Summary

Dumbledore thinks he will rescue Harry from his terrible family, setting himself up as Harry's mentor. Unfortunately for him, somebody else got there first. BAMF!Harry, M for violence, language, child abuse/prostitution, drug use, and all around criminal goings on.

Notes

Many people have asked about the pairing for this series, and I'm honestly sick of answering the question so I'm just going to put it here. There won't be one. This is not a tale of romance and overcoming emotional damage when finding the love of his life. This is not a redemption story. This is not even a coming of age story. It's a story about a kid forced into a terrible situation, and the things he did to survive and fulfill what he believes to be his purpose in life. It isn't a nice story, and it won't become so at any point. It's dark, it's horrible, and it's terribly sad. So no, there won't be romance in this story at all.
Prologue

Harry refused to react to the pain as the hunting knife was buried into his thigh. Bastard was quick, he'd give him that, but he'd be damned if he would give the fucker the satisfaction of knowing he'd hurt the vengeful teen. Stepping quickly to the side, Harry slashed up with his own blade, disembowelling his opponent and removing the poor fools hand in the same movement. The blood splashed over him, arterial spray adding to his already demonic visage and trickling down his lightning bolt scar.

Glancing around the hallway, he took a moment to appreciate the pure artistry that went into the corpse strewn carpet and blood soaked walls. Fifteen men dead – butchered, really, since there wasn't a single one intact - and Harry's only wound was the knife still in his thigh. He smiled wolfishly and flicked the blood from his ninjato.

He paused to listen against the door at the end of the hallway. Two men, and Abby. Well now, time for some drama to drive the message home, just in case the carnage behind him wasn't clear enough. His emerald green eyes glowed with anticipation as he raised his hand.

He knocked politely.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

The beginning.

Harry Potter was a small child. He wore threadbare second hand clothes that were so large they dwarfed his tiny frame, and had round glasses that didn't actually fix his eyesight, held together with tape. He was thin, some might even say scrawny, and had a lightning bolt shaped scar on his forehead; the result of the car crash that had killed his parents, he had been told. His hair was black and constantly messy regardless of his attempts to tame it, and his eyes a startling luminescent green that had old ladies cooing and teenaged girls pouting in envy.

Harry Potter was five years old.

He was a very smart child, unusually so, able to put together the most basic information and see patterns in things that other people seemed to overlook. He learned quickly, and never needed to be told something twice. He learned at a young age to keep his intelligence hidden, and to never appear smarter than his cousin, Dudley. Unfortunately Dudley was denser than reinforced concrete, with about as much personality, so Harry found it easiest to stay silent. His relatives seemed to prefer that anyway.

His Aunt Petunia and her husband, Vernon Dursley, didn't like him very much. He lived in the cupboard under the stairs, and was often refused food or basic hygiene facilities, even though he worked very hard with his cooking, cleaning, and gardening, trying to be a Good Boy like his cousin, who never had to do any chores, let alone the physically demanding ones assigned to Harry. He had yet to succeed.

"Boy!" His aunt shrieked, banging on the door to his cupboard. "Get up!"

Harry quickly straightened his oversized clothes to the best of his ability, and slipped out into the hall, following his aunt's tall and thin figure into the kitchen. Without a word, he began cooking. He did this every morning; he also cooked lunch, and dinner. If he was lucky, he was allowed to eat some of it.

Serving the food, Harry turned and began cleaning the kitchen without a word of acknowledgement from his family. He was so used to it, that it barely even stung any more.

Today was grocery day.

Aunt Petunia bundled Dudley into his thick woollen coat, straining to do it up over the obese child's girth. Harry was carelessly tossed a thin jumper that Dudley had outgrown. It was so huge that it came halfway down his shins when he put it on, but he didn't mind, it was one more layer that he wasn't normally given. Rolling up the sleeves, Harry waited patiently while Dudley had his usual tantrum and was bribed with all manner of new toys, before they could finally leave.

Harry hated it when Dudley came shopping with them.

Aunt Petunia decided as usual that Harry could wait outside, ignoring the snow and lack of suitable
clothing on the tiny boy, while she and 'Precious Duddikins' did the shopping.

Shivering, Harry looked around for somewhere he could wait out of the wind. It was biting cold and his ungloved fingers were already turning blue. He knew the store owners didn't like him standing out the front since Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon had told everyone that Harry was mentally disturbed, a criminal in the making, and definitely not to be trusted. Harry was none of these things of course, but it wasn't like anyone would believe him.

Huddling miserably in an alley, Harry fought to stop shivering. The snow had gotten into his shoes through the holes, and he couldn't feel his toes.

"Well now, look what we've got 'ere!"

Harry looked up, his blurred vision quickly taking in the people standing in front of him. His eyes flicked over them, assessing, recording, absorbing as much detail as possible.

The boy who had spoken would have been in his mid-teens, his messily cropped blond hair flopping limply onto a sickly pale forehead. Pale blue eyes were hidden behind sleepy looking lids, but they shone with sly intelligence. His clothes were ratty and worn, but in better condition than Harry's, fitting his wiry form fairly well. There was another boy about the same age, with dark brown curly hair and slightly darker skin, and two younger children. The boy looked to be around ten and looked a lot like the first teen, while the girl would have been about seven and had curly red hair to her shoulders and sparkling hazel eyes. Harry thought she was very pretty, some long forgotten memory stirring slightly in the dark recesses of his mind.

Harry shuffled closer to the wall, trying to make himself inconspicuous.

"Oi, 'sall right kid. We won't hurt ya none. Name's Mike. There 'ere is Dave," he indicated the other teen, "Mickey," the boy, "and Sally. What's ya name then?"

Harry peered up at them hesitantly. "Boy. Freak." He shrugged.

Mike's face softened with sympathy. "Ya need somewhere to stay? 'S a mite cold to stay on the streets this time 'o year."

Harry pondered this for a moment. He really didn't like living with Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon, but he didn't really have anywhere else to go. "M-my Aunt and Uncle…" He trailed off. His teeth were chattering so hard he couldn't talk even if he wanted to.

Crouching down in front of him, Mike placed a finger under his chin, lifting his head up so he could see Harry's face clearly. His eyes roamed over Harry's features critically. Whatever he was looking for, he seemed to find it, and he smiled slightly. Harry didn't miss that the smile didn't reach his eyes.

"They the ones that call ya Freak?"

Harry nodded.

"Well that just won't do. Pretty boy like you should be looked after the right way. Ya could make some real money with a face like yours. Them eyes'll bring in a few regulars I reckon. Come on, let's get ya somewhere warm, aye?"

Harry barely thought about it. These boys had been nice to him, the nicest anyone had ever been, and he was so cold he could barely see through the vibrations of his teeth chattering. Standing, he followed his new friends down the alley without a second thought.
Harry looked around the building. It was a small abandoned warehouse, filled with assorted boxes, crates, and a table with lots of chemicals and complicated looking equipment against the far wall. There was a walkway creating a small second level, with an office off to one side.

The older boys threw themselves onto a ratty old couch, while Mickey and Sally curled up on a small stained mattress, wrapping a blanket around their shoulders and huddling together.

Harry stood, shuffling awkwardly.

"'S alright, kid. Already said we ain't gonna hurt ya none." Mike grabbed a baggie from under the couch and started fiddling with it, rolling something into a white tube that he twisted at the ends. He noticed Harry watching, and shot him a grin. "Want some?" He lit the joint, then held it out in offering.

Harry was trembling, uncertain, but he didn't want to disappoint his new friends. Taking it, he tried to mimic Mike's drag, only to double over coughing at the burning in his throat.

The others laughed loudly, except for Sally who simply smiled shyly.

Their laughter died down a little when Harry staggered, knocking over a crate and spilling its contents.

"Oi! Watch it!" Dave yelped, leaping up.

Harry panicked, and tried to straighten the box so he could repack it. He fought tears, kicking himself for messing everything up already.

"Calm down, kid. Ain't the end of the world, just gotta be careful, right? We're just holding these for some mates, 'fore they get sold. Can't sell 'em if they're wrecked now, can we? An' the sorta people who buy these, well, they ain't the sort you wanna upset. Understand?"

Harry nodded vigorously.

Dave pursed his lips thoughtfully as he watched Harry carefully repack the rifles into the crate. It was clear he couldn't see properly, but despite that, his movements were unusually precise, especially for someone so young.

"You ever handled a weapon before, kid?" Dave refused to call him Boy or Freak. His own family had used such monikers when his homosexuality had been revealed – before he'd run away - and he had a strong aversion to using the same words to describe a kid who actually seemed pretty sweet.

Harry shook his head, keeping his eyes low and repacking the crate as quickly as he could manage.

Dave took possession of the last rifle, resting on one knee so Harry could stand close and see.

"This is a Vahan assault rifle. It's Armenian, like me," he smiled. "Not as popular or reliable as an AK47, but it's cheap and we can move enough of them to make it worthwhile." Dave showed Harry how it worked, letting him hold it, and teaching him how to dismantle, reassemble, load, and aim. He admitted to being very impressed at how quickly Harry picked it up, earning him a beaming smile in return. Harry could recite the complete run down of the weapon without Dave having to repeat it even once. Kid was a freaking genius.

Mike just watched in amusement, smoking his joint and relaxing. He had big plans for this kid.
The afternoon passed pleasantly. Harry discovered that Dave was an incredibly patient teacher, and Harry delighted in learning as much as possible to please his new friends and mentor. By the time night fell, Harry knew all about several different firearms, had cleaned and sharpened all of their knives (a useful skill gained courtesy of his aunt and uncle), and had learned how to take a hit from the apparently never ending supply of joints without hacking up a lung. He wasn't sure if he liked the floaty feeling they gave him, but his new friends seemed pleased, and he was warm and felt welcome for the first time he could remember.

"Alrigh', time for you kids to earn ya keep. Come on." Mike stood as night fell. Leaving Dave behind, he ushered Harry, Mickey and Sally out the door, and down the alleys until they stood in a seedy looking area.

