lord's own dungeons, where you spilled all the Order's secrets. Or that you made a deal in exchange for your friends not getting killed. I want to know what happened, Potter."

Harry gritted his teeth. "All right." He glanced back to his sleeping room mates. "Not here, though."

"Tonight then, after dinner."

Harry nodded, moving past him, but Malfoy clamped down on his arm.

"Next time you feel the need to sneak out," he sneered and his breath fanned against Harry's cheek, "I'll make sure my story is properly...embellished."

Harry kept his expression carefully blank, inwardly snorting at Malfoy's attempt at intimidation. With Voldemort breathing down his neck, their old rivalry didn't seem that threatening any more.
Malfoys eyes swept over Ron for a moment, then he stalked off.

Ron shook his head at the retreating form, murmuring something about noses being pointed permanently towards the ceiling.

The hallways were blessedly empty as they walked down to breakfast: Harry felt like he'd already reached the limits of his tolerance to stares for the week.

Two Ravenclaws joined them on the third floor, having come from the opposite side of the castle. Harry, deep in thought over Malfoy's sudden strange interest, jumped when a hand fell on his elbow.

"Good morning Harry, Ron."

Harry blinked. Luna.

\textit{Luna.}

Ron frowned when he jabbed his friend in the side with a significant look and a dismissive gesture. Luckily he got the hint and promptly turned towards the girl next to Luna. "So Cho, how was your summer?"

Harry touched Luna's arm and she stopped with a smile.

"How have you been?" he asked. There appeared to be nothing different about her, and he was glad to notice her usual eccentric earrings (tiny magical camera's that flashed every few seconds).

"I am well enough, thank you. I've been taking a lot of walks at our home this summer, just like always. I inherited the house, you see."

Harry nodded. She was an orphan now just like him, and he knew there was nothing meaningful to say to comfort her. "Thank you for the birthday card, that was really kind of you."

"You're very welcome."

"And uh, for the potion. I'm sorry it didn't work. I gave it a good try, though," he hastened to reassure her.

"The potion?" Luna said with surprise in her voice. "Oh, that was from Albus."

The air felt suddenly like it was loaded, the way it was buzzing in his ears and pressing hard against his lungs. "Albus?" he whispered, glancing around for any eavesdroppers. But the hallway was deserted, Ron and Cho having long turned a corner. "As in, Albus Dumbledore?"

"Yes, of course!" He couldn't blame her for laughing a little at that. Who else did they know named Albus? "The potion is his present for your birthday. He couldn't very well send you a personal letter, so he asked me if I could send it with mine."

Harry figured he must look very stupid, the way his mouth was hanging open.

"You talked to him?"

"He visited me a couple of times. He doesn't like it that I'm living all on my own now, with how dangerous the roads have become."

Werewolves, she must be talking about the outbreak of werewolves and who knew what else was
out there, now that the only thing this Auror Department had in common with the last was its name.

Someone was approaching. He hastily steered them to an empty classroom were he put up a silencing charm.

"How is he?"

Her face fell. "The... the battle has changed him. He is not his old self."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, when he conjured tea on his last visit, the tea service was all in black and the pot was sealed off. We had to use a severing charm to get the lid off. And the other day, when he wanted to conjure a bouquet of flowers they appeared dead and shrivelled."

"Could it be the work of dark magic?"

Luna considered that. "It might be. But he hasn't said anything about... about that day."

"I see." He must have been severely hurt, for his magic to change. It was just like Dumbledore to not let on about something like that. Then Harry asked, fearing the answer: "How is his hand?"

"It's still black, but he told me the curse is receding."

"That's great news!" Harry gave a relieved smile, but it turned a bit crooked. What in Merlin's beard was going on? Hadn't the Headmaster – no the former Headmaster – had that injury for over a year now? A man of Dumbledore's stature, walking around with a black hand for that length of time, all his considerable magic not capable of curing him – how could it be that now when his magic had turned strange, did the curse brake?

Could the two be connected? But that didn't make any sense. A moment ago he could have sworn on his wand core that the curse had spread, and that's why the Headmaster's magic had changed.

He couldn't wait to chew on this news together with Hermione and Ron.

"Do you know how I can reach him?"

Luna shook her head. "I only know he's staying at Hagrid's, but I don't know where Hagrid lives outside of Hogwarts, do you?"

Harry's shoulder fell. "He probably doesn't have another home. He's been gamekeeper almost his whole life." Ever since Tom Riddle had gotten him send from school, that is.

"Oh, I just remembered: he wanted me to tell you something. 'Know that you can always place your trust in you're closest friends, no matter what may happen.' Yes, that's it."

In the silence that followed, Dumbledore’s words hit Harry with a malevolent edge. A weird pressure was squeezing his chest as he thought about their meaning. Was something going to happen, something he caused that was so terrible that he wouldn't dare to tell his friends?

Was this Dumbledore's cryptic way of saying he should be prepared for the worst?

"He means Ron and Hermione, of course," Luna helpfully supplied. Harry studied her. He had missed Luna's unique honesty, he suddenly realised. But this time he had to correct her.

"No Luna, he also means you." And Neville.
He really had to get in touch with them more this year, he thought guiltily.

Somehow, in all their years at Hogwarts, he and Neville had never gotten around to really hanging out together, the way he did with Ron and Hermione – even though Neville had followed him into the dangerous and the unknown several times, and without hesitation. They were living in the same dormitory, for Merlin's sake.

Why was that? And what did it say about Harry, that apparently he couldn't be bothered before now?

"That's sweet of you to say, Harry. I also consider you a close friend." Her eyes sparkled now, the dulled gaze gone for the moment. Harry grinned back.

"Shall we go? I really have to get to breakfast early, otherwise my room-mates will hide some of my things again when they wake. It usually takes longer to find them back then."

Harry ground his teeth. Why couldn't they all just leave her alone? He was going to find those douche-bags. This week he would gather some intelligence. And if that would help to reduce the nagging feeling of guilt for his carelessness, well, that would be good too.

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**Surprising verdict Wizengamot for captured rogue werewolves**

By Zemlas Lorrobor

4 September 1996 – Yesterday the rogue werewolf trial reached its conclusion with a surprising verdict from the Wizengamot: each werewolf is to be offered a second chance.

The sensational trial against the rogue werewolves captured in the beginning of August, which has kept the wizarding public in suspense for over a week, has reached its surprising verdict yesterday afternoon. In an unexpected show of mercy the Wizengamot, as lead by our great Lord, offered the werewolves, all of whom have been found guilty for maiming and murdering citizens, a chance to redeem themselves. Although the Dementor's Kiss is the usual punishment in cases like these, the Wizengamot decided to offer the werewolves a choice instead: to be Kissed instantly, or to join the prestigious army of our Lord.

Lucius Malfoy, General of the Dark Lord's army, commented after the proceedings: "Although I am much surprised by this verdict, the werewolves would be a welcome addition to the Dark Lord's army. What they have done is unforgivable, but it is a werewolf's nature to be savage. The government has planned to scale up the production of Wolfsbane Potion in the coming months, precisely to curb the dangerous risks they pose to wizarding society. This potion would render the creatures tame and more rational." The General adds with a reassuring smile: "Except against our enemies, of course."

Remus Lupin, a known member of the Order of the Phoenix, a shadowy organisation whose mission disrupts the fragile relations between wizards and magical creatures, was among the werewolves captured. Lupin was responsible for murdering a woman and her two children in her own home, before proceeding to raid the family's stock of dry meat in the basement. Since the Order is a known enemy of the Dark Lord, speculation has been rife on which option Lupin will choose.

In an outrageous move four years ago by former Headmaster and head of the Order Albus Dumbledore, Lupin was allowed to teach at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Only
due to the watchfulness of the Potions Master and current Headmaster of Hogwarts Severus Snape was the imposter revealed in time, and thus the impeding disaster averted. Professor Snape received an Order of Merlin, second class for his outstanding efforts to protect the school.

He and Hermione were bent over the Daily Prophet article on page three, their heads close together. As Harry neared the end of it, his forehead pressing dejectedly onto the palms of his hands, he pulled out several strands of hair in frustration. They straightened up at the same time. Ron immediately snatched the article from under Hermione's fingers.

"Did you know about Lupin?" Harry asked, voice a bit hoarse.

"No. I would have told you immediately," Hermione whispered. "This is bad. Do you think he really murdered that family?"

The article was bad on so many levels that Harry couldn't begin to count them. "They could have done something to him, poisoned him so that his Werewolf side took over completely. Or they could just be writing their usual nonsense." Whatever had really happened, a family was dead, and it was linked to Lupin's actions. And knowing Lupin, he would never forgive himself for this.

Ron was nodding along with his words while reading at the same time. "They must have set him up, it's the only explanation."

Harry glanced down at the scrambled eggs on his place, but his appetite was gone.

"I'm heading up to class."

He stood and left the Great Hall, climbing the floors towards the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom. Just Dark Arts it was now, Harry corrected himself grimly.

He was ten minutes early but he didn't mind, practicing a wandless magic exercise to pass the time.

The book which he'd managed to smuggle to Hogwarts from Voldemort's library held an excellent chapter on the basics of learning wandless magic. The first lesson was to feel the flow of energy from your body into your wand. In later stages, the book had explained, it would become possible to feel the magical energy expanding from your magical core and to trace it back to its point of origin.

So far, he was still stuck on lesson one.

He knew from his experience with the Dark Marks how magic felt when it was still adrift inside someone's body. He thought this would help him to feel his own magic, which made it all the more frustrating that he couldn't – not when he was holding his wand and not when he imagined casting a Lumos.

Maybe the problem was that he didn't yet know precisely what form his own magical energy took. When he was connected to a Mark, the experience felt quite personal, like he had skimmed the surface of someone's memory in a Pensieve and was hit with a sudden flash of their deepest thoughts and feelings, crystallised into one unique sensation. Each servant's bond to the Dark Lord, he had concluded, consisted of a distinct, unique signature. If he wanted to, he could blindly recognise the owners of the Marks he'd touched.

This thought brought back the awful, slimy sensation of Moore's Dark Mark, like oil dripping over his fingertips, and shivered.

He straightened with a jolt, not sure how long he'd been staring into space when a figure came out
of the Dark Arts classroom. He turned, expecting to see Snape, but instead it was Ms. Cammon, the
examinator who'd tested them in Charms the day before. She returned his greeting with a nod, then
disappeared into the adjacent chamber.

The group of Hufflepuffs and Gryffindors filled in soon after and Harry choose a seat at the back,
which was his favourite spot for most classes. Ron and Hermione were among the stragglers and
were forced to sit near the teacher's desk.

Practically everyone was buzzing in soft tones about the werewolf verdict. Most thought it a fair
and merciful punishment. Harry concentrated on his interrupted wandless magic exercise, not
wanting to hear their annoyingly prejudiced opinions.

"I will be testing your casting abilities in the field of Dark Arts and defence," Cammon's voice cut
into the noise and everyone quieted instantly. Snape was still nowhere to be found, and Harry
assumed the git couldn't be bothered to show when he wasn't the centre of attention. For all his
complaints about Harry's attention-grabbing urges, he sure knew how to make a good show in their
Defense classes last year, not bothering to hide his deep respect for the Dark Arts.

Harry sensed an exited tension in the air. He was a bit tense himself. Were they going to have to
demonstrate their knowledge of the Dark Arts in front of the entire class? In that case he was going
to play dumb for sure, because he wasn't going to betray the skill he had acquired from his secret
training sessions.

He drooped a little in his seat as he realised how futile that was. This advantage that Dumbledore
had wanted him to have in his fight against Voldemort was going to be gone soon anyway, when
their classes began. Either he could pretend not to have any foreknowledge for an entire year,
meaning he had to start at the beginner's level and would be quickly overtaken by all the Death
Eater kids in Slytherin, or he could try to hold on to his lead and best them.

He'd be damned if he passed by an opportunity to humiliate Malfoy.

"Hanna Abbot."

Shit. What was the assignment again?

Hannah meanwhile had walked to the front. She pulled out her wand and presented it to Cammon.

Harry looked around, trying to get a hint of what was going on. Everyone had their wands out on
their desks. Harry copied them, then bend his head towards a Hufflepuff sitting on his right.

"Do you know what we're-"

"Shhh!" She waved at him like he was an annoying fly. Harry straightened, deciding to get his
clues from what was happening at the front.

Hannah was standing with her arms folded defensively against her chest, her shoulders hunched, as
Cammon held her wand on eye-level, examining it with narrowed eyes. The woman frowned a
little.

"Spotless. A predilection towards Transfiguration, am I right?"

Hannah nodded, smiling a little. Her proud stance vanished when the examinator continued with:
"This is unacceptable. No traces of anything besides standard light spells."

Hannah was biting her lip. Cammon's gaze softened. "I know your test results are not revealed until
tomorrow, but I don't want you to wait anxiously when it's not necessary. I'm sorry Ms. Abbot, I cannot allow you in this class. Don't feel bad about it. These tests were precisely designed for you to find your speciality and to excel in that area. Your wand's penchant for Transfigurations will get you far."

With that she handed Hannah her wand back. Her soothing tone did not have any effect: Hannah looked dazed as she walked back to her seat.

Everyone shifted nervously at that.

Why were they being graded in front of the entire class over something so personal as your wand's abilities, Harry wondered.

The next person called to the front was Lavender. Her brows pinched together in worry as she waited while Cammon studied her wand.

Cammon chuckled suddenly. "A bit of woman's revenge I see, interesting..." Lavender blushed, frozen in place, studiously avoiding looking at the class. Cammon gave back the wand and ordered Lavender to fire the most advanced Dark Arts spell she knew.

Lavender cast using an unfamiliar incantation. A light blue streak approached Cammon and she shielded. She nodded and told Lavender to return to her seat.

Things proceeded in this vein for a while. Harry filed away every observation Cammon made for future use. He now regretted not sharing this test with the Slytherins instead of with the Hufflepuffs. Although he underestimated that House by no means (he was still avoiding Zacharius in the hallways), the seventh year Slytherins were destined to be the future leaders of society, if Voldemort had his way, and knowing their weaknesses could save his life at some point.

As far as he could judge Cammon's reactions, Seamus Finnigan, Susan Bones and Zacharius Smith were already quite advanced. Justin Finch-Fletchley and Neville were both at the bottom of the heap, with everyone else able to cast Dark Arts spells of various degrees of difficulty and power.

When it was his turn he wearily handed over his wand, curious what she would find: it had been Voldemort's for three full months.

She was silent a long time, then shifted her gaze to study his face. He forced himself not to fidget under her scrutiny. She gave his wand back without a word about it, then said: "Give me your best."

Powerful, or deadly? Harry choose the latter. "Perditio Pectus," he incanted softly.

A cloudy brown beam emerged, much larger than the one he'd managed on the grey squirrels in Snape's training sessions. His heart flew into his throat as he watched it race towards the examinator. Her eyes widened a little. She stepped aside quickly and the curse crashed into the wall with a noise like an avalanche, leaving a smoky, hand-deep crater.

Cammon's brows shot upwards. The class held their collective breath. Cammon wrote something down in her notebook, then dismissed him without another word.

Once again he was the centre of gossip as the Gryffindors made their way to the next examination (Elementary Magic). He quickened his pace to outrun the whispers and Hermione and Ron matched pace. Hermione looked worried as usual and told him what was being said, as if Harry was in any way interested.
Apparently most of his classmates in their boundless imagination had decided he had gotten lessons from Voldemort over the summer. Harry told Hermione he didn't want to hear it. She stomped away. Ron hesitated for a moment before following her. Of course.

Harry closed his eyes for a moment. Everyone was speculating, wondering what had happened to him this summer, and that included his friends. He had kept them in the dark along with everyone else. He told himself he just hadn't gotten around to telling them yet, but he knew that was a lame excuse. It was not like he didn't have any opportunities to be alone with them. He actually wanted to avoid the whole subject.

The whole summer felt different now. It was a grim one since Ginny's death, but it had acquired a miserable sheen on top of that ever since his second attempted escape and what it had lead to: Narda's punishment.

He just wanted to forget about it all. Start over in a way.

He could tell his friends that his sudden talent came from last years' training session, which was technically true. Hermione and Ron deserved better, though. They deserved the whole picture. It could even help Hermione with her research into Voldemort's motives.

For Harry and Ron Elementary Magic was the last examination of the day, as the other subject left, Astronomy, did not include any magical application and thus was not included in the testing (Harry had no clue why Potions was, then). Hermione still had Ancient Runes to go to after lunch.

Harry quietly joined his friends as they took their seats. He flashed Hermione an apologetic smile. Touching her hand briefly, he whispered: "I'm a real ass. You know what, why don't we all get together in the dormitories tonight and I'll tell you what actually happened? That way you can ignore this bullshit they're telling about me," he groused.

"We always do that, Harry," Ron said. "Ever since fourth year, I'm never believing any stories about you again. Anyway, you're on for tonight." He made it sound slightly threatening. Harry chuckled.

The wrinkles between Hermione's brows had disappeared. "I'm in."

Once again there was no sign of the teacher. The examinator from their earlier potion's class strode in after a couple of minutes in which the volume had quickly risen to Great Hall levels.

He began immediately: "This class, as your teacher will explain, is about the building blocks of our magic, and how they have combined throughout history to form the different branches that exist today. For us to know your potential in this class, you will demonstrate the basic spells of all magical branches that you know. When I call your name, please step forward and proceed to the room at the back. No one is to talk in the meanwhile. I have asked Hufflepuff's patron ghost to watch that you don't." The Fat Friar nodded, drifting in a corner.

Everyone was called to the front again in mind-dulling fashion. Harry was beginning to feel like a lab rat, forced to perform tricks on the spot to prove his worthiness.

They were not allowed to study beforehand. Hermione went a few classmates before him, and the moment she sat down she hastily gestured under the table. She was holding up nine fingers.

Harry and Ron both nodded. It didn't make Harry feel any better that he only knew about five of them.
As predicted, he did badly. The Lumos charm was easy, as was coming up with the most basic curse. He had to gamble on the correct hex and Transfiguration spell, although he felt like he should know them. There was no time to think about it however, since everyone was given just five minutes. He didn't want to care about his performance, but based on what Lucius Malfoy had told them in his fancy mansion, the class seemed very interesting – the elder Malfoy had even confessed to being jealous of anyone allowed to attend it.

After dinner, which was free of any nasty surprises of the Daily Prophet variety, Harry warily passed the stone wall that led to the Slytherin common room. It was busy inside, nearly all the sofas and chairs taken. He had no intention of sitting with any of them, however.

Just when he thought he would reach the dormitory unhindered, someone clamped his arm in the passageway. With a sigh he turned around. It was a girl, maybe first or second-year.

"What do you want?"

"I have a message for you from professor Snape." The girl stuck out a note almost like it was a shield. Harry took it and read:

_Come to the Room of Requirement tonight at 8:00 pm, alone. Don't be late._

S. S.

Harry absent-mindedly thanked her before turning to enter his dormitory. The note had somehow been folded into a tight ball in his hands, which he threw against the wall before hastily picking it up and stashing it away again, remembering someone could walk in at any moment.

He chuckled darkly.

He didn't know why he was surprised that Malfoy had ratted him out. Well, he could forget about those summer stories then. Instead he was going to drop exciting hints on all that Malfoy was missing out on.

And his rendezvous with Ron and Hermione now went down the drain. Of course Snape didn't care if he had anything planned for the evening.

The Tempus spell showed him he still had forty-five minutes. He decided to make a trip to the kitchens first to visit Dobby.

The elf jumped excitedly when he caught sight of Harry making his way over to one of the huge tables. The movement made the top hat fall off his head. Dobby quickly snatched it up and pressed it down carefully on top of the other five hats that balanced between his pointy ears.

"Mr. Harry Potter sir, it is great to see you!"

"It's great to see you too, Dobby!" Feeling his emotions brim close to the surface at the familiar sight, Harry gave Dobby a quick hug. The elf froze in surprise. Sure enough when Harry drew back, the big green eyes swam in tears.

"Mr. Potter, I am- I am-"

"Yes I know Dobby, so am I," Harry said hastily to fend off any more dramatics. Dobby's face crinkled into a watery smile.
Harry sat down near the table end. "How have you been?"

"I is being fine, sir. I is being worried about Harry Potter, though, and his friends." Dobby wrung his towel in his knobbly hands.

"You don't have to worry about me. In fact I'm lucky to-"Harry broke of, distracted. His eyes were drawn to the seal on Dobby's towel. It had been changed: the House symbols making up the Hogwarts crest had shifted from a square composition to a diamond one, as if all the symbols had decided together to make a quarter turn. The House symbol gleaming on top, in a silver hue that rained down on the others, was Slytherin. Gryffindor was at the bottom.

"Mr. Potter, sir?" Something was shaking his arm.

Harry searched for the source and realised it was Dobby, eyes narrowed in concern.

"Is everything all right, sir?"

Harry blinked. "Yes, I'm fine." He scratched the back of his head, eyes involuntarily drawn back to the new Hogwarts crest. Upon further inspection, it looked strange and unbalanced. Along with the silver theme, green colour had seeped around the eagle and the lion, and the snake was twice as big as before, weaving along the borders of the other Houses.

"Would Mr. Potter like some fresh pie?"

Harry pulled his eyes away from the disconcerting sight. He stared blindly at the kettles stacked against back wall for two seconds, which vanished the mental image, then gave the elf a reassuring smile. Dobby instantly brightened.

"Yes please." He knew there was nothing that would please Dobby more.

In no time had the elves whirled up a stack of all sorts of pies – blueberry, chocolate, apple, something light blue... and pumpkin juice to go along with it.

"Still excellent service, I see," Harry managed around a huge bite of apple pie. The elves in the vicinity bowed low at hearing this (Dobby with both hands pressed over his hats). Where humans showed their appreciation with the wideness of their smiles, house-elves showed it with the depth of their bows.

"How are your new masters treating you?" Harry asked the group at large. He knew it was an impossible question, but maybe their reactions would still tell him something. After all, "If you want to know what a man's like, take a good look at how he treats his inferiors, not his equals" Sirius had said.

As predicted there was much shifting and frightened looks. Many avoided his eyes.

"Not well, Harry Potter, not well," Dobby said firmly. "They is increasing our workload, ordering us to work also outside of Hogwarts School, at other wizarding residences. We is working day and night, and many of us is not getting sleep as a result, sir."

Now that he mentioned it, Harry saw the signs of exhaustion: there were bags under Dobby's eyes. The others didn't look any better. Someone by the stove was swaying on her feet dangerously close to the fire. The elf assisting her with cooking had a hand on her back to keep her standing upright.

"They can't just... double your working hours like that!" Harry exclaimed. The group of elves behind Dobby went from studying their feet to hurrying away from him, back to their tasks.
Dobby hadn't moved. He was vigorously shaking his head. All his hats fell off at this, and Harry stooped to collect them.

Dobby's strong reaction only served to fuel Harry's resolve. "Dobby, I'm going to see what can be done about this. Who are your masters?"

Dobby clapped his hands over his ears, still shaking his head. "Noo Harry Potter sir, Dobby should never have said anything."

"No, it's good that you did." He offered back the hats but the elf had scrunched his eyes shut.

Harry bit his lip. He knelt down to look Dobby in the eyes. "I won't tell anyone that you told me, alright? I'll just tell them that you all looked exhausted, and that it's... that it's dangerous for the quality of the food or something. That will get their attention." Explaining that elves were about to fall into the fire from exhaustion was not something the average dark wizard would care about, unfortunately.

"Harry Potter is being very kind sir, but Harry Potter is not going to be listened to about this."

Harry frowned. Dobby was right, of course. Anything he said about house-elves was going to be laughed at. But he couldn't watch this go on: it was only a week into the school year and already the elves' energy was wearing thin.

Hermione would know what to do.

He glanced at the clock above the fireplace, but if it was showing the time, Harry didn't know how to read it.

"It is being nearing eight, sir," Dobby supplied.

"I have to hurry then." He grasped the elves small shoulders. "Dobby, I'm going to look into this, and I promise not to tell anyone about our conversation. I know how dangerous it has become around here, believe me."

But Dobby could not be reassured on this point. Harry didn't know how to take away his fear and now wished he hadn't said anything.

"It's going to get better," he settled on, before departing with a pained smile that was mirrored by the elf.

He guessed he was about five minutes early. After only a few moments a dark shape appeared at the end of the corridor, gliding towards Harry. His robes were blowing dramatically as usual, and he idly wondered if perhaps Snape had learned this trick from Voldemort.

Harry itched to torture Snape through his Mark. But would Snape then alert Voldemort, or was it just something he'd said to stop him from trying?

Snape went past him without a word. He strolled a certain spot of wall for precisely nine deliberate paces, stopping when a door took shape. Behind it lay a familiar long and narrow hall, streaked in the warm evening light of late summer.

"I regret to inform you that we will be continuing your training sessions in the Dark Arts," Snape spoke in a soft, measured voice when the door closed behind Harry.
"Why?" Harry sputtered. That was the last thing he'd expected.

Snape spread his hands as if in supplication. "Why does anyone do anything these days?"

"The Dark Lord ordered this?" Harry asked, incredulous.

"The Dark Lord has always ordered it."

"What? What about-" he almost said his name, but then he remembered who he was talking to, and he clamped his mouth shut.

Snape raised a brow at this. "Albus? He merely went along with my suggestion."

Harry felt his rage come to a boil just underneath his skin. "Don't you dare call him that! You... you traitor!"

He realised he was sounding ridiculous and felt his face becoming warm. He turned his eyes to the shelves of weird items.

"Au contraire, I have always been very loyal to both my masters," Snape drawled.

"That is self-contradictory and you know it."

"My, such complicated words from our resident hero!" Snape taunted. "Perhaps there is hope for you yet, Potter."

"Whatever, I'm not going to stay here just so you can have an excuse to torture me." With that he briskly put his back to the man and headed for the door.

It didn't have a handle.

He drew his wand and pointed it at Snape a little more aggressively then was strictly necessary. "Let me out."

"Now we're getting somewhere. Reducto."

Snape's wand was drawn faster than Harry's eyes could follow. He had just enough time to turn his body sideways before the blasting curse collided with the door, producing a low humming sound.

Harry was quick to retaliate with a blood-boiling curse.

Things escalated fast from there. Harry was determined to make the most of this offer to legitimately bash Snape's brains in, hurling a wide range of dark curses in quick succession, but Snape remained quite unmoving, swiftly countering or cancelling each attack and responding with spells that were far past the realm of merely dangerous: an asphyxiating hex, a Crusher and Devil's Snare were a few of the incantations that Harry narrowly managed to block, dodge or in the last case slice off his body from where it was climbing up his legs and stomach.

He managed to hold on for some ten minutes – the practice over the summer seemed to be paying off - when a searing pain flashed over his legs.

He sank to the ground and looked down. An unfamiliar spell had punctured his shield and trousers, and the result was spreading over his skin.

Snape was quick to close the distance. He crouched to eye-level – not out of any concern for Harry, he knew, but merely to enjoy the sight better.
"Episkey," Harry waved but the huge rash showed no signs of vanishing. It was worth a try, anyway. As he touched the skin it started to swell and blister. His eyes watered and he quickly pulled away.

"A fourth year would know that a minor healing spell won't work on these."

Harry looked up at that. If Snape thought Harry was going to ask him for help he had another thing coming.

"You are pathetically incompetent on the matter of common healing spells. You're far behind on your classmates, as usual. But of course, why would the Chosen One bother when he has so many friends willing to sacrifice themselves for- "

The image of Ginny's bleeding face flashed through his mind and the next thing he knew, he had shoved Snape in the chest. Harry's lips curled with satisfaction as Snape stumbled back, surprise and momentum working together to smash him against the stone floor with a loud thud. The second it took for Snape to get his bearings was enough for Harry – he clamped down on the man's wand arm, instinctively knowing how far up he had to reach.

Nothing happened.

Snape smiled lazily. Harry inwardly scolded himself for his mistake and murmured an Evanesco. The Headmaster froze as his outer robe vanished and Harry's fingers found contact with the Dark Mark. The familiar sensation of icy magic washed over him. His hand was soon numb were it touched Snape, and he couldn't feel the tops of his fingers.

Snape growled and reared up to dislodge him. Harry's grip on Snape's arm stayed firm however, and this time he knew what to look for – or feel for, rather. Remembering a dream from some time ago, he gripped the cursed bond and yanked.

He knew it had worked when Snape's arm twitched and the man let out a long hiss. The movement and the change in the bond was invisible, only existing inside his mind. Harry pulled again on the swirling vortex of magical energy, which appeared to him as a trail of reddish light against the back of his eyelids. Snape's wand dropped to the stone floor with a soft clanging sound.

Snape had closed his eyes. He was actually sweating a bit, Harry noticed with fascination as he peered down over Snape's prone form.

"Potter..." Snape gasped between clenched teeth. "I shall have to... report this to... the Dark Lord."

"You do that, Snape."

The man's eyes snapped open. "Do you have... the faintest idea- "

Harry pushed and Snape fell silent. His eyes fell shut again, as if the mere sight of Harry pained him. Snape then reached with his free hand to feel along the back of his head.

Harry felt a twinge of worry, or guilt, but he shook it off angrily.

The hard part was to maintain the mental force he was continuously placing on the mark: it was like pushing against a wall while trying to maintain the same steady amount of force – at some point you would find that, without noticing, the strength in your hands had gradually diminished.

When Harry felt his grip loosen on the vortex of energy, he re-gripped, each time a bit tighter than the last. As he did this, Snape's pallor became whiter and his grimace more pronounced.
"Very... Slytherin... of you, Potter," Snape whispered through lips that were bitten bloody. It seemed like everyone wanted to point out his un-Gryffindorish behaviour nowadays.

Harry could only guess the amount of pain Snape must be under for it to show so clearly. "Whatever would your... Gryffindor friends think... of their Golden Boy now?"

"They would be glad to see you get the punishment you deserve," Harry hissed. He closed his eyes and twisted: Snape's body curled reflexively around the suffering appendage.

"As usual, you lack all subtlety, Potter... Blindly reacting to... whatever bone is thrown your way."

Harry halted. "What do you mean?" He loosened his mental hold when Snape showed no intention of responding.

Snape, slowly uncurling to shift on his back, laughed, looking quite deranged. Harry's stomach clenched with a sudden feeling of trepidation that he couldn't explain.

"You make it so easy..."

Snape had gone officially around the bend. Harry stood, deciding to call it a day before things became even stranger.

"Thanks for the training, Professor. I won't be needing it any more."

Whatever skills he could be learning weren't worth being around Snape for. Harry just couldn't stand the sight of the man.

Something warm hit him as he turned for the door. He whirled around, touching his back for the possible damage but not finding any.

Snape was sitting upright, completely composed, wand aimed and steady. "This is your homework for our next session," he drawled. "Cure yourself."

Harry froze. "What was the incantation?"

Snape's eyes, although still narrowed a bit in pain, now shimmered with amusement. "It is a neurological curse," he said after watching Harry's terror for a moment. His lip curled. "I will see you tomorrow evening at eight."

"You're kidding."

Snape raised an eyebrow in response.

Harry ran.

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He made it to the library in record time, having to hush his loud breathing under Madame Pince's glare. He went over to the bookcases, then stillled. He glanced back over his shoulder at Madame Pince, who sat bending over something on her desk.

He was wasting his time: he wasn't going to find the right book here.

He abruptly turned and left again, jogging all the way up to the seventh floor. There he came to a full stop in front of the Gryffindor portrait hole.
This was an obstacle he hadn’t foreseen. It was no use arguing with the fat lady, which meant he had to wait for the first Gryffindor to show up.

Ten anxious minutes later, he managed to slip inside behind a first or second-year. He spotted Hermione immediately, reading a book next to Parvati on one of the couches. Ron was nowhere to be seen.

She looked pleasantly surprised to see him and closed it hurriedly. They made their way over to a quiet corner far from the fireplace.

"I know I was going to tell you about my summer tonight, but something's come up and I'm in a bit of a hurry," Harry began. Now that he thought it, he'd promised the exact same thing to Malfoy... "I need your help."

Hermione nodded. "Name it."

"I need you to find me a book on neurological curses in the restricted section, as soon as possible."

Hermione's eyes widened. "What have you gotten yourself into now?"

"Nothing, just a stupid accident," Harry said casually. His fight with Snape was just between him and Snape as far as he was concerned.

She frowned. "Just a neurological curse gone wrong?"

He rubbed his hair back with both hands. "Common Hermione, I don't have time for this now."

"Al right, let me get my bag."

He took up a firm pace again, too keyed-up for small talk. Back in the library he hid himself behind a bookcase while Madame Pince nodded in approval to a small purple pass Hermione flashed her. He watched from around the corner as she browsed a few shelves with purpose, now and then adding another book to the pile in her arms.

He didn't feel any different. Whatever it was that Snape had hit him with must be too slow-working to show any noticeable effects yet, Harry mused. He didn't know if that was good or bad news in this case.

Hermione led the way towards one of the reading tables and immediately started in on a big tome, shoving one across to Harry as well. They read in silence for a few minutes.

Harry found out there were about thirty different types of neurological curses. This fact seemed to sap all the energy out of him in one heartfelt sigh.

He jumped at the sudden tingling feeling of an Identificator washing over him. It flashed in dark- and light-green colours.

When Hermione was through asking him all sorts of questions about the attack (she had healed the rash on his leg in no time, much to his annoyance), her mouth was set in a grim line of frustration. There was little to tell, since Harry hadn't seen the curse responsible or heard an incantation. He confessed that Snape was responsible and that this was a test of his healing skills, which was all true. Determined now, she shot numerous diagnostic questions at him.

Again he had to shake his head. He felt no different whatsoever.
Curfew came and they were ushered out of the library.

"We'll probably know more tomorrow anyway, when you start showing symptoms" Hermione said in what was supposed to be a reassuring tone, after checking out three of the most useful books.

"I can't wait," Harry said dryly.

Hermione shot him a worried look. "Write down whatever you feel that's different from the usual, okay?"

At that moment madame Pince shuffled out to lock the library doors rattling a huge old key.

Harry nodded silently. They parted ways, Hermione trudging up to the seventh floor and Harry down to the dungeons, preparing for a night of likely little sleep.

Harry woke up to the sound of his alarm. Remembering the events of the evening before, he shot up in bed. Immediately he had to clamp the bed frame to stay upright.

Everything was off track. His mind was slogging inside his skull, bearing down heavily on his neck. The sunlight filtering through the lake water was moving on the walls in a way that was giving him a blinding headache for some reason. Like he had the worst hangover while being drunk at the same time.

Damn Snape and damn his curses.

He was surprised he'd slept at all. He wished he was still sleeping now as he glanced at the floor. Snakes and frogs slithered around, thousands of them gliding over each other, blending with the green of the carpet, which made it look like one huge moving animal. The snakes were all eating the frogs, he saw with a frown.

That didn't look good.

His classmates were either gone, or all still sleeping. It was probably the latter. How was he going to reach the bathroom?

He straightened, slowly standing on top of the duvet which moved horribly underneath his feet. He checked that his wand was still in his pyjamas.

The walls were moving. He squeezed his eyes closed for a moment. Ignore it, ignore it.

He would have to jump to Malfoy's bed if he wanted to reach the bathroom without getting caught by the whirling mass below. The snakes were small, but they had eaten all the frogs in about five seconds. Some of them were getting quite big too, and were now eating smaller snakes.

Wait, he could talk to them.

"Could you let me pass, please? I don't want to step on anyone by accident," he hissed in Parseltongue.

The snakes didn't seem to hear, continuing to cannibalise each other.

"Ok I'm going to jump," Harry murmured to the room at large and promptly did so.

The soft bed didn't make for a good jumping ground however, and Malfoy's bed was way out of
reach. He fell between the writhing mass of reptiles with a scream.

He felt nothing. No slimy scales and no piercing bites. Scrambling up he looked down to see the carpet completely clear and uninhabited. The walls still swayed, however.

All the noise had woken the Slytherins, who stuck their heads out with sleepy expressions.

"Sorry, nothing." Harry said to their silent regard.

"You were hissing something," Nott said. "It was Parseltongue, right?"

Harry ignored him, reaching the bathroom mirror with the aid of the wall.

His face didn't look any different. His brain still felt swollen, though. He hoped it would go away like the vision earlier.

With a heroic effort he managed to put on his school attire and reach the Great Hall. He'd kept one hand against the wall on his journey there to keep his balance, since everything was still spinning and distorting weirdly around him. Ignoring it worked best, because whenever he touched something, turned out it wasn't actually moving at all.

People watched him with weird looks along the way, but what else was new.

By the time he sat down he was sweating profusely. He loosened his tie, then noticed his hands were shaking badly.

"Harry!" Hermione hurried over to sit next to him, closing her steady hands over his trembling ones. "How do you feel?"

"Weird. Everything's moving. But it's not really, right?" It looked so real that he wasn't quite sure.

"No." Her brows knit together and she touched a palm to his forehead. "You have a fever."

Harry shrugged, not knowing what to say to that.

"Snape is punishing you, isn't he? It's not an accident."

Harry shrugged again, not having the energy to start a full-out conversation.

"That bastard," Hermione whispered. Harry turned to look at her in surprise.

That was when the candles started falling down from the ceiling. Harry covered his head while chunks of candle wax hit the mugs and plates on the table with a terrible crashing noise. They cracked and broke. Harry chanced a look upwards: a million candles were now falling out of the enchanted sky.

Meanwhile it bothered him somewhat that the long house tables had taken up a dance, spinning faster and faster around him... The bit of tomato he'd eaten threatened to show itself again then, in a decidedly different manner.

Hermione tugged on his arms to lower them. "What is it, Harry? What do you see?"

Harry swallowed, looked at her wildly. "You don't see it?"

Everyone near them froze. Neville quietly asked: "Do you want me to go with you to the infirmary?"
He shook his painful head, which now felt like it might actually crack and break off his neck due to its sheer weight. He buried it in his hands to keep it steady.

He should get away from all these people, these witnesses. This was between him and Snape.

Rage against Snape's underhanded tactics made the air stifling around him. He stood, carefully turning to leave.

The walls were now... No, he would ignore it, it wasn't real.

He was not suddenly going to be squeezed between the stones of Hogwarts, obviously, or everyone here would be screaming.

Oh he was so dizzy. He had to lie down.

He didn't remember escaping the Great Hall, but the next thing he knew, he was walking along a hallway with someone next to him.

It was Neville. Harry saw big white doors ahead. He was walking him to the Infirmary, he realised. But that wouldn't count in Snape's eyes.

"No," he murmured, noticing with embarrassment that he was clinging to Neville's arm.

"I heard that Snape has cursed you, Harry," Neville said calmly. "Don't worry, we're going to report this."

Harry broke away from Neville, stumbling a step to keep his balance. "No don't! I have to do this myself. Who would you tell anyway?"

"McGonagall at least!" Neville said, sounding very angry for some reason. "If you don't, I will! Snape is a horrible git who thrives on his pathetic rivalry with you! All because he's jealous or something!"

A wave of dizziness washed over him, and he threw up.

Then he blackened out.

"Mr. Potter, you're awake I see."

Harry nodded to madame Pomfrey.

"You are suffering from fever and hallucinations, which was caused by a curse or a poison. I have been unable to find a cure as of yet. I asked professor Snape for his expertise on these subjects, but he told me that this is a test of some kind that you will have to solve for yourself." The way she said the word 'test' told him she'd never before heard of something so ridiculous.

"Were you aware of this, Mr. Potter?"

Harry nodded again. His head felt less heavy, at least.

Pomfrey threw up her arms in defeat at that. "Well, I guess I will have to let you go, then!" She stalked away.

Harry watched her go, puzzled by her sudden annoyance.
Standing he donned his robe that Neville handed. They walked out at a slow pace. He found he was actually getting used to seeing everything tilt and bend strangely around him.


"Do you know where Hermione is?"

"She's in the library."

Harry stopped. "Don't we have class?"

"No, we have today off. They're deciding today which classes we are allowed into, remember?"

Harry didn't but he nodded anyway because it was less tiring.

"Come on, let's get you to the library. Hermione wants to try some spells she found."

Hermione and Ron met them at the library doors. They all went in search of an empty classroom, which they found a few doors down. Inside, Harry held up a hand to ward off her explanation. "Please, just... try what you have."

Hermione nodded grimly, raising her wand. She uttered several counter-curses, but afterwards he didn't feel any different, except for a tingling of magic over his torso, where he'd been repeatedly hit.

Hermione's shoulders sagged as she put away her wand. "He won't get away with it this time, Harry, you'll see," Ron exclaimed, frustrated.

Harry's headache was back full force, flaming along the back of his skull. He grimaced and silently gestured to Ron to lower his voice a bit. "Sorry mate," Ron whispered.

The snakes were also back all of a sudden. They crawled over the walls, thousands of them. That made sense, Harry thought, because the walls were green. He didn't mind them so much. What did bother him was the way he was unable to keep standing when the floor was moving up and down. He was forced to sit down in one of the empty chairs in the corner.

"What's he going to do Ron, report him to the Headmaster? Oh wait, he is the Headmaster!" Hermione snapped back.

When Hermione got sarcastic, you were really in trouble as a rule, as it meant that she was genuinely worried. Harry dejectedly lowered his head onto his folded hands and closed his eyes. Someone whispered something, but he was out before he could register the words.

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When he woke a second time, the sun was setting. He immediately recognised the window as belonging to Gryffindor tower. He lay in a soft bed, and Ron was sitting next to him.

Ron shook his head to his silent inquiry. "Other than what we tried already, we didn't find anything useful. We thought it was best to let you sleep, since you didn't seem to be in any pain."

"I wasn't," Harry said, sitting up.

"And now?"

"I have a huge headache that doesn't leave. And everything seems to be moving. Other than that
"I'm fine."

There was a spider the size of Ron's head on his shoulder, but he thought it best not to mention it. It shifted and scurried away over Ron's stomach and legs, to the ground and from there out the window. Harry shivered, glad he wasn't afraid of spiders like Ron.

"What time is it?"

"It's eight-thirty."

"What?" He was supposed to meet with Snape half an hour ago! "I have to go."

"Where, to that back-stabbing git?"

Harry grabbed at his head with both hands as pain spiked through it. "Don't say that, Ron."

"What, that he's a git?"

Harry groaned, closing his eyes.

"Wait," Ron said suddenly, shifting forward. "Every time we mention him you're in pain, aren't you?"

Harry nodded carefully, struck by the exact same realisation. He also realised how the hallucinations got particularly intense sometimes – the floor was now crawling with spiders.

"So, we found it, we know how it works! We have to tell Hermione-"

"You can tell her, I have to go see him." Harry knew it was not merely spoken words that the curse responded to, and he was careful to keep his thoughts neutral on the subject of the Headmaster. This was only possible when imagining Snape in his thoughts as a stranger he knew nothing about. "If I don't show now he may never lift the curse, and who knows when we'll ever find a cure."

Ron looked like he wanted to stop him, or perhaps go with him to punch Snape in the face, but then his shoulder drooped. "You're right, but keep your guard up. I don't like this one bit, Harry."

Harry patted his shoulder. He descended the stairs on shaky legs. Outside the common room it was just a small walk to the Room of Requirement.

The door was still there. There was a small indentation where a handle would normally be, which he pulled. Inside the room looked the same as always, except for a fireplace in the corner and yellow balls of light, all the same size, that floated in the air to battle the twilight. Snape was staring at the flames, but turned and approached him as soon as the door closed.

"I have told you before I don't tolerate tardiness."

"I had some problems getting here." Harry said. The more he looked at the man, the angrier he got and the more the walls shifted crazily around him. The floor, filled with glittering creatures, lurched and he stumbled. Snape gave a satisfying smirk. The floor tilted some more. With nothing around to use for support Harry fell to the ground, cheeks burning with a mixture of anger and embarrassment.

Snape tilted his head and regarded Harry's sitting form. "What problems, precisely? Don't tell me that in all this time you haven't found the counter yet."

Harry avoiding looking at Snape as he climbed back up and made his way towards the fire. He
chose the comfortable sofa. "No I haven't," he managed to force out. "I did discover that the curse is neurological as well as conditional."

From the corner of his eye Harry saw the shadowy form of his professor come closer and retake his seat near the fire, opposite the sofa.

"On what premise?"

Harry figured he'd rather finish this sooner rather than later, whatever it was that Snape wanted, and so he tried to be as precise as possible. "On the premise that anyone near me, including myself, who mentions you in a negative context in thought or in words, causes the curse to worsen and causes hallucinations."

Snape smirked at that, which made him look strangely young. Harry's hands twitched in his sleeves, wanting to pull out his wand.

"Other symptoms?"

"Dizziness, vertigo, headaches." Harry ground his teeth. "Black-outs, a heavy feeling of the head."

He chanced a look. Snape had gone back to watching him with an indiscernible expression. The flickering light from the fire accentuated the contrast between his black hair and pale skin.

"And what did you make of the original curse itself?"

Harry tried remembering what it was that Hermione had said. He shook his head.

"You let your friends do all the work, did you not? And didn't even bother to ask what they'd found," Snape sneered.

Harry balled his fists inside his pockets, remaining silent.

"Well?"

What the hell did Snape want? "Yes, sir."

"The considerable brainpower of Granger was let loose on the situation, and still you couldn't find the cure. Imagine that you would've had to find it on your own, with no friends to help you. Do you now appreciate the kind of knowledge you could have learned, that you threw away with that little stunt yesterday?" Snape's face remained unmoving but his jaw was tense with fury.

Ah, now they were getting somewhere.

"If you don't find a way to tame your undisciplined mind, to curb your primitive whims and impulses, slave as you are to your emotions, I predict that the Dark Lord will soon become bored with you."

He let that sink in for a moment, then continued in low tones, gradually building in volume. "He detests the undisciplined, the uncontrolled. Fools who wear their hearts proudly on their sleeves, who cannot control their emotions, who wallow in sad memories and allow themselves to be provoked this easily - weak people, in other words - they stand no chance against his powers!"

Harry sat frozen, trying to focus his thoughts on the dancing flames.

"Do you imagine that you are important in some way Potter? That you are special? That the Dark Lord is going to think twice about killing you when you turn out to be less than he expected?"
"What does he want from me then, hm?" Harry raged, turning on Snape. "You must know all about it right? Close pals as you are?"

"I might." Snape's eyebrows rose a fraction. "I believe you told me lessons were over, Potter. Surely you don't need my help?"

Shit. He remembered saying that in a bout of... something, anger? "Right," Harry gave a tight nod, not caring how it increased the headache, "I wouldn't dream of it."

"You have not demonstrated to me that you are worth my time or explanations."

Snape waved his wand. Harry jumped but the room merely stopped moving. His headache was gone, and the snakes that had been twisting over the mantelpiece had vanished. He could've sighed in relief.

They stared at each other. Harry imagined that their resentment was quite evenly matched.

"He is a handful, isn't he?" A glacial voice intoned behind them.

Harry jumped. Snape didn't move a muscle at the unexpected intrusion. He gave the Dark Lord, who had appeared out of nowhere to stand behind the sofa – Harry certainly hadn't seen the door move – a nod and said: "Quite so, my Lord."

Long fingers that made him think of the spiders' legs from his hallucinations crept over his shoulders and held them loosely against the back of the sofa. Harry tried to remain relaxed, but it was hard to do so while Voldemort's gaze burned into the back of his head.

"How is his training coming along?"

Harry scowled at the flames. Voldemort was apparently no different from the other adults in his life in that he did not count Harry as part of the conversation.

"His spell-work has improved over the summer. His attitude has not."

Harry swallowed. It was one thing for Snape to be angry, quite another when it was Voldemort.

"I see." Voldemort's thumbs skirted casually over his neck. "We've talked about this, haven't we Harry?"

"Yes s-sir."

"I've actually come to bring you a present. I hope you will show me more gratitude than you've shown Severus."

"I will." Voldemort had turned his nails to Harry's skin and now dug them in deep. Harry took a surprised breath from the pain of it. "My Lord," he whispered. The nails retracted. Harry turned, feeling an irresistible urge to know how long they were.

They were – long, that is. They were white, not yellowish like Snape's and now tipped in red, like some kind of macabre nail polish.

Voldemort stepped to the side to let Harry see what was behind him.

A body, on the floor.

With a jolt he saw that it was Umbridge. Her clothes were dirty, not their usual vivid pink, but the
face was unmistakable. Her cheeks were a healthy colour – she wasn't dead, then. She just looked like she was sleeping peacefully on the floor.

Harry closed his mouth with a snap. Voldemort was studying his reaction with some amusement.

"Severus, I have some matters to discuss with you."

Snape nodded, having unglued his gaze from the floor.

"But first, Harry, show me what you've learned from my dear Severus. *Ennervate.*"

One quote is directly taken from Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince, courtesy of Rowling.

What do you think? Please share your thoughts!
Chapter 16

Umbridge's eyes blinked open and she squinted at the ceiling before scrambling to sit. She caught sight of the company and her eyes bulged.

The woman's usually stiffly-nurtured hair-cut had sagged into a heap upon her head. Harry felt a sting of satisfaction at watching her pudgy arms tremble in fear.

Voldemort beckoned. Blanking his expression, Harry rounded the sofa to stand next to him. A hand landed on his shoulder. This close Harry could feel the subtle pressure of magic which the man radiated, like water lapping against his skin.

His scar prickled, making him realize it had been quiet today. He remembered a night in Dumbledore's office, when they had discussed the changing dynamics of the bond. Snape had believed that Voldemort was clueless: "The bond must have strengthened to such an extent that the Dark Lord is not capable of blocking when he is most... distressed."

But the slimy git had been Voldemort's agent all along. Of course Voldemort knew. He just didn't care.

"Well?" Voldemort drawled, shaking Harry from his murky thoughts.

Harry drew his wand but held it off to the side, not quite ready, if ever, to start. He repressed a shudder imagining what sort of thing would satisfy Voldemort's thirst for bloody entertainment.

Umbridge now stood, swaying a little. Her face morphed into a scowl of wrinkles and squinty eyes as she regarded Harry. She then focused on Voldemort.

"Hem, my Lord." She gave a little tilt of her head in acknowledgement. "There seems to be a misunderstanding. I'm sure we can come to some kind of arrangement. I have been serving your cause faithfully for years – I have devoted myself completely to ridding the populace of the beastly blood. I am -"

Voldemort turned his head, which shut her up as effectively as a curse, and regarded him with impatience.

Harry wondered what Umbridge had done to incur Voldemort's wrath. She was a fanatic hunter of muggleborns, the papers cited her on a regular basis as an expert on the subject. He thought she'd fit into the new system like a tailored glove. He felt a sudden burst of anger at what Voldemort was forcing him to do.
His fingers though, they were itching to let loose against the horrible woman.

Her expression changed into a simpering smile as she noticed his hesitancy. He recalled an evening in her office – that same smile on her face when his left hand was being ripped open, drenching the paper in his own blood; when he was forced to drop the quill for the first time.

His surroundings faded into a blur.

He let loose the tight-wrung pulse in his arms. Umbridge skirted backwards from the blasting curse. She skidded to a stop halfway, unhurt. He threw a Lung Burner for more effect and the woman gave a scream that stroked Harry's ears. She muffled it the moment she realized that the action was increasing the symptoms.

Satisfied, he glanced to his left, but the Dark Lord looked unimpressed. Harry forced himself to stay in place as the man's magic made little stings crawl along skin.

"Do you imagine I am a patient man, Potter?" Voldemort said, gaze fixed on the crumbled form some ten meters away.

Harry rubbed his hands for a moment – they had become cold from the tension in his limbs. "No, my Lord." He scolded then, clenching his teeth. How natural did the honorific pass his lips completely without permission from his brain.

"Then show me something worthy of my attention," the tall man whispered. On Harry's other side Snape shifted, but he didn't dare look his way. What could be suitably impressive for the bloody Dark Lord, he wondered. But the answer was obvious. He relaxed his shoulders and unfocused his gaze.

"Imperio."

A warm buzz fell over him as the spell connected with Umbridge. He sighed, the tension in his back seeping away at once. Calm returned and he wondered why he had been standing so rigidly before. Everything was as it should be. The play on the stage had narrowed down to a simple narrative of master and slave.

*Come here.*

Umbridge stood and made her way over like a wooden doll. The magical contours of her body shimmered in Harry's thoughts, his will deciding their shape. He imagined the form to bend, as it seemed like that would be satisfying. In front of him Umbridge sank to her knees, the tip of her nose touching the floor.

The sting in his belly was back, making his eyelids droop a little. He searched for something to fuel it.

*What are you most afraid of? Say it.*

Umbridge's mouth opened. "I am afraid I will get infected by a half-breed."

He narrowed his eyes, annoyance cutting into his drowsiness. "That's not possible. You're supposed to be the expert on this... You're afraid to get Lycanthropy, is that what you're saying?"

Umbridge twitched, fighting the curse. He concentrated hard on the magical shape in his mind and she slumped back into a complacent state at once, as if he had pulled on invisible strings.
"Yes," she mumbled finally.

"Well, we can arrange that, can't we?" Harry felt a smile grow that might split his face in two. Voldemort was breeding armies after all.

"We could," Voldemort unexpectedly cut in. "But it would take too long."

"Of course," Harry's clouded mind conceded to the man with a flamboyant half-bow. "What else, Umbridge, hm?"

He felt a kind of detached surprise with his own casual manner; it was the small part of his brain not affected by the amused buzz along his scar and the absolute confidence surging through him.

"That someone would break my wand."

As Harry thought of doing just that, Umbridge obediently presented the item. *Break it,* he whispered into her mind and she did, snapping the rather small wand in two. He cancelled the curse.

At once Umbridge reared back, the pieces clattering to the floor from her slack fingers. She stared down in horror at what remained of her wand.

"No! Repair it, now!" she screeched, her eyes wild.

Harry just laughed. He jumped when the pale hand snug back into his vision to press down on his shoulder.

Voldemort whispered: "Finish it."

Harry stared at him. "What?"

There was a moment of silence in which not a muscle moved in the Dark Lord's face. "I don't have all evening, Potter," he said.

Harry took a shuddering breath. He let his wand arm fall, which was betraying small tremors. Right. Finish it, clear enough, no explanation needed. He just had to... kill her. Like Voldemort had killed his parents. And Sirius.

Umbridge was frozen into wide-eyed stillness. He looked down at the wand of holly.

"Oh you can't?" Voldemort jeered when it became clear he wasn't going to move. "I was hoping for that, actually. Dobby."

Harry's head snapped up. Dobby appeared with a soft plop in front of them, bowed low.

"Dobby, get the Granger girl."

And Dobby was gone again. It all went so fast that only after he appeared a second time, clutching a bewildered Hermione, did Harry react. Raising his wand he placed himself between her and Voldemort. He heard a startled take-in of breath behind him.

"Potter," Snape drew his attention, then shook his head once, sharply.

"Dobby, go and take her with you," Harry said, turning back to the Dark Lord, alert for any wand movements.
"Dobby is so sorry, Harry Potter, but he cannot disobey the Headmaster in this." Another plopping sound signaled his departure. His scar had turned into full-blown agony again.

"Restrain him," Voldemort ordered. Something jerked him backwards and into black cloth, his wand torn from his hand.

"Behave and I won't have to restrain you with magic," Snape drawled behind him. Harry jerked away but paid for it when ropes cut into his arms to squeeze his wrists together behind his back. Hermione had drawn her wand as well, but hadn't cast anything yet. He felt terrified for her.

"Next time I expect to see more exotic curses from you Potter. Like this one." Voldemort made a couple of small slices through the air with his wand. Hermione screamed. Blood was welling in lines on her face. One cut narrowly missed an eye.

Harry wrestled in Snape's hold with renewed energy. He heard an Immobulus cast behind him and all his movements stopped. Damn him.

Voldemort was sketching the air with the precision of a muggle surgeon. Harry was still able to keep Hermione in his field of vision. She had muttered a healing charm on her face, but Voldemort had already started in on her chest.

Stop it! He wanted to shout, as if it would be any use. It hadn't helped Narda any. Whenever he begged, it was too late already, the damage done.

Hermione had switched to counterattack, animating nearby books and whole bookcases to throw themselves against Voldemort. They crumbled against an invisible shield surrounding the man. The chandelier did catch him by surprise however. Not expecting a threat from above, the man was forced to sidestep as it crushed into the floor.

Voldemort laughed. Without any outwards gesture from the man, Hermione was lifted off the ground and thrown into the glass debris. She moaned. The chandelier had shattered into many nasty thick and curvy shards, which were now tearing into her backside. Meanwhile, Voldemort's efficient gestures kept tearing into her front, moving downwards in orderly fashion.

Harry swallowed against the dryness in his mouth. He wanted to close his eyes, to think, but of course that was impossible. He was forced to watch as her blood turned into small rivulets down her sides. As she slowly, carefully turned her head to catch his eyes. Hers were starting to droop.

His brains were the only thing he could use now. With a mighty effort he focused on his scar and the sickening feeling of satisfaction that it gave off, warm, sticky, and tried to grab at it somehow. Alright, I will do it, I will kill her. I will kill Umbridge if you stop this!

The last words he screamed in his mind and felt them thunder and echo, connect with something, with Voldemort.

The Dark Lord lowered his wand and the corner of Harry's unmoving eyes met his gleaming gaze. Voldemort gave a jerk of his head. Harry was released and fell forward on slack muscles. His skin was still tingling with adrenaline. He scrambled over to Hermione, then realized he didn't have is wand.

"Heal her!

"No Potter." Voldemort looked down on him, eyes half-lidded. "Not until you've done your part."

Snape was next to him in a beat and stuck out his holly wand.
"I will get you for this," Harry hissed at the Potions Master as he snatched it from his fingers, uncaring of his audience. He didn't wait to see Snape's reaction, stalking up to Umbridge who had sneaked to the farthest corner of the hall during the action.

The hatred that warmed his blood worked to block his deep-rooted aversion of what he was about to do. He managed to keep his thoughts simple and focused, for which he would feel grateful later. Umbridge was heaving great breaths, sweat trickling down the sides of her face. He raised his wand. It felt eager and warm in his fingers, feeling its master's urgency.

Not Avada Kedavra. He was a little too attached to his soul being whole for that, thank you very much. Besides, he couldn't imagine actually meaning it.

"Asphyxias."

Umbridge fell forward with a large exhalation, as if fainting. Considerable power and focus was needed to make the lungs compress completely. Partial suffocation would of course also do the trick; it was actually the curse's intent for the victim to suffer for several minutes in agonizing half-breaths. But he was damned if he was going to give them a show.

Umbridge rolled unto her back then, twisting her head left and right, hands scrabbling at the stones. Her struggles soon became weaker until shortly after, she moved no more.

The wards surrounding Hogwarts were in the shape of a dome. It made sense if he thought about it: wards reaching all the way into the outer atmosphere seemed a bit excessive. Somewhere to the east of the castle, there was a point where you couldn't climb any higher. His Firebolt had stayed unmoving for a while when Harry began to realize he wasn't getting anywhere. From that highest point he had spiraled his broom downwards in increasingly wider circles, exploring the limits of his confinement.

The weather was lovely but the grounds were empty. All the castle's inhabitants gathered in the Great Hall for lunch. He didn't feel like eating. His stomach was empty on food but heavy with anxiety.

He also didn't feel like stumbling upon a certain Dark Lord, who might still be somewhere in the castle.

Harry felt a shudder pass over his neck as he watched the giant squid circling slowly along the opposite shore. Voldemort might have even decided to join in for lunch. He hoped McGonagall was annoying the hell out of him, in that case.

Sitting down in the long grass, he smirked. That would be just like her, actually.

Her steady presence made Hogwarts not quite the awful place it could be. Dozens of students had knocked upon her door for council already, sad or frightened. After ten minutes they came back out with a spring in their step and with quiet resolve in their eyes. Hermione had visited McGonagall three times, she said.

Thoughts of Hermione made the soreness in his throat worse and he quickly lifted his aching eyes to search the huge expanse of water. But the lake was undisturbed, its surface reflecting the beautiful light-blue colour of the sky like a giant mirror.

The gates, he had found out, were guarded by Dementors. He had been grabbing fistfuls of hair, flooded by horrible visions of dead loved ones, too panicked to figure it out. Awful seconds passed
before it dawned on him what was there. He managed to stumble back onto his broom to make a break for it.

Someone was standing behind him. It took three seconds for him to aim his wand—ridiculous, that. The intruder held a hand over his eyes to block the sunlight, but Harry recognized the posture and hair at once.

"Sorry," he mumbled, putting the wand away.

Ron shook his head. He lowered his body against the tree trunk they were sharing and stretching his long limbs in front of him. "Don't be sorry 'bout that. I'm glad you're on top of things."

Harry snorted.

"Yeah, yeah," Ron tossed his head, his tone sharp. "You know what Neville said to me? Focus on the good stuff, it'll keep your mind strong." He proceeded to pull out grass helms with his right hand. He stared at the result for a moment, deep in thought, then threw it away to demolish the next patch of lawn.

"Neville's a surprise," Harry remarked. Neville's quiet presence next to him the other day had been a welcome sort of strength for Harry during the hallucinations. Completely unrelated to this, Neville was also looking out for the lower year students. They often got drawn into fights with the Slytherin gangs roaming the hallways. Because of his efforts all student of third year downwards could now be seen walking in twos or threes (or more) to and from their classes. In just a few days' time the level of harassment had been significantly reduced.

The Slytherins were getting bored though. With all the privileges given to them (when the perpetrator was a Slytherin, many teachers turned a blind eye to whatever rules there were. As a result, the power balance among the student population had changed), they would probably soon be moving on to something else.

"I don't know," Ron mused, "Still waters run deep."

They fell into a pleasant silence. Harry closed his eyes, determined to enjoy the quiet with his friend. He realized that the lousier things were, the more he valued it. This had always been true; it just hadn't been true all of the time.

"I went to give her her schedule, we just got them at lunch. Where were you, actually? Never mind. The doors to the Hospital Wing were locked now." Ron shrugged as if to say, I had to try.

Harry took a moment to study his friend. Ron's eyes were red-rimmed. He was tense and he looked like all his energy had been sapped from him. Nevertheless, the fact that he was here, sitting next to him, made Harry's limbs feel strangely light.

It was past two by the time Harry had been released from the Room. He practically ran the whole way down to the hospital wing. The doors were locked though, and knowing there was no way he would get into Gryffindor tower at this hour to talk to Ron, he was forced to wait until morning.

By the time the sunlight filtered through the curtains Harry finally managed to doze a little. When his early alarm went off it felt like he hadn't slept at all. He walked with sleepy detachment up to the seventh floor. There he asked an early riser, a member of his horrible and unauthorized fan club, to fetch Ron. Her wide eyes studied his face for a moment before she turned with a wink, making his cheeks burn.

Ron returned alone, fortunately. He quickly picked up on Harry's serious expression. Harry gave a
short explanation of Hermione's predicament on the way to the hospital wing. The doors were unlocked this time. There was one occupied bed at the far end of the hall.

Ron noticed with a frown that Harry had come to a halt some distance away. After a second of hesitation, he softly called her name through the white screen.

"Ron," a tight whisper returned. Ron's eyes found Harry's, then he turned back to ask: "Hermione? Is it alright if we come in?"

Hermione must have whispered her assent. Ron ducked behind the curtains. Like a spectator to his own doom, Harry felt compelled to follow.

"What the hell?" Ron exclaimed. Hermione lifted a finger to her lips, her eyes flickering to the left.

"Hermione....," Ron went on in a pained tone, sitting down in the visitor's chair to clasp her hand in both of his.

Hermione's upper body was completely covered in bandage, it went right up to her elbows and was wrapped tightly around her neck and the sides of her face, which was drawn and tired-looking. She braced one hand against the bedding to slowly pull herself up to a sitting position.

"Ah, that's better," she whispered. Her eyes flickered between Ron's and Harry's. "I'm glad you're here."

"What happened?" The white was clearly visible in Ron's eyes. "You were... Voldemort did this, right?" He turned to Harry, silently demanding an explanation.

"Yes." Harry's mouth suddenly felt bone-dry. He looked from Ron's slack jaw to Hermione's intent gaze. He couldn't read her expression.

He would go for the truth. His friends had done everything to help him, after all. "I- as you know I went to Snape's appointment last night." He explained that what they had thought of as Dumbledore's training sessions were actually Voldemort's; that Snape had cured him.

"I don't know what he wanted," Harry remarked, shaking his head. "One minute he's enjoying my account of all he made me suffer, the next he's scolding me for being undisciplined, telling me that the Dark Lord will grow bored with me. As if he actually cares."

His eyes which were roaming the white sheets were drawn to Hermione again. "Then Voldemort showed up. With Umbridge, she was unconscious. He wanted me to show him what I learned from Snape."

He noticed he was shaking. He found a second chair nearby and sank into it, elbows on knees. He burrowed his hands into his hair and proceeded to explain to the white-tiled floor how he had chosen to use an Imperio on Umbridge, how he made her break her wand.

"I thought that would be enough for him." He shook his head, thinking back to his own gullibility. The Dark Lord enjoyed pain, destruction. How could Harry in any way fail to keep that in the front of his thoughts? He knew what drove the psychopath like he knew the back of his hand. Hermione might not have been called up if he had been a little quicker to think things through to their logical conclusion.

He flinched violently when a hand grasped his shoulder. Ron's arm froze halfway in the gesture. Harry straightened and caught his arm in silent apology. The corner of Ron's mouth lifted. They retook their respective chairs. Hermione hadn't moved from her silent observation. It was
beginning to grate on his nerves.

He heaved a great sigh that seemed to travel all the way into the bones of his feet. Just when he opened his mouth to continue, Hermione shushed him with a violent gesture.

The curtains were briskly pushed aside and Madame Pomfrey stepped in with a pinched look on her face. Her gaze softened as she saw them.

"Mr. Weasley, Mr. Potter, I'm afraid these aren't visiting hours."

"Madame Pomfrey please let us have ten minutes," Ron said, hands folded against his chest in emphasis.

"Ten more minutes, you mean," Madame Pomfrey returned, but she went with a smile, closing the screen behind her.

"You were saying," Ron went on with a strain in his voice.

"He said, 'finish her'. Umbridge. I had to, he wanted me to-- and I hesitated." His mouth strained into a horrible resemblance of a smile. "As if I could do anything about it. That's just me, wanting to rescue everyone, even if it's her."

Ron was looking at him with awful pity in his eyes. Harry lowered his head into his hands again. "I'm so sorry Hermione."

The silence that followed strained against his ears. She had tears in her eyes. They hadn't been there when she was being tortured.

"You couldn't have known," Hermione whispered.

"Your voice," Harry wanted to know. "Will you be able to…" He didn't have the courage to finish the sentence.

"In a little while," she breathed. His shoulders sagged at this. He closed his eyes.

"Harry," Ron snapped behind him. "Go on, I want to hear it."

Harry turned to him, somehow bolstered to continue. "He summoned Dobby, made him fetch Hermione to the Room. He said he knew I wouldn't be able to do it."

Harry chewed his lip, hard after explaining the spell Voldemort had used. "I… don't know how deep it went, but I saw the blood. I was restrained by Snape. I couldn't help her." He left it at that.

He kept his head bowed, his knuckles pressing into the sheets.

"But he stopped at some point, right?" Ron said.

"Yes," he sneered at himself. "When I managed to get at the connection between us, between our minds. I told him, or projected actually, that I would do it if he'd stop."

The result was obvious, the evidence in front of them.

Hermione held out her arm, which he took. She mouthed: It's ok.

He had sunken onto the bed, he realized the next moment, her hand trapped against his cheek as his head pressed into the bedding. He became aware of the homely flowery scent of the Hogwarts
linen, which never failed to relax him.

Now they knew. From this day onwards, he was no longer Harry Potter. He was Harry Potter who had murdered someone.

The sound of something smashing violently into the wall reached his ears. A clatter of wood on tiles followed. He chanced a look. There was a spray of debris, the remains of a chair, spread out in a wide area. Ron's eyes were sharp as they studied him, his fists balled.

"Hermione's right. We have to know what he's up to. Why he's doing this, playing with you, like he wants you to become some kind of Death Eater."

"I've also been thinking about that," Hermione whispered. "I would like to discuss it, but later, alright?" They all agreed it was better to reconvene in a more private setting, when Hermione had been discharged.

They heard Finally Madame Pomfrey's brisk strides and quickly vanished the pieces of chair that lay strewn everywhere. She had had enough. "She needs to sleep," she scolded them.

Ron had to clearly force himself to stand. Hermione whispered to Madame Pomfrey, who drew close to the bed to hear. Whatever was discussed made the woman think for a moment, before she nodded.

"Understandable." She turned and said: "Ms. Granger would ask if one of you would stay with her during her napping."

Ron promptly sat down again. When Pomfrey was out of sight Harry grinned at Hermione, which she weakly returned. Things still didn't feel quite right between them, like an invisible screen had been put up, but he didn't know how to fix it.

Standing in the hallway and feeling decidedly unsociable, he considered that what he needed was the quiet exhilaration of a fast ride on his broom, and the wind roaring in his ears.

A few hours later and the first cloud was yet to be spotted.

"What classes did she get?"

Ron appeared very intent on the blades of grass in his palm. "I don't know. I can't read it but she probably nailed it, right? Mine could be better. There're just four classes in my schedule. Whatever. I'm not really feeling my 'ambitions' these days anyway." He gave a depreciating laugh.

Harry thought of summer class, and Lucius Malfoy explaining that Muggle-borns would be allowed to attend some classes that they were good at – but others they were never allowed to attend, like Dark Arts and Elementary Magic. With a sinking feeling in his stomach, he imagined that Hermione's class schedule might be rather empty. Ron was a pureblood though, so how did that figure?