Harry was a little unsure what was happening, but followed his usual rule of keeping his mouth shut and doing what he was told.

Mike plucked the glasses from Harry's face. "Criminal to keep those beautiful eyes hidden, kid. An' you don' really need to see anyway. I'll give 'em back later."

Harry nodded silently. He still wasn't certain about what was going on, and he had a bad feeling that he wasn't going to like it, but even if he wanted to run, he wouldn't get far without his glasses. It never occurred to him that Mike might have taken them for that exact reason.

Harry watched as Mike talked with a blurry shape that looked vaguely like an older man. The man seemed to look over Harry, Mickey and Sally, then gestured to Sally with a negligent wave. He handed some money to Mike, then took the young girl further into the alley.

Harry couldn't see what was happening, but he could hear perfectly well. The man was doing to Sally what Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia did once a month. He could hear her whimpering in pain, and the man grunting, and Harry felt sick, the bile rising in his throat. He wanted to help her, but what could he do against a fully grown man? And besides, Mike had said that they needed to earn their keep; apparently this was how they would be doing it. Trembling, Harry looked towards Mike, who was negotiating with another man.

Harry sat gingerly on the stained mattress. His bottom hurt, and his jaw ached so much he wasn't sure he would be able to eat the warm food that Mike was passing around. He felt dirty and miserable.

Dave settled next to him, leaning back against the crates. His dark brown eyes showed his concern.

"You alright, kid? I know it can be a bit rough, especially the first time."

Harry swallowed gingerly and nodded, his eyes downcast.

"Here." Dave took away the take away cup of soft drink and handed him a cup of cool water.

Drinking gingerly, Harry was relieved to find the pain in his throat easing slightly.

Dave continued to observe him carefully. "If your life is better at home, then you should go back. Life on the streets is hard, even with people like me 'n' Mike looking out for you. This ain't a life to choose if you've got another choice."

Harry kept his eyes downcast and continued eating silently. He doubted he could speak above a whisper at the moment anyway.
Dave sighed. "Alright. Get some rest. Tomorrow I'll teach you some more stuff." He patted Harry's bony shoulder lightly, and shuffled off into the office that had been converted into a bedroom for himself and Mike.

When he wasn't earning his keep or sleeping, Harry stuck to Dave like glue.

The older boy was always happy to teach Harry something new, and Harry absorbed it like a sponge. He was given clothes to replace Dudley's cast offs, ones that actually fit him decently, and he had started to gain a little weight from the regular meals the older boys provided him. There wasn't a lot, and it wasn't good quality, but it was more than he was used to and so he decided that staying with his new friends was worth the unpleasantness he experienced each night. He didn't like it, hated it in fact, but at least he was warm and fed, and they didn't smack him around. Well worth the price, in his opinion.

It had been a month since he joined his friends, give or take, and Harry was now rather skilled in his new life. He assisted Dave in his drug manufacturing – able to make meth, crack, and speed (though the fumes made him feel sick even with the mask) – and was also a rather accomplished thief and pickpocket.

Mike was thrilled, but Dave looked at him with a mixture of pride and sadness that Harry found unsettling. Regardless, he continued to use his new skills to make himself as valuable to the older boys as possible.

Dave looked after all the kids as best he could, giving them lessons each day on how to read and write, basic mathematics, and any other useful skill he could think of. All the kids adored him, but none so much as Harry. The green eyed boy was devoted to the teen, following him around and hanging on his every word. Harry stored everything away, every word and action from the older boy locked into the Harry's mental vault, deliberately mulled over and integrated. Day by day, Dave unknowingly shaped his quiet shadow, the tiny boy's hero worship amusing his companions.

Harry and Dave were sitting on the walkway in the warehouse with their legs dangling over the edge, leaning forward on the railing, sharing a joint. Dave was unusually chatty, and Harry was his usual silently attentive self.

"I hate it, you know? The whorin' of you kids. Makes me so fuckin' mad. Mike an' me should be doing it, not you lil' uns. Fuckin' sicko's touching you. So many fuckin' kids working the streets, an' it ain't right. I know it makes good money an' all, but I wish…” he trailed off, taking another lungful. "I wish there was someone who looked out for you guys better than me an' Mike. If it was up to me, I'd have you kids doin' other stuff, find you some yard work or somethin', or even just the stealin'. But Mike's the boss, and it's his call." He gazed off into the distance. "You're a good kid, you know. Those relatives of yours don't know what they had with you. You promise me something, kid – we really need to get you a proper name, by the way, it's already been a bloody month – when you're all grown up an' can look afta' yourself, you keep an eye out for kids like you an' Mickey an' Sally, and you look after 'em, make sure they don't need to be whorin'. You're a smart kid. You keep your eyes open and learn from people bigger an' tougher than you, an' you learn how to keep yourself an' other kids safe. If anyone can, it'd be you. Don't make the same mistakes as me, you hear? Gotta be a leader, not a follower."

Harry listened intently to Dave's rant. Dave had always looked after them, but he thought he wasn't doing enough, because he wasn't the boss? Harry stewed over this for a while. If Dave wanted him to do better than Dave did, then the only way he could see to do that was to be the boss, so he got to make the decisions like Mike did. But Mike was tough. Really tough. And mean too, when he needed to be. He treated the kids ok, but Harry knew he didn't really care about them. He got into
fights all the time, and he usually won. Harry had seen him knife some guy who was trying to move in on their territory the other night. So that meant that if Harry was going to look after kids better than Dave, Harry would have to be tougher and meaner than everyone else around him so that nobody would challenge him. But how? He was a tiny kid, he didn't know how to fight, and he couldn't intimidate a flea, let alone a grown up. So then how?

Dave watched Harry puzzling through what he'd said. "Start small, kid. You're still a little'un yourself. If you wanna be the boss man when you're grown up, then you've gotta live long enough to be a grown up first. Do what you gotta, no matter how much it hurts or makes you scared or sad, and learn from the people around you. You don't gotta play with the big boys yet. Start local, one step at a time. Watch the kids your age an' see what they do to win against other kids. Then figure out how you can beat them. You're smart, you can do it. Just remember, there is always someone tougher and scarier than you, someone who is willing to go further just to win. When you meet someone like that, watch, learn, and study 'til you can beat 'em. 'Cos when you think you're the biggest badass and stop learning, you'll get yourself killed, and then who's gonna look afta' the kids? You've always gotta go one step further than the other guy, make your victory clear and undeniable. You don't always gotta use brute force, either. You don't need to be a thug, but you do have to be able to defend yourself. Use your head when you can, and your fists to keep your head safe."

Whenever Harry was to think back on that conversation later, he would always wonder if somehow his friend knew that something was going to happen to him. There was no outward sign, of course, but Dave had always seemed to know things, so Harry wouldn't have been surprised. Regardless, Harry was grateful to the older boy, and treasured his advice with a devotion bordering on fanaticism. After all, the advice kept him alive.

The door to the warehouse slid open, and six men in cheap suits entered.

Dave stiffened, and motioned for Harry to hide, while he himself crossed the walkway and made his way down the stairs on the opposite wall.

Mike was already squaring up to the men, bristling.

"I already told ya! We ain't working for ya! We got our contracts, an' we ain't gonna stiff 'em to work for a pittance from you!"

Harry stuffed his fist in his mouth to stifle his scream when a bored looking man to the right of the leader pulled a handgun from inside his jacket and shot Mike in the chest without a word.

Mike fell with a thud and a surprised look, blood blooming on his white shirt like an obscene flower. He coughed once, spitting up blood, before laying still.

Harry stared in shock from his hiding place behind the current load of gun crates. He watched Dave shout as he ran down the stairs on the opposite wall, only to take a bullet in the gut and fall the last few steps with a sickening crack. His neck was on an odd angle, and he didn't move, though he was awake and watching in horror.

Harry heard screams, and watched as Sally and Mickey were grabbed and dragged out of the warehouse. A distant part of his mind registered the remaining men saying something about the other boy, which he dimly realised must be him, but he couldn't move past the view of Dave laying there, painfully still.

*One step further. Clear and undeniable victory.*

Harry bit back a whimper as he saw the men start to spread out and look for him. Glancing back at
Dave's prone form, he made his decision.

Grabbing one of the Vahan rifles from the crate he was hiding behind, he loaded it with quick fingers. Taking a deep breath to steel himself, he army crawled to the edge of the walkway, set his sights, and opened fire.

The recoil hurt his shoulder, and the shots were startlingly loud, but Harry refused to let that stop him. Firing off short bursts, he was surprised at how quickly his four opponents went down, blood pouring from multiple wounds on each of them. He was even more surprised when they didn't get up again.

He paused, watching them carefully. They had already shown they would hurt people, and Harry wasn't willing to give them the opportunity to hurt anyone else, especially not him. They'd had no mercy, so Harry would give them none.

When they didn't move for several moments, Harry began to scuttle carefully around the walkway. Dave had always told him to take any advantage offered, and when in doubt, keep moving.

Harry cradled his rifle as he scooted around the walls and down the stairs to Dave.

Dave's breathing was laboured, but he was awake. Harry placed the rifle to his side, easily reached if any of the suited men moved. He looked down at Dave's pained face, tears starting to leak down his cheeks.

"Oi, no tears kid. Nothin' wrong with crying, but never let anyone see you do it, not if you're gonna be the biggest badass around. In our world, tears are a weakness you can't be seen t' have, got me?" Dave's voice was soft, softer than Harry had ever heard.

Harry nodded and wiped his eyes, shoving his feeling down into that part of his mind that he locked away each night that he earned his keep. He would deal with it later, just like Dave had taught him.

A slight scuffling from one of the suited men had Harry grabbing up the rifle and unloading a round directly between the man's eyes. The tiny boy seemed oblivious to the unusual skill and accuracy he had just displayed, his focus already returned to his fallen mentor.

"Reckon we got a name for you now, kid." Dave's eyes lingered on the rifle near his head. "You know what Vahan means in Armenian?" Harry shook his head silently. "Means shield. Just like you'll be for the other kids when you're grown, right?" Harry nodded. He knew Dave was saying goodbye. There was too much blood and he wasn't moving, his neck visibly broken. "A shield can be a weapon too, you know. Depends which side of it you stand on." His breath was getting laboured, his skin pale and clammy, but he managed a small smile for the little boy. "Go back to your relatives, kid. Get yourself big, and remember what I taught you, yeah? An' no matter what those meat sacks tell you, you're special, but that don't make you a freak. Don't let 'em break you. Every time they try, it'll just make you stronger. You're a good kid, Vahan. You're gonna go far, an' do me proud."

Harry sat silent as Dave stopped talking and his eyes went dull. He knew he was gone, he'd seen that same look on the guy Mike had knifed, but he couldn't bring himself to move just yet. He felt cold, like everything around him was moving too slowly and too fast at the same time.

It wasn't until he heard the shuffle of feet near the door that he roused himself. Grabbing the rifle, he slipped through the door to the room that Mike and Dave shared. Had shared. Grabbing Dave's ratty backpack, he disassembled the rifle in record time and wrapped the pieces in a cloth, stuffing it in the
bag. A handful of knives and a handgun, a couple of boxes of ammo and a sharpening stone joined it, and Harry looked around for anything else. Spying the tin Mike kept the money in, he grabbed that too, struggling to zip the bulging bag closed.

He could hear cops entering the building now, so he shimmied out the tiny window and bolted as quickly as he could, navigating the back alleys with ease. His activities the last month had given him excellent local knowledge and sense of direction, both of which he employed now to evade the uniforms swarming his former home.

As he made his way back to the hated Dursley's, he kept replaying Dave's words over in his mind, committing them to heart indelibly. And with them, the name he had been given by the one person he could recall ever actually caring about him. The name he would spend every moment of his life living up to. No matter what anyone else called him, he had only one real name.

Vahan.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Warning: There is some pretty confronting stuff in this chapter. You've been warned.

Eight year old Harry sat under the tree in the school playground, watching Dudley beating a small boy. He felt a little bad for the kid, but not enough to intervene at this point. Instead, he used the opportunity to examine how Dudley moved, what moves he favoured, and where his weaknesses lay. It was a rare opportunity; usually he was the one receiving the beating at the fat bully's hands, which made accurate observation a tad difficult.

Right handed. Favours a left hook, right uppercut combo while opponent is standing. Right jab for prone victim. Prefers to have support of three or more, less likely to attack if alone. Powerful hit but slow movement. Low intelligence, collective and individual. Most effective strategy: quick strikes and fast dodging, keep him off balance. Best him in front of his gang to achieve collective dominance. Future use: muscle outsourcing, distribution, intimidation.

Harry didn't move from his place, keeping watch over the small boy and ignoring the fleshy thuds of fists impacting tenderized flesh. The kid would be scared and bruised, but it was unlikely any permanent damage would be done. Harry allowed himself to drift a little mentally, keeping only enough attention to his surroundings to let him know if the beating took a step up, or if his own position was compromised.

He'd been dreaming about Dave again last night. The older boy had been sitting with him on the walkway, just like their last conversation. The topic of conversation was different this time though, and hadn't ended in gunfire and death, which was a pleasant change.

Dream Dave had told him that it was time to start his Work. He'd had three years to prepare, and Harry was as ready as he could be to take his first steps down the path Dave had set him on.

Baby steps.

Harry shifted slightly. He was as prepared as he could be for this venture. After leaving the warehouse to return to the Dursley's, he'd stashed his bag in one of the hidey holes he'd found at Dave's direction, and had been slowly adding to it, collecting everything of use he could get his hands on. He'd trained himself as best he could in combat tactics and techniques from books and videos at the library, and had practiced the movements until they were as natural as breathing. He knew his strengths and weaknesses. All he needed now was a field test; which considering he was self-taught, he expected to be thoroughly painful.

The departure of Dudley's gang drew his attention, and he waited patiently until they were out of sight before moving towards the crying boy they had left on the ground. Crouching down out of arms reach, Harry waited patiently for the boy to notice him.

When the boy's sniffles hitched slightly, Harry tilted his head to the side, observing.

"Do you need to see the nurse?" His voice was quiet, soothing.
The boy sniffled again and nodded.

"Do you want me to help you get there?" Harry hadn't moved closer, well aware that many other children were afraid of approaching him because of Dudley's gang responding brutally to any attempts made.

The boy nodded once more, and Harry shifted forward to help the child up. The boy would have been a year or two younger, but Harry's state of permanent malnutrition had left him a similar height. Taking advantage of that, Harry slung the boy's arm over his shoulder and locked his own around the boy's waist, taking most of the weight off the boy's injured leg.

The boys slowly made their way to the nurse's office, where the older woman immediately began clucking over the injured child. When she turned to shoo Harry away, the younger boy looked up.

"Please miss, can my friend stay with me?"

Harry didn't allow his surprise to show, simply standing quietly in the corner.

The nurse was not so restrained, her eyebrows rising. As far as she was aware, the scruffy boy in the corner didn't have any friends, and the other children actively shunned him. Not that she could blame them, there was something unsettling about his cold green stare. There was nothing childlike in that gaze.

"If you want, dear. I'll be right back, I just need to get something from the other room." She bustled out, leaving the boys alone.

"I'm Daniel Andrews. Thanks for helping me."

Harry nodded slightly. "Harry Potter, and you're welcome. You might want to be careful about claiming me as a friend though. Dudley and his goons tend to target people near me."

Daniel frowned. "Why?"

"He's my cousin. I live with him and his parents, and they dislike me." Harry shrugged nonchalantly.

Daniel frowned again. "Why?"

Smiling faintly, Harry tilted his head slightly, crossing his arms and leaning against the wall. "Don't know, it's just the way things are. For the moment at least. I'll be dealing with Dudley soon."

The younger boy looked Harry over silently for a moment. "You aren't scared of him."

Harry shook his head negatively but stayed silent.

Tilting his bruised face inquisitively, Daniel eyed him intently, as if trying to see past the oversized clothes and bad glasses to the person underneath.

"You remind me of my brother."

Harry quirked an eyebrow silently.

"You hold yourself the same, and your eyes are the same. He's really nice to people, mostly, but he's really scary if you get on his bad side."

Harry kept his expression bland and his gaze locked on Daniel.
"I reckon Dudley is going to be in for a bad time when you make your move. And I think I'd rather be on your good side. Do you want to be friends?" Daniel looked unsure of his welcome, but his pleading brown eyes and dark wavy hair reminded Harry of Dave, and he found himself smirking lightly.

"If you want. I can't promise I'll be a good one though, I've never really had a friend before."

Daniel's face lit up. "That's ok! Like my mum says, I'm sure we can muddle through."

Harry grinned, but quickly blanked his face and sank back into himself when the nurse returned with an icepack.

A few days later found Harry under the same tree, idly watching the other children playing. He acknowledged Daniel's approach with a slight twitch of his head, but otherwise didn't react as the boy flopped down next to him.

"Here." Daniel dropped a sandwich and apple in Harry's lap.

Harry frowned, watching the other boy out of the corner of his eye. "Um, thanks?"

"I thought you might be hungry. Dudley's really fat, but you're really thin, and you said your relatives didn't like you, and I've never seen you eat at school. You're probably fine, but I thought I'd bring some extra, just in case. If you don't need it, that's fine, but friends look after each other, so…"

He trailed off uncomfortably, panting slightly from forcing his ramble out in a single breath.

Harry forced himself not to shift uncomfortably. "You're very observant."

Daniel grinned. "Yeah. Mum and Dad used to read me Sherlock Holmes books when I was smaller, and I got interested in the whole deductive observation and reasoning thing. I'm really smart too - gifted."

Harry mulled this over for a few moments. "Gifted? Is that like a genius or something?"

Daniel nodded, chewing his own apple. "Yeah, something like that. I'm not sure where the exact line is between the two, never bothered to look it up."

"Is that why you don't talk like a normal kid?"

Swallowing, Daniel grinned. "Probably. And I read a lot, but kid's books are boring. You're smarter than you let on too, I can tell."

Harry watched Daniel watch him for a few moments, then picked up the sandwich. "Interesting."

Harry was running. Dudley and his lackeys had started a game of Harry Hunting, and Harry was using the opportunity to get in some speed training. He hadn't dealt with Dudley yet, but he would have to do that soon, this was getting ridiculous.

His uncle had beaten him last night, and his ribs and leg were screaming in pain, but he refused to let himself falter. He'd need to find somewhere safe soon though, he couldn't keep this up for long. He jumped over a fallen garbage can, frantically thinking of where he could hide long enough to escape and rest. A tight squeezing feeling wrapped itself around him, crushing the air from his lungs, before releasing just as quickly as it appeared.
Harry stumbled and blinked in surprise. How the hell did he get on the roof?

Shaking off that thought for the moment, and focusing on the more pressing issue, Harry crouched, peering cautiously over the edge and down at Dudley and his gang. Their angry shouts at his disappearance brought a smirk to his face, and he absently noted that none of them had seen how he got up here. Now if only he could figure out how he did it, and maybe do it again when he wanted to, he would have quite the handy little trick up his sleeve.

The next day, Daniel grabbed Harry as soon as they found each other at recess.

"You're a wizard!" He hissed.

Harry blinked, confused. He usually had no trouble following Daniel's somewhat scattered thought processes, but this was a bit left field, even for him.

"What?"

Daniel dragged him further away from the other children, tucking them into a quiet corner of the playground.

"I saw you Apparate yesterday! Onto the roof! It's ok, I'm one too. When you said your name was Harry Potter, I didn't know you were that Harry Potter!"

Harry frowned, confused and irritated. "I don't know what you're talking about!"