"And mine?"

Ron had just been waiting for this cue it seemed, as his left hand held out a letter the next instant, gaze lingering on the ground.

"Thanks." The moment Ron let go, ink appeared on the slip of paper, spreading out to form the lines of a table for the seven days of the week.
His was chockfull.

He blinked a few times. He had Wednesday and Friday evening off, and Sunday.

"We have classes on Saturday."

"You got classes? I've got something called 'ground maintenance work'. Just an excuse for free labour, is how I see it. So, what do you have?"

Harry looked at the schedule on Saturday, but got distracted by a small box in the evening. Below the rather vague description of "Junior Meeting" there was drawn a tiny symbol of some kind. Peering more closely, he saw what it was. He threw the schedule away in a fit of anger. It floated back to land pathetically at his feet.

"What?" Ron said, picking it up to stare at the little figure. His arms lowered after a few seconds. He looked to be deep in thought.

The symbol was a skull with a snake hanging from its teeth.

Last night, after Hermione and Umbridge had been carted off by House Elfs in ghastly similar ways, something that made nausea jump up Harry's throat, Voldemort still wasn't done with him.

The horrible red eyes took in Harry's disheveled state. His scar pulsed with pleased contentment, in bizarre contrast with his own state of mind. He swallowed before the acid in his throat got any further, aware of the greedy stare that missed nothing.

Gliding into his personal space, Voldemort took Harry's tightly balled wand-hand in his, turning it over, all the while ignoring the weapon pointed his way. Harry blinked, noticing the bruises and cuts that marred his forearms for the first time, which were the result of Snape's tying spell. Voldemort's wand glided with supple elegance over his wrist and arm, healing the marks until the skin was completely unblemished. Voldemort repeated this with the other arm.

The man was laying it on thick, Harry thought. The audacity to think that Harry could be mollified after this. If anything drove him these days, it was the burning desire for the destruction of this monster. Or was that the point: that there was no point?

Later, out of curiosity, he had looked it up, and he had been furious with himself: a blasting curse from such close range was lethal in 98% of cases. It would have meant one less Horcrux to hunt, at the least.

A tight smile flitted over the snake-like features, as if he'd read Harry's turmoil. Voldemort's thumb gave one slow stroke over the back of his left hand, making his insides crawl, before he released him.

"You see Severus, with the right incentive…," Voldemort drawled.

Snape, standing a respectful distance away, nodded – more like a small bow – and said: "I draw much inspiration from your method, my Lord."

"See that you do," Voldemort said distractedly. Harry briefly met his gaze and hastily looked away.

"Don't worry, little one," the Dark Lord hissed in Parseltongue. "I've already seen everything there is to see. Remember our exchange in my summer house?"
Harry felt his face heat up with rage and shame. Voldemort had been fishing Harry's mind for information on Dumbledore that day. The Legilimency spell had never hurt so much as it had then. All his memories ripped open… It seemed impossible that Voldemort would have seen everything. Harry bit the inside of his cheek. Voldemort was just messing with him again.

"Now, I have a new assignment for you," the Dark Lord had whispered eagerly, obviously enjoying himself. "Another special class, let us say. You will find it in your schedule."

Ron's casual changing of the subject drew Harry from his grim recollection and back to the sunny day.

"Malfoy was looking constipated again at lunch."

"The little spy," Harry breathed. "Waiting to see when I'll slip up. What do they think, I'm going to join the resistance from out here? Great idea with this brand on my forehead." He held up the schedule. "He's probably got a copy of this. My personal little stalker."

"Try to see it as having a bodyguard for free," Ron said thoughtfully. "Now when you're in a tight situation, you can just throw him in."

Harry grinned. "Good idea. Though I think he'd rather watch me get beaten up. Then he would tell me off to the teachers for something completely unrelated."

Thinking of Draco made him wonder when the other shoe would drop. The blond still hadn't let on, saving the juicy story of his father's work for later, undoubtedly, when Harry had landed himself at the bottom of the social pecking order. At the speed things were going, that would be about next week.

Ron shrugged. Harry felt a surge of camaraderie: he couldn't care less about school dynamics at the moment. He stole another sideways glance. Ron had closed his eyes, hands behind his head as he drank in the warmth of the sun. There had been no mention of Umbridge yet, or anything else about that morning. Harry had braced himself for a confrontation with Ron's latent fury from the moment he'd come to sit down beside him. He imagined that Ron, watching over a severely injured Hermione for half the morning, would be filled with a righteous anger. It would only be natural. Ron was quite the actor in that case.

"Ron."

"Hm."

"About yesterday… what I did."

Ron interrupted, eyes still closed: "You did what you had to do. I would have done the same. And I wouldn't have been able to connect with that monster. You saved her, man." His jaw clenched for a moment.

"Ron, you're being very rational about this."

Ron's eyes snapped open to give him a level look. "I have to. We all have to. I'm not saying I don't get the shivers from what you- what he made you do. All I'm saying is we shouldn't let them get to us. So what if you killed Umbridge. Good for you. We still got each other, that's what it's all about."

Harry wrapped his arms around his knees and stared numbly at the patches of earth exposed by
Ron's digging. He felt just as exposed, his throat constricted.

By silent agreement they had, quite gratifyingly, missed their first classes of the year. It was Charms. Flitwick would understand. Harry marveled for a moment that in a Voldemort-ruled world, he could still take classes together with Ron. Ron was just surprised he got in at all.

After that it was Herbology for the both of them, which meant they just had to walk fifty meters to the greenhouses. As he had suspected, Ms. Terrence was a very kind teacher. She had left off her orange-striped hat for now, probably to keep it from getting dirty in the mess of students and uprooted earth. She had him pair with Neville again, to some covert looks of jealousy from his classmates (they were paired with Ravenclaw).

He conveyed this to Neville, who just said: "I'm glad that I can give you a break here at least, Harry." When he looked up there was no pity in Neville's eyes, just an intense look that seemed to be making an expensive sort of promise. Harry ducked his head at that, eyes burning.

His seesawing emotions frustrated him – ever since last night he seemed to be on the brink of something. Whatever it was, he hoped it would keep for just a little while longer until it was surrounded by the privacy of his bed curtains.

He was beginning to think Neville and Luna would hit it off splendidly. Actually, playing matchmaker would be just the frivolous distraction he needed to take his mind off things. He resolved to do a little subtle scheming and see what came of it. Come to think, he'd better check with Hermione first. She always seemed to know what was going on before anything actually happened.

When she was being tortured, she had bent her head towards him, he mused, but what was that look she had send him?

"Harry!" someone said sharply, shaking him back to his surroundings.

"What?" Harry looked down, startled. Two of their specimen were making a break for it, and he quickly grabbed onto both their roots just before they slipped from the table's edge. "Sorry."

Neville grinned. "Don't worry. My talent will get us through."

Harry laughed, shaking his head. "You've changed."

"In what way?"

Harry smiled. "In a good way."

The evening owls brought with them the usual tension. Harry realized that all of Gryffindor had been conditioned to equal owls to bad omens.

Hermione had been released from the Hospital Wing on the condition that she would start with half days this week and rest for the remainder of the day. The bandages had uncovered nothing but undamaged skin. She spread out the Evening Prophet in front of her, Ron's arm around her shoulder. The three of them tensed as they all read the headline:

*Albus Dumbledore breaks into Ministry holding cells, escapes with convicted werewolf*
By Zemlas Lorrobob

**Albus Dumbledore, wanted criminal and former Chief of the Wizengamot, showed up last night at the Ministry surprising friend and foe alike, proceeding to the Ministry holding cells where he managed to overpower the guards and break out the notorious werewolf Remus Lupin unchallenged, who was proven guilty for the crime of homicide and unanimously convicted by the Wizengamot earlier that day.**

No trace of the lawbreakers has been found thus far by the Auror forces. The break-out was precisely timed, as the werewolf was on schedule to be Kissed the next morning. Lupin refused the Lord's Clemency, as it is informally called: this verdict of the rogue werewolf trial allows werewolves convicted for turning and murder the merciful chance to join the Dark Lord's army.

Dumbledore, whose lengthy absence has led to a nation-wide search on his whereabouts, was last seen in

Harry stopped there to look at his friends, fighting a grin. Ron was biting the inside of his cheeks to keep from smiling. Hermione's expression wasn't quite as shadowed as before.

"Some good news, finally," Ron muttered.

"Let's hope they manage to stay undercover," Hermione said.

"But it's great, right?" Harry prodded. She nodded, not looking at him. His hands clenched under the table. His apology was hopelessly inadequate, he understood that, but when would things be back to normal? Or was he just being paranoid, seeing a reaction where there wasn't one?

He had to get Ron alone. He would know. Hermione napping that morning was bollocks; they probably had been talking about him. He comforted himself with the thought that all would be resolved this very evening at eight. He was glad now that today was a Wednesday, and he was free in the evening. They would ward a random unused classroom up to the nines (the Room of Requirement couldn't be trusted any longer) to discuss Voldemort's possible motives and how Harry fit into them.

He stood, excess energy making it impossible to sit. "Ron, would you like to get a bit of training in before Sunday?"

All houses had held to an unspoken agreement – which surprisingly included Slytherin as well – to continue with Quidditch, Snape's abolishment of House points be damned. There was a Quidditch field, there was equipment, so the game could continue; it was as simple as that. And it wasn't like the Hogwarts Houses had a reckoning going on for the last few decades, or anything.

"I'll join you later, alright mate?"

Harry stared as Ron's arm gave a comforting stroke down Hermione's back. "Right, later," he managed with a sharp nod, before turning briskly on his heels. After five minutes he came back up the steps, his Firebolt slung over his back. A voice made him freeze in his tracks halfway up the dungeons.

"Ah, there he is. My nest-brother. Where have you been?"

He turned to see Nagini nestled in the windowsill, eyes half-closed as she enjoyed the evening rays that played in orange tones over her scales, making them look lighter than their usual dark green.
"Nagini," Harry hissed in acknowledgement. "I could ask the same of you."

"I wasn't the one who suddenly had to leave, human," she spat back.

Harry drew closer, carefully placing his broom on a nearby ledge. "Awww, did someone miss me?" he teased.

"There is no fire around anywhere," she sulked by way of reply.

Harry looked around. The hallway was deserted. "When will your master be back, do you know?"

"When the warmth has left," she answered, and after a moment Harry realised she meant sundown, which was at least two hours from now.

"Shall we go looking for a fire? Will your master expect you to stay here?"

"Of course not, I'm not a mouse in a box!" Nagini sputtered. "He finds me wherever I am."

"I know just the thing, then. Will you allow me to carry you?"

"If you must." She unwound her beautiful body from the ledge, rising up to reach onto Harry's shoulders. By now Harry was used to the feeling of a small person's weight in deadly predator pressing down on him. It took only a moment to balance his Firebolt accordingly.

"Be nice, alright? We don't want to draw attention."

"We don't?"

Harry gave a tiny shake of his head, thinking he was going to regret this later.

His destination was just one up from the Entrance Hall. With any luck they would make it without being seen, since he had left dinner quite early. Bracing his hands on the weight bungling from his shoulders, he sped the last few steps and quickly turned for the small stairs behind the grand staircase.

Luck, of course, had left some months ago.

"Potter!? What the- what are you doing?" Draco Malfoy hissed the last bit, though not in Parseltongue.

"Taking a walk," Harry deadpanned, keeping pace. "You might want to consider trying it yourself. She's quickly annoyed, you see."

He heard Malfoy follow close on his heels, to his immense annoyance. Nagini picked up on this apparently, as she turned her head to hiss: "Get rid of the boy. He smells awful."

Harry chuckled. Malfoy managed to catch up with him at the door to the kitchens, which opened to Harry scratching the painted pear.

"What is she saying?" he panted. "What did she- ahrgeeg!"

Malfoy broke off with a frightened yell as Nagini lunged, grazing his cheek in what Harry thought was a fairly playful gesture on her part, but Malfoy unfortunately didn't take it that way. Brandishing his wand he shrieked over his bruised ego:

"You're coming with me Potter, right now. I mean it! You illegally took the Dark Lord's familiar,
of all things, and I am under oath to report it." He jerked his wand for emphasis. "We're going to
the Headmasters office."

Harry stood still, not daring to move and risk Nagini being hit with a stray spell. He felt her
discontent prickle against his skin.

"Would you just relax, Malfoy?" he implored, exasperated. "There's nothing going on. Nagini just
wants to have a place in front of a fire to warm up." He gestured behind him, where a couple of
House Elfs were standing, their work forgotten, around large, steaming pots hung above the
fireplace.

Malfy jerked his head as if Harry's words were contagious. "I don't care what lies you're spewing,
Potter. Now, leave the snake."

Malfy was actually convinced that he was out to hurt her, Harry realised with a sharp intake of
breath. His gaze slid over the kitchen knives on the wall next to the hearth.

"Alright tell you what Malfoy, I'm just going to walk over to that fire and sit down. You do what
you need to do, alright?"

Malfy's face twisted in anger and fear, and for a moment Harry felt sorry for him.

"Common Nagini, we have to prove to the boy that I'm not out to hurt you."

"Hurt me? What is this?" Nagini hissed in a dangerous tone, reminding him of Voldemort. Harry's
hands were becoming slippery with sweat and he had to adjust is grip on her scales.

"Ehm. Well, he thinks I'm going to chop you into pieces. What do you think?"

To his utter relief, Nagini gave a large snort –unrecognised by Malfy.

With difficulty he forced himself to turn his back on Malfy's brandished wand. He walked
steadily over to the fireplace, where he sunk down into a lotus position. The hairs in his neck made
him shiver as he idly stroked her scales. Malfy slowly drew closer, passing into Harry's field of
vision in the same way one would corner a dangerous criminal.

Everything was fine by him as long as Draco didn't go for his Dark Mark. But Malfy just studied
the unlikely pair thoughtfully.

Then he said: "If you do kill her, I wasn't here." And he left.

A strange light-headedness made him want to burst into full-out laughter. Unable to contain it any
longer he did so with abandon, annoying Nagini who had to shift her body to accommodate, which
in turn made him laugh even harder.

As he drew level with the right door, he could feel something different about it and realised it was
the thick wards that were pushing against his senses. Pleased with this observation, he opened the
door and found Hermione and Ron seated in a broken-down bench by the windows. They smiled
when they saw him, beckoning to a severely scarred chair nearby. Harry sat, clasping his hands in
front of him.

"So, did you see your schedule yet, Hermione?" Harry said just to say something. It was the wrong
thing to say apparently: Hermione looked ready to burst into tears all of a sudden.
"They gave me three classes. *Three!*"

Harry frowned. "But then what are you doing the rest of the time?"

Hermione raised her arms, incredulous. "Muggle-born administration, of course!" She collapsed in the next moment, burrowing her head in her hands. Ron and Harry both froze but when she withdrew there were no tears.

"But…" Harry scratched his head, thinking back hard. "But you did excellent in-"

"Oh *shut it*, Harry. You know how these things work!" she snapped, quite hatefully to Harry's ears. Harry closed his mouth with a snap, stunned into silence. Ron was looking nonplussed as well, making him feel a little less left out.

Harry wrung his hands anxiously. No one said anything. Their breaths sounded too loud in the silence.

"Which did you get, then?" Harry tried, fearing her reply.

"I got Transfiguration, Potions and Study of Ancient Runes."

"Well, that's a better score than me getting Charms, Herbology and Dark Arts," Ron proclaimed, a bit too hastily in Harry's opinion. "We've got Potions together, at least."

"*Better, you say hm?*" Hermione's eyes gleamed like a viper ready to strike. Ron hastily backed off.

Harry was thinking that he was actually starting to prefer Nagini's company over this.

"What about my Astronomy education, my plans to take Alchemy for 7th year? All down the drain." Her laughter had a hysterical edge. "To say *nothing* of the standard classes we are all supposed to get, that we *deserve*, Charms, History of Magic. And Elementary Magic, can't miss that one, I heard about it and- and I was so excited…"

Harry had drawn closer to kneel in front of her. He hastily clasped her hands to get her attention. "Hermione, forget about all that for a moment. We can work around it, don't you see? Whoever is attending those classes can trade notes with you."

"Oh but I don't have the *time*, Harry, or did you forget? The administration took me at least three days a week this summer." Hermione said bitterly. "And besides, I can't take the tests so it would all be for nought." She withdrew her hands from his.

A cold feeling squeezed his chest. "Ron," he said softly, not moving from the cold ground. "Can you… wait outside for a moment?"

Ron started. He had wisely decided not to interfere in the sudden quicksand that the conversation had turned into. "Sure," he nodded briskly. "I'll come back in when you knock." He stalked out and softly closed the door behind him.

"I know that there's something else bothering you, something to do with yesterday."

Hermione seemed to draw into herself at these words. She stared out the window. She was clenching her jaw, hard.

"'Mione, you're my best friend, I need you out there," Harry said plaintively. "I really do. I need to
know how to fix this."

Silence cut between them. They both listened to Ron's pacing in the hallway.

Gradually Hermione's jawline softened. She bowed her head, then shook it slowly back and forth.

"Right now, I just don't know, Harry. I just don't know."

Thank you for reading. I'm curious what you all think of the last scene. Please review!
Harry swallowed with difficulty, unsure of what to say. He feared for the easy bond between them. After so many years of steady friendship it was now suddenly, inexplicitly, unravelling at the seams. There were countless of times over the course of the summer when he'd imagined what would become of Hermione, now that Muggle-borns were being discarded to the edges of society like so much trash. Her safety and state of mind were not something he took for granted.

It felt like he was living someone else's nightmare, and the past was but a dream. Danger lurked inside all that had been innocuous before. His emotions, the bonds he'd forged with the wizarding world, which had been the roots of his strength, now seemed to turn against him. This castle, his friends, his enemies – Voldemort's triumph had bent everything awry and out of shape.

He noticed he was pulling at his hair again and forced himself to stop.

"I'm sorry."

"I know."

"I- I'll-"

"Let's continue with what we've come here for," she interrupted him hastily. "I feel much better trying to do something about it." Her voice trembled at the end.

She straightened up and demonstratively flicked her long strands of hair back over her shoulders. She gave his arm a small squeeze, which eased the tightness in his throat a bit, before calling out: "Ron!"

The door opened at once. "Yes," Ron burst out as he stalked in, wringing his hands as if it would expel the grim mood. He pulled a chair close and sat down between them, eyes going back and forth.

Hermione straightened and took a breath. "I would like to start off with my thoughts."

They nodded their agreement.

"You have always been his number one target, Harry, because of the prophecy. It's the only substantial thing to actually threaten his existence. Moreover, aside from Professor Dumbledore
you're the only person who has come close to defeating him."

Her voice still sounded hoarse from the pain that had been squeezed through it. She was deep in thought. "He kills all his enemies, without exception. I imagine the only reason he hasn't killed you yet is because you must have something that no one else has. And the only thing you have that the rest don't is your scar of course, your connection with - with Riddle. And that strange bond has grown in the past years, hasn't it, to the point that you can now pick up whatever he's feeling and thinking."

"Not what he's thinking," Harry corrected. Then he wondered whether that was true.

"Just his emotions, then. But you're still having visions, right?"

Harry nodded. Hermione stared at him in silence for a moment. "It really makes no sense to me. Think about it. He knows you can get into his brain, you, Harry Potter of all people, oh not all the time but even one percent of the time should freak him out, and yet you're still alive."

"Oh I have thought about it," Harry said darkly. "Before the battle, Snape said that when the Dark Lord is very distressed or elated about something, it's possible that his Occlusion against me fails without him noticing. Everything that the traitor says could be codswallop of course, but he couldn't have been lying to Dumbledore about this. I'm sure he already told him back in sixth year, though. So I figure Voldemort just doesn't care."

"What was the last one about? I don't think you told us."

Harry repressed a flicker of irritation at her reproachful tone. He felt guilty immediately. "I didn't remember at first, ok? It was only when Voldemort brought Umbridge to the Room, that I recalled he had tortured her at the Ministry." Umbridge had fallen from grace that day, but his recollection was still a bit muddy. This was strange, as he usually remembered the horrid endings to his visions quite well.

They got on his nerves more than usual lately. The visions could be useful, they had prevented Arthur Weasley's death, but it was scary to think where this might be going. Were they getting longer now? He could end up looking out of Voldemort's eyes all the time, for all he knew. And get barking mad as a result, probably. The Dreamless Sleep had worked before to block them – but even if he managed to get access to the stuff somewhere it was no use, since he had gotten immune to its effects.

"You said not to use his name," Ron chastised. He looked around as if expecting Death Eaters to barge in any second.

Hermione waved a hand dismissively. "It doesn't count at Hogwarts, I've seen Neville use the name and nothing happened. But it's better not to, just in case. So. Why did he kill her?"

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Does he have to have a reason?"

"Yes, she's quite useful to him. She's been managing all his Muggle-born operations; the replacements, the tests, the sentencing… Can you remember anything else, anything that caught Riddle's attention in your dream?"

Harry frowned, shook his head. "But I remember there was a sense of purpose, he was… anticipating something."

Ron abruptly started pacing and muttering: "He wants to manipulate you to the dark, I get that. He wants to use you as an example of his power, his victory, to show everyone that you lost, you've
submitted to him-

"Actually," Hermione cut in, "He should kill you if he wants to set an example. Right now you are the symbol of the resistance. You're still inspiring hope in his enemies."

Harry shared a glance with Ron, who nodded almost imperceptibly. The Order was still going strong then, he thought with relief. They had not stopped in their dogged determination to undermine the regime. Then the logic behind her reasoning struck home. It hung around him like smog, suffocating if he thought about it too long.

Ron nodded along while stalking the edges of the room. "It definitely doesn't add up. He transferred some of his powers to you that night, right?" He stopped and whirled to regard Harry. "Parseltongue, Dark Magic as well I guess."

"Might be. What I do know," said Harry, "is that he wants me to learn the Dark Arts. Not to taunt me I think, well perhaps that too, but he genuinely want me to learn them, can you believe it? It would demoralize the public when word gets out I get that, but even he can't believe I'll suddenly start acting all dark wizard-y. I thought it must be to see what I can do… but why, what does he care?"

He knew he was rambling but now that they'd gotten down to the core of his worries of the last weeks, he couldn't seem to stop himself.

"And I don't think it's an accident that now my wand feels strange. I got it back just after he used it for all kinds of horrible things this summer. For example when I use curses and hexes, they come out as soon as I think of them now." He pulled out his wand to study it. The red finger stains still hadn't come off, giving the wood a macabre touch. He opened his mouth to tell them about his other strange new skill, but stopped himself just in time.

Hermione held out her hand. He placed the wand in her palm.

"Not only does he not want to kill you," she murmured almost to herself, "he wants to make you stronger."

She took out her own wand to give it a light whack. The stains disappeared. Harry grimaced at himself for not thinking of that; it had worked for Voldemort, after all.

Hermione looked up, her eyes slightly narrowed, making him fidget. "When did your training start, somewhere around Easter holidays right?"

"Right."

"You were captured around that time."

Harry just stared, wishing she got to the point.

"You told me he looked at your magic with a spell. First it was painful, but then it changed and you could feel it… merge, with his, right? And then all of a sudden he let you go."

Ron who retook his chair, added: "Your magics recognized each other, I think you said."

Harry felt his cheeks grow warm for no reason. He hadn't thought about it much. He'd rather just forget the whole weird encounter altogether.

Hermione nodded. "That would be the part of his magic he transferred to you that night."
Ron shook his head. "No, no, he already knew about that. That's not what he was testing. From the way you told me how he acted, I think something surprised him, made him change tactics. After all, he wasn't so eager to let you go before, right? He held you for what, a week, two? No it's something else."

He stood again to pace a zigzag route along the upturned furniture. Wearing his usual chess-playing face, he was probably turning motives over in his head, enemies' next moves. Hermione and Harry watched in silence as he made a second and third round.

"The only thing I can think of that makes sense here, is that he discovered that you're a descendant from Slytherin."

No one spoke for a moment. Then Harry burst out laughing.

Ron looked affronted. "What? It could explain the Parseltongue. Maybe we've overlooked it because we thought it had to do with his transfer of magic all along. But everyone knows the trait is hereditary."

"What are you suggesting?" Harry managed, not quite able to suppress a smile, "that he's my great uncle or something?"

"Or something," Ron spat, which effectively sobered Harry's mood.

Hermione had tilted her head, comparing this new piece of the puzzle to the immense reference chart in her mind.

"The curse of knowledge," she murmured. "Something we think is part of one supposition, is actually evidence of another."

Harry felt bewildered. "Guys, we've known since forever that this is all because of my scar. Dumbledore said so as well, don't you think he would share it with me if he thought otherwise?"

Hermione regarded him thoughtfully. "I don't know if he would, Harry. I don't know him that well."

Harry blinked, then switched tactics. "Alright, but don't you always say that the easiest explanation is always the best? Now you're telling me I have this unique connection, of which we don't actually know the implications, and aside from that oh by the way, I'm also related to the snake face?!"

Hermione put a hand over his palm. "I know it sounds awful, and far-fetched, but it's even more bizarre that he's keeping you alive, Harry. And we both know that scar of yours has always been much more of a hindrance to him than an advantage."

She sat back and made a gesture towards him. "What do you think, has his manner towards you changed?"

Harry stared at the floor, trying to remember if there was something different about Voldemort since that awful week of imprisonment. The next time he'd seen him, the Dark Lord had killed Ginny minutes earlier.

He glanced up. Both his friends stared at him with equally grim looks. "I remember him remarking at the battle that I was taught well." Harry's frown turned into a scowl. "Now I know what that was about."

"It would help if you could tell us more about your summer," Hermione said, which momentarily
cut off the churning anger that seemed to be building all day.

"Right. Well, I told you about the manor right?" They nodded. Harry went on to explain about his reckless attempt on Nagini’s life and how Voldemort had inexplicably purged the poison in him - no trip to St. Mungo’s necessary.

"And there was another time that he saved my life, basically. I've been meaning to tell you about that, the great summer I've had…” Harry shifted to the edge of his chair, elbows on his knees, gazing at the far wall. "Voldemort had 'requested' my presence at the Celebratory Ball. When I came there, I kept a low profile. That went fine. But at the end of the evening, the place was packed with Death Eaters. You know Armando Moore, the one who said all that crap about my being responsible for the war or something, in the papers? He was there.

"So he's coming at me, and I could tell he's just looking for an excuse. He starts harassing me, I insult his dear master – well I was just telling the truth actually-"

"Wait, you insulted You-Know-Who? In front of his servants?" Ron exclaimed, delighted. Hermione's deadpan look clearly conveyed she thought that Harry had gone round the bend.

"Yeah, I called Voldemort a half-blood."

Ron whistled. Harry felt his face stretch into something between a smile and a grimace. "Not one of my smartest moves. Anyway, Moore sends a curse at me, and it kind of - ripped the skin off my head, I think, I'm not sure. But it hurt like hell."

He tried to suppress the feeling of all those stares, the awful silence. He managed to unclench his teeth after a moment. "The funny thing was, Voldemort came to see what the noise was all about - shit I really have to practice at that name for when I ever get out of here. He started to torture Moore, maybe a Crucio. And then, he killed him."

Ron's eyes had reached their maximum size. Hermione looked to be frozen to her chair. Harry continued into the tense stillness: "And then he said, 'Potter is mine. He's not to be touched.'"

"Well, you have the fatherly concern right there," Hermione commented. This made Harry cough hard several times.

She didn't appear to notice, becoming thoughtful. "I think you're right Ron. There's something more here than sharing traits – Riddle is never one for sharing, he's too narcissistic for that. He would rather kill you so he could be the only Parselmouth in existence. But not so when it comes to his own blood."

"He killed all his other descendants," Harry felt compelled to point out.

"Yes but the Gaunts were mentally unstable, they had squandered their fortune and their name in pure-blood society."

"And yet I'm a Gaunt, you're saying?"

"No of course not." She looked annoyed with him, again. "The Slytherin line had many descendants. The history books are murky on this though, especially after the sixteen hundred's. So it's unlikely, but not impossible."

"But the Potters go back all the way to Ignotus Peverell."

"The name is passed through the male line. There have been plenty of female lines entering into it
in the last few centuries actually, but they are impossible to trace back."

Harry took that in. Tried to imagine it.

"That would be… ironic," Ron muttered.

"How do we find out?" Harry asked sharply.

"We can't," Hermione sounded sad, as always in the rare case that knowledge could not be granted to her.

"Well, then I don't think that's it. I already told you, he needs me for propaganda purposes. If any pissed-off Death Eater were allowed to torture the Boy-Who-Lived, there wouldn't be much of me left to pick up, would there?"

"Well, but-"

"Simplest explanation, 'Mione."

Harry squeezed her arm and briskly stood, thinking curfew must be long past by now.

He was annoyed by their fantastical ideas. If he was an heir of Salazar Slytherin, than surely Slytherin would have minded one of his heirs trying to off the other in his very own secret chamber.

Besides, he thought, turning the doorknob, they didn't know Voldemort, not like he did. They couldn't know what drove Voldemort to kill someone or not – they couldn't even take a wild guess at what went on in that sick mind of his, while Harry had front-row seats. He knew only too well.

"Ginny's wide smile met him as he sank down next to her against the old tree not far from the great lake. Her hair shimmered in the sunlight as if made from fire.

He stroked it. It was long, falling all the way to the small of her back.

He felt along her arm. At once pleasant magic pulsed against his fingers. He sighed, drawing her closer still.

Her Dark Mark was a lovely rose, and he told her so.

"Thank you Harry, I'm glad you like it. I got it to smell like a rose too." She giggled as if she'd just said something very suggestive.

"Smells wonderful," Harry said even though there were no scents in the air. Her magic made a soft roar against his skin, like her hair, stirring something inside him. He bent his head to kiss her. Touching her lips increased the warm buzzy feeling in his stomach. Now it started to spread to his nether regions as well…

An alarm sounded, waking him roughly from the idyllic scene. After a few beats he realized it was his own. Giving his wand a shake to silence it, he closed his eyes, delaying facing the outside world and the morning rituals of his Slytherin roommates.

Self-disgust made him curl onto his side, away from the light of the wall-torch. He had not just dreamed of Ginny and Dark Marks together, and got excited about it. He missed her. And his healthy seventeen-year-old body wouldn't make him forget anytime soon.
On top of that, as always when he was not quite awake yet, his sleepy mind easily made out the undercurrent of passive energy exuded by the Dark Marks around him.

One evening in the common room, Harry realized that even among upper-year Slytherin only few had been chosen to serve the Dark Lord. One of the Marks in the dormitory was Malfoy's. The other he had discerned over the last days to be Zabini, and unexpectedly powerful. Recent too, since Harry couldn't remember sensing anything during summer school.

Being Voldemort's radar was the last thing he wanted to be reminded about this early in the morning. He couldn't shut it off though – once he sensed a Dark Mark nearby, he stayed aware of it.

He stood to cast off the layers of cotton behind his eyelids. His bad mood from yesterday was back, and not the least bit assuaged by the sight of a perfectly dressed Malfoy combing his gelled-up hair on the bed next to his.

Malfoy noticed his scowl and smirked. "Had a bad night?"

Harry's cheeks coloured. This he cursed silently but soundly. "Ah," Malfoy went on, "that kind of night. Who's the lucky girl?"

Harry threw a pillow at him, which managed to ruffle his now-perfect coiffure. "Shut up Malfoy," he growled.

Malfoy's smirk slipped a bit. He hastily touched the damage. "Moved on from the Weasel already? I have to say I approve, Potter."

Tiredness combined with frustration, triggering in Harry the need to maim the git's perfect appearance. He felt along the invisible magical bond and gave it a twist.

It was nothing like he had done to Snape, but still Draco bent over his arm with a hiss, his comb meeting the floor with a loud clattering sound.

All movement froze around them.

"Draco?" Nott whispered fearfully from one bed over. "Is it… is he calling you?"

Harry's heartbeat jumped in his throat as he waited for Draco's answer. Malfoy straightened. A few strands of hair had slipped out from under his slicked-back hairdo. His face was expressionless as he studied Harry for a moment. "Yes," he said quietly, never taking his eyes off Harry's wide stare. "I have to go."

And he slipped out before anyone could say another word.

Harry mechanically turned to pick up his wand, trying to keep it steady in his grasp. He… shouldn't have done that. Snape had mentioned in several non-subtle hints what could happen if Voldemort found out that he was messing with his servants. Harry had assumed Draco was watching him on Snape's orders, but what if they came directly from Voldemort? Was Draco off to report on him right now?

As with the visions though, Harry couldn't imagine the Dark Lord not knowing all along: he was the center, the creator of this web of Dark Marks. He must know when someone else was using it in his place.

Unless – just like with the visions – he just didn't care.
'Enough.' Harry remembered him saying in the great hall, cancelling Harry's hold on all the Dark Marks in the vicinity. Harry had been able to catch all of them with just one determent push, fueled by desperation.

His friends' theory was starting to sound significantly less implausible.
"But I'm a pureblood! Don't I get more privileges or something?"

"Not quite. Dumbledore supporter counts first, blood level second."

"What about me then?" Harry said, amused despite himself. "I'm a level B." Neville's expression turned grim. "That means you can use any spell taught in the Hogwarts curriculum, in and outside of Hogwarts, at any time. I haven't seen a lot of B's yet. They're probably all reserved for the pro-Riddles."

Even though the taboo didn't work inside of Hogwarts, everyone agreed it was better to be safe than sorry. But Harry had a feeling that if Voldemort knew what they had replaced the ban with, they'd soon find themselves with a second ban.

"I don't know what their plans are for you Harry," Neville went on in an unusually serious tone, "but it gives me a bad feeling. Especially since you're the only person getting Dark Arts training. I don't think even Malfoy gets that."

Ron poked him in the side. "I want to see his face when you tell him!" He nodded to where Malfoy was munching on a piece of toast at the Slytherin table.

"Nah, the less I see of him the better, I think."

"I agree," Neville said. "Don't tell anyone. It might give you an edge when you most need it."

"One that all the people who matter know about."

Neville shrugged. "You never know."

"What would the A clearance be?" Ron mused. "Probably unlimited use of magic, right?"

"I think so. Something linked to working in high-up places."

"The ministry, his Inner Circle," Harry chimed in.

"You know, we're definitely going to get around this somehow," Ron fumed. Harry didn't know what he meant until Neville hissed: "Be quiet!" and Ron slunk down in his seat, chastised.

"So, how do you like the new Herbology professor, Neville?" Harry hastily asked to reduce the tension in the air. What followed was an informed discussion of Herbology, in which Neville compared the pros and cons of their old and new professor. The level of detail went way over Harry's head, but that had been his intention; the less time spent on dangerous subjects, the less likely they were to be picked up during Legilimency.

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"You owe me twice now, Potter," Malfoy hissed as the Gryffindors and Slytherins settled down for Potions class – that is to say, the rare Gryffindors like Hermione who were allowed in. It was as always a double period and, oh the joy, a Gryffindor-Slytherin combination.

At the very last moment Malfoy chose to take the seat right next to his, to Harry's immense frustration. Hermione raised a brow at Malfoy, but took a seat on Harry's other side without a word.

"Why did you do it?" Harry hissed back in a whisper, not referring to the seating arrangement.

"Not now," Draco murmured, glancing around while picking imaginary dust from his robes.
Harry rolled his eyes. If he didn't want to talk about it, why did he say anything? "Is that all? Then if you don't mind please fuck off, Malfoy."

Malfoy blinked at him. Slughorn, who had decided he'd spent enough time reminiscing, chose that moment to start the lesson. It was quite boring, a long lecture about the most important topics learned last year. Something Snape would never have done, but Harry had to admit this was the best way to remove all the hay that had stuffed itself into the students' sun-drained minds. And it was much better than doing actual potion work.

After class Harry quickly made his way to the back, not wanting to get snatched up by Slughorn again. Hermione, saw him waiting at the door, but waved him off. Harry rolled his eyes. Of course she was going to be discussing this year's new topics with the teacher, as she always did.

As he reached the upper levels of the dungeons, a fist descended out of nowhere on the cloth of his arm and slammed him into the shade of an alcove.

His wand was out in a beat, but Malfoy ignored it.

"You're going to tell me about your summer, Potter," he said in a low voice that wouldn't carry. "And as to your second debt, I will call upon it whenever I see fit."

Harry pushed at his chest and the boy was forced to take a step back. "Come off it Malfoy, we both know that little act in the dormitory was to advance your position in Slytherin." Voldemort calling someone so young must have been unheard of in Slytherin.

"True, but if I hadn't...." Malfoy tilted his head as if to let Harry's imagination fill in the rest.

Surreptitiously mirroring Malfoy's casual arrogance, Harry folded his arms and leaned into the stone ridge. He raised an eyebrow. A few meters away students passed the two boys on their way to the great hall, oblivious.

"Yes? If I hadn't, what? You imagine he would punish me?"

Malfoy scoffed. "You imagine he wouldn't? You're dangerously optimistic, Potter."

"More like realistic. He doesn't care."

Now it was Malfoy's turn to raise an eyebrow. "Really?"

"As long as I don't cause anything permanent to happen."

"How does it work, exactly?" Malfoy asked offhandedly, but Harry could read the agitation in his Mark.

He could hardly explain his peculiar effect on the Mark to himself, let alone someone else. He wasn't about to admit that to Malfoy of course. Working to keep his features blank, he whispered: "Didn't you hear? I'm the Dark Lord's pet project."

Malfoy just watched him.

"I'm to be the living example of his merciful rule. He's ironic like that."

He hoped to stir him away from any more questions to do with that morning, but Malfoy apparently drew his own conclusions.

"So the papers are actually halfway right. You really are the Dark Lord's protégé. He wants the
Parseltongue trait to continue. And, it's more than that. You serve as a... back-up, let's say, his magical heir. That's why he granted you access to his Death Eaters, right? To practice?"

He pinned Harry with an intense look. The Slytherin had put one and one together and to be fair, it did sound like the most logical explanation. He could see now why the blond was so interested in his summer. Harry felt a jolt as he imagined how fast this would go through the Hogwarts rumour mill, and what that would mean for his well-being.

The papers' speculation sat uncomfortably close to the scenario they had come up with yesterday evening. It was far-fetched but it was the only thing anyone could think of to explain Harry's bizarre situation, including Harry himself. Still, the suggestion that he could be the Dark Lord's descendant was making him sick to his stomach.

On the other hand, if he played along with this, life in Slytherin might become a bit easier. One thing was for sure, he thought with a twinge: if Dumbledore had still been around, he wouldn't have told Harry the truth about his scar, even if he knew.

He realized he'd waited too long to answer. Malfoy nodded slowly, taking his silence for confirmation. "Let's make a deal," Draco drawled. "You don't mess with my Mark again, and I won't tell everyone that you can, or that you're the Dark Lord's heir. Personally, if it were me well, I couldn't imagine anything better. But I understand your reluctance here."

"The papers don't actually say that, right?" Harry asked.

Malfoy waved one delicate hand. "Ill-informed as always. They think he keeps you alive to breed with a pureblood and pass on the Parseltongue."

Harry felt disgust and relieved at the same time for this explanation. He considered his old school rival for a moment. Malfoy, who had grown over the summer and was now slightly taller than Harry, returned a bored look. He wouldn't trust Malfoy if his life depended on it. If the little opportunist ever did talk, however, there was no harm done since Voldemort didn't mind (he drew a blank trying to imagine Voldemort not minding, something he didn't want to think about too closely).

"Agreed, provided you don't annoy me any further, or I might be tempted to let my control... slip, sometimes."

Harry hardly recognized the words that came out of his own mouth. The result of being around Slytherins all the time, he supposed. It was bound to rub off.

Perhaps thinking along those same lines, Malfoy's eyes sparkled as he extended his hand. It came to Harry in a burst of insight that Malfoy enjoyed Harry's half-bantered threat.

He couldn't decide if he would ever really understand Slytherins at this point, or understood too well already. Harry looked at the outstretched hand which was held quite steady, and was reminded of that long-ago day on the Hogwarts Express. This time, their palms touched in a firm handshake.

A grim feeling had settled over the student body of Hogwarts. More often than not corridor fights ended with a visit to the hospital wing nowadays, and the hostile atmosphere in the castle was getting ready to burst. The new discrimination of clearance levels and classes put everyone on edge. Hermione was one of those who appeared to be brimming on the edge of something. She was
mostly quiet, tuned inwards.

In light of his illuminating conversation with Malfoy, he understood now why the hostility he sensed was so widespread among the houses. Where Ravenclaw had blessedly decided to wait for the facts before making judgements about the Boy-Who-Was-Kept-Alive, plenty Hufflepuffs considered him a disappointment. He supposedly had an affinity for casting pain curses (a rumour no doubt started by Zacharius) and entirely too much in common with the Dark Lord.

Moreover, while many Gryffindors were part of the underground resistance (Ron's occasional offhand remarks on the subject sent Hermione scowling and Harry wincing at his carelessness), his competence in the Dark Arts still rubbed them the wrong way, as well as the complete absence of his previous heroic defiance towards authority figures. The Slytherins just looked at him like they had swallowed a lemon. They felt betrayed by their Lord's mercy towards his former enemy, Dumbledore's golden boy, but mostly they were jealous.

The attitude of his old House annoyed him the most. The mutterings and angry looks usually came from lower year Gryffindors. Their sanctimonious attitude was wearing. He was like a sweet kitten to them who had grown out of its fur, ripped off by the vicious monster underneath.

And so it was with some tolerance that he withstood Zacharius' harsh push to his ribs as they met in the hallways between classes. He straightened his tie, which had come loose when he'd been slammed into the wall, and resumed his pace like nothing was amiss.

A growl sounded close behind. Then he lost balance and once again his forehead was pressed against cold stone. *Note to self*, he thought, *don't ignore Smith*.

"Think you're such a hot-shot huh?" Smith breathed into his ear. A clenched fist pulled on his tie, crinkling the fabric, curling it tight until it cut painfully into his neck. Harry saw Ernie standing behind Zacharius' shoulder, looking uncertain.

"How dare you show your face back here," the Hufflepuff continued harshly. "You've ruined it for all of us. Instead of doing the proper thing, like running away or better yet killing yourself, you kiss the Dark Lord's feet like the phony turncoat you are. It doesn't matter which camp he's in, the Golden Boy can always count on special treatment. I bet it was easy huh, a nice painless welcome in return for Dumbledore's secrets."

Harry couldn't speak for a moment, he was so angry.

"Oh you're going to tell me the 'true' reason why he hasn't killed you yet?" Zacharius gloated. "To 'preserve the Parseltongue', isn't that right?" He smiled in a very unpleasant way.

By now Harry's blood circulation was seriously starting to become a problem. He roughly shoved Zacharius off him and with a look of disgust spat: "Says the one who's been attending the Dark Lord's own summer school."

Zacharius glanced over his shoulder at the gathering crowd. Whatever this thing was, it was clearly personal because Smith drew close again before whispering:

"You might want to know, my brother's become a ghost. I'll ask him to come to Hogwarts and say hi, sometime."

Then he walked away. Ernie sent Harry a glare before hurrying to catch up with his classmate. The crowd was standing on their toes. They watched him with wide eyes, glancing back and forth to the retreating figure of Zacharius. They did not understand the abrupt ending to what had started out as
a promising altercation.

Furious with everyone Harry wrestled off his mangled tie and stalked to class.

Their first Transfiguration class came after lunch that day. He smiled as he saw Hermione enter the classroom. She smiled back and slid into the seat next to him, to his relief.

The class was surprisingly small for having all four Houses attending. The gaping absence of more than half of his year mates was painfully obvious. Slytherin made up the biggest part of the class, and Muggle-borns from all other Houses the smallest (possibly only Hermione had made it, but he wasn't sure). He could only hope now that the new configuration would aid in some much needed commiseration among the Houses.

On his way up from the great hall he'd realized he had again forgotten to tell Hermione about the House Elf's rotten working conditions. The classroom was getting too crowded to discuss it now, however, so he resolved to tell her later that day.

There was a collective sigh as McGonagall announced a surprise start of term test. A sheet of questions floated down on each desk, and McGonagall switched the hour glass.

Harry looked down. Twenty questions, to be done in an hour. Stifling another sigh, he bent over his desk and started in on the first question.

The scribbling of quills was the only sound to be heard for the next ten minutes.

"Mister Potter, no exchanging of notes in my class, I think I have been very clear on this!"

Harry's head snapped up. "What?"

He was in the middle of scratching out an answer to a question explaining the gains in solidity when Transfiguring lifeless over sentient objects. Feeling thoroughly bewildered, he glanced around but saw no evidence of anything being exchanged below the table tops. He opened his mouth to say as much, then jumped when McGonagall slammed her hand on the table's surface angrily.

"Are you purposefully ignoring my instructions of two seconds ago?"

Muffled sniggers sounded behind him. He felt his cheeks start to burn when he realised his error.

"No Professor. I wasn't exchanging any notes."

McGonagall's eyebrows touched her hairline. "Oh? That will be detention Mr. Potter, for wilful disobedience, to be served on Saturday at one o'clock in the afternoon."

Harry looked at her for a moment in disbelief. Then, seeing the minute quirking of her lips, he realised she was just acting. He glanced at Hermione but she was busy pouring over her answering sheet. McGonagall gestured for everyone to continue with their examination.

When the bell rang, Harry made sure he was stalking out looking properly grim and annoyed.

The horrid first week made Harry yearn for the quiet of Saturday morning. But even that was ruined, by the morning owl.
It was not the news this time, but a letter to Ron from his dad. Harry wondered how it had passed
the wards since, outside of newspapers and journals, only the privileged few were allowed to have
correspondence. Ron had frozen in his seat and after reading with clear horror, passed the
parchment on to Harry and Hermione.

Mr. Weasley ensured his son that he was as well as could be expected, and hoped Ron was also.
After some general remarks on how the Weasleys were faring, it said:

"An important matter has come to my attention. I wanted to spare you this, but I think you'd want
to know, and Hermione as well. As you're probably aware there has been a mass departure of
Muggleborns from the country in the last months. We reckoned no news was good news, but it was
only by accident that I discovered the latest shocking developments.

Over the past few weeks at least, they have not been walking towards their freedom but into traps
set by his followers. Based on what I overheard at work I believe that many of them have been
detained without trial, I don't know where. Some are tortured – something about the use of
'wheels', I'm not sure what it means – and afterwards they are send back to their families in a
terrible state, as a warning against any further acts of rebellion.

I am currently tracking those I overheard to get more information and hopefully to warn people off
from any further traps. Anything relevant to us I will let you know immediately. In the meantime I
ask you not to talk about this to anyone outside of your two closest friends. It is a state secret,
covered up, so you will not find it in the Prophet.

This letter will self-destruct after one minute. Please know that we

The letter burst into ashes on the table. Hermione's head jerked up. "Know that we what? What did
it say?"

Ron jerked from his reverie of the sausage cooling on his plate. "Know that we are doing
everything we can to get to the bottom of this. And, it said, greetings to both of you, stay watchful
and something about keep doing fun things."

She grimaced. "Wheels. Really. How positively Muggle." Seeing their puzzled faces she went on to
explain: "Breaking wheels, they were torture devices used from the Muggle Middle Ages up until
the nineteenth century. It was a form of public execution by placing the convicted on a wheel and
breaking their bones."

Harry glanced at his friend sitting next to him. Feeling their contemplative stares, she answered
their unspoken question. "They're fine, they're already in Australia. They sent me a note over the
summer."

"You got a note here?"

"Some Death Eater had looked it through first, but…" She shrugged as if to say: it doesn't matter,
they're safe.

Harry felt the content of his stomach turn sour and rise up in his throat. He swallowed a couple of
times, wanting to keep the little he had eaten down. The new regime, even crueller in secret than it
demonstrated to the public, had escalated already to the point that it deemed Muggleborns worthy
of the most heinous, non-magical forms of torture. Just for trying to escape.

It was too horrible to process. And all done in the name of the evil called Tom Riddle, who also
happened to kindly grant Harry a life among friends, his wand, education and even extra training.
He suddenly realised that right now, the absolute last thing he wanted to know was why.

Standing before McGonagall's door, he wondered what this meeting in disguise could be about.

When she opened the door he smiled at her, which she returned before waving him inside.

"I really wanted to keep a straight face," she said, amused. "Why do I get the feeling that all of you are far too competent schemers?" She sat down behind her large desk and gestured him towards a chair, which he took with a puzzled frown.

"You probably want to know why all this circumspection? I'm being monitored. We both are, for that matter. I wanted you to stop by without raising suspicions with our resident imposters."

"Alright," Harry said slowly.

She folded her hands in front of her, unlike Dumbledore with one palm folded over the other. "How are you doing, Potter? I know that Riddle has paid you a visit the other day. Thank Merlin that you managed to save Ms. Granger in time. That witless monster," she ended in a low voice.

Her words rubbed like sandpaper against his guilt, tugging at the wounds.

"You actually went to school with him, right?" he said to avoid answering.

"Yes. He was already a petty boy back then."

"I wonder what he most wants now that he has Britain."

"He won't stop, that's for sure. He wants absolute control over everything, but without needing to bother to maintain himself all that he has seized. He wants the old wizarding families and their traditions to set the standard and govern the way of life throughout the world. And apparently he wants to keep you alive."

She fell silent, surveying him with a kind look.

Harry shook his head at her inquiry. "I really don't know."

"Could it have anything to do with your mission from Albus?"

"I don't think so. That would rather be a reason not to keep me alive, I should think."

McGonagall's eyes were narrowed. "I would like to know if there is anything I can assist you with on that account."

"No, Professor. But thank you." Dumbledore had told him not to confide in anyone else outside of Ron and Hermione.

"Are you sure?"

"How is Professor Dumbledore?" Harry returned.

"I don't know." She gave him an intense look, though. He nodded that he understood. She could not say anything important in his presence, when her words could possibly be forced from him into another, very dangerous mind. He wondered why she thought it was safe to mention Dumbledore's mission, in that case.
"Do let me know if I can help. You can call on my assistance at any time," she stressed, her expression serious and a bit pained. She then pulled close one of the huge piles of paperwork on her desk with the air of settling in for the long haul.

He stood, hearing a dismissal. He turned to go but looked back when she spoke, her eyes twinkling:

"I mean it Potter, do stop by. If you don't I'm going to have to wrestle myself down into Slytherin territory. You know how I hate to have to do that."

He quirked a smile, the light humour dispelling some of his somberness. "I will. Thank you Professor."

"Not at all, not at all," she said, waving him out the door.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Much thanks to my beta for straightening out all the quirks in this chapter. More action coming up!
Chapter 18

After lunch, which they took outside in the lovely autumn weather, it was back to class for Harry. Ron, along with Dean, reported to the barn adjoining the greenhouses. They had ground maintenance duty. It was meaningless labour, no doubt intended as an exercise in humiliation for the students of un-pure blood and allegiance: Hagrid had always managed the grounds fine on his own.

While the 'commoners' were kept busy, Harry had a double period of Elemental Magic. As expected the group consisted mostly of Slytherins, and they acted like royals of court.

As the group trickled into the classroom on the fifth floor, Harry took a seat near the windows overlooking the courtyard. He listened to the roll call with only half an ear, which the teacher uttered in a slow, lilting voice. He was jolted from his dismal inner musings when the voice said:

"Mr. Potter?"

Harry met the impassive gaze of Gaius Finch. "Yes, sir?"

"I was just telling the class about your extraordinary dance with Death," he exhaled deeply on the last word, which gave it special emphasis. An expectant silence followed. Harry glanced around, feeling pressed to his chair by everyone's gaze. He noticed that the stocky boy from summer class who had spoken in accented English was present as well. "Yes, sir?"

"Well? What are your thoughts on the matter?"

"I was a baby, sir, I didn't have much in the way of thoughts."

There were some chuckles at that. Finch's posture didn't change a hairbreadth. This made Harry feel ill at ease, though he wasn't sure why.

"Indeed," was all he said. Harry had the sudden impression that the man didn't believe him.

Finch stood in one smooth motion and walked around his desk. "A large part of this class has already enjoyed an introduction a few weeks ago. Those who haven't shall need to catch up with their peers in their own time."

Some murmurings of protest sounded in the back. For the first time, an expression bled onto the teacher's pale face: a slight upturn of the lips that vanished just as quickly. "My colleague Mr. Malfoy has already covered the basics of entropy. Today I will cover the rudimentary foundation spells of magic. You will practice them for the next class. Do not lag behind, as this wastes both
my time and yours." Finch's gaze swept over the class. "I am curious to see the level of magical proficiency of this class. After all, you set the standard of what this school can offer his Lordship."

Enough was said: they would practice.

Finch went over each foundation spell. His pace was measured, every move precise and calculated. For spells that were supposed to be the basic building blocks of current magical knowledge, they were much more complicated than Harry expected. He couldn't follow half of the wand movements. He wasn't the only one: a look around showed most of his classmates were frowning or narrowing their eyes at the teacher, while they attempted to mimic the man's movements.

Pronunciation was another problem: the spells were all in old Aramaic, the same etymology as the Avada Kedavra curse. The length and accent of vowels was tricky to get exactly right.

The class watched with a sharp focus as Finch came to the last foundation spell. What kind of spell could possibly be at the beginning of all curses and hexes in existence, they all wondered.

"The effect of the foundation spell," Finch began, "is simply the negation of all kinetic energy of living organic material on all levels: from molecular to cellular activity, to the flow of blood inside vessels."

This mother of all curses was so dangerous that its use had been forbidden since the seventeen hundreds. Which was why they were restricted to practicing wand movement and pronunciation separately. Harry saw a few shoulders sag at this point.

The professor raised his wand then, pointing it at Malfoy sitting in the front, who instantly shrank back.

"Whatever part of the flesh one aims at will, within a radius of about one centimetre, turn gangrenous." Finch moved his aim towards various parts of Malfoy's body as if to demonstrate. "It will become dead meat. Afterwards if not stopped, the decay will slowly spread. The spreading can be blocked but the initial damage is irreversible."

Finch quirked his lips at the tense huddle that was Malfoy. Then he stepped back and said, perhaps addressing their earlier disappointment: "You are required to learn the Dammāḵā, or the Mother curse as it is affectionately called, not to use it but in order to develop a deeper, more intuitive understanding of all other curses and hexes in existence."

Harry felt a shiver make its way to the back of his neck but was unable to pinpoint his discomfort. Finch's free hand went into an inside pocket and pulled out a life white rabbit, reminding Harry bizarrely of a Muggle magician. The rabbit sat docile on the desk, not sensing the tension in the room. Professor Finch clasped one of the rabbit's paws and pointed his wand:

"Dammāḵā."

The gleaming white fur of the paw turned a horrible black. Finch then cut off the cursed paw in one sweep like he did it every day (it hit the desk with a disgusting thud), following up with a wand movement that made something shimmer over the wound (or rather, absence of life).

One drop of blood had managed to touch the desk. Finch swiped it away with a finger. His low melodic voice swept through the wall of silence: "Even the smallest accident in this classroom would be a disaster, as you might imagine."

They practiced the wand movements. An hour later, the bell ruined the solemn weight in the air. No one dared to move for the door just yet.
The usual teachers' chair had been swapped for a tall straight-backed fauteuil. Gaius Finch sank into it like a king might, grasping the arms with his back rigid. "You," he said in a soft tone, "are the first class in three centuries to witness the Mother curse used at Hogwarts. I myself am one of a privileged few in the non-Arabic world allowed to use it. Do not ever practice the spell in its entirety. You may practice pronunciation or the wand movements, never both. Any misuse you see you may report to me, and you will get credit for it." A half smile again. "You may go."

The hours left until seven o'clock seemed to be inversely related to the level of anxiety burning in his stomach. The prospect of a junior Death Eater meeting didn't sound particularly child-friendly. He managed to shove down some cabbage – better to keep it light in case the program included torture practice.

His fork fell to his plate at that thought. His reluctant eyes found the banner behind the teacher's table, the new symbol of Hogwarts with a snake winding around the four Houses. What if he was going to be asked to share his experience in the subject? What if felt like to be tortured with the knife and the whip – purely for academic purposes of course? What if Lucius Malfoy taught the class?

He closed his eyes for a moment. He was being illogical. That bunch of demented sadists was not bothered by such trivial contemplations.

A hand descended onto his back. "Harry, are you alright?" Neville asked. Opening his eyes he saw that across from him, Ron and Hermione had pulled their attention from their discussion on the merits of the new teachers – he had already been subjected to a rigorous inquiry of Elemental Magic earlier.

The standard answer sat stuck inside his mouth. He knew he looked unwell, sweat beading on his forehead and hands.

"The meeting is tonight, right?" Neville said quietly.

Harry again was struck by the change in him. Neville, the would-be Boy-Who-Lived. His fellow Gryffindor had always been precocious and observant. But it was something internal, rarely reflected outwards. Just last year he'd been watching from the sidelines, as he had for the past five years – unless shyly answering a question from the Golden Trio. Neville and Ginny had been close, Harry reflected.

"Yes."

"It probably won't be as bad as you think. Just wait until you see what it's actually about."

Harry grimaced. "I know. I can't not think about it, though." Across from them a group of Slytherins left the table, among them Malfoy. It was ten to seven: time to go.

He stood. "See you guys later, I hope," he joked feebly before setting off after the Slytherins. A handful of Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs joined as well, with a sneering Zacharius in the lead.

Their group trudged up to the seventh floor. They stopped at a set of double doors. He'd walked past it often on his way to the Gryffindor common room, but had never been inside.

Standing next to the doors was Narda.

She looked exhausted, with huge bags under her eyes. She seemed smaller than he remembered.
her, but that might be the way she held herself. Smoothing away his initial surprise at seeing her, he snuck close. Narda tensed at his approach. Harry was more used to ignoring the comments rising up behind them.

"Narda, how are you?" he asked. "When did you get back?"

After a second she lowered her eyes. "I've been back since this morning."

"How are you doing?" he repeated. She shrugged. "Fine."

One hand subtly supported her weight against the wall behind. 'Fine' was such a useful word for whatever you were actually feeling, Harry reflected. For that reason he was very fond of it himself. He wanted to ask more, but Pansy already took over the conversation: "Narda! Welcome back. Where have you been all this time?"

Zacharius, standing close, scoffed and sent Harry a sneer. "Don't you remember? She snuck off with Potter. And, you know, whatever Potter touches ends up in a bad way." His eyes glided to Narda. "Didn't you?"

Narda averted her face as if to block him out. Harry felt his patience with Smith wearing thin already. He made it sound like they had gone off to snog or something. Zacharius' eyes gleamed hatefully as he studied Harry's reaction.

"Caught you in the act, did they?" Ernie asked, to make matters worse. Zacharius snorted. Narda seemed to be trying to press herself through the wall.

Harry felt the familiar itch for his wand. A bunch of ignorant teenagers they were, all of them. He focused on calming his breathing. He knew they were trying to make him do something foolish just when the teacher showed up. Imagining himself as someone else, an actor in a play, he turned his whole body towards Zacharius.

He allowed a smile to get through his stony stare and hoped it looked a bit like it had looked on Finch. "Don't bring Narda into this, Smith, we're just friends. Besides, I told you already I'm not interested in you that way. Now, is there anything else you wanted from me?" He knew it was a low blow, but the sight of Narda, barely recovered, shaking against the wall because of this pathetic little boy, made white rage melt into clear purpose.

The sniggering was much louder now. Zacharius' cheeks visibly coloured. Watching him, Harry couldn't keep his fake smile from turning into a real smirk. The Hufflepuff threw him a look filled with rage. The thought came to Harry that this was certainly a change in dynamics, to be fighting Zacharius instead of Malfoy.

"Gentlemen." The both of them turned at the sound of a soft-spoken voice. Takumi Watanabe stood a few paces away, a slight frown creasing his brows as he took in the scene. Harry felt some undefinable emotion pass through him at seeing the familiar face. Watanabe wore his usual loose attire, his scabbard sheathed in plain sight on his right leg. The man's gaze took him in like he was any other student. Harry did his best to look just as unaffected. He knew that for Watanabe it wasn't an act.

"Your energy would be better spent honing your magical skills than engaging in verbal brawling, wouldn't you say?" Watanabe went on. He stressed the words 'verbal brawling' like they represented something positively vulgar, making him feel like a boor. Watanabe himself was much
Harry raised his eyes, determined to get a reaction. "Better than actual brawling, right sir?"

Watanabe just stared, the way Voldemort often did: without any expression on his face. Harry felt very small right then.

Watanabe turned to open the double doors and gestured the class inside. They stepped into a large space, about twice as big as a regular classroom. For all its size the room was mostly empty. A beautiful dark-red oval table that would be large enough to seat the class had been shoved in one corner, about ten upholstered chairs lined up next to it stacked in twos. The panelled walls, unusual for the stone castle, were richly decorated with typical English landscape paintings. The central panel above the hearth depicted Hogwarts castle in all its sun-bathed glory. There were no windows: four chandeliers cast their light down from the ceiling and torches burned along the walls. All in all, it seemed like interesting discussions must have taken place here over the years.

A few Slytherins already started towards the chairs, but Watanabe beckoned the group to the centre of the room.

They all looked around curiously. "Welcome everyone," Watanabe began with a nod. As if picking up on Harry's thoughts, he explained: "This room is one that students rarely get to see. It's been used as a meeting room ever since the age of the Founders – I have been told the Great Four gathered here to discuss the school's affairs."

Unlike the elder Malfoy's lecturing pace, Watanabe stood motionless except for his eyes. "Most of you know each other already from your summer classes. Those of you who were unable to attend: you are here on the Dark Lord's request. As promising witches and wizards of your generation, you have been chosen to receive extra training in the more advanced areas of magic, such as the class on Elemental Magic you had this afternoon.

"Now to the matter at hand. The Dark Lord has bestowed upon you all the great honour of serving him in a more direct manner than the context of your education allows. This is an opportunity for you to become acquainted with the ways in which you can contribute to the realm, and for your trainers to determine your skills and future career path.

"Your attendance in the summer months gave us, your teachers, the opportunity to assess your strengths and weaknesses. Based on the results of this assessment, you have all been assigned a personal instructor. He or she is specialised in the magical area that is your forte. From now on, each week you will receive training in this specific field. As for the late arrivals, I will be testing your skills today."

Excited whispering broke out around Harry. The late arrivals shared worried gazes.

He glanced at Narda. She was still trembling. He wondered why she had been discharged when it was obviously too soon. Maybe the hospital standard today wasn't what it used to be. Or maybe, he considered grimly, it wouldn't get any better than this. She was after all a Crucio survivor.

Narda caught his gaze and looked away, her jaw firming. Harry bit the inside of his cheek. Now she thought he was pitying her.

"Potter, your training schedule," Watanabe said to catch his attention, in the middle of handing out pieces of parchment. Harry's read:

_Instructor: Severus Snape, Professor._
Harry crumbled the parchment into a tiny ball, a part of it ripping under the pressure of his nails. He became even angrier when he realised that apparently within the span of a minute, he had already, subconsciously, managed to get his hopes up. He had hoped to be taught by the man who had coldly passed him this note.

_Snape. Why is it always Snape?_  

He froze as his quick temper made the Dark Marks around him stand out in stark relief, like fleas caught in a web. His eyes narrowed as he tried to hold on to the vision. Watanabe's Mark felt different from the others, warm and strong. It seemed to be pulling at Harry rather than the other way around.

Watanabe dismissed everyone with a note, and a majority of the class walked out, staring at their parchments or deep in thought.

In the corridor Harry realised he wanted to talk to Narda, help her if he could, but when she emerged behind her classmates she quickly turned the other way. Realising he was making a scene he got moving again, blindly stalking towards the staircase at the opposite end.

He stopped with his hand on the railing. He didn't want to face the busy hive that was the Saturday night common room right now – be it Slytherin or Gryffindor. Hermione, he considered, had told him earlier she was going to work ahead in order to get to the homework that she was barred from. She was probably busy reading in her old summer refuge on the sixth floor. That was just one floor down from here.

He descended the staircase. On the sixth floor he noticed that he was now in a completely different part of the castle. Nothing here looked familiar – he had never seen this pattern of tapestries before. If he extrapolated where he knew the Gryffindor tower to be though, going southwards would get him back on familiar ground.

He walked leisurely and took in his surroundings, enjoying the feeling of the unfamiliar. It was rare to come by nowadays, overbearing and restrictive as his daily routine felt to him. With each new portrait and scenery of the grounds that passed his view, he felt his mood calming. He loved Hogwarts. Even now it still felt like home to him. Especially now. He wondered what Hogwarts meant to Voldemort, then quickly stopped that train of thought. He didn't want anything to spoil this.

He heard a *whoosh* of a spell trail close by. That was when his legs flew out from under him. The back of his head bashed with a nauseating speed against the stone floor. His awareness blackened out, whether for a minute or ten he didn't know. When his vision came back it was all blurry.

He carefully turned his aching head, wondering how he had come to lay sprawled out on the floor. Had he gone to lie down? That didn't seem likely. The floor was hard and very cold. He felt the urge to throw up, but pushed it back with a will. He had lost his glasses, he realised. He groped about to find them, thinking they couldn't be far.

His ears caught the sound of footfalls drawing near. The shape of a person loomed in his vision. A crushing sound then, close to his left ear.

"Oops. Were those your glasses?"

Harry's whole body tensed at hearing that voice. He pushed away from the ground to a sitting
position. The movement made his vague surroundings tilt crazily, and he was forced to close his
eyes to keep the acid in his stomach down.

When the bout of nausea had passed he slowly tilted his head, which felt like a block of concrete
had been attached to it, to stare into the vague features of his attacker. Zacharius Smith had aimed
his wand point-blank. Harry could see it because it was about five centimetres away from his nose.

The dark lump lowered itself to Harry's height. Zacharius' other hand held something that sparkled
in places – his broken glasses.

"Awww… and they looked so nice on you."

The vehemence in his voice was scary. Zacharius stood. "Get him up," he ordered to someone who
apparently stood at his back. Harry's back spasmed with fear. The sheer powerlessness of his
position was sinking in.

The second person walked around them both, then strong hands grasped below his forearms to pull
him upwards. His vision threatened to tunnel in again. He gradually lost feeling in his limbs. The
grip became painfully tight as one arm sneaked across his chest to press him against his second
assailant.

They slowly went into motion, away from the light of dusk. His bearer pulled him backwards into a
dark space. The constant feeling of sinking towards the edge of consciousness made it impossible
to put up any resistance – he couldn't even feel past his shoulders.

His brain managed to process the dull thought that it was bad when you got dragged somewhere
else. His panic peaked then, ruining his concentration.

The darkness around him was now complete. "No, don't throw it here, you idiot," Zacharius was
saying.

"As if you're the expert on this." It was Nott who spoke from another part of the room. Harry
inhaled sharply. Three, there are three of them.

Pain, out of nowhere, spread over his lower chest, leeching away his breath. Someone had punched
him the Muggle way. Another punch against his cheek jarred his teeth. He tasted blood on his
tongue.

No. This couldn't be happening. Was he– were they actually going to kill him? Did any of them
have it in them, to kill him?

He was still being held upright. He lashed out blindly with unfeeling arms. The person to his back
surprisingly let go, making the movement of air of the third punch rush overhead. Harry crawled
forward. He was hit in the side next and fell to the floor.

"No," Zacharius spoke, "I want to see his face." They turned him over onto his back. "This," the
boy hissed next, "is for my brother, Potter."

Zacharius lifted a shoe in the centre of his vision. Then he slammed it down hard on his chest.

Harry screamed, wheezing and curling into himself. Something tightened horribly then, and it was
like breathing acid, like fire was licking his insides with each shallow breath.

The shoe swam into focus again.
It hit his head just like Malfoy's boot had done before, last year on the Hogwarts Express. His nose cracked. The sensitive spot on the back of his head exploded with pain. Then the boot switched smoothly back to his chest, crashing home like a hammer.

No. Merlin, no. Not like this.

He tried to gather his magic, willing the image of power to present itself. But he couldn't think, couldn't even pull a decent breath. Knowing he had little time, he tried to focus on finding a Mark. A pained moan left him as he realised that no one in the room had one.

No. No. NO. He was unaware of his head shaking a useless denial while his body swam in layers of pain. A twinge passed over his scar then. Something tickled inside his skull.

The French, eternal enemies of the United Kingdom, were getting bothersome. That was to be expected, but recently their ambitions had become too large to ignore: an upcoming alliance with Germany was being formalised at this moment.

"Content?"

"A joining of armed forces for the purpose of infiltrating Ireland."

From his high vantage point, Voldemort noted with some contentment that his servant's hair was in complete disarray. Devoted to personal care though Lucius was, he had not wasted any time to seek him out.

"How is Huber these days?" Lea Huber was the German ambassador of the French Minister for Magic and, accidently, a close friend of the Malfoys. Bowed down on the dark green carpet, Lucius answered: "She is delighted to be of service, my Lord."

"Does he suspect?"

"Not a thing, my Lord." Versed as she was in court politics from an early age, Huber's judgement had been spotless over the years. Based on earlier experience Voldemort had decided to grant her this sensitive task.

"You will be in daily contact from now on."

Subterfuge was actually more Severus' forte, but his talents were required for the current domestic problems. As Voldemort mentally browsed through the growing list, he became aware with some chagrin that he felt… relieved for the excuse to engage with a common enemy again.

When it came to ruling, the finer details proved to be more annoying than anticipated. Taking power was so much more satisfying than maintaining it. The thrill had been the chase, the droplet of his strength that broke the political system of the last fifty years. He had known this, yet had not foreseen his own aversion against dealing with what he thought of as trivial internal skirmishes, and what is advisors told him were propelling movements in society that needed to be nipped in the bud. Sometimes repression was most efficient through the use of force; often, it was honey that did the job better.