Daniel peered at him for a moment before his eyes widened. "You really don't know? But, you're famous! You stopped You-Know-Who when you were just a baby!"

Harry began edging away slightly, only to be pulled back by his wrist. His eyes flashed in warning but Daniel released his arm before Harry decided to make him.

"Look, I get that you don't believe me. Come over to my place after school and I'll prove it!" Daniel's large brown eyes were pleading, and he sported something suspiciously like a pout.

Harry eyed him warily for a few moments. "Will there be cookies?"

Daniel grinned. "If there aren't, we can make some." His face fell slightly. "What about your relatives? Will they get mad?"

Harry waved dismissively. "They prefer me out of their hair. They'll use it as an excuse to punish me, but they would do that anyway."

That settled, the boys got down to the serious business of enjoying the rest of their recess.

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The Andrews' house was nondescript; a standard unremarkable brick with a small lawn out the front and no garden to speak of. Harry observed it closely, but couldn't see anything unusual about it that might corroborate Daniel's story, or prove him to be a lunatic.

Daniel's mum was a tiny little witch with a wide smile and a face startlingly similar to her son's. She greeted Harry with a warm hug, a plate of cookies and a tall glass of milk.

Her sharp brown eyes swept over the small boy who had befriended her son, and reached some disturbing conclusions. The boy was clearly undernourished, neglected, and possibly physically abused too, judging by the limp he was trying to hide. She listened intently as her son explained that
Harry was the Harry Potter, but he didn't know anything about magic.

"Well then, I guess we will start with the basics. You can call me Tammy or Mama Andrews."

Harry nodded politely.

"I'll go get some books, and we can go through them together, alright? Hopefully that will help explain some things."

Bustling away, she returned shortly with a small stack of books which she placed on the table.

"Alright, I think we should start with the one that has you in it."

Harry's eyes widened.

The next three hours were filled with so many surprises that Harry's mind boggled. Finding out that his parents had actually been murdered and that someone called Albus Dumbledore was responsible for putting him with the Dursley's (a simple matter of deductive reasoning that would definitely require further investigation) had him pursing his lips thoughtfully and his eyes growing marginally colder as he pondered the implications. Harry had snorted with laughter at some of the supposed 'facts' about his life. He made a mental note to find out about wizard banking and royalties for using his name. Apparently Harry Potter books and merchandise was rather prolific, and it might possibly provide another (legal) stream of income for him. He'd also been given a brief outline of the main branches of magic.

Harry's head was buzzing.

Magic was real.

Magic was really real, and he was famous.

Exhausted, Harry had gratefully accepted dinner, over which he had met Daniel's older brother Greg, and his father, Captain Nathan Andrews when they returned home from school and work respectively.

The entire family had made him feel welcome, and had informed Harry that he was welcome any time of the day or night. Captain Andrews had made the same assessment as his wife, but didn't miss that the boy already had the hard look in his eyes that Greg had developed after running away and spending a few months on the street. He silently swore that he would do whatever he could to help this kid survive.

Harry was at the Andrews', happily stuffed full of sandwiches and milk, and critically eyeing the garden beds in the backyard.

"Mama Andrews?"

The woman in question hummed distractedly in response, most of her attention focused on the tangle of wool that was resulting from her attempts to teach herself crochet.

"Your perennial beds are about ready to be prepped and planted. Would you like some help?"

Tammy looked up in confusion. "My what beds are ready for what?"

Harry blinked. "Your garden? It's ready to be weeded and prepped for the perennials. I thought you might like some help."
Tammy stared blankly for a moment. "Ok, I understood garden, and help."

Captain Andrews chuckled as he stepped outside onto the porch to join them. "Harry, for all her beauty and talent, my wife wouldn't know a Primrose from a Daffodil, let alone how to care for them. Our gardens are pretty much left to tend themselves."

Harry looked faintly horrified, triggering another laugh from the older man. "I'm guessing you're a bit of a gardener?"

Harry cleared his throat and carefully rearranged his expression to one of polite neutrality – an act that did not pass unnoticed by the adults. "I do the gardening at my relatives."

The Captain pursed his lips thoughtfully. "Do you enjoy it?"

Shrugging noncommittally, Harry shifted his gaze back to the overgrown gardens for a moment, before snapping his gaze back to his scruffy shoes. "I guess." He did, but he wasn't so foolish as to let other people know that. If it got back to the Dursleys they would stop him from doing it in future.

The adults traded a loaded glance, communicating silently.

"You know, many common plants are used in potions. I've always thought it would be a good idea to grow some of my own, I just don't know enough about plants to do it. Would you be interested in doing our gardens? We can talk to your aunt and uncle and arrange for you to come around regularly. We can use the time to teach you more about the Wizarding world while we are at it. What do you think?" Tammy offered.

Harry cringed slightly when she mentioned talking to his relatives, but agreed regardless. "Sure, I can do that. But, um…" He trailed off, looking uncomfortable. "My relatives…"

The Captain placed a gentle hand on Harry's shoulder, ignoring the boy's flinch. "It's alright. We know you have some – issues – at home. What would be the best way to get your relatives to agree?"

Harry looked up, his expression wary. His green eyes roved searchingly over the Captain's face, taking in every detail and assessing the man's honesty. Finding nothing alarming, Harry pondered for a moment.

Dave's voice rang in his mind, advising him as always. *You can't rely on anyone but yourself, and you'd be foolish to trust anyone else either. Everyone wants something. But sometimes, your wants and theirs will match up, and if you're lucky, the price of getting it is something you're willing to pay.*

Aside from Daniel, who wanted someone to protect him from bullies, Harry didn't know what the Andrews family wanted from him. But he needed more knowledge about the Wizarding world, and doing some gardening in exchange was a small price to pay for it. He realised that he wasn't going to find out their end game without playing in the short term, so he made his decision.

"You heard my reputation as a juvenile delinquent, and thought you'd do your civic duty by teaching me the value of hard work; straighten me out, military style. If they don't go for that, you may need to offer to pay them for my labour." Harry's face was cold, but he shrugged, his eyes straying back to the plant beds. He really did enjoy gardening.

Captain Andrews nodded. "Play the hardarse, got it."

Harry smirked slightly at the phrasing, casting a sideways glance up at the genial man. He hoped he was there to see that little performance.
Three weeks of backbreaking labour over afternoons and weekends, and Harry was finished with the gardens. He carefully washed his hands and made sure he was clean enough to enter the house, idling flipping through his mental list of places he could set up his drug lab. He really did need to get a move on with his business.

It bothered him that he had yet to work out what the Andrews wanted, too. They had been as friendly and caring as ever, stuffing him with good food at every opportunity, and teaching him as much as they could about magic and the Wizarding world. He wasn't allowed to cast spells of course, but they had covered the basic theory behind the different branches of magic, as well as discussed the society in general.

Harry thought some of the society stuff was archaic, but dutifully stored it away in his mind. Apparently he would be going to a school called Hogwarts when he turned eleven, and so all of these details would become relevant once he entered that world.

His fame was a matter of interest as well. Harry and Mama Andrews had spent an entire afternoon talking about it, discussing what it would mean for him when he started school, and people's expectations of him as their child hero. They had also discussed his family, and the inherited responsibly that came with being a Potter. Apparently great stock was put in one's blood purity, a fact that made Harry wrinkle his nose in disgust.

The Potter line was considered Pureblood, and until his father had married his mother, a Muggleborn, they had been ridiculously proud of the fact, though they weren't as prejudiced as some of the other old families.

Mama Andrews had gone out of her way to get more information for him, buying some books on things specific to whatever caught his interest. He was particularly keen on the "Official" biography of his life. His fascination had less to do with the completely absurd content, and everything to do with the pictures scattered throughout it. There was a picture of his parents, and he found himself a little choked up, particularly at the picture of his mother.

Wavy red hair, peaches and cream skin, and sparkling green eyes that matched his own. Aside from the eyes, she could have been an older version of Sally. His chest ached at the thought of the shy girl who had sneaked him stolen chocolates and sat quietly with him when he couldn't sleep from the pain after a nights work.

He also diligently worked through books on society and etiquette, and made a point of learning what he could about the most prominent families he was likely to encounter when he started school. It would be foolish to go into such a political situation without knowing who the major players were.

_Do your research, know your territory. If you can possibly avoid it, never go into a situation blind; it will get you killed._

He also developed an interest in potions, seeing the immediate potential for expanding his future drug options into the Wizarding world. He realised that supplying potions into the muggle world would bring down the Aurors onto him in short order, but that didn't mean he couldn't provide them in the Wizarding world. And he could move the muggle drugs in both worlds. He could practically hear the money rolling in already.

Greg had spent some time helping Harry with the heavy lifting in the garden, and the two had become friendly over dirty hands and aching blisters. The older boy had quietly confided about his time on the streets – information Harry had absorbed silently – and offered a non-judgemental ear if Harry ever needed it. A few subtle questions and apparently absent minded comments, and Harry
had ascertained that Greg still had a few of his street contacts, and would do the occasional low level job for them to earn some extra cash. The boy was no leader, but he was loyal and canny, and Harry decided that he was just the sort of person he needed to start moving his product.

Two months had passed with the Andrews making excuses to keep Harry at their house as often as possible. The Dursley's were thrilled at the idea that he was being worked to the bone, and happy with the small amount of compensation the Captain provided them.

Harry decided it was time to enact his plan. He was a ready as he would ever be, so he didn't bother going home that night. He ate dinner with the Andrews as usual before making his excuses – explaining that he couldn't come over on the weekend because his relatives wanted him home – then headed out into the night. It wasn't true of course, but he knew the Dursley's wouldn't look for him.

He'd carefully selected a building for his lab, and had set it up with everything he'd need, plus a bit besides. All he needed now was ephedrine. Carefully approaching the fence at the pharmaceutical warehouse he'd been scoping out for weeks, he slipped inside, avoiding the security cameras and guards.

Harry decided he was fortunate to have such a good memory. While he was living with Mike and Dave it had been a mixed blessing, but now he was putting what he learned to good use.

*Use every advantage to achieve your goals, but never trust a person you've blackmailed.*

Harry settled himself into the dark corner of the Head of Security's office. He'd already planted the small camera and microphone in the bookshelf, and was now just waiting for his quarry. He used the time to get into character, making himself seem small and vulnerable, shaking from fear. It couldn't be further from the truth of course, but he could have been a professional actor by this stage.

When Harry had spotted the Head of Security and matched the face to one of his former regular clients, he'd nearly cackled at the beautiful coincidence of it. The tall man had softened around the middle to the point that his belly was beginning to hang over his belt and strained the buttons on his shirt. He was sickly pale with a yellow tinge to his skin, and his receding sandy blonde hair feathered over his brow in a way that Harry thought was supposed to look rakish but really just looked like he needed a haircut. His watery grey eyes darted constantly, slightly glazed. Harry was amused when he realised that the man had probably bought more than time with the kids from Mike. Eyeing the ostentatious name plaque – Matthew Peterson – and the overly poncy office, Harry decided that his plan couldn't happen to a more deserving guy.

The man himself returned from his dinner break, keeping to his usual routine of using his Friday evening to catch up on paperwork and killing time before heading to the streets where the kids worked. Harry waited until he was settled at his desk, immersed in his work, before sniffling slightly and shuffling his feet.

Peterson's head shot up, and he zeroed in on the tiny form cringing in the corner.

"Well now, who might you be?" He crooned, moving to crouch in front of the small boy.

Harry looked back with his eyes huge, sniffling again. "T-tiny, sir."

Peterson smiled slightly. "And what are you doing in here, Tiny?"

Harry cringed further into the corner. "H-hiding, sir. I-I was being chased, and I crawled through the fence, a-and then I saw the guards, but the boys chasing me were still there, so I-I hid, and please, please don't tell anyone I'm here!" Harry called forth a few tears, making his large green eyes glisten.
Peterson had always liked seeing them shine.

Peterson smiled. "How old are you, Tiny?"

"S-six, sir."

Peterson's smile took a predatory edge. "Well now, Tiny, we have a bit of a problem. See, this is a restricted area, which means you need permission to be in here. And you, you don't have permission." He coaxed Harry out with a hand on his shoulder, steering him into the chair in front of his desk. "So, I'm going to have to turn you in, you understand? You'll be in a lot of trouble for being here."

Harry trembled. "No! Please, no! I'll do anything, don't turn me in, please!" Harry allowed an edge of hysteria to creep into his voice. He twitched a hand forward slightly, before dropping it back into his lap and letting his shoulders droop. He lowered his head, eyes in his lap. "Anything," he whispered.

Peterson leaned against the front of his desk, ankles crossed and arms folded. His eyes drifted hungrily over the shaking boy in front of him. He was a bit bigger than his old favourite, but those eyes and black hair reminded him of the little boy he used to get from Mike. That one had been a real treat, remembering what he liked and doing it without any more complaints than was enjoyable. Really, he had been most upset when the boy had disappeared.

"Alright," he finally spoke. "I'll make you a deal."

Harry looked up, hope shining in his eyes.

"You do me a favour, and I'll do you one by not turning you in, sound fair? But this would be just between us, you mustn't ever tell anyone, otherwise they'll send you to prison for breaking in here."

Harry shuddered and forced a small whimper. He twitched forward again, before cringing back again. Peterson liked the desperation, he remembered. "What," he licked his lips nervously. "What do you want me to do?"

Peterson smirked, uncrossing his legs and moving into his office chair. He leaned back, eyes never leaving the small boy as he shuffled his hips toward the edge of the chair. "Come here."

"Take off your clothes, and suck me like a lollypop."

Harry sighed mentally. Honestly, couldn't the instructions even be original? The man hadn't changed his script since Harry was five. Steeling himself and letting himself drift into the dissociative state he had perfected on the streets, he got to work.

It had been a long time since he had done this, and he found his body remembered the pain but had not retained the conditioning to cope with it. His jaw was aching by the time he was finally breached, and he bit his lip bloody as he felt himself tear slightly.

He whined and cried as his body was used, and he made sure to wriggle around a little and angle them so that the camera could get clear shots of both their faces; Peterson's in bliss and Harry's streaked with tears. He detested pretending to be so weak.

Whichever it takes. Play any part, use any tool.
The mental distance Harry maintained helped him ignore what was happening to him for the moment, but he knew he would have nightmares until he processed it. He had anticipated this, however, and had already stocked his safe house/lab with provisions for the weekend. He'd be in for a rough few days, but all going to plan he would be healed and sufficiently rested for school on Monday.

Harry printed out a few stills of his little assignation with Peterson from the computer he had set up at his lab. He included a letter from the mysterious but threatening Vahan, a standard blackmailing for a regular supply of ephedrine taken from the warehouse and left in a backpack at a designated location, and stuffed them into an envelope. He didn't expect Peterson to be stupid enough to go to the police, but he wore latex gloves while handing every part of it, just in case. No point taking chances after all.

Everything was in place. He'd obtained a fake identity in the name of John Smith – the most boring name he could think of – which he could use to conduct any business he wasn't old enough to do yet, the lab was set up, and he'd obtained the paperwork to set up a bank account in his fake name and to purchase the property the lab was on. He had the material on Peterson that would obtain him the ephedrine, and he'd purchased a bicycle he could use to transport it from the warehouse to the lab.

Nobody ever looks twice at a kid on a bike. If you need to move something, that's the way to do it.

A grim smile flitted across his features, and he stood. He had business to conduct.
Harry packaged the last of the current batch of meth, placing the bags neatly in the backpacks for delivery. Over the past several months he had moved a significant amount of product with the assistance of Greg and several of Mike's old contacts. Harry generally preferred to use Greg as a go-between – the older boy was surprisingly reliable, but Harry was unwilling to use him exclusively. Eggs, baskets.

The financial rewards had been… Satisfying.

With the assistance of Mr Marcus Bradshaw – a very talented lawyer with less than reputable contacts – Harry (or Mr Smith, rather) had bought the house his lab was in, and had just closed on another small two bedroom apartment. He had every intention of setting up several safe houses in various neighbourhoods, as well as a couple more labs.

Vahan, also, was gaining a reputation. The mysterious man had been responsible for several blackmailing's and thefts, not to mention supply of high quality drugs, and had begun to draw the attention of the bigger figures in the local crime scene. Nothing worrisome yet, but enough that Harry was going to have to stay alert. He had already been marked as "Vahan's boy", and as such had to be on his guard for people who might try to use him to get close to his shadowy "benefactor".

His ninth birthday was approaching soon, and Harry was pondering what to give himself as a gift. He tugged at his ratty sleeves, and wished he could buy himself a new wardrobe. He certainly had the money, but the Dursley's would start asking unfortunate questions if he showed up with new clothes, and might prevent him going to the Andrews. Which was unacceptable since he still hadn't worked out their endgame, and he had business with Greg. It was a pity that there wasn't anyone he could trust who could get custody of him.

He paused.

Actually, there was. He had a perfectly good adult identity with which to conduct all his legal business. Why not custody as well? He had the apartment that he could live in, and more than enough money to live on. And courtesy of the Dursley's and his time on the streets he knew how to look after himself and a household. And it would make his Work easier…

Grinning, Harry removed his protective gear and straightened his clothes. He had a birthday present to arrange.

Harry was sitting in the darkened office of Bradshaw and Cohen, flicking through the contents of an envelope he had found on the desk. He'd broken in with the intention of rifling through the office files before approaching Mr Bradshaw in person, but the envelope was much more interesting than the dry files he'd found in the filing cabinet.

Mr Bradshaw was a principled criminal lawyer. His extensive network of shady contacts was used freely, but he took his professionalism seriously and protected his clients' interests with vicious dedication. His reputation in that regard was part of why Harry had hired him in the first place. But now it had gotten the man in trouble.

According to the letter enclosed with the pictures of a pretty brunette woman and a little boy with reddish brown hair and a cheeky smile, Mr Bradshaw was required to hand over information on how to find one of his clients to ensure his family's safe return.
A terrifying situation for the unfortunate man, to be sure, but Harry saw it as an opportunity.

His lazy perusal was interrupted by the light flicking on and a startled expletive from the handsome redhead in the doorway.

"Jesus, kid, you scared the daylights out of me!"

The man puttered around the office, stowing his briefcase and turning on the fancy coffee maker. His leanly muscled form highlighted perfectly by his suit. With his aristocratic features and perfectly groomed appearance, the tall man cut an imposing figure.

Harry was impressed and slightly amused to note that despite his casual actions, the man never fully turned his back to the small boy reclining in his chair with his feet on the desk.

Finally finished his morning ritual, the man visibly gave his guest his full attention, though Harry was aware that he'd actually had it the entire time. A tactic he'd seen Mike and Dave use many times. Even the Captain used it occasionally.

"So, how can I help you?"

Harry gave the man points for not treating him like a stupid kid.

"My business can wait for the moment. Right now, I'm more interested in what I can do for you."

Bradshaw's eyebrows rose. "Sorry kid, I don't know who sent you, but I don't lean to the younger ones. You're wasting your time."

Harry flashed a faint smile. "I know you don't, Mr Bradshaw, it's one of the reasons my employer chose to use your services. No, he's offering something much more valuable." He casually tossed the envelope and its contents onto the desk between them. Waiting patiently while the man quickly absorbed the details, he laced his fingers together and rested them on his stomach, not shifting his legs off the desk.

"How dare you!" Bradshaw's choked whisper broke the brief silence.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Don't be ridiculous. This matter has nothing to do with my employer or his business. He stumbled onto it by accident. However, he foresees a mutually beneficial partnership rising from this, which does relate to his business. One that is significantly better and more profitable than he had originally intended to offer you." His calm green eyes never moved from the distressed man's face.