The last time he'd resorted to flattery he was just shy of twenty.

Isn't that what servants are for?
A slight movement – it was the hunching of Lucius' shoulders – brought him back to the matter at hand. The corner of his mouth curled in mild amusement. Lucius was frightened by his silence. His hand gestured a dismissal. "Go, Bella shall be - "

He broke off midsentence, narrowing his eyes. Something was amiss. After a beat he realised it was the headache forming at the back of his skull. He hadn't had a headache in fifteen years. Except for that time in the Ministry when he had possessed… Potter.

He waved Lucius off impatiently – the man fairly ran out the door – and focused his attention inwards. The boy had had the audacity to contact him through the link before. If Potter thought he could call upon him any time he felt like it…

No, a clear thought came through. The desperate tone told him it was not in answer to his own musings. Sticky, mind-numbing panic bled through the link. The force of it made Voldemort's eyes snap wide open.

No, it cried again, NO.

He sneered, imagining several ways in which to return the favour – a nice view of the Muggle border surrounding London would teach the boy to keep his pathetic adolescent wailings to himself.

It was Nagini who managed to seep the malice from his ire. Sensing her master's restlessness, she came to lay her head on his lap. He exhaled, letting her unassuming mind calm him.

Ten minutes into reading the report from Huber, Nagini hissed at him to stroke her scales. He became aware, as he did so, of a lack of pressure. The headache was gone. It had been replaced by a queer, enclosed feeling.

The connection - for the first time it was blocked. Potter, he knew, had not become a master Occlumens overnight.

Emerging from his reverie he absently noticed he was already standing, his wand drawn. A wisp of thought took him to the entrance hall of Hogwarts, the wards recognising their true Headmaster. Someone yelped in surprise. He looked up and noted the lone student on the grand staircase, who ran at meeting his gaze. He could always punish him later for breaking his concentration, he considered as he drew inwards once more.

While the connection was blocked the mind-path still drifted, lifeless, as if dislocated. He traced a trail of Legilimency along his share of the link. At the border it lay scattered. It took an effort then, to once more un-focus his attention. A thought snagged at him: it was a careful study of a tapestry pattern, which he knew hung on the sixth floor in the north part of the castle.

Torches flared to life around his next spot of Apparation, illuminating the same tapestry pattern he'd seen in his mind. This part of the castle was uninhabited by night, and rarely used by day. He wondered fleetingly what had brought Potter here.

"Point me, Harry Potter." The spell was reliable now that the subject was within a hundred meters. His wand stirred, then pointed further down the corridor.

He took up a swift pace. His wand soon jerked aside to point to a door close by. The handle turned under his touch. His Lumos illuminated an assortment of school materials stacked haphazardly in the small room.
He threw the ball of light into the centre. A human form was revealed in the back corner. The Identificator spell first flashed grey for unconsciousness, then orange and blue, indicating cranial damage and broken bones. He snarled, crouching down to feel along the back of Potter's head. The hair was caked with dried blood. The spell, annoyingly, could not tell him anything about the severity of the damage.

Fear, absent ever since he'd crippled Dumbledore beneath his boots like the minor nuisance he was, now stabbed in slow pulses in his chest. His wand sizzled where he held it, projecting the frustration of its owner. He had never been proficient in the magical art of Healing. He didn't need it, in any event, being immortal himself and seeing no use in healing anyone else.

A form-locking carrying charm came to mind, but there was a risk that the external magic would throw off Potter's own. He stilled, frozen with indecision.

To have to actually …

*Think of it as inanimate. It cannot touch back.*

His annoyance at the situation spiked, and the overflow of magic made the nearby wall groan as if alive.

*Think of it as Nagini.*

Drenching his thoughts with her familiar features, he braced an arm under Potter's neck and knees. Then he lifted the boy in one smooth motion against his chest.

He looked down at his charge. Potter was lighter than Nagini. His head hung at an unhealthy angle. Spidery fingers kept a tight hold as he shifted the head more securely into the crook of his arm. With that he slipped away.

He appeared soundlessly in the middle of the waiting area. A pile of charts fell out of the arms of a male nurse walking in. His colleague behind the long visitors' desk stared at Voldemort with a gaping mouth.

In ten seconds the waiting area behind him cleared of people and blessed silence ensued.

"Get your best Healers," he whispered to a nearby healer who stood as if rooted to the floor.

"Cer- certainly, my Lord." The female's expression turned from fear to surprise when she gazed down at his burden and the famous scar. Then she took on a professional air, turning on her heels.

She gestured him into a spacious room, with racks of potions and equipment meticulously shelved against the white walls. One operation bed was stood lengthwise in the middle of the room.

In the space of two heartbeats she had managed to gather another healer and two nurses into the room, who all started pulling on white gloves. One of them sped towards him as he lowered Potter to the bed, intercepting his hold on the boy's head to place it sideways on the cushion.

"Thank you, you can now wait outside please," she murmured, absorbed in studying the head wound. She must have caught the flash in his red eyes, because in the next moment she was looking anywhere else and stuttering: "Mr. You-Know- I mean Lord Voldemort, I…"

He straightened and gestured towards Potter with his now free hand, letting an edge into his tone: "Do continue."
This made the nurse snap right back to her duties. He put some working space between him and the
bed. The personnel went to attack the boy, or so it looked like. From all across the room equipment
came hovering around the healers and nurses and Potter’s body vanished behind a sea of lime
green coats. Quiet descended as the team bustled about with wands and equipment.

He waited with parchment-thin patience for their assessment.

"Pupils unequal and reactive." A Sterility charm was uttered, followed by an Ennervate.

"Mr. Potter, welcome back. Do you remember what happened?"

The sound of vomiting, then: "Evanesco. Calming draught, now," the man ordered. "Mr. Potter,
you are in a hospital. You have a concussion. We are giving you a calming draught in order to treat
you better." He went on for some time with calm reassurances while he worked, but the patient
remained eerily silent.

Voldemort narrowed his eyes as the male healer bowed towards his female colleague to whisper
something too softly for even his sensitive ears to catch. His magic, held close with a will, begged
him to let loose. He contemplated the type of curse that would make them aware of the stakes
without impeding their work.

At that precise moment the door opened and a man wearing a Head of Department
badge came in.

He went straight to Voldemort and ushered a quick bow. "My Lord, we are honoured with your
presence…"

The man trailed off, a frown marring his bald head as if he had forgotten his lines.

"And?"

The bowed form appeared to shrink even further. "We would appreciate it if you could perhaps…
well, wait outside. For the benefit of the patient," he added hastily.

The Dark Lord merely stared. The man avoided this, his wringing hands turned into stiff knots.
"They are not used to having an audience, my Lord. It is standard procedure that the patient's
relation waits outside."

Voldemort tuned him out. "Alright, speculate," he heard the woman say and, dismissing the man's
presence completely, he slipped into a spot between the nurses. Potter's eyes were vacant. He tilted
the boy's chin and peered into the glassy stare. There was no recognition.

The eyes slid closed and the head fell lax to the side.

At this the male healer started chanting something in Latin. "My Lord," the woman stressed from
annoyingly close. "Please wait outside and let us treat him."

His anger flared in sparks along his skin. She jumped back with a shout. His left arm came up and
he fisted her tight bun between long fingers. The hair was soft and smoked where he caressed it.

The sounds that now came out of her throat soothed his frayed nerves. "Ms…." – he read her badge
– "Garron, do remember your place." She gave a tiny nod, her eyes scrunched up. He retracted his
fingers and she stumbled away. Large chunks of burned-off hair fell from her head to land on the
spotless floor.

He threw the assemblage a rigid stare. "I am confident there will be a complete recovery," he
whispered in a glacial tone.
He Disapparated. There was punishment to be doled out.

Someone was touching his head. Harry flinched, wide awake in the space of two seconds.

Around him the darkness was absolute. There was a stabbing pain at the back of his head. He felt along his scalp. Gauze was pressed firmly against it. His brain felt parched, like cerebrospinal fluid was being tapped off and now the dried-up content was grinding against his skull.

The hands stilled. "Mr. Potter?" a woman whispered close by. "Are you awake?"

He quickly closed his burning eyes, feigning sleep. He then noticed the dull pain that radiated from his chest. It felt aflame with each breath. He tried to recall what this was all about, but he failed miserably.

A cold pressure at the back of his head, then the fabric was tightened once more. The woman's footsteps walked off and the door closed. He waited, concentrating on the tiniest sound. He decided it was safe to open his eyes after a minute.

A vast blackness pressed around him.

On the verge of panic now, he felt around himself. He wore a loose-fitting shirt and he was covered with a thick blanket. He couldn't find his wand on the night stand, but he hadn't really expected to. He sagged against the bedstead. Either the room was windowless, or he was in a dungeon.

He imagined a Lumos charm and went through the motions with his wand. The flow of magic up his arm surprised him. Warm air touched his hand but there was no light hovering over it. He shook away the spell. At least it was a start.

He hunched in on himself, trying and failing to dismiss the nothingness around him, which was like a near-physical presence, a silent witness bearing down over his shoulders. He gnashed his teeth, then swung his feet over the side of the bed. Dizziness made him loose his balance and he nearly fell over. He sat very still for a moment, drawing slow breaths.

Fresh air hit is face from somewhere and he turned his head towards it. Some kind of window or exit was nearby. He ought to scout his surroundings while he could. Grabbing the bed with both hands, he touched down to the floor. The cold was a shock to his warm feet. He shuffled to where he thought the wind came from and soon felt a wall. He stopped when he found the ridge of the window ledge. It was partway open. Conversations and car noises floated up from the street below.

He couldn't see it. Not even a patch of grey. Everything. Was. Darkness.

His anxiety made the pain in his chest worse. He again felt at his eyes. They were open. He carefully touched an eyeball, then cried out as a bolt of pain cleaved through his head. The touch had set of an electric charge in the centre of his skull. He grasped at the wall, gasping.

The clacking of footsteps again, now much faster than before.

"Mr. Potter!" the same voice exclaimed. Harry shrunk back from its volume.

"What's going on?" His voice trembled.

The woman's voice softened. "You are in St. Mungo's. You are being treated for a severe
"That's why I can't see, because of the treatment?" he blurted.

She paused on her way out. "Mr. Potter, please return to the bed. I will get the healer. It is probably a reaction to your treatment and nothing to worry about." She took his arm and returned him to his bed, tucking him in as if he were an infant before strolling away.

Concussion. That was probably why he couldn't remember.

After about ten minutes someone came in. A second woman's voice introduced herself as his healer and asked him to relax and keep his eyes open. He did, immensely relieved when she didn't make a move to touch them. She whispered an incantation, probably an indicator spell.

"Strange," she murmured, then she said: "There is a spell woven into the tissue layers of your eyes that is currently transforming their shape. It's not something we usually scan for, which is why I didn't detect it before."

"You mean I'm going blind?"

"No," she quickly assured him. "We scan for any traces of malignant magic. This is benign."

He sagged back into his cushion, already drained of energy. "So someone from the staff-"

"This is very advanced magic, Mr. Potter," she interrupted, "Magic that we would only entrust to an Oculist, and only with explicit permission from the patient." He probably looked confused, because she clarified: "An eye healer."

"Ah. Has… has anyone come to visit me?"

Her next words made his chest tighten with fear.

"I completely understand your suspicion, but no one wanting to harm you could have entered this room. It is actually drenched in advanced wards. They were placed here by the Dark Lord himself. He was busy for a full ten minutes, in fact, before he deemed the place sufficiently secure for your transfer."

As if this was all perfectly ordinary, she continued: "Mr. Lomberlay is our resident Oculist. I will ask him to examine your eyes." Then her footsteps receded.

She doesn't really know what's going on, does she, if she needs to get a specialist. The foggy terror he had managed to keep at bay thus far flared again, like a Dementor had turned its head to send its hollow stare right through him. Unable to sit still, he rocked back and forth.

Voldemort must be very displeased, to mutilate his eyes like this. It had to be the Dark Lord, he just knew it. It was his style. The man surely knew his way around the standard medical detection spells. It was already too late now to stop the effects of whatever curse this was. He didn't doubt that was exactly the way Voldemort intended it.

He would have to learn Braille. That wasn't so bad. He frowned as he considered the little raised dots he'd seen on paper in primary school. Maybe they only had that in the Muggle world. He rocked a bit harder, trying to still his jumpy thoughts. Don't be so dramatic. Wait until the healers return. Just don't think, just wait a little.

"Harry!"
He jumped, jerking his head so fast he pulled a muscle in his neck.

"Neville?"

Judging from the boy's tone Neville was probably grinning. "I heard you were here so I thought I'd stop by."

"Neville…" Harry muttered, stretching out a hand.

"Are you alright? What happened? Did you hit your head?"

Neville came to stand next to the bed. After a few more seconds of blindly sticking his arm into the darkness, it was gently clasped and the bed dipped to his right as Neville sat down.

"Harry?"

Harry was distantly aware his body was still moving slightly back and forth. He stilled himself and let go of Neville's hand in order to wrap the blanket tighter around himself.

"I- I can't see right now."

A pause. "Alright. I suppose that makes sense."

Wizarding logic. Harry's lips turned into a grimace. "Actually, no. They're going to send an expert to take a look at my eyes."

"Oh. That's awful Harry."

"Are you here because of your parents, Neville?" Harry asked to change the subject.

"Yes, I visit them once a week on Sunday."

"You're allowed to leave the grounds for that?"

"No, but there's a secret way to get out of Hogwarts."

"One of the passages into Hogsmeade, you mean? Wait, never mind. It's best that I don't know."

He had briefly forgotten that little fact, funny enough.

They turned the conversation to sharing memories of the good times in the little wizarding town, and wondering if they would ever be allowed to go there again. The warmth of Neville's shoulder next to his had soothed away the edge of his panic. This was real. There was just something blocking him from seeing it. The expert would come soon.

"You wouldn't say it, but business is booming actually," Neville was saying. "Voldemort has revoked a lot of the old trading sanctions on all kinds of things. It's a lot of Dark Arts now, though, my Grandma says."

*My Grandma says.* Not a passage into Hogsmeade then. "How is she?"

"She's fine. She's helping out with Muggle support, warning them and helping them to move away from wizarding areas. Especially at the border it's very dangerous for Muggles right now."

Harry swallowed. "How are they doing, the Muggles?" It was plain ridiculous, how he had no clue at all of what was going on. Obviously the papers were being filled with nationalistic drivel. Voldemort didn't want the public to become restless. But since Harry was sleeping in the lion's den,
you’d think he would pick up on some of it at least.

"Not good. There are a lot of disappearances reported by the Muggle authorities. We don't know where they are being taken." His tone became firm. "But you'd be surprised how little support there is for these abductions, on all levels. Right now, although I think most people agree that this serves no purpose at all, no one is lifting a finger to intervene."

By the end there was clear anger in his voice. Harry felt chilled as he remembered what Hermione had said about breaking wheels. If that's what happened to Muggleborns who tried to escape, what happened to the Muggles?

His hand was clasped again. "I'm sorry Harry. Here I am, trying to cheer you up and of course the opposite happens."

"Not at all Neville, I'm happy you're here. And I always prefer knowing things. So thanks."

Neville squeezed then let go of his hand. "I have to go now Harry. I need to be back for dinner, or they're going to notice I'm gone."

Harry thought he was taking a huge risk every week, coming here to visit his parents. Of course, he would've done the exact same thing in his place. "Say hi to Ron and Hermione for me."

Neville rose. "Sure thing. Hang in there Harry. St. Mungo's is supposed to be the best hospital in the country now. They'll know what to do."

"Right. Thanks."

Neville's soft footfalls went across the room. "I'll be back next week in any case, if you're still here."

"That's great. See you soon, then."

"Bye," Neville whispered near the door.

Harry curled into himself and closed his eyes, trying hard not to think of anything in particular.

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The next time someone walked in it was to bring him dinner, plane hospital fare. Careful not to spoil the food on himself he ate slowly and mechanically, interested in nothing but waiting out the hours for the Oculist to show up. After dinner he was directed by a staff member to the bathroom facilities. The woman described the smallest details of his surroundings in a manner that made him feel like a small child. He supposed it couldn't be helped.

After a restless night that seemed to drag on forever, when breakfast came it was still a surprise. He noted with relief that overnight the painful burning of his airway had been reduced to a mere dull ache.

His jaw clenched hard along with his nerves when the nurse announced the Oculist. He was instructed to lay back. The man interrogated him on the changes in his eye sight and the manner of his headache. Lomberlay then murmured a spell that glued his eyes wide open. He tensed. Something icy cold touched his eyes, but it didn't hurt as expected.

"I see," the man said, straightening. "It's the scenario I was hoping for. You, young man, have been blessed with the perfect sight, or *visionem perfectam* as we call it. It is a complicated and powerful
Transformation spell, with a notorious history – many who have attempted it have become permanently blind. However-" he quickly went on at Harry's sharp intake of breath, "if performed correctly, the retina reforms in the second or third day after incantation. This is the case now. The focus and shape of your retina are already at a higher acuity then they were, based on what you say to be your former vision."

Perfect vision? No more need for glasses, was his first thought. Then another thought came right after. Voldemort was as likely to grand him perfect vision as he was to take him for a trip to the zoo. But then, who else could have gotten past the wards?

The man went on and Harry focused back to the sound of his voice. "You will have a visual acuity superior to that of most people. If my extrapolation is correct it will stabilize at the limit of acuity in the human eye. To speak plainly, it means you will be able to see details from six meters away which people with a normal eyesight can see from three meters away."

"When do I know if it has worked?" In this case the idiom 'seeing is believing' was an apt description of his predicament.

"It takes about four days until the transfiguration of the eye is completed. Until that time the spell ensures that the transfiguration, while it takes place, is protected from any outside interference. As a precautionary measure it therefore blocks all visual cues from reaching the brain. This is why you have become temporarily sightless."

Harry took that in with a frown. "Why are so many people wearing glasses then, if this is the perfect solution?"

"It takes a witch or wizard of exceptional skill and power to pull of such a feat, Mr. Potter. I can't perform the spell, although I wish I could." He chuckled a moment. "I would be instantaneously famous. In fact," Mr. Lomberlay added in suppressed excitement, "I rarely encounter it. Do you have any idea who the benefactor might be?"

Harry had his suspicions, but he didn't trust this man to tell him anything – he hadn't even seen him yet. "I have no clue, Mr. Lomberlay."

"Hm, shame, shame." the man muttered. "Alright, this is all for now. Do you have any questions?"

"No sir, thank you."

"Not at all, Mr. Potter." The man walked off with instructions to the nurse nearby, which were simple: he needed rest and regular check-ups as well as access to a radio, for some reason.

His blood was circulating so fast he could hear the rhythm in his neck. Someone from the Order had visited him, to give him this, a perfect sight. Or someone loyal to him. This person had probably also rescued him from whatever trouble he'd gotten into in the first place, the mystery that made his head pound and his airways burn. Perhaps it was Dumbledore! Maybe, just maybe, he was waiting for an opportunity to get him out of here right now!

The rest of Monday dragged on at a frustratingly slow pace. He half expected someone from the Order to come and snatch him away. He was restless as a result. The music from the installation they brought in didn't manage to hold his attention, and the talking programs made it clear that the radio had been reduced to the sole purpose of being Voldemort's mouthpiece. It was disgusting and depressing, so he switched it off.
The door opened. He tensed. It was right after lunch, not a logical time for the staff to enter. Someone took a breath as if frightened of what they saw. Harry's heart leaped.

"That bad huh?" he joked.

The chuckle that followed, he knew it like his thumb. "Hermione!"

The door closed. "Shhh! Oh I hope they didn't hear that." She murmured a Silencing charm, reminding him that she carried a second wand. She drew near to sit down where he padded the bed, in the same spot that Neville had.

"Hermione, are you skipping class?" Harry asked with fake wonder. He got a hair ruffle for his trouble.

"I'm not skipping class, I will have you know. I'm skipping administration but I'll make it up tonight." He knew she was now waving her arm dismissively. "Oh Harry we were so worried!" She hugged him, careful not to press too hard. "You didn't show up for Quidditch. A whole day, nothing."

She fell silent, probably reliving that day, but she quickly ploughed on like the old Hermione he knew. It almost felt like everything was alright between them again.

"Then Neville returned at dinner and told us where you were. Then, Monday morning, the pictures… they were awful. I came as fast as I could. I'm sorry Ron couldn't be here as well. He has Charms now. Along with the Slytherins, so it would be too conspicuous. I mean, they've become like a plague, you know. They're suddenly all studious and showing up for all the classes."

When she finally stopped her nervous babbling to take a breath he quickly cut in with: "Pictures? What pictures?"

Hermione froze in the middle of straightening. Then he felt her shift to lean against the headboard, unfolding her legs next to his. She sighed. "You don't know."

"What don't I know," Harry demanded in a low tone. He had his eyes closed – he would explain about them later.

There was a sound of fabric shifting, then the cracking of paper. "Here."

"Can you read it for me? My eyes are a bit sensitive now, because of the concussion."

"Of course. It's the front page of the Daily Prophet. There's a picture of you, unconscious, being… carried, by… by Volde- I mean Riddle."

"What?!"

The effect was rather like turning a beautiful stone and finding a cockroach underneath.

"It's true Harry. He found you actually, you were in a very bad condition. He carried you to St. Mungo's. And there's more-"

"A condition he put me in!" Harry fumed at the mere idea that Hermione could be contemplating this farce. He would need some time to figure this out, but whatever it look like, Voldemort coming to the rescue wasn't it.

He'd put Harry under some kind of torture, of course. Along with a round of Legilimency since
Harry couldn't recall any of it – although he'd riled the man plenty of times, and the Dark Lord never needed any reason anyway. Maybe it was exactly because someone had done a kind, caring thing for Harry for once like, say, granting him *visionem perfectam*, that Voldemort went berserk... After all, he was 'not to be touched'.

And then, he'd taken Harry to St. Mungo's, the slimy cutthroat, proclaiming himself Harry Potter's great protector.

Hermione's quite voice slowly seeped through his turmoil: "Maybe it's better if I just read the paper."

Harry jerked a hand upwards to say, go ahead.

"The title reads: 'Harry Potter rescued last minute from deadly plot'" She scraped her throat. "'His Lordship was on a regular inspection of the goings on at Hogwarts castle last night, when he became aware of an unusual disturbance on the sixth floor. He was quick to discover, our correspondent is shocked to say, none other than Harry Potter, trapped away in a closet, unconscious and with a severe head wound. Our sovereign wasted no time in taking Mr. Potter to St. Mungo's himself and alerting the Aurors. Due to the use of exceptionally sensitive tracing spells, the culprits were quickly found to be three Hogwarts students.'"

Harry sagged back against the cushion. The man had clearly made it up. But then, why would he need to? Good press? That was ridiculous.

"You don't remember any of this, do you?" Hermione asked sadly. She went on to quote the paper: "Next paragraph: 'The offenders, whose names shall remain undisclosed for privacy reasons, have been charged and found guilty of aggravated assault and murder to the second degree. A conference was held in the morning at Hogwarts castle to assure the students and the press. Our Lordship made a quick appearance, honouring the reporters with a short speech before he went to check up on his charge.' Quote of the speech: 'Yesterday's events are an unfortunate blemish on Hogwarts' near-spotless and thousand-year record of keeping its students safe. I will personally see to it that'."

Harry jerked his hand again and Hermione abruptly stopped. He didn't need to hear Voldemort's slippery words coming from her mouth. "What else does it say?"

"In general? That security at Hogwarts will be reinforced. That you are recovering remarkably well, and that there will be a public punishment dealt somewhere next week. That's the gist of it."

With a sinking feeling, he considered that at this point, the possibility that Dumbledore, or anyone else from the Order, had rescued him was becoming very unlikely. Had that been the case, the papers would be screaming bloody murder, claiming his old mentor had kidnapped him or some such.

"I don't get it," Harry whispered. "Why would Riddle set all this up? And the wards… I can't figure out what he gains by doing this."

"What do you mean, the wards?"

"The healer told me that Voldemort came by for a visit. He warded this room to the nines. Actually, I'm surprised you got through. But of course you don't mean any harm, so …" 

She took this in for a moment, then touched his arm lightly. "It's not a lie this time, Harry. Riddle didn't set it up. Two whole common rooms were witness to the capture of your attackers, and two
out of the three immediately confessed."

Harry jerked his head. It was unlike Hermione to be so gullible. "He made them confess, of course."

"Harry," Hermione interrupted. "Did you lose your glasses?"

Glasses.

He remembered, suddenly, a fragment of sound, the sound of glasses breaking beneath someone's boots. Zacharius. And Nott, in the little room. And a third.

With the names, recollection flooded back, like a tidal wave of Legilimency. He jerked upright. They held me down so he could kick me.

Someone touched his chin. He jumped, then forced himself to relax. "Don't," he began shakily, "don't touch me please."

He felt for her hand to soften the harsh words. "Yes," he answered after a moment. "Zacharius crushed them."

"He set it all up, right?"

"Why are you here?" Harry returned suddenly. "Isn't it very dangerous? What's the punishment actually, for a Muggleborn student to be caught outside of Hogwarts grounds?"

Silence for a few beats. "Expulsion," she said. "Probably more."

"You're risking… expulsion, to come here?" Harry gritted his teeth, inexplicably annoyed. It was obvious now that she had taken Neville's route. Neville should have known better than to show her. A pureblood would have nothing to fear from a little rule-breaking, but a Muggleborn… And it was absolutely forbidden for students to leave the grounds. Or had the Order found a passage that only they could use and no one else? It had to be that. Harry couldn't imagine Hermione risking expulsion in any situation.

"Why aren't you-" running away, he wanted to ask, but he caught himself just in time. She may have escaped the grounds before, she may be doing it all the time for all he knew. The point was, whatever the situation, he couldn't afford to be witness to the answer.

But then actually…

"This is great Hermione, just great," he snarled. "He will know now, won't he? Sometime soon, he will see this in my mind."

"He can't kill me, I'm too useful," Hermione stated. Her voice was weird, emotionless.

Harry felt his hands start to shake in anger. If she was so brilliant, how could she be so stupid?

"Harry," she cut into his frenzy, "There's something you're not telling me. I mean, it's obvious that right now, you're completely blind."

His hand came down to knot tightly in the coverlet. What a low blow to turn the conversation. "Yes," he hissed.

"Did the staff say- "
Harry wanted to snap at her, but his anger left him like a gust of wind. He could never be angry at Hermione for long. "Before I was brought here someone had fixed my eyes. I think someone from the Order or loyal to it, who had taken me to St. Mungo's and noticed my broken glasses." Or it was a member of the Harry Potter fanclub: from what Ron's good-humoured taunts had told him, the club was still going strong.

"Then Voldemort got wind of it, and he took all the credit," he finished.

The more he thought about it, the more it made sense. Although it seemed like there was no way anyone would fall for it, Voldemort had been corrupting the Daily Prophet for some time now - so who knew what people actually thought of him nowadays? The public opinion was fickle: he had learned that the hard way. The only people who knew the real Dark Lord were the handful of his most devoted followers and enemies.

"Can you tell me a bit more about what the Oculist said?"

He described the check-up he'd had that morning with the specialist, repeating the Oculist's words about his soon-to-be perfect vision.

Hermione remarked, quick as ever: "Visionem perfectam, you mean?"

"Exactly."

He felt her hand slacken in his grip. "Hermione?" He asked after the silence had become too pressing on his ears.

"Harry," she said with a tremble in her voice. "Harry, I think you're a Horcrux."

* Dammâḵā: several meanings, including: to die, to be motionless, to put to sleep. (I don't know anything about old Aramaic conjugation, though).

Let me know what you think! Reviews are my energy bars.
Chapter 19

Harry turned away, squeezing his eyes shut. It was hard to breathe all of a sudden, as if an icicle was stuck in his throat. The cold spread from there, numbing his thoughts. Even in this numbness, he was filled with the awful conviction that something had clicked into place, something had come full circle. It was a nauseating thought that reverberated outward, making hackles rise on his skin.

The lack of oxygen kicked his body back into action. He coughed, focusing on drawing air into his lungs.

"Harry." Hermione's voice was very close now. "Harry, I'm not even sure."

He heard a chuckle leave his lips.

"Harry…." Hermione sounded like she regretted speaking at all.

There was a claustrophobic air to the darkness.

The collection of jagged pieces which made up the glass dome of his new life, now glittered tauntingly, whole at last. Distant and factual, he observed himself, his own scientific object. That one word uttered, and the time of the Knowing was bulging outwards.

It was a vacuum without colour. He feared that soon, it would cover him and everything around him in joyless, grey dust.

The edges of his shock gave way to something else: morbid curiosity.

Had he known, deep down, and just refused to see?

The clues had been staring him in the face! His scar. The visions, which had gotten stronger in time rather than weaker. Was that his own magic becoming more like Voldemort's, or that rotting piece of soul gleefully distorting its companion and rebuilding it in its own image?

The parseltongue for fuck's sake. Ever since Tom Riddle pointed out the similarities, he had wondered about that one: how could a blunt shot of Avada Kedavra gone wrong gift him with such a refined instrument?

More things started to make sense now. The fact that Harry had been locked in a luxurious mansion and not a dungeon cell; Voldemort's own home where not even his Death Eaters were allowed to enter, except for Watanabe. He'd enjoyed Harry's pain, no surprise there, yet always made sure to… compensate, neutralize the damage afterwards.
Just like he'd done now. Harry rubbed at his eyes, wanting to ignore the shame he always felt thinking about that day. He had been so weak. That's how the Dark Lord had found him, beaten to a pulp by his schoolmates. The Muggle way, even.

*He is not to be touched,* Voldemort's voice echoed in his thoughts mockingly.

*Little one.*

A shudder went up his back. He opened his eyes. Still blind, of course.

Voldemort had been the one to order Snape to teach him the Dark Arts, not Dumbledore. The Dark Lord couldn't stand the idea that his own Horcrux was less than a master in the field, of course. And who knew, maybe he'd thought Harry would develop a fondness for it.

Hadn't he? Although Snape was a horrid teacher Harry welcomed the training. It made him feel more prepared to deal with... things.

Another chuckle escaped him. Fate had played a cruel joke on the both of them. The Dark Lord would rather have used *anything* else for a vessel than the body of his fated enemy. Voldemort would have ripped it out if he could, gladly killing Harry in the process. Maybe that was still a possibility. Because nothing and no one could ever be worthy of a piece of his soul.

Oh the irony.

He didn't know how long he sat there sunken in thought, when suddenly he couldn't bear to think anymore, it gave him such horrible insights, and so he paced on unsteady feet, window – bed – window – bed, but still the wires in his brain continued to make sense. His thoughts kept coming back to the same conclusions:

He was an anchor of Voldemort's immortality.

One way or another, he had to be killed.

Voldemort knew this. That's why he hadn't told him. Keeping this from Harry was actually a compliment, in a weird way. He knew what Harry was capable of, what he was prepared to lose.

And to think that all this time everyone had been so proud of the Boy-Who-Survived. His life was one completely fucked-up paradox.

Someplace somewhere, the gods were laughing.

His breaths turned into short bursts, making him dizzy. The seconds dripped out slowly. Time itself, he considered, wouldn't be able to take the bite off this one. You couldn't really stop being a Horcrux.

He still felt very weak, and so he sat down once more. Hermione's hand came up to grasp his shoulder.

What he wouldn't give to be able to see his friend's eyes right now, to let her gaze steady him. His blindness wouldn't budge for at least a day, which was hard to accept all of a sudden. Being forced to experience *this* while he was locked in the confines of his own consciousness, with no external stimulus to distract himself, made him want to scream. He figured that if he remained at the center of it, he might become quite literally senseless.

"I have to go," he heard himself say.
Although fine tremors shook his limbs, he felt strangely calm as he touched down on the cold floor. By now he knew exactly which direction the door was. He let go of the bed to step into nothingness.

"Where are you going?" Hermione was by his side immediately, a hand on his arm.

"Getting out of here."

He rested for a moment against the doorframe. His ears picked up the bustle of movement in the corridor. The personnel was bound to recognize him. He had to try, though. When would he get such a chance again? No one would expect him to go off now, just a day before he could see again.

"Take me to Dumbledore, please."

"I don't know where he is."

"Then take me to someone who does, damn it!"

"Harry, you can't really expect to-"

"Alright, you want to help me or not?" he fumed, blindly staring her way.

"Course I do," Hermione quietly answered. "Come here, I'll put you under a Disillusionment." Harry stepped closer. She incanted the charm for them both, with the tell-tale feeling of an egg gliding over his head.

"Can you Apparate us out?"

"We can't - you can't Apparate or Disapparate in public buildings anymore, it's one of the new decrees. Come on, the exit is just one floor down."

Now that he had made up his mind to leave, his resolve tore and scrambled again, halting his stride. For a whole week he'd stayed inside the bubble that was Hogwarts. He had played it safe, timidly attending his lessons. Hermione and Ron though, and Neville and all the others from the resistance, they were making offers, risking their lives to set up schemes and going off on dangerous meetings with what was left of the Order (or so he presumed).

He could have slipped out alongside them, but he hadn't. He'd been afraid of what would happen to the people left behind. Voldemort could trace anyone anywhere. He knew exactly where to strike where it hurt the most.

But pretending time was over. His skin felt like it was crawling with maggots. The killer of his parents – the reason for his own miserable existence, the very thing he fought against – resided in his very own body, right underneath his skin. Could it hear him? Was it a separate entity in his head?

He bit his lip hard when it occurred to him that he couldn't drag Hermione into this. If anything went wrong…

"I'm sorry," Hermione cut into his thoughts suddenly. "I shouldn't have just- I mean…” she stuttered into silence.

"You'd rather I never found out, you mean? Gee, thanks," he said, stung.

"If it meant things would continue the way they are, then maybe!" she said. "Because there's not
much to complain about, is there? You're free to go wherever you like if you stay within school grounds. And you get to finish your education on top of that. Things could be a lot worse." She took a deep breath. "If he finds out that I told you though, who knows what might happen."

"What do you think will happen?"

There was a horrible laugh. "It's fairly obvious, isn't it? He can hardly kill you for knowing about this, but me…"

He will see this conversation. Unwillingly the dungeon scene came to mind that Voldemort had forced on him. This time around, it was Hermione's empty eye sockets that stared up at him accusingly from where she hung. He tugged at his hair, trying to get rid of the image.

"Unless of course," she went on with an edge of hysterics in her tone, "you know someone here who could perform a narrow-tuned Obliviate without asking questions."

His heart hammered with the speed of a bullet train. It made his magic sizzle like electricity against his skin, jolting him out of a sickening spiral of fear.

The solution was obvious. Only one person would be able to get them out of this mess.

With renewed purpose, a sense of calm returned. His muscles relaxed, his focus narrowed. He grasped her hand. "You'd better go. Find Dumbledore. Tell him about- about this. I will-"

"You're coming with me," she cut in.

He shook his head. "If he catches us together he'll know that you know." Harry squeezed her hand to convey his resolution. "I can serve as bait. That way you'll have a head start. But you have to go now."

She scoffed. "I'm not going to leave you-"

He hissed, jerking his hand back: "This is ridiculous. Try using that logical brain on yourself for once. If we go together and we don't make it, you know he'll kill you on first sight. Please, Hermione. Imagine our position were reversed, what would you say then?"

She was silent for a while. Was she angry?

"I'd tell me to go," she said finally. Her voice was muffled, thick.

Harry hugged her. She was crying for real now, her whole body shaking against him. "It'll be alright," he whispered into her hair. "Dumbledore can solve just about anything, you know."

"Can he solve you?" she murmured.

He froze at that, thoughts cluttering into quietness like flies caught in honey. The familiar flowery shampoo scent of her hair managed to calm his wild heart rate. "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it. Later, I'll deal with that later.

"What will you do now?"

Yes what was he going to do? Stumble about in the hopes of finding the exit? Well, everything was better than waiting to be escorted back into Voldemort's claws.

"I don't know yet." He held her at arm's length, guessing the height of her face. "My first concern right now is that you get out of here before anyone notices."
She withdrew and sniffed loudly a few times. A hand fell ever so carefully onto his right cheek.

Her tone was solemn as she said: "Don't give them any reason to punish you. It's important that you keep your temper, Harry. Being his... "horcrux," she whispered the word, "you're actually very safe. Try to use this to your advantage. Take after Malfoy, for all I care. He's not actually half bad when he doesn't open his mouth too much."

Harry chuckled. "He isn't," he agreed.

"Take care Harry," Hermione said. The tone of finality made his gut lurch.

She went.

Her fading footsteps echoed like the rattling sound of a medieval gate being pulled down. The only comfort he had in this blackish nightmare was walking out, and he might never see her again.

Alone, he felt nausea coming on, trapped in his own thoughts. They swarmed like insects around him, festering in a swamp of fear that he couldn't seem to push down, no matter that it was useless right now.

He found his bed and sat, his arms around his knees. He didn't know when his translucency would wear off, so he'd wait a few minutes to give her a head start, then find the exit - it was just one floor down after all.

Or should he let himself be caught and avoid any suspicion? If he acted like nothing happened, Voldemort wouldn't know why precisely Hermione had escaped. She'd be just another unremarkable Muggleborn who had fled the regime.

Or maybe, maybe they'll catch her first and put her into one of those Muggle devices the newspaper was talking about.

No, not Hermione, they needed her alive to dangle her over his head. Riddle knew by now she made for the perfect incentive to make him behave.

Running now would mean stumbling into people and people stumbling into him because of his near-invisibility. It was bound to end in failure. More importantly it would make for a severely cranky Dark Lord. If he stayed here though, Voldemort would need just one look into his mind to know.

Damn it. Damned if you do, damned if you don't.

Harry sensed a sharpness in his vision as sudden as if a light bulb had been switched on in the pervasive blackness. A Dark Mark was near.

It felt packed tight with power which was barely contained, like a great ball of ice, the way it wafted coldness. The man's magic seeped through his clothing right into his skin and Harry shivered, recalling what had happened the last time he'd sensed this particular one.

It was not Harry who had awakened it: it was Snape. Which meant…

Right on cue Harry's forehead burned as if a stove was pressed against it.

"What's going on?" he snapped.

A chuckle answered him. "And so it takes the removal of Potter's eyesight to finally make him
perceptive. If only I'd known this earlier…"

Harry couldn't suppress a violent flinch as out of nowhere, fingers clenched like a vice around his upper arm.

"No games this time, Potter," Snape drawled from up close.

The familiar sensation of Apparation tugged at him. Being blind made the experience disturbing, and his stomach lurched in protest. The shift in space couldn't have taken more than two seconds. He was kept tight in Snape's grip, to his immense disgust. The burn in his scar cracked up a few degrees higher. He welcomed the pain for once, as it cleared the fog of fear from his head.

**Voldemort is here. Don't think about anything, distract him.**

"So it was you who fucked up my eyes!" he spat, throwing all his weight into getting Snape off him, while shutting down any thoughts of Hermione in the process. He heard Snape's satisfying stumble. The grip though, was back right away.

In the hospital just now, for the first time since the battle, he'd been witness to Voldemort forcing his will onto a Dark Mark. As a spectator he could now sense the resulting ebb and flow of magic. Voldemort stood out like a void of negative space, a black hole carved out in the vast emptiness of his vision, although to describe it as something physically observable was incorrect. The same way one could pinpoint the location of a stare at their back, Harry knew exactly where Voldemort stood.

His legs still trembled, now not from fear but from exhaustion. Three days of bed rest had sunk into them.

Hating how weak he must look to these men, he let his anger with Snape fester, thoughts leaping back to that evening in the Room when the man's grip had kept him from coming to Hermione's aid. The painful truth of the past half hour still sat like a hundred pound vault in his stomach, but the ringing in his head fell away for a moment, replaced by an eerie focus. He tilted his head to where he thought Snape's eyes must be, somewhere above the well of wafting coldness that still remained drifting in the dark, an afterimage of Voldemort's command to Apparate.

Anchoring his conviction into that swirl of magic, he pushed down. There was no physical Mark to ground his will on. Still he felt it working: the flow became restless, turning in loops like an encaged tiger. The hand bit harder now, squeezing off the circulation in his arm. He pushed harder in return, knowing how humiliating this would be for this proud man. Voldemort chuckled and Snape stiffened, making dark satisfaction curl all the way into Harry's toes.

Snape finally yanked away his arm, staying completely silent. Harry couldn't even hear an elevated breathing. He found that, along with the physical connection, his grip on the Mark's afterimage had disappeared.

"Take him to his room," Voldemort said. He had come to stand beside Snape.

"Yes my Lord," Snape answered.

Harry felt him move closer. "Touch me again and you will suffer," he snarled. He was under no delusions that Voldemort would allow the torture a second time, but his concern for this completely fucked-up situation had found rock bottom.

There was one thing that mattered right now, but thinking about it was out of the question. Besides, what was there to worry about? The great Dark Lord had just become harmless overnight, wasn't
that ironic.

The tip of a wand dug into his throat and he was shoved backward, the skin burning where it had touched the wand. Caught off guard he nearly fell over.

"Let's go Potter," Snape said, distinctly bored-sounding. Harry felt something vile creep up his throat begging to come out. He held his tongue though, not wanting any more interaction with Voldemort.

His scar dulled as they walked, letting him know that it was just Snape accompanying him. They took several flights of stairs in silence. Although the fact that this was Voldemort's manor was depressing, he was still glad to recognize his surroundings again. Being blind in an unfamiliar environment had been exhausting.

He could imagine Snape's superior smirk right now, escorting a stone-blind Potter back into his cage. The git's aloofness under any circumstances made Harry's fists itch to try one of the Dursley's techniques.

He felt a smirk twitch at the corner of his mouth. He was a precious Horcrux now: didn't that mean he was inviolable, in a way? He could provoke Snape however he liked and he'd get away with it. Snape would just have to take it, just like Harry always had to tolerate all the bullshit Snape dealt out in the classroom.

Boy, could he use a distraction right about now.

"So Snape," he began conversationally, "you had a thing for my mum, didn't you? That's why you were so pissed off at my dad. He was something else, wasn't he?" He grinned. "Handsome, funny, popular… You just couldn't compare. And because you are a petty man you wanted revenge, and so you turned to Voldemort." He ignored Snape's hiss at the name. "Although I'm sure that eventually he'll become bored with you as well…"

He stopped when he realized the lack of reaction from his audience. Snape was a master Occlumence. Harry didn't doubt that he could keep his emotions hidden even from the Dark Mark if he wanted to. He cursed his lack of sight for the umpteenth time – he was missing important clues here, all while Snape could observe him like a hawk.

"But not with you, right Potter?" Snape drawled suddenly, long after the silence had become thick and awkward.

Harry's heart stuttered for a beat. Did Snape know?

"Still alive am I not?" he shot back, feigning cockiness.

The man didn't reply, just shoved him inside his room and closed the door. After the man's footsteps had faded he tried the handle, but of course it wouldn't budge.

So much for a distraction.

He let his head fall against the door. Splaying his hands wide, he felt the coolness of the wood. The chair and bed would be a few meters to his back, the hearth was rustling to his left, the beautiful velvety dark-blue ceiling with its glittering chandelier would be hovering above. He wondered randomly if Nagini was home.

His fevered mind turned inevitably, unbidden, to thoughts of Hermione. Where would she go, now that every wizarding place was a potential trap? Maybe she would visit her parents. He hoped their
new hiding place was a save one.

He forced his leaden legs over to the fireplace and sat down heavily on the rug. It was a ridiculous wizarding habit actually, he thought, keeping the hearth burning in late summer. Maybe that was just house elves always being overeager.

Speaking of... "Tadders!"

A plop sounded. "Good afternoon, Mr. Potter sir. You is wanting anything?"

"I know I'm not allowed to leave the grounds, but can you get me out of this room?"

"You is allowed out when the Master has left."

Harry sighed. "When will that be?"

"After he has punished the herb-brewing servant."

Harry tilted his head, taking that in. "And what has he done?"

"He is being failing in his assignment, I has heard Master say, Mr. Potter sir."

Interesting. Was that why Voldemort had assigned Snape to become Harry's nurse? Despite his predicament, this thought made him grin. What assignment had Snape failed to make him fall out of the Dark Lord's nonexistent grace? Wasn't Snape among his 'favourites'?

Drawing his focus inwards, he tried to sense the other wizards in the house. They were too far away, or perhaps Voldemort wasn't actively punishing Snape at the moment. Whatever the cause, he couldn't get any grip on the network.

"Would Mr. Potter sir be wanting anything?"

My wand please. "No, nothing. Thanks Tadders."

"Of course, Mr. Potter sir," Tadders answered. A plop sounded and Harry was alone once more.

He hoped fiercely that Voldemort would leave soon. He quickly focused on the feeling of the rug under his fingertips, afraid the turn of his thoughts would actually summon the man.

Something, a pressure like a giant's hands on his head, lifted. He rubbed at his scar. It felt like normal tissue. The handle of the door budged and he eagerly escaped into the hallway.

He was distinctly aware of the vast space around him. Keeping one hand on the wall, he slowly made his way down. The stairs were tricky, leading all the way into the dungeon level.

A sudden coldness in the air let him know he should turn back up a few steps for the ground floor. From there it was easy, a few turns and he was out into the grounds. The warmth of the sun felt like a blessing, seeping away the tension in his body. He walked a few paces onto the grass, then lay down, hands behind his head. Repulsed with his own situation and sufficiently sure that Voldemort would not be back for some time, he turned his thoughts to Hermione.

Albus Dumbledore lifted his eyes from the swirl of dots on the magical map, and couldn't hold back a quiet laugh at the sight.
The werewolf's ears were sharp. "Not funny Albus. Why did you pick the one area which has rose bushes everywhere?"

His stomach muscles still burning from laughter, Albus pinked away a tear. "My dear Remus, the roses are what makes this garden. I did warn you about them, if I recall."

Remus sank down into the other luxurious lawn chair, a grumpy blend of bronzed skin and torn clothes. His forehead and nose looked like a raven had been scratching away at it. Exhausted though he was from the long night, the bags under his eyes had diminished somewhat, Albus was relieved to note.

"Next time I'm going back to the forest," the brown-eyed man went on sullenly, scowling.

His mirth subsiding somewhat, Albus poured a second cup of herbal tea with his good hand – although 'good' had become a relative term: there was a large chunk of flesh below his wrist ripped off by the Inferi that he would never get back. "Remus, if you get whisked off again in werewolf form the consequences are not likely to be as pleasant this time around. It's not worth the risk." That had been a week ago, and Dumbledore still felt the echo of frayed nerves thinking back on it.

Muttering something about pierced eyes not being worth the risk either, Remus nevertheless took a dutiful sip of the medicinal brew. Letting out a heart-felt sigh, he lay back and the chair at once accommodated the horizontal position. Apparently he was too lazy to spell clear the damage to his face. Albus went back to studying the dotted forces on the map.

"Any new developments?" Remus said with his eyes closed against the cloudless sky.

"I will be sure to tell you if there are. Drink your tea."

Remus straightened in order to take another sip, before laying down again. Out of the corner of his eyes, Albus could see him pull a thoughtful face. "Tastes better at least."

The lack of Wolfsbane had been a difficult hurdle to tackle but his friend took it in stride, clearly expecting little from life for the foreseeable future. That was for the best, of course. They all had to adjust their expectations, although Albus made sure to keep the morale high, encouraging an optimistic viewpoint. With the horridness that the papers were spewing, it was hard to stay true to this conviction sometimes.

It was frustrating how little they had achieved as of yet. The resistance' strength, briefly revived in the months following Tom's takeover of the country, now dwindled fast. The lack of accurate information made it impossible to measure the effect of their actions: where they targeting the right factions, had they caught onto all the Muggleborn escape routes, were Harry, Ron and Hermione carrying out the mission he had set for them? There was no way to be sure.

Cut off from most of his contacts, he had lost access to Tom's inner circle, the actual command center of the country. Whatever the Wizengamot decided (and Minerva was sure to keep him apprised) had been approved by Tom first. Albus' agent in those meetings had been out of touch, unwilling to risk the colossal cost that his exposure would bring to the war effort. And Albus agreed. In this case, the same as with Harry, no news was good news.

The Dark Lord carrying a heavily injured Harry Potter into St. Mungo's, therefore, was not good news.

He was distracted from his musings by a voice booming behind them: "Remus, yer back! Lookin' a bit ruffled. Here, lemme help yeh with that eh?"
Hagrid's large form walked out the back door of the large estate onto the lawn, already brandishing his wand-turned-walking stick. Remus held up a hand. "No need Hagrid, I'll do it myself. How's Elizabeth doing?"

As always their friend was easily distracted by thoughts of animals under his care. A shadow passed over his features. "Fine. She's recovering," he said, gruffly. "Sir?"

Albus looked up with a hand over his eyes to block out the sunlight. "Dear friend, when are you going to call me Albus?"

Hagrid scratched his beard. "Still have ter get used to it, I guess."

Albus vanished the map with a wave and stood to follow him into the coolness of the drawing room. The silvery liquid that shone like a light source on the table was as breathtaking to behold as always. Hagrid hadn't bothered with a stopper.

His chest clenched at the sight. Although they had done this little ritual a handful of times already, he became deeply unsettled each time. It made him feel his age like not much else could.

"Alright then, Professor."

Albus carefully took the bottle that Hagrid held out between two fingers. Two large gulps and the glass was empty. Immediately his stomach felt like it might burst with warmth, the potency of the blood astonishing. He felt reenergized and hollowed-out at the same time. He sat down on a kitchen chair and passed a hand over his eyes. Suddenly bone-tired, he willed the lightheadedness from the magical surplus to pass quickly.

Hagrid patted his shoulder. "She's fine, yeh know, she doesn't even feel it." His kind face regarded him with a serious expression. "I told yeh she understands."

"Yes Hagrid, you told me," Albus spoke, hand still covering his eyes.

He had tried to visit Elizabeth once. A creature from the Forbidden Forest, she now roamed the magical Everhawn forest that surrounded the estate. How Hagrid had managed to escape Hogwarts with a full-grown unicorn he would probably never find out. And that was after his friend had made sure to free all the wildlife that wanted to leave.

Dappled in moonlight she stood at the forest's edge. As he'd approached she became tense, drawing up her beautiful head to regard him solemnly, unblinking. He hadn't dared to go any closer, just sank down in the fallen leaves and closed his eyes. Focusing on the core of his magic, he'd let it convey to her his sorrow for her continued sacrifices, his gratitude for the reprieve he'd been given that she found him somehow worthy of, and finally, his unshakeable believe that with this blessing of prolonged life, he would have the world be rid of the evil ruling it.

As Harry got up the next morning, he contemplated the vague trails of a haunting dream, before deciding he couldn't remember what it had been about. He looked around at the familiar surroundings of his room with a feeling there was something going on that he absolutely didn't like. His heart jumped into his throat when he tried to pursue his memory. At once recollection flooded in and his skin started to crawl in an instant. He stood, needing to move.

On the way to the door he found a bundle of cloths on the chair by the desk. They were as soft as always and it occurred to him, looking closer at the fabric, that they were in fact his own from Hogwarts (well, as far as he owned anything these days). Harry strolled the hallways, letting his
mind fill up with his surroundings - the fancily instrumented glass side tables, the landscape paintings and tapestries that passed to his left and right - before his feet froze.

He could see.

The smallest details of brushstrokes and wooden carvings, the tiny symbols on the Egyptian-inspired tapestries, the pristineness of the table glass.

It was fascinating.

He jumped up and fairly ran down the stairs to the gardens. It turned out that the real tree branches were even more mesmerizing. High above, the trees separated into the most refined structures of wood and leave, far out of reach of human hands.

He touched his eyes. They no longer burned. He suddenly wished for a broom to look down on the world and take in all the little details like a hawk. He couldn't wait to find out how everything looked from the sky.

Feeling his growling stomach he walked inside. In the dining hall the food was already served, steaming under a warming charm. He smiled, then considered that Tadders would know where to look for a broom. The elf's name was already on his tongue before he caught himself. He'd rather try and search him out. Who knew what his master might be ordering him to do.

His hunch proved to be correct. He found him in one of the storage rooms on the ground floor, where all kinds of stones and jewels were kept on shelves. His upper body was completely buried in a huge wooden chest. Several items had already been fished from the treasure and placed on the lone table in the center of the room. They looked exotic, made from wood or gold or other metals, sometimes shining and sometimes blackened with age. Other than using them as decorative sculptures, their purpose remained elusive to Harry.

Sensing his presence Tadders straightened, black cloth gliding in place over bare feet. The ninja-like ensemble looked as outlandish as ever.

"Mr. Potter sir, is there anything I is being able to help you with?"

The sight of the shiny items collected by the elf made something sink down hard in Harry's mind.

"Tadders," he said, swallowing against a sudden dry throat, "have you seen a small pouch somewhere, made from black leather?"

"Yes, Mr. Potter sir," the elf replied in his usual matter-of-fact tone. "If you is meaning your pouch, I is having taken it from you when you arrived."

Harry let his head fall forward. "Why?"

"Master is wanting to be seeing young wizard only using master's cloths and things, and so I is having put all things from Mr. Potter away, so Master's sight is not being disturbed."

The logic of a house elf. Harry rubbed his face, suddenly much too weary for this early in the day. "Could you give it back, please?"

Tadders eyes, the only part visible underneath his garment, widened with worry as he shook his head. "No sir, I is getting rid of things not belonging to the House, of course."

"What?"
Far from wanting to lie down, he now wanted to wring the little creature's neck. Had Tadders actually...

The elf trembled and bowed. "I is having Banished the pouch to be far from Master's sight."

"Where is it?" he snarled, clutching at his hair in order not to shake the elf silly. Tadders just shook his head again, scrambling on his knees pathetically.

"You're not going to say, or you don't know where it is?" Harry asked, tone gone low.

"The first, Mr. Potter sir," Tadders mumbled at the ground.

Although he made a conscious effort to stay calm, his magic pushed out anyway, feral and persistent, making the sculptures tremble and fall onto the table and the ground with cracking sounds. He'd been this close to getting rid of Nagini's Horcrux for real. Now the gift he'd gotten from Albus Dumbledore, the only weapon with the power to destroy Horcruxes might be gone forever...

Before he was quite aware of it, his wandless magic had already slammed the elf against the wall. Tadders fell over, eyes closed.

At the sight of the pathetic pile of clothing the surplus of energy faded along with the charged feeling on his skin, making way for rational thought. Kneeling down next to the black bundle he carefully turned Tadders on his back. Calling his name didn't yield any response. He frowned, chewing his lip. Was this serious, in house elf terms? Should he take him to St. Mungo's?

There was Voldemort's giant Apparation barrier to get through though.

Well damn. 'Dear readers, we are shocked to announce that our former hero Harry Potter has sunken to previously unimagined depths, killing a House-Elf in cold blood, in its own home.'

Harry pulled the mask from Tadders head, expecting... he didn't know what, but definitely not the sight of a perfectly normal House-Elf. He sighed with relief when he found no blood-like substances. He felt at the small chest. The elf's heart thudded faster than a human's, which was probably normal.

He straightened, considering his options. Only Watanabe was able to cross the barrier at will, aside from Riddle himself. His stomach turned at the thought of Watanabe's expression when he saw the mess he'd made. But actually, there was someone else who might be able to pass through...

"Dobby?"

After about six seconds, a cheerfully-coloured Dobby materialised in front of him.

"Harry Potter, sir! You is inviting Dobby for a visit?"

The gnawing at his stomach now started to burn a little. "Actually Dobby, I need your help. You see my friend here, Tadders, he uh... he got unwell and fell against the wall. He's such a good house elf, he's been working way too hard. Could you take him to Madame Pomfrey?"

You're getting better at this.

Dobby blinked, taking in the scene. "Of course Harry Potter sir, Dobby is bringing Tadders to Hogwarts right away." Dobby stooped down to take the other elf's arm and the both of them vanished.
Apparently Dobby's mysterious house elf magic even worked on Voldemort's mighty barrier. Harry wondered why he hadn't thought of this possibility fidgeting for five minutes to make sure Tadders was safely in Madame Pomfrey's care, he called again for Dobby.

"Yes, Harry Potter sir?" Dobby said with a big smile when he returned.

"Did Madame Pomfrey say if Tadders is going to get better?"

"Yes, Harry Potter, she is talking about a full recovery."

He sighed. "Thank Merlin. Dobby I have one more favour to ask. Could you help me... escape?"

His scar seared the moment the words were out. He clenched his teeth, hands cold with sweat as he waited for Dobby's reply.

Dobby's shoulders slumped. "Dobby is having tried sir. Harry Potter wasn't looking happy in Headmaster's house over the summer, but Dobby is not able to help because the Headmaster is Dobby's new master now and Dobby is having to obey him."

"What do you mean this is the Headmaster's house? This is Voldemort's house."

Dobby nodded miserably.

Harry took a step back, mouth dry. Of course. Snape had been publicly appointed as Headmaster by name, but it was Tom Riddle who had made the actual contract with Hogwarts, thereby bounding the castle's magic and becoming its real master. Of course the Dark Lord wouldn't allow anyone else to be in charge of the only place he (and Harry) could call home.

A gust of fear lapped at him with icy fingers, making goosebumps form on his arms. He didn't know why he found this little detail so unsettling.

On top of the pain in his scar that just wouldn't go away, experiencing the world in perfect vision had given him a headache as well as making him feel lightheaded.

"Harry Potter is looking white as a sheet!" Dobby exclaimed. Harry glanced down to see him tugging at his shirt. "Tadders is telling Dobby he's having made breakfast. Dobby will take care of Harry Potter."

He pulled at Harry with surprising strength, who followed him meekly towards the dining hall.

Still steaming away on the corner of the huge table was Tadders' hearty breakfast. Staring down at it from his usual place near the table's end, Harry knew he wouldn't be able to swallow one bite of it. He jumped when he felt a small hand descend on his shoulder.

Dobby wore an unusual serious expression. "Dobby will always help Harry Potter when it is possible. Harry Potter is just having to call for him, and wherever he is Dobby can help a little, even if not much."

Harry smiled despite himself. "Thanks Dobby, that means a lot."

He slammed his fork down on a piece of egg and took a tiny bite. He had almost killed Tadders: he figured the least he could do was eat the elf's breakfast.

While eating a modest serving, he was bombarded with questions about how he was doing with his classes and his friends. He kept things vague, aware of the pain in his scar. In return he was
informed of the goings-on at Hogwarts: the castle's inhabitants never did consider that along with impeccable service, Hogwarts' house elves also offered constant spying to whomever let them enter their private meetings and chambers.

It was strange to think how much he had missed already in just a few days. Some of the elf's stories were amusing, some disturbing: the Carrows for example, had instructed Filch to furnish and decorate an actual torture chamber, an order which the old squib obeyed with relish (or so Harry imagined). No one had been subjected to it as of yet, but the threat made all the students even more skittish and subdued than they were.

Dobby brightened after that. When he began about an illegal student group gathering in the Room of Requirement, Harry hastily cut him off.

Dobby bowed his leave then, needing to get back to his duties. Harry urged him to stop by again sometime, to which the elf agreed with clear delight.

After a fortifying cup of tea he started a search of all the logical places where a broom could be kept in and around the house. After a half hour of searching he had to concede to the logic that the Dark Lord didn't need a broom to fly. Dejectedly he settled in the library, a tome on wandless magic he'd been studying over the summer open on his lap. His concentration was shot from the start. This place took him back, to high summer and lazy days alternating with scary encounters.

He found that he actually missed Nagini's usual presence near the fire, which was… disgusting. Just… yeah.

*Get real. You have to kill her at some point, you know.*

Better to think of all the evil she had done: eating Muggles, nearly killing Mr. Weasley. And who knew the amount of poison she'd dealt out during the Battle of Hogwarts. On the other hand, their conversations were fun and interesting while everything else in his life was just plain shitty. He rubbed his scar absently. It was just this place. Once he was back among his friends, things would start to look up for sure.

He jumped up from a passage on the wandless use of knifes when a familiar plop sounded. Tadders was in front of him, arms spread wide.

"Tadders is back, Mr. Potter sir! And thanks to you he is being healthy and rested, thank you Mr. Potter!"

Harry scratched his head. It was hard to look up from his book all of a sudden. "Sure, Tadders. No need to thank me," he mumbled.

"Dinner is being served!" Tadders announced next.

Harry felt his eyebrows rise as he looked at the clock on the wall: it was already past six in the evening. He descended the stairs and settled down in the usual place, book propped open to his right. His headache was gone and his scar only gave a twinge of pain, which greatly helped his appetite.

At the sound of rustling cloth he looked up; immediately the hand holding his spoon fell slack against his plate.

Voldemort walked in through the double doors, taking the seat to his left at the head of the table like he did it every day. An empty plate and silverware materialised in front of him, while the pitcher of water hopped close.
Harry stared, then quickly looked down as he became the object of the Dark Lord's full attention.

"Pass me a glass, would you Harry?" Voldemort said airily.

Harry felt his teeth start to chatter, but clenching his jaw kept it in check. Don't look and don't think of anything. He could do that, right? He reached for one of the spare glasses to his right and set it down next to Riddle's plate. It started to fill at once with water from the pitcher. The contours around him were still painfully sharp to his unadjusted brain, and he gratefully let his thoughts dwell on this fact.

The Dark Lord briefly studied the book before the stare was back, unblinking. What could have been a pleasant silence with any other person was different in the presence of the Dark Lord. Sitting so near, the quietness enclosed him like a vice: the slightest move and he might just end up bleeding from somewhere.

From the corner of his eyes he saw Voldemort helping himself to a serving of steak and taking up his knife and fork. The sound of cutlery was little better than the silence.

"Eat, you look thin."

Harry couldn't stop his eyes from widening in disbelief. While the Dark Lord was cutting the red meat and methodically putting bite-sized pieces into his mouth, he never once drew his eyes away from Harry.

"I think I lost my appetite, thanks." Harry shot him a quick look as to not appear to be avoiding him, holding his gaze just below eyelevel. Had Voldemort done something to his nose? It seemed more... normal now. Shouldn't he be getting less normal actually, with less Horcr – why are you thinking about that, look at your soup, it's green.

There was no reaction. To his left Voldemort was chewing carefully on his meat, as if trying it on for size. Does he even have any teeth left from his father's corps? Harry thought randomly with a shiver. He became aware then of the man's heavy magic. It was dripping and pushing the air around him, like a curious viper sniffing him out. He quickly looked down again: the texture of the soup was really fascinating.

"You really have a way with my servants, Potter," Voldemort spoke suddenly, eyes gleaming. "Poor Tadders, his head didn't take the wall very well. And Severus, tortured by his most hated pupil ... he suffers so gracefully don't you think?"

Harry's head snapped up and he cursed himself for it when he saw Voldemort's greedy expression. Cheeks colouring, he felt the sudden urge to drop through the stones beneath his feet, or perhaps into a bathtub to scrub away the Dark Lord's backward praise.

"It's good that you found a more appropriate candidate for your revenge," the man murmured next, voice low and slow.

What the hell was that supposed to mean? Snape was a git, Harry considered, but it just didn't compare to the loathing he reserved for the man he was now sharing dinner.

A spike of irritation pulsed through their bond. "Such fire you have inside you Harry, such... feelings." Voldemort hissed. "Yet like a typical Gryffindor you squander it, with your primitive urge to react where instead you should reflect."

He took a sip of water, the glass held between the very tips of his fingers. The gesture made him look almost human. "You are chained by your emotions," he went on, annoyance gritting through
Harry's scar like sandpaper. "Instead of harnessing that energy like a chisel for your magic as I have done in order to reshape it into something precise and deadly, you let it control you."

Voldemort flicked a wrist and both their plates vanished at the same time. He then sat back languidly, tilting his head in a distinctly non-human way. "Imagine my surprise when I heard that you are establishing some credibility in Slytherin House."

His eyes, now an unholy orange in the reflected light of the setting sun, were the only part alive in a deadened face. Harry wanted to look away, but that would mean admitting something, anything: agreement, disagreement, regret, guilt… "Yes, about that," Harry broke in, disliking the direction of the conversation. "Since I'm- since I can see again, I think I'm well enough to go back to Hogwarts now."

Voldemort stroked his chin, thoughtful. "You will not be going back."

"What?" Harry breathed. "But… why?"

Below the table his nails dug into his legs. He added a "sir" when it looked like the man wouldn't be responding today. Then he winced.

"It's ironic, isn't it?" Voldemort said by way of reply, ignoring his blunder. "You and me, arch enemies yet bound together in the most intimate of ways…"

"I… don't know what you mean."

The air was stuck in his lungs. He coughed. A forceful blend of hatred and disgust bled from his scar, like a hot acid seeping holes into his skull. He gave a muffled groan, clutching at it with both hands, feeling the ever-present urge to cut a slice from his forehead.

When he peered through his fingers, the sight that met his eyes would stay with him for long a long time afterwards. Although Voldemort's face retained a blank mask, Harry read him well. Cold fury had turned the Dark Lord's stare flat. The entity next to him was not a man any longer, but a demon. Tendrils of shadow unfurled around the wizard, blurring the folds of his black robes, cloying and warping the sunlight except for his eyes, hellish eyes that burned their way into Harry's brain. And that voice - malicious and jagged and so soft.

"Oh but you do, dear Horcrux of mine. You are - you have always been - a nuisance. Since leaving you to your own devices has nearly led to the death of part of my soul, I am forced to minimise your interaction with others. Be grateful that I cannot kill you now, since that would mean killing part of myself."

Voldemort's lips curled into a vicious smile. "Consider yourself my guest for the foreseeable future. Depending on how the extraction process will go, your stay here will be rather short… or rather permanent."

Hope you enjoyed reading. Please leave a review: would love to hear your thoughts!
A/N: My dear readers, I apologise for the long wait. I struggled for some time with the angle to take here. But now I have created plenty of chaos to carry on with. :) Thanks for reading!

Chapter 20

Harry stared, heart hammering. *Extraction.*

Voldemort came to stand behind him. Harry's stomach muscles tightened painfully. In the warping energy of the Dark Lord's magic the room looked distorted. The older wizard's fingers trailed over his neck, kneading the knotted muscles, and Harry felt strangely disconnected, as if he was looking down at himself from a distance.

"Oh you *are* my equal, I concur. The one with the *power to vanquish the Dark Lord.*" Voldemort barked a laugh. "I should have known that I would only have *myself* to compete with."

Harry rolled his eyes, unseen. Next he gave a shout of surprise as the man ripped his nails over his forehead. He felt a biting pain where blood began to flow through the sliced skin. Voldemort rubbed the wound gently, his left hand still kneading his neck.

Harry shook him off and pulled himself shakily out of the chair. The table at his back blocked any more movement. He wiped his forehead where the blood threatened to drip into his eyes. The wound stung, but at least his scar had stopped hurting and was merely warm now.

Voldemort appeared slightly surprised by this show of defiance. Careful not to look directly into the red orbs, Harry made an effort to relax his shoulders. He was *not* going to feel intimidated.

Voldemort absently smelled, then tasted the blood on his right hand. The urge to look away was almost too much, but Harry managed to swallow his disgust. The scar pulsed and Voldemort smiled, sensing his discomfort.

They remained like this for some time, Harry not daring to escape but too numb to speak. Voldemort's magic had settled, only incidentally brushing against him, like drifting leaves.

"Sizzles on the tongue," the man hummed. "It senses the closeness of its kin."

Harry scowled – was this supposed to make him feel all warm and fuzzy inside? Voldemort's fingers made a tiny movement. He was starting to recognise these little gestures, he realised next when he was pushed in the back by wandless magic, forced to follow as the man strode out a side door onto the landing.

The thick rug muffled the sound of their boots as they walked. Just four seconds into this and Harry began to feel like a real-life puppet. Voldemort touched his hand upon a locked door, which opened to reveal what was apparently the study. The desk was built from black stone, the carvings of eagles clearly wizard-made. The same theme was cut into the walled shelves behind the carved
chair. Not quite fitting the Slytherin legacy, Harry mused, but its splendour probably appealed to Voldemort.

"I can walk by myself, you know," he bit out as the grip was lifted. He took the visitor's chair and curled up, making himself comfortable like this was the Slytherin common room - might as well return the lack of courtesy while he still could.

Voldemort, already seated behind his desk, leaned forward at that. He hissed: "Then you can come closer \textit{by yourself}.

Harry made an ungainly hop forward with the chair. Voldemort's annoyance flashed through the bond. Next the same force from a minute earlier slammed his stomach into the table's edge. Harry let out a breath of anger before his expression was sufficiently controlled again.

Voldemort splayed the tips of his cold, cold fingers on the sides of Harry's face. Little ice-cubes they were, pressing hard into his temples. He jerked away to no use.

Voldemort's thumbs dug into his carotid artery, making him see spots. He still refused to look into the man's eyes, glaring pointedly at the metallic quill holder on his left. The sudden fear in his chest didn't help in calming his thoughts. He had always been terrible at Occlumency...

The Dark Lord sighed. Then he said: "Potter, I dug up your mother's grave."

"\textit{What}?" He looked up in outrage to meet the ruby gaze - before he realised this was exactly what Riddle wanted.

The foreign mind slipped through his own, making him shudder in disgust. The man's crushing will draped over his panicky thoughts, muffling them. He felt claustrophobic and hazy, which was fortunate, since he couldn't seem to remember what it was he shouldn't be thinking right now.

A whisper dripped down the blank walls of his mind.

\textit{Think of the night your parents died.}

This drew up an image of a skeleton, his mother's, floating over upturned earth.

There was distinct exasperation on the other end, a mental sigh. \textit{Interesting, the level of detail you put into that.}

\textit{But- so you didn't...?} Harry stuttered.