Bradshaw was giving him a suspicious look, but seemed willing to hear Harry out. If he was unnerved by the unusually eloquent boy he didn't show it.

"What exactly is he offering, Mr…?"

Harry smiled faintly. "We'll avoid names for the moment, I think. What my employer is offering, is to retrieve your family for you, and make a very definite statement that you are under protection as a neutral party. Furthermore, should there be any future attempts to coerce or force your cooperation, it will be dealt with appropriately to reinforce the message."

Bradshaw settled himself on a seat in front of his desk, his face expressionless as he assessed what was being offered. "And what would your employer gain from this? And for that matter, who do you represent?"
Finally sitting up properly, Harry crossed his arms on the desk in front of him, ignoring that his feet didn't even reach the floor properly. The sight of the tiny boy in baggy clothes perched so seriously at the huge antique desk might have been comical, but the cold green eyes removed all humour from the situation.

"Nothing that would compromise your other clients or future business prospects. My employer is interested in a slightly closer relationship than you might usually enjoy with your clients." Rolling his eyes as Bradshaw indignantly opened his mouth to decline the perceived proposition, he held up one hand, palm out, and continued. "Not a sexual relationship. My employer has no use for such things at this time. What he does need, is someone he can trust beyond a standard employee relationship. He has some needs that can only be addressed by someone intimately aware of his business, and he requires this person to be effectively on retainer; though as far as is possible his requests will not interfere with your existing or future work. As for who I represent, with your contacts, I assume you have heard of Vahan?"

Bradshaw quirked an eyebrow. "I've heard the name. No concrete information though. How do I know your employer can deliver what is offered? If I agree, I'm placing my business and my family in the hands of a man that I don't know can effectively protect them."

Harry leaned back, secretly pleased. "Mr Bradshaw, your reputation has been built around the rabid protection of your clients and their interests. As such, you come highly recommended, and until now this has afforded you and your family a measure of protection. If this reputation was suddenly compromised by your capitulation to blackmail, your family would be in constant danger of this situation repeating whenever someone wanted confidential information from you. Assuming you survived the initial backlash, your business would be ruined, your reputation in tatters. I'm offering you a way to not only maintain your reputation, but further it, with backup to enforce it when necessary. The benefit of this arrangement to my employer is that if you burn him, he will publically withdraw his protection, and explain why. I highly doubt your business will survive that situation."

Harry fell silent, allowing the man to ponder what he had heard.

"You didn't answer my question. Your employer is still a small fish in a big pond. Can he provide what he is offering?"

Harry's cold voice left no doubt. "Yes."

Bradshaw paused for another moment, before setting his shoulders. "Alright. What do I need to do?"

Harry sat back with a slow smile that sent shivers down the older man's spine.

"A mobile phone will be delivered to you later today. Keep it with you at all times. Instructions will be texted to it. Until then, act as you would if we hadn't had this conversation, and stall. Now, tell me everything you can think of about your dealing with these people, and where your family may have been when they were taken."

Harry was mildly disappointed at how easy it was to track down where the Bradshaw family was being held. A few subtle questions and a couple of pocket change bribes, and he had not only located the targets and their superior, but the locations for both. Shaking his head, he casually approached the office of one Anthony Michaels.

After being shown into the office by an amused and condescending man that Harry decided must be part gorilla, Harry casually glanced around.

The office was behind a bar, and while plush and comfortable, it was tacky and severely outdated.
Faded carpet of indeterminate colour released the scent of old cigarettes and booze, and Harry fought the urge to sneeze. He personally found the scent repulsive. The walls were barely visible through the frames that covered it, pictures of various people doing boring things but pretending to enjoy themselves, newspaper clippings, business certificates, and assorted other memorabilia.

The desk was old and worn, but sturdy, buried under mountains of barely organised paperwork. Harry observed with amusement that it was for show, as the man he was there to see was just in the process of shutting an extremely organised filing cabinet.

Waiting quietly for the shabby man's attention, Harry allowed himself to look around subtly, practicing the "deductive observation" that he had learned from Daniel. They'd turned it into something of a game, competing for who could "deduce" the most in the shortest time possible. Daniel was better, but Harry was no slouch.

Harry had to admit, the man before him played his part well. The outdated office, overflowing ashtray, and shabby rumpled appearance made him seem to be nothing more than an overworked bar owner, a non-threat, but Harry saw past all of that. The calloused and flattened knuckles spoke of a man who spent a lot of time talking with his fists, and the faint bruises and scrapes indicated he had done so recently. The bulge of a concealed gun was nestled against his ribs, and the slightly altered gait as he moved around indicated another strapped to his leg – obviously something he wore regularly as the gait seemed habitual. Greying hair grown out and shaggy, but still holding a rough military cut shape – previous military experience but long enough ago to soften the old habits, letting him blend in better. No nicotine stains on his fingers but the scent clinging to his clothes – not a regular smoker himself, but often surrounded by them. Slightly ginger in his movements, favouring his right side – bruised or broken ribs, mostly healed. Possibly obtained at the same time as the scrapes on his knuckles. Overall, a man who was not to be underestimated.

Harry remained silent, waiting for the man to address him. He didn't have to wait long.

"What can I do for you, kid?"

Harry perched on the offered chair, gazing back calmly. "Hello Mr Michaels. I've come to discuss a problem with some of your employees."

The older man's shrewd gaze took in Harry's appearance as quickly as Harry had made his own assessments. "Oh?"

"My employer is aware that you and your associates are attempting to locate a Mr Tim Barton."

Michaels leaned back in his chair, deceptively casual. "And what makes you think that?"

Harry graced him with a withering look. "Feigning ignorance in this case will only waste time for both of us, and while I'd love to sit here and play the innocence game all afternoon, I'm sure we each have other things that need our attention. May we please cut to the point of this conversation?"

The man's lips twitched into a hastily suppressed smile. "Alright. You said there is a problem with my employees?"

Harry nodded. "I'm certain you are familiar with a Mr Bradshaw, of Bradshaw and Cohen, yes?" At his companion's nod, he continued. "Mr Bradshaw has an excellent reputation for neutrality towards his clients, as well as his devotion to protecting their interests. This neutrality is being threatened by the actions of a few of your men. As you can imagine, this would be bad for business, since Mr Bradshaw has worked for yourself, as well as many other people in our line of work. My employer was very disappointed that such a valuable resource is being compromised by thugs too lazy to do
their own legwork."

Michaels raised an eyebrow questioningly. "Is that so? I'm assuming this involves Mr Barton somehow?"

Harry nodded. "Rather than respect Mr Bradshaw's neutrality, your employees have abducted Mr Bradshaw's wife and child, in an attempt to force him to reveal information on how to find one of his clients; Mr Barton, specifically. Clearly, they were overlooking the fact that you too are one of his clients, and that if their tactic succeeds in this instance, it can be effectively used to compromise you as well."

Michaels pursed his lips in irritation. "I agree with your employer, whoever that is. Their actions are unacceptable. I will deal with them, and return Mr Bradshaw's family."

Harry smiled in amusement and tilted his head slightly to the side. "My employer has an alternative proposition."

Michaels attempted to restrain his curiosity, but the tiny boy who spoke so confidently was an irresistible puzzle. "Alright, let's hear it then." He resisted the urge to light a cigarette. He wasn't a regular smoker, but he was intrigued by this scruffy child, and needed something to help him focus on the business at hand. He wouldn't though, a leftover relic of his mother's influence wouldn't let him do anything to hurt a kid, even something as simple as passive smoking.

"Bradshaw, his family, offices, and employees will be placed under my employers protection. This protection will be used to enforce and protect the neutrality from which we all benefit. What my employer requests of you, is that you allow him to make an example of the men who have caused this situation. This offer will also be extended to the other organisations that would benefit from it."

"Why shouldn't I just clean house myself, and put the word out that Bradshaw isn't to be touched?"

Harry smiled brilliantly, and Michaels felt his breath catch slightly. He didn't like kids that way, but this boy would be stunning when he was older.

"Because my employer will do it with style."

Michaels threw his head back and laughed uproariously. He liked this kid. "Tempting. What else does he have to offer? A good showing isn't enough reason to hand over the responsibility for disciplining lazy employees, no matter how entertaining it might be."

Harry sighed lightly. 'He had hoped that this wouldn't be required, but very well. Mr Bradshaw has engaged my employer on an ongoing basis, on the understanding that his neutrality be maintained and that he will not be providing client information to my employer or anyone else. His business dealings will not be interfered with in any way, but if he, his family, business or employees are threatened or coerced, my employer will be notified to deal with the issue. Now, the current situation is this. My employer will be dealing with the idiots who took Bradshaw's family, with or without your permission. Should you refuse, Bradshaw and Cohen will cease all dealings with you, your organisation, and employees. If having the best in the business blacklist you is insufficient motivation and retaliation is attempted, compromising information will be sent to all of your business rivals. Sufficient information to wipe out your entire organisation. To be clear, this agreement is universal, not specific to you. If one of your rivals is stupid enough to cross Bradshaw, you yourself may find yourself receiving some interesting files. Assuming, of course, that you are smart enough to play ball today."

Harry let the silence stretch, his cold green gaze never wavering from the hazel opposite him.
Michaels breathed out slowly. "Alright, kid, alright. Tell your boss he has my permission. I assume the word will be put out, but I'll pass it around too."

Harry nodded politely and stood, taking his leave.

Michaels called to him as he reached the door. "Hey, kid?"

Harry half turned back, his hand on the doorknob.

"Who the hell do you work for?"

Harry smiled faintly. "His name is Vahan, Mr Michaels."

Michaels blinked, and the boy was gone, the door shutting quietly behind him.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Warning: Violence, and a bit of gore. Harry is not a nice little boy.

Reputation is everything. Think very carefully before you run your mouth.