\textit{Of course not. What use do I have for a seventeen year old corpse?} A sense of bewilderment floated towards him, which felt decidedly weird since it wasn't his own. He knew how little the man cared to be surprised: he could hardly be faking this, which meant – thank Merlin – it had really been only a trick.

\textit{Now, think of Godric's Hollow, Voldemort's mental voice continued. It held an edge of eagerness now. You are in a crib, looking up at your mother. She's struck by a green flash-}

Like a switch being turned, the mention of green light was all that was needed to draw up the scene. Next, right in front of him, his mother crumbled out of sight. A tall form took shape at the foot of his bed. He was probably crying, but he couldn't feel his body… Then another green flash, coming right at him. This one bounced back to the caster, who sagged downwards like his mom had seconds before.
With the Dark Lord in his mind observing the tragedy, the memory became at once enriched with details that his one-year old self could never have noticed. The room appeared bigger. Furniture had popped up - it made it look tangible, more real, like it could have been a regular nursery, instead of the stage on which a war was decided.

A shadow arose from the vicinity of the fallen figure. Something else his baby self had failed to notice. Voldemort didn't seem surprised, but Harry wondered how he could have witnessed himself as a disembodied spirit. The thing hovered for a moment over the cradle, then crawled in, coming closer and closer until his vision was filled with a black mist…

It touched his forehead.

His baby self wailed. Harry flinched back from the noise – it was seemingly coming from his own mouth. The scene became blurry. White-hot pain shot through his skull, forming into a bone-grinding headache. His own mental scream soon joined the baby's.

Voldemort was muttering something on the edge of hearing, projecting clear excitement. Harry couldn't focus enough to make it out - but was that a third presence he was hearing, echoing back a cold inquiry?

Frustrated at his failure to grasp the goings on inside his own mind, Harry tried to ignore the pain and focus on the mental voices. He must have been partially successful since the sounds of pain gradually faded out, becoming back-ground noise to the conversation playing out between Voldemort and the presence at the back of his mind.

After all, the third voice was saying, you made it clear from the beginning that I'm to be 'kept safe'. The situation has changed. Your vessel has become unreliable, Voldemort told it patiently. There was a hint of reluctance in the thought, as if he didn't want Harry to hear.

I am content with it, though I thank you for your concern, the other – the Horcrux Tom Riddle, he realised – sarcastically returned. It was exceedingly strange, Harry reflected, to witness a conversation between two strangers inside your own head. In fact this whole thing felt like an out-of-body experience.

Voldemort's annoyance flared once more, his presence churning like a furnace inside Harry's head. We will discuss the details later, he spoke with clear menace.

Harry felt light-headed all of a sudden, there was a rushing sound in his ears – You think the boy won't- was all he caught before he blacked out.

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Hermione imagined how her mother would feel if she saw her now, rumpled and hungry, roaming the streets of London. Every time she despaired over her situation, and the likelihood of her getting caught, she thought of all the Muggle-borns out there, forced into jobs at best, tortured and murdered at worst, trying to make a living in this god-forsaken part of Europe.

Wheels. Imagine she had thought Tom Riddle subtle, back in sixth year.

Her breaths sounded too loud in the silence of after-dinnertime. The hat she had stolen a few blocks back to cover her hair gave her a much-needed feeling of anonymity. She was both relieved and afraid of the encroaching darkness. The long shadows of the lampposts threw the concrete into a repetitive pattern, an immense carpet of possibility if you didn't know where to go.
She did. Kind of. If you walked on in a straight line, you were bound to walk right into it: the Muggle border, a gigantic piece of warding surrounding a large and ever-expanding part of London, which separated the Muggle world from the magical one.

For all intents and purposes Riddle only owned as much of England as he could steal from within the cities. But of course if you had magic on your side, such a distinction was irrelevant. It was not necessary, plain and simple, to put as much effort into the rural areas when you governed all the country's infrastructure.

She stood still, checked the spell once more to see if she was still going east. She was, but she better keep more to the left from now on.

Laughter came from a nearby café. She yearned to take part in the warmth and cosiness she saw inside. But it was too much of a risk.

She began to walk a little faster, not sure how far she had to go. Would she even recognise it, were she standing with her nose pressed to the rebellious part of the Border? She knew much less of the goings-on in the Resistance as Ron did. She knew much less of the goings-on in the Resistance as Ron did. She couldn't afford to know, she had thought, as closely supervised as she was in her job of administrator. Now she wished she had attended all of the meetings, danger be damned.

She only had the smallest of bags in her inside pocket. It was still a size too large to fit properly though, and it scraped painfully against the wounds on her chest.

She wasn't quite healed yet, from that evening. Sick man-child. If Harry ever did manage to get rid of the Horcrux, boy did she want to see the face of that bastard when he heard the news.

The salve that Madame Pomfrey had given her helped to dull the cursed scars, but she couldn't very well administer her own backside by herself. She just had to hope she'd reach the outpost tonight.

Harry watched the area where a maze of invisible wards was sizzling in the air. Here, around the entrance gate, they were most tangible. Aside from authorised Apparition this was the only opening to the outside world, and therefore the place where the wards were anchored.

He felt a strange thrill imagining their power.

When he'd woken up that morning (or actually, early afternoon), it was to the familiar surroundings of his bedroom. He could remember nothing beyond the moment he lost awareness in Voldemort's study. His scar was silent, the expected headache absent. Rubbing it didn't even produce a twinge of pain as it always had before.

It was early afternoon and the Dark Lord had yet to make an appearance. Rather than feeling relieved, his stomach was knotted up in fear. Did it mean the extraction had worked? He didn't feel any different. Then again, you couldn't actually feel your soul, just like you couldn't feel your brain. Was the Horcrux still there, was the quiet in his scar merely a sign of the man's absence? Or was Voldemort exulting right now, hauling his wayward soul-piece to wherever he kept his precious collection?

It would have been a relieve not to have Tom Riddle traipsing around in his brain anymore, if only it didn't make him worse than useless in the eyes of the Dark Lord right now. He was the Chosen One after all, as well as the only living person aside from Ron and Hermione who knew about
He wasn't sure how much time had passed when he finally strolled back. Judging by the sun, he figured it had to be around midday. His feet walked him to the manor but he felt reluctant to go inside. He took a seat on the veranda with its leisurely upholstered chairs. A curious calm had seeped into him. He wondered if that was despite or because of the fact that any moment now, he might get a visit from the grim reaper. He gave a mental shrug. He had felt disconnected from events ever since Hermione had uttered those horrible words.

He should be feeling worried. He should be wanting to run. But he felt lethargic.

Actually, there was one person he could ask for advice.

He closed his eyes and imagined Watanabe – the man he thought him to be, the Dark Mark which he had sensed in a bout of anger at the junior Death Eater meeting. It had felt warm, mellowing, like a tiny sun was burning on the man's arm. Thinking back on that small window of time, he realised that Watanabe's Mark was the first to give him a sense of energy, rather than draining it. Ironically, he could also remember that it was pulling at their connection, like it was… extracting something.

In the space of these thoughts, he made a mental stretch towards the Death Eaters' network. There was no Summoning to work with this time, no afterimage of a Mark. But certainly the Dark Lord didn't need a Mark nearby every time he summoned a servant.

Harry clenched his teeth, willing it, like he had willed the Room of Requirement into being so many times.

His magic stayed stubbornly silent but he kept at it, envisioning behind closed eyelids as much as he could of the man's presence, his character, his quietly devoted – yes that was it – devoted Dark Mark.

Suddenly a rustle of cloth, a voice.

"Harry?"

He opened his eyes.

There Watanabe stood, in the flesh, straightening from a half-bow. His bewildered eyes revealed more emotion than they ever had before in Harry's presence.

Watanabe darted a glance around the premises. After a moment of waiting, or indecision, he lowered himself gracefully into the chair next to him, all expression seeped away as he studied Harry.

"Are you alright?"

Harry cocked his head. "Depends on the situation."

"Where is Lord Voldemort?"

Harry shrugged one shoulder.

"Is he angry with you?"
Being angry and wanting to kill someone were practically exchangeable concepts in the Dark Lord's mind. Harry nodded, staring at the gravel beneath his boots. "He is deciding right now on the permanence of my punishment."

Watanabe sat back, his shoulders falling in a soundless sigh. "Does this have anything to do with the fact that you are disturbing his followers and summoning them behind his back?"

The admonishment was clear in his tone. Harry nodded again.

"I have heard… rumours," Watanabe went on in an undertone, "about your status as his pupil. They, that is to say, some of my colleagues, think he is grooming you for command, allowing you leeway to explore his powerbase, in order to acquire the skills you need to command his forces."

"And what do you think?"

He paused. "I think it unlikely. It is against Lord Voldemort's nature to regard anyone as an equal."

_Funny you should say that,_ Harry thought. Then he wondered what he should reveal – did it matter at this point?

"He doesn't," Harry agreed. "The night he tried to kill me as a baby, the killing curse backfired. It tore away some of his magical power, which he transferred to me, unwillingly of course. And since babies tend to grow…"

"… their magical powers grow with them." Watanabe finished, his eyes fixed on Harry's face. After a month of getting the cold shoulder, the attention was slightly unnerving.

"Your power level is far below his own," his friend mused, breaking the gaze. "But your magical characters are compatible. Whatever he creates you can manipulate. That causes all kinds of security issues."

For a few moments, the sound of birds floated between them. Harry kept silent, hoping the man would continue. His head snapped up when he heard a chuckle.

Watanabe was smiling slightly, gaze far away, shaking his head in that reserved way of his. "You must have gotten under his skin. He must have known this ever since that trick you pulled at the battle of Hogwarts. Maybe even before that."

Harry grinned back. "What can I say, the man has an ego the size of a basilisk. I guess it's quite a downer, killing your own magic. And the fact that I speak parseltongue can't hurt."

"It's exceedingly rare," Watanabe agreed. "He wouldn't want to be hasty. He'd want to be sure you can't be persuaded to join his cause."

It was no surprise to Harry that Voldemort thought the material of the Prophecy too delicate to share with his right-hand man.

They settled into a companionable silence. It was a cloudy day, summer's warmth trapped in the air. Watanabe looked completely at ease studying a nearby tree, like he hadn't just been snatched away from something important.

Bolstered by the friendly atmosphere Harry asked: "How did you come to know him? There is no mention of you in any stories I heard about the first war, or afterwards."

"That's because I wasn't here." Watanabe's gaze was shuttered, blocking any more questions on the
Harry felt horribly inadequate again. He hastily looked down, focusing on the squirming feeling in his stomach. The request he had wanted to make lay stale in his mouth. How could he fuck this up so fast?

Watanabe clasped his hands on his folded knees. "So," he relented, and the rigidity in his expression melted somewhat, "you are becoming a liability, and he is wondering if in fact he shouldn't dispose of you after all."

Harry nodded.

"And you want me to talk him out of it?" the man asked slowly.

Harry snorted. "I don't think that's possible. No, it's something else." He hesitated, searching the man's gaze. It was blank as usual.

"You've been… like a mentor to me." Harry willed away the ridiculous urge to blush. "Even though Voldemort has taken over, you showed me that this – this world can still be an interesting place. That I could still make a difference."

He darted a glance. Watanabe's gaze held something sharp. He went on: "From what I can see, you are among the Dark Lord's most loyal followers. Still, I'd like to think you're not afraid to speak your mind, and that if there's something you strongly believe in, you would act on it."

It was this strength of character that made him admire the man. An admiring tone had in fact slipped into his speech - he wished he'd kept it back.

"I would like to think so as well."

Harry bit his lip. This time, he managed to hold his friend's gaze. "What would you do? If you were me, I mean. You know him well… " he cut himself off, realising he was babbling.

Watanabe thought for a moment. "You just told me the answer yourself, Harry. Show him what he's about to lose."

He felt vaguely nauseous, waiting for Voldemort to show up, Nagini's weight crushing down on his shoulders and arms. He had made a search of every nook and cranny and gave up after an hour, thinking she must have been locked up for good with all the other Horcruxes now, when suddenly she was there, slithering onto the chair that Watanabe had vacated an hour ago.

He made use of the time to admire the glitter of her scales. Even the gathering clouds could not manage to dull it.

He had an inkling of why she was here, right when Voldemort was about to make an entrance. She would be a perfect back-up for when things would… leak. If she functioned well with one Horcrux, why not make it two? Neat and tidy. It didn't help his nerves any.

However, she was also the perfect instrument to show the man what he'd be missing. The snake tongue was the only bargaining chip left he could think of. He wasn't sure how to go about looking seemingly swayed to Voldemort's cause, which was what Watanabe seemed to be hinting at. He could be Slytherin, sure, but wasn't this just a tad outside the bounds of credibility? Voldemort would see right through it.
He hadn't the heart to correct Watanabe's optimism, just when things seemed to be all right between them again. As a member of the Inner Circle, Watanabe was the wrong audience for making a point about the gruesome world that Voldemort was creating.

"Then eventually, he will dispose of me as well," Nagini was hissing into his musings. Harry gave a stroke to her scales. He wanted to tell her he wasn't sure if Voldemort had gotten the soul-piece out, but since that wouldn't help his case, he wrestled the urge down.

He felt the magic before he saw the man. Nagini sensed it too of course, curling more tightly around his torso. "Preposterous," she murmured in his ear. "I have been his one companion, in all his life! I am irreplaceable!"

"What are you blathering on about Nagini?" Voldemort interrupted, swiftly striding towards them from the manor front doors.

"Is it true?" she returned, angry now. "Have you extracted the soul-piece? Are you going to kill Potter?" Harry bit his tongue. He wished she wasn't quite so forward so soon.

Voldemort was just a few feet away, glancing between them. He concluded something, judging by the twitch of his lips. "I might. Do you want him?"

"To silence my hunger for a few hours? He is far more useful to me as a companion than as a meal. I don't tolerate a lot of companions."

Voldemort gave a nod and came to stand behind his chair. Harry sighed. He hated it when the man did that.

"I did not intend to imply that Potter is just a meal to you. I merely thought you'd want to try out something different."

Nagini made a sound like a hissy grumble.

"So have you?" Harry hissed, not caring that he was being blunt. "Extracted it?"

The devil behind his back stayed silent, one hand coming up to trace the result of his work on Harry's forehead. He flinched back, expecting to feel another slash of the nails. Voldemort's hand then moved for his arm - and suddenly he felt the harsh tug of Apparation.

They appeared inside Voldemort's study. Harry felt a burst of nerves as he realised that Nagini had stayed on the terrace. Had Voldemort blocked her from Apparating? Of course it would be upsetting for her to see him get killed…

The Dark Lord released him, moving to stand behind the desk. He was instructed to sit.

He felt like he had been pressed and stretched through a giant pasta maker, then haphazardly kneaded together again. He had to know. Knowing was better than what his imagination was conjuring up, surely. His voice shook a little when he asked: "So this is it?"

Voldemort threw him a narrow look. "Perhaps," he drawled, and his gaze held such weight, such terrible weight, and something broke -

Pain. Mind-narrowing, lung-crushing -

Like someone was slowly scraping away all the bones in his body. The weight of the pain made his legs fall away. His vision blackened with shock. But inexplicably, he was still standing-
Voldemort was possessing him.

*Not again. No please. Let me go. Let me out...*

From somewhere beyond the onslaught to his nerve endings, his eyes were jammed open. His vision became a psychedelic landscape. Blacked out and not at the same time, like an electrical charge was forcing his brain to keep on running past endurance. Voldemort's eyes bore into his on the opposite side of the desk. They were glassy, lifeless.

"Quiet," Voldemort intoned through Harry's throat.

His thoughts scattered to static in the background. The crushing pain had to be paid full attention. After an uncertain amount of time, he found back some coherence. He was sure of nothing, only that this was the end station.

*You win, now let me go. Let me see my mum again.*

The last part he had not meant to think out loud. An impression of Lily drifted to him as she appeared on photos, soft smile and auburn hair, and he considered there were worse things than meeting her in person. The cloud of thoughts changed then. Lily regarded him with wide, lifeless eyes from the floor of the nursery – but no, there she was, floating above her own grave...

*Potter, do you want to have brain damage?* Voldemort snapped from inside his mind.

*No,* he reflected back feebly. Forming the word cost enormous effort. He was horribly certain all of a sudden, that these were the last seconds of his own sanity ticking away... *Kill me then... going to anyway... what's....the...*

"Point?" a familiar voice drifted towards him and he jerked in surprise, opening his eyes to find himself back in the visitor's chair. Voldemort's eyes across from him were once more sharp with life. He was unable to move his head.

The pain. There used to be pain. It was gone. He wanted to sag in relief, but his body stayed firmly stuck against the chair. *Now what?*

Voldemort's lip curled in annoyance, and he realised he'd said that last thought out loud. Apparently he could still move his mouth.

He rubbed the tips of his fingers, which were completely numb. He was only a little dizzy, his thoughts slow. His sight had become blurred. He wondered if this was the result of a spell of some kind. Was the man reversing the recent improvements?

A dense mist formed in the lower half of his vision. He could still move his eyes, so he blinked them, which cleared the mist a bit.

"The point, Potter," Voldemort drawled, "is this." His wand twitched and something floated towards him – it was the foam or gas that was obscuring Harry's sight. He quickly blinked some more. The next silvery substance came loose like tears and was snatched up to cling to Voldemort's wand.

Harry couldn't help snorting at the sight: it looked absurdly like the Dark Lord was spinning candy floss.

Voldemort glanced down at his wand and a rare smile flitted over his face. Doubtlessly he had caught the Muggle reference.
"You know what that is, Potter?"

He failed to shake his head, snorts turning to poorly suppressed laughter.

"That is your brain leaking out."

"What?" Harry stammered, the mirth turning to dirt in his mouth. He tried to stand but it was no use trying to move. "What? But…"

"Let's take a look, shall we?" Voldemort said and placed the shimmering wand, which Harry realised was covered with memories, his memories, to his own temple. They clung there, halfway between floating gas and liquid.

The Dark Lord closed his eyes. Harry waited, fingers cold and sweaty. You couldn't just pull out all of someone's memories, right? He wouldn't be able to think anymore in that case, would he? He could think fine, he could imagine grass, and castles…

But then, the man wasn't after his memories.

Tom Riddle's Horcrux was hanging around somewhere in his brain. Perhaps his own soul was there also, in his mind – and once the Horcrux had entered his body it made sense that it would search for a companion to cling to, or maybe it was just plain physics that would make them stick together. Maybe, maybe removing everything else just made things easier for Tom: no more active brain left to put up a fight, just an empty shell sitting in the visitor's chair…

Voldemort's wand-hand hit the desk with a thud, pulling the cloud of memory strands with it, straight from his scull.

The man's magic pushed aggressively outwards. It took only a second for the air in the room to be drenched in magical surplus. His skin seared like it did when he sat a little too close to the common room fire.

Voldemort opened his eyes. His mouth was twitching with rage. He looked slightly insane.

Harry still couldn't move a finger. Against all reason, his scar was quiet.

"Why is it," Voldemort began in a whisper, "that when things bend inexplicably, unaccountably out of shape, it always involves you, Potter?"

Harry didn't know what to answer to that. His eyes were drawn to the wand, which was smoking slightly. Steam was wafting from the memories.

Wow. Let's all wave to Harry's ruined memories.

He swallowed. He should try to look at this rationally. His memories still seemed be in place, at least those he could think up now. Were those Tom's memories he was seeing then? Or just some of his own memories? The horribly thing about that was that of course you wouldn't know which ones were missing.

In the next moment Voldemort, whose fury seemed to have tampered down to great annoyance, jammed the wand against Harry's skull. Harry hissed, eyes watering as the scorching tip came into contact with his temple.

The wand's removal from his burned skin was blessedly fast, but then the memories sank in.
The matron's face, close to his own, was sunken in and full of disappointment. "You shall give it back, Tom. And tell John that you're sorry."

Harry threw the scarf into the room. He felt his lips turn down in disgust as he stared silently at the older boy, unblinking. John, fists balled, reacted quite violently:

"I'm going to get you back for this! You just wait, when it's winter I'll steal all your cloths and it's going to be so cold!"

The scene faded, a different landscape already taking its place, something with lots of bowing figures…

"Potter," the youthful visage of the Dark Lord was saying, the only figure that was standing upright - but now he was back in the study again, the black blur of the desk-

"Focus on me, let it drift by-"

Another plunge, this time-

– the grinning face of Lucius Malfoy, a dungeon cell. The terrible feel of cold leather trailing his bare back. "Such flawless skin you have…"

He wanted to real back from that voice but already he was wrenched away-

He was staring at his younger self. Little Harry winked at him from inside the Mirror of Erised, and a heavy weight fell into his pocket. But it faded-

The plump woman eyed him greedily. "Can you keep a secret, Tom? Will you promise you won't tell Mr. Burke I've got it? He'd never let me rest if he knew I'd shown it to you, and I'm not selling, not to Burke, not to anyone!"

The scene made way for the next one - Harry felt nausea burn in his stomach at the speed of the visions-

Bellatrix stood before him. She was scantily clad but it didn't bother him at all. Harry trailed his gaze slowly up her body. He caught her chin, pinching it cruelly. He didn't think her eyes could get any wider than they were.

"Tell me Bella, what makes you worthy of Lord Voldemort's attention?"

The scene whirled-

He was standing in a dark room, more spacious than the last one. Cho's face was coming closer and closer-

His physical body threatened to expel his lunch. This, finally, managed to draw his attention to his surroundings. The scenes stopped. He looked up warily. Voldemort's face was a study in stone.

"What-" Harry began, but snapped his mouth closed just in time. How to play this…

First he had to fix his foolishly open expression. He shoved his agitation behind a blank mindscape and with some effort, managed to relax. He was rewarded when he felt his face smoothing out completely.

He was glad for the distraction, or rather the focus that a half-baked plan brought. Because the more he thought about things, the more disgusted he became.
And it was so much, if he wanted it to be, like the Room of Hidden Things – towers stacking up to near-infinity, and if he took a peak they would fall over and surely crush him into dust. The appearance of control was vital: panic was not an unrealistic scenario at the moment. He was- he was sharing –

Shhh, nothing to be gained from thinking of that now.

Harry considered the angle to take here. It came to him at once, thinking back to his own words from earlier: What can I say, the man has an ego the size of a basilisk. They echoed differently now in his mind, strangely refreshing. Yes, something useful, he resolved grimly, was going to be gained from this.

He replaced the blank look with a smirk. "Ah, such memories. I nearly forgot, that little tryst with Bella. The one time you succumbed… But very satisfying. I remember such a strong body…"

Voldemort´s silence had grown deeper; a mark of his surprise. Harry revelled in the rare sight. Having the upper hand warmed his frayed nerves.

"But you don't, right?" he went on, a soft, confident murmur to his voice. "You don't know what I'm talking about. It was a weakness, so you cut it off. No," he corrected himself as understanding came with these words. "They were too rare, the memories, which made them fragile, and they broke off under the strain of the Killing Curse."

He felt a bit like Alice in Wonderland.

Actually, he should indeed be careful to allow himself only a specific bite of curiosity, and no more.

Mindful of this he dug in just enough to catch a drift of understanding that these memories were among the last vestiges of humanity that Voldemort shedded that night. It had nothing to do with love, or lust. It was the thought of needing anything, however trivial, from someone else.

He held back a twist of his face, pressing down on his own interest, ever mindful of the towering stacks. Inside, he was reeling. It was one thing to know, quite another to also understand.

On the bright side of things, his mind felt agile now. Also not unwelcome, it had the discipline of a rigorous machine he could switch off at any moment.

Looking at the Dark Lord now was like looking at a childhood friend – well, one that happened to grow up a power-hungry mass-murderer. The eyes were the key. Right now they conveyed a barely repressed urge for murder.

It was not enough. He had to… push.

"Does she remember, I wonder? Let's find out…"

Harry flicked off the wards holding him to the chair with a mere thought – they were quite willing. He stood, ignoring the wand trained at him. He was in equal measures thrilled and disgusted at what he was about to do. Above all, though, this new control had the fine advantage of making him significantly Not. Care.

Voldemort's magic fit like a glove. He could sense the shape of the network of Marks if he focused hard enough, like a third arm connected to his nervous system. The magic of Voldemort's servants was distant, each one nagging in a different way: reluctant, eager, afraid. Most were willing enough in their servitude, he realised. In the next moment he felt dizzy with the dual feelings of
disappointment and pleasure.

He stomach churned rebelliously. He ignored it, returning his attention to the network. It was hard
to match Marks and names but hers, he remembered, was a special kind of devotion. This made
tracing his intended target easy: just find that tickle of yearning magic pushing at the gates,
needing to be used by him, only him – god the sheer abandonment of self was, it was –

Suddenly a hand clamped down on his shoulder. He twisted to punch his attacker in the stomach,
but Voldemort had anticipated this and threw him bodily against the wall.

Harry stumbled for a moment. He twisted to avoid the Crucio that was thrown after.

"My Lord?"

They both froze mid-motion, turning to stare at the unexpected visitor who had appeared out of
nowhere. Harry's stomach gave a jolt as he took in the bowed head covered in black curls.

Bellatrix looked up from her crouched position, taking in the scene with a blink of her long lashes.
She rose, wand already in hand, and turned to face Voldemort. All the while the man's face
remained carved from stone. There was a question in her eyes. She looked prepared for anything,
though.

"Bella," Voldemort returned airily as if this was all just perfectly as he wanted it. His gaze found
Harry's. "The boy seems to have some trouble adjusting - would you help him settle in?"

Her wand was pointed at Harry's head the next second. "Certainly, my Lord."

Harry widened his eyes at the Dark Lord in warning – the magic pulsing through the brand on her
arm was wide open to him, and he had no qualms left. A mocking grin was the only response he
got, before Voldemort broke the stare, dismissing them both with a tilt of his head –

And his fortunes had turned, just like that.

Harry swallowed as his arm was pinched between polished black nails. Her face up close was
disturbing to behold, with eyes that might just spontaneously combust from the sheer intensity of
their expression.

Since the rewiring of his brain – or something, he didn't know the precise details... yet –
Voldemort's magic was a constant background noise to his senses. The moment that the wards
were pried open Harry felt it, a bit like sweat-glued cloth coming loose.

Bellatrix yanked him into Disapparation. They landed in a dark, cold environment. The smell of
her hair reminded him of a memory, that time she had come back from the Auror raid on the
Longbottoms…

The Longbottoms.

He pushed her away from him as hard as he could. She gave a cry of surprise. It turned into a low
laugh.

The wall sconces all burst to life. The dancing lights illuminated a huge, spacious bedchamber,
though not one he recognised. Next the hearth followed, in which massive wooden beams had been
piled to feed the flames. There was a large black night robe slung over the sofa near it. Otherwise
the room had a Spartan feel to it: some kind of cabinet, covered beneath a cloth; one bookcase in
the corner, a painting in the other. The frame was currently empty.
Harry swallowed. The undercurrent of Voldemort's magic was still there, but lower now, as if emerging from the floorboards underneath his feet. They must still be in the house, in one of the locked rooms on the second floor.

What the hell did Bellatrix want in Voldemort's bedroom?

The sight of her wide-eyed and stalking to the sofa distracted him from following that thought any further. Lestrange took the robe in both hands, then brought it up to her face to smell. She proceeded to browse down the whole cloth of black velvet in this way.

She was *smelling* the Dark Lord.

He closed his eyes against a sudden bout of nausea. A distinct foreign disgust at his own weakness brought him up short. He blinked. His mind had been cleared before he was aware of doing so.

Meanwhile Bellatrix had wrapped herself in the night robe, which was several sizes too big for her, and proceeded to lie down on the bed, her head buried in the cushions. The nausea was absent when he regarded her now – there was nothing but a mild curiosity left.

"Bella," he began, then bit his lip at the slip-up. He balled his fists, furious suddenly at the foreign hold over his mind. Or maybe the sense of familiarity it made him feel. His detachment turned his anger muddy though, unimportant. His arms fell lax to his sides.

The word worked to cut through Bellatrix' self-absorbed state. She turned her head, slowly rising to sit. She whispered:

"What did you call me?"

Harry sneered. "Just trying out the sound. Not quite the same as when *he* says it though, right?"

Her shimmering Bordeaux-red evening dress had become bunched up, and there was quite a bit of leg showing when she touched down upon the floor.

"Yes," she said. She closed in, putting a hand on his cheek. Her gaze fell were most did, just above his eyes.

He shook his head, her hand moving along with it. "Bella, Bella. He's just not that into you. How many more years will it take for you to realise this?"

A slight frown marred her perfectly sculptured face. She smelled nice, which made his fists want to ball up again.

"Something's different," she mused.

Both her thumbs came up to rub at his now-scarred scar. His hand came up to squeeze her throat. Unfortunately she was still half a head taller than him. Her eyes widened with pleasant surprise. "My, Mr. Potter, you are turning into quite the fetching little heir."

He squeezed harder. "You disappoint me, Ms. Lestrange. I thought you were above the rumours of the servant masses."

She smiled the sort of smile that used to creep him out. "You're right, Potter. Static noise, that's all they are to me, but I take my cues from the Dark Lord himself." She bowed towards him and he was afraid she was going to kiss his scar. Worse: she licked it. One hand moved to his neck, the other trailed firmly down his back.
There must be bruises forming from the pressure he put on her throat, but it seemed all the same to her. She whispered in his ear: "But I don't call them servants. That is, of course, your privilege."

Harry clenched his teeth at the unwanted memories now at the front of his thoughts. Gods, it was only because of the same foreign influence that he wasn't turning into a hysterical puddle on the floor.

"You're right, something is different," he whispered back. "I am more deeply linked to our Lord than ever before. I can now appreciate your value to him."

He trailed his wand-hand over her chin, then pinched it cruelly as he had seen Riddle doing in the memory. "I know what makes you worthy of Lord Voldemort's attention."

He knew distantly he was playing with fire, but right now his body still felt only about halfway his own. He was rewarded when her eyes showed recognition.

"He does not remember, you know," he told her. "I do."

She looked intrigued. After all, who could guess at the truth? He released her neck and chin, drawing up a cold expression once more. "So," he drawled. "You can yet improve my other self's low opinion by making yourself useful to me."

He let his magic seep into her Mark. He was sure she could feel the difference – the way that dusk made foreign shadows of well-known objects, or the way a strawberry tasted when it was filled with mould. Apparently her black pupils could get a little wider still.

Oh he'd torture her mind if he wanted to, but that was quite unnecessary. Yes, that was a neat trick wasn't it? However did he pull that off?

The hand against his back trembled. She released him, drawing back and lifting her chin.

"You have impressed me, little heir. Act or no, though, my loyalty remains with the Dark Lord." Her eyebrows rose. "And he has entrusted me with adjusting you to this new… situation."

Harry gave a mocking chuckle. "You don't even know what it is. He doesn't trust you that much, does he?"

Bellatrix' head tilted to the side. "You say it as if it would matter. Trust, real trust, is blind, Potter."

"Then you are a fool, to think he regards you any differently than his other disposable subjects."

Her wand was raised in an eye-blink. "I see you are ill-informed of the dynamics here. This is an important part of your education, Potter." A sharpness entered her voice. "Before you go ditching out orders you need to know your place a little better. The extend of your liberties, of my liberties… That's where I can help."

I love reviews. Let me know what you think!
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

A/N: A big thank you to those who reviewed! Criticism, thoughts, ideas, everything is more than welcome!

Update 16th of April: I revised a few scenes in chapters 21-23 and added material in a few places where my fancy struck :) (especially this chapter). I think the chronological order is fixed now - let me know if you still notice something amiss.

In case you're wondering: Harry is not going to become the next manifestation of Tom Riddle. That said though, where does one essence end and the other begin?

Chapter 21

The croak of the stones shifting signalled the end of his tense stroll up to the seventh floor. Draco bit into his hand to distract himself from the nerves. It didn't help. Far too soon the door to the Headmaster's study swung open and he was forced to walk inside.

Severus was seated behind the large desk, a curtain of black hair concealing his expression. Draco slowly sat down in the visitor's chair. Snape looked up suddenly to pin him with a glare.

"You know why you are here?" he asked in a calm, almost bored tone.

Draco nodded, staring down at his lap.

"Tell me."

"I was ordered to babysit Potter. When I went to check on him Sunday, he wasn't where he was supposed to be. Then the idiot went and almost got himself killed, and I should have - I should have been there."

"'Where he was supposed to be'? He was supposed to be with you."

The disappointment in his tone was thick. Draco buried his nails in the arm rests before braving that awful black stare. "Okay, so I should've spend my Sunday following around the golden boy like a puppy? Professor, you must know how important the first weekend is, to catch up, you know, get a feel for the mood in the House."

"I see," Snape said with fake thoughtfulness. "You were neglecting the task set to you by the Dark Lord, so that you could affirm your status in Slytherin."

Draco, who had been slouched down up till now, sat ramrod straight at the mention of the Dark Lord. "No, I didn't- I wasn't aware that I had to watch him all the time!"

"I suppose you think the word 'shadowing' means something like 'dropping by once in a while'?" Snape's voice dripped with venom.

Draco noticed his arms were shaking. He pushed them harder against the chair. "The- he told me to
be unobtrusive about it, so I thought—"

"You didn't think. You should have come to me. I could have told you several techniques with which to observe and never be seen."

Of course, Snape was a master spy. Why didn't he think of that? He lowered his voice to a whisper: "What will happen now?"

Snape didn't reply right away. Draco resisted the urge to swallow.

"You remind me of Potter. Barely a week goes by and already you manage to screw things up in spectacular fashion."

Draco ignored the bait, his expression remorseful.

"Our Lord is annoyed with you. Go to Malfoy Manor to receive your punishment. Your parents will be there."

"You mean he's going to punish me?"

Snape inclined his head.

Draco drew in a sharp breath. He'd been confident that Slughorn would be the one to reprimand him. He wouldn't for a moment have thought…

"Why not… why there?"

"The Dark Lord does not receive visitors," Snape said sharply, indicating his displeasure with this line of questioning. "He's at your parents' at the moment, concerning other matters."

Lord Voldemort wanted his mom and dad to watch while he tortured their son, in other words. A part of him felt like running, but it was easily repressed – he wasn't a Gryffindor after all.

"You may use my floo."

"Right. Thanks, Professor."

Draco got up and walked with wooden legs over to the hearth. He grasped a pinch of floo powder. There was a heavy feeling in his gut as he watched the flames turn green, before they whirled him away.

"You know Potter," Bellatrix said as they stood in Voldemort's bedchamber, continuing to hold him at wand-point. "When I started my service to the Dark Lord, I was just a snotty little brat, like you were until recently. I didn't know wand tip from handle." Her eyes drifted towards her own wand, and she stroked the curves at the base. "But as young as I was, I knew this was what our world had been waiting for. The glorious power and knowledge of the Dark Lord, a legacy of great wizards and witches harkening back to the ancient times of the Founders.

"Wizarddom had been slipping into complacency back then, not realizing that the growth of the Muggle population is a threat to our way of life. Muggle culture was already seeping through the cracks of the Ministry."

Bellatrix leaned against the side of the sofa in repose, her legs crossed at the ankles. She looked decidedly normal, her gaze calm as her eyes drifted between him and the fire in the hearth. A
somewhat sane Bellatrix was not much of an improvement from the Bellatrix he used to know. But maybe he didn't know her at all, and the part she put up for her enemies had been only an act. Or maybe, his restless mind went on, maybe this was just another manifestation of the same kind of crazy.

"I'm talking some twenty years after the death of Grindelwald and his foolish quest to lead us out of hiding," Bellatrix went on. "His legacy caused the old dilemma's surrounding the Statute of Secrecy to resurface. As a consequence the Statute was reinterpreted. Muggles were considered harmless and ignorant; they needed to be protected and cherished like any other animal on the earth. Wizardry was there to guide the way on their path of 'evolution'. It was our responsibility to try and understand their culture so that one day, hopefully, they would come to understand us, and the Statute would no longer be needed." She chuckled.

Her face turned to stone so quickly that Harry tensed in anticipation. "They had forgotten," she spat, "why it was constructed in the first place: to protect our people against the Muggles' hate of the unknown, which has nearly destroyed us in the seventeen hundreds. Such hatred can't be reasoned with. The ignorant are to be repressed or otherwise, avoided."

She tilted her head upwards, as if dappled in sunlight. Harry wondered where she was going with all this. He was intrigued by her effort to make him understand. Though it wasn't a history lesson she wanted to convey.

Her tone was soft when she continued. "And then came a man who understood the simmering threat, who saw the way the Ministry constrained Purebloods, the way it shaved off our rich customs of hundreds of years and reduced them to a few Ministry-approved wand-bound spells and rituals. As if magic can be bound by rule of law! Our magical prowess is limited only by our imagination."

She showed him a smile full of teeth. "It's a public secret that Dumbledore and the Ministry have kept well hidden from our youngsters. Our Lord has pulverised their backward policies. The walls of Hogwarts will resound once more with the unchained magics for which they've been build."

Bellatrix looked lost in thought. A minute must have passed before her gaze snapped down to lock onto his. Harry felt ensnared by it. There was a hunger there he couldn't place.

"My life's work," she whispered, then her tone turned harsh – and when she spoke he realised her thoughts had jumped again, gravitated back to their natural dwellings. "For thirteen years, you took it away from me. You made him suffer unimaginable horrors. Crawling from animal life to animal life, their baser bodies a torture to his sentience."

Her chin lifted. "You are his reckoning. You made him suffer and so you have suffered, and shall suffer still, until those thirteen years have been repaid."

Harry shuddered as a coldness swept over his back. Something seemed to have taken hold in her, her incantation giving Voldemort a near tangible presence in the room. Harry noticed then that he was unconsciously waiting for a pain in his scar that didn't come.

Lestrange stood, walking into his personal space to draw her wand along his left cheek. He knew she was tracing the silver line there, where Nagini had slapped him.

"I had some difficulty at first accepting your continued existence." She smiled. It turned terrible after two seconds. "But I never doubted him. I see now the yield of his decision to keep you alive while prolonging your suffering, as his power inside you which you so unjustly received as a babe takes hold."
Harry had to keep from swallowing – she would hear, *feel* the click of his throat. That sounded disgusting. Like a virus consuming him, a parasite. Which in a way, it was. Her breaths were heavy against the side of his face now. He couldn't tell whether she was exited or angry.

"My jealousy made me short-sighted at first. I was plebeian. The Dark Lord of course saw the benefits that would come from nourishing that power, essentially protecting his own magic – which is precious and must be cherished above all others. By allowing you to attend Hogwarts, he's merely ensuring its growth. It's consumption. So you see, I understand now why he allows you to play."

Her left hand reached upwards to clasp underneath his forearm, drawing his fingertips to her Dark Mark. The moment they connected he felt awash in oily warmth, as if sinking into a bath made from warm honey – quite different from Snape's ice-cave feel, he thought. It raked in lazy waves over his body, as if searching him out. His heart rate increased, which a part of him was astonished to witness. (*The part that was never flustered, had only felt the rhythm of this organ this clearly twice or thrice before.*) And was it his own mind making it flow downwards, or was that her doing?

Her mouth now whispered against his ear. "For seventeen years I was dedicated to destroying you, his one threat. But it turns out, Prophecies are only as real as we make them."

The grip of her arm was starting to hurt. Her normal voice was actually quite low, he thought.

"You have sunken into that magnificent magic, I can taste it around you, smell it from your sweat. Your maturing body is becoming a better host. That is what you are, an expandable host," she exclaimed mockingly. "My Lord's magic will bind you more deeply to our goals than any prison could. You can escape, it doesn't matter – you'll never be free of him, of nurturing his legacy. In the end, you'll be recreated in his image. The image of your parents' murderer."

The glee in her voice was sickening, as was the sudden warmth in his groin. *You'll never be free of him.*

He pushed her away like she was spreading a toxic substance. Bellatrix took one high-heeled step back, eyes knowing, shining like a cat's. She turned abruptly to pace back to the bed. She kicked off her high heels, then lay down on her side on the coverlet.

The position showed off the curve of her hip and stomach. He caught himself staring and bit the inside of his lip hard, careful to refocus his thoughts towards the titles on the spines in the lonely bookcase.

In the space of a day, his mind had turned into a foreign country.

He was very glad right now that his expression had remained rigidly blank. It was getting rather difficult actually. Emotion was something only contemplated deep within the mental shield, if ever.

The other's associations were burrowed like ghostly companions alongside his own – reach one, you reach the other (like there was a constant debate going on except that both sides had already won, or something). These mental comments made it clear that Voldemort was repulsed by all this feeling, this reacting and subjecting to outside influences which most other people exhibited all the time – though Slytherins in general were the exception. He had never bothered to consider why *(in Salazar's name)* many projected their vulnerability so willingly and proudly. Then again, Riddle never considered anything aside from himself for too long, since everyone else was untalented and inferior.
He thought she was finished with him, but then her voice started up again. He was careful to keep his eyes on the books.

"You must understand, I have given him more of myself than anyone else. Although they'll tell you different. Many of his servants are as interesting to him as spoiled children. Their wealth and connections make them useful to the Dark Lord, and they turn to putty in his hands. But their privileged upbringing had made of them weak and unimaginative wizards and witches, spoilt and coddled as they are, used to getting what they want, feeling entitled to a place in the new world order. Their sense of superiority has dulled their brains.

His eyes gravitated, unwillingly. She stood tall like a warrior. "They call themselves his servants, but they never learned what it means to work for something, to give away your magic and love it, to sacrifice your health for a higher purpose than your own. Here's something to keep in mind, Potter: they are only as valuable as the price they're willing to pay to save themselves and their pathetic families."

"But, as nature teaches us, the fittest among us are the most enduring. A select few of us are not held back by such considerations." Her eyes drew a line of fire down his body. "And in you our Lord saw his own potential. He has given you the immense honour of a choice, between death and serving him."

"I don't serve him," Harry spat. "I became his heir."

She tsked. "You don't have to pretend with me. We both know he'd never tolerate an heir."

You're quite right and that's precisely why you're wrong, he thought with irony. Aloud he said: "That jealousy you mentioned earlier, sure you left it all behind?"

"Crucio."

Harry jerked at the sound but it was too late. The yellowish streak had caught up to him in an instant and he shut his mouth over the pain. His mind dug into the memory of the marvellous old tree in the garden: touching it and feeling its branches and thirsty roots.

His eyes had become moist by the time she released the spell. He was lying on the soft rug that covered the floor, Bellatrix standing over him like an angel of doom. His thoughts were adrift, dulled by the pain that was not leaving his shaking limbs yet. It was impossible to get to her Mark in this state.

He growled, and in no time at all, the foreign helplessness he was feeling had turned into rage.

She was his servant. The gall she had to wound him like this!

"Yes, yes…" he heard her breathy moan. She whispered something he couldn't catch, something that made his skin burn where it touched the carpet. He writhed to escape the feeling of his back being scraped raw – stupid, stupid, hyper sensatio, only making it worse.

He forced his body in an upright position to try and stand. Too late he noticed Bellatrix slipping around him to slash her wand at his unprotected back. He knew pain from the whip, but this, this felt like a knife was pushed in to the hilt.

He screamed. He felt the first stirrings of fear when the pain refused to Occlude away. The rareness of actually being afraid momentarily distracted him, the second thing to catch him off guard today – but it brought little relief. The pain stacked up, building onto itself the longer it existed, courtesy of the hypersensitivity curse. He turned and groped wildly around, but there was nothing to strike
at, nothing to hit with…

He willed himself to calmness, intent on finding her form. She had drawn a few steps back to watch him from a distance. It was then that he felt it, the hum of magic at his fingertips that broke through the agony. The warmth that spread over his painful limbs was like a bonfire in winter, vaguely familiar. He let it loose with a roar.

Lestrange was thrown back like a weightless leaf. Next the fireplace exploded, green flames bursting to life and leaping onto the carpet and the ceiling. They flung around him in a dance, his friends, crawling towards her fallen figure. The heat was dizzying, yet all around him objects remained untouched by the fire's destructive force.

He strolled over, concealing the shake in his limbs with a swagger. The fire had formed into a nest of snakes. The biggest of them – her lovely head reminded him of Nagini – had circled around her neck. Through the intense green light he saw that her skin was smoking.

Her cat-like gaze widened as he planted a leg on each side of her stomach. Looking down at her was like looking at something from the past – before the cries of a babe had announced a long black sleep. But no, he'd seen these eyes last year, when she had laughed while killing Black, killing Sirius…

He tilted his head. She looked different from a second ago – then he realized it was the press of hatred on his lungs, not her features that had changed. There used to be a small amount of satisfaction when regarding her, his most devoted servant. He bowed down low over her form, dismissing the fire's existence with a thought. He held back a hiss as the movement burned along his bleeding back. He preferred this persona actually, when dealing with her.

"My dear Bella, don't act all informed when you're not. It's distasteful."

He disarmed her with a small burst of his magic, then cancelled the hyper sensation on himself. He rotated the wand to dig into the skin above her heart. Her neck had turned an interesting shade of brown-red from the burns. Her eyes were dull from agony.

As he considered what spell would serve his purpose, the answer came to him at once. Although never executed by Tom before, he recalled the theory. His mind depicted the steps to follow with clinical precision. His mental library, it seemed, was quite fast when it had a rudimentary idea or intention to work with.

The incantation was a long recitation in Latin. His voice changed to a monotone murmur. He blocked out the individual words, since understanding was not important for this curse. The ancient language relaxed his shoulders, the flow of magic quieting his rage.

The towers of books in his mind had been patient to explain, to answer the unspoken but nevertheless resonant question in his subconscious thoughts: no natural distinction had ever been found between dark and light magic. Only the intention of the user mattered, as did the effect of the spell on the amount of order or chaos in the environment.

And the key to making it all work, like Bellatrix said, was imagination.

So Malfy senior's lectures were not merely propaganda after all. This was reassuring – if his intention was to preserve that which he loved, and to fight that which he hated… Although his mind had shifted – through shared thought patterns, memories and understanding, such ghastly understanding – he found that his intentions had not. He knew he could trust them: his convictions of right and wrong remained firm. He still wanted to save Hermione for example, to find
Dumbledore, to get rid of the Horcruxes… including his own.

Torturing Bellatrix, therefore, did not bother his conscience at all – it was a treat he would give himself, for those long months of suffering under Voldemort’s rule. And because he knew Neville would appreciate it.

When he was done he stood to observe the results.

Nothing happened at first. Then Bellatrix clawed at her chest, gasping and curling into a fetal position. This would entertain her for a while. He gave her a grim smile, then walked out the bedroom onto the landing.

He needed to do something about this bleeding.

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"The German representatives have agreed upon the revisions," Arthur Weasley told the Order members seated around the rectangular Muggle conference table. It was a full gathering today. Except for those who absolutely couldn't afford to be there, everyone was present. Arthur rubbed his hands, exited despite himself. It was finally happening, the plan they had been working towards for the last three months.

He continued: "So, we've got the green light. To summarise: both operations will start at 2100 hours tonight. Kingsley and Tonks will coordinate the attack led by the Irish and the Resistance from the Beaver entrance. Bill, Fleur and myself will take the Spider entrance along with the French and German armies. Estimated flying time into cave level is two minutes. From there it'll take less than a minute to decrypt and reverse the wards and enter the Department of Mysteries. We assume the Death Eaters secured the floor with their own wards since breaking the previous ones two days ago. But just in case they didn't, in case their Unspeakables made only slight adjustments, one of our own Unspeakables will be there to guide us through."

Arthur sighed heavily. "We have no control over the amount of Muggles that might witness something in case the whole thing goes pear-shaped. But since we vastly outnumber the enemy, we believe that the chances of that happening are small. Are there any questions?"

Ron was biting his lip and he knew the question on his youngest son's mind before it was asked.

"What if Riddle shows up?"

Albus spoke before Arthur could. Silence lapsed around him when he did. "It is possible, though unlikely. Knowing Tom, he will misjudge the strength of our attack. He will respond by sending us the outer shell of his army – the bluntest tools in the shed, so to speak. By the time he decides to activate his Inner Circle, we will have re-established control."

Albus looked around to address everyone. "As I mentioned in the beginning of this meeting, time works in our favour. Tom is distracted by something, has been so for two days now. My best guess is that it concerns our young friend Harry Potter – the next item on the agenda I believe?"

The man's searing blue gaze fell back onto Arthur, who hastily browsed to the last item on the parchment in front of him.

He nodded in affirmation. He knew the man well enough to know he was being gently urged to change the subject. Something paranoid wanted to flare up in his thoughts at that, but he repressed it with practiced ease. "Yes. Harry was last seen two days ago, in St. Mungo's recovering from the attack on him by three classmates. Riddle disappeared from our radar around that same time."
"I've been asking around under the cover of a fake detention he was supposed to attend," Nymphadora Tonks pinched in, "But nope, not the teachers nor the classmates are any the wiser."

Alastor Moody's magical eye swivelled to stare at the Muggle telly in the corner. "Have you counted in the fact that they simply don't trust ya?"

Tonks waved away the comment. "Most of the teachers are new to this, so we're all strangers in the same boat, in a way."

Moody shrugged as if that was neither here nor there.

"Oh don't worry, he's fine," someone said airily.

The eyes of everyone in the room turned towards the interruption. Luna Lovegood's smile was vaguely bemused as she noticed the sudden attention. As usual, no one knew quite how to respond. No one of course, except the former Headmaster.

"Would you care to elaborate, Ms. Lovegood?"

"Well, I think it means that Tom is just concerned for Harry." Ignoring Fred and George's protests, she continued: "Neville told me that Harry's injuries were very severe. Tom must have been so angry. He properly locked Harry up again, like he did during summer. It's the only way he knows how to deal with something he cares about."

"He doesn't care for Harry," Ron said, incredulous. "What the hell, Luna? He just wants to make sure Harry stays alive to carry his own magic, like a back-up. And he keeps Harry for what it is that he represents."

"What do you think he represents?" Tonks asked.

Ron was silent for a beat, then said: "Hopelessness. He has 'turned' the symbol of the resistance, right? Or so everyone thinks," he finished dejectedly.

Moody grunted. "You think he'd allow people to call Potter his heir if it wasn't the real deal, boy? He had no trouble killing Potter before. No, something's changed. He's not trusting his own immortality as he used to. Somehow Potter has got him thinking, which means bad news for us."

"Bad and good news, Alastor," Albus corrected him gently, giving Luna a nod. "Ms. Lovegood is right. It is a harrowing ordeal that Harry is going through right now. But consider that Tom is actually looking after his wellbeing, however rudimentary. We may take comfort in the fact that Harry is as safe as he can possibly be – that is to say, safer in captivity than any of us free witches or wizards are in the whole of the United Kingdom."

The contemplative silence that followed was interrupted by a knock at the door. Arthur quickly looked over to watch Moody's magical eye swivel towards the sound. There was no change in the veteran's expression however, and Arthur relaxed again.

The door opened to a wave of Albus' wand. In walked Remus, along with… Hermione.

"'Mione!" Ron screamed, predictably jumping from his chair to engulf her in a hug. She looked flabbergasted by the volume of familiar faces. After greeting Ron and everyone present, she looked back at Remus' emaciated form to say: "you weren't kidding."

Remus smiled and gestured for her to take a seat at the table. Another wave of Albus' wand and cups of tea spun into existence in front of the visitors. The teapot let out a burst of steam and
hopped close.

When the initial murmurs had died down Remus spoke: "Ms. Granger has come to us under unfortunate circumstances. Hermione, would you like to tell us why you are here?"

Hermione took a shaky breath. Then she began to tell her story.

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The wounds on his back made him jittery. He couldn't confront Voldemort like this.

That is, assuming Voldemort hadn't seen through his charade the first time. He was counting on the size of the man's ego for that one. It had seemed a sure bet, acting a younger version of the man.

But then he just had to call in Bellatrix, hadn't he… By throwing her into the mix he had made himself a game of Russian roulette, as the Muggles called it.

Since it was not possible to reach Madame Pomfrey… Snape would have to do.

His lips tugged upwards as he felt out the specific chord in the jumble of harmonies from the network. It took almost no effort this time around. His stomach burned with excitement when in the blink of an eye, the faux headmaster stood bowed before him. There was also the urge to wring the man's neck with his bare hands, but he could do that any time he felt like, and now was not the time.

A second later Snape's head wrenched upwards, rage distorting the ragged lines of his face as he realized before whom he'd been kneeling. Of course Snape would think this was the Dark Lord calling: he had to have felt the very specific wards. It was a pity the ingenious transporting ability of the Mark didn't work both ways.

Quick as a viper he moved into Harry's personal space. Clawed hands made their way into Harry's already ruined robes.

"Charming the Dark Lord with that stolen magic of yours," Snape hissed, his breath hot on Harry's face. "As always, when in danger our true selves are most apparent."

A taut smile ripped over the man's features. The physical strength in his wiry frame was remarkable. "But I recognised your scrounging spinelessness from the moment you stained the stones of Hogwarts."

Harry remained silent. He had started taking a detached interest in his own reactions to others, which all seemed bewildering discoveries ever since Voldemort made candy floss out of his memories. Right now he was interested to note his own increasing heartbeat. There was also more energy in his balled hands, but he forced them to stillness.

Snape tilted his head slowly to the side, perhaps surprised by the lack of reaction. "In fact I take it back, Potter. You're not quite like your father – at least he had some merits of his own. You're more like Wormtail, thriving under the attention of those far more gifted and powerful than yourself."

Harry felt his eyes narrow despite the blankness of Occlusion that had become part of his routine.

Severus Snape, he thought coldly, had kneeled to him many times before, and always with gratitude.
'Rise, Severus,' Harry recalled saying that first time, to a younger version of his servant. 'I hear from Lucius you have quite the talent with poisons.'

'Yes, Lord Voldemort,' Snape had answered, solemn – not quite in his possession yet, but almost.

A shiver of revulsion crawled over his spine, shaking him from his reverie. Each time Snape kneeled in his memories, the satisfaction that Riddle had felt came along with it. If only he could un-recall.

He had no choice but to welcome these insights, though. They could help him understand Voldemort's persuasive power, the way his servants could be triggered.

"It must be painful to watch my swift rise in the ranks, isn't it, Severus?" Harry asked, quite unaware that his voice had dropped into a sibilant whisper. "Especially since yours has been such a… trying struggle."

The professor's gaze was flat as he studied Harry's face. His face had become as blank a slate as Harry's must be. Snape swept his eyes over his ravaged cloths, stilling on his stomach. Harry glanced down and blinked at the wound there. It looked vicious and deep.

The slicing curse had apparently leaped onto his belly. A frown slipped through his detachment, his audience forgotten. If his whole backside was like this, then where was the pain? Were these just phantom wounds? Was the curse in fact neurological and not exogenic, as it appeared?

He flinched when he became aware of the hand pressing against his cheek, a thumb lifting an eyelid. Snape's other hand was on the side of his neck, stilling the movement.

"Had a little chat with Bellatrix, I gather?" Snape murmured. The black voids of his pupils filled Harry's vision. "Remarkable shield you have there. Reminiscent of the Dark Lord's, in fact. Ah I see," he said to himself.

He dropped both hands and took a step back. "Apparently the Dark Lord's magic has provided you with the Occlumency skills of a master. Your body is not ready for it. I would advise you to drop your mental shields."

Harry send him a lazy grin. Inwardly he made note of the man's sudden change in demeanour. "Nice try, Snape."

"You're feeling a high level of detachment, Potter," Snape went on, slow and intent. "That is your Occlusion blocking your senses, which prevents you from feeling the gallon of blood leaking out of your body as we speak. Your blood pressure is sinking into dangerous levels. You were wondering just now why you can't feel the pain, were you not?" He rose an eyebrow. "Same blissful state one gets from downing four shots of Firewhiskey."

Harry curled the corner of his mouth in amusement. "How do you know?"

"I speak from experience."

Harry’s legs were protesting against their upright position. He stumbled before finding a wall to lean against. Paranoia flaring, he groped around for his wand, before realizing it was still in his right hand. Inwardly he seethed with mortification. A curse was on his lips, but he remembered in time that Snape was here to treat his back.

"The whiskey, or the Occlusion?"
"Both." Snape's eyes were gleaming strangely, as if something amused him.

"Very well," Harry conceded. He tried to recall something specific about his wounds. A vapid trail of thought escaped his shields – Bellatrix smelling Voldemort's night robe. Then he remembered the hyper sensatio she had cast afterwards, the pain of it.

He hissed. The burning on his back had returned with a vengeance and his head felt weird, stuffed with wool. "Shit," he whispered to himself.

"Just so," Snape said calmly. He was holding out a vial of Blood-Replenisher. "If you smash this one, I will charm the next batch straight into your stomach."

Harry got a glimpse of his inside pocket: it held about seven bottles in a row, all the same red colour.

Harry pulled the stopper and gulped the whole thing in one go. A few residue droplets clung against the glass. This concoction, he considered, was becoming far too familiar for his taste.

In no time at all the stuffy feeling was gone, and the weakness in his limbs had lifted. Snape was studying the wounds on his back, murmuring an incantation, then another.

"This will do for now to start the healing process," Snape said. "Though I recommend a healer in the coming days."

Harry nodded. Thanks, was the word on his tongue but he couldn't get it passed his lips.

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Come on, come on. It's right there.

Harry sat hunched over on his bed, eyes squeezed shut in concentration, muscles taut as if his physical body could help strengthen the magical effort.

The invisible wards of Voldemort's manor sparkled in his mind's eye, mocking him. Harry blew out a hard breath and tried again to make the connection. He was a keeper of that magic. It should work, damn it.

The impact was about the same as scratching the surface of a diamond. He straightened, grimacing at the protest from his bruised body.

He was glad to be alone, finally, so he could lick his wounds and think about his strategy. But it turned out being alone wasn't so relaxing after all.

His clash with Bella had proved exhausting in more ways than one. It had triggered memories, which triggered other memories… to the point that his head was bursting with them. At this rate, it would be no time at all before his thoughts and associations were mostly formed by the other. In fact, he considered, it came down to his own seventeen years of living versus the – what, fifty years of Voldemort's when the Horcrux was made?

Fifty-five years. Harry rolled his eyes at the stray thought – exactly his point. These random flickers of knowledge were popping up at every turn, and then more came with them just by association. He was stumbling into webs of knowledge with no end in sight – and wasn't it great to start the whole thing off with the exact way to maim the bodies so that the ritual would be most potent? The stench a day later? Lovely.
It had struck him that Voldemort's servants which were chained to himself were now accessible to him as well. This was a deeply disconcerting thought, and he tried not to dwell on it. His shoulders already felt weighted down by the imaginary stares of Death Eaters, like a constant ghost army in the room.

He had gotten averse to thinking in general. He needed to do something instead, but his body was less than willing at the moment. The disturbing encounter with Bellatrix an hour ago kept intruding on his thoughts, scattering his concentration.

Damn it. Harry scowled at the window when his next attempt on the wards proved just as useless. Voldemort renewed them regularly of course, he mused, which meant the magical signature was not very old. A timespan of his own age was between the magic in the ward and the Horcrux inside him, perhaps enough to make them incompatible. Still, he had managed to break the body-locking charm that Voldemort had placed on him earlier. Why shouldn't this work as well?

He let that reasoning seep through him. His mind felt sharp and cleaned out now, like it had recently gone for a maintenance check. It easily inclined towards this logic. With magic, as with all things, conviction was the better part of success.

But there was no change. The wards felt as untouched as ever.

Harry jumped from the bed, furious at everything. Finding a potions book on his desk, he threw it at the window.

Childish.

The book bounced off the window and fell back to the desk, unsatisfying. Harry stared at the title, momentarily distracted. It was called 'The Heedful Harvester'. He remembered perusing it from Voldemort's library a few months ago when he tried to murder Nagini, foolishly forgetting that there was only one weapon that could kill a Horcrux.

The pouch – he should torture the elf for its location. Then kill Nagini.

He should kill himself while he was at it - two Horcruxes in one go.

The decision came to him like an electrical current. His thoughts were leaping to ways in which to fall on the sword, when his throat suddenly closed up with hot, poisonous fear. He coughed, trying and failing to get some air into his system. Only after Occluding did he manage to take his first gulp of air.

He stood from where he had apparently fallen to the floor, wiping the sweat from his brow. He shook his head. It was necessary. This reaction was clearly the other's issues with mortality – he had never been afraid of death before. He knew it would happen eventually.

He laughed, looking at his own hands, which were still shaking. 'Flight of death', Voldemort called himself, and he was scared alright.

You're such a wussy, Tom, he said into his mind. But it felt phony, like talking to himself.

Perhaps he was being too hasty. This was so very definitive. He had vital knowledge at his disposal. He couldn't let all of that go to waste yet. He'd imagined all the different possibilities, just to avoid this sort of Gryffindor rashness.

And if this worked - if he was allowed out again… he would put it to good use.
Draco could feel the eyes of his father, who was standing in the corner, burning a hole into his back. He rose to his feet as commanded. Weirdly enough he felt calm – maybe because there was no escaping anyway.

Lord Voldemort stood next to him, gazing off into the gardens visible through the huge drawing room windows.

Draco had always been secretly fascinated by the way he was holding his wand: as if it were weightless, an afterthought.

"Have I overestimated you, Draco? Has this been too great a task for you to carry out?"

Draco let his eyes slip from the delicate hands to the floor, recalling his father's training. "I do not believe so, my Lord. I beg your forgiveness, even though I don't deserve it. I had miscalculated the danger that Potter was in, but I promise that I will do much better."

He felt Voldemort's eyes glide over his form. "You have done me a far greater disservice than a mere miscalculation. You neglected your duty."

Suddenly there were tears in his eyes (he was glad no one could see it). "I- I'm-"

"Crucio."

Draco screamed.

Voldemort had cancelled the curse after a certain amount of time. Draco barely noticed: the blistering of flames on the inside of his skin lessened only slightly.

"I am aware of the enmity between you and Potter. I hear from Lucius that, through no direction of his own, you have been making amends with him. I encourage this behaviour among my Slytherins. This is the only reason why I shall refrain from torturing you into a mental wreck."

The Dark Lord didn't care for empty threats, Draco thought, and a flicker of panic made his head spin. He managed to sit upright. He was not able to do so without breathing loudly around the pain, and his cheeks warmed with embarrassment.

"Look at me," Voldemort ordered. Draco's eyes drew upwards, into the demon glare. The man's voice cut like a knife into the silence:

"I trust that my visit will stress the importance of your task."

Draco nodded. He held tight to his blank expression, but he probably reeked of fear.

A cold smile made charming angles of the man's cheekbones. The red eyes remained lifeless.

Draco's Mark started to burn fiercely, and he knew the skin must be smoking. Voldemort's wand, which was still warm from the curse, stroked his cheek. The man's eyes widened a little in excitement, or perhaps mild amusement – you never knew.

He was probably being Legilimized. It was good then, Draco thought inanely, that he was too preoccupied by the aches in his body to think straight.

"Are you honoured, Draco?" Voldemort whispered.
He really is barking, Draco thought and said: "Yes, my Lord."

He was rewarded with the faintest smile. Draco was strangely glad of the anchor of those striking eyes. Voldemort's taste for torture was well known. If nothing else, at least he knew what was coming.
Chapter 22

Chapter 22

Hermione had practiced her story during her long walk through London. It was a good one, she thought.

She had come to visit Harry in St. Mungo's. He was badly beaten up, she explained to the silent audience, but he was going to be alright. A Death Eater was guarding the hospital room, which they both realised too late. He had his mask drawn so she couldn't see who it was. He gloated that he was going to get her expelled for being outside Hogwarts grounds, told her to get used to it. He went on to insult her Muggleborn origins.

That, of course, was when Harry lost it. A fight broke out between the three of them. All too soon though, the stranger had gotten the upper hand. The man told her that he was going to make sure she would be locked up in Azkaban, which was after all the punishment for attacking a pureblood. She knew he was making it up, but she didn't want to find out.

So she ran.

By the end of it, Hermione looked distraught enough that no one thought to ask any further. They were also distracted, restless with anticipation for the upcoming battle. Soon after she had finished her story the Order members broke up to get back to their respective stations.

Except for Dumbledore, she had everyone fooled.

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One thing they could agree on: they both hated being caged ('both' were strictly separate only in his thoughts – where the loss of his individuality was still too painful to consider for long). Which was why Harry was sitting cross-legged on the library sofa the next morning, bend over a book called 'Unlockment: Theory of Wardbreaking - level 1'.

The problem was that when it came to the Dark Lord's wards, knowing the basics didn't really cut it. And the junior version in his head was no help: setting wards was a talent of his, not breaking them.

The nails of his left hand bit into his thigh compulsively every few pages. That muddled feel of his body – he had hoped a good night's sleep would clear it away, but his skin and the muscles beneath still didn't feel quite like his own. They didn't really seem to exist in the same way his mind did. The sting in his leg that followed changed nothing about that. It took the edge off, though.

Harry’s eyes shot to the walls. The feeling of the wards had changed, for just a second.

Voldemort was here, and he was not alone.

He folded the book and rose from the sofa. Not by pressing his palms, but by tightening his cheek and back muscles. In standing position, they relaxed into absolute stillness.

He hadn’t noticed this before. What else was he not aware of? Observing his own body was like talking to a masked stranger. A muggle robot, which had taken up residence, programmed by a powerful new subconscious. There was no knowing what came next, true, but since it made sense he would follow it, for now.
Right now it made sense to go and see. No sound left the floor boards as his feet took him to an antechamber on the ground floor. He took a peek around the door. And felt a jolt of curiosity.

Standing with his back to Harry was Snape, and he appeared to be in some kind of argument with Voldemort. His tone was barely above a whisper, but the sound carried in the small space.

"… on his mind and physique, I am confident the usual amount will-"

"Be that as it may…” Voldemort drawled. The accent on 'be' made the half-sentence sound menacing and final.

Snape wisely took it in stride and nodded briskly. He held out a vial of clear liquid – *Veritaserum* – which Voldemort took.

"He will be…” Snape began.

"- I know," Voldemort cut in, "and he's standing right there."

Snape turned as if under attack, showing a rare grimace as their eyes met.

Snape handed the Dark Lord another potion, then turned on his heels. "The Skeeter woman will be thrilled, you know," he told no one in particular as he strolled passed Harry onto the landing. "We'll never hear the end of it."

At the end of the landing, the billowing trail of Snape's cloak rose on the stairs. *Where is he going?* Voldemort had un-stoppered the vial of Veritaserum. The man drew close and placed the bottle in his palm. Mechanically Harry's hand closed around it, to keep it from falling.

The vial was tiny but still… that was a lot of Veritaserum.

"So…," Harry stalled, knowing he was being obvious, "Isn't three drops sufficient?"

Voldemort narrowed his eyes slightly - annoyed, Harry guessed, by his slowness. As usual, the expression was gone as soon as it was perceived.

"Either your act needs refinement, or… " *it's not an act*, the silence told him.

Oh. In other words, this was something *he* would have known. This dancing on a knife's edge was getting exhausting already.

Veritaserum. He led the Latin word like lantern light through shadowed, uncharted knots. There, his own memories of the potion connected, or so he guessed, with the foreign ones.

A splatter of feeling lid up… drugged, dizzy, vomiting… *Toxins* - building tolerance. Not quite what he was looking for…

Harry swallowed convulsively a few times against the pressure at the back of his throat. He knew his mistake when he saw the raptness that had come over the other man.

The Dark Lord's lips twisted in comprehension.

Damn these mental ambushes, he thought annoyed. Harry quickly focused his gaze on the bottle with a bored look.

Perhaps it was the one good thing to come out of all this. Reacting to things with an obvious smile
or a frown like a normal person felt weird now, *exhibitionistic*. Silly. He had tried in his room but... he couldn't do it, at least not without effort. He had become what Snape had always wanted then: disconnected from his emotions.

Beyond the numbness though, he was frightened by this sudden stranger that had taken over his mannerisms. Worse than a stranger, even... The spike of nerves in his stomach gave hollow comfort: Riddle would never be nervous over something like this.

He wondered for a moment what would become of him, when he had excavated all the cobwebs sleeping within the young Riddle's mind. Surely, his own severe lack of knowledge protected him from too many floods of memories.

The vial was still cold in Harry's palm, containing enough droplets to fill a teaspoon. He looked up. How could this man, who had shied away from Harry's pain in the Department of Mysteries when all he could think about was Sirius, go to such agonizing lengths in order to make himself immune to poisoning, even creating Horcruxes that ripped out part of your soul? Where had that tenacity in the face of pain gone that awful day, when he could have easily killed Harry with it?

"Drink," Voldemort said.

Harry raised the vial to the mass murderer. "Cheers."

The liquid without taste hit the back of his tongue. That part of him quickly became numb, followed by the rest of his body. Soon he couldn't feel the soles of his shoes pressing into the carpet.

He swayed softly, and Voldemort's wandless magic guided him to a nearby fauteuil, where he took a seat blindly.

Harry tensed in anticipation. There, that was his heartbeat picking up speed. It was finally behaving normally. He swallowed back the panic in his fingertips. Could there be a way to phrase things so that they were accepted by the potion, but concealed the truth?

Right. With the Dark Lord as his gullible witness. *Fuck.*

"Are you Harry Potter?" The man was reclining against the other arm rest, ankles and arms casually crossed, though a spark of interest had bled into his gaze.

At once Harry felt the need to respond. "Yes," his mouth spoke.

"Are you Tom Riddle?"

His lips tried a few shapes. "I'm not sure," he finally said.

"Why?"

"I can see things from his perspective, but... I don't think I would ever act on his views."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't agree with them."

"Are you my Horcrux?"

Harry looked straight ahead, away from the wild red of the man's eyes. There was a modern
painting on the wall opposite, made up of golden hues. "Yes."

"Who else knows you are a Horcrux?"

He tried to think of a different answer that the potion would accept, but his throat closed up as soon as he tried. Gulping for air, the name slipped out. "Hermione Granger."

A slight movement to his left. "How did she find out?"

"She… had read about how you brought me to St. Mungo's." Under the guidance of the Veritaserum, the words came with a currant of feeling. It affected his wording, making him sound like his old self. "I told her how you had put wards on my room… that a healer had given me perfect vision to replace my glasses. That's when she realised."

"Too smart for her own good," Voldemort murmured.

"What are you going to do?" Harry asked, surprised the potion led him.

"I will have to kill her."

"No! No…" Harry tried to wrestle up from the couch, but the potion forced calm back into his limbs and he fell back, exhausted.

"She can be useful to you, you know, to the magical world… she is so smart, she can, she can…" He tried fervently to find words that would demonstrate her worth. Witch of exceptional skill, expert in Transfiguration…

She dies because she knows, nothing more to it. She is Muggleborn without influence. Besides, her death doesn't affect the old families in any way.

Shut up, he thought to himself. Shut the fuck up, you traitor. He closed his eyes, horrified at his own cold reasoning. He hadn't felt this miserable in quite some time.

He was jolted out of his mood when he felt a tug at his hair – or rather, the way it raised his head. Opening his eyes, it was like he had missed a step on the stairs: instead of sitting upright, he had apparently curled into a ball, hands covering his face– no, squeezing his forehead.

He raised his head and met the slit-eyed gaze. The burning fear in his stomach turned painful in the silence.

"I concede, she has talents," the Dark Lord spoke after a beat.

Harry jerked his head. The statement kept repeating in his head, distinctly mocking. Talents were no matter when you were a mudblood.

"What is Mr. Weasley doing in the Room of Hidden Things after classes?"

"He works together with the… rebels."

"Yes," Voldemort hissed, impatient, "be more specific."

"The Order. That is all I know."

The man's irritation seeped like warm water over his scar, but the expected pain was absent.

He felt lightheaded. He had passed his most important test!
There was a question in the air. He really needed to answer, but he hadn't caught the words right.

"Where is the new head of the what?" His throat rumbled weirdly as he spoke. His hands shook. There was something horrible going to happen, but he couldn't remember… The potion urged for an answer but at the same time, he wanted to lie down, to ease the burn in his stomach…

*Overdose*, insight whispered before he even had time to wonder.

He nearly slid from the couch next, but wandless magic steadied his body, pushing his head to lie on the armrest. The warmth on his forehead peaked, and lulled him into closing his eyes.

"Potter."

He blinked a few times. His tongue was stuck out by the same magic and liquid was poured over it. He was ordered to swallow.

It tasted like nothing… *more Veritaserum – no, the antidote.*

He closed his eyes again to block out the visage of Voldemort standing over him, and waited for the potion to work.

"We will continue this later," the voice above him decided curtly. His scar prickled again - so much for wishing that part of their connection had shrivelled up.

The grip from the potion gone, Harry slowly pushed from the couch. He had to lick his wounds in private... The horrible something came back: *Hermione*. He started a brisk pace, lest he'd try something rash or desperate, but Voldemort gripped his shoulder non too gently.

He jerked away with a primal sound. His lungs burned. She was beyond saving, it was unimaginable… The new part of him was still kept at bay by the knife of emotions in his gut. Giving vent to his rage seemed an appropriate way to savour that freedom.

"Just leave me the hell alone!" he shouted. "You pathetic bully-"

"I might give her the Draught of Living Death and bury her somewhere," the Dark Lord interrupted, ignoring him completely. "After Obliviating her of course. Is that an acceptable alternative to you?"

His voice was low with indifference: he didn't care either way.

Caught off guard, Harry stared. He focused on his breathing and with that, a flair of Tom's sharpness returned.

"Why would you want to?" he whispered. Suddenly, there was this wild urge… "Yes, it's a loss of intellect and creativity," he went on in the same emotionless tone that was Voldemort's trademark. "But you'll find others with her talents."

He narrowed his eyes. "In fact, we should try to kill all the smart Muggleborns. After all, they are a risk to our pureblood propaganda. They could undermine our cause. Perhaps a competition of some kind, a gladiator fight, a Mudblood bloodbath…!"

"Silence!" Voldemort hissed. Harry responded with a smirk.

"I will allow for some leeway with regards to your unique situation," the Dark Lord said in a clipped tone. "Your progress under my younger self's influence pleases me, after all…"
The antidote had sunk in. Harry's perception of his surroundings was slowly broadening once more, the nuances sharpening. It was easy now to rival the man's calculated stare. Voldemort's mouth curled ever so slightly. "I will keep the Granger girl alive— I can see you don't believe me - if you manage to hold that tongue, and only if you keep me content."

*You haven't got her yet*, Harry thought. He hoped to whatever magical gods people worshipped that Hermione had gotten to the rebels' location safely….

The man's wand traced the scar on his cheek. Harry jerked away again, trying to increase the distance between them.

"I am often tempted to wring your little neck," Voldemort's voice dripped icily. "However… My approval and nothing less, is what you will aim for. A feat you have yet to accomplish."

Harry opened his mouth to say something along the line of *I don't give a shit if you approve* but Voldemort was quicker: "*Ah*, careful. Remember the choice that I offer."

Choice. Harry's hands balled in frustration. The man had a habit of presenting choices that were no choices at all…

He heard him sigh. "I hate to have to order a raid on her parents, just so you will snap out of whatever revolting *adolescent* woe you are wallowing in *now*... A waste of my servants' time, and quite unnecessary."

Harry's cheeks grew warm. It was no *woe* to be lamenting his ordeal, but the way he made it sound… Was he really wallowing?

He refused to show any reaction, focusing on his (Tom's) abstract musings. They were hard to put into words, but the impressions were easy to comprehend: they could range from apprehension and attentiveness to serenity or even a sticky sort of contentment, depending on the situation.

Focus, he had come to learn instinctively, was the trademark of the *other* and guided these insights. Right now his curiosity urged him to watch his opponent's eyes and the space around them, which gave clues to the man's mood and actions. He was too pissed off to care though. He would wait until he was released. None of the cards were in his hands, and he had quite enough of this company.

Voldemort's tall form drifted nearer, blocking out the sunlight. From the corner of his eye, Harry saw him lift very pale fingers from the deep folds of his cloak and raise them to the side of Harry's head. Then, to his horror, they started to… stroke his hair.

Harry froze, thoughts falling into disorder again. He ducked his head, which was flushed from embarrassment, but this only gave Voldemort more access.

Every once in a while, a nail would snag and the hand would start over from the beginning. The warm buzz in Harry's scar made him want to fall asleep.

"You are… stressed, uprooted," Voldemort said pleasantly. One arm kept up the motion while the other wrapped around him, stiffly, unused to assuming this position. The hold was not very tight though, and surprisingly gentle.

He tried to work up the anger to shake him off, but there was a heavy pressure on his chest which he couldn't quite place. It drained him of energy. His eyes became damp from the foreign weight. It felt like… grief? Not quite...
Voldemort detested any sort of touch. Harry was confident about this fact, which he quickly filed away - he really didn't want to examine its origins. It made him feel even more out of his depth, even though he should be used to the man's cruel tricks by now. Why was he- how could he emulate this basic human interaction...

"Routine is what's needed, isn't that so, Nagini?"

The snake came out of nowhere from the adjoining dining hall. Harry was relieved to see her. He would have laughed at himself in different circumstances - she might as well have been called to chew him up right here. Nagini climbed the fauteuil to lazily flick her tongue at their intertwined forms.

"The little one is upset. He is shedding liquid form the eye."

Voldemort's rhythmic stroking of his head never ceased. The man's magic was quiet today, at the edge of perception. I'm not, he wanted to say, but the tears were on his cheeks. "Stop- back off," he said instead, hating the tremble that had gotten hold of his voice.

"Routine," Voldemort whispered into his ear. "And a little care."

"Get away from me, now," Harry tried in a lower tone. Riddle's composure seeped back into his muscles, giving them strength. Voldemort sensed the change, and stopped the carding.

"You are disgusting," Harry muttered, casually wiping away the tears. Why did he have to go and cry, of all things. "With your body of a corpse. With your arrogant, cowardly refusal of anything not in line with you dumb ideas about how society should function. They're full of flaws, you know that? You think this is sustainable, to keep everyone terrorised like this? That's how civilisations fall, no matter how big they become. In the end, the people will revolt."

He was glad nothing of Riddle's viewpoint had slipped into his words.

The arms of the creature still held him stiffly. Harry felt like crying again. Nothing would change, he could rave all he want and still it would happen, the wizarding world would bend to the yoke of darkness.

"Pity you've become insane, with that broken soul of yours," he sneered. "That's also really cowardly of you. And just dumb. You want to live forever, but you don't mind that it's just - well, a mere shadow of yourself that's left to enjoy it."

Surely he had gone too far now, he thought hopefully. The provocation at least distracted him from the tightness in his chest. Tension crept into his stance, beyond his own control: the other's reaction to his recklessness. Pathetic woes of a little boy, Tom echoed his counterpart with relish in the privacy of his thoughts. All this effort served no purpose except to anger the man... (yes, exactly!).

Voldemort chuckled.

"Is this the famous power of love I'm witnessing that the old codger is always rambling about?"

Harry froze once more. "What… what do you mean?"

"I think you know." Voldemort tightened his awfully gentle hold again. Hugging him, for crying out loud. Harry bit the inside of his cheek hard.

The open French doors reflected an image of a man holding a child. Although he had grown a lot in
the past year, Harry's head still couldn't quite reach the Dark Lord's shoulders. Voldemort caught his eye in the reflection.

Harry huffed. "That’s not love." It was so ridiculous he could have laughed. Except there was still that awful pressure that he was trying to carefully breathe around. Voldemort didn't have a clue of course, but still, dangerous territory…

"What is he saying?" Nagini hissed at Voldemort from the armchair.

"That I am incapable of caring," Voldemort responded. The word for love did not exist in the language of snakes.

"You are," Harry asserted incredulously as Tom Riddle once more raised his eyes to regard him levelly in the mirror image. Nagini was huffing now, in what Harry recognised as snake laughter.

"How do you know this?"

His heart raced at the direction the conversation was taking. "What do you mean? You don't give a damn about anyone besides yourself."

"Really? Am I not looking out for your welfare? Nagini’s?"

Harry sighed inwardly, not wanting to examine his own relief too closely. Really, what had he feared the man would say…? "That is different. I am your horcrux. It is in your own interest to keep me alive."

Voldemort paused for a moment, arm still frozen around Harry like a statue’s. "I am noticing that kindness is affecting you in ways my threats cannot."

Harry blinked. Of course kindness affected him differently than threats… This was just the sort of weird observation that showed how little the Dark Lord knew of the human species. He pushed against the arm, and this time was allowed to move away. From the corner of his eye he saw the man's scrutiny hadn't abated.

"You and I will make an Unbreakable Vow tonight. Then you may go back to school. Nagini will join you. She’ll be roaming the halls."

Harry nodded, surprised. Was Nagini supposed to keep an eye on him? Was she safer inside the school? He quickly blanked his expression. Voldemort gave the smallest of smiles. He too sensed the déjà vu.

"I will enjoy the collection of rats," Nagini hissed.

The extraction process hadn't gone as Voldemort wanted, but apparently the result was close enough to hold off his murderous urge. Exposing Harry to Hogwarts in this state, with Riddle's influence as his unwanted guide – well, Harry could see how that would be appealing to the Dark Lord's ego.

"Before I agree to vow to anything, I want to know the wording."

"Naturally."

"You must also vow something in return," he dared. It never hurt to explore the boundaries early on.
"Is that so?" Voldemort's eyebrows had risen in clear amusement, which didn't bode well. "We shall see. Crucio."

Pain suddenly washed over his arms and legs, slicing through intestines and scraping muscle. Harry cried out, sinking to the ground. It was over in seconds.

"You seem to have forgotten your place again. Well?"

Harry extracted his teeth carefully from his bleeding tongue. He raised his head.

"Thank you… my Lord."

The Dark Lord's eyes glittered, unreadable.

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A profound sense of embarrassment had tingled over Draco's body while reporting to the hospital wing, seeing Madame Pomfrey look so caring. He managed to be quite bored about it all. Still, he was glad there had been no Slytherin nearby to witness the humiliation.

Now that he was sitting in front of the common room fire, a glass of (still) illegal Firewhisky nearby, he was gradually finding his bearings. The sight of Zabini in a clinch with Nott over his latest escapade with a Muggleborn (Zabini called it a violation) also helped.

"You think you can just do whatever you want now?" Zabini was hissing, emphasising his words with a Stinging Hex, which Nott dodged. "No care for our reputation?"

"Someone's a little wound up," Nott taunted, making no move to retaliate. "You could use a bit of fun yourself."

The room's attention was riveted on the pair, the older years especially eager for a distraction from the dull pile of Thursday's homework. Next to Draco, Pansy chuckled.

Zabini showed no signs of slowing down. A fireball flew through the air next. Nott yelped and deflected with a shield. The ball snuffed out when it touched the low ceiling.

"Hit a nerve, did I?"

"You assaulted her!" Zabini raged, quite unlike his usual composed style.

"I did not, I traded, I found an opportunity and I took it." Nott was looking bored in a way that managed to convey 'grow up'. "Besides, I was a perfect gentleman."

Zabini's face stilled, his voice dragging low. "What did you trade her for?"

"I traded her services," Nott corrected briskly, "for a bit of leeway with her wand papers. I think that's fair."

"You should be more careful, Nott," Draco suddenly stated, and both heads turned at once towards him. The rest of the crowd followed in a beat.

A warm thrill made its way up his stomach at the vacuum of silence he'd caused. Word had gotten around about his injuries, and precisely who had dealt them. It was no shame, no shame at all to return half-crippled from a personal appointment with the Dark Lord. He had not foreseen this… advantage of recent events.
He held their attention lazily, taking a moment to shift his tightly bandaged right arm. Their minds were spinning now, imagining the scene in which that arm was slashed, or cursed. Bandages wrapped the burned skin around his legs as well, invisible beneath his robes.

"You don't want to be caught out for the second time in one week, do you?"

To his credit, Nott's cheeks remained the same creamy colour.

He had been sent a howler by an anonymous Potter-fan that morning for his involvement in the Potter conspiracy, as the Slytherins called it. He'd manage to worm his way out of that one quite elegantly, Draco thought: of course Nott had been taken by surprise, sent into a trap by those resentful Hufflepuffs, and forced to watch as Potter was tortured by the snake-haters. Afterwards Nott had managed just barely to make a run for it. He would be next, they had told him.

By the time Nott managed to 'notify' Professor Snape, Voldemort had already disappeared to St. Mungo's with his charge.

It had been an educational exercise for Slytherin House. So certain Draco had been that Nott was turned into a can of dead flubberworms by one of Voldemort's minions – after all, Draco himself was glad to be sporting only temporary injuries, and he was barely involved.

But he had not counted on Snape's flair for persuasion, his talent for feeding the Dark Lord's partiality towards Slytherin house.

The tightening of Nott's jaw told him his comment had hit home. "Rest assured," the tall boy bit off, "I will be more discreet in the future." He threw a last sneer at Zabini before stalking off.

When the common room buzzed once more with conversation, Pansy turned to Zabini. "Theodore's right you know," she said. "You look stressed. You really need to loosen up a little."

Zabini sagged gracefully into the nearest chair. "You had your first training yet?" he said instead of replying.

Pansy nodded. "Yesterday afternoon. Amycus Carrow, Dark Arts," she added for Draco. "Was interesting. I'm happy with the subject. He's quite particular though, with his teaching. I'm not sure I want to know that much about all the different curses for controlling Muggles."

Zabini wrinkled his nose in distaste. "Mine wasn't that great either. Guess our future professions are already decided. Finch," he added at their questioning looks. "A creep if I ever saw one."

Draco raised a brow. "And you've seen many."

"Exactly. That guy is not natural. You know he's a vampire? I'm pretty sure. Remember Eldred Worple, that time at Slughorn's Christmas party? Same skin colour, same… ancient mannerisms."

Draco, exuding boredom, replied: "You forget, I wasn't there." Actually, not officially.

"That's right," Zabini said thoughtfully, though the remark didn't appear to be a jab. "Wonder what he's planned for this year. I don't think he can afford to shun Death Eaters from his club this time around."

Very smooth, Blaise, Draco thought.

Yesterday his father told him the news that Zabini had become a Death Eater. It had made Draco blink hard several times. He really needed to catch him alone soon. Blaise – solitary, liberated
Blaise – a Death Eater?

"I hear Potter is getting lessons from Snape," Pansy pinched in. Daphne, who strolled over after finishing a game of wizarding chess with Tracey, chuckled.

"Do I detect…?" she didn't bother to finish the sentence.

Scowling didn't really fit Pansy's face. "Oh I don't care," she cut in. "We know Snape's forced into it. He hates that he has to do it. I actually almost feel sorry for Potter."

"Whatever issue our Lord has against killing Potter, I hope he gets over it soon," Daphne declared boldly.

"This again," Draco sighed, though inwardly his chest flared with nerves. His new edginess was just the events of yesterday talking. No time like the present though, to make amends. "It's the real deal. He wants Potter alive. Do your own life expectancy a favour and don't question that."

He felt Pansy's gaze sear over him. She was worried, but had to wait until they were in a more private setting. Blaise, who was about to withdraw to the bedroom, now settled a bit firmer into his chair.

Draco was somehow glad for Nott's absence. He took a swallow of whiskey to gather his thoughts. He closed his eyes for a moment, letting the alcohol do its work.

"I have been tasked with guarding Potter," he said in a whisper. "It was an undercover assignment, but you're allowed to hear now. However, this is not supposed to leave the common room." He looked around at the slightly widened gazes.

They all returned serious nods. It had not needed to be said aloud before.

Another unexpected upside, he considered, was that the usual petty rivalries among Slytherins had all but disappeared. His classmates were reserving their energy for the more dire challenges facing all of them this year. This was the House of the winners – nevertheless, the grown-up world had invaded Hogwarts' walls. Expectations were set. The warping of reality had been just as hard on the Slytherins as the other Houses, and harder for some.

He explained his recent efforts in shadowing Potter, and how he had tricked him in order to escape – covering up the part where his own laziness had made him fail in his assignment. It was that laziness, above any other flaw, that had irked the Dark Lord.

He had actually managed to insult Lord Voldemort. In the first week of classes.

His hands badly wanted to continue their shaking of yesterday, from the moment he realised the depth of his screw-up. Looking back he couldn't quite believe how fast his situation had turned into dragon dung. He still wasn't quite sure at what point in the last few weeks his common sense had left him.

At the end of his vague rapport, he told them between the lines that curiosity about this matter was not encouraged. His tale was convincing. The subject soon moved back to Finch and his supposed vampire status.

Later that evening, Pansy managed to corner him on his way to the 'library' – which was a cover for the physical exercise Madame Pomfrey had urged him to do. The nurse had given him painkillers for the coming days. His body nearly felt normal after taking one.
She touched his sleeve, gesturing him to an empty alcove. "So, how are you?"

Draco leaned against the old stone, crossing his feet at the ankles. "Splendid. Father is content at least." He huffed with a smile he knew was strained at the edges. "'Took it like a real Malfoy', was what he said."

Pansy was silent for a moment. "And your mother?"

Draco studied a ridge in the rim of his nails. Pieces of it had broken off from his wild scratching of the Malfoy great hall rug yesterday. He hadn't known the Malfoy family rug was so sturdy.

"She was… sad, afterwards."

Pansy pursed her lips. "It says a lot though, that you're still allowed to keep guarding him, right?"

"I guess you could say that."

"They're all impressed, Draco," Pansy went on in an undertone. Her hand on his shoulder was not unwelcome. "You're the first of us who's really allowed to do something. You've got to crack a few eggs to make an omelette."

He smirked. "Great future ahead and all that."

Pansy scowled – clearly he hadn't been convincing. "Don't become cynical now, not when you've always dreamed of this. Morgane knows how many times you bragged about it."

Draco gave a languid shrug. "I'm excited, really. I'm just… getting used to it."

"Oh, same here. I'm going to be in the military, apparently. I didn't actually have any plans of my own, but," she shrugged as well, "I guess it was naïve to think I still could."

Draco shook his head, agreeing with her. "Well, at least we'll get first dibs."

Pansy smirked. "I just have to imagine being Granger. I feel better already."

Hermione straightened, attempting to read the instructions for the fourth time. How was she supposed to interpret it anyway, 'collude the doxy wings before adding'? They were in need of Professor Snape. But Snape was abetting murderers right now, and didn't have time to help Hermione with the seventh step of the Wolfsbane.

She had offered to help the Order in any way possible. She was stuck here for the foreseeable future; might as well make herself useful, while studying for the N.E.W.T.'s of course, which she would never be able to take on the record.

That was too awful to contemplate so soon.

*Let's make some tea, then look up the possible interpretations for 'collude'…*

She still wasn't quite sure if she had done the right thing yesterday, telling Dumbledore. He had been so… understanding. Then Lupin had to walk in… Somehow she was sure he had overheard.

"Ms. Granger," Dumbledore had said when he found her two hours ago, still in the meeting room, staring at the map of England's occupied areas.
"Quite a sight, isn't it?" He had drawn close to study the map alongside her. His robes were a beautiful deep yellow colour, warmer than gold, with flocks of blue.

"Professor, how have you been?"

"Well, thank you – but alas a professor no longer, my dear." The old man's smile always held about four layers of meaning.

"How is your magic?" she asked, remembering Harry's conversation with Luna. Then she considered this might be a rude question to ask up front. But Dumbledore took no offense.

"Not what is used to be. I'll manage. And how have you been?"

What happened, in other words, she thought. Hermione glanced around carefully.

"I will sense when anyone approaches within hearing," Dumbledore said. Later she realised that wasn't the same as him saying he would let her know when that happened.

"As you know I visited Harry on Monday… He was badly beaten up. He couldn't even recall what had happened, so I explained that Riddle had rescued him. It was Zacharius and Ernie, by the way." Hermione took a breath to calm her vicious heartbeat. She wondered for a moment about the public punishment. It was set for this Friday afternoon.

"Thank you for telling me," Dumbledore said with a nod.

"Harry started to say something about the wards that Riddle had put up, and he wondered why he would go to all that trouble. It didn't add up. Then he told me his eyesight had been fixed, which is an expensive procedure…"

Dumbledore pressed the tips of his fingers together in a characteristic gesture. "And so you realised Riddle must have a reason for going to such lengths to protect his former nemesis," he said softly, "and it must have something to do with why Harry is still alive."

"Yes," Hermione breathed, his patient manner making her even more nervous. "You know why," she stated. Her heart felt soar from hammering.

Albus nodded, closing his eyes for no more than a second.

"You know that Harry is…" she went on numbly, wanting to make sure he understood.

"Yes, Ms. Granger. One of his soul pieces."

A weird kind of calm returned. "How long have you known?" She felt a bit like a journalist.

"For some time. It dooms and saves him in equal measure." Dumbledore paused for a moment, eyes flying over the map. "He will not be killed but gathered close inside the enemy's stronghold. This puts him in a unique position. And when they lower their guard, lured into a false sense of control – in the end, they always are – there will come an opportunity for us to take them unawares, attack them where they are weak."

Dumbledore placed a hand on her forearm, his light-blue gaze boring into hers.

"However, the price he pays is a severe one, as you surely understand. The Dark Lord is now aware as well. He will view Harry as an extension of himself, precious like his other Horcruxes. He will be kept under the ruthless scrutiny of his most trusted – meaning most dangerous – servants."
Something hard sprung in the man's eyes. "Far older men than Harry have been brainwashed or gone insane under such pressure. There is no telling what Voldemort may command him to do, what kind of blackmail or temptation he may use to shape Harry into his own image. And how the soul piece in Harry might respond."

At the last part Hermione closed her eyes in horror. Surely, Harry would rather be dead than become like him. But if that happened, the Prophecy had foretold their world was doomed.

A small knock on the door made her jerk in surprise.

Remus Lupin stuck his head around the door. "Am I interrupting something?"

Dumbledore waited for her response, to which she shook her head. "Not at all, Remus, come in."

"Hi, Hermione. Albus, Hagrid is here. We have to go soon."

Back to their hiding place, she had heard from Ron. They were most wanted men now, and couldn't be seen or sensed anywhere near this building, or the enemy would know immediately which out of all the anonymous blocks was the Order headquarters.

Dumbledore nodded. "I will be right there." The door closed once more.

"Professor," Hermione said, using the title without thought. "Riddle knows that I know. He will… hunt me down."

Albus Dumbledore opened his palms. It was the first time today she had seen him smile. "My dear, you have come to the right place."

The scroll with its damnable message burned quickly to ashes in the hearth fire. Voldemort felt like spitting fire himself. Lucius would be the preferred target, but he was currently occupied, fending off the enemy on home soil.

The smell of singed bird feather drew his eyes to the desk. His furious magic groaned against the walls and the objects in the room. He would order stronger quills next time.

Ireland had been a ruse. German and French troops were gathered in Dublin, so much was true, but from there they had not Apparated north as predicted, barging into Scotland to take over Hogwarts. That had been his first guess. Setting up base in Liverpool with its strong strategic benefits and mostly Muggle population, had been his second.

They were far bolder.

Instead, and with help from the blasted Order, they had crossed St. George's Channel the Muggle way. There they managed to slip off his magical radar, passing through Wales undetected in order to infiltrate the United Kingdom from the south.

The real target had been the Ministry for Magic in London.

Voldemort breathed in deeply, closing his eyes to the surroundings of his personal study.

Who would have the guts to betray him? Huber? No, even if she were a traitor which he doubted, she would not show her hand in such an obvious way. Most likely she had been misinformed.
The French Minister himself?

He would set Watanabe on the trail. Later. Right now, he would Apparate to the Ministry's ground floor and rectify this *incompetence*.

Potter's vow would have to wait.
My warm gratitude to every person who left a review: they've all been a big help in keeping me motivated! Thanks for waiting. As always, I'm curious to know your thoughts on this story.

A side note since an Unbreakable Vow is mentioned in this chapter: in my version of events the Vow between Narcissa and Snape never happened – I'm ignoring it because I just love that old coot Dumbledore too much.

Chapter 23

Arthur wiped the blood from his forehead, ducking another slicing hex that came at him from his anonymous attacker. His faux Death Eater mask had slipped off in the heat of battle.

The Ministry hearths were cold, out of commission at night. The few wall torches not doused or destroyed by battle barely lit the fast-moving figures around him.

They were fighting the 'outer shell' Albus had mentioned, which turned out to be a tough nut to crack. What the Dark Lord's army lacked in spellwork or strategy, it made up for in force. When the first wave of soldiers hit the Atrium level, Albus had proceeded to near singlehandedly force them to their knees.

But this wasn't the old Dumbledore with a sheer bottomless amount of magic at his fingertips – he always held complete control whenever Arthur had been lucky enough to watch the sorcerer in a fight. His mentor had looked agitated when Arthur saw him running past afterwards. He was gone before Arthur could gauge him. Albus had a key role to play in the actual target of the mission, on the lowest floor: warding the Department of Mysteries.

They seemed to barely get the upper hand when the next horde of Voldemort's army arrived. And not soldiers from the new recruitment either, who were clearly still wet behind the ears, but the familiar masked figures of the Inner Circle. Perhaps they had underestimated how readily Voldemort would summon his most capable.

To his right Tonks, in the form of a boy, was absorbing a barrage of attacks from multiple angles, pushed back into a wall, almost losing the fight to keep standing. She held her own though, throwing exotic curses from her time in the Caribbean over her excellent shields. Two men lay nearby, victims of Sturgis Podmore's binding spells, their green and silver attire a sign they were plain soldiers.

A grim tableau was forming to his left. Rosier had discovered Kingsley beneath his fake Death Eater mask – Shacklebolt had become infamous among the Death Eaters for the damage he'd caused at the Battle of Hogwarts.

Ropes tied Kingsley's hands to his chest, his wand nowhere in sight, while Rosier cut into the ex-Auror with clear relish. Kingsley stood hunched, defenceless, as Arthur saw Rosier summoning nearby bits of glass from a crushed chandelier. He had to struggle to keep his gaze on his own
opponent when he heard the man's next incantation – a *Magnes corpus*.

Kingsley's hysterical screech, though predicted, still made Arthur's knees weak with emotion. Right that instant another of the damn slicing hexes caught him, ripping through his upper thigh. Inwardly cursing, Arthur put up a shield, stumbling to favour his good leg.

"That the only thing you can do?" he shouted in frustration.

The white-masked figure raised his wand higher, a tad dramatic – and paid for it when Arthur's spell choked him with his own cloak. Staggering towards the falling body, mindful of the figures and spells moving around him, Arthur wrenched the mask away. He had to know.

Crabbe senior's eyes were bulging, lifeless.

Swallowing, he let go of the head and looked around the chaos of the Atrium for a new target.

The first part of the operation had gone swimmingly: no tricky warding to get through, which could mean the Unspeakables had all been killed. Predictable in his arrogance, Voldemort had not bothered to tend to the wards himself. Breaking them had been a breeze for Bill.

The fight seemed to be well balanced, with both sides struggling to get the upper hand. Stunned and chained-up enemy soldiers lay strewn everywhere, silent witnesses. A few figures in black lay unmoving – though whether Order or enemy was hard to tell, which had of course been the whole point.

Notwithstanding the potential losses, Arthur still believed this was the hardest blow they were likely going to land in the near future, at a time when the Dark Lord's army was still in its formative stages. The fight in the Atrium was merely a distraction: knowing Albus, they must have retaken the Ministry from Level Nine downwards by now.

The considerable barriers Dumbledore had set would keep Voldemort occupied long enough for them to relocate or otherwise destroy the mysterious experiments inside the Department of Mysteries in the coming days, as well as all recordkeeping. The amount of information one place could hold on wizarding society was incredible. Arthur refused to think about what could happen if that particular department ever returned in the hands of the Dark Lord.

Right now though, they had what they came for.

His heart wrenched as his eyes landed on his sons. Fred and George were both wearing equally grim smiles. Once more his eyes were drawn to Kingsley's unmoving form, covered in blood. Remus started stumbling towards him, bleeding heavily from a head wound. He was carrying someone in his arms, holding up a wide shield to protect the both of them against the stray spells. The way his jaw was set told Arthur all he needed to know. The mask of the figure had been ripped off at some point – upon closer inspection he saw with a wrench in his stomach that it was Hestia Jones.

"Four severely wounded," Remus rasped, swaying on his feet.

Arthur nodded. *Make that five*, he thought.

Time to abort the mission, as per Albus' instructions. His Patronus sprung from his wand in a burst of light, blinding to whoever looked at it directly. The weasel flew to circle the boundaries of the now-slippery floor – the signal for retreat.
Harry surveyed the wreckage around him also known as the Ministry Atrium.

A Death Eater mask lay nearby, which flew to his open palm with a thought. It was not of his own making, the material thinner, different.

He dropped it as if burned, anger seething beneath his skin.

The familiar toasty scent of spells gone awry permeated the air. His servants were kneeling down all around him, most in various stages of injury. His soldiers knelt or lay in one line against the far wall, either dead or waiting to be released from the curses put on them. He briefly noted the loss as unimportant and replaceable, before gazing over the bowed heads of his inner circle.

"Lucius, stay. The rest of you: dismissed."

After due prostrating the group of white masks dissolved. The mass at the back spurred to life once more, Healers crossing back and forth with stretchers.

In a more private setting, Lucius knew to stand. His hands were fluttering at his sides in an unusual bout of nerves.

"Report."

Lucius stared at Harry's boots. "My Lord, as my letter explained, we were caught by-"

"The relevant details, Lucius."

Malfoy gave a jerky nod.

"The Order struck at Level Nine, at approximately twelve thirty tonight. They must have cut a hole through the stone that's blocking the main entrance... we detected no hint of activity on the ground floor. That's the only one that used to be accessible from the outside. They struck with about twenty. Dumbledore was with them."

Lucius shifted as he mentioned the name.

"They've destroyed the wards. They incapacitated two of our Unspeakables, I've been told. Dumbledore put up a new ward in place of the old one, at the staircase to Courtroom Ten. He was gone by the time our forces arrived."

Lucius eyes rose to meet his for just a second. "We have put our best Cursebreakers on the job, my Lord. I expect they'll be able to crack it any moment now."

Harry suspected otherwise, but this was not the time or place to discuss it.

Hurrying to be done with his ordeal, Lucius described the Death Eaters' arrival and the Order's hasty retreat. Harry was barely listening.

The Order had gained control of the entire Department of Mysteries, however fleeting. Something he couldn't afford. Not now, not at this vulnerable juncture of his reign.

"Someone has been playing you, Lucius," he hissed, effectively silencing his servant. "Has your political intuition left you so soon after our victory? All that Firewhiskey you've been drinking with Evan has dulled your wits."

"No, my Lord, I-"
"You disagree?"

Malfoy shook his head, paling. A few more beats of Voldemort's raging stare and the younger man bowed to the floor – a quite unimaginative plead for mercy, Voldemort thought. He turned away, reaching out for Bella's Mark in order to dampen the ire that was clouding his thinking.

Harry jerked awake, suppressing a wince at the burn in his scar, which was probably what tore his consciousness away from the Dark Lord's. Voldemort's initial anger had thickened.

He sat up slowly, flicking Bella's wand to send a ball of light to the middle of the room. Its familiar corners grounded him: that battle was miles away.

The vision surprised him. It had been a while. So long in fact, he'd forgotten how sharp it felt to his senses – the way the thick smell of blood –unremarkable to Voldemort – had lodged like a tang in his throat, or the way the monster's magic thickened the air. He felt a bit nauseous thinking about the thrill of power he felt like a drug inside Voldemort's mind. If anyone deserved it though, he thought darkly, it was Malfoy senior.

Voldemort was looking for Bella.

Harry's mouth went dry. Bella.

Heart hammering, he stumbled from the bed and onto the darkened landing. With a Lumos he descended the stairs to the first floor, running past a number of doors until he found the one from last night.

A day. She was now under the curse's influence for a day. He'd…forgotten.

At this point he was fully awake, and Tom's cold confidence stroked over his nerves, smoothing out his movements and the heartbeat pounding against his chest.

He tried the handle, which warmed before yielding. The chandelier flared to life at a wave of his wand, along with the embers smouldering in the hearth. His gaze stilled on a bundle of life next to Voldemort's bed. The owner of the wand he was holding was twitching her head every once in a while, as if in the grips of a nightmare.

Harry let out a slow breath of relief. He wasn't quite sure what he expected to find, but the pull of instinct last night had dulled his recollection.

Watching the embers he tried to recall what happened. He'd started things off with a Crucio, he thought, and the spells had left his wand in a blur from there. Her wand had been warm in his palm as if alive. The sequence had felt familiar like a routine Quidditch manoeuvre, effortless – his routine, he thought grimly.

Harry swallowed against a sudden dryness in his mouth. His blood was thrumming against his temples. Who said the Dark Lord couldn't be passionate…

It was getting easier to recognise Tom's thinking and how it affected him: he could block that feeling, he discovered, by thinking of someone dear to him. This time he imagined Hermione, safe with the Order, and the bloodthirst became jarring, grotesque, a separate state of mind that he could switch off like a television screen.

Feeling back in control he rolled up her sleeve to study the Dark Mark. It was pitch black, the skin
around it painfully inflamed.

He bit his lip. Voldemort would be quite angry with her when she didn't respond. Though not as angry as the man would be with him, when she told him why.

But Bellatrix loathed disappointing her Lord more than she loved Harry's pain. He counted on that, anyway. Voldemort appeared quite occupied with Lucius– he probably wouldn't notice the delay.

With quiet steps he retreated back to the doorway. He whispered the counter-spell to the Revoking of Regrets curse he'd left her with – an easy one but only if you happened to be its caster. Harry murmured an Ennervate next.

He glanced down at the glint of wood. This was the hard part.

He willed his hand to loosen – it almost didn't want to let go of the handle.

Bellatrix groaned, waking.

Before he could think better of it he threw the wand in the room, hurrying out the door before she might notice his presence.

Back in his own room, his body heat was still trapped in the bedcovers. He burrowed into them gratefully.

When the pain in his scar lessened to the sensation of nails scraping his forehead, he knew she had responded to his call – Voldemort was merely annoyed now.

Endearingly ruthless Bella had that same calming effect on him now as she had at twenty. She had always been a stirring presence among his mostly male following.

Harry squeezed his eyes shut as his thoughts caught up to him, a sudden despair lodged in the back of his throat, wondering when the novelty of these feelings would wear off.

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"Go on, tell him what you told me," Cho Chang murmured, kneeling down on her high heels to eye-level with the distraught third year Hufflepuff next to her, a hand on his hunched shoulder. The curtain of her black hair swung elegantly before settling down. "I'm right here, I'm not going anywhere."

Snape raised an eyebrow at that.

James Tuckett appeared to bolster himself before looking up, way up, at Snape's tall form standing near the door to his private laboratory, from which he'd just been summoned to his office.

It was burning at his back like a mental itch. It the boy didn't bloody start talking soon…

It was then that he noticed the bruises on Tuckett's jaw the size of fingertips, like his chin had been gripped hard for some time.

"Pro- professor Carrow-" the boy began.

"Which one?" Snape interrupted.

"The woman, sir. She thought I was the one passing that note with the-"
Chang shook her head wildly to stop whatever juicy detail Tuckett was about to spill, and he fell silent. "The note doesn't matter," she said in a reassuring tone. "Just tell him what she did."

Snape wondered for a moment how these two had met.

Meanwhile, a heavy pendulum was swinging behind Snape's eyelids. In silent admonishment it went, left, right, left, right, each stroke counting down to the exact moment four and a half minutes from now, at which point his batch of twenty Blood-Replenishing potions would need to be stirred to the next stage. It they got spoiled...

The boy's soft voice brought him back to the situation in his office. It was a tone, Snape thought, his left hand starting to squeeze the nails into his palm, which believed there was still a body of reason to be found in this world, in this case represented by Snape.

"She held me back after class, and then she... she told me to take off my robes," he stammered, "and she- said,"– and Snape couldn't care less what his jagged colleague had spewed – "This is what happens when naughty little boys get up to no good in my class.' And then she put a curse on my behind..." His face reddened and he fidgeted, looking away.

Chang frowned at this before deciding to take over, tilting her face upwards: "She used some kind of Flagrante, Headmaster, and I don't know the counter. Madame Pomfrey hasn't seen it before either. She sent us to you in the hope that you might've."

And so it begins.

He didn't like the fear in her eyes. Like most of the older years she held no delusions about him, and had realised his current position meant he was a dangerous man. He quickly dismissed an ungraceful flicker of annoyance – she was the one who had opted to retake seventh year, even though her N.E.W.T. grades during the chaotic period of the Dark Lord's takeover had been quite acceptable, all things considered.

Ironically, his façade was the only protection they had. "Let me see."

Cheeks burning, the boy took off his robes and pants and turned around.

Snape inhaled silently in surprise.

Tuckett's boxers had been soaked in Murtlap Essence by Madame Pomfrey, judging from the smell, which would've only relieved the pain by a fraction. His regard for the boy rising slightly, Snape bowed to study the red skin visible through the holes in the shredded garment. The amount of blistering told him it was a partial-thickness burn. The buttocks were completely scalded. A Locatam, then.

Pulling his wand – he noticed Chang stiffening beside him before he remembered to send her out of the door with a pointed glare – he vanished the shredded part, at which the boy froze, which he ignored. He then started chanting the specialised counter, which was quite the regular in the Auror department. Two minutes later, the blistering started to lessen, with Tuckett hanging his head in relief. It would require at least a week of treatment with burn-healing paste. The boy was lucky he had two doses ready in the back.

Telling him not to move a muscle, he hurried into the laboratory to get the orange salve, sparing a glance for workbench on his way back. The concoctions were still in balance, simmering calmly.

Fully clothed once more, Tuckett was waiting like a statue, hands folded in front of him.
Wordlessly, Snape stuck out his hand with the jars of salve and drawled the instructions. The boy pocketed them with great care.

"Who passed the note?"

"I'm not sure," Tuckett murmured, still with bowed head.

"Look at me." Clearly hesitant, the third year straightened. Grey eyes locked with black.

The safety of the students was more important than one boy's privacy. Besides, he was careful to only take a focused look: "Think back to the moment when you first saw the note being passed around."

Tuckett's face blurred and then he was inside his mind, witnessing a third year Muggle Studies class play out. The boy's eyes were pinned to Alecto, but Snape could hear the Slytherins guffawing at his back in low whispers. He decided he'd seen enough.

"Off you go," he waved him to the door. "I will deal with the culprits." Tuckett fairly ran out. In the hallway, Chang shot him a frown before she closed it.

Back in the laboratory, a Tempus showed he had a generous forty seconds to spare.

Yet another wearisome task that fell on his shoulders alone: keeping his Slytherins in line – mostly the younger ones who didn't realise the stakes quite yet. He sighed, passing a hand over his eyes. He needed a drink for this.

Not only was he supposed to keep the Infirmary stocks filled, which were currently depleting by the day… more importantly, the Dark Lord demanded his every spare moment to supply his finest with the best possible medical care.

And if that wasn't enough, it was because of the same bloody battle that took place yesterday that he had to secretly double his medicine production, in order to provide for the Order as well. Hit harder for its smaller size, the Order's needs were much more urgent than his fellow Death Eaters'. He didn't dare to delay brewing the first batch for the Dark Lord any longer (technically the second). He also thought about making it less potent, but figured the risks outweighed the benefits.

He shook his head, not wanting to think about how thin the ice was getting below his feet. Dousing the fires at the right mark, he proceeded to spell twenty ladles to stir clockwise, then counter clockwise at regular intervals. With everything set, he took a seat at the long table near the ingredients, which were perfectly diced and waiting for the following steps.

Already Voldemort had reprimanded him over the summer when, on a surprise visit to his storage rooms, Snape had to account for the scarcity of some of his ingredients (because of the war, he'd told him). He would rather not repeat that experience.

Time was of the essence, yet it slipped in gallons between his fingers. The demand for life-saving potion was simply too much for one person to satiate. Draco had offered to help and was surprisingly diligent, but couldn't be left unsupervised. Hermione Granger was aiding him as well, albeit unknowingly. Still: some potions, some ingredients were too important to risk spoiling even one batch.

Overexposure to the Dark Arts tended to rot one's ability to perform healing magics. Snape for that reason had always been careful to use the Arts sparingly. He had promptly become a rare commodity in Voldemort's ranks. Moreover, his position as a double spy and the need for appearances that came with it, made it easy to keep a distance from his colleagues. It protected him
from the more grotesque urges of the Dark Lord's followers, never having to experience them himself.

For how much longer, he now wondered: that card had been dealt. He was unchained, supposedly. He knew his colleagues were waiting for him to act out his urges, now that he was third in command. Especially Bellatrix. He'd have to give them a show soon, or he would start to smell of weakness.

Harry had found a comfy little storage room that was perfect for thinking. In the quite of this morning, with Voldemort surely distracted by things to do with the satisfying events of last night, he wouldn't be interrupted anytime soon.

The room in question was the room with the fabrics – too many of them to count. Perhaps it was a hobby of Tadders, who had a unique fashion sense. He would ask him about it later.

Rolled and stacked, thick, thin, plush, floating in a solution of some kind, charred or ripped from spell burns, fabrics with reliefs of some kind, and all of them rectangular in form, and black. A black sea that begged to be jumped on like a bouncing castle, which was what Harry did next, feeling quite the eleven year old and not caring one wit.

After wearing himself out, he'd heated the fireplace (a fireplace in a room full of dry cloths – he would never understand wizards) and transfigured the rickety chair into a comfy fauteuil worthy of Dumbledore. He silently dubbed the room Albus' Alcove.

With heavy eyes, he set his thoughts to Horcruxes. He was in excellent company, after all. He hadn't been able to fall asleep again after the events of last night. Times like these he really missed the Dreamless Sleep potions Madame Pomfrey sometimes gave him, when he had an especially bad vision. His dependency on the stuff had probably worn off by now.

The locket from Slytherin was one, Dumbledore had said. Something from Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw.

His eyes snapped open. Perhaps... perhaps Voldemort was so confident he hadn't thought it necessary to move them from wherever he'd put them? He had snatched back the ring, true. But Nagini wasn't locked up, and Dumbledore thought she was a Horcrux...

Harry took a breath before closing his eyes again to shut out everything else. The real locket was probably larger than the one in his vision of the cave. All it would take was to think...

Harry felt a jolt when his thoughts were pulled to Umbridge walking around, alive – he had no idea why – but this was good, this was unexpected, it could only be his thoughts. The recollection shifted then, because she reminded him of shrivelled heads and that thief Mundungus Fletcher, and Grimmauld Place...

Realisation tingled over his skin, speeding his blood. That was Voldemort's real purpose when he demanded entrance to his godfather's old home: the locket. A nightmare from a week ago came back, which he now recognised as a vision. Umbridge was wearing it. Riddle had been so pissed off about that...

Harry's heart slammed wildly against his ribcage. And now she was dead, he thought dully – he had killed her... It figured.

He shivered, jerking his head to clear the irrational fear that sprung up at that thought.
What else… something from Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw…

He waited patiently for a minute, but no sudden insight came. Of course it didn't help that he had no idea what the objects looked like. Harry sighed, rubbing his scar, which was merely tingling now. This was bad. If Riddle had already collected two of his horcruxes there was no reason to assume he'd stop there…

He had to go about this differently. What was behind all the locked doors of the manor, was there some place to easily store these items?

The attic.

Before he was quite aware, he'd gotten up and out the door onto the landing. At the grand staircase he climbed all the way to the third floor, but the ceiling gave no hint of a trapdoor.

He had to smile as out of nowhere a burst of laughter welled up in his stomach.

*Stupid little brat.*

Harry whirled around, heart hammering in his throat. For a moment he thought he'd heard his own voice saying something, out loud.

*Slow, too,* his thoughts whispered – what?

The realisation made his insides plunge. His own voice was speaking the words, but he sure didn't think them. Yeah, that wasn't insane at all.

With a sinking feeling, he realised it happened before. Several times in fact. He'd just been dismissing it, like a scared kid in the dark wishing away the monster in the corner.

Another wave of mirth pressed up against his windpipe. He scowled at the unholy glee of it. He wasn't hearing voices – it was his nice cohabitant talking.

Great, that was just…

He balled his fists. *Welcome to my head, you bloody wanker,* he thought back viciously. *Feeling a bit trapped? Can't even use your own voice...*

He felt his eyes widen as the words echoed in his ears. Did that mean he had been thinking all kinds of things, but it hadn't in fact been *himself* thinking them? All his ponderings – fake, a murderer's?

Harry yanked at his hair until the skin on his scalp started to burn. This was – this was enough to drive anyone crazy. Soon he could be shipped off to St. Mungo's permanent ward.

*Say hi to Neville's parents.*

His head whipped aside again, as if physically struck. Was he thinking that just now, or the other?

Beads of sweat formed on his forehead as quick breaths filled the silence, his left hand scrabbling against his chest. He needed to block this...

He missed Hermione with a sudden deep ache that pulsed somewhere near his heart. But there was another friend quite nearby, in magical terms… "Dobby," he whispered. The elf appeared next to him in a beat, with a warm greeting and a tired smile.
Harry felt a hollow sort of guilt. "Dobby, how are things?"

Dobby nodded his head a few times, like he was falling asleep. "Dobby is fine, Harry Potter sir," he slurred.

With a burning stomach he recalled the insane working hours that the current staff was forcing on Hogwarts' elves. "Are they still giving you too much work to do?"

Dobby's ears drooped. "We is also having to clean all the teacher's houses this year, Harry Potter, and feed the Dark Lord's army. And so we is now only able to make four different options for each of Hogwarts dinners instead of nine." He shook his head sadly.

Seeing Dobby so wrung out, and knowing how proud the elves were of their work made Harry hate Snape with renewed vigour. He had to at least know about this – at worst, he'd ordered it.

"Is Harry Potter needing anything from Hogwarts?" Dobby asked, fidgeting to get back.

Harry grinned suddenly, knowing just the thing.

A few moments later, the familiar weight of his Firebolt was soothing in his hands. Dobby beamed from head to toe at being able to help. With a hurried bow and a pop, he was gone.

Harry set out to the first floor balcony and jumped straight down. The feeling of weightlessness overpowered all else. He flew at breakneck speed – brushing the tops of trees, making twists and turns, plunging down then soaring high upwards. He was wary of thinking about anything. He felt like a little kid in the dark who is terrified of hearing a sound.

The sight of the landscape below comforted him. The trees were not judging. Flying higher and higher, his eyes teared up in the wind. When his legs became numb and his arms were shaking with the effort of holding him upright – he was obviously out of practice – he plunged sharply, slowing down at the last possible second to jump to solid ground.

His mind kept silent. His scar was quiet as well.

Harry swung his broom over his shoulder and walked back to the manor. Inside the hallway he placed the broom in the empty umbrella stand, ready for the next flight. He stumbled up the stairs towards his room. The attic would still be there in the morning and although evening was still an hour off, he was suddenly exhausted. If all Riddle could do was taunt him, well, that said enough about his power over Harry right?

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It was when finishing up his dinner, while Harry was considering trying the attic again, that Voldemort walked in. Harry took a last sip of his butterbeer. He had the feeling he was going to need it.

Voldemort vanished the tableware midstride, then sat down across from Harry. He gestured Watanabe to stand between them, at the head of the table. The man vanished the chair in silence and took his position.

Harry's suspicions were confirmed when the Dark Lord turned back towards him. The man placed his elbow on the table, hand outstretched. Harry mirrored his pose, more confidently than he felt.

He'd read somewhere that breaking an Unbreakable Vow was deadly. Presumably that meant there was something worse than his and Riddle's death that the vow was meant to prevent.
The man was clearly hiding a dark sense of humour.

Their palms met. Harry tried to stop his churning thoughts by focusing on the weird sensation. Voldemort's hand was cold and buzzed against his skin. It looked strangely harmless there. Takumi stood unmoving between them, blank-faced, looking down at their joined palms.

The Dark Lord asked: "You've read the conditions of the Vow. Do you have any questions?"

"Yes." Harry raised his chin. "My companion and I, we demand-"

"Companion is it now?" Voldemort's mouth twitched. "Your abominable skills at deception aside, let me explain to you what's in there. I have transferred to you the earliest threads of my life – which is more honour than you deserve. You are carrying a self-aware pensieve of my memories – a magical painting, as it were; thinking is all it can do in real life."

Harry wanted to point out that wasn't quite true, but the words got stuck in his throat. He somehow doubted it would improve the situation.

"I demand a vow in return," he tried again. See, his voice was perfectly even.

This time the man's annoyance was more pronounced. "You dare to demand that I, Lord Voldemort take an Unbreakable Vow?" he hissed. "You actually believe you're in a position to make demands of me?"

Without warning the grip on his hand tightened. Voldemort pulled and Harry was forced to bend closer to keep his elbow in position on the table. The man's face remained without expression, which was all the more frightening. Next to them Watanabe stood unmoving, as if meditating.

"You are a putrid ooze of emotion," Voldemort snarled, though his eyes stayed dead. "If everything had gone as I planned, you'd be a soulless corpse."

The man's indifference settled as a chill deep underneath Harry's skin. The urge to flee had never been so strong, but Voldemort's iron grip kept him seated.

A smirk cut a frightening line over the Dark Lord's features. "The idea was very entertaining," he murmured. "You see, when I had my Horcrux safely stored away I was going to send you back to Albus – just so I could watch from a distance through your empty shell of a mind how the smile on that old coot's face would crumble when he saw what was left of his chosen one – how his expression would turn into horror and disgust-

Sick glee skidded over his scar and Harry had to close his eyes, it was too much.

"- and I would make your living corpse speak such sad words…"

Then the Dark Lord's voice dropped: "'Professor, why did you run away from Hogwarts? Why did you leave me with him, I thought you cared about me…'"

It was uncanny, how the Dark Lord's intonation resembled his own. Harry noticed he was shaking. Tom's presence was vague, perhaps held off by the mention of his hated old Headmaster. He almost wished for him now. Almost.

Watanabe's wand coming to rest lightly over the back of Voldemort's hand brought them both back to the present. Voldemort's skewed smile vanished, his face a canvas of blankness once more.

"Takumi here will act as our Bonder. Now, you have not done this before, correct?"
Harry shook his head.

"As I explained in my letter, you will affirm each of my three demands either in the positive or negative way in which they are phrased."

Voldemort's letter that morning had told him how the Vow would go, which did nothing for his nerves. He would be trapped with these vows forever – except, you know, when he felt like dying…

That could even be a good thing if it destroyed the Horcrux as well, but Harry wasn't so sure anymore. The extraction attempt had failed, but Riddle had come loose somehow… Wasn't the Vow rather a sign of how confident the Dark Lord was about keeping his precious little soul part safe? Or worse, had he finally found a way to separate Harry's state from the Horcrux?

Voldemort's unwavering attention when he looked up plucked at his nerves. It was a relief when the man broke the silence.

"Then we shall begin. Any and all information regarding the presence of my Horcrux residing in your body, as well as any other information concerning my Horcruxes you will divulge only to me, and no one else."

"I will." A thread of red light proceeded to emanate from Watanabe's wand, coming to drift over their hands.

"Any knowledge about me that you glean from the Horcrux residing in your body, you will keep a secret from everyone but me."

"I will," Harry repeated after a beat.

When another red beam joined the first he looked away. Possible implications for the Prophecy were making panic flare in his chest. He blinked, dizzy. He wondered why Voldemort would bother with all this when he could just as well use an Obliviate.

He needed to breathe.

Inexplicably, an echo of birdsong reached his ears. The walls of the dining room fell away to reveal Hogwarts in the distance, bathed in late-afternoon sunlight. Harry shivered, wondering how this was happening.

He scowled when the image faded. Of course, it wasn't real – it was Tom interfering again. Annoyingly, it worked to stop the shaking. He looked down at his own hand entwined with the devil's opposite. He was hyperaware of the Dark Lord's red eyes, now slightly narrowed.

The man continued in a soft tone as if nothing had happened: "You will not deliberately instigate or contribute to events you know may directly or indirectly result in the damage or death of the Horcrux residing in your body."

"I won't," Harry growled. Jesus. It took effort not to wrench away his hand right then.

If he saw nothing of Voldemort until the end of the schoolyear, it would be too soon. Riddles left and right were turning him into a puppet. Cutting the figure they wanted out of the old frame, before polishing his new hinges to a shine.

The third thread wrapped around their clasped hands. Something hot spiked along his skin for a moment, signalling the end of the Vow. Watanabe lifted his wand and Voldemort released him.
Harry sat back, ignoring them both with what he hoped was studied nonchalance.

"Thank you, Takumi," Voldemort clearly dismissed his servant, who gave a nod before vanishing in a whirl of robes.

The silence held for half a minute. Harry wondered what Watanabe could have done to be trusted so.

Voldemort sat back as well. "The next time you find yourself in a dangerous situation, you may call upon either Severus or Takumi through their Marks."

"You mean when Dumbledore shows up?"

His scar seared with sudden pain; seeing a muscle move in the Dark Lord's cheek at the mention of the old headmaster however, it was worth it.

"When you are in danger or severely wounded," the Dark Lord hissed, lips curling.

They regarded each other in silence.

"May I also use the Mark in case I need to defend myself?" Harry asked, hoping it sounded casual. If someone pulled another Bella on him…

"To vent all that revolting teenage angst like you've been doing, you mean?" Contrary to the disapproving tone, rare amusement glittered in the red eyes.

Harry, trying to keep his cheeks from reddening, took this for encouragement – Riddle in this case would welcome the offered scenario – always appear to agree with your patron, or something like that.

He raised his eyebrows slightly, switching to the snake language. "You're right it calms me. And I believe it will help with those followers of yours that are still confused about my position."

He was taking a huge gamble. There was no 'position' Voldemort had ever spoken of. The Dark Lord however... chuckled. He waved his palm, dismissing him. Harry blinked and stood.

He couldn't believe that had worked. He went before the man could change his mind.

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The atmosphere in the Slytherin common room was tense when he stepped inside, transported through elf magic, with Tadders at his heel floating his luggage. With an arm gesture the elf whisked the suitcase upstairs. Then he bowed low before Harry, palms raised to present… his wand.

Harry took it, marvelling anew at getting it back. He shivered as a thrill of warmth snuck up his arm to spread through his limbs.

"Thanks, Tadders," he whispered. The elf's eyes – the only part of him visible through the black clothes – widened with happiness. He bowed a second time, then vanished.

Harry looked up. More stares met his than he thought was strictly warranted - probably nothing interesting had happened in a while. It was a step up from all the devoted sneering at least, though he knew the novelty would wear off soon.

Draco had sat up straight at his arrival. It was strange: he wasn't that bothered to see him. Or the
others, actually. He had missed the easy environment of school, of familiar faces…

It was kind of depressing, he thought, when seeing a bunch of Slytherins made your day.

He ignored the press of eyes, walking with purpose towards the passageway leading to his dormitory. He really didn't feel like talking to them now. He was bone-tired from the ritual. They probably wanted to know where he'd been, or gossip about him when he turned his back...

He closed his eyes for a moment in relief when he reached the black dormitory door without any interruption. Inside, he sank onto the soft green duvet of his four-poster, shoulders drooping with exhaustion. He threw a dull stare at the suitcase next to it, not quite willing to unpack yet. Fortunately it was Friday evening: no waking early, no teachers to nag him about his missed classes…

He burrowed his head into his palms, rubbing them against his eyes. A week of classes to catch up on... I can't wait.

His palms froze as his thoughts went to Zacharius and what he was doing right now. Scrubbing Snape's greasy dungeon floors with a toothbrush hopefully, along with Nott. He thought the third boy had a vaguely familiar face… The image of the boy was sharp behind his eyelids. And suddenly, recognition: it was the East-European guy from summer class.

All three of his attackers, shiny members of the junior Death Eaters club… He swallowed. He just had to make sure to watch out during the next meeting.

He tilted his head when a feeling came to him of derision. A scoff tried to bleed onto his face next – ironically meant for himself – but he blocked it with a deep scowl of his own, something he knew Riddle would find ungraceful. His posture was already looser than seconds ago, though. His arms and legs looked like his own, but felt foreign, borrowed.

He simply couldn't remember – when had he straightened his spine?

If he wasn't sure for a fact there was someone in his head, he'd have called himself a whack-job.

Horribly, tears were prickling in the corners of his eyes. He blinked them rapidly. He felt the sudden urge to punch his fist into the wall, just to hear the bones crack.

See how dear Tom Marvolo Riddle liked that.

"Well?" Harry said briskly to the empty room, guessing Riddle had to hear him somehow. "Now I'm curious. Let's find out, shall we?"

He stood – and froze.

Draco Malfoy was framing the doorway. His wand was out – weirdly, in his left hand.

"You were talking…" he trailed off when the silence stretched, eyes cutting left and right.

Riddle's casual stance held. "And you were interrupting. What do you want, Malfoy?"

Malfoy blinked and walked in, closing the door and casting a Muffliato at it. "To talk to you."

Harry raised his eyebrows. Letting out a breath, Malfoy walked over to where the windows would be, in Gryffindor Tower. Instead a poster hung between the beds of a famous Slytherin or other. He turned his head slightly to speak over his left shoulder.
"Your- the ones that attacked you? They've been dealt with." As our Lord has seen fit, hung between them.

Harry didn't know how to feel about that.

As if in response, his right hand suddenly held a wand, twirling it between his fingers. He stared dumbly at the fluid dance from index to little finger, which looked like it took weeks of practice. It brought a welcome feeling of distance from the conversation. The silence build again until Draco's leg twitching pulled him out of his stupor.

"How?" Gods, he sounded arrogant.

No – Riddle did. Riddle had twisted his simple question into a haughty demand!

For a second it was like he'd missed a step on the stairs: his thoughts, now his voice…

Blood pounding in his ears, he clenched his teeth until it hurt. He kept his gaze on his wand, although it was a blur now. Was his cerebral passenger merely playing with him, bored? Or was this the beginning of a takeover – in fact, he couldn't for the life of him clench his hand into a fist…

As much as he wished it, Malfoy didn't vanish into thin air. A horrific future came to Harry then: one in which his mind was trapped in his own body, and Riddle had taken over, and no one had noticed-

Then again, perhaps they were just getting to know each other. Who knew with crazy Lord Voldydork.

He winced with the sudden pain on the tip of his tongue, tasting blood. Totally worth it.

Malfoy turned to face him fully. From the corner of his eye Harry noticed his gaze was restless, betraying his nerves. "Smith was expelled. Nott and Resnik have been heavily punished by their parents."

This close, the boy's Mark bled a prickling energy that tickled just at the edge of awareness. Harry had to resist the urge press down, just to stop the mental itch.

"Nott is still sleeping here," Malfoy went on to answer his unspoken question. Then muttered: "He won't be a bother though."

Harry still had his eyes trained on his wand. "Did you know," he murmured – and he didn't know why he said it – "that the Dark Lord values talent more than blood purity? If my mother hadn't fought against him, he would have let her join his ranks and let her serve him. Imagine that."

Later, Harry would realise that the Vow should have made it impossible for him to speak those words; information after all, which he could only have gleaned from the Horcrux.

He looked up to pin Malfoy with his gaze. Draco looked wary.

"I- didn't know that."

"Why do you serve him?" And he found his voice sounded like his own again.

"What?" Malfoy exclaimed. "Because- because I admire him." Two small red dots had appeared on his cheeks.
"What do you admire about him?"

Malfoy scowled. "I'm not here on a social call, Potter."

"Just curious Malfoy, it's a simple question."

"I'm not going to explain myself to you," Draco hissed back.

Harry shrugged. He glanced at Malfoy's wand arm, which had been folded stiffly in front of him from the moment he'd walked in the room. "And what about yourself?"

"What do you mean?"

Harry watched him carefully, not sure if Malfoy was pretending. "You were supposed to guard me, right? Is that…"

Malfoy tensed, then fumed: "The Dark Lord saw to my punishment himself. Happy now, Potter?"

It was the first time during their conversation that Draco really looked at him. What Harry saw surprised him: the usual loathing was absent, replaced by a seriousness that made him look mature. Trapped, like himself, and trying to make the best of it.

Malfoy's sense of duty – which he suspected was to his family first, the Dark Lord a close second – was like a well-kept garden, years in the making. All Harry had to do was plant a little seed.
Harry went for an early breakfast on Saturday, not feeling like any more social interaction in the dorm than was strictly necessary. More to the point, he could do without seeing Nott's face for the rest of the year.

As he sat down at the nearly empty table, it was strange to consider that pleasant things like Hogwarts breakfast would continue, however the world was governed. Harry was munching on some scrambled eggs when a couple of chatty eleven or twelve year-olds - hard to tell these days - sat down nearby in blue Ravenclaw attire. As if on cue, a handful of early-owl Daily Prophets flew into the great hall.

One of the group received her copy and they burrowed into the front page. As they flipped the cover and stared at the headline, the sudden silence became loud in Harry's ears. He ignored the screaming capitals across from him, his thoughts turning to Hedwig. Where would she be staying now? He hoped she was safe in Hagrid's care. He would already have heard if she were dead… right?

Thinking of Hedwig somehow made him think of Ginny. Needing something to do, he grabbed his school bag to take a look at his class schedule.

The little piece of paper had appeared on his pillow when he closed the curtains of his four-poster last night, a welcome contrast to the chaos of the last few days. Its tidy message was a stark reminder that going to class was a privilege when there was a war going on (at least in his eyes; the deal was sealed as far as Voldemort was concerned).

He eyed it now with growing distaste: the days were just as full as before his little clinch with mortality and evil soul pieces. 'Junior's meeting' it said at one p. Sunday. It was held in the same classroom as the first one, on the seventh floor.

"Oh come on," he murmured.

Across from him the girl and the two boys jerked, lowering their newspaper, then tensed when they spotted him. Harry waved a palm dismissively, and they hurriedly returned to their reading.

"You've got to be kidding," he muttered again. Future Death Eater socializing was now also part of the curriculum?

Let's say he wouldn't go.

He rubbed hard at his eyes. Let's say Draco told Snape when he didn't show.

"Morning, Harry."

Luna appeared next to him, taking a seat, her face brightening. She wore a scarf whose colours changed with dizzying speed through all possible hues of blue. It dawned on him that he was sitting at the Ravenclaw table. Which hardly mattered nowadays: many students felt that whatever differences existed between the three other Houses, they had become insignificant now.
Harry's smile felt a bit rusty when he returned it. Luna turned her head to study him a moment.

"Good," she said. "You look stronger."

His right hand spasmed at that and he quickly put it below the table top. It wanted to draw his wand, as if to prove her point right then and there. "I'd better be, right?" he returned.

She nodded, though he wasn't sure she was agreeing. "You're like Albus in that way. He brings that out, I think. He's a mirror for what you can do."

His scar twinged now. He forced his breaths to stay calm. "You mean Albus is?"

The teapot floated over to fill her cup while she took a serving of mashed potatoes and boiled eggs. "No, Tom."

Harry ate another fork of eggs to distract himself from the jolt in his chest at the name. Still, some of the weight on his thoughts lightened at being able to talk about it, however indirectly. Did she mean Voldemort was a reflection of what Harry might become? Or what he wanted to become?

How could she sound so ambiguous and yet so spot-on?

"You mean," he said in an undertone, glancing around – the group across from them had left, taking the Prophet with them – "he pushes me to become more… like him?"

"No, better!" she said in a fierce whisper. "To become your best self."

Harry couldn't help it: he started laughing. "Next you'll be saying he 'makes me want to be a better man'."

Luna burst into cackles as well. Once the chuckles began it was hard to stop. Soon they were both wheezing with silent mirth, shoulders shaking. Harry bowed his head to wipe away a few stray tears. It was refreshing, rather like coming back from a good hot bath.

He sent a thought to the foreign presence – but all stayed quiet. Luna finally reigned in her chuckles and stood. "Let's take a walk."

Harry took a moment to scan the tables. Luna seemed to read his mind: "Ron is still finishing up his groundwork duties. He'll be back by ten though."

Ah. Quidditch practice. "Wonder what they made of the tryouts," he said as they made their way to the back. Harry had missed the tryouts last week, but Ron assured him he'd be on a team… somewhere. It was all rather vague.

Based on what he could gather from common room talk, when the official game had closed down courtesy of Snape's joyful personality, the Slytherin team had been quick to test the waters. Though half expected, no angry teachers had stormed the grounds the moment they got on their brooms; the signal for everyone to continue practice as usual, whether illegal or not.

"Oh you'll see," was Luna's helpful reply. They passed into the entrance hall just when rush hour started, setting out for the lake.

"How was it, seeing Malfoy… after?" Luna asked.

Oh, just a wee bit satisfying. "Awkward. He seems… uprooted, or something."

"No wonder, with all that's happened. It must be everything he's ever wanted – all he's ever been
able to imagine, this pureblood vision of how the wizarding world should look like. And now it's real."

"And reality's a bitch," Harry finished for her. Luna grinned as her long hair moved with the autumn wind.

They rounded the lake, there was no Giant Squid to greet them: the water was a mirror for the sky. They chose a big tree to sit under, and Luna started collecting rocks. She turned out to be a pro in the art of stone skipping. Harry soon learned there was only one right angle to take. A few tries in and he got the hang of it, closing in on Luna's scores.

A shout behind them drew their attention towards the direction of the castle. Dean and Ron were strolling over, spotting them, with Dean holding something large and heavy bundled in a sack on one shoulder. Halting next to them, he put it down with a sigh. "Harvest," he explained when he saw their wandering gaze.

Somehow Harry found it hard to lift his eyes to meet Ron's gaze, as if a hand was pressing down on his eyelids. After a beat he did.

Ron stared.

Harry's face felt equally frozen. Luna cut through the tension with her usual weightless commentary.

"You mean the Grigglebonders? They've become huge in my garden."

"Eh…" Dean rubbed at his sweaty forehead with a muddy hand, raising his eyebrows at Harry. He felt relieved that Dean still considered him part of the group. Then he felt annoyed at his own caring, and wondered whose annoyance it was.

Ron's hands and arms were dirty as well, looking like he came straight from Herbology class.

Luna appeared slightly puzzled herself. "I thought that's why you're not using magic."

"Nah, it's not allowed, some of the plants are very sensitive," Dean explained.

Throughout their exchange Ron kept silent, staring Harry down, his expression pained as if there was something he was burning to ask. Harry suddenly realised what it was.

He shook his head and shrugged – *I don't know*. 

Ron's eyes closed, but Harry couldn't tell if he was relieved or not at the news.

"Hey, Ron," he tried to find words, feeling slightly awkward, "get me up to speed with the new team, will you? Practice starts in ten minutes."

Ron jerked his head. "Sure, let's get our brooms."

Harry couldn't shake the feeling that Ron didn't know quite how to deal with him. They left Dean to explain the intricacies of the Hogwarts potions gardens to an avid Luna – which he seemed happy to do, although a certain flatness never left his voice – and trudged up to the castle entrance. There they split up, Ron for Gryffindor Tower and Harry for the dungeons to get his Firebolt. Back outside on the grounds the time was down to four minutes of privacy. They took a roundabout path through tall grass to avoid classmates.
"She knows something that makes her a target," Harry started without preamble. "That's why she fled."

"If that's the case, I think she must be safe then," Ron said. They were silent for a few moments, the different possibilities hanging between them.

"Is it about- him?"

Harry nodded. Something twisted low in his gut and he felt his heart pick up pace.