Harry paused a block away from Michaels' office, and texted the sound recording of the conversation to Bradshaw, along with instructions to prepare the files just in case. Michaels wasn't stupid, and Harry doubted that his threat would be tested, but in the event that Michaels or anyone else thought he was bluffing, he wanted to be prepared. As Dave always said, never bluff; bluffing is for yappy little pissant wannabes.

Wandering into a nearby café for a sandwich and drink - and answering the inevitable and irritating questions about where his parents were - he sent a second text to another contact. He wanted something special for this job, and Mr South always had the best toys. Chewing slowly, he absently fiddled with his phone, waiting for a response. When it came, Harry wasted no time going to the gentleman's current place of business, excitement churning in his gut.

Strolling confidently past the hulking "assistants" and "private security consultants", he entered the reception room. Understated, elegant, and carefully inoffensive, the space was deceptively pleasant; appearing at first glance to be a comfortable waiting room for business personnel. It was easy to overlook the excessive number of security cameras, the state of the art digital locks on the doors, and the stash of hidden weapons behind the wet bar. There was undoubtedly much more security than was visible, but since Harry was always on his best behaviour he'd thankfully never had reason to encounter it.

"Mr South." Harry nodded respectfully.

"Greetings," the smooth baritone swept over Harry, calm and genteel; perfectly matching the man producing it. He gestured for his assistants to go, leaving him alone with the small boy.

Harry had first met Mr South while he was running with Mike. His quiet manner and obvious skill and intelligence had impressed the older man, and it had been an uncharacteristically short period before he allowed Harry to deal with him without Mike or Dave present. It could even be said that the man had a soft spot for the little boy; though nobody was foolish enough to actually say it. Mr South's employees were known for their discretion, and not just because they preferred to keep their tongues attached.

After Harry had returned to the Dursleys, he had met with Mr South on a semi regular basis, running odd jobs to earn some extra cash, or posing as his grandson when the gentleman had determined a cover was necessary for whatever reason. After one memorable and particularly messy incident where Harry had shot a client who thought to dispose of the smooth arms dealer – saving the man's life – Harry had become something of a favourite. The man had never expressed it, but he viewed the lad as a friend, or perhaps a distant nephew.

To date, he was the only person who knew that the scruffy little boy with no name was actually Vahan and not the employee he pretended to be, as well as the origin of the name. To say he was
impressed by the skill and accuracy Harry had displayed that night – he'd seen the aftermath first hand – would be a massive understatement. In fact, he had every intention of recruiting the boy when he was older. He would make an excellent successor.

The older gentleman extended a perfectly manicured hand to Harry, his immaculate black pinstripe suit, charcoal shirt and silver tie shifting flawlessly on his elegant form. He offered a rare smile. An observer might not have noticed the faint movement at all, but to those who knew the man, it was the equivalent of a beaming toothy grin. He had aged extremely well, gracefully frozen at an indeterminate age between forty five and sixty, and the people who'd had long term dealings with him would tell you that he never seemed to age beyond that point. It had been jokingly suggested that the man must be some kind of immortal wizard, especially considering how many assassination attempts the man had survived, oftentimes without even a scratch.

"Vahan."

Harry smiled back and shook his hand professionally. "Thank you for seeing me, Mr South."

"I am always happy to see my most unique client. What can I help you with today?"

"I'm branching out into protection. My client needs a statement made, and I was wondering if you had anything new which might help me with that?"

"As a matter of fact, I was going to call you in to have a look at some new toys. I think I have just the thing you need. Follow me." Turning gracefully on his heel, he made his way to a discretely concealed door at the back of the room.

Harry followed the older gentleman out of the welcoming lounge, down the hallway, and into the large storage room. The walls to each side were filled with boxes of various goods and accessories, each neatly packed and carefully arranged. The back wall was covered in mounted displays, and a waist height glass display cabinet in front of it showed off the newest offerings. A large metal table filled the centre of the room, and on this rested a beautiful piece of shiny that made Harry's verdant eyes gleam with as much lust as a nine year old can muster.

"Oh," he breathed softly, excitement betrayed by the faint trembling in his thin body. "Is that a crossbow?"

Mr South chuckled. "I thought you might like it. This is the PSE TAC 10i Crossbow." He watched as Harry reverently picked it up and examined it. "Hard anodized aluminium for durability. Fully adjustable stock, 3lb trigger, fully integrated quick cock allowing reload in as little as 15 seconds."

Harry had it braced against his shoulder and was sighting down it. "Draw weight?"

"145lb, but with the quick cock integration it's reduced to as little as 4lb. It also has a scope attachment."

"It's light."

"7.8lb, but will shoot a bolt at 350 feet per second."

"Got plenty of bolts in stock, I assume?"

Mr South smirked, another faint twitch of his lips. "I thought it might be to your liking, so I laid in a few."

"I'll take two, and a hundred bolts. I'm sure I'll be requiring more at a later date."
Nodding, Mr South proceeded to show Harry a few more weapons, selling him another four handguns, six knives of various designs, ammunition for his pre-existing collection, and a box of hand grenades by the time they finished.

"Our usual method of delivery I assume?"

At Harry's agreement and payment, the two men parted ways.

It was ten pm, and Harry had set up outside the target house. He'd scoped it out thoroughly, memorising the floor plan and the locations of his targets, and scouted for any surveillance or mobile guards.

*Always do your recon. Going in blind will get you killed, and then where would you be?*

Sighting carefully through his scope, he lined up his shot through the open window.

Targets One and Two were sprawled on the couch, watching television. Harry mentally tsked at how oblivious they were to potential threats, and how badly they'd arranged the room to minimise them.

Loosing his bolt, he smiled when it passed through the window screen with a whisper and impaled Target One through the throat, pinning him to the back of the (perfectly hideous) floral sofa. Target Two jumped to his feet, looking around wildly for the threat while ignoring his friend as he gurgled, choking on his own blood.

Harry fought down a giggle at Target Two's bewildered expression. The night was pleasantly cool, and the sound of crickets and distant traffic made an enjoyable backdrop for his work. He wondered if he should get a pizza on his way back to the Lab afterwards.

Quickly reloading, he loosed the second bolt, catching Target Two through the eye and flinging the now dead body back into his paralysed friends lap. Jumping up, Harry crouched and sprinted silently to a new position on the other side of the house, reloading as he moved.

There were four targets, and Harry knew the next would be sleeping in the bedroom. He'd seen the paunchy man lie down earlier, and had heard the snores within minutes. Lining up his shot, Harry snorted silently, amused when the bolt went from the soft underchin and up into the man's skull, poking out the top slightly like some kind of oversized pointy metal pimple. Instantly fatal, Harry noted with a smirk. God he loved this crossbow! Maybe he could get some bolts with an exploding tip? The splatter would be *awesome*!

'*Three down, one to go.'* He fought the urge to hum in contentment.

One more shift of position, and Harry's good mood dissipated. The last target should have been in the office, but wasn't anywhere in sight. He grumbled mentally, it had been going so smoothly, too.

A quick scout around the house showed that the final target wasn't visible through any of the windows. That meant that he was in the room with the Bradshaw's. Harry bit back a curse, unloading the crossbow and stashing it and the remaining bolts under a bush. He'd hoped to avoid a face to face confrontation, but he'd come prepared, knowing it was a possibility.

Screwing the silencer onto the barrel of his handgun, Harry silently picked the lock and cautiously made his way up the hall, clearing each of the rooms as he passed. Finally making it to the room in which the hostages were kept, Harry stopped and took a deep breath.

This was it. He'd wanted to field test his skills, and now he would get the chance. Admittedly, he
hadn't intended to pit his not-quite-nine-year-old self against a fully grown thug (he could practically hear Dave clucking in irritation), but hey, at least he'd get to see if he was actually any good. Silver linings and all that, right?

He winced in anticipation. This was going to hurt.

Quickly patting himself down, he checked his weapons were in place. Hunting knife on each forearm hidden inside his baggy clothes, check. Small stiletto blade in his boot, check. Garrotte wire coiled in his pocket (he really did need a better way of concealing and carrying that), check. Silenced pistol, check.

He looked at the doorframe, noting the screw marks. They'd reversed the door, making it open into the room rather than against the wall. He would have to open the door fully and enter the room before he could even see in. He was grudgingly impressed; apparently they weren't as stupid as they first appeared. Taking a deep breath, he threw open the door and dashed forward, crouching slightly.

A fraction too slow, he grunted as the door was kicked into him, knocking him bodily into the wall and jamming him between the two solid objects, the handle hitting him behind his ear. His ribs creaked in protest, forcing the air from his lungs and knocking the pistol from his grasp. He barely noticed it skidding under the bed in front of the door, too focused on trying to draw breath and blink away the black spots dancing in front of his eyes. Bloody buggering fuck that hurt!

Before he had time to recover his balance, he was grabbed by the hair and thrown into the room, landing on the floor with a thud. Looking up, he saw Target Four standing over him calmly, pointing a large handgun at his head.

Target Four was an exceptionally average man. Average height, unremarkable sandy brown hair, medium brown eyes, no distinguishing scars or marks, and bland features melding together to make a man who was completely forgettable. If Harry hadn't noticed the fighters knuckles and experienced movements, he would have completely discounted the man, dismissing him from mind immediately. Dangerous indeed.

"And who might you be, hm?" The man's voice was as unremarkable as the rest of him. He was so bland it was creepy.

"T-tiny, sir!" Harry whimpered, trying to seem as innocent and unthreatening as possible.

The thug hummed thoughtfully, staring down at the cowering child. "Nice work outside with the crossbow, by the way."

Harry had a moment of surprise before he managed to blank his expression. Fuck, how had he missed the security cameras? He could have sworn there weren't any! No wonder Target Four was ready and waiting for him.

"Oh, don't feel bad. The cameras are well hidden. I watched you check, you were unusually thorough. Whoever taught you did a good job." Four sounded smug, and faintly patronising. Harry wanted to bite him.