"Listen, Ron, there's something important I need to tell you," he murmured. "I'm not- you can't-"

He tried again. "Something has changed. With me."

His lips closed, refused to obey him any further.

"What do you mean?" Ron's eyes narrowed when he firmly shook his head. "You can't say. Some kind of curse? Never mind. Probably something to do with the scar situation if you're so cryptic and I'm used to that, so... I'll be careful, alright mate? I know what to watch for when you're... getting weird," he finished dryly.

Changing into Quidditch gear just like old times, Harry noticed the corners of his mouth wanted to tug upwards, and it was definitely not Riddle.

At that point the rest of the team trickled into the changing rooms. Harry saw school outfits from various Houses and threw a pointed look Ron's way. His friend's grin turned a bit pain. "New Decree of Snivellus," he said in reply.

By the end of his explanation, Harry felt like tearing some hair out. It turned out Quidditch was also on the list of things that would never get back to how they were. The teams had been forced to adjust to the new rule, which declared that Muggleborns were not allowed to leave the castle outside of regular school duties without the express permission from their Head of House. Katie Bell had bravely tried explaining to Snape their need to use the grounds for practice, to which he had apparently replied:

*Miss Bell, haven't you heard my speech at the beginning of the school year, in which I abolished the practice of Quidditch at Hogwarts?*

"In short it means muggleborn students are unable to play, since they can't train, or participate in the games," Ron said. "So yeah, Dean took it hard."

He thought back to Dean's listless pose. Working throughout the weekend and no Quidditch to look forward to would put even Dean in a grim mood. Still, he'd switch with him anytime.

He felt a mocking smirk start on his face at that thought, the shape taking form by an *otherness* pulling at his features. He quickly ducted his head, blood thrumming in his throat. It was a horrible powerless feeling, each time. And maddening, for Riddle to push through the moment Harry had forgotten about him for a second. Half the time he didn't even know what the hell the other *meant* with his mute commentary.

"You alright mate?"

Harry nodded, straightening. He pierced nails into his arm – but no answer. Riddle reminded him of Malfoy, and he wondered at the boy's stealth. Really, why did they still bother... he was hardly going to be attacked a second time on Hogwarts grounds.
"Alright," Ron went on with a forced lightness, "I see what you mean by the way...

He had probably been drifting off for too long. To Ron's credit he didn't miss a beat as he went on: "So without the Muggleborns, three of the four teams are dealing with shortages – the exception being Slytherin of course."

He kicked at a spot of grass, shaking loose a clump of earth. "Since we simply don't have the right numbers, keeping our four teams isn't possible any longer. Yes, the second formation we discussed," he told Katie Bell in passing. "We had to cut one out to keep enough players for the other two. Now we have two teams left to fight the snake bastards."

Harry scowled at that, frustration bubbling in his fingers. This would only cause more of a polarisation effect in a school that was already scarring from the fighting between the two factions. Slytherin still had the means to fill up all twelve places and more, never having allowed any Muggleborns on their team, which drew the war lines neatly into the school game.

"Of course they're insufferable about it," Ron sneered. "They have two spots still open – I think so they can get bribes from the candidates or something, it's ridiculous."

The players trickled onto the pitch, a couple of them greeting Harry warmly, but most looking grim as they formed half a circle around Ron. Harry sighed. It was going to be like that again. Like no one wanted to be near him. The worst thing was that he couldn't really blame them.

"On the upside…" Ron was grinning now, and Harry was sure it was meant to distract him, "Now we can make our own schedules! Everyone agrees the old rates were a drag, right. Which means more Quidditch for us!"

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After practice – a dull affair compared with last year, now that most everyone was ignoring their infamous Seeker – Harry felt a sudden need to be alone. He trudged up to the Owlery, thinking once more of his old friend Hedwig. She had to be alright. He had to trust in that, or Hagrid would waste no time informing him otherwise.

The slightly musty smell of the attic-like structure and its welcome association with friendly and mundane things made him take a deep breath. He sagged into a corner of straw, head in his hands, listening to the near-silence.

How long could he sustain this… this duality?

By the time he went down he had no sense of the hour. Malfoy was standing at the foot of the staircase, scowling him down silently.

Harry narrowed his eyes, jerking a hand upwards. "What?"

Malfoy kept silent, gaze smouldering like he was ready for a fight. Harry passed him with a shove to his shoulder. The kitchens would be his next stop, he decided. Considering the blonde's hysterics last time he was there, he was sure Malfoy wouldn't follow. He was right.

The ruling powers, it seemed, kept them both tightly in the vices of their fates.

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Ron was occupied for the whole of the afternoon as well. Which sucked, because his old friend was about the only person he could stand right now. He felt antsy. It was all too much – the mass
of students, the oppressive school intrigues. The sizzle of magic seeping from Dark Marks nearby as he slept, old abettors in attempted murders allowed to share his dormitory…

However much he was idling the afternoon away, talking to Dobby, tracking down Nagini or trying to – she was nowhere to be found – evening still came too soon, foreshadowing the dreaded meeting tomorrow.

Neville caught him on his way to dinner with a hand on his shoulder. He forced a smile, which cut through the numbness that was taking hold of him.

"Harry! Looking better I see."

"I am."

Neville's gaze was piercing, almost as much as Dumbledore's. "When you're done with dinner I want to show you something."

"Sure." Neville turned again. "Wait, you're not coming?"

Neville shook his head, padding his bag. Harry realised he had come from the direction of the kitchens. "I have some to go. I'm allowed to assist with managing the gardens."

Harry felt his eyebrows climb upwards. "That's impressive."

Neville shrugged. "Got to keep busy, right?" And off he went.

Predictably, Ron wasn't at dinner either. Harry hoped he had some to go as well. After another sit-down at Ravenclaw table with Luna, where animosity against him was the lowest, rational minds that they were, he took to the grounds again to look for his Gryffindor friends. Parvati, who had shared a meal with her sister, insisted on joining him.

They found Neville at the greenhouses. He didn't mind her tailing along, leading them into a greenhouse crammed with brown-leaved plants.

"Burning bushes!" Parvati explained.

"Spot on," Neville said, glowing a bit with pleasure. "It's dittany," he explained turning to Harry. "It has powerful healing properties."

"Impressive," Parvati murmured. "Aren't they just impossible to keep satisfied?"

"They have a tricky diet, yes." To Harry he muttered: "But lately, rare ingredients have been coming from everywhere, so now we have plenty in stock – and what to do with it all, hm?"

It was clear from his tone it was a rhetorical question. Harry shot a glance at Parvati. Neville gave a solemn nod. She could be trusted.

But then could he? He swallowed. What was Neville going to tell him that the Dark Lord was going to rip out of his mind sooner or later?

Apparently something showed in his face, because Neville said: "Don't worry, it's nothing… illegal. Not quite in the books though…" He grinned. The Voldemort camp was not their sole recipient, then.

Harry grinned back despite the twinge in his gut. "Great work."
Neville jerked his head. "Come on, let's go find Ron and Dean."

The two Gryffindors were just finishing up when they found them. Night was falling, with large shadows seeping around them. "Do you have to work tomorrow as well?" he asked Ron, who grimaced a yes as the four of them turned back to the castle.

Something didn't add up. "Say Dean, if you're not allowed out on the grounds, how come they let you do the gardening?"

"Because they're filthy hypocrites who can't do menial work if it would save their lives, that's why," Dean replied sharply.

"Just a little while," Parvati was saying softly, rubbing Dean's back, clearly referring to something ongoing. Harry clenched his jaw, thinking he needed to get out of earshot soon if this continued.

He needn't have worried: in the next moment they all fell silent at the sight of Draco Malfoy leaning casually against one of the Medieval castle doors blackened with age. He was twirling his wand in a manner that sent prickles over Harry's back.

"So, Weasley, how was gardening today?"

Ron turned sharply at that, but when Neville touched his sleeve he shut his mouth again, crossing the threshold with a determent look.

Malfoy had seen the move. "Ah, Longbottom, I see aunt Bella has yet to find the time to pay you a visit."

Neville blanched.

"It's Bellatrix to you, Draco, Harry wanted to say, the thought wafting coldness. His shoulders lost their tension. Nodding towards the others to move along – they hesitated but he insisted with an intense gaze – he waited until they were far enough along before he came to a stop in front of the boy. He knew what would irk him to no end.

"Now Draco, behave."

Malfoy's mouth twisted. "You've got some-"

But Harry's rage sat close to the surface these days. "What does it mean when you talk to Neville about your insane aunt, hm?" He tilted his head, eyes searing. "It means 'Someone has tortured your parents and gave them the most excruciating death possible, and she is going to come looking for you soon.' That's," - with every other word he jabbed a finger into Draco's chest-- "what you mean when you say that."

Malfoy's eyes flashed, though he appeared a bit unsure by Harry's outburst.

"So let's say," – Harry tapped his chin in a show of deep thinking, eyes roaming the shadowed arches above – "we apply that to your situation, what would we get... Ah, I know!"

Something or Riddle's must have come up along with the restless energy coursing through him, because next thing he knew he had them whirled around, left arm nearly clenching off the air in Draco's windpipe, wand pressed against the back of his neck and mouth whispering near his ear:

"We get your mother, screaming in pain from The Dark Lord's Cruciatus, voice turning hoarse, urinating on the floor because she's been under it too long already-"
His thoughts filled with an image of Narda, which only increased the itch in his fingertips, urged on by a Mark so near, the itch to tear and burn-

His head cocked, imagining the scene. "Ah but your father is a proud one, isn't he?"

Draco didn't respond, trembling ever so slightly.

"He turns his head away at the smell, can't stand to watch anymore as his wife-

"Sh-shut up."

Harry stilled, like a switch turned. "What was that?"

He loosened his grip and took a step back, leaning far to the side to catch Draco's eyes.

Malfoy looked away, squaring his shoulders. "You're exaggerating. I was merely telling Longbottom to watch his back, because you never know-"

"Yesssss – what?" Harry hissed, nearly a shout.

Draco's eyes had widened a little. "You never know who might have it in for him."

"Precisely," Harry agreed. He circled Malfoy, who turned to keep him in view. "Take a leaf from your own book, Draco. Because you never know when I might lose my patience with your pathetic prancing," he went on in a murmur – it was a melodic sound, a distant, pleasant river like the Latin that had flown through him a while back. "And when I do, you better be watching your back, watch it well..."

With that he turned on his heels, light cloak drifting around him as he took the dungeon stairs.

Draco was holding his wand poised. But somehow Harry knew there was no need to watch his back.

The next morning dawned at a pleasant late hour for Harry. Yawning, he noticed the dormitory was nearly empty. Draco was away.

He felt a bit weird, thinking about the other boy. It felt similar to an alternative scenario in which he had, in a bout drunken aggression, been spouting nonsense at his classmate. In the clarity of day he considered that most likely he hadn't entirely been himself last night. He could admit to himself – but only for a second – that on a less conscious level he might have welcomed it even, this excuse to lose control.

His cheeks heated up at that thought, while at the same time his stomach clenched.

This thing, this unwanted experiment with the other – it was not going well, all things considered. What would Hermione say, he wondered. Go to McGonagall, probably.

He went up to the kitchens again for a late morning snack, then all the way to Gryffindor Tower. In the common room Ron, Parvati and Dean let him join in on a game of Exploding Snap, and he forgot about his clash for a while. Except for his yearmates everyone else kept far away, which was fine by him. Visiting McGonagall was far from his mind when they went for lunch. Dean told them a story about luring the soldiers guarding the gardens into a nest of snakes.

Their laughter was interrupted by Snape's rigid figure approaching their part of the table. Midstride,
Ron was told to follow. Snape did not check to see if he followed. Ron shrugged and went, though not before snatching two sandwiches and taking his half glass of pumpkin juice in one gulp.

When the clock struck one the rest of their group split up, with Dean and Neville going back up to the common room (fortunately they were relieved of their duties for the rest of the day) while Harry once more walked up to the seventh floor corridor with great reluctance.

The door to the classroom stood open – a murmur of voices inside. He was late.

He felt calm return in his limbs along with a drawn-out sigh. Riddle's brand of stoicism smoothed the worry from his eyes. Immediately he tried to tense – couldn't. Annoyance still reached to his balling hands, though. He walked in.

Already there, standing near the back was… Ron.

Harry's tongue lay stuck to the roof of his mouth. What was Ron doing here?

The others had noticed the Gryffindor as well and were quietly speculating about his presence. Draco was smirking. Not for the first time, Harry itched to yank his Mark and hear him scream.

His feet took him to Ron in no time at all. His friend's shoulders were hunched and he was sporting a tense frown.

"Ron," he murmured, catching his gaze. There was fear there, and uncertainty. He felt more than heard his classmates rally closer. The door shut with a low echo. Then, silence. Harry still held his gaze, willing his own to convey confidence and strength.

Footsteps coming closer, soft, Watanabe's.

He whispered the only thing he could think of with so little time. "I'm here with you, Ron."

Ron swallowed, starting to shake a little.

"Children of the revolution."

Harry froze at the new voice. He turned around stiffly.

Lord Voldemort was standing in the middle of the room, having glided in on silent feet. Watanabe stood off to the side. For their impassive faces, they looked almost like brothers, although Voldemort's eyes held an unholy gleam below the surface.

"Some of your classmates think that I value only a select few in the magical population – those most fanatical supporters of my reign. This is a lie that is actively encouraged by the rebels."

Voldemort's cloak drifted in an unseen wind around him, like black ink in water. Harry's classmates looked on tense, some even afraid. An unexpected visit then.

The Dark Lord went on in that mesmerizing soft tone: "Today I will demonstrate that all magical blood is of paramount importance to me, whether it be a soldier's in my army or even a rebel's. The true blood after all, is what makes us the superior human race."

Harry's insides felt like he had missed a step on the stairs. He looked over at Ron from the corner of his eye and found him staring at Voldemort with unconcealed disgust. Was it to conceal the puzzlement lurking there? He wished then that Ron had been sorted into another house, any other house which did not harness itself with pride.
"Ronald Weasley," the Dark Lord drawled, turning towards the red-head standing firm near the opposite wall. Ron lifted his chin in brooding silence.

"You have drawn Lord Voldemort's attention – a first for your family."

Voldemort drew closer, a wreath come to collect a debt owed. By now Harry was used to the man's presence, but Ron's freckles had turned white in a beat; he looked to be biting his tongue.

Harry stepped aside, not wanting to draw even more attention and make things worse for his friend. But as the nightmare of their lives closed the distance he wondered if Ron would see it as an act of abandonment. Too late now.

A mere meter from the boy, Voldemort started to leisurely pace up and down the length of the classroom.

The silence in the large space deepened. To his left, Zabini clenched his hands into fists before covering them with his sleeves. Draco had stopped smiling, at least. Watanabe stood off to Ron's other side, hands folded behind him like a soldier waiting for his next order. Harry couldn't tell if the turn of events surprised him or not. He could hear the blood roaring through his temples as he was forced to watch the scene play out.

Voldemort's eyes shot to the side to pin Ron down. His head tilted in a snakelike, almost considerate manner. Harry knew that look painfully well.

He came to a stop. "You have been given fair warning, have you not?"

Ron stayed silent. It looked though, like the Dark Lord could wait all day. Meanwhile, Harry's mind was churning. Why- how had Ron been caught?

Finally Ron spoke: "Did you expect us to just… roll over and swallow every petty torture the Carrows can come up with?"

Harry clenched his jaw hard. The expected Crucio didn't come.

"Of course not," Voldemort answered and he sounded so reasonable… Harry wished he would just start hissing like he used to, lose control like the madman he was – not this… this temperance.

"If the Carrows have misbehaved, rest assured they will be punished accordingly. I believe all those with magical abilities deserves fair consideration in my empire," he continued softly, turning to encompass their audience. "This is why all students at Hogwarts whatever their background or blood status, have signed an accountability contract for their families."

Of course, 'fair' was quite an elastic concept in a country where only a select few in the Dark Lord's favour got all the privileges. The contract was news to Harry, but clearly not to anyone else. It sounded ominous; the student would be held accountable for their family's actions, and the other way around.

This infraction wasn't about the Order, however – at least not on the surface. He wasn't entirely convinced it was about the Carrows' tastes either.

His stomach burned then with a horrible insight: the Veritaserum.

That afternoon last week had been so hazy in his thoughts, not least because of his new passenger – he couldn't remember half the things he'd admitted to. But it was obvious now. He hadn't spared a thought to the betrayal of his friend when he told The Dark Lord of Ron's contact with the Order…
whom days ago, Harry had seen securing a mission in the Ministry and generally pissing Voldemort off…

The only real traitor in this room was Harry.

"Speaking of which…" Tom Riddle murmured next, like an afterthought. "You take after your father. I hear he misplaced himself as well."

Ron seemed to fall into a deeper kind of stillness, like this was something expected, his face showing a mixture of fear and pride. All the eyes in the room swung from Ron's frozen form to the Dark Lord strolling back and forth, back and forth.

"And the Weasley's are big on family."

A few of his classmates chuckled, though Harry clearly heard a threat. A shallow smirk slipped over the Dark Lord's features. He raised a hand in a casual gesture. "Now as I explained, I hate to spill magical blood when it's not necessary." Voldemort came to a stop right in front of Ron, and Harry had to strain to hear. "You are still young enough to prove yourself, aren't you?"

Ron visibly swallowed.

"Will you take the Mark?"

Harry heard a few intakes of breath. It wasn't a question – Voldemort didn't do asking. Ron's eyes narrowed, perhaps in pain, before he closed them. When they opened they skidded left to find Harry.

Harry was pinned in place by the gazes that followed. His friend seemed to be urging him for something. His palms were starting to sweat under that stare, the silence drawing out like the dull boom of a giant pendulum. Time slowed to a crawl as Ron's life was about to be ruined.

Voldemort, following Ron's gaze, turned to regard him as well.

"Oh, Harry won't mind."

It was such a casual, out of place reassurance that Harry felt his lips twitch in annoyance. His classmates would surely wonder. The man seemed to be waiting for something, so Harry forced himself to hiss in Parseltongue:

"Will you leave him unharmed otherwise?"

"Ah, that depends… What will you give me instead?"

Harry wreaked his mind. Came up empty.

"Think upon it. I will be at the school next week. Then you will give me your answer."

Voldemort switched back to Ron. "Perhaps this is an honour you are not worthy of." Harry felt dizzy from the sudden change in manner: his tone wafted ice, malice – anticipation. His patience had run out.

"For your sake, let's hope your father will be."

That brought Ron out of his stupor. "No!" he cried in a hoarse voice. "No I'll- I'll do it. I'll take the Mark."
Watching it happen didn't make him feel any more part of the room than if he saw the scene through the glass of a pensive. Ron was led to the centre by Watanabe – such a normal, bright classroom in Hogwarts, where things like this shouldn't be possible – and was told to kneel.

Harry was shaking as well now. Glancing at his classmates he saw their expressions ranged from bafflement to fascination. It probably seemed like far too much trouble, and honour, for a traitor.

To Harry though, it was perfectly obvious. His followers might view the Mark as an honourable brand of membership, or friendship even, but to Riddle its purpose was solely practical: shackle their magical cores, wring them dry if they became difficult.

That's what would happen to Ron, he realised with a jolt, if he betrayed the Dark Lord a second time. Harry had to warn him… He wanted badly to join him on the ground, make this easier somehow – but he knew it might anger the Dark Lord, and make the Marking ceremony hurt worse.

Kneel, old friend.

The words formed close to his ears, echoing weirdly.

A memory tried to take hold. He shook his head, willing himself to be in the present, but his resolve faltered when he saw who it was kneeling down to receive the Mark. Watanabe, smiling.

"This will hurt, but only for a moment," he murmured, excited but nervous as well this time. Nervous!

He nearly chuckled at himself – he was never nervous. But this was the person who had aligned a much respected country towards his vision of wizardom. This was his- ally, not really a minion.

But no, he couldn't afford to think like that. He was after all superior to all of them, even this ageless samurai…

"Extent your left arm."

Harry shook loose and back into himself. Beads of sweat were forming on Ron's forehead. Harry felt a sudden wild anger: why here, in view of their bullying year mates?

The Dark Lord's claw gripped his friend's wrist and turned his palm upwards.

His friend would be serving the man who had killed his sister. The itch to go for his wand was nearly unbearable then. Harry's magic drifted outwards, a physical presence like a layer over his skin. A hot rush of something sunk down in his belly – the same feeling he had before, with Bellatrix.

Voldemort placed his wand over the tender flesh just below Ron's wrist.

Breathe, he thought to himself, don't make a scene. Later. It was a small mercy that the Tom in his head was still quiet.

"Morsmordre," Voldemort murmured, and it was like something ripped through Harry's head, an electrical current. Harry hissed in pain but it was drowned out by another sound: Ron screaming.

Inky black threads crawled from the wand down Ron's arm, pooling into the shape of a skull. A snake oozed from its mouth, shivering and shimmering for a moment before the Mark stilled, the black turning dull underneath Ron's skin.
The sound that came from his friend's throat hit Harry like a bone-scraping curse. He almost hurled himself forward to try and get Voldemort's sticky magic off of him. His scar *seared* like the skin would flake off any second…

He swayed on his feet. Someone caught him.

"Steady there Mr. Potter," Watanabe whispered behind him.

Harry looked down to where Ron was curling into himself. Voldemort had let go of him in the same way one let go of an empty bottle of wine that was no longer of interest. Watanabe's grip seemed to tighten, as if he was afraid Harry was going to do something foolish. His scattered thoughts went back in time, to Lupin's fierce hold when all Harry wanted to do was follow Sirius through the Veil.

Ron lay very still. Voldemort walked out without a word, Watanabe on his heels.

Monday morning Potions class.

A new and creepy habit of Slughorn's was to stand at the back of the class during brewing time, when all students might feel his critical gaze burning in their necks. Harry wondered if perhaps this was because of the reputation of the Slytherins.

One desk ahead, Neville doused the fire underneath his cauldron with a routine-like gesture. The smoke still drifted as a painful reminder of his – was it his third? – failed attempt at the Draught of Living Death. Behind Harry, Draco sniggered.

Harry squeezed his eyes for a second, trying to keep the soft pull of sleep at bay. His own potion was simmering blue-grey, with large bells of air welling up to the surface every few seconds. According to the textbook this meant the potion was nearly done.

It was no wonder really, that he had managed so well this time: Zabini, who had offered to partner up, was a natural. If only Harry could rub off that constant weight on his eyelids.

Ron was absent.

After tending to Ron lying near-catatonic on his four-poster for all that remained of Sunday, he hadn't slept a wink in his own dormitory. When his roommates came in, Ron had quickly covered up the 'atrocity' as he called it. Neville was persistent though. News of what happened travelled fast of course. No praise of his bravery and success in keeping the Order's secrets seemed to matter to Ron, or reach him.

Ron was cursed and trapped now to a monster, like Harry was. Harry was surprised that Voldemort would leave it at that, but then realised the Dark Lord could summon Ron for interrogation any time he wanted.

*Hermione*, he thought again. *We need Hermione.*

Slughorn coughed delicately. Harry jumped a little at the sound: the clock read the hour, class was over.

Beside him his class partner was just finishing up their supplies. Zabini glanced at Harry but didn't say anything. It took a beat before Harry realised he was frowning, and it was real concern. He quickly focused his gaze back on the teacher.
Slughorn said: "I would like to remind those of you who are Muggleborn that this will be the potion on your brewing schedule for Saturday afternoon. If you still feel that you may need some assistance, my door is always open to you in the evenings for questions, except of course during the weekend. I might even have some excellent crystallised pineapple for the occasion. That is all, everyone."

Outside, Neville fell into step beside him, as Zabini merged with the Slytherins.

"Bless him for saying 'Muggleborn'."  
"Yes," Harry agreed.

"Say, let's take some hot cocoa in the kitchens. You look like you could use it."

Harry nodded, thinking since he went so often he should make camp there, with only House Elves to bother him. In the large open space of the kitchen the elves were busy getting the food transported to the floor above.

They sat down on two tiny footstools in the corner. Dobby was away, probably cleaning a mansion or other.

"Ahrg!" Neville jumped up from his stool next, backing away in fear.

They had forgotten to close the little kitchen door, and it was now filled with snake – pounds and pounds of snake.

"Nagini, hello," Harry greeted, strolling over to her. "You know you're scaring the elves right?"

"Harry?"

"It's all right Nev," Harry said over his shoulder, lifting her up when she commanded it. "She likes to sit near the fire."

"I suppose," Neville muttered back. "Ehm, you'll be alright? I think I'm off to lunch, then."

Harry waved him off with a reassuring smile. He conjured a more comfortable fauteuil and sat down with the snake's cold weight around his neck. The elves kept a wide distance.

"Master always fetches me eggs to digest in front of the fire."

"Raw probably," Harry said to himself, and asked one of the elves for them. Content with her eggs and her fire, Nagini nestled into Harry's lap to sleep. Harry looked down at his charge.

"Uhm, I have class you know," he said but she didn't stir. In the end he managed to carefully fold her onto the chair before slipping out.

He saw Ron again later that afternoon in Transfiguration. He was early, sitting at the back, and McGonagall was leaning down towards him. Ron shook his head at something she said.

"Potter," their teacher took Harry aside. She looked at him for a moment, sad.

"It is very unfortunate what happened to Mr. Weasley. I tried assuring him this doesn't mean we regard him any less than before. He seems to think he is the 'enemy' now. Could you tell him that we all continue to have the utmost confidence in him? You know better than anyone what this means - and more importantly, what it doesn't," she finished in a whisper.
It seemed McGonagall read his look. She patted his shoulder a few times: "It needs a bit of repeating – you'll get through eventually."

Harry nodded. "By the way, I thought Ron's not doing Transfigurations this year?" It slipped out before he realised his possible mistake, as he remembered that Ron's score had been insufficient.

McGonagall winked. "He is now." She gave him one more pat and said: "Very well, class is about to start. Please be careful, you two."

With that she went to her desk to begin a lecture on animate to animate transfigurations. Neville had taken the seat next to Ron, so Harry sat down one place over, beside Hannah. She said nothing, but forced her gaze to the front with a grimace. It drew up something murky in his thoughts, which he hastily squashed.

Transfiguration was just as difficult, if not more so, than last year. And Harry was further behind than anyone else, having missed two months of the school year. The gap between him and his year mates was most obvious with the subjects he'd always had some trouble with. He sighed, digging into his sixth year tome for the duration of the lesson.

Neville was trying to push through Ron's petulance all day, once again without success. Not even dinner managed to rouse him from his grim state. Afterwards, when no more than three bites of food had found their way into Ron's stomach, Harry led him through a rarely used tapestry on the fourth floor. It ended at a random classroom. Harry waited a beat – they had effectively shaken Malfoy from their trail.

He sat Ron down on a desk and took the one opposite, hands under his knees.

"Listen, Ron. This is not the end of the world."

Ron shrugged, pushed up his sleeve to uncover the reddish Dark Mark. All day it had been giving Harry a weird tingling feeling, which he tried to ignore. "Disgusting."

"And you think this – he pointed towards his scar – 'isn't'?"

"That's different and you know it."

Ron proceeded to pull out his wand and point it at the disfigured skin. He whispered a spell.

The skin started smoking.

"Ron!" Harry shouted, ripping the wand from his grip. He felt at the damage – and both of them sucked in a breath.

Something pulled and pushed at the part where there skin touched – an invisible cord. The tingling feeling spread. His legs turned to jelly. His hand slipped when Ron jerked his arm away.

"Damn it Harry, what was that?" Ron bellowed, short of breath.

"I'm sorry!" It came out more like a squeak. Harry closed his eyes. It was like an itch that you finally get to scratch. "What did you feel?" he asked.

"Warm, it feels warm. Not too bad. What'd you do?"

He finally opened his eyes. It didn't look like Ron's experience had been similar, to his relief. He was glad his own face was blank. The sensation was nothing exciting, thank Merlin, but there was
He imagined the Mark's use, and the answer fell through his thoughts like the mental shapes of objects. Skin contact closed the conduit between master and servant. Through direct contact with their magical cores, Voldemort was able to sense his servants' emotions towards him, and so take the measure of their loyalty.

His mind leaped then to Snape's privileged position, and how worshipful the man must be. "Good – what?"

Ron was waving a hand in front of him. "You been listening?"

"Right, you were saying?"

It was the first time today that Ron really looked at him. His eyes were bloodshot, bags underneath. His gaze was serious.

"I said thanks, the pain is almost gone now. So what did you do?"

"I think it's because of the scar, that's how I feel some kind of connection when I touch it. Through the Marks Voldemort can sense what his servants feel towards him." He left out the part about measuring their strength, not comfortable with the question that would surely follow. "In this case it feels… nice, because we're friends of course."

Ron shuddered. "He can sense what I'm feeling now?"

"I don't think so. He would have to physically touch it."

Ron nodded. He glanced towards the door and his voice turned to a whisper: "So… does that mean you can also, you know, punish one of them, like him?"

"Yep."

Ron grinned weakly. "Neat! Have you tried it yet, with say… Snape?"

Harry smirked. "Yes actually. Really hurt the bastard."

Ron whistled. "Wow, that's… Wait, how'd he take it?"

Harry laughed. "Not well. Boy, that was scary. You don't really want to mess with Snape."

Ron's mouth hung open slightly. "No shit."

Harry's eyes found a bit of mud from the gardens on his robes. "Yeah… he Crucio'd me."

Ron sucked in another breath. "You mean that time you were practically crawling up to Gryffindor Tower? Yeah I remember, your lips were blueish. Thought that was weird."

Harry nodded, still staring at the stain.

"Didn't think you two could get any worse."

"Yeah. He's going to be my supervisor in this Junior Death Eater class I have to take. And he's my Dark Arts tutor, at least I guess he still is. Imagine the fun we will have together."

Ron grimaced. "That sucks mate."
Harry proceeded to tell the tale of Severus Snape going down on his knees for him – along with detailed descriptions of the various expressions that passed over the man's face when he'd realised it wasn't Voldemort standing in front of him. By the end of it, Ron was laughing so hard he had to take gulps of air in between. Harry was grinning as well, glad to distract his friend.

After the shock of the weekend – Harry was starting to dread them – Ron seemed back to his usual spirit on Tuesday, though he was still prone to bouts of gloominess. He had been allowed to visit his family last night by flu. It seemed to have bolstered him, at least.

Snape had dragged Ron out of the Gryffindor common room onto the seventh floor corridor when he had come back that evening, which Ron explained colourfully at breakfast. At Snape's orders and with an affronted Filch on his heels Ron, walked up and down the stretch of wall three times… and nothing happened. Harry had smiled at the story, feeling relieve chase away the tight feeling in his chest when Ron joined in. It was through Harry's own Veritaserum-numbed lips after all, that Ron's hideout had been compromised. Best not tell him now, Harry quietly decided. He wondered then how Snape could not know about the Room, considering Umbridge's antics last year.

Harry dreaded Dark Arts class: Ron would be there, Snape was the teacher and Slytherin was overrepresented.

The same students that were disappointed or angry at Harry for not being away fighting for the Order, or dead, or both, were also sympathetic towards Ron's situation – perhaps because it looked more helpless than Harry's, he thought. He was glad though, because it clearly meant the world to his friend: he still had a penchant for sinking into a grim mood, but someone always managed to pull him out of it. Ron was well liked.

The Slytherins were a different matter. They had seen or heard of his 'initiation' and could hardly understand it – in his vicinity they became a jealous, vengeful lot. Harry would have rolled his eyes, except for the fact that he'd almost gotten killed for vengeance himself, and the spoiled children of Death Eaters could get away with nearly anything.

And so it was with a heavy feeling that he sat down next to his friend at the back of the classroom.

Malfoy sauntered over, leaning towards Ron. "I'd say welcome, but…" He looked Ron up and down derisively. "Had your initiation yet?"

Ron tensed. "What do you mean?"

"That means no, then." Malfoy smirked

"Malfoy, move along." Harry drawled frostily, eyes drilling into Draco's. Remember last time?

Draco scowled. "Don't think you're doing him any favours Potter. He's going to get a hazing soon, all the new initiates-"

"Draco."

One person in the classroom could pull off coldness even better: Snape was standing behind Malfoy, gaze drilling down on Ron.

The blond turned warily. "Yes, sir?"

"Class has started. Sit down."
Harry gave Draco a wide smirk before the boy was whisked away to his seat at the front of the class.

Ron meanwhile, was looking a little green around the edges.

"You should ask Takumi Watanabe about it, when he's here," Harry whispered. "You know, my guard during summer? He's not so bad, really."

Ron was nodding a bit too hard but his jaw was set, and that's what Harry was going for.

Harry was relieved there was no duelling this time – he didn't fancy getting anywhere near Nott, who sat at the front. Today's subject was curses: different creatures and objects were stowed in boxes in the corner, and each held a different curse, which they had to remove.

Ron had his own Remembrall restored to a crack-less form in no time, to which Harry raised his eyebrows.

"Bill's been coaching me," Ron whispered. Harry punched his arm, grinning. His grin faltered when he realised Ron could probably never set foot into the Room of Requirement again.

Elemental Magic was just as weird as it was the first time Harry attended. Except now there was no chatting at the start: everyone immediately paired up to try spells on each other. Harry asked Zabini where they were at. The class had moved on from the shape of the Dammāḵā, the Mother curse from first class, towards the son and daughter curses.

Finch glided closer to guide Harry through the different spells he'd missed. He left him alone to practice, which Harry was perfectly fine with. There was still something off about him.

"Have you felt anything from it?" Harry asked Ron during lunch.

Ron shook his head. "No. It's not like I will get unexpectedly called for something though, Bill told me – that's very rare. Besides," he added in a whisper, "the Marks are only given to Inner Circle members of course, exception being me. I'm not sure he's even going to want me there. You think…" Ron faltered.

"Yes?"

The people around them were in deep conversation over the next bloody retaliation in the papers – the best time for stealthy topics.

"You think he did it because of you? He could have just… "

"I think if he kills every rebel kid that's plotting against him, soon he would have very little of that precious 'true' blood left. And it wouldn't help his popularity either, although I'm not sure he cares about that."

"See that's just it, though. I'm from a large family. He doesn't need me around."

Harry thought of what to say: You're his blackmail. In case I escape or endanger the Horcrux that's inside me, he can summon you from wherever you are and kill you in retaliation. Torture would probably also work. sounded a bit harsh.

"I guess he wants to keep me in line – and now he's got you on a short leash, in case I misbehave."

Ron nodded with narrowed eyes. "He's got me to get you to do what he wants."
"Exactly."
"Let's not antagonise him for the time being, then," he finished with a weak grin.

Soon they were drawn into the conversation around them: the tables were abuzz with the 'unofficial' Quidditch game that would take place tonight. Twice a month was the frequency everyone could agree on for the new games – which was twice as many as before. Ron lit up at once, explaining tactics to whoever wanted to listen like a seasoned general. Harry felt some anticipation himself: he couldn't wait for the even playing ground of the Quidditch pitch to thrash a few uppity Slytherins.

A/N: Thanks everyone for sticking around. Your support makes all the difference in the world. For all those leaving a review: you're the best!

Chapter 25 is underway.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thanks everyone for sticking around. Your support makes all the difference in the world. Many of you have given me long reviews for the last chapter: you're the best!

Chapter 25 is underway.
Chapter 25

After an unremarkable Charms period that afternoon, dinner was a cheerful mixture of House colours at the Ravenclaw table. Quidditch players from all former teams except Slytherin had gathered together to get to know each other for tonight's first match of the year. Harry found an empty spot on the edge of the gathering. Next to him Katie Bell and Demelza Robins were discussing the perks of Chasing together with Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw for the first time.

Across from him a boy was eyeing him between bites, distracting him from his musings. He stared back, wrecking his mind for a name.

"Don't remember me?" the boy sneered. "Emmett Cadwallader."

Harry cleared his throat and tried to recall. "You had that far shot last year right? With Hufflepuff’s second game."

When no response to his question, Harry went back to eating his stew. Then Cadwallader said in a riling tone: "Is this your way of snooping for information? Go back to your own team, Potter."

The conversation around them lagged. Harry put his fork down. "It's not my team. And Slytherin's already got a seeker."

The boy looked up slowly, as if surprised Harry was still talking. "I hear you're an A level jerk now," he murmured, eyes darting to Demelza on his left, who smirked.

"What are you-" Harry started but stopped when Katie subtly jabbed him on the arm. She loudly said: "Really? They didn't prefer you over Draco?"

Harry decided to ignore Cadwallader. Sometimes it was hard to remember that most Gryffindors still viewed him as some kind of traitor. He took another bite, as if this weren't an interrogation. "Why do you all assume I want to be there? I'm still a Gryffindor you know, it's just that I have to stay in the dungeons now."

Katie's mouth fell open slightly. "We- well some of us thought you were…"

"Courting them," Ron supplied when she fell silent. He rolled his eyes when Harry turned his way, as if to say "I know, right?" He had apparently kept Harry's new lodging situation to himself. Harry itched to let something sharp slip, but held back. Ron had more important things on his mind right now than refuting the rumours surrounding him. He forced a chuckle.

"Well, as much as I'm fond of Malfoy, he can be a right awful roommate."

"No doubt," Katie murmured, to which others hummed their agreement.

When talk turned back to Quidditch, most of his former housemates appeared to relax around him. One step at the time, he thought wryly. He could work on Cadwalladar another time. Having decided this, hunger came with a gnarl in his stomach and he focused back on his food.

Harry was on his way to the Quidditch pitch after dinner, Firebolt slung over his shoulder. He felt
anticipation warm his stomach. Technically tonight's game was supposed to be a try-out session, but both teams had scheduled the pitch – an 'accident' on the part of the anti-Slytherin camp, according to Neville: everyone was dying to throttle Slytherin as soon as possible. Slytherin had agreed to the match, also eager to play after such a long dry spell.

And it's a foolproof way to test the newbie's, he mused as the stands came into view. He looked up and noted the direction of the wind by the whipping of the flags. When his eyes lowered, he saw something that send a tinge of fear through his legs, nearly making him stumble.

Lucius Malfoy was standing not twenty meters away, talking to his son near the equipment shed.

Malfoy senior was overdressed as usual in thick layered robes of what was probably the latest wizarding fashion, gaze boring into his son's head while Draco studied the muddy ground. As his talk wound down, Lucius stepped back and patted Draco's shoulder. With a short nod goodbye Draco walked back towards his team.

His father watched him go, hands clasped around the silver cane at his back, stance eerily frozen. There was a storm just waiting to rise up around the man – or perhaps Harry was imaging things: Lucius looked as calm and collected as ever. Harry sighed in relief as Lucius briskly turned around to walk back towards the castle, looking deep in thought. Harry's eyes tracked the dark figure's path, which soon drew level with Hagrid's hut. Numbness leaving his legs, he resumed pace towards the locker rooms.

"Potter."

He jumped. The anxiety from seconds before stirred and something took over Harry's brain. In the next moment his wand was digging into the soft flesh of Nott's neck.

"Yes?" he said.

Nott recovered quickly, shooting him a lazy smirk. Nott was here, he mused, but he had never shown any particular interest in Quidditch before. Harry felt like his hands ought to be shaking. He was glad of the magic he felt sizzling underneath his skin, as if in response to his fear. Smoke wafted from his wand tip. In contrast, calmness weaved like a spell over his shoulders and back. *Rational.*

His hand twitched at the thought. Nott hissed, jerking his head back from his seething wand. He noticed Pansy then, standing next to him. He wanted to cut the smirk out of her face to see what that looked like. A very visceral image, not his own, trailed that thought and he shuddered.

The Slytherin team had gathered nearby. Draco stood next to Urquhart, who was rumoured to be taking over from Malfoy as the new choice of captain. The hulking figures of Crabbe and Goyle were absent. Perhaps Malfoy had removed them from the team in anticipation of tonight's new recruits – no more House boundaries meant Slytherin could draw as much players from other Houses as were willing to make the switch.

A splash of blue among the green uniforms confirmed that indeed, Slytherin did not lack in popularity this year. Former Ravenclaw beater Jason Samuals was talking to a Slytherin he didn't know. His eyes slid over to a figure at the back with long black tresses. With a jolt he realised it was Cho.

He hurriedly focused his gaze back on Nott, uncertain how his attention could have wondered from this potential threat.
"Relax," Nott chuckled, which looked less than convincing held at wand-point. "I was merely wondering what everyone thinks, but somehow," – he threw a glance at Malfoy, who turned their way – "no one dares to say."

Harry tilted his head, forcing a bored expression. His wand was hot in his hand. If Nott was hinting at the events of last week…

Theodore raised an eyebrow at the lack of response. "Whether you want to join our Quidditch team as a Seeker, of course."

Nott's eyes were flat, unreadable. But Harry had learned to look for emotion in stoic faces. Around them the others shifted ever so slightly in the silence, discomfited. Zabini's expression remained blank, but tension was visible in his stance. Malfoy on the other hand looked like he'd swallowed a knarl.

He suddenly knew just how to get the situation ticking his way.

"Perhaps," he tossed out, not quite able to keep the coldness from his tone. Nott's eyes narrowed in disbelief or perhaps fascination: he wasn't reacting like he should.

"Theo," Draco drawled, almost a growl. "What are you doing?"

Nott raised his hands defensively, turning half a circle. "I'm just going where the talent is."

He threw Harry a raised brow. Draco's eyebrows twitched.

"I'll think about it," Harry said in a bored tone.

A hush of silence again.

"What?" Malfoy snapped after a beat. Losing the Seeker position was clearly not a scenario he had accounted for.

"Oh, don't worry your pretty little head, Draco," Nott jeered, delighted. He lifted his broom a fraction – a shiny Nimbus 2001. "Dad's still good for the money."

A few chuckles followed this. Fighting off a smirk of his own, Harry broke away from the circle to join his future teammates, or so he hoped, at the other end of the pitch. Behind his back Draco's voice had turned shrill with agitation. Turning the encounter over in his head, Harry considered there was still a thing or two about Nott left to figure out.

Ron was waiting with the snitch, shooting him a puzzled look. Harry rolled his eyes. "Politics."

"Right," Ron murmured, scratching his cheek. "Right."

Turning on his heels, he clapped his hands with an "Oi!" to gather their red, blue and yellow assembly. The makeshift Hogwarts team bent their heads together and Harry joined them. Ron snarled: "We're going to crush them into the ground. Victory to the toughest!"

The battle cry was echoed. Harry met Ron's intense gaze. He looked slightly off, his eyes bloodshot and grimacing. It looked like sleep had left him a week ago. Sensing his fresh Mark this close felt like a swallow of Firewhiskey had hit his veins. In contrast a burn started in his stomach as he considered his friend – Ginny gone, Hermione vanished, and now Ron had to deal with this….
Luna sounded the whistle and the fourteen players shot upwards. He left the ground and his jumbled emotions with relief. Cho sent him a quick smile before she was off. He wondered distractedly what she was up to, playing for the Slytherin team. She wouldn't challenge Draco for the Seeker position, he thought – only Theodore got away with that.

Searching around for a speck of gold, Harry had to dodge a volley of bludger attacks. Both sides were playing offense, and the score quickly left the lower digits. Ten minutes into the game it was clear that the mixture of House colours was confusing all around, to the point where Robin accidentally threw the Quaffle to Cho before covering her mouth with a hand in horror. Harry patted her shoulder in passing, thinking it a logical mistake. She responded with a scowl.

He bolted upwards to quiet his growing agitation with the lot of them. Just in time: Draco had frozen in place halfway across the pitch. They both flew hard at the golden speck that hung between them. Draco was nearly there when a beater slammed into his side, giving Harry plenty of time to catch the golden ball, to loud cheers from his teammates. Malfoy's sour expression turned grim as they flew downwards. Harry followed his gaze down and saw Nott, lips twitching upwards, head bent close to Urquhart and his catch turned queasy in his stomach.

Later that evening a subdued mood hung to the Slytherin common room in the wake of Huffinchlawn's victory, as the three joined Houses had coined their inter-House collaboration, though the Slytherins called them 'The Muds', which Harry thought was very uninspired, aside from being incorrect as well. Feeling like the instigator of said mood, he was ready for all kinds of quick-and-dirty tricks upon entering the dungeons, but aside from a few stares no one paid him any mind.

Nott was holding court with a couple of sixth years, looking serious. As he walked past the group, Harry caught part of a phrase about Slytherin's reputation. Draco was sitting with Daphne Greengrass on the other side of the fireplace, looking grumpy indeed.

Harry found a seat nearby and opened Voldemort's book on wandless magic on his lap, which he'd transfigured to look like seventh year's Transfiguration appendix – the man was unlikely to notice its absence from his library, or so he hoped. Within minutes Nott's subtle jabs had Malfoy practically steaming in frustration.

No one bothered him. He hadn't counted on that reaction and it started to make him feel displaced, weirded out. When the words started to blend together on the page Harry closed his tome and walked the cold route towards his four-poster.

Minutes later, Draco followed him into the dormitory.

"You're kidding," the blond said immediately after waving around a Silencing charm.

"Hm?" Harry said, not looking up from rummaging through his trunk. Perhaps it still held something that no one had bothered to remove, like the two-way mirror…

Draco spoke in a clipped tone: "You know perfectly well Nott's got no say in this. He's not on the team."

Harry looked up with narrowed eyes. "I think he's got plenty of say, considering he's still around after all the shit he pulled."

Malfoy's posture turned stiff as he went to stand next to his four-poster, perhaps reminded of their earlier encounter in the entrance hall, or so Harry hoped. Draco glanced away first, blond tresses
covering his face. They were getting quite long this year. Harry wondered if that was some sort of Pureblood fashion.

"That's different," Draco said quietly. He shook his head like one would shake away a fly. "You think you got us figured out already, don't you?"

"I wouldn't say that."

"Then what are you doing stirring him up?"

Harry couldn't suppress a small grin. "Did you see his face?"

Malfoy passed a hand through his hair, exasperated. Good. Let him think he was just kidding around.

They both sank down on their respective beds at the same time. Harry felt a weird twinge in his chest – just for a moment, if you didn't look too closely, it was like the good old days of hanging around in Gryffindor tower with Ron. But Ron would be splayed out in an ungraceful mess of limbs, not sitting down with measured speed and crossing is legs, like Malfoy did.

"How do you imagine the Gryffindors feel about me these days?"

"Ah," Draco uttered in an exaggerated tone. "Gryffies don't want the Golden Boy anymore, now that he's proved rotten?"

Harry kept silent. Malfoy scoffed. "Poor Potter, reviled by all things pure and light. Not even Dumbledore bothers to save him."

"Oh, they'll turn around." Harry's palms were suddenly flaming, and he realised he'd dug his nails in hard. The words had tumbled out beyond his control. It took a few more seconds before he realised the anger wasn't his own either.

His hands slowly detached from the duvet. Riddle was annoyed. Silence drew out as Harry tried to grasp at meaning, his own panicked heart only a distant thud to his senses. Riddle wasn't one to handle disrespect well. Harry had become persona non grata in at least two of the four Houses. That had to suck for the crazy bastard, he considered with a twinge of satisfaction.

_You're sooo predictable_, Harry thought childishly at the shard of the Dark Lord, feeling chafed.

He opened his eyes. Malfoy's gaze held a gleam of interest. Harry cursed himself for forgetting he was not alone.

"You know," Malfoy continued unperturbed, "they act like you should've died or something, like a proper hero, instead of surrendering. We're not such hypocrites, you'll find."

_Just a different kind_, Harry thought but stayed silent, studying the pattern of silver seams threaded through the green coverlet. He unclenched his hands slowly, relaxing his shoulders. Calm could be used as a shield, Riddle had taught him.

"Adapting to circumstance is a quality we can appreciate in Slytherin."

His eyes shot up to assess the boy. Malfoy jump slightly in response.

Draco might be trapped by his duty as Harry's guard, but he wasn't about to make his job easy – this was the boy who _grinned_ when the Death Eaters came into the Great Hall. He gave a tiny shake of
his head. "So caring, Draco."

Malfoy's expression shuttered at once, the gleam replaced by a more familiar, steely expression. He said softly: "I stand corrected. You're not so Slytherin after all."

There seemed to be some kind of puzzlement or worry behind his steely gaze. When Harry turned back to his rummaging, the silence held. His trunk did not reveal any of his prized possessions.

Harry couldn't sleep. His mind was refusing to shut down.

Quite an intimate thing, this body-sharing business. Whenever things were not to his liking, Riddle would manage him. He shivered. Was his voice the first step towards possession? No, he thought. This was merely a convulsion of a mad man, a sliver of soul attempting at influence. Still he'd got him to lose his cool, fucking around with his head like this…

*Can you hear me?* he thought, feeling silly when no reply came.

Back when the Chamber of Secrets was open, Ginny had not been aware of being possessed. Harry was. He relaxed slightly into the mattress, bolstered by this logic. Although, that moment the other day with Draco in the entrance hall was a bit of a draw, come to think of it…

His stomach burned. Ginny's face was suddenly stark in his mind. Thoughts of her red hair were enough to shake the sticky feeling of the Horcrux completely, whether real or imagined.

The next day of classes went by in a haze of fatigue. He crashed into Neville at their meeting point in front of the Potions classroom. While their teacher talked, Harry started dropping off several times. Each time his eyes opened just before his head crashed into the desk – waking up felt like a Portkey hooked into his stomach.

Zabini, whom he was once more pared with, whispered viciously: "Take a pepper-up or something Potter. Your hairs are ruining the potion."

Harry rubbed his eyes and straightened. "Sorry."

"Everything all right here boys?" Slughorn said in a cheery voice behind them.

"Yes, fine sir," Zabini said dismissively, hovering a hair out of their concoction. It left a yellowish streak in the potion though, which didn't look promising. Harry winced.

"Hmf," Slughorn uttered, taking a note before moving on to the next bench.

"Thanks a bunch," Zabini hissed at him, vanishing the potion with a jerk of his wand. "Next class, you're going to be here extra early, so we can remake it."

Harry opened one eye. "Why don't you pair with Malfoy then." He didn't mind the low grade that working with Neville could cause, if it meant seeing more of his friend. Between classes and Malfoy's 'Potterwatch', there was very little private time left for him – and even less to spend with Gryffindors of unsavoury status, like Ron, who was always busy around the grounds with one manual task or another.

"I can stand for one class to be spared from my roommates, thank you," Zabini stiffly replied.

This woke Harry up a little. "But I am one," he said with a laugh. When Zabini didn't respond he
chuckled. It seemed all that Pureblood bigotry was starting to wear on this fine example.

Zabini shook his head once, reminding him of Watanabe. "They're like territorial apes aiming for the biggest banana tree. Well, they can be," he added the last word in a mumble, appearing quite busy with shoving his potions kit into his bag all of a sudden.

Something inside Harry thrilled at being taken into Zabini's confidence, however small. He realised then that he wasn't sure whether the feeling was his own or not. He refused to let that spoil the sense of warmth in his chest. Harry glanced towards Malfoy, who was smiling sickly at Slughorn's praise of his near-perfect potion.

"I know what you mean," he said in commiseration.

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The answer to what gift Harry could offer the Dark Lord, had yet to present itself on Wednesday afternoon. He felt a pressure in his chest at the mere thought that Voldemort might show up right there and then to demand his answer. In exchange he would keep from torturing Ron through the Dark Mark, though. It seemed too good to be true. Besides, there was nothing Harry could do if the man changed his mind in the future.

As he was standing next to Neville in one of the greenhouses, oiling some pointy leaf of a colourful plant in Herbology class of which he'd forgotten the Latin name, he considered that perhaps Voldemort was merely toying with him. He had no use for Ron except to blackmail Harry into behaving like he wanted, whatever that meant. Ron would be more likely to muck up his plans than make himself an asset.

He bit his lip, feeling trapped by the idea of what Voldemort might ask of him in the future. He could demand all sorts of things, and Harry would never be able to refuse him again. He noticed his arms shaking when Neville put a hand over his.

"Alright there, Harry?"

"Yes, just thinking about Ron," he said to stop any more questions.

Neville nodded, already distracted by the plants, the way the leafs changed colours at the tips in reaction to the balm, where they held a poisonous substance.

When classes finished Harry headed up to McGonagall's office, hoping to find her there. She was absent however. He wondered if she was still in touch with Dumbledore. Most likely, he thought with some energy returning to his limbs. He turned around, thinking he'd better try again in the weekend.

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Snape was negotiating the finer points of the new restrictions on Hogwarts House Elves with the Head Elf, when he heard the sound of the floo to his right.

Some of them had become difficult, refusing to put in the extra-long hours required courtesy of a House-Elf named Dobby, who happened to be close to a certain troublesome former Gryffindor.

Voldemort's distinct figure landed lightly on the balls of his feet inside the great iron curls of the Headmaster's hearth and stepped out onto the rug.

Snape jumped, shooing off the elf, who vanished on the spot, before bowing his head, thinking
"Severus," the Dark Lord said, a sigh in fact, black robes swirling into his line of sight.

"My Lord."

The Dark Lord gestured for him to sit back down in the Headmaster's chair, which he did, wondering if this meant official business, or the unofficial, oftentimes painful kind. Though Lord Voldemort never stated his purpose outright, one could be sure there was always an undercurrent with this man. Snape was glad he hadn't brought his snake this time, then remembered Hogwarts' pipes system was Nagini's new home now.

The Dark Lord sank into the visitor's chair, raising a palm. The next instant an ancient set of wizarding chess floated into view to settle down on the desk between them.

Snape obliged without a word, putting forward a white pawn, which Voldemort mirrored.

They were evenly matched in the beginning. The game went on for some time, in Snape's opinion, before a dormant black bishop caught his remaining knight, signalling the start of the endgame. Snape was beaten shortly afterwards. The white king hung its head as a rook patted his shoulder.

"They are remarkably quiet," he commented when the silence stretched after the pieces had been returned to their wooden box.

Voldemort's head was tilted back and his eyes half closed as he regarded Snape. "I suppose they are still mourning his absence. As are you."

Snape froze.

One of the man's pastimes was to catch his subjects unawares, the off-centre remark either true or false, and observe the results. It was risky to ask questions but Snape decided to feign ignorance.

"What precisely would I be mourning, my Lord?"

"The presence of your our old mentor." Snape blinked. Voldemort went on, waving a dismissive hand: "No shame in it. Quite a remarkable wizard."

Snape said: "I worked closely with him for many years. He may have… rubbed off somewhat." He frowned slightly as if disturbed by the notion.

The Dark Lord's head tilted to the left. "Ah, but you miss him, my loyal servant. You miss his brimming personality."

Snape looked down, though he was quite confident of his Occlumency shields. Riddle had sensed a whiff of emotion. It was wise to play the part.

"Yes," Voldemort hissed, dragging out the word. "That cloying feeling is seeping through your magic." He meant the Mark, Snape knew from Albus theories. The Dark Lord was in a generous mood however because he changed the subject: "Any occurrences of note?"

"None, my Lord." He knew the Dark Lord would only be interested in any sign of resistance inside the school.

Voldemort once more tipped back his head to rest against the high-backed chair, closing his eyes. He appeared tired, but that was probably Snape superimposing his own state of fatigue on the man in front of him.
"I have need of your questioning skills, Severus. We have a new addition to the Malfoy dungeon. A former colleague of yours, I believe."

The Malfoy dungeon was for high-profile guests only. A muscle wanted to jump in Snape's jaw. "Certainly. When do you wish for my presence?"

"This Saturday, four in the afternoon. He will be stubborn. Bring ample Veritaserum."

"I shall, my Lord."

Snape wondered whether it was a former teacher or an Order member, and whether he himself was still able, fifteen years onwards, to draw up the necessary amount of malice. He decided to put that thought aside until he had to face this unfortunate soul, whomever it may be.

"Where is our Chosen One?" the Dark Lord asked next.

Suppressing a shiver at Voldemort's choice of that now incongruous title, Snape replied: "Most likely in his dormitory at this hour. Would you like for me to fetch him?"

"Not necessary. I shall leave you to your work."

Snape rose along with the Dark Lord, bowing his head. He was still getting used to this new form of deference, a more casual one which only a few servants in favour were allowed.

Voldemort was at the door when he called over his shoulder: "And Severus, I expect a report by tomorrow evening of your findings regarding the Order's use of the Room of Hidden Things, or whatever you call it."

Snape sagged in his chair as soon as the Dark Lord was gone from the tower room, resisting the urge to burrow his head in his palms.

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Silence draped over the castle stones, undisturbed by the soles of his boots. Voldemort's robes blended with the shadows of the third floor corridor, a place few had business being at this hour.

It had been years since he'd taken a glance at it. Back then, he could only afford short-term goals. What would it show him this time, he wondered with anticipation.

Stopping next to the trapdoor, he tossed a spell to check for tampering before unlocking it. He folded into himself to descend the narrow space downwards until he felt solid stone, a motion well-practiced due to countless visits to the Chamber of Secrets' underground halls.

The chambers beyond were a feat of wizarding space. They stood completely bare of objects. The exception to this stood in the last room: a magnificent mirror which still remained in the same place Dumbledore had left it.

He threw a lumos towards the centre of the room. On the threshold his mind churned, thinking back to the last time he was here, when his immortality was thwarted by a hairsbreadth due to the flailing of a twelve-year old boy. Dumbledore's trick should not have set him back as far as it had, he considered, caught in the memory.

After a few seconds he managed to shake off the twinge in his chest. Purpose flowed through him as he strode up to the shimmering object and stepped in front of it.
He took a breath – and looked up.

He was no longer alone. The old Headmaster lay at his feet, eyes glassy, skin nearly the colour of his beard. The culprit was immediately clear: it was the young green-eyed man about to stand from a kneeling position at his side, and gazing up at the mirror's Riddle in reverence. He looked older, about twenty-five or thirty. Nagini unwound from his alternate's shoulders to settle onto mirror Potter's.

The Dark Lord's gaze was drawn to the sword next. It was sheeted hilt-deep inside Dumbledore's chest. While he watched, Potter pulled it out. The decorative stones now matched the blade dripping blood. Harry's green cloak merely darkened where it met the generous flow of red. He recognised his mother's locket, hanging from the young man's chest. Potter's searing eyes were locked on Voldemort's alternate self. His counterpart smirked and raised the tiara which he held clutched between both hands. A ring glimmered on his left – Voldemort imagined it to be the resurrection stone, so it probably was.

The mirror's Harry bowed his head to his counterpart then, to be crowned.

The Dark Lord wetted his lips, eyes inexplicably glued to the scene. Stepping away from the mirror took conscious effort, and he was not certain of the amount of time that had passed.

Back on the third floor corridor his feet took him on automatic to the dungeon stairs where he stopped, hand drumming on the railing. His mouth twitched as he imagined the reaction he'd get walking into the Slytherin common room now. But unnecessary – he would summon the boy through Draco. First, he would greet Nagini.

A few elves were still at work scrubbing pots as he entered the Hogwarts kitchens, though they did so without a sound. They froze when he passed, shrinking into the wall. He headed for the huge fireplace, then stopped abruptly upon finding his pet snake in his favourite position – and in the arms of his young charge. Potter's form was folded into a leather fauteuil he had pulled from somewhere. His head rested on the chair back in a pose similar to Voldemort's own an hour ago. Both appeared to revel in the warmth exuded by the flames. They were also soundly asleep, which explained the studious quiet of the elves.

Voldemort took a seat on the rug with the hearth at his back. The fabric's warmth kept away the cold of the stones. His eyes wanted to droop as well. But the adrenaline from the vision had not yet left his blood and so it was easy to resist the pull.

Of course it didn't mean anything. No link with reality was implied. Putting meaning into it meant deluding himself. He knew all this, still he could not deny his own inner conflict, which felt all too real. Why should he want to honour Potter so, when he could just as well unleash another of his Horcruxes on a more fitting human form – his Bella for instance? The mirror had been tricked before, was perhaps still warped by Dumbledore's machinations years later.

He studied Potter's sleeping form. Bags lined Harry's eyes. He marvelled anew that such a vulnerable creature could harbour an immortal piece of his soul.

He counted on his younger self's ability to realign the boy's wilful idealism with his own restructuring of wizard society. His own particular way of governing could do with a human touch, also, as his advisors kept reminding him. Redirecting Potter's righteous energy towards quieting the fanatics, though tiresome now, would undoubtedly be rewarding in the end.

The boy twitched then, and rubbed at his scar with his free left hand. He blinked, taking in his
surroundings when his gaze fell upon the Dark Lord.

"Gha!" Potter yelled, jumping in the air, eyes round and fearful. This move disturbed Nagini, who hissed in her sleep. Harry looked down, then up, clearly feeling trapped.

Voldemort smirked lazily, whispering: "Best not wake her."

Harry visibly swallowed. He began trying to extricate himself from the large animal wrapped around him, starting with the snake's thick neck. Nagini came awake enough to grumble: "Hmmm... no twitching, nest-brother."

This worked on the boy like a freezing charm. After confirming that Voldemort wasn't going anywhere, he sagged back into the upholstery.

They stared at each other in silence. The Dark Lord was content to keep staring, but Potter quickly grew agitated.

"Why are you-" Harry clamped his mouth shut on the rest of the sentence, but Voldemort caught a flicker of thought anyway, due to his still half-awake state.

"On the floor?" he returned in a low tone so as to not disturb Nagini. "I enjoy the warmth."

The boy's puzzlement turned more pronounced.

His followers expected him to demand high standards of comfort – that was something they could understand. But comfort held a different meaning to him, which the Horcrux would have known.

"Interesting that I'm talking to just you for a change."

The boy fell into stillness. "What do you mean?" he breathed. "Sir," he muttered then.

"Your reactions can be... entertaining." Whereas watching his counterpart was quite boring.

Harry broke the stare to glance down at the creature in his lap. "You wanted to see me because of last week, right?" he blurted, clumsily changing the subject. Voldemort filed away the signs of discomfort for later study.

The Dark Lord felt another smirk tug at his mouth but he resisted it. "What about last week, Potter?"

"The meeting. You wanted something in return for... not using the Mark on Ron."

Voldemort chuckled, stretching out his legs to let the flames reach the lower part of his back. Harry should be grateful he was in moderately good spirits. The boy's eyes kept glued to a spot on Nagini's scales where his left hand stroked them.

"You are lying, Harry," he hissed and Harry's hand shook. "We agreed I would keep from using the Mark to apply pain. I said nothing about not making use of my newest servant."

At this Potter's shoulders knotted with tension. Perhaps his Horcrux kept far from such emotion-wired subjects and was therefore currently absent in Potter's mannerisms. Either that, or his influence over Potter was not as persistent as Harry wanted him to think.

He pushed beyond and Potter flinched as the Legilimency spell took. Voldemort saw flashes of conversation – Potter talking to Nagini, Potter explaining to someone that the Granger girl knew something that made her a target. Next the young Malfoy trembling in Potter's strangling hold
while Harry murmured insults in his ear-

Harry starting bending over his inflamed scar, threatening to wake Nagini again, and he stopped. That last fragment revealed a duality still present in Potter's behaviour. The boy warranted closer study to ascertain how much of his Horcrux had taken hold, and the triggers to that part of him. Distilling the boy's thoughts this way, when he was in a weaker state, was more effective than dosing him with truth serum. He would have to guess at the times when Potter would be just as weary for a next round of Legilimency, or have Draco report in.

Potter straightened, breathing levelling out. Voldemort drank in the sound of his shaking voice: "How w- will you be making use of him, may I ask?"

"That depends on his own behaviour and competence. He shall certainly have to start at the bottom."

"I've thought of what to offer you in exchange for not hurting him," Harry went on. He took a deep breath. "I would like to offer Nagini my help in assisting her with her search for a partner."

Voldemort's brows raised as he took this in. "What makes you think that's necessary?" he asked in a bored tone.

Potter caught his eyes then. "Um. She wants one." It sounded like a question.

"You don't say."

"Yes, she wants a mate." Potter tossed a hand. His cheeks coloured subtly. "She says you're too busy with your- what'd she call it, human webs to accompany her. So she asked me if I wanted to help her search the Forbidden Forest."

The boy was telling the truth – Voldemort could see their conversation in his eyes, in this same room. Leave it to Potter to find something to offer him that still fit in with his sensibilities.

"To find her kin one would have to travel to the continent, far eastwards." Albania, for example. He wondered whether his snake wasn't actually planning an adventure of a different kind – he remembered the Basilisk loved to roam the Forbidden Forest for the sense of freedom that natural hunting gave her. "Something which would please her, not me. No, that won't do." Harry's shoulders sank. His cheeks lost colour.

"But," Voldemort said, fingers stroking the wand inside his pocket in anticipation. "I might allow you to accompany me on such an endeavour. If you behave on this trip and do as I ask, you may take her out hunting."

"What kind of trip?"

Voldemort tilted his head. When the moment stretched Harry blinked tiredly and asserted: "My Lord?"

"The program will involve visits to foreign dignitaries and heads of state on the continent."

Harry straightened, fully awake once more. His mouth opened, closed, then opened again to whisper: "What will my role there be, sir?"

"All in due time, Potter." Voldemort unfolded himself to stand, holding out his arms.

Harry stood also, careful to slowly lower the pounds of snake into his waiting arms. Nagini's
breathing stayed even throughout. He would question her next about the going's on inside the castle, but in private.

This docile Potter pleased him. Though the fiercer version, where the urges of boy and Horcrux blended together like they did in the memory he'd gleamed, proved unexpectedly entertaining.

"I accept your offer, Potter," he stated before departing. As he turned towards the door his lips twitched at the barely repressed panic still roaring in Potter's gaze.

Voldemort's visit left Harry antsy again. Strangely, afterwards he slept just fine in his four-poster for the first time in a long while. Perhaps it was the sheer relief that for the time being, he had done all he could to help Ron. That visit could have gone a lot worse. It was no use pushing the Dark Lord for anything more since he had already given Harry more consideration than he had expected of him.

The next day of classes went by in a pleasant semblance of normalcy and Harry pushed the Dark Lord's words from his mind.

Ron's first confrontation with his new position would be that Saturday, he had been informed that morning, in the next junior Death Eater's meeting. His friend took it in stride, bolstered by Harry's assurance his Mark wouldn't bother him for a while, at least. They skipped their study period in the afternoon, spending their time playing exploding snap in the Gryffindor common room, where they were soon joined by Dean and Neville.

After dinner Harry was summoned to the Headmaster's office without explanation. Climbing the stairs, Malfoy's remark about adapting to circumstances buzzed through his head. Was he going to have to keep on adapting, whatever might be asked of him? Or would he find his way with time, and come out if not on top, then at least even, like he had managed yesterday evening.

Snape and Takumi were standing by the windows when he entered, conversing in quiet tones. His nerves flared at the sight.

"Mr. Potter," Armando Dippet greeted him with a solemn nod from his painted chair. A few frames over, Phineas Black was watching him as well with a surly expression. Other portraits blinked open bleary eyes at this, or stopped pretending to be asleep altogether.

"Hello, Mr. Dippet," Harry answered.

"I have to say, young man, I never imagined this," Dippet commented with a shake of his aged head. "Such a good lad he was."

After a moment Harry realized he was referring to Riddle, whom he had met as Headmaster.

"I predicted this might happen," Professor Brian Gagwilde interjected, before moving a white bishop on the chess board covering the right third of his frame. It was unclear who his opponent was, since there was no space for him or her to inhabit the portrait.

"So you've been telling us the entire summer," a Headmistress opposite murmured, too softly for him to hear. Harry had to smile at the dryness in her tone. Her neighbour looked like someone who loved the sound of his own voice, alright.

"Mr. Potter?" Watanabe cut in, drawing his eyes back to the room's living inhabitants. The portraits fell quiet, once more feigning sleep in seconds.
Harry approached, returning the greeting with a bow of his head. Snape's form was blessedly turned towards the window. The view of the lake at sunset was probably magnificent from up here. He decided to follow Snape's lead, which was to say ignore the man.

Watanabe was not one to mince words. "You've been invited by the Evening Prophet to attend an interview concerning last week's events. I will be assisting you."

He took that in. He could almost feel Snape's condescending expression at those words: he once again looked like the Boy-Who-Lived-To-Be-The-Centre-Of-Attention.

"What if I don't want to go? Sir?"

Watanabe's neutral expression didn't change. "Our Lord wishes you to be present. The rumours surrounding your temporary absence last week are getting wilder by the day. We can curb them this way, as well as inform the people of your new standing."

"My.. standing?"

"With regard to the Dark Lord's administration."

*And that is what?* he thought.

He nodded mechanically, not wanting to let on.

"The reporter is an acquaintance of yours, I believe." Watanabe took a piece of parchment from his robe pocket and held it at eyelevel. "A Ms. Rita Skeeter?"

He felt a sense of foreboding. "I guess."

Takumi's head tilted slightly. "You'd prefer someone else?"

If he scorned her now, her writings about him would probably get much worse.

"That's alright. She can be a little... sensational." He shrugged.

"Ah. In that case, not to worry. I will be screening the interview before publication."

"Alright." He almost hunched to burrow his hands in his pockets, but shook off the urge. He folded his arms instead.

"The interview will be in about half an hour. There are some things we should discuss first." Watanabe gestured towards the two rigid-looking chairs near the fireplace. Harry sat, shooting a glance at Snape moving behind his desk. The man appeared to be ignoring his two visitors, and started scribbling away at something.

The hearth was warm at their backs, which bolstered him somewhat. Watanabe sank down next to him and turned his neck to regard him. "Although the Dark Lord has placed restrictions on any classified subjects, we must still take care when crafting your public image."

Harry wondered for a moment what kind of reputation the Dark Lord wanted for him.

"The public narrative is that you were a pupil of his greatest enemy, have been a factor in his first downfall even, yet he let you live. More than that, he allows you to continue your education here at Hogwarts, a place which you clearly love." Watanabe seemed to wait for something, studying him. Harry refused to reward the wreckage that was his new life with a nod.
The man went on unperturbed: "He has given you generous space to decide whether you want to join the rebels or to stay and help your friends in this difficult transition. So, you have made the brave choice to stay, which is an attribute to your character."

Harry bit his tongue on his thoughts. *I tried to escape twice. Both times I've been tortured. Both times the lives of my friends were threatened.*

Watanabe smiled lightly. "You are bursting to say something."

He shook his head. He wanted to see where Takumi was getting at first.

"Now that you have chosen to stay, what would you wish to contribute to our Lord's administration? What do you want to do, or to have changed?"

Harry glanced towards the resident Headmaster, whose quill now hung frozen over the paper. He swallowed, thinking perhaps more was at stake here than it seemed.

"You really want to know what I want?"

"Yes, so we can practice what you are going to say about your aims for the coming years for the purpose of the interview."

Harry blinked, thinking it was rather cruel to be asking him this, as if his opinion mattered. The man's well-meaning attitude was starting to grind already.

"Well. I want the torture of Muggleborns at the borders to stop, first of all."

Watanabe grimaced. "Yes, I disagreed with him on this point."

Harry tried to keep his mouth from falling open. "And the Muggles. No more killing," he prodded to see how that would go over. The older wizard took note of this on a little writing pad.

"Barbarous acts, certainly."

Harry blinked again. "Did you tell him this?"

"I did. Do consider though, that we have some demanding allies that want a reward for their services. The vampires, for example. *Potens est primum.*"

"Sorry, what sir?"

"It is wise to keep the powerful satisfied, is what it means," Watanabe quietly explained.

Harry tried to find the right words to voice his opinion. "So you think the Muggles deserve it?"

"Not by any means," Watanabe said, and Harry's head jerked again. "I'm merely presenting you with the Dark Lord's utilitarian viewpoint."

Harry mulled this over a moment, eyes roaming the portraits on the walls. "He judges the value of people by their usefulness to him," he rephrased. "The powerful can make use of the weak, and he makes use of the powerful."

Watanabe gave a nod. "To put it simply."

"So he's a bully, is what you're saying," Harry stated to rile Takumi's serene pose. "Sir."
Watanabe had that smile again. "He is many things, to many people. However, we were discussing you, and what you want to be doing in the near future."

Harry scowled and turned his head to watch the fire. The scratching from Snape's quill resumed.

Takumi clasped his hands in front of him, undeterred by the silence. "So. You want to champion the rights of people, magical and not, who are being marginalised at this time in the new administration."

"And magical beings," he said, thinking of the House Elves at Hogwarts and not able to keep silent on that matter.

"Hm. Perhaps a Foundation is in order, for reaching these goals. Say, we can call it the Harry Potter Foundation."

Harry quickly glanced at Snape. He expected a snide comment, but the Headmaster's face remained smooth. He felt a twinge of nerves in his chest, wondering why Snape would waste a perfect opportunity to mock him. They must have discussed him before he walked in, Harry thought. He turned back towards Watanabe.

"Are you serious? I'll actually be allowed to do something?"

"Of course. I will have an account set up for you next week at Gringotts. In the meantime, consider how you want to go about achieving your goals. In fact this might be a good opportunity to appeal to the readers of the Prophet."

Harry stared at him, trying to gauge the expression on his face. Of course? He felt dizzy at the sudden twists of the conversation. "Am I allowed to talk to the people in charge of this, these rules or decrees?"

"I think it will be a learning experience for you." Watanabe folded his knees and took his first sip of tea on the tray between them. "I have noticed Hogwarts does not prepare its students for their future careers quite as well as my own wizarding school did for me – Mahoutokoro on the island of Minami Iwo Jima. In Japan at sixteen years of age all students are send out to stretch their skills, as we would say, at an organisation of their choosing – a company, or the Ministry of Magic even. They do this in an internship of six months. We offer nothing of the sort in English wizarding schools below University level. This is something I am working on changing here at Hogwarts for the seventh years."

Watanabe's words held a certain fire as he spoke. "Why did you leave Japan?" Harry asked, had been dying to ask for some time in fact. He sounded so… reasonable. Why did he start working for Tom Riddle? What would be the appeal of being a Death Eater to a man like him?

"Ah. That's a story for another time, I think." Watanabe quirked a grin. "So, now that you have your headline for the interview, we shall go over the procedure concerning what is sensitive information and what is not."

Harry nodded, feeling antsy again as he thought of meeting Skeeter in a few minutes time.

"Firstly, when asked, do not offer any information about Nagini. You may tell her she likes the old magic of the building, which is why she's let out to roam." He waited for Harry's nod before continuing: "This goes the same for the Chamber of Secrets. Secondly, don't engage in anything regarding the Dark Lord's politics or the rebels. You may tell her how you feel about attending Hogwarts, and the changes that have occurred here. You may not share whatever you may have
heard about the situation with the resistance."

"What do I tell her in case she asks?"

"Say you are concerned for your friends, and hope they stay out of harm's way. That is the case, right?"

Harry nodded. Three more warnings later and Harry was grinding his teeth. It all came down to two things: don't tell her anything about your opinion of the outside world, and do fill the time gushing about your new Foundation and your magical education.

Voldemort was clearly holding the press in an iron fist. If he did call out on something, there was no chance in hell any of it would get printed, he was sure. What he could count on, was getting punished for it. Or Ron would, he thought with frayed nerves.

Watanabe sat back in the end and clasped his hands. "Any questions?"

Harry took a sip of his own cooling tea to give himself more time to think. "You're serious about this Foundation thing?"

"Why is that so hard to believe?"

Harry shook his head. "I don't get it. What does he get out of this?" When Watanabe merely narrowed his eyes he explained: "I mean, say he gives permission for this... Foundation. Wouldn't I be going against the laws he's making, protesting for the rights of Muggleborns?"

"You have my permission Mr. Potter, which will be sufficient." He bent closer with his elbows on his knees, instantly putting him on alert. "I will allow you some room, Mr. Potter, to try and change things from within the system. But not without: any activities that point towards cooperation with the resistance I shall have to report to the Dark Lord."

His eyes flew fast between both of Harry's, assessing. Tracking them made him vaguely dizzy again. "If you were to breach these rules, I am afraid I shall have to revoke that privilege, and your aims shall remain unfulfilled for the foreseeable future."

Harry sat back, swallowing hard. They had him all figured out, he realised. They knew he wouldn't want to risk this chance to change things from the inside, if he could. If he would make contact with the resistance, all these offered doors would close on him.

Perhaps the horcrux should do the interview, he thought flippantly. But he couldn't summon him like one of Voldemort's servants. Besides, Riddle could care less about the rights of Muggleborns and magical creatures.

Takumi sat back as well to consider him. "I've told our Lord before that your continued popularity is a direct consequence of your passionate regard for others. Your caring attitude does not need to interfere with his plans for you, as I am trying to demonstrate to him in this way. Do not make me regret giving you this opportunity, Mr. Potter."

Harry nodded, marvelling that Watanabe would look out for him so. "May I ask, what are his plans for me?"

"I could not tell you."

Harry decided to hold off on any further questions until he had time to explore this Foundation thing. "Thank you," he murmured into the silence, not wanting to appear ungrateful. Watanabe was
in fact on his side. "If we're really going to do this though, let's not call it the Harry Potter Foundation."

"What should we call it?"

Harry thought a moment. "The Magical Rights Foundation?"

"The Foundation for Magical Rights, very well." Watanabe noted this down. They both stood. Watanabe whisked away the chairs and turned towards the fireplace, holding out the floo powder. Harry took a handful, eyes turning to regard Snape's form.

Snape was staring right at him this time, through him it felt like. His gaze narrowed. "Watch that tongue of yours, Mr. Potter."

Harry nodded, somehow relieved to hear the man speak. "Yes, sir."

A/N: thoughts?
Skeeter was surprisingly pleasant during Harry's interview, which she held in a brightly-lit office of the Daily Prophet building - no Quick-Quotes-Quill in sight. Being Rita though, she went straight for the drama. Was he still grieving Ginny? And would he say that they had been star-crossed lovers from the start? It took quite a bit of effort to keep his mouth in check but he did, aware of Watanabe watching them nearby.

She drilled him first on the attack, but he was careful to stick to a vague outline. On his plans to advocate for the rights of Muggles, Muggleborns, and magical beings she was less keen. His words sounded forced as a result. They caused a hollow feeling in his gut, like he'd been fooled and everyone knew it.

The feeling stayed the next day when the owls flew in at breakfast. Malfoy joined him, in a foul mood. Nott's grin that morning had not been subtle but Harry ignored them both, not interested in student politics. This time it didn't bother him to sit at the Slytherin table - Ron was out on grounds duty anyway. He snagged the Daily Prophet from Draco's owl the moment its wings touched the wood, browsing towards the third page.

Reinventing the hero, it said. **Harry Potter starts Magical Rights Foundation.**

Rita Skeeter could always be trusted to bend his words. The quote 'Magical blood is precious, no matter if someone is human or creature, says Potter,' seemed alright but she followed that up with a creative 'We have to protect the true magical blood from foreign intrusion,' our boy hero explained with passion.' The true blood, with a dash of Muggleborn rights. Muggles weren't even mentioned anywhere. Why hadn't he seen this coming?

Why, indeed. He closed the paper delicately, making sure his face was calm.

Skeeter knew him too well: the first part at least sounded like something he could say. He noticed he was shaking a little, and quickly pushed his elbows down on the bench to quell the movement. He felt strangely numb. Could he have refused the interview, anyway? The last time he had tried to refuse one of Voldemort's 'lessons', Hermione had suffered for it. Thinking about it still made his chest lurch painfully.
Malfy noticed and smirked. He caught the headline with repressed glee. "Not what you were expecting?"

"Shut up Malfoy," Harry grumbled, pushing away from the bench. As far as his stomach was concerned, he was finished.

"Wait a second," Malfoy sputtered then, dropping his spoon. "I'm not done yet." Harry sent him a sceptical look. Neville came up to their part of the table then, folded pancake in hand, gesturing towards the doors. Harry followed, glad to get out.

"You're not his guard, Longbottom," Draco sneered after them. Daphne had to smother a grin - probably at the tone - while Pansy bend towards Draco to whisper something in his ear.

"Got it, Malfoy," Neville threw back.

The two Gryffindors walked the grounds without a destination in mind. A cold wind immediately cut into their cloak-less shirts and whipped at their ties. He was still edgy. After a while he felt Neville's gaze.

"You're not happy about it," Neville spoke at last.

Harry studied the razor-like outline of green that marked the edge of the Forbidden Forest. He wondered for moment if Rita was allowed to use her animagus form nowadays. "The way that Skeeter describes it - that's not what I want to do. She's twisted my words."

There was a dusty betrayal at the back of his tongue, but it had nothing to do with the reporter. He wondered again how he could have failed to see the trap that Watanabe had lured him into - that Voldemort had set. Had he learned nothing, he thought as he clenched his wand through his clothes, which strangely made him think of Snape. He remembered Watanabe telling him it was perfectly understandable to want to stop the torture: it wouldn't even contradict Voldemort's plans for him. Was he that obvious to figure out?

Near Hagrid's hut a few untended pumpkins braved their way through the soil. They walked passed it in silence – no Fangs and no Hagrid to greet them.

Watanabe expected him to feel honoured, surely. And if his own words were being stretched until they fit right into the regime's mould, that was the way of things now, wasn't it?

Neville swallowed a bite of pancake, then said: "Just forget about that article. It's your Foundation, you get to decide what to make of it."

Harry shook his head. He was strangely glad that Neville could still be so hopeful. "You've read it. I'm just there as a puppet, to say what they want me to say." He huffed. "At least it makes sense now, for Riddle to be offering me this job, position, whatever."

Neville frowned at him. Harry went on, gesturing towards the castle: "They were waiting for me to ask for something, like equal rights for Muggleborns, just so they can twist it for their own ends." He chuckled, although nothing about this was even remotely funny. "And for a little while I bought into it."

"I'm not sure," Neville said thoughtfully with a shake of his head. "I don't think R-Riddle is the type to bother with making up nonsense. Perhaps they are offering you a way to get involved, and this is just how they make it look from the outside."

Harry shrugged. They resumed walking along the forest edge.
"You're still called the Chosen One you know." He frowned. "Again, I should say. Since... the hospital."

Harry threw him an incredulous look.

"Dunno how that happened," Neville went on with a shrug, sounding stubborn now.

Harry let his hands drift along the bark of the first row of trees. "A name means nothing. I think I've proven that by now."

"That's not true. You're allowed a lot of freedom here Harry, more than Ron for example. People notice those kind of things. And... He hasn't exactly gone out of his way to condemn you or anything."

Neville clearly still had trouble with the name.

Neville came to a halt to study a white-flowered plant. He rubbed a stem carefully to smell the aroma, then resumed pace. "We're seventeen this year. That's an important age in our world. Our magic is maturing, we decide on a profession..." He went on in a murmur: "It's not all exiting now, but I think a lot of doors will open for you, Harry."

He blinked hard, struggling with a reply. It was hard to believe that Neville of all people could be so optimistic.

"McGonagall thinks you'll be helping in negotiations with the Order and the rebels at some point."

Neville looked up at the sky then, shivering. "Rain's coming."

Yes, I'm sure we'll be fine Death Eaters by the end of the year, Harry thought.

Neville bit his lip in the silence. "I want to understand where they're coming from, you know? Why is this man the answer for so many witches and wizards. I've been asking my gran how things were before the ministry barred a lot of magic – the advanced stuff that's not practiced with wands. And Riddle, he's offering the purebloods back their rituals, their... heritage."

Harry watched him closely. His friend was saying these things – spewing these half-truths – because he was just trying to accept the new reality, where his parent's torturer was now probably heading the Dark Lord's army. He didn't need Harry telling him that Riddle's promises were worthless.

Neville's gaze drifted back to a nearby rosebush. "It's a kind freedom, I think, that he gives them. Freedom to celebrate magic, not hide it."

The first raindrops started to fall. Harry cast an impermeable charm over the both of them. As if reading his thoughts, Neville turned back towards the castle and quickened pace. They ran the last stretch of open ground through the downpour. Back inside the castle they came to a stop in the entrance hall, where his friend pulled his wand to warm their spot. The hall was empty of students. He wondered where Ron was at. Probably hiding from the storm in one of the greenhouses.

Harry lowered his voice to mutter: "I won't go through with this foundation nonsense, that's for sure. It's bad enough as it is, even worse to be giving people false hope. Voldemort can find himself another figurehead."

Neville's face twitched a little. "Perhaps you shouldn't say the name," he whispered.

Harry felt his lips curl upwards. "Never thought you'd say that."
"No really, if you do, the Snatchers will come to take you to court."

"Let them," he murmured, then grasped for something to change the subject. "Haven't seen you at the junior meetings. Did you manage to ditch them or something?"

After a beat Neville whispered: "I asked Snape if I could help out in the greenhouses instead. I'll be assisting professor Terrance with Herbology classes." He shrugged. "I hope professor Terrance keep me on as a trainee. That way I could stay at Hogwarts, keep an eye on things."

Snape's name was uttered in hushed tones by all students not of Slytherin making.

Harry grinned. "Sounds good." The greenhouses were practically Neville's domain.

He wished he could stay in the draughty entrance hall instead of dealing with his smug classmates at the junior meeting, or Dark Arts training with Snape afterwards.

"Do you want me to go with you?"

He smiled. Shook his head. "No that's alright."

He'd better go before he'd make a late entrance.

"Oh before I forget," Neville looked around, but the space was completely empty, with only the sound of the rain intruding. His smile was mischievous. "We're having a party. You should come."

'Oh?" Harry whispered back with a smirk.

"Yeah," Neville bend towards him - he'd gotten taller – to say: "Next Saturday, in the Room. You know which one."

The feeling of lightness in his chest vanished. "I don't know Neville, shouldn't you keep the Room a secret? He can… read my mind," he finished carefully.

To his surprise Neville just wagged his brows. "All the better. He'll see it's nothing for him to worry about – just a bunch of students having a good time."

Harry felt his cheeks grow warm for no reason at all. He bit his lips before they could burst into an all-out grin. "Wicked."

Snape's assignment was waiting on his desk on Saturday when he came back from his weekly inspection of the grounds. His plants were enjoying a good rain after a dry week. Leaving his cloak to dry near the fire he sat down, taking a moment to enjoy the dark and quiet.

His lip curled thinking back on Weasley's attitude that morning when the boy plodded through his greenhouse chores: jaw clenched, gaze fixed into a permanent scowl. He'd have thought the importance of the work – harvesting potion ingredients for the hospital wing – would temper the boy's wilfulness. But Weasley was similar to Potter in that regard.

Longbottom on the other hand showed some promise, overseeing the group of Muggleborns and so-called blood-traitors. Being a pureblood, Longbottom was exempt from manual labour, but he didn't get lazy like some of the Slytherins did: he now had an informal job as assistant to Sprout's replacement – whatever her name was.

His eyes caught the length of the scroll in front of him. The less savoury his Lord's business, the
more tidy the paperwork. Snape waved the flames in the hearth higher and set to reading the transcript of the first and second interview. They were conducted by Mulciber before he had the sense to escalate to his superiors.

8:20 pm. Suspect treated with Coercive Concoction. Starts to vomit. Repeated with same results.

He wasn't a complete fools at least.

8:32 pm. Suspect pressed with threats of physical harm, no response.


9:06 pm. Suspect Ennervated. Questioner takes five.

Reading further into the second interview, Snape was starting to dread the identity of the tortured soul. A member of the Order, the Dark Lord had said, and had there been a glint of anticipation in those devilish eyes?

Voldemort knew well his passion for torturous concoctions, which along with their shared interest in spell craft had fostered a sense of camaraderie between them over the years. It had the added benefit of keeping him above suspicion despite his scarce use of the Dark Arts. Since he couldn't risk triggering the man's paranoia, he had continued their analytic exchanges after Albus had granted him clemency – although his enthusiasm for the subject was somewhat dampened by the image of Lily's dead body fresh in his mind.

He blinked. This guest must be a present – his Lord's gift to him for services rendered.

He made his way over to the Malfoy manor to meet said gift with some reluctance. There he found a troubled Lucius staring out of a windowsill framed with peacock drawings. During the course of their luncheon they went over Draco's preparation for N.E.W.T.S, the continuing efforts to retrieve the artefacts removed from the Department of Mysteries, and the performance of the seventh year 'Young Bloods' – the new name for the soon-to-be junior Death Eaters.

He'd rather they remain nameless, except that the Dark Lord had suggested it, and it meant that Snape could gleefully turn down Slughorn's horrid suggestion 'Excellentia'. Meanwhile the Death Eaters were now calling themselves 'Knights of Walpurgis' – less aggressive, more wizarding tradition. A dusty title fifty years ago. Snape sometimes wished he could laugh about these things.

Lucius studied his hands when their plates were empty, shaking his head. "I am in need of some advice. There is a... traitor among my diplomatic team. He or she has left no trace." It was a rare thing to see the man's posture unravelling. Snape scanned his face for subterfuge, but didn't find any yet. "You will agree I cannot let this stand."

Snape put his utensils away and took a sip of his wine – beverages were standard fare at the Malfoy's from eleven o'clock onwards. "Are you sure there is no other explanation?"

"Quite," Lucius insisted. He looked to be resisting the urge to fidget under his bland scrutiny. Snape couldn't be bothered to feel pity for Malfoy's unfortunate track record where the Department of Mysteries was concerned. He felt a ghostly twinge as he recalled Voldemort's anger that night.

Lucius threw his head back, gesturing with his wine glass: "I don't have the time to flush them out myself."

"And your current list of suspects for this… false intelligence?" He didn't bother to hide his disdain.
Lucius quirked a smile though, used to his barbs. He strolled back to the table. "I'd rather you tell me."

Apparently he was seen as trustworthy, or Lucius wanted him to think so. He filed this away for later study.

"I'm busy Lucius, in case it slipped your mind. Put someone else on the task."

"Ah. But this is just the thing for you, Severus."

"And you imagine I have time to spare?"

Lucius was silent for a beat, studying him. "Perhaps no longer. Your name is carrying weight now."

"I'll be sure to ask for a raise," he drawled to distract himself from the absurd pleasure flitting through him at those words.

Malfy well-groomed eyebrows climbed upwards. "Don't be so modest, Severus. You and I both know Hogwarts is his pet project. You have earned the title."

It was true that Tom Riddle was showing a disconcerting amount of interest in the curriculum.

He was saved from answering by the doorbell. He glanced at the clock: their guest had arrived.

"Speaking of those skills..." Malfoy stayed unmoving, presumably letting the elf take care of guiding said person to the dungeons.

Snape swung back what was left of his wine and stood, padding his coat and feeling the bottles inside. "I will contact you if I find something," he conceded coolly.

Lucius raised his glass by way of reply.

Snape took his time getting to the lower level. Downstairs the air was cold and damp. One guard stood at attention, consuming a cigarette of all things, eyes tracking his form.

As he stepped into the dungeon cell he waited a moment for his eyes to adjust to the dimness. There was a gleam of metal where chains hung at intervals on the wall caught the light of the chandeliers. Even the floor had a shine to it. The new elf here was either very grateful, or very afraid of their employer.

He sat down in the bolted chair opposite the youthful, dark-skinned prisoner, who didn't look up yet. A sheen of sweat on his skin hinted at his earlier torture. The man's gaze seemed far away as he stared down at his shackled hands, the tips of his fingers meeting. Snape's jaw dropped slightly in surprise at the gesture – luckily there was no one around to see it. When the prisoner looked up all doubt left Snape's mind, despite the man's appearance.

A shock passed up his legs as he met unfamiliar brown eyes, unconsciously searching for a flicker of blue that wasn't there.

Blood dripped from his mentor's wand hand and arm where his plain prisoner cloth was ripped open. The unfocused eyes revealed the pain from the torture curse up close.

He put on a vaguely disgusted air in case Lucius was listening in, folding his hands in his lap and tilting his head. All the while his lungs screamed the man was insane.
He felt along the inside of his mouth for the procedural words, nodding a greeting.

"I am here to administer a healing potion." Normally this was the moment when he'd place his first torturous creation on the table – the lie meant to start things off in a constructive manner. He now wished he did in fact carry a healing potion. "Then I will ask you a few questions."

The stranger's mouth curled slightly.

"Swallow," Snape deadpanned after counting four seconds, while they both sat quite unmoving. Snape felt strangely exposed under his friend's scrutiny.

"I will now silence the area, in case of listeners." He flicked his wand to utter his most thorough silencing spell, trusting that were Malfoy in fact listening, he would chuck it up to a security level above his station. This was something only Voldemort could verify, which meant it would remain unverified.

"Albus," Snape whispered.

The unfamiliar hand clasped one of his. "My boy."

"You are incorrigible," he managed to speak, feeling a strange pull at his midsection.

The lines around the man's eyes crinkled. Then Snape noticed the hand that was gleaming silvery-white where the hidden one should be black and rotting – a gleam that had somehow remained after the polyjuice transformation.

"Have you managed to..." he trailed off, not daring to believe it.

Dumbledore studied his hand. "Hagrid's work. Only a delay, I'm afraid."

Snape scrutinized the skin. He couldn't recall having seen such a treatment before. Certainly not one that showed through the disguise. But Voldemort's good mood earlier was more urgent.

"Does he know?"

"No. He is convinced along with Mr. Mulciber that I am Remus Lupin at the moment."

"How?" he asked. Polyjuice over polyjuice was impossible...

"An experiment of mine," Albus said airily, and followed with: "It is mightily good to see you. How have you been?"


"Can't say I have," Albus chuckled, eyes gleaming.

"We don't have much time." Snape said tersely. He found himself checking the walls for anomalies, as he would during an Order mission.

Albus leaned back in his bolted chair like it was one of his plush creations. "I am being a particularly contrary delinquent at the moment. I dare say we have all the time in the world."

"Albus," Snape gritted his teeth. "What-"

"Has Tom been giving you much trouble?"
Snape pressed his lips to keep them from twitching. Tom. Albus always managed to make the Dark Lord sound like an errand child.

"Aside from the main trouble you mean? Not much. I am mostly left to my own devices to perform my Headmaster duties. He meets with his Inner Circle once a month. I am included in these discussions. Main point on the agenda is the broadening of the Muggle-free zone in London. I gather you've noticed global warming is used as explanation towards the Muggle authorities?"

When Albus nodded, he continued: "Crouch junior is in charge. I hope he'll stick to the current method of flooding, since it is the least violent option. We also discuss the hostile situation oversees as regards to our dwindling allies. Although it seems the Dark Lord has gotten a foothold in Austria and Ukraine. I believe he first wants his internal skirmishes sorted out before he acts on his international ambitions."

"And the students?"

"Well, considering. The Muggleborns are allowed into a few classes and put to work the remainder of the time. Mostly gardening for the boys, filing paperwork for the girls – unpaid work for the Muggle-Born Registration Commission, specifically the relocation of the Muggleborn children under the age of ten that go to Zemers Institute. On a similar note, Filch imagines he has free reign now to use those decrepit devices of his. I disavowed him of that notion. He thought a moment. "Though the number of injuries from fights have increased. I can't protect the students from their own viciousness," he added as an afterthought.

"Yes, of course."

"I hope you didn't bring a wand." It would be in Mulciber's collection by now.

"An orphaned one," Dumbledore waved dismissively. The man regarded him fondly, seeming to feast on his appearance. Snape again felt the pull of something.

"I hear he visits the castle often. What does he do on these visits?" Albus inquired.

"He was seen by Filch wandering the third floor corridor yesterday evening. He came up to your study afterwards."

"Your study now, Severus."

Snape rolled his eyes and continued. "We played chess. He asked after Potter."

"To what purpose?"

"Unclear. I'm tutoring the brat, I intend to find out then."

"How is Harry?"

Snape scowled. "Glorying in his fame as usual. Giving interviews. Playing that dunderheaded sport even though I've explicitly forbidden it this year. Taking even more liberties now that he's seen as the Dark Lord's protégé. He accosted Draco last week in the entrance hall, the nerve of him..."

"Really? That sounds unlike him."

Snape was gratified to see the interest turn into a frown. He gave a thin smile. "Threatening with more violence, I heard. Unhinged, really."
"Unhinged you say?" Dumbledore tilted his head. "I heard from Minerva his behaviour is exemplary in all his classes."

"Quite. I believe Ronald Weasley getting the Dark Mark is proving too much for the poor golden boy."


The man regarded him with a searching look. "His protégé status, would you say that is something Tom is encouraging?"

"Just before Weasley was branded, Potter seemed to negotiate with the Dark Lord in Parseltongue. I wasn't present but heard from Draco there was a kind of familiarity between them. Of course the Dark Lord does nothing without deliberation." Except when he got mad with rage, he refrained from adding.

"Anything else that struck you as unusual?"

Snape thought for a moment. "One of my students heard him hissing to himself in Parseltongue in one of the dungeon corridors."

Dumbledore raised a brow. "I hope you're attention goes out to all the students now, not just the Slytherin ones."

Snape's eyes narrowed. Oh. "Of course. Do you know what's happening to Potter?" he asked, curious despite the subject matter.

Albus' eyes turned colder. "I believe Tom is using a new form of Legilimency on Harry, through his curse scar. He now has the ability to access his thought and speak to him directly, wherever he is."

The idea left Snape feeling a bit queasy. He spoke his next words carefully: "I hope you don't intend to draw him back into the fold, in that case."

The brown eyes zeroed in on his own.

"He is a liability now more than ever," Snape spat.

"We need him back, Severus. He cannot remain under Tom's influence, as well you know. And when we've got him, we have to find a way to inure him to the mental intrusion. I am counting on your considerable expertise." Albus leaned forward now. "You have not forgotten I hope, how vital the boy is to our efforts."

Snape unclenched jaw after a moment. "Certainly not."

Dumbledore sat back as if to say, well then.

"May I inquire about your theories regarding this bond?" he prodded.

"I am not at liberty to share them at this time with anyone, Severus."

Snape nodded, keeping his annoyance well hidden.

"How is Minerva's network coming along?"

"She's found five students willing to report back possible disturbances, mostly older years."
Snape proceeded to explain the instances where transgressions – mostly Slytherins or teachers – had been reported and successfully deterred. His reputation as one of Voldemort's favourites was helpful in keeping the sadistic new colleagues in line.

Albus rubbed his hands enthusiastically. "Excellent. Now. What else can you share?"

Snape longed to ask the same question, but he had learned long ago to be content with whatever Dumbledore thought prudent to share.

"Arthur has kept you up to speed about his plans to 'cleanse' the Ministry I suppose?"

Albus nodded. He went on: "Muggleborns have been fired from many positions – the Auror Division, Treasury, Wizengamot seats … The Sacred Twenty-Eight are squabbling like children on how to divide it all." He smiled. "Right now the argument is down to who has the oldest family versus who is the most loyal. Keeps them busy. Congratulations on the Department of Mysteries attack by the way – Lucius is out of favour, again."

Amusement shimmered in Dumbledore's gaze. Snape continued: "Speaking of, the Dark Lord has abducted Ollivander and tortured him for information, here in this cellar, where you aware of this?"

The man in front of him nodded. Snape went on: "Ollivander is still in chains to assist the Dark Lord, something to do with wandlore in any case. Ollivander is allowed to resume his work under strict supervision. Making wands, that is, not selling. Each week his assistant takes the new wands to the Ministry, which, well, you know about the new laws on wand possession.

He took a breath. "Let's see… Dolores Umbridge managed to develop quite a creative system for the Muggleborn workforce before she was killed –"

"She was killed?" Dumbledore frowned slightly. "By whom?"

Snape felt at a sudden loss for words. "By Potter. He was ordered to kill her be the Dark Lord. As you know he can be… persuasive. "

His mentor sagged. The stranger in front of him lowered his head and closed his eyes.

"Not the Avada," Snape hastened to add. "Nothing pretty, though."

Brown eyes peaked out between black fingers.

"Ms. Granger was the leverage, I assume?"

Snape nodded.

"Fortunately we have plans in motion to get him out within a fortnight."

Snape curled his hands into fists on the table. "I see. Am I to assist in these plans?"

Dumbledore's eyes narrowed, a needle of a gaze. "What is it, Severus?"

"I don't see how you could smuggle him out of Hogwarts without alerting the guards. And as you just explained, the Dark Lord could be watching it all from inside Potter's head."

Albus tilted his head, studying him. Snape scowled, sitting back and folding his arms. It was true, he wasn't usually so… inquisitive in their meetings, but this might be the only chance they got to speak in a while. And he was Headmaster of the place now, for god's sake. Was he not entitled to know everything? But of course, all normal procedures stopped when precious Potter is
"You may trust that I have taken into account any contingencies," the man replied at length.

Apparently not.

The scrutiny didn't abate. Snape repressed the ridiculous urge to fidget.

"Do you and Tom still partake in your common… interests?"

Snape wished the ground could swallow him, chair and all. "Spell invention, you mean?" *Dark Arts*, his thoughts mocked him. *What are you, ten, that you can't say it out loud?*

"Purely theoretical, then?"

"Mostly. His visits are short and to the point nowadays."

"Get him to share on this level with you again, Severus. Feed his appetite."

"Are you telling me to indulge, Albus?" Severus whispered back, leaning forward with a cutting smile. He felt his nails biting through his cloak beneath the table. "Find myself a creature to play with? Or a muggle, why not?"

Albus leaned forward. "Of course not. I am merely imploring you to do what is needed to keep his trust."

"What's needed?" he hissed. "I am the Headmaster of Hogwarts, for crying out loud. Evidently I've done my part to entertain him."

"You know even better than I it's in his nature to always be restless, whatever his accomplishments. You both share an eagerness to push the boundaries of magic. Find a practical form that's not harmful, but still holds his interest."

Snape gave a stiff nod, doubtful he could find anything harmless that would hold Voldemort's attention for long.

A bit of blue bled through the brown. "You should go," he said urgently.

"Somewhere inside Harry's trunk you'll find a shard of glass," Albus uttered carefully. "I'd like you to take it and keep it on your person. It's a safe way for us to communicate."

"Safer than letting yourself get caught and tortured, you mean?" he asked, raising a brow.

Albus smiled. "Precisely. Now, I really have to be getting a move on." It sounded like the end of a night in the pub instead of the heavily warded Malfoy dungeon. "When I leave, Mr. Goyle will appear here in my place. He is unconscious at the moment. We've had to Obliviate him, unfortunately."

Snape wasn't aware the man was even missing.

Albus continued: "The batch we used is your own quality brew: now in its twentieth hour," he confided with a smile.

Snape nodded to acknowledge the underlying compliment. Dumbledore stood.

"I will now share with you my memory of these hours so that you can leave an imprint on his
mind.” Albus came to stand close and Snape lowered his Occlumency shields obligingly.

He flinched involuntarily at the sheer violence in the memory of Mulciber he was forced to witness.

When he was finished, his mentor raised his good arm. Snape knew what would happen next.

"Take care, my boy. We will speak soon."

And he vanished in a burst of Phoenix fire that left a green print on the inside of Snape's eyelids.

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The junior meeting was a waste of time, Harry thought. Even the Slytherins seemed to think so, staring ahead in varying levels of boredom. The set-up was that of a regular classroom this time. They were subjected to the latest political drivel about the annulment of magic-controlling regulations. A woman taught them today. She looked very bored with it all.

At least the current company offered him a reprieve from the looks he got walking to the classroom. Many felt conflicted about him before the article that morning, so what would they think now? The problem wasn't even the Foundation idea itself, but what it said about his level of freedom that he was allowed to speak with the national press.

If only they knew, he thought darkly as he bored his quill into the parchment in front of him, ripping up the sheet.

The bad weather drew Neville, Dean and Ron away from grounds work and into the castle. It was a brilliant opportunity to enjoy a long game of Exploding Snap in the Great Hall after lunch. At five o'clock he reluctantly left the others to climb all seven floors for his meeting with Snape.

Snape was never soft on him, but there was something careless about his spellcasting. Twenty minutes into his Dark Arts training, Harry considered it a win that he was still standing. He put his head between his knees, breathing hard. He had practiced a handful of rare spells just for this occasion and one of them had even managed to catch Snape off guard, though his shield easily blocked the curse.

He knew he should've kept away, should have flat out refused to take any more lessons from the man. Somehow, he couldn't. He wanted to get stronger. And duelling was something he was actually good at. Even with Snape as his duelling partner, it was almost enjoyable. His mind was clear, sharp, silent…

It was during these lessons that he managed to forget about the outside world, and just be a regular student. And since he couldn't keep Snape out of his life, it was… easier, to play along, not antagonize the man any further when he was one of the few people who could teach him about wandless magic. He was completely stuck anyway.

Harry's next wandless stunner dissipated before it reached it's target. Snape scowled, throwing his wand back at him. "A month of study and you haven't gotten past the basics, I see," he sneered in his usual drawl.

He thought about that time when he'd slammed Tadders into the wall. His magic pushing out of his hands, it felt like. And he recalled the fireplace exploding into crawling snakes of fire, with Bellatrix... There was a hum of magic in those moments hovering right over his fingertips. Like it was always there but now he could see it, use it.
"I've managed it before," He swallowed the 'sir' but it was a near thing – what was the matter with him? "But I can't summon it at will."

Snape considered him. "What were you thinking about, when it happened?"

He remembered Tadders refusal to reveal the Banished pouch. And Bella was torturing him… "I was angry, I guess. It felt like a layer of energy on my skin, a layer of magic. Does that make sense?"

"It's something at least." Snape stowed his wand away. He was watching him with an unreadable expression. "You will practice each evening this week after finishing homework. Imagine dummies in your mind, like so."

Snape closed his eyes for only a second. Suddenly there were two bright red doll-like figures on the other side of the Room, the size of a grown person, complete with limbs but lacking facial features.

Snape threw something orange. The figure absorbed the curse and appeared to come alive, throwing back a grey spell of its own straight from one of its hands. Snape flicked it to the side where it dissipated into the wall.

"The figures move as well. They will get more sophisticated the higher the level of skill shown. That is assuming you do improve…"

His tone told him that was an unlikely event.

"The room will remember the properties of the dummies the next time you conjure them. Now..."

Snape was suddenly close, tilting his chin back to hold his gaze. He wanted to jump away but the grip only tightened. The man's black eyes seared into him, and by then it was too late-

In the memory that sprung up he woke in front of a fire, a large snake in his lap and a Dark Lord across from him. Snape watched his exchange with Voldemort, then extracted himself. Harry didn't miss the flinch before Snape's face smoothed out.

"Something is pressing onto your memories. A spell or a foreign presence, perhaps."

Harry blinked. Snape didn't usually volunteer information.

His teacher studied him. "You were aware of this?"

He tried to speak but no words came out. His posture loosened.

"Yes," Riddle answered for him. Snape nodded after a beat and left him standing there to wonder what had just happened.

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Dinner was the usual gossip hive. Despite this, Ron and Neville had cajoled him into sitting at the Gryffindor table. Along with Lavender, Dean and Parvati they formed a tight group, chatting like it was a regular day. The girls' attitudes surprised him, until he noticed Lavender's fascinated stares in Ron's direction whenever his friend was looking in a different direction.

Feeling the pressure of homework on top of the training time Snape demanded, he decided on the library for study. Malfoy walked off after a quick whisper in Blaise's ear, who proceeded to trail Harry through the hallways like a shadow.
After two hours of quiet study he rolled his eyes at Blaise that it was fine by him if he left. His roommate didn't budge though. He was browsing a nearby shelf and wondering how he could shake him off – to look for McGonagall again – when a figure shot past to the exit, her tied bun bouncing left and right with each step.

Harry froze in his tracks. Zabini, noticing this, looked up.

"Isn't that Cho Chang?" Blaise was saying unnecessarily.

"Yes," Harry said. "I need to talk to her a sec." He waved him off. "See you back in the dorm."

The black ponytail had vanished around the corner. He sped up and caught her halfway up the stairs. She turned with a book on defensive spells in her hands.

He tried to slow his breathing. "You're, ah- still taking classes here?"

Could he sound any more moronic?

"Yes. I didn't get all my grades last year," Cho said, combing a hand through her hair. "End of year exams were not a good study period." She smiled a little melancholy. "I'm also doing a traineeship. I want to become a teacher."

"Wow, I didn't know that." Really smooth, he thought to himself, forcing a smile out of his gritted teeth.

"Yes, well, I realised it just last year. It was professor Dumbledore actually, who inspired me. He was – is – very committed to this school."

There was a long silence in their part of the hallway after her words.

"Anyway, how have you been Harry?"

He shrugged. "Good, I guess."

"Things have changed alright," she commiserated, shoulders hunching. "I heard about Ron…"

"You want to teach at Hogwarts, then?" he cut in after a suitable pause to avoid her stare.

Her mouth formed a grim line. "I just couldn't imagine any other place I want to be. Here is where I can help the most. I'm doing work for the Infirmary now, assisting Madame Pomfrey. I'm allowed to now that I'm of age." Her eyes flicked to her book for a beat. "Oh Harry, I'd love to catch up some time but I've got to go. Say, let's meet up for a lunch in Hogsmeade? For old times' sake?"

Harry cocked his head. "They still allow that?"

She smiled wryly. "They do if an adult accompanies you."

"Right." He felt a burst of annoyance, but then figured it must be Riddle's since he wasn't bothered at all by this fact. "See you soon, then."

They parted, Cho going up to her dormitory and Harry descending into the Slytherin domain.

"Bummer, huh?" Harry said to himself as he strolled through the dim dungeon.

Something snapped his jaw shut. He grinned through it. "You're just so easy to rile up, it's adorable," he went on in a whisper, just in case there was anyone nearby. It no longer felt crazy,
talking to himself. "A bit childish, actually."

He received a sharp burn along his forehead in response. Harry cursed, rubbing the spot viciously. He quickened his pace. The common room was suddenly too loud. He opened his dormitory door with a sense of relief. There he stopped abruptly.

Nott, alone. Reading.

He silently cursed his luck. The place was usually deserted this early on a Sunday evening.

Theodore watched silently as Harry walked passed to sink onto his mattress. He stared Nott down until the boy turned back to his book. The text looked to be long strings of formulas, probably Arithmancy homework.

He was glad he'd kept a hold of his expression. But really he shouldn't have worried – the more at edge he felt around people, the more tranquil Riddle made it look. It was perhaps the only thing Riddle was useful for, he thought scathingly.

He smoothed a thumb over his wand, its familiar grains and spots. Come to think of it. Perhaps he and Tom needed to talk. Set a few things straight. Some ground rules for cohabitation, as it were.

"Say, Potter-" Nott's face leaned towards him, eyes focused on his forehead.

"Yes," he hissed, jerking back. The boy was standing too close.

Nott was about to continue when Harry's left hand found the inside of his sleeve.

Riddle had taken the initiative, quite beyond Harry's will, nearly cutting off Nott's circulation so strong was his grip on the Mark. Harry's attention was automatically caught by the boy's magic, like a restless tickle underneath his fingertips. He waited a beat but his host's control had left again.

He swallowed. What if he… just to see what would happen…

He pushed.

The tension inside lessened, like taking a calming draught. The cloying lethargy behind his eyelids vanished. Nothing mattered except the heady thrum of blood in his ears, the widening of his lungs...

Yes...

An intake of breath took him back to the room. Nott's gaze was unfocused, his nostrils flaring, head trembling slightly. He didn't try and pull away, to Harry's surprise. The sight of his enemy so pliant made a thrill flit through his stomach. Taking in the boy's glazed expression, a sudden doubt took hold, that perhaps this wasn't painful at all…

A chuckle cut off that thought.

Harry barely refrained from jumping out of his skin - that hadn't been Nott's voice.

"Ah, I just wanted to point out," Nott finally spoke softly, brushing a thumb over Harry's scar, "that you have a bit of blood there."

They both looked down at the red smear that came off. Theodore shot him a thin smile. Harry realised he was still gripping the Mark. He let it go as if burned.
Something was burning all right. The skin around the Mark was angry and swollen, like it was sunburned. If it wasn't for Riddle, his mouth would have dropped open at the sight.

Nott glanced at it, then straightened. Harry felt a jolt when he met his weirdly intense gaze. "Don't spread the love too much Potter," Nott drawled. "Slytherins can get envious of that sort of thing." He turned back to his bed then to pick up his book, browsing to the correct page. Harry blinked at him, feeling like he was missing something. He also had to fight the urge to put his head on his pillow.

You need sustenance, Riddle prodded. He was speaking in a normal tone, and the fact that only he could hear it was a bizarre feeling. Go on, a bit more, you were doing so well...

Get lost will you, he bit back.

Have you forgotten how they let him off with just a slap on the wrist?

He stroked the soft fabric of the duvet to distract from the memory. But it played behind his eyelids: a boot hurling down on his face with a cracking sound. Nott tugging at his body to give Zacharius better access. An urge to flee crawled over him, to get as much space as possible between himself and Nott.

Stop sending me these memories, he bit out.

Ah, that was just you.

I know what you're trying to do.

A chuckle behind his left ear. So smart, Riddle mocked.

He watched the way that Nott's back moved slightly with his breathing. He wished he could just ask the boy outright why he had done what he had.

Riddle, damn the man for staying so near his thoughts, actually snorted.

Let's not.

He considered asking after Zacharius but actually, he didn't want to mention that night ever again. Nott's form was quite still on the bed. He stood slowly to get a better view.

His classmate had fallen asleep right into the pages. Already? Riddle's vague contentment oozed behind that thought. That's not because of me, right? he thought at him, even though he tried holding it back – but that was the trouble with thoughts.

Riddle of course had no such qualms. You drained him quite nicely. Leave him for now. A bit of restraint would be wise next time, or you won't be able to use him ever again.

Harry felt shivers crawl over his back. I don't want to use them at all! He hurled back, twitching for an escape from Riddle that wasn't possible.

Oh, please do, Riddle was saying. It's the easiest thing in the world. Besides, you need to keep your magic brimming if you intend to practice wandlessly every night. Like Snape wants you to, he finished in a melodic sing-song tone.

He was reminded of that moment when Voldemort had steadied him against the wall after his head had been sliced up, and drizzled power into his scar...
Tomorrow you can use Malfoy. He's begging for it really, with that attitude. You want to become better at it, right? I myself became a master of raw magic around the age of sixteen.

Harry stood and marched into the hallway, away from the suffocating air – as if he could escape his tormentor that way. It occurred to him he had never held such a long conversation with Riddle before. His eyes found the common room entrance and he snug past the odd late-night student. He needed to be with his friends.

_Hmmm. The red-head is better fuel, I suppose,_ Riddle supplied.

_Leave me alone_, he returned.

He turned to someone calling his name. Malfoy was standing just outside the common room entrance. He felt like tearing some hair out. "I'm just taking a walk, Malfoy," he threw over his shoulder, continuing his pace.

"I'll be reporting it."

"You do that," he muttered, taking the steps two at a time. He kept pace all the way to the seventh floor, until the Fat Lady threw him for a loop.

The Lady's cheeks wobbled left and right in a firm no, even after his third plea to at least let him to put his head through the door. After waiting mere minutes Neville came up to him. He looked grubby and tired, probably from working in the greenhouses, but brightened when he spotted Harry.

"She's stubborn that one, right?" he said cheerfully, then spoke the password – Muggleborn.

It was like a shockwave went through the Gryffindor common room when his feet hit the other side of the wall. Right. He'd forgotten.

"Come on," Neville said, irritated, taking his hand to pull him towards the hearth near the middle of the room. Neville was also blissfully free of Dark Marks.

An advantage of his new standing was that he could stare people away and it actually worked. Sinking into his favourite seat in front of the fire was pure bliss. He closed his eyes, musing how Nagini would enjoy it here.

"Hi mate!" Ron spotted him from the dormitory stairs. He came over to sit on the nearby couch along with a few of his yearmates. "Way to get the best seats."

"Well we're seventh years now, we _should_ get the best seats," Lavender asserted.

Malfoy was fuming delicately Sunday morning at breakfast. Harry took the seat next to him with a grin.

"Why the long face?"

"I warned you, Potter..."

Harry scooped scrambled eggs on his plate. "And your point is...?" he said in a bored tone he knew would drive him up the wall.

"I don't know," Draco mused in a fake tone. "Perhaps I'll just let Snape deal with you."
He longed to tell him where to shove it, or better yet, yank that Dark Mark scratching at his senses from across the table, but there was no guessing how Malfoy would react in such a public place. Besides he should stay clear of that, if only because Riddle wanted him to – Nott had joined the table and it already took some effort not to look his way, to see if there was anything different about him.

"Blaise can accompany me again today. Right Blaise?" he asked the boy across from him.

"Sure. I'll be taking my homework to the Quidditch pitch though." Zabini’s eyes went from Harry to Draco, mischievous. "Guess you'll be joining us then."

"In the stands, yes," Draco said airily, but Harry noticed his shoulders tensing slightly.

"Urquhart will be announcing the team today," Pansy explained to him.

Harry watched Malfoy coolly. "Wouldn't want to miss such an important event, of course."

Malfoy looked to be grinding his teeth, but stayed silent. He had kept their interactions business-like ever since their little spat in the dormitory, which suited Harry just fine. There were better persons to spend his time and energy on.

Their group trudged towards the Quidditch pitch after lunch. Harry took to the stands along with Blaise and a smattering of students from other houses who had come to watch. Urquhart was already there along with most of his classmates from sixth year, carrying the large crate with Quidditch supplies onto the field. Ramone Urquhart was a stocky, muscled sixth year, and when he turned to the players they all fell silent.

"Our new positions," he said, without preamble. "Samuals and Harper as beater."

A smattering of applause – Harper scowled, obviously expecting a different position.

"Myself, Vaisey and Chang as chaser."

Harry looked up to see Cho smiling politely. Assisting wounded students who'd fallen prey to Slytherin bullies and joining the Slytherin quidditch theme? Interesting.

"As for Seeker..." Urquhart could never be accused of subtlety: his gaze left Malfoy to trail towards the stands.

"Well, Potter?" Nott called, his voice carrying towards his seated form, making heads jerk towards him in surprise, "Want to join? We're all dying to hear."

Nott looked like he was enjoying himself immensely. No one would be able to guess that last night, Harry had practically abused him. Malfoy on the other hand seemed to be wrestling with his anger: he jerked Theodore by the tie to snarl something in his ear. Urquhart stayed silent, waiting for his answer.

Harry stood, considering his options. He wasn't sure whether he wanted to continue with this farce if it meant actually having to join the team.

Malfoy let go of Nott's tie in favour of balling his fists at his side.

If he joined the team it would strengthen his position, which would help his chances of pursuing his own agenda in the future. If he stayed on as Seeker for Huffinclaw on the other hand, there were no extra benefits, except quality time with people he actually liked.
Ron might not understand, though.

"All right," he finally said.

Urquhart smiled slowly. "Good. Malfoy," he called and waited for Draco to turn his way. "You're Keeper, in that case."

Draco's expression looked like it could slay a Blast-Ended Screwed.

Harry's gaze found Cho, whose expression lit up as she joined in the clapping. They exchanged grins, which made him feel strangely light about his decision. Perhaps this wouldn't turn out so bad after all.

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That light feeling vanished quickly when Ron found him the next day after breakfast. Harry had taken to walking with Zabini as his guard. His easy manner was preferable to Malfoy's company any day. Besides, Malfoy was carefully avoiding him at the moment. That was likely as much to Harry's benefit as his own, since he was probably resisting the urge to bash Harry's skull in.

"Harry," Ron said. Blaise waited at a tactful distance.

"Yes."

Ron looked haggard as always. "I heard..." He stopped, then tried again: "Why?"

"I don't want to leave Cho alone with a team full of Slytherins," he whispered, thinking on the spot.

Ron frowned, stepping closer – close enough to feel the now-familiar buzz of his Mark. A sense of vertigo seeped into his temples. He scowled inwardly as his fingertips found a wall, steadying him. He couldn't imagine why Voldemort would make it this way, when it was just so distracting.

"So that's what this is about," Ron went on slowly. "You still have feelings for her?"

"What?" Harry jerked back, denial on the tip of his tongue before he saw a glimpse of sympathy in Ron's gaze.

He ducked his head instead. "Yeah." He hastily added: "I mean, Ginny will always be-"

Ron's eyes narrowed, biting his lip. "No of course, I don't mean- Merlin, I know that. Of course you can..." he trailed off, turning his head towards the nearby gargoyle.

"Right," Harry said into the silence. He punched Ron's arm. "Besides, you have a killer team now. And you know I don't care about Slytherin winning. Hey, how about if I catch sight of the snitch I just... look the other way."

Ron chuckled. "Don't do that on my account. I want to win fair and square."

"Because the Slytherins are such fair players."

"That article this morning," Ron said suddenly, "I don't believe any of it. And I'll tell everyone who wants to hear how ridiculous it is."

"Thanks Ron," Harry smiled, grateful.

Katie Bell and Demelza Robins presented the next hurdle at lunchtime. Sitting at the Ravenclaw
table, which was filled with students from all the houses, he saw the pair of Chasers stalk towards him from the other end. The eyes of both witches flickered to the Quidditch captain and their steps faltered a moment. Harry waved cheerily.

"Oh, oh," Ron murmured.

"Harry," Katie said briskly as she sat down across from him, leaning in. "Can you explain to me why you are *deserting* to the other side?" She waved to his friend. "Apparently Ron gets this."

"Well," Harry said slowly to stall, "I've decided -"

"It's more strategic for him to Seek for the Slytherins," Ron finished for him. "You know how Malfoy is, demands a spot on the team with daddy on the Board of Governors. So with Harry on the team, Urquhart had to refuse the poor git the Seeker position. It's worth it, don't you think?"

Ron was really getting a flare for this, Harry mused.

Katie frowned. "But that still means Slytherin will win."

Harry winked. "Guess it's all down to me, huh?"

During Transfiguration that afternoon he imagined explaining his situation to McGonagall after class.

*Professor. I have the young version of Voldemort in my head, hearing my thoughts. It means Voldemort will stay immortal for as long as I live. Any advice on how to deal with that?*

She wouldn't be able to help him anyway. There was also the risk of her sharing too much with him about the Order. And Tom. His unwanted guest was quiet ever since their talk last night - a discussion he definitely didn't want to revisit ever again.

McGonagall's gaze stayed on him a little longer when she dismissed her class.

It seemed the amount of homework kept growing, to the point that after dinner everyone scurried off to their dorms just to get started early. It had its perks: when he told Blaise he was off to train for his specialty the Slytherin waved him off, without even pausing to look up from his Charms homework. Malfoy was ignoring him categorically now, which meant no one stopped him from going up towards the Room of Requirement on his own.

Walking the hallways alone after so much time in company felt like a balm to his senses: finally there was no one around to talk or snap at him. Snape had told him to practice only after finishing homework, but he assumed Harry cared about such things the same way he cared about becoming stronger.

In the Room he was relieved when, after a moment of thought, the dummies sprung back to life. He started throwing random spells at them. They would block the spell, then send something similar his way. It was a mindless and pleasant repetition. Next he tried to curse wandlessly. This only got him into a sweat: he stared ahead to will the magic to appear, to form a layer against his skin like it had when he'd bested Bellatrix, but nothing came. He almost wished for a Mark nearby, to study that feeling of magic waving against his skin.

*It's a form of wandless magic,* Riddle offered.
Harry cursed loudly the Muggle way – it was still hard to get used to that voice. Riddle went on, unperturbed:

*They can help you tune in, so to speak. Another reason why it's wise to make use of them at this stage in your training.*

Harry growled. "I told you I'm not going to do that."

The rest of the training proved as fruitless as his first attempt, evaporating his earlier good mood.

There was a party Thursday night in the dorms, on accounts of Malfoy having smuggled in a stash of liquor. The timing was either very fortunate or unfortunate, depending one's view.

"So let me get this straight," Ron said during afternoon break, eyebrows raised. The weather was pleasant enough for them to meet in the courtyard: he had just washed the mud from his hands and was now chewing with gusty on a pumpkin pie Harry had brought from the kitchens. "First you're going to the Slug Club, with, you know, the wine. And then onto the booze in the dungeons." He shook his head, finishing the second piece in record time. "Boy I could use me some of that."

Harry chuckled. "Well, come along then. It's not just the Slytherins you know." He straightened on the stone bench. "Actually, that's a good idea. Let's crowd it up a little."

Ron wiped the crumbles from the bench. They caught the eye of a nearby robin, which tilted its head at the tiny particles.

"Nah, don't really feel like the company."

"All the more reason to annoy him."

His friend turned to regard him, expression serious. Harry felt his smile slip a little.

"You know what Malfoy did to Neville the other day?" Ron murmured, as if the birds were listening in. "After classes on Monday Neville counts the yields in the stockroom, right. Don't know how the git's caught wind of it, but he came down and he knocked the ink jar all over the place. Neville had to start all over. He pushes him around as well I think, but Neville isn't saying."

They watched as more robins joined the first.

Perhaps Malfoy still felt cheated out of harassing Neville a week earlier in the entrance hall, Harry considered. He loosened his jaw enough to ask: "Does that happen a lot?"

Ron laughed, sitting back against the old stone wall. "What, Malfoy being a git, or Slytherins in general?"

He shrugged. Either.

"Well, it's mostly Malfoy and Nott being general douchebags. And Pansy. She's Head Girl."

"Who's Head Boy?"

"Terry Boot. He's fine, not too bright though, always mouthing off to the Carrows when they single out the Muggleborns. By the way, did you know Cho is doing a traineeship here? That's why she's back, I heard. Don't know why she's still putting up with that Michael Corner, that one. She could have about anyone she likes."
"Yeah, I heard." Harry swallowed, distracted by thinking of her long black hair, and Corner touching it. He paid for it with a shove to his midsection.

"Ouch!"

Ron's grin was shit-eating. "Thinking of making a move? You have a good shot, you know."

Harry scoffed, feeling his cheeks burn. Shit. He'd already claimed to have feelings for her, to cover for his switching sides on the Quidditch pitch. Not that he didn't think she was attractive, mind - they had dated for god's sake – but...

"She wants to become a teacher, she told me," he said just to say something. "Transfigurations."

"See?" Ron said, like Harry just made his point. Harry punched him on the shoulder. The bell signified the last class of the day, and he left Ron laughing silently on the bench.

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Ron had been right about the wine: it was ridiculously good.

"It's Amarone," Slughorn nodded towards him from where he sat at the head of the table when Harry paused to savour his first nip. As if that was supposed to mean something to him. Perhaps Voldemort would know, he thought flippantly, but going back to those blood-soaked memory doors wasn't his idea of a good time. He nodded his appreciation.

The first course had been served twenty minutes ago, but his stomach still rumbled. It was clear everyone was hungry from the long day.

Two places over Malfoy narrowed his eyes. "Isn't that, like, Muggle?"

Slughorn winked indulgently. "They make the best sort, dear boy."

"I'm not taking this shit," Draco whispered to Pansy beneath his breath.

"Take a sip, Malfoy," Harry ordered in a flat voice. Their part of the table quietened.

Malfoy hid his reaction quite well – there was only a slight tension to his eyes. He drank deeply in response, never taking his eyes off of Harry.

"And?" Harry asked.

Draco's mouth twisted. "Tolerable." Which they all knew was high praise for someone with access to a wizarding wine cellar. Malfoy's gaze flickered to his own glass. "You're full of shit Potter. You haven't even taken a proper sip yourself."

He had a point there. Harry barely kept himself from glancing at the wine in his own glass. He wasn't feeling too sure about splurging on beverages, now that Riddle had shown he could force his actions. Alcohol didn't seem to be a good way to cope with that.

"It tastes better when combined with food," Harry told him.

"True," Pansy nodded unexpectedly. When Draco threatened to continue he knocked back a large swallow, which tingled at the back of his throat, then quickly turned to listen in on Cho discussing the wins of the new season with Michael Corner.

"I don't think it's worth it in the end. He's bound to fly slower next week, due to the recovery time."
Corner tilted his head: "I've seen him come back from worse."

Their heads were close together now. Corner slipped a hand underneath the table inconspicuously.

Harry took another gulp.

"Say Potter," Pansy said softly. "I heard Filch tell one of the teachers that the Dark Lord was here last Friday. Did he pay you a visit?"

Harry felt the buzz from the wine hitting the back of his mind, then remembered he should wait for the food. Luckily, the main course sparkled in right then: a spicy Moroccan dish. The sound of cutlery and conversation filling the room gave him time to consider an answer. At least it would get him pointers with this crowd...

"Yes."

Pansy twisted a lock behind her ear, appearing nervous. "How is he? In person, I mean."

"Oh he's a right darling when nobody's looking."

Pansy barked a surprised laugh. Nott choked on something and had to cough loudly a few times.

Inside his mind it was quiet. *That's right*, Harry thought half to himself, though unsure whether Riddle could hear it all. *I'm endearing myself, which is what you like to see.*

"Do tell us," Daphne insisted next to him.

To Harry's right, Malfoy was deep in conversation with Slughorn and a flask of Crystallised Pineapple exchanged hands.

"He's bossy," he said for lack of anything to say that didn't involve the man's despicable character.

That earned him another laugh. He took a few bites, recalled the Vow he'd taken, which would prevent him from spilling the man's secrets.

He blinked as he caught the various fascinated gazes turned his way.

"He's impatient," he offered next. "He's very quiet – you never know when he walks into a room. I like his snake better, really," he concluded, which earned him another round of snickers.

"That's right, you're a parselmouth," Nott drawled. Harry still couldn't figure him out, with his flat, polite smile.

"Say something in Parseltongue," Daphne ordered again. His eyebrows raised as he turned to regard her. Clearly she was used to getting her way. He felt Cho's gaze burn on his left cheek, now that she was finished with her Quidditch talk.

He dropped his voice playfully. "Well, what do you want me to say?"

"Tell me I'm pretty."

"You're spoiled," Harry hissed instead. A chuckle sounded in his mind, making him clench the tablecloth.

Her admittedly pretty mouth opened a little in wonder. Terry Boot rolled his eyes at them both. He looked uncomfortable with the current company, which he normally took care to avoid, and Harry
wondered why he'd bothered to come at all. Strange how a dinner invite from a scheming teacher could change that. Neville, although invited, was absent.

When the course was finished Slughorn clapped his hands to get their attention: "My dear ladies and gents, a toast. To you, a promising new generation of witches and wizards."

They clinked their glasses obligingly. Slughorn went on to ask Malfoy about the next Quidditch game. Harry had to smother his grin at the way Malfoy's jaw clenched: clearly Slughorn hadn't caught up with the latest twist. This was the man who had led Tom Riddle down the path of immortality. Many months ago Dumbledore had told him this, before their private lessons were abruptly cut off. How would he ever get to that vital memory now, he wondered.

The party in the dungeons later that night meant a break from thinking altogether: the music was loud, the conversations were stilted, and the booze near the back wall seemed to be working on a permanent replenishing charm.

Harry chose a red drink that looked familiar, and which turned out to be the strawberry one he'd enjoyed before. He kept to superficial talk with the Slytherins. He was glad to see that the common room filled up with students from other houses after a while. Ron and Neville were absent of course, but Luna and Padma were there along with a girl named Su Li, as well as Justin Finch-Fletchley and Anthony Goldstein.

When everyone started dancing properly, Harry took a seat in a fauteuil in front of the fireplace, where Daphne joined him on the sofa, sipping what looked like something warm. He studied his next glass of strawberry stuff thoughtfully. This one tasted different somehow. He shrugged, setting it aside – enough alcohol for today.

"Too sweet, I take it?" Daphne asked loudly to be heard.

He shook his head. "I've had enough."

She raised her glass and took another sip.

"What is that?" He pointed for clarification, because the beat was low and wonky.

"Tea!" Daphne shouted back. She stood to lean over him. "I never drink anything else after a good wine," she said into his ear.

She was strapped into a tightly fitting, gothic-looking bodice.

He looked up when she laughed. He felt his cheeks grow hot and averted his eyes. "Sorry."

Her head lowered again, but not to his ear.

She kissed him.

He jerked, mouth opening in what would've probably been an embarrassing squeal, if her tongue hadn't slipped inside. Her hesitance while she was pushing him down into the seat was a heady combination, and he kissed her back. Daphne's legs came up to wrap around him in the seat, which was big enough for the both of them. His arms burrowed in her robes to draw her close.

The fireplace behind them draped shadows over their faces. She kissed him again.

The layers of her skirt where thin against his thigh. He closed his eyes at the sensations. A grunt escaped him when she moved slightly. What was she doing, he thought, right here in the middle of
the common room...

A glance over her shoulder showed him no one seemed to notice, really. Girls and boys were dancing close together, limbs gyrating to the music. Malfoy was entangled with Pansy on the left. Two girls sat trading kisses in a corner nearby. He recognised the dark skinned form of Zabini to his right, holding Cho close to a wall as he whispered in her ear. She laughed, spilling punch over her glass. She was wearing knee-length boots and a dark blue skirt, which Blaise was stroking. The fabric had risen slightly to reveal a milky thigh.

Daphne leaned down to bite lightly into his neck, stealing his trail focus. With a jolt he realised his nails had ripped through the fabric of her skirt. Daphne had gone still. He took a few steadying breaths, then pulled back slightly to study her.

"Are you all right?" he asked loudly, gesturing to clarify over the loudness of the music.

She nodded.

He closed his eyes in relief, rubbing them hard to fight off a sudden bout of sleepiness. Then he snapped them open again. Would she be expecting something of him...?

"Would you like to...?" He couldn't quite gather his thoughts on the subject.

"That's all right," Daphne said breathlessly. Her lips twitched in a mischievous smile. "Lucky girl, that one."

He stared up at her for a moment. "What?"

He looked around. The music was thumping, bodies were still moving.

"Don't worry, I won't tell," Daphne said into his ear, stroking the side of his face.

He shook his head. "No that's not..." He wasn't really, was he?

She stood and pulled at his arm before he could think on it further.

"Want to dance?"

Harry grinned and followed to join her.

Love to hear your thoughts.
Chapter 27

At the start of Potions on Monday Harry had just gotten to Zabini's table when Malfoy took the other seat – his seat – without even bothering to look at him. He was clearly still pissed about Harry's sabotage of his Quidditch star status. Harry did a mental shrug and turned to find another spot. At least he'd gotten a blissfully Malfoy-less weekend out of it.

Although he wasn't really sure why he had switched to the Slytherin team, he knew it would annoy the right people.

He beamed when Ron came walking through the doors. His friend gave a smirk in return. Ron had skipped potions class ever since he'd gotten branded, so this was a pleasant surprise. Harry figured it had to do with an often gloating Malfoy, and too few students to keep them out of each other's paths.

He gestured them both to a seat farthest away from Malfoy – which was to say two tables over. There was no room for talking, as they got to work immediately on the list of forty-two steps that Slughorn had waved on the blackboard. They were making a skin-strengthening solution.

Everyone hastened to gather their ingredients. Ron started cutting different plants into long segments with unerring speed. Harry could hardly keep pace.

Ron grinned. "This feels like gardening." He was sweating a bit; the only student that had kept on his outer cloak.

"Right," Harry said. "I'll dissect the frog then."

Unfortunately their table was right next to Nott. He'd already dissected his frogs and was now carefully adding fire to his and Daphne's cauldron. He'd rolled up his sleeves, and Harry's gaze fell on the red, blistered skin of his wrist, dulling the Dark Mark symbol underneath.

Harry swallowed hard, unable to draw his gaze away. Hadn't Nott gone to the infirmary, if the damage was so severe?

Too late he realised he'd been staring, when Nott caught his gaze.

One corner of the boy's mouth drew upwards. He raised the damaged arm ever so slowly as his grey eyes kept Harry rooted, only to pass a hand through his hair – for no reason Harry could see.
Then he stretched casually, which made the mark visible to anyone who looked their way.

Daphne did, and Neville behind him.

Nott winked, like they shared a secret, then ignored him once more to focus on his cauldron.

"Looks nasty," Ron murmured next to him. "Of course not to him, he's probably showing off the whole day..."
"Showing off?"

Ron paused to regard him. He shrugged. "It means the Dark Lord summoned him, or tortured him – gave him his personal attention anyway. So of course he wants everyone to know it."

He went back to cutting, leaving Harry to blink hard at his frog entrails. He had a sinking feeling that Nott was still watching them, so he took up his knife and mindlessly set to work.

Later that week, in the confines of his four-poster, his thoughts returned to the Horcruxes still out there. He remembered wanting to explore the attic of the manor during the summer, but he couldn’t remember going there. And he’d lost the pouch to destroy them with. Perhaps it was wishful thinking at this point, but he had to believe the pouch was still out there somewhere.

But in the meantime, there was actually something he could do. A creature nearby that had destroyed a Horcrux once before. In the depth of Hogwarts lay the body of the Basilisk. Unless Voldemort had decided to take a peek, it was still there.

He donned his overcoat, careful not to wake anyone, then took the dungeon corridors towards the stairs and up to the third floor. Luckily the halls were deserted as he walked towards the girl's lavatory.

"Myrtle?" His shoulders sagged in relief when there was no answer.

The faucet's snake seemed to wiggle at him.

"Open," he hissed

The tap glided down and vanished without a sound. A void appeared, grotesque in the cramped space. A sudden push against his windpipe made him cough, perishing the thought that Riddle wasn't tracking his every move. Well, he could hardly kill him, right?

"Harry?"

He jumped, then pulled his lips into a wry smile. He turned his neck to regard Myrtle's pearly presence. The pressure on his windpipe eased for him to greet her.

"You came to visit me?"

He nodded.

"I missed you!"

_She still hasn't been exorcised…?_ Riddle remarked, incredulous.

_Shut up_, he said internally. "I'm glad you're doing well."
"Well?" she returned shrilly. "You think I'm well? This is a terrible year. Those Slytherin girls, coming here to brew their putrid potions, laughing all the time, silencing me!"

"You could go somewhere else," he tried. "I heard Sir Cadogan is a bit lonely these days."

"You know very well that I can't go anywhere else, Harry," she returned with a silvery frown. "This is my home. And I don't think you've visited as much as you promised."

She has a point, Riddle murmured – although he couldn't know of Harry's promise, or lack thereof.

You caused this mess in the first place, he returned.

"Have there been any other visitors besides the Slytherin girls?"

She shook her head. "No… I was waiting for you actually."

We can still exorcize her.

"I'm being watched, so it was hard to get away."

Myrtle stopped carding her silvery hair, blinking her large eyes at him. "You shook off your guard for me?"

"That's right."

He stood, unsure whether to move forwards with his plan. His eyes were drawn to the black tunnel next to his sneakers hole.

Myrtle clapped her hands. "Let's play a game."

"I can't right now. Listen, I've got to go down there before they notice I'm gone."

She was suddenly right in his face, eyes narrowed with suspicion. She looked so young that way. It made him wonder about the mental state of a person after they’d witnessed their own gruesome death.

Harry hissed when an unexpected pain spiked along his scar, and an image of a freshly-dead Myrtle assaulted his mind. I hardly touched her at all before I killed her, Riddle supplied.

He shook his head to dispel the scene.

"Why do you have to go there?"

"What?" Harry thought a beat. "Er… detention. Myrtle I've really got to go-"

"What did they threaten you with?" Myrtle said suddenly.

Harry blinked at her. "Nothing."

With that he stepped over the edge into the abys. Myrtle's frustrated followed him downwards, where he landed softly on a pile of dead snakeskin.

The Chamber of Secrets was just as he remembered it: dank, gloomy, with stone snakes of all sizes on the pillars and ceiling. And deathly quiet.

A dank smell made itself known as he passed into the main chamber. The sense of stale air –
magical as well as physical – wafted from what was left of the huge Basilisk, which covered at least a third of the chamber's surface.

The carcass was a dry grey husk now, void of fluids. The basilisk's large eyes were still striking. He crouched down on level with her one remaining fang. His arm remembered the pain from its counterpart with a twinge.

The poison was supposed to be rare and powerful. It certainly had taken Tom Riddle down a notch. He drew back into that moment – of tearing the fang through the pages, hearing Tom scream and scream…

"Ow!"

He tasted blood where his teeth had chewed on his tongue. He scowled when he realised who had caused it. Ignoring his unwelcome host, he stood to explore his surroundings.

Now that he was older the chamber no longer looked as large as it used to. Gliding his fingers along the slightly uneven surfaces around him, he supposed that even wizarding space had its limits when it had to be cut from Hogwarts' very stones.

He looked around. There was symmetrical passageways leading away from the main chamber. He strained his eyes in the green light of the torches for a glimmer of jewellery, or a protruding lever, or something. But no hidden objects revealed themselves. Riddle kept his silence. He didn't even mock him when many minutes of fruitless searching had passed. Probably a bad sign, he thought with a sigh.

Walking back to the main chamber, he felt at the flank of the monstrous tooth of the basilisk. When nothing painful happened, he wrapped both his palms around the base. This caused the layers of dust to smear all over his hands and drift in the air. He sneezed.

Then he pulled at the tooth, hard.

Except for his hands turning numb, nothing happened. The tooth hadn't moved a bit.

Right. This was the same as pulling teeth, times a hundred. He brought out his wand. It couldn't be that hard, cutting through the musk. Alive the basilisk was a creature made from strong muscles. Now there was only a sunken frame, nibbled by time and rodents.

He murmured a severing charm.

The tough material parted from the frame, taking part of the scaly cheek with it. The flesh revealed below was of a darker variety grey.

He sat back on his hunches, carefully lowering the fang-with-skin-bits to the ground. He felt nauseous. The snake made him think of Nagini, his Nagini. He wanted to throw up, but clamped down on the urge.

When he was certain his dinner would stay in, he stood on wobbly feet.

_She's grown on you, hasn't she_, the youthful version of Voldemort drawled in mock compassion.

"That's all you Riddle," Harry said aloud, lightheaded still. He threw a shrinking charm at the fang, then hovered it to an inside pocket.

A second go-round revealed still no Horcrux-like objects or secret passageways.
You think Voldemort could have put his Horcruxes here? He asked after what felt like a half hour of silence all around. No point in beating around it, the man could hear his every thought...

Without warning his throat closed up – all the way. He bent over wheezing trying to breathe, but it was like he didn't know how all of a sudden, his lungs couldn't fill properly...

You've got some nerve, boy.

Don't call me that, Harry thought reflexively.

Hmm, a strong distaste for the word. Why is that I wonder...

Images flickered in and out of sight, too fast to see. But then something came into focus…

"Boy." Vernon's snarling face came into his thoughts – again thinking preceded self-control. The male Dursley set his claws in young Harry's arm and dragged him back to his cupboard.

Ah, poor Harry. Hated you, did they?

"Shut up," he gasped.

Riddle laughed softly.

All those childish memories of a dark, small space make sense now.

He felt a sudden rage. "That orphanage you went to couldn't have been pleasant either," he snapped. "Luckily Dumbledore came to save you, right?"

Riddle hissed a string of feverish words: You might want to be a bit more careful, Potter, I could crush your tiny mind until you are nothing but a shell for me to use-

So why haven't you done it yet? he returned.

He got a fleeting impression of annoyance. When I'm certain it will work. In the meantime, we shall coexist.

The pressure on his throat vanished.

He straightened. Well, that concluded the useful part of the evening, Harry thought and stalked the black stones towards the exit. There he murmured the incantation for the sticky-rope charm, and a rope shot out of his wand, climbing upwards. He put his weight on the first knot of the rope.

Why was it called a Chamber of Secrets anyway, if there was nothing there…

You're not worthy of its secrets.

Harry sighed as he pulled himself upwards to the next knot. It occurred to him that with Snape, Riddle had just taken control of his mouth. "You're going to report this, aren't you?"

Of course not, Harry, Tom Riddle said, his tone caressing.

Right.

I promise. And Lord Voldemort keeps his promises.

"Thanks," he breathed, winded from keeping his body in line with the rope. So kind of Riddle to
not rat him out, heart-warming really. Perhaps he feared the same thing Harry feared – getting locked away again.

*You have to promise me something in return though,* Riddle went on, ignoring this.

Harry rolled his eyes. "What is it?"

*A favour, to collect later.*

"As long as it isn't killing or maiming, or anything like that."

*Deal."

"Harry?"

His feet jerked, making the rope swing wildly. He'd forgotten about Myrtle. As he finished the climb he tried to appear casual, like he did this every other day.

"You went in. Just like that awful boy did, the one who- "

"Yes, well I had detention down there. Let me tell you it's no fun. There's something wrong with the plumbing, Filch wasn't kidding. Have you noticed?"

Distracting Myrtle was easy. She frowned in thought. "Yes actually. Every now and then I hear a noise like something large is moving through them."

That would be Nagini. Harry rubbed back his unruly hair. His hand came back filled with cobwebs.

"I have to be off." He went for the door. "Take care Myrtle. I'll see you next time I get a detention down here, which is probably soon," he called over his shoulder, and was rewarded with a smile.

888

After Transfiguration class on Friday morning, Harry was deliberately slow packing his things. He waved off Dean with a pointed look towards the teacher's desk.

Transfiguration was one of the few classes Dean was allowed in, and Harry could tell by his red cheeks that it lifted his spirits immensely to just be among his classmates and learn magic. Perhaps he should start up some kind of remedial D.A. in the Room of Requirement, he considered. Then all the Muggleborns would be able to study the subjects they weren't allowed to attend now.

Dean shrugged in answer, then left.

"What's on your mind, Potter?" McGonagall intoned behind him. She was leaning back against the desk, arms folded. She smiled warmly, although her eyes were regarding him with a narrow look.

"I sometimes visit Dobby in the kitchens."

He had done so last night. Dobby and the other elves weren't looking any better than they had a month ago.

McGonagall's eyebrows rose slightly at the choice of subject. "Yes?"

"Well, I noticed the elves are looking rather exhausted because of what they have to do. They're clearly overworked – not only do they have to clean the castle, they're also out at night, at the beck and call of every Death Eater now."
Minerva rubbed her brow. "Yes I'm aware, Potter. There's nothing much to be done about it."

Harry threw his hands in the air. "Don't these people have their own elves?"

"Only the oldest magical families." She clasped her hands in front of her. "The newer Death Eater families thought they were entitled to elves as well, when Riddle took over. But as you know a house elf is bound to a family. Which make the Hogwarts elves targets for Riddle's henchmen. So you're right, there is too much work for them at the moment."

Harry tapped a nearby desk in thought. "What about employing people to do the work?"

McGonagall laughed. "You are so level-minded Harry. These wizards and witches don't think that way. For the last three centuries having a house elf has meant status in the wizarding world. The reality is that Dobby and the others are trapped to do their bidding, just like we are."

"Could I- could I use this foundation nonsense to help them?"

"Why do you call it nonsense?"

Harry was thrown for a moment. "I don't think that just because it's got my name, I'll actually be allowed to change things."

"There is power in a name, as you know." The witch smiled mischievously. "You might surprise the Wizengamot with your well thought out plans. They'll certainly listen to you, at least. Then they're going to need a pretty good reason to block them."

Harry snorted. "Right, who's going to help me with that?" But then he knew the answer.

McGonagall's eyebrows had found their peak. "I am, of course."

888

The Portkey – a small stone – had just dropped him off on the steps of Voldemort's manor. He tossed it onto the lawn before making his way inside on reluctant feet. A letter from the man at Sunday night's dinner had bade Harry to make an appearance immediately after. With no explanation as to why.

Harry cocked his head.

Classical music.

It came from the drawing room. He felt a flutter of nerves as he pushed open the French doors. The Dark Lord was standing near the large windows, appearing to be reading something.

Here the sound came at him from all sides. The piece of music was beautiful, ancient sounding. A harpsichord and a set of violins played in a mesmerising, rigid rhythm. Harry glanced around but couldn't find anything resembling a wizarding radio.

Without looking up Voldemort gestured towards the settee in front of the large fireplace.

"Sit down."

Harry curled up in one corner of the giant thing. As if sensing him, the fire sprang to life.

The Dark Lord had gone back to his reading. Harry waited for a beat, then sat back, enjoying this moment without a bodyguard.
Music was an experience he never really bothered with, despite Dean's valiant attempts to get him hooked on rock-'n-roll. There had been something swinging on last weekend, but he couldn't recall. He felt a blush creep up his neck – he'd been a bit preoccupied at the time. Daphne probably wanted to know what this was about, one way or another.

He tilted his head to rest on the back of the upholstery. There was a theme echoing between the violins and the keyboard, while the minor chords set a dramatic mood.

"Do you know what it is?"

Harry jumped. Damn how that man's voice always managed to make him twitch with nerves.

"I don't. Sir." he added hastily, straightening to glance over his shoulder.

"It's a concerto by Bach. He was gifted in the ritualistic magical arts, but decided to waste his talent on music."

"Perhaps music was his favourite art," he said after the silence held. Was Bach really a wizard? He wouldn't take the man's word for it. Hermione would know…

Voldemort walked over to sit down on the other side of the settee. Harry tried not to fidget at his proximity.

"You appear tired."

Up close, the red gaze was like the threat of a sharp object nearby. Voldemort's white face was bland, without expression, like Harry's own must be when the Horcrux shard sent calmness through him. He kept silent, annoyed suddenly at his own inability to show some of the hatred he felt for this man. Would he always be a good little boy when in in his presence?

The devil in front of him seemed to expect an answer, in any case. "I came from Dark Arts training with Snape."

"Severus tells me you are interested in the wandless magics."

The music shifted to a much slower pace – the next part probably. Harry stayed silent, wishing he could yell at the man.

"But you cannot summon it at will."

He bit his tongue. Voldemort's lips twitched. "Your hatred of me makes your magic restless. The Dark Arts are a state of restlessness. Pour those emotions in a dark spell and you might succeed." He raised an eyebrow. "I'm sure you can pull it off in your next training, what with Severus being your teacher."

*He was Albus' most trusted colleague,* Harry thought. But saying it would just be a treat for the Dark Lord. He stared out the window mutinously, not wanting to see the man gloat.

"Skeeter's article caused quite a stir in the ministry."

"Yes well, it doesn't mean squad does it?" Harry hissed at him. "It's all bollocks!"

It was eerie to see no change in Riddle's countenance – like Voldemort was already humouring him, and acting up was how he expected Harry to behave.

Harry bristled when no reply came, turning back to the fire. He was bursting to stand, to get away,
but actually doing it was a whole different story. He felt like he might go crazy…

"You appear to be labouring under the impression that you are entitled to things," the Dark Lord said after the silence had become like a third person in the room. "I am giving you a gift, to pursue your interests-"

Harry forced himself to glance at the man. "Forgive me if I don't believe you're going to grant Muggleborns and creatures the same rights as purebloods now." Whatever McGonagall might say, that wasn't going to happen.

Voldemort chuckled. "Harry," he said, and it was nearly affectionate, "I am establishing ways for us to coexist with the least amount of drama, since I have to suffer your presence for quite some time. If I wanted to fake a story, I'd ask Skeeter to report on the Muggle border. Now tell me. How are you finding the ghost of my past?"

Harry knew he was being sidestepped. He opened his mouth, but his throat closed up right at that moment. He coughed and send a mental curse at the soul shard squeezing his oxygen supply.

"Nosy," he settled on with gritted teeth.

"It talks, does it?" Voldemort breathed, suddenly appearing interested. He drew closer on the settee, to Harry's horror. "So much turmoil on this subject. Do share…"

His spidery hand touched upon Harry's cheek, where Nagini had left silver markings – the second time he appeared fascinated by it.

Now he'd done it and caught the man's interest. Harry scowled inwardly at his own sloppiness. "He sometimes comments on things."

"Such as?"

"My classmates. How I'm pants at potions, and Malfoy's so great at it," he told his knuckles, trying for annoyance.

A finger turned his cheek towards the horrible face. "You're lying," Voldemort hissed menacingly. "Let's try that again..."

"He's been helping me get back at Nott."

That… shouldn't get him into trouble, should it? Or could Voldemort sense he was now basically justifying torture? He had to remember it was Tom Riddle who had pushed him into it.

*It's Slytherin, they're used to it,* Riddle broke into his thoughts, as if that was any excuse. *Besides, it's wise to assert dominance early on.*

"Understandable." The Dark Lord appeared amused. "It pleases me that you are taking advice from my younger self." Harry immediately resolved to avoid saying pleasing things in the future.

Voldemort straightened to summon something from the nearby chestnut cabinet, which he waved onto the round table in front of them. It was a rectangular wooden box, or briefcase. It had the markings of a trick-track board, one of Dean's favourite games. Voldemort turned his gaze back to Harry. Then the Dark Lord draped a black-clad arm over Harry's shoulders.

Harry froze, hardly daring to breathe. The man was holding him like it was the most natural thing in the world, like -
Voldemort was saying something close to his ear:

"- try and open the box but without a wand; make your magic flow from your fingertips."

Harry nodded, placing shaking hands over the wooden object. He waited, trying to feel something, some kind of energy. Looking down at the object made it seem terribly mundane and un-magical.

Nothing happened.

Voldemort waved his wand over the box: "Try again."

Once more he touched the wood, willing it to open. It did so with a creaky sound.

He blinked at the round wooden pieces. It was like his magic had loosened around him just enough to do the job.

"Good. Now make the pieces float."

Harry thought the man would be cold, like a Dementor, but he was actually starting to feel the warmth of his arm through the layers of fabric. He focused back on the pieces – imagining them floating was no use, he had to capture that feeling of expending his magic beyond the border of his skin.

But it looked all too solid. Focussing about his actual skin only made it harder to imagine how he'd gotten through earlier.

"Here, feel it," Voldemort said, holding out his free left hand, fingertips turned upwards. And even though Harry had also killed Umbridge per this man's instructions, and he knew this was silly, touching his hand was just out of the question. "I'm not going to-"

"You are thinking too much. You need to feel the sensation in order to master the spell."

Harry brought his hand closer. He was relieved when he could sense the restless charge to the air without actually making contact. Magic spilled from Voldemort's fingers into the air and over his hand, twisting left and right, stilling sometimes then speeding up again,

So wandless magic wasn't about pushing, it was more about freedom.

Harry tried to emulate him, even though there was a nagging guilt in his stomach that he was taking lessons from this murderer now. But hey, he could use this against him some day…

He thought of his firebolt, cutting through air, the whole sky was his to explore-

Something pressed on his fingertips from the inside, the same feeling as when he had got the box to open, and he knew he'd gotten it right when the first pieces started to float. Harry let go of his concentration and the pieces clattered back into the box. His hand was tingly.

"Very good, Harry."

As much as he wanted to, he couldn't ignore the feeling of pride he got now that he finally got wandless magic to work.

888

The next week was soon known as the week of the term assignments. Professors were handing them out to all fifth through seventh years at the end of each class.
On Tuesday in charms the class groaned as they got their slip of parchment from Flitwick with instructions: the fifth term assignment of the week was yet another theoretical research project. So far only Dark Arts and Transfiguration were practical examinations to test their skills after Christmas holidays (and Harry really didn't want to think about the holidays just now, because Voldemort had made it clear last week that Christmas would be the time when he was to join in the mission to foreign dignitaries).

Professor Flitwick bounced in excitement. "No, no, this really is a fine subject I've chosen for you. Only with a good grasp of the theory will you be able to excel in the field of Charms. And I will reveal now that the person who gets an excellent score on this term assignment… will be allowed to practice duelling with me!"

Harry looked up to see Padma's eyes widen at the chance to win a duelling session with the Professor. Harry wondered if he might persuade the man to show off the moves that had made him a champion later.

"Not to worry, there will be plenty of time for practice. At the end of the year, your examiner Ms. Cammon will test you on your duelling skills."

After class Harry followed Terry Boot to the Ravenclaw table, where he spotted Luna.

"So how are things with you?" he asked as he sat down. He was glad to have an afternoon without Slytherins for a change. Although Draco had to guard him between classes, he had made a deal with Terry Boot to supervise him when he wasn't sharing classes with Harry.

Terry joined in the conversation on Harry's left side: "Do they leave your stuff alone, now?"

There was no need to explain who "they" were. Luna glanced past Harry with her big eyes. "Not really, though they are getting sloppier. Last night I saw Pansy Parkinson wear my necklace, the one I'd gotten from my dad."

"Did you confront her?" Harry asked.

Luna smiled, looking tired. "No. I thought it best to get it back another time, when she's not so taken with it."

Harry clenched a fist underneath the table, while his other hand speared a carrot into two pieces.

"Look, this isn't right Luna," Terry said, shaking his head. "I'll have a talk with her. As Head Boy I can demand that she give the necklace to me."

Luna looked down at her plate, making her butterbeer earrings swing lightly. "I don't think that will help."

"Well," Terry went on, his annoyance making his voice rise in volume, "They can't just do whatever the hell they want. I got my badge to make sure they know they're not above the rules."

"Good for you," Padma across from them raised her pumpkin juice in a kind of salute.

"I hear Dean also has to deal with shit from the Slytherins," Terry said, looking at Harry. "Do you know something about it?"

Harry shook his head. "Don't sleep there anymore."

"That's right you're sleeping with the snakes!" Padma exclaimed. "Can you do something about
this? I don't know, threaten Pansy with one of your Dark Arts spells?"

"Sure, I can try." Why not. He wasn't making friends there anytime soon, anyway. Well except for Zabini, he was alright. And Daphne.

"You know I've been thinking. Why don't we start a new club? Something that's for everyone," Anthony said airily, gesturing with his fork. "Flitwick's got me thinking, a duelling club?"

"I'm not sure that the Slytherins will behave any better when they're at wand-point," Padma said dryly.

"At least we can put them down a notch," Anthony, a half-blood himself, smiled thinly.

888

The atmosphere of a Slytherin party was quite different from that of a non-Slytherin party, Harry noticed when he entered the Room of Requirement, which he had found because of a piece of parchment pinned to the wall in Neville's handwriting that said "Extracurricular Muggle studies". Here, between the Gryffindors, Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws, everyone was dressed in their favourite costume, dress robes or Muggle suit, the laughter was raucous, people were chasing each other over the dancefloor – it was all very unrefined and very welcome.

Someone pushed a smoking glass into his hand, probably Firewhiskey.

"Harry, you made it!" Parvati exclaimed. She frowned as she drew closer in a shimmering evening dress. "You didn't change into anything, these really your favourite clothes then?"

"Didn't realise we could go all out," Harry said with a grin.

Harry raised his glass for a sip of Firewhiskey. He hesitated with the glass at his lips, eyes drawn to all the rebelling youth surrounding them, before his gaze found Ron who approached them with Lavender in tow.

"I shouldn't."

"Shouldn't what?" Parvati asked

Harry laughed. "I shouldn't be here, unsupervised, I think."

Ron had a wicked gleam in his eyes. "Oh? What are they going to do if they find out eh, Mark me?" He laughed. "Or torture me some more?" He raised his own glass, looking very mature all of a sudden. "Bottom's up, you've earned it."

And proceeded to toss back the entire brown content.

Harry thought it wise not to copy the move just now, all mental passengers considered. Ron was right, the party was a good choice, especially because he could finally forget about said passenger or Slytherins for a whole evening. The music was loudest in the centre of the dancefloor, so his Gryffindor classmates steered him off to the side to hear.

"Just had my initiation," Ron was saying to the group. "Check this out." He pulled up his Weasley sweater to reveal a stomach which had geometrical patterns carved into it. Neville and Lavander grimaced.

"Looks nasty," Neville commented, echoing Harry's thought.
"I know right?" Ron said, grinning and tossing back another shot.

"Hey mate, perhaps slow it down a little," Harry said softly.

Ron pointed at him with his empty glass. "Great. He's a great friend, that one."

"Oh boy," Lavender muttered. "Come on, let's get you some water."

Harry watched them walk towards the drinks table, which had different kinds of moss and plants growing from the side. He wasn't sure whether they were an item now. He should ask Neville later.

"Your idea?" he asked Neville, gesturing to the tropical table.

"That one? Yeah," Neville nodded.

"I imagined a beach in one of the rooms, and it actually appeared!" Parvati said excitedly. "Came like poof out of the floor. You can really get a tan there, even take a swim. I'll show you later."

"Want to see something cool?" Neville said excitedly when the others had drifted off towards the dancefloor. He gestured past the punch bowl, towards what seemed to be a hallway to rooms Parvati was talking about.

Neville was in a weirdly intense mood today. Perhaps Malfoy was starting to get to him, Harry considered as he followed, past a room filled with sea creatures and a Halloween themed room, with orange lanterns and life bats. They waved at Luna who was sipping punch on a giant pumpkin with Hannah Abbott.

In the next magical space an actual cave had been recreated. Harry could see nothing beyond the darkness of the entrance. Around the gaping mouth were glistening stalactites or -mites of all colours, although there was no one here to enjoy it.

"Wow," Harry breathed. "The Room really outdid itself. How did you manage this?"

Neville said: "It took about seven tries before we got it to make more than one theme. Gave me a headache. Common."

They carefully stepped into the unknown between the glistening rocks.

"You organised all this?"

A few meters in, it was too dark to see anything.

"Lumos," Neville said. "Luna and me both."

"Why? I mean it's a great party."

"We thought we could do with a bit of inter-house cheer. Careful, there are tree roots ahead, don't ask me why..."

"No Slytherins?" he said.

Neville shrugged. "We told Blaise and Daphne along with a few younger years, so I'm still hoping they'll show up." His voice was casual in the way of one determined not to feel bothered.

The temperature dropped. With the wand light between them they walked. He wondered what was at the end, or whether this was already the thing Neville wanted to show him.
Further onwards, actual tree roots started to appear from the dense rock formation. Typically something Neville would think up.

Harry, glancing downwards every few seconds, lowered his voice even though he was quite sure there was no one around: "I hear Malfoy is being more of a git than usual."

To his surprise Neville just shrugged, making the light at the tip of his wand tremble a moment. "He's frustrated, I think. The great Malfoy family, out of favour again. Just when Draco thinks he has it all, he's put in his place."

The Longbottoms were loyal to the Order, but Neville they seemed to have left alone. Ironic, that. "You've probably got more freedom than Draco now," Harry remarked.

"Ron showed me a few warding tricks he's gotten from his brother. If I can get a bit of Draco's blood, I could ban him from the greenhouses completely."

Harry grinned. "Just say the word and I'll give him a nice nosebleed, return the favour he did me last year." Neville laughed.

All of a sudden Harry shivered as he felt an aggressive caress of something pass over his back, the sensation like a waterfall. Next to him Neville's shoulders hunched, but he kept pace.

*The wards,* Riddle suddenly snapped in his mind, making him jump.

What was going on?

"Almost there," Neville said and his intense gaze made Harry's heart thrum with nerves. Riddle was now dragging Harry's feet, apparently not one to take risks. His legs seesawed between two owners and he stumbled.

"Harry?"

Neville's light was meters away. Harry cast his own Lumos to see. His scar burned then. He gritted his teeth, throwing one leg in front of the other with all his might. "Coming."

Something grabbed his arm. He whirled, throwing a Reducto without pause. It struck a shield that lit up the tunnel briefly.

*Sectumsempra,* Harry thought next, then froze for one second when the person laughed - he must have blocked already. He knew that voice, but how could it be...?

He paid dearly for his moment of confusion when Mad-Eye Moody twisted his wand-arm behind his back with such force that he tipped over.

Positively alive, then.

Harry clamped down on a yell of pain as all the muscles in his arm burned fiercely. His fingers went instantly numb and his wand was jerked away. His arm felt even more lifeless without magic flowing through it.

"Neville," Harry gasped in warning. Mad-Eye chuckled, trapping his left arm as well.

"Incarcerous," the man only whispered, pulling his arms in front of him now to bind his hands together.

That made Riddle loosen his muscles completely and Harry dropped down. Moody was ready though, keeping him in a tight hold. He whispered something else and the ropes burned against his
skin a moment before cooling off.

_Magical suppressant_, Riddle whispered at him.

"No wriggling away now," Mad-Eye growled positively gleeful, "You're surrounded."

Lumos spells struck up around him, revealing Shacklebolt and Mr. Weasley. He wanted to speak but Riddle wasn't letting him choose the words:

"How's life without the eye, Moody?" Riddle asked airily from his mouth as Moody pulled him – _them_ – to the left, though Harry knew that inside, the young Dark Lord was seething.

Moody's remaining eye stared him down. Harry turned his head to take in the sight of Order members regarding him with grim expressions. Could they know?

He was tugged back, much more gently, and wrapped in someone's arms. His fingers twitched - he hated being manhandled, but then again these people were on his side...

Magic suddenly snapped to attention over his skin. Clearly Riddle didn't agree.

The one holding him jolted, probably from whatever wandless magic Riddle had brought out. The voice of Remus Lupin said softly: "It's no use Harry. Try to hold on tight now."

Before he could get over the jolt to his heart, something heavy was pressed to his side, a Portkey, and in the next second he was tugged away from Hogwarts.

They landed somewhere soft. The smell of nature hit his nose – tall grass and autumn leaves, standing next to a country road.

"Remus," Harry said hoarsely, trying to turn around but Lupin had clasped his shoulders tightly. He gave him a gentle push to start walking.

"Harry, we can't right now." Remus sounded pained. "First Albus wants to talk to you."

He walked them down the road towards a familiar and welcome sight: the twinkling evening lights of the Burrow. A crunch of gravel told him that at least two people had followed with another Portkey.

Harry swallowed against the burning in his stomach as the dilapidated building filled his sight. The robes cut his arms, making them tingle. They weren't sure about him – or they were too sure. Either way, it couldn't mean anything good.

Mrs. Weasley came out to pull him into a hug. The affront this caused his silent passenger made him smile back at her.

"Oh it's so good to see you again, finally," Molly babbled. "After the horrible news in September-"

"We are on a schedule here, Molly," Lupin intervened behind him, apologetic.

"Of course, we shouldn't dally," Mrs. Weasley nodded with a final fuss of his hair - he had no idea what he looked like these days, never bothered to check - and led him inside towards the kitchen.

There, at the end of the table with a steaming tea set in front of him, sat Albus Dumbledore. Harry knew it but he still wasn't prepared – his knees went weak from a strange mix of elation and fear.

Harry felt defenceless under his blue gaze. The man's yellow robes glimmered where the soft light
of the chandelier touched them, giving him a serene appearance.

He was pointed towards the chair to Dumbledore's left. There was a hint of apple pie in the air. Up close he saw that Dumbledore wore matching yellow and orange patterned gloves, which was definitely a new thing.

Lupin nodded to his leader, then left. They were alone.

The old headmaster smiled warmly. "Welcome back Harry to the home of the Weasley family. Tea?" A cup drifted towards him. He curled his hands around the warm tea, glad to have something to focus on.

Dumbledore spoke: "I apologise for this sudden ambush, and for the stringent measures we've taken to smuggle you out. Though I'm sure you agree that both are necessary?"

Harry nodded, going back to studying his tea. The former headmaster seemed troubled. Riddle was silent, perhaps because of the dizzying feelings tugging at his heart every few seconds - he could never get used to his emotions, it seemed.

His old mentor sighed, making him look up. The man's expression was pained as he said: "Before we can catch up, there is something in your mind which I assume you'd rather be getting rid of, correct?"

Harry nodded again, feeling like his vocal chords had dried up. His scar seared then and he bit his lip against the pain.

Dumbledore's gaze was awfully understanding. Tears burned his eyes. Riddle, having somehow wrestled past his aching emotions tilted Harry's head back to heave a loud scream of rage. Harry's magic was pulled from his core - or let out, it rather felt like - to crackle through his palms and over the tea cup.

Dumbledore's ebony wand pointed at him in a heartbeat, which he was kind of glad for. With a murmur of Latin, the pressure against his hands lessened. His hands felt cold.

"Come," the headmaster only said. The man's magic pulled him gently to his feet. The spell tugged him through empty hallways towards the back garden.

"Where were the Weasley's?"

Clouds made the night into a black hole beyond the porch. None of the garden lights were lit as they came to a stop somewhere in the darkness.

Dumbledore turned to him and lifted whatever had been controlling his movements. His glittering robes made him barely visible in the darkness.

Next the ropes fell from Harry's wrists, and he brought them around to massage the biting streaks gratefully.

Harry's shaking legs told him Riddle wanted to run, but his mentor's steady gaze kept him grounded. This moment was his, not Riddle's and he'd be damned if he released control now.

"Cast a Patronus for me, if you would."

Dumbledore held out what might be his wand. Harry grasped at it, not daring to break the stare to look. He nearly closed his eyes when familiar magic swirled into his arm at the touch. Riddle
buzzed against his scar.

"All right."

He thought hard. Seeing Remus alive and well was a good sign. Dumbledore's steadfast support, after all that had happened was heartening as well.

He bellowed the words and a stag jumped from his wand, to his relief. That turned into alarm when it turned around, charging at - *him*.

Harry stumbled backwards. He fell onto the grass just as the antlers made from pure light were brought downwards and closed the distance to pierce him

He had fallen on his back, eyes closed but there was no pain, only the feeling of warmth above him, and something pinning his neck to the ground. Opening his eyes made them water against the blinding spectacle of the stag, so he shut them. He was unable to turn his head. Where was Dumbledore?

A horrible cold crept over his shoulders. His legs twitched in fear. Harry tried to straighten but the Patronus stag held firm. His teeth chattered.

Riddle sketched a vision in his thoughts, of a Dementor bending down to kiss. *Get up Potter! You want your soul sucked out for all eternity?*

"Hold on Harry, this will take only a moment longer," Dumbledore uttered close to the ground next to him.

There was a rattling noise. Harry whimpered, no longer able to keep his panic at bay. "Please, no," he whispered back.

"We are almost there, my boy," Dumbledore murmured.

*I'm not staying for this. You can rot on your own.*

Harry screamed when the fiercest pain yet assaulted his forehead. His Patronus, still miraculously corporeal against the sides of his neck, kept his head in place. He couldn't imagine how it was still there, when his mind was being split by Riddle and his soul was about to be sucked.

His screams turned hoarse after a minute, or a few. It felt like a giant hand was squeezing his brain. He must have blacked out because in the next moment, the smell of something burning had him opening his eyes wide to a very different scene.

Dumbledore… wasn't here.

Small fires made a smouldering line in the grass in a circle around him. They were the only source of light, making it hard to see beyond. Whoever had cast it had chased away the Dementor, since the horrible rattling had stopped, thank Merlin.

His Patronus had disappeared as well. But he still had hold of his wand. He sat up slowly, nauseous.

Harry felt a deep stirring of betrayal thinking back to the creature Dumbledore had called. But at the same time it was for the best: clearly Dumbledore knew what Harry was now. Had he always suspected, or was this a recent development? Whatever the case, this was not the time to think about it.
He surveyed the grounds. Figures seemed to be dancing in the dark nearby. He was an easy target here. Keeping low to the ground Harry made for the outline of the Burrow, barely visible. He wondered why all the lights were out, but at least it was good to have the familiar stones at his back.

Edging past the corner, he saw the elder Nott's fierce scowl by the sickly green light of a killing curse; Remus Lupin flew to the side to avoid it, striking out with a blinding white. There, near the gate, was Bellatrix, duelling Tonks. Harry shook his head. Hadn't Tonks and Moody both been killed at the battle of Hogwarts?

He gripped his wand tighter, moving away from the relative safety behind him but still hesitating to join in, when something bright moved his way. It was a spell shooting towards him in a web-like pattern. He gave a startled yelp of pain when it glanced his shoulder with the sensation of a piercing blade.

His assailant hadn't been aiming at him: the ever-growing web sped onwards to clash against the shield of someone behind him with a sound like rain hitting glass. Both spells dissipated, and the darkness was once more thick around him.

Before he could take two steps, an arm on his shoulder stopped him.

"Get inside, Harry," Dumbledore spoke, and Harry detected urgency in his voice. He felt weak with relief.

"Potter!" an awfully familiar voice cut into whatever more the headmaster wanted to say – without a doubt he was the caster of the webbing spell that was now making his shoulder bleed profusely.

Harry shuddered at the sound. He was barely visible in the light of the still-smouldering fire, but Harry could recognise the shape of the man like the back of his hand now. Voldemort's outline drew closer, a mere twenty meters away.

Dumbledore had pushed Harry behind him. He was very glad to have the phoenix leader next to him. Albus was twisting his wand this way and that, and their adversary was responding with similar twitches, his gate never stopping. It looked like they weren't even casting, but Harry could feel the charged air – the spells were probably too fast to see, or undetectable in this poor light.

Harry turned on his heel to sprint for the Burrow, throwing out a shield just in case.

Voldemort let out a high-pitched laugh. He had to be seconds away now. "Oh, Harry," he bellowed, and the fake affection in his tone, hinting at something, made Harry turn his head.

The formidable wizards were conjuring: ropes transfiguring into squirming things – snakes probably – turning into metal, needle-like weapons-

"You think you're safe with Dumbledore?" the Dark Lord went on, lazily incinerating the heavy chains flying towards him. He wasn't even breathless.

"Harry, please," his mentor urged, his focus firmly on Voldemort.

He should go, he was distracting the man-

"What did he make you do, just now?" Voldemort's eyes flashed in rage. "Who do you think banished that Dementor?"

Harry swallowed before resuming pace.
"He doesn't care much about your soul, does he?"

He gritted his teeth as Riddle's voice only got louder as he got further away.

"But the Horcrux isn't really gone, is it?"

Harry frowned, coming to a stop near the window ledge. "What do you mean?" he yelled back.

Dumbledore went rigid, actually turning his head to regard Harry. He appeared perplexed, dismayed even. Voldemort was watching the former headmaster with unholy glee. They had paused in their duelling.

"Yes," the Dark Lord hissed. "You see? Your pathetic attempts are pointless. He will always be mine."

Harry reluctantly turned around again. The wizards regarded him in silence. Harry looked from the one to the other, not getting it.

"Harry," Dumbledore said softly, with a gentleness that hurt his ears. "You just spoke Parseltongue."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: The concerto by Bach is the concerto in A minor for harpsichord, violin, fluit and oboe. It's inspired by the Concerto in B minor for four violins by Vivaldi. Start with the first part here: www (dot) youtube (dot) com (slash) watch? v=QA1L0SsEXxU (I really recommend listening to all three, I can't quite choose my favourite between them. And no, I am in fact a young person, and yes, classical music is the best thing there is. Ahem.)

Please review! That's what I'm writing this for :).
Chapter 28

"In essence merged," Voldemort hissed with a sharp grin, apparently in response to Dumbledore's statement.

The phoenix leader sent a volley of what looked like tiny glass shards. Tom Riddle blocked with a minimum of wrist movements, then returned his own crippling spells with dizzying speed. Harry recognised only some of them, ones meant to incapacitate, numb, wound– or scrape the skin from the body, in case of the Dark Lord. Luckily, his old mentor seemed unsurprised by anything that came his way.

"What- what does he mean?" Harry stammered after watching numbly for a minute.

The wound on his shoulder burned. Bloody streaks were slowly creeping down his wand arm onto the tips of his fingers, making them sticky.

The sorcerers in front of him twisted and turned in a macabre dance, only a few meters between them. The little fires threw shadows that concealed rather than revealed their expressions. Albus seemed calm, while Voldemort's figure was all energy. Harry hated his own inaction – he dare not interfere, not with the speed of their duelling.

Bellatrix' distinctive cackles cut through the air behind him just as Voldemort bit out his next words, which Harry strained to hear:

"You've been coddling your golden boy too much, Dumbledore. Sheltered him from your darkest suspicions."

"They are neither suspicions nor dark. Harry's soul remains whole and strong," Dumbledore said in a low tone that was even harder to make out.

Harry's eyes were rooted to Voldemort's wand. Suddenly he was cast back to that sunny day, when Watanabe had been the bonder for their Vow. In the terror of earlier he had forgotten that trying to rip out the Horcrux would not end well for him. The Vow should be taking effect right about now, but... he felt no different, apart from his shaky legs in the cold of the night.

"What else did you keep Harry in the dark about, I wonder?" Voldemort sneered, throwing green flames which Dumbledore sidestepped, then negated with a freezing charm.

In the course of the night it had become clear that his mentor knew what he was, perhaps had known all along. He wouldn't easily forget the image of Dumbledore's hard gaze at the kitchen table.
A stray beam found Harry's position. Some kind of quidditch reflex made him duck out of the way just in time. The window behind him shattered.

Right, he was supposed to be getting inside... He carefully stepped through the broken glass, feeling a nick to his leg as his feet found purchase on the other side of the window. Inside he breathed slowly as he listened for intruders. He could barely make out the familiar forms of the cluttered table and sofa in the drawing room. There seemed to be no one here.

"The wizarding public will never submit to your radical agenda, Tom," sounded through the windowsill. Harry twisted his head to listen, feeling like an eavesdropper.

"The system of our government is far from perfect, we can agree on that. In fact, much like yourself I used to think I'd remake it into something better. I thought that meant showing the Muggles our true selves -"

There was a ringing sound where two curses met, and how did Dumbledore manage talking through all this?

"All it did was lead us into civil war, magical beings destroying each other--"

"But it was all for the greater good, was it not?" Voldemort jeered.

Harry inched over to the window to see. The man-monster was throwing an explosive volley of something that gleamed like metal, which Dumbledore swiped away, sparks setting the sky alight.

"Taking the Muggles in was your mistake, old man," the Dark Lord went on with an eerie smile, like he knew he'd scored a point. "I don't merge with them, I simply eradicate them wherever they impede our progress."

Voldemort's next curse was blocked with a wall of dirt that surged up around Dumbledore, pulled straight from the ground. The effect was like a small earthquake. Harry stumbled, grasping for balance, and cursed loudly when his palm met the jagged broken edge of the window.

Around him objects quivered in their places or lost the battle with gravity altogether. He murmured a quick episkey. The unexpected sweet smell of fresh flowers hit nose, probably a vase knocked over – he didn't dare cast a lumos to check. Riddle's gift of perception would come in handy now, but he clenched his teeth against that thought.

It was unclear whether they were still talking, until the Dark Lord suddenly raised his voice:

"Such noble convictions you share with your old flame Grindelwald. Have you gone to visit him yet? Your great love, the one you were so quick to forgive for his bloodlust. You told everyone you had defeated him, but I hear you just couldn't bear to kill him..."

Harry gaped blindly into the darkness around him. Old flame?

"You see, Potter," the man went on, and he jerked in surprise at being addressed directly - "Love makes one weak."

The feeling of blood pouring over his arm was making him queasy – he should sit down-

"Harry!" a loud whisper behind him.

He spun with a curse on his lips, but strong hands pushed his wand aside. Again he felt naked without Riddle.
"There you are," the man said and he now recognised Mr. Weasley's voice. "Come, let's get away from that window, why are you standing there? Someone could see you."

"How are you, sir? How is the fighting going?"

It annoyed him how Arthur was studiously avoiding the name, as if that could banish the man's attack mere feet from them. The man guided Harry through the drawing room and into the tiny hall, where the light from the hanging lamp revealed dark scorch marks on the man's robes.

"Oh it's fine, Harry. The battle is turning in our favour, now that we've got reinforcements," Arthur smiled. "Let's say we have more friends now than we did before."

When his gaze reached Harry's eyes his smile stiffened at the edges, then relaxed again.

"Good," Harry said.

"Let me see." Arthur stated. Grasping his shoulders at arm's length, he gave Harry a once-over. "That is a nasty cut you've got there, and on your leg I see-"

"Did you know Voldemort's here?" Harry needled him.

Mr. Weasley flinched, whipping his wand left and right as if to check for intruders. "Don't say the name," he said harshly. "You should know by now it's not worth it. Yes, and I heard that last bit just now. Don't believe what he's saying, Harry."

"A-allright," he stammered, thrown by the sudden directness.

The man shook his head. "Can't imagine what kind of delusions he's been feeding you these past few months."

"I can think for myself, you know," Harry bit off, then forced his shoulders to relax. Here was a friend, come to help him get away.

Arthur raised a brow. "Can you, now?"

Harry looked away to study the plastic Muggle umbrella stand.

The hand on his shoulder was back. Mr. Weasley murmured: "I'm not here to judge you, Harry. You gave us quite a scare, that's all. I guess I'd better take you to Fred and George's. There you'll be safe."

"How did they manage to find me – a tracking spell?" Harry asked.

"No, we check for those. Now, quickly."

Despite the adrenaline in his chest, Harry had to smile when he saw the object the man took out with a flourish: a light bulb. He put a finger on the glass. With a "one, two, three," from Mr. Weasley they were wrenched from the Burrow. They arrived in a more brightly lit apartment floor. The space needed several glances to take it all in.

The octagon space was filled with stacks of gleaming orange-stickered boxes and barrels of all sizes bearing the mark of Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes, in some places nearly to the tall ceiling. Some were open - they revealed toys, potions, Hogwarts hall size candles, firework arrows, and weirdly shaped tools of unclear function. One corner of the room appeared to be in the middle of a flooding crisis: the floorboards were covered with a thick grey drab that stunk of brackishness. A
self-scrubbing broom and bucket were trying to reclaim the territory, to no avail. Four tall windows showed the night sky.

There was just enough space in the middle of the room for a round working desk. Two familiar redheads were seated on rickety chairs, grown men now really, staring Harry down with disturbingly intense gazes. Harry wondered if he reminded them of Ginny.

They looked to be in the middle of administration, quills in hand and tea nearby. A bouquet of Extendable Ears was draped in a tall butterbeer glass with a sign from Madame Rosmerta's. A jazzy tune was coming from the radio next to it. One of the twins slammed it like a Muggle alarm clock to make it go quiet.

Mr. Weasley scraped his throat. "Boys, we've hit a bit of a snag in the plan. I hope you don't mind Harry staying here, just until things settle down."

The silence held a bit too long for Harry's comfort. Then Fred or George said: "Sure thing, dad. Hi, Harry."

"Hi," Harry returned quietly.

Mr. Weasley was wringing his hands, then realised he was doing so. He dropped them with a sigh. "I have to get back."

The other twin stood abruptly with a sound of wood scratching on wood. "How's the fighting going? Your message sounded bad."

"Well enough, Albus managed to signal in time when Riddle showed up and breached the wards." Rubbing the back of his head, he went on with a grimace: "We're not sure."

"Wait," the seated twin cut in, frozen to his seat. "You're not saying Riddle is at the Burrow?"

"U-No-Poo, in person?" said his brother.

"How the hell-"

"Albus is taking care of it. And this is why I have to get back," Arthur said hastily, pulling his wand.

The person Harry decided to call Fred locked eyes with Harry, who felt a burn in his stomach. His brother snatched his wand from the table. "I'm coming with you, I'll just use one of the-"

"NO," Arthur bellowed suddenly. Surprised by his own outburst he continued more quietly: "We've been over this. They'll know it's you, we can't risk it. I have to go." He pulled the light bulb from a pocket. "Take care of each other," he stated before disappearing from the room.

George was still standing frozen and armed. He seemed to wilt in the next second. "Well," he muttered before sagging into a different chair.

Fred went round the table towards his position. It was easier to keep watching George twirl his wand between dexterous fingers then to confront their stares.

"You're the reason he was there," Fred said into the quiet like stones dropping on concrete. "Why wouldn't he follow you here, as well?"

Harry led out a slow breath.
Fred was suddenly in his face, scrutiny bordering on disgust. He jerked back. He opened his mouth but couldn't find any words.

"Don't think it worked, George," Fred said, trapping Harry with his gaze. "Could be he's still here with us."

Harry wrenched out of his hold to scowl: "What do you mean?" He knew what they meant. But it could hardly be true, or he wouldn't be allowed to come here, right?

"That monster is still in there," Fred said through clenched teeth.

George came to stand between them. Then he looked at Harry. And did a double-take.

"What?" Harry snapped. "What?"

"Speculum," George said. A mirror appeared which he shoved into Harry's hand.

At first he could not see anything strange. When he looked more closely, he found an anomaly in his eyes. There were red specks filtering through the green, sinister little droplets.

He gave the mirror back before it could fall from his lifeless palm.

Harry looked from one identical face to the other. "Why don't you take my wand, then? It's probably no use trying to convince you."

"Why don't you sit down and tell us what happened," Fred returned, more genial suddenly. "I'll get the first-aid kit. Aside from your shoulder, are those shallow cuts?"

And so, after he was bandaged in a few places and a towel was placed on his shoulder drenched in essence of Murtlap, Harry talked. He told them of the nearness of the Dementor, of passing out and finding Riddle's voice gone.

"So do you…" Harry began, then rephrased: "Everyone knows about my… problem?"

"If you mean the Order, we do."

He didn't know why that surprised him.

"Don't take this personally Harry, you can hardly fault us for being careful. That's why you were supposed to have gone with Dumbledore tonight. But then snake-face showed up and ruined everyone's evening, as usual."

Harry felt his eyebrows rise. "You sicced a Dementor on me, remember?"

They remained silent. He wished they'd just speak their minds around him like they used to. Perhaps he had changed more than he thought. And the eyes didn't help. "I understand," he backtracked. "I wouldn't trust me either."

"Perhaps he should cast a patronus," George suggested to Fred.

"No, they could be two separate entities." Fred's gaze lit up suddenly. "We do have a bottle of Snape's finest Veritaserum. Stolen fresh from the batch earlier this week."

After some arguments back and forth - Harry was resigned to whatever the verdict would be - they decided on the Truth Serum, for two reasons. Voldemort was one of the most private persons Harry knew, never spilling anything of his past, especially not the secret of his immortality. Even if
he had somehow build a tolerance the risk was just not a sensible one to take - so he'd be screaming murder with the first drop on his tongue. Secondly, they could ask Harry things that Voldemort couldn't possibly know.

After a round of tea, Harry was offered four drops on the tongue, just over the legal limit. Harry wanted to be sure just as badly as the twins did. In silence they waited for the potion to take hold. He felt like his brain was gently kneaded in giant hands as he stared at the table. His tongue seemed to have vanished completely.

"Why do you love Ginny?" George said, piercing through the haze. Fred beside him sucked in a harsh breath, eyes shooting towards his brother. Harry took all of this in stride.

"Because she is fierce, and kind, and she gets me, gets how difficult it can be to stay strong when everyone is chewing you out, or using you for something." he murmured with the thick slur of a drunk. "I love her warm hair in the sun. I love how she smells like…"

"Alright," George cut him off hastily. Harry blinked, slowly emerging from these pleasant musings, though something seemed not right about them. But that thought disappeared.

"What did Sirius mean to you?"

Harry's eyes filled at once when his slow mind processed the past tense. "I've always wanted someone to just love me for myself," he drawled slowly. "They either hate me or love me for something I did as a baby. Sirius didn't care about any of that. He just wanted me to be safe."

George and Fred were looking at each other, though their exchange was now gobbledygook to Harry.

"Er… I'm convinced," said George.

"Hm, I've got one more." Fred turned back to Harry. "Who do you want to have sex with?"

George choked on his tea. "This would be really traumatic if-"

"Shhhh!"

"Hmm," Harry mused. That was a tricky one. He wanted to say Ginny but that wasn't quite true for some reason… Ah. "Cho. And I think Bella is quite a catch."

"What the fuck?!"

This too came at him slowly, from far away. Fred put a hand on his brother's shoulder and looked at him intently, until George sat back.

"You mean Bellatrix Lestrange?" Fred continued.

"Yes," Harry responded. His eyes wanted to drop closed.

"You want to… have sex with her."

He remembered her Dark Mark, like honey. "Maybe. She seemed to want me, anyway," Harry murmured. "I'm not sure about Cho."

George was whispering to Fred on the other side of the table: "Really. How far from a Dark Lord can you get?"
"He calls her 'Bella'?!"

"That makes sense, he's been in his mind for we don't know how long." Then louder, to Harry: "Don't you think the Dark Lord should get to have her, Harry? Isn't he more entitled to her than you?"

At that Fred burst into laughter. Tears were soon making their way over the older boy's cheeks. Harry smiled at him. George shushed his brother.

"No." Why, though? "She adores him, but it wouldn't be equal. And it wouldn't mean anything to him, he's lost that side of himself. So I would be better at it."

George was chuckling now as well. "That decides it for me."

"Shit," Fred stated when they managed to stop laughing.

"What?"

"We don't have any antidote."

Harry remained silent, since they hadn't asked him a question. They pulled him up by his arms anyway, which he allowed only because his eyes were still drooping. They ascended a ladder to what was clearly the attic. A sea of soft blue lights came on, floating near the ceiling. Harry stared at them in wonder.

"Here," Fred or George said. "You can have Lee's. He won't be back until next Friday anyway."

Harry was slowly pushed onto a mattress. He happily placed his head on the pillow. His shoes were removed and a blanket was drawn over his shoulders.

"Say," a twin said grinning, "Which Weasley do you like the most?"

"Ginny," Harry answered at length. The face floating in the blue light crumbled, then shook silently with something Harry couldn't grasp.

"Right, right."

The other pulled his brother into a hug. "It's fine, it's fine," the man said again twice.

"What's wrong?" Harry managed to wring from his mouth after some effort at shaping words.

"Nothing, go to sleep."

Harry woke to a stroke of slanted light crawling its way up his pillow. He blinked at the thick beams that hung one meter above his head. The Burrow – no, he was at Fred and George's place.

That cleared his brain fast. He shot upwards, looking left and right. The brothers were not here. He went to take care of his morning abolitions in the area next to the bedroom.

Their experiment seemed to have worked, but Harry was hard pressed to believe he could actually be rid of that reincarnation of the Dark Lord. The man had made a reputation of being
indestructible like a cockroach. Seeing his reflection in the mirror above the sink did little to put him at ease. He put his nose close to the surface. What seemed greyish green from a distance became green bleeding red up close. The little flecks appeared to be twinkling, taunting him.

He imagined them as poisonous snakes and tried: "Are you there?"

"Yes, yes, your eyes are striking," a male voice in the mirror spoke. He jumped, heartbeat ringing in his ears, then realised the voice sounded nothing like Riddle. He cursed next, more because the parseltongue had worked than anything else.

"You'll have to try better, kid, I've heard them all."

When he came down the ladder the twins weren't in their office either. But there was a small breakfast ready for him at the table. He poured still-warm tea into a purple-orange mug. Harry scrubbed his face hard when the memory hit him again from last night. The way he'd answered that sex question… And going on and on about Ginny. They'd never let him live it down. He rubbed his scar. It prickled.

"What the hell!" he yelled in shock. He slammed his fist next to his runny eggs, resisting the urge to swipe the whole breakfast set from the table.

"Damn it, you fucker! Let's have it then. Talk to me you spineless, ugly," – what would drive Voldemort up the wall? – "We're destroying your soul bit by bit you know, didn't think we'd find out did you-"

"What the hell."

He turned, shoulder drooping. "Oh."

George or Fred had come up to stick their head around the door. "What's going on? We're trying to run a shop here."

"Sorry, just letting off some steam."

"I get that, but keep it down will you?"

"Sure, I will. Thanks for breakfast."

"No problem. How are you feeling? I'm George by the way." He pulled at the green shirt peeking out from under his purple-orange work set. "We took pity on you."

"I'm fine. How's the shop going?"

"Good. I can recommend our new love potions, they are quite popular." He winked, retreating, then pulled back to say: "Oh, Dumbledore is coming in half an hour."

"How did it go last night?"

"It went well. We didn't lose anyone and we managed to catch a few of them."

"So we've got hostages now?"

"We had hostages," George corrected. "You know that when the Death Eaters get back from a fight with the Order, they're put under interrogation by orders of the Dark Dick, right? To find out our tactics, our identities, our strengths. So we do a little counter-surveillance of our own on the ones we manage to catch. Then we Obliviate them of course, making it seem like they were never
caught in the first place. It's only fair."

George grinned then. "So it's good you've been cured from Dark Dick-ism." He went out again before Harry could point out this was perhaps a tad optimistic.

He sat down heavily. He really didn't want to face Dumbledore again so soon; way too much of Voldemort was still sticking to his skin. There was a Daily Prophet ready on the table to take his mind of things.

'Boy-Who-Lived stolen from Hogwarts, nation-wide search on its way.' And right below: 'Rebel headquarters dismantled'. With a picture of Aurors - or whatever they called the agents in Voldemort's pockets these days - securing the perimeter of the Burrow. It was somehow a relief because instead of a building he'd expected to see a burned-out shell.

Breakfast done, he took the dishes to a little sink near the swampy area, careful not to get the stuff on his socks. Cleaning them manually with a sponge brought some calm to his shoulders. He never minded the chore at the Dursley's either.

Someone chuckled behind him. He spun, wet plate in hand.

Albus Dumbledore, resplendent in night blue robes and matching gloves, stood in the doorway, smiling at the ground near Harry's feet.

"They're still trying for the portable swamp, I see. Alas, I see no way of allowing such a product in any legal manner. Good morning, Harry."

Harry nodded back, a bit stunned still by the man's presence.

Dumbledore studied him. "Did you sleep well?"

"Yes." Which was probably only because of the Veritaserum, he added to himself.

One eye-brow went up. Oh oh.

The phoenix leader drew closer. Harry froze, but Dumbledore merely took a potion bottle from the sink to study closely. "One of Severus's brew." He sniffed. "Odourless." He turned his gaze, expectant.

"Shouldn't you… ask someone first before you Legilimise them?" he muttered, miffed.

Albus hummed. "Normally yes, but you were wearing your thoughts on your sleeve, so to speak."

"Yes, well," Harry went back to the dishes. "We wanted to make sure."

"Of course."

The man's light tone niggled at his nerves. Harry dropped the sponge, hunching over the sink. "I mean, I know he's not completely gone," he said to the tiles in front of him. "My scar still tingles... But we don't think he can control my thoughts any more."

"Are you sure?"

"Well, he'd hardly take four drops of Veritaserum just to keep his cover, would he? He wouldn't risk his secrets getting out. And just in case he's taken over and I just don't know it... we all agreed only I could have given those answers. Things I said about Ginny, for example. And Sirius."
He braved a look. The man's eyes were radiant up close, in sharp contrast to his wrinkled appearance. His mentor drew a breath to speak, but Harry held up a hand, feeling quite rude after the fact:

"I know, sir, he's a master manipulator - he's been impersonating me. But he doesn't understand…” He balled his fist, frustrated with how to explain. "What drives me, it's not something he's known. So he cannot fake it. Not about Ginny, not to Fred and George."

He swallowed hard when Dumbledore remained silent, merely watching him.

"I imagine it was excruciating sometimes,” the man spoke after a moment.

Harry turned back to the sink, although all the dishes were clean now.

He shrugged, not sure why he felt like faking nonchalance. "At school sometimes he would just... take over. When I was angry at Malfoy, for example. Riddle, he would speak with my mouth and threaten him. And in the dormitory he would grab a Mark of one of the new Death Eaters, make it burn just for the hell of it.” He turned around to stare at the rows of boxes. "Sometimes he helped me out, when I got into some kind of trouble. He even talked to me inside my head, in the end, mostly to mock me."

Of course then Dumbledore wanted to know who the new recruits in Slytherin were. Harry told him of the handful he was sure about - funny thing most of them were his dorm mates.

"You have held up remarkably well under the pressure, Harry."

The man's words of pride rang hollow. "I had to kill someone. Umbridge.” He braced the sink with both hands, closing his eyes.

A hand fell on his shoulder. This was no news to Dumbledore, apparently. "And your friend lived because of it. Often-times, Harry, all our choices consist of losses and we only have the power to decide which one to bear."

He nodded, gulping back the tightness that wanted to spill out. It had been so long since he had experienced a strong emotion, because of Riddle's interference, that he now felt adrift letting them wash over him, even though it should have been liberating. But informing the Phoenix leader was important, so he soldiered on:

"I- I tried to find more horcruxes, just like you told me to. I found nothing in the place he was keeping me - his manor I suppose. I also looked inside the Chamber at Hogwarts; it just seemed empty."

"The Chamber of Secrets?"

"Yes." He braved Dumbledore's gaze. "Someone else should check out the manor, I think. I don't know where it's located, but maybe you can look into my mind?"

The blue eyes flickered between Harry's, but there was no push of his mind. "I cannot risk a mental connection between me and him at this time. I believe, like yourself, that he is not completely gone."

Something struck him that was of the utmost importance. "Vo- Riddle had me take an Unbreakable Vow. Before I went back to school, when he found out I knew. But,” he frowned. "It doesn't appear to work because last night we managed to…"
"...thwart him," Dumbledore finished when he trailed off. "Do you remember the wording?"

Harry thought a moment, although that led him to something else he needed to confess: "If I focused hard on a person he's got a connection with, I would... fall into his memories, like I'd dipped my head in a pensieve. I would suddenly remember a moment with them that was completely strange to me. I hope that's finished now... That's how I learned how Snape got into his service, for example," he went on, spitting the name. "Poisons, go figure."

As expected, nothing in Albus' expression told him what he thought about that. "They were little things I found out, fragments. And they seemed useful so I tried it a lot at first, but it got too intense, too gruesome, watching his memories. So I kind of started avoiding those after a while..."

"Quite understandable. I am relieved to hear you didn't dwell on his thoughts any more than you had to. As the Vow you mention, let me guess: it demanded you would keep anything you learned from the Horcrux a secret?"

Harry nodded. "And I can't take any action that could damage it."

Dumbledore hummed. "Which is quite ironic, seeing as the Vow made sure taking action would then cause your death, thereby destroying the horcrux. It's actually a miracle that you are safe and sound, in hindsight."

His mentor shook his head, catching his eyes with a serious look. "You should have told me what was at stake, Harry. I'd never have gone through with it."

It all happened so fast... "I'm glad you did, because I think this is exactly why he made the vow that way. To keep us from trying to remove it."

"Fine reasoning," Albus conceded with a nod. "With the kind of convoluted logic I've come to know from Riddle. Although that still leaves us with a conundrum. As you rightly point out, the Vow should have taken effect. That it has not is a most curious phenomenon which I'll think on more later." He clapped his hands. "Now it is time for tea and biscuits."

A purple-orange tray came from one of the stacks to float towards the table, complete with a steaming tea set.

They enjoyed their tea – a fruity concoction. Harry marvelled silently at his change of circumstances. Which reminded him, he should just rip off that bandage now...

"Have you known all this time?" His gaze fled to the tea cup in his hand. "About me."

"After you described to me your nightmare of being in Nagini's mind two years ago, I came to suspect it."

Of course the man hadn't thought to share this with him or anything. "Volde- Riddle talked about something like 'essence merged', that's me and the soul part, right?"

Albus gave a nod.

"So then I'll never be rid of it," he said listlessly, gazing on the swamp. "He's won, it's still inside me. I'll have to, to-"

It seemed such a crude thing to say aloud.

Albus shifted to the edge of his seat to catch his gaze. "One thing at the time, Harry. We've already
weakened him so much that he cannot converse with you from inside your thoughts. And I dare say he won't be 'taking over' again, as you described it, simply because he cannot submit his will over something that he himself is intricately merged with."

Harry felt a shudder crawl over his arms. "So we share one mind now."

"But it is still your mind he is clinging to. You have the advantage, Harry. We'll just have to find the right leverage."

Harry nodded, but inside he felt colder than before: how could he get ahead of something inside his own mind?

"I believe I owe you an explanation, Harry," Dumbledore uttered when they had been enjoying a friendly silence for a while. "It concerns something from my past that is most painful to me."

Harry shifted in his seat. "Sir, about last night, you don't have to-"

"But I do. It has been one of my greatest mistakes. You see, as Tom Riddle correctly described, Gellert and I were close friends in our youth. We were both idealists, wanting to make a better place for wizardkind, to stake a claim on a corner of the world for our own people separate from Muggles."

Harry took slow sips of his tea. He couldn't believe the greatest wizard of the age felt the need to explain himself – to him.

"But whereas I wanted to work within the system of government, Gellert chose to put himself above the law, enforcing his power over non-magical folk, even going so far as to kill Muggles in order to subjugate them. Soon enough he would refuse to hear any criticism of his radical ideas, even from me. That's when I should have put a stop to it. The war could have been over much sooner, had I not been blinded by maudlin sentiment."

"But… you can't always know what the right choice is in every situation, can you?"

"You are quite lenient with me, Harry." There was that wistful smile again as Dumbledore regarded him. "I'd like to test something, if you are agreeable."

After his nod, Dumbledore shifted his chair so that he was facing him fully. Harry copied him.

Albus took off his gloves. He raised his palms to both sides of Harry's face. "May I?"

Harry nodded, trying not to stare at the damaged hand, which seemed to have been dipped into a sheen of silver that reminded him awfully of unicorn's blood. The hands covered his cheeks in the next second – the silver one much cooler than the other.

Dumbledore had closed his eyes. He appeared not to be breathing.

Then something… pushed upwards inside his head, towards his scar. Harry felt a great irritation that was already growing into revulsion, or rage... His face twisted into something grotesque. His left cheek was on fire - a burning line right where Nagini had scarred him. He hissed, hands rising and trembling to rip the man's hands from him, to smash his face in-

Rational thought won out, barely.

Dumbledore pulled away, and the feeling dropped into nothingness. He rubbed his cheek, which was only twinging now. He looked down to find he'd scratched his knees bloody.
His mentor was frowning. "I'm sorry this was such an ordeal, Harry."

Dumbledore's gaze found his knees and he waved his wand, healing them. Harry noticed its unique appearance, with carvings running down its length.

The former headmaster studied Harry's cheek more closely. "Who did this?"

"Nagini."

At that, the man fell back into his chair as if Harry had told him he was his grandson.

"What is it, sir?"

He frowned, shaking his head. "I'll explain later, Harry, when we are sure of where we stand with regards to our unwanted guest."

Harry waited for the verdict.

"Your magic is considerable. And not entirely your own. I believe that your magical core and the horcrux's have... merged, let's say, because of the events of last night. I don't mean younger Riddle's mind - or at least not only his mind - but the magic. It is quite unheard of, two magical signatures in one person." Dumbledore did not seem too happy about this. "Normally, forcing foreign magic on a person ends with either the stranger's magic conquering the other's or being rejected. But then again, you share blood and souls, which could make you more compatible. Have you cast a spell yet?"

Harry turned to look at the dishes in the corner dumbly. "No."

His mentor stood and he followed. The complete set of table and chairs vanished and the boxes nearest to them shifted onto their neighbouring stacks to clear more space.

"Let's see, then. A Reducto, if you please." Dumbledore shifted to a duelling stance.

Harry pulled out his wand and aimed, then lowered it a fraction. "Er, what about all this stuff?"

Albus smiled softly. "Not to worry, my boy. I have great control over this room. Throw your heart into it."

Harry swallowed. "Reducto!"

He had to hold on tight to keep hold of his wand with the force of the magic that burst out of it. Dumbledore blocked the curse, the sound of his shield colliding like a gong. Harry jumped, thinking of Fred or George's earlier admonishment.

His mentor smiled lightly, apparently content. "Excellent, Harry. I do believe his magic has fortified yours, although your aim is somewhat unfocused. We can work on that."

Harry scratched his head. "You know, at Hogwarts he gave me the impression he wants me to become stronger as well."

Dumbledore hummed. "He was counting on the horcrux taking over. Of course we cannot yet rule out the possibility of that happening in the future - with the Dementor's effect on the soul shard we are journeying into unfamiliar magical terrain. But I get the impression you feel more like yourself at the moment, correct?"

"Yes, sir."
"Good, I consider that a battle won. Well," Dumbledore rubbed his hands briskly. "I very much enjoyed our talk. I shall take my leave now, to see how the wounded are faring."

"Are they badly hurt, sir?"

"Nothing permanent, we have been lucky in that regard." Dumbledore took a few steps closer, so that Harry had to look up slightly. "Tom could've tried to take you from the Burrow yesterday. Instead he focused his attention on me. He let you slip away deliberately, convinced you would return shortly under the influence of his soul-part. Now he knows his mistake."

The man's next words made Harry shiver:

"If he finds you again, he won't let you go so easily next time. Which is why I believe it would be wise for you to stay here for a while."

Harry nodded, thinking of the castle and his friends there - was that part of his life over now?

Dumbledore spread his arms to encompass the room. "I placed this part of the building and the bedroom under a Fidilius. Please do not venture further downwards, no matter how urgent a call you may get. This is the safest place for now, since our current headquarters is a high profile target. However," the man's eyebrows rose. "I can allow for a couple of visitors here. I know of a certain studious girl who can't wait to see you."

"Hermione!" Harry said, feeling his mouth tug into another smile.

"Just the one." Dumbledore tapped an invisible hat, pulling his gloves from a nearby pocket. "This is just a temporary solution. Remus will be visiting as well to bring you some clothes and whatever else you might need. If your scar starts acting up, do not hesitate to contact me: I am a mere patronus away."

Harry entertained himself with the different knick-knacks in the room to pass the time. There was a whole section of metal contraptions, which he resolved to ask the twins about. Fred and George came upstairs in the beginning of the evening, carrying the delicious scent of pot roast in a large casserole. Courtesy of their mother who'd come to the shop a few minutes ago, Fred explained. They dug in after George brought out cold pumpkin juice from who knew where.

"Everyone's dying to see you," George said around a mouthful. "Dumbledore is strict, though. Mum he can't refuse of course, so I think you'll see her soon. And she told us Remus will be coming tomorrow."

"That's great." He still felt a slight unease at their presence, like they could switch back to their previous hostility any moment.

"Also," Fred inserted with a mischievous glint in his gaze. "Bellatrix, huh?"

Harry stomped him under the table, cheeks flaming.

"The real question to ask here," his brother said, "Is how do you know she's so hot?"

"That's what you want to know? Not 'why do you like that murderous bitch?'" Harry returned, feeling all the worse when he thought of Sirius.

"Oh you don't have to like her," Fred said airily. "Didn't stop Padma from banging Malfoy."

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Harry coughed when the food went down badly. "Right."

"The worst taste…"

"She was a little overbearing that's all, when I saw things more through Riddle's eyes. Doesn't mean I don't still hate her."

George shivered. "You saw things through his eyes?"

Right... perhaps he was saying too much. How had Dumbledore explained the whole situation to them? "Well, because we share a connection I sometimes felt things the way he does. And he... I don't think like is the word - he tolerates her best, aside from Nagini."

Fred shuddered dramatically. "So he and her..."

"I can't believe I'm having this conversation. No, not like that. Jesus."

"That poor fellow?"

"He's trying to distract us. So Harry," George smirked, "What about this femme fatale caught your fancy?"

"I felt a kind of history with her." He shrugged. It was hard to explain that he was feeling a fondness from a much younger version of Voldemort.

"The foils of youth." George wagged his eyebrows.

Harry looked down at his steaming plate. "I think I'm done now."

"Oh come on, we're just messing with you. She is freakishly hot, her thighs could compete with Angelina's."

George stomped Fred in the side at that. "So I hear," Fred smiled at George. Then he turned back to Harry: "But Cho is perhaps the more healthful obsession, in terms of life expectancy."

Harry pointed a fork at him accusingly. "All this information was given to you under illegal circumstances, you know."

Fred waved it away. At least they stopped harassing him, which gave Harry the chance to needle George about Angelina.

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He'd already counted on a restless night, considering he was not under the influence of a potion this time. As he closed his eyes though, his mind pulled him under at once.

Like a film reel being turned, he dreamed.

He was looking down on a rumpled, trembling figure splayed on the gleaming floor, head turned to the ground. Watanabe wasn't trembling from fear, Harry knew with some satisfaction, but the wild, uncontrollable jerks caused by prolonged exposure to the Cruciatius. It was enough for now: he could always kill him later.

Harry found he was suddenly looking up at the ceiling – all this happened quite beyond his will – and he recognised the familiar fixtures of Voldemort's drawing room.
"Ah Harry, welcome," he hissed to himself. "You remember Takumi. He has been loyal to me, yet still he failed me – failed us both actually, with the oath he sabotaged." The parseltongue was weirdly meditative in contrast to the words, like hearing a bedtime story.

"My lord?" Watanabe uttered weakly near the vicinity of his feet, probably perturbed by the hissing.

"Or failed to execute rightly, I care little which, for the outcome is the same."

"Leave me," he dismissed the man while still contemplating the ornamentation above him. Harry sensed how the Death Eater dragged himself stumbling out of sight.

Riddle walked towards the dark windows to watch his own reflection from up close. "You have not returned, therefore I must conclude that my precious soul-part has lost control over you."

He smiled thinly, which frightened Harry more than his anger. "But we share blood and souls, horcrux. And you see," he spread his long-sleeved arms, white palms upwards as if to encompass the whole room, and his face lost all expression. "Our connection remains - I am forced to experience all your insipid little emotions from hundreds of miles away."

He turned and Harry could see the rest of the room and the fireplace more clearly. "Now, you have violated something very dear to me and so I must violate something of yours…"

His eyes zeroed in on the table, at the head of which sat Ron. His friend met Harry's gaze squarely. The twisted expression on his face told Harry he was clearly in much pain. His forearm with the Dark Mark was splayed over the table, the other hand clamped down on it. He gave a sound of agony through his clenched lips as Harry drew closer to take the seat next to him.

Harry raised his wand to point at Ron's head. "Don't fret, Weasley. I'm sure Potter will turn up soon at the gates of Hogwarts. Crucio."

Ron's screams pierced Harry's mind into wakefulness.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Please keep the reviews coming, they fuel my writing!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!