Deciding he may as well stop the pathetic act, Harry slowly pushed himself to his feet and stood calmly. Tilting his head slightly, he eyed the older man before glancing around the room.

In line with the door was a rickety single bed with a metal frame, and a heavy recliner in the far corner. Beyond that, the room was depressingly bare. The Bradshaw's were cowering on the bed, Mrs Bradshaw tightly clutching her barely five year old son in her lap. Returning his gaze to Four,
Harry quirked an eyebrow.

"Now what?"

Four chuckled. "Now you tell me who you really are, and who you work for."

Heaving a sigh and playing up his petulance, Harry crossed his arms. Slipping his fingers unseen through the slits in the seams, he wrapped his hands around the handles of his hunting knives. "Vahan," he stated flatly.

Four frowned, but before he could process Harry's meaning, Harry had pulled his blades free and lunged, scoring a few shallow but painful cuts on the older man's hands and arms before being forced back by a hard kick to the stomach. His attack had the intended effect though, the thug dropped his gun, and Harry stepped quick to kick it under the bed with his own.

Four snarled, shrugging off the wounds and stepped forward, crowding Harry back towards the corner. He kicked at him again causing Harry to twist out of the way to avoid a broken knee. Using his momentum to carry him forward, Four hooked his foot around the small boy's ankles and shoved, sending him sprawling.

Harry cursed mentally and covered his head as kicks and punches rained down on him with devastating force. He rolled, trying to get clear, and managed to partially dodge a kick that would have caved his ribs. The added force from the glancing blow helped roll him clear, and he popped to his feet, slashing at Four's legs. The wounds were shallow but bled profusely, staining the man's pants and floor a deep scarlet.

*You just need one good cut.*

Harry heard Dave whispering in his head, calming him from his near panic, walking him through the anatomy.

The thug threw a right hook towards Harry's head. Had it connected Harry would have been out for the count with a severe concussion, but he simply swayed backwards and raised his blade, slashing the wrist as it swept past. Four stared in surprise as his hand became useless, tendons severed. His distraction cost him, as Harry pressed his advantage and stepped to the side, using the movement from the punch to guide the arm further past the centreline of Four's body. Twisting to drive a bony shoulder into the older man's ribs, Harry stabbed the leg next to him, knife unerringly seeking the femoral artery.

*Vasospasm can reduce or even stop the bleeding. The Ghurkers would twist the knife so that it destroyed the arterial wall and made sure they bled out. Useful trick, worth remembering.*

Twisting the knife as he jerked it free, Harry ducked under the elbow being thrown at his head and jammed his second knife into his target's gut, just below the sternum.

*Hepatic artery. Not always easy to hit, but even if you miss it, you'll still do some damage.*

Green eyes glittering with excitement, Harry looked into his victim's eyes and reversed the direction of the knife, dragging it down with his body weight as he sank to one knee, razor sharp steel slicing open the abdominal wall with ease.

The shocked look on Four's face might have made Harry giggle, had he not been more focused on getting the hell out of arms reach, just in case Four turned out to be one of those crazy commando types that wouldn't go down without taking you with them.
Four looked from his hand, to his stomach, then met Harry's wary green gaze. His eyes widened and he opened his mouth as if to ask a question. As his vision darkened, he clutched at the wound, trying in vain to keep his organs inside before collapsing on the floor.

Glancing at his watch, the blood drenched child raised an impressed eyebrow. "Five minutes. I did better than I'd expected." Harry wiped his blades clean on an unsplattered part of Four's shirt, then tucked the knives away and fished his pistol out from under the bed, leaving Four's behind for whoever had the fun job of cleanup.

"Stay here. I'll be back shortly," he ordered the terrified woman, staring at her until she nodded frantically.

Walking into the lounge room, he heard a faint wheezing and choking noise. He zeroed in on Target One.

"Oh," he exclaimed softly. "You're still alive!" He blinked angelically. "Let me help you with that."

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Bradshaw clutched his wife and son to him, sobbing in relief. Vahan had delivered on his promise, and despite their obvious terror, they were otherwise unharmed.

Peering over his wife's shoulder, he smiled gratefully at the tiny boy who had delivered them.

"Thank you."

Harry nodded stiffly, watching the reunion with an unreadable expression.

"I'll be by your office next week."

Bradshaw nodded and gently led his family into the warm home behind them.

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Harry limped into the Lab, carefully putting away the duffle bag with his crossbow and spare bolts. Opening it, he pulled out the plastic bag with his bloody clothes and shuffled into the laundry, tossing them into the machine and setting it to a deep wash. After a moment's thought, he stripped off his current clothing and threw that in too. He should probably burn them, but he didn't have an incinerator set up. He made a mental note to have one installed.

Making his way gingerly into the bathroom, he turned on the shower and examined himself in the mirror while waiting for it to heat up.

He was a mess, but not as bad as he'd thought. He had livid black and purple bruises up both sides of his ribs, and a rounder one partially hidden by his hair where the door handle had hit him. Assorted other scrapes and bruises littered his body, evidence of the beating he'd taken before he'd managed to end the fight.

He pursed his lips, annoyed. Even taking into account the age, size, and experience difference, he was unimpressed with his performance. The margin of his victory was too small to be acceptable.

Stepping under the shower, he carefully washed, gently soaping and rinsing off. He grunted in pain when he raised his arms to wash his hair, tender ribs protesting, but he persisted, washing the messy raven locks twice just to prove a point.

Drying off, he hunted around for some spare clothes. Gritting his teeth in annoyance, he managed to dig out some rags he'd meant to throw out. Dressing reluctantly in threadbare and hole ridden boxers
and a similarly ratty shirt, he tossed his freshly washed clothes into the dryer before slipping into the cot bed, pulling the light blanket over him. It was insufficient for the weather, but it was all he had. When he’d furnished the house, he hadn’t anticipated spending much time in it, so had kept to the basics, not wanting to waste money on things that would be lost when the lab was eventually discovered.

Shivering, he huddled in a tired and miserable ball and drifted into a restless sleep.
Harry woke the next morning with a grimace. He had stiffened up during the night and his injuries throbbed insistently, bringing his memories of the previous night into sharp relief. Edging his way out of the cot, he limped painfully to the bathroom, cringing when he saw his battered body in the mirror; he hadn't looked this bad since his "welcome home" from the Dursleys after Dave had been killed.

A hot shower later, he was able to move well enough to drag on some clean clothes from the dryer, and fix himself a cup of tea.

Sipping slowly and enjoying the aroma, he glanced at the backpack full of product ready for sale, and decided that he may as well stop by the Andrews to deliver it to Greg for distribution. There was no urgent need for the cash, but Mama Andrews was sure to give him a decent meal while he was there, which was convenient since he wasn't really capable of cooking at this point in time. Regretfully finishing his tea, he gingerly shouldered the pack and headed out the door into the brisk morning air.

Mama Andrews' eyes narrowed with rage when she saw the state of the tiny boy on her doorstep. Harry was swaying slightly and had a grey cast to his skin, clammy sweat glistening in the weak morning sun. He looked moments away from collapsing; the dark bruising visible just under his shirt collar sending alarm bells ringing through her mind. She fought back a vicious snarl for fear of frightening the sweet little boy she had grown ridiculously fond of. He was always so quiet and polite, and her heart broke every time he left to go back to his horrid relatives. Despite his harsh life, something about him just screamed his innocence, and she longed to be able to wrap him up in her arms and never let him be hurt again. Ushering him inside, she sat him gently at the table.

"Harry, what happened?" Her tone was kind but firm, a polite but unyielding demand.

Harry blinked up at her tiredly. "Wasn't the Dursleys, if that's what you're thinking. Ran into some trouble yesterday, but it's all been sorted."

Mama Andrews pursed her lips in irritation at the evasion. He was far too practiced at it, and getting information from him was often an exercise in futility. "Will you let me run some scans to make sure you are ok? I'm fairly nifty with healing charms and the like. Once we know what's wrong, I should be able to heal you up a bit."

Harry shook his head. "Thank you, but I need the injuries as they are. I'll need them to be documented later." Turning to nod a greeting to Greg and the Captain as they joined them at the table, he flicked a brief glance at the backpack at his feet. Greg blinked in acknowledgement, well used to this process.

They had the exchange down to a fine art now. Harry would arrive with a backpack full of product, and leave with an identical one full of cash. His next visit the bags would be switched again. It was remarkably effective, and even the hyper observant Daniel hadn't picked up on the exchanges.

"At least let me give you a potion for the pain. Look at you, you can barely move!"

Harry smiled slightly and accepted the offer and downed it quickly, the foul taste washed away immediately after by fresh orange juice and a pile of pancakes drowning in syrup. He still hadn't worked out the Andrews endgame, but he was more than willing to accept their hospitality for the
time being if it kept him fed and relatively pain free.

"Mr Bradshaw."

The lawyer started, spilling his coffee down his shirt. Glaring slightly at the little boy sitting with his feet up on the desk and reclining comfortably in his leather executive chair, he mopped ineffectually at his ruined clothing.

"Do I even want to know how you got in here, unseen, in the minute and a half that I was away from my desk?" Despite his irritable words, his tone was fond exasperation.

"Does it matter?" Harry raised a mocking eyebrow.

Shaking his head, Bradshaw smiled slightly. "Would you like something to eat? I was about to send Sally out to pick up some lunch."

Harry shrugged. "Sure. Whatever you're having is fine."

Sticking his head out the office door to relay the order to his secretary, Bradshaw couldn't help but marvel at the child sitting so commandingly at his desk. For such a tiny little thing, he was full of surprises.

Turning back, he was amused to see the boy had moved from Bradshaw's chair, and was standing in front of the frame on the wall, gazing pensively up at the abstract artwork.

Using the opportunity to reclaim his seat, he leaned back and laced his fingers over his lightly muscled stomach. "I wasn't expecting to see you until later in the week, but I'm glad you came. Thank you for rescuing my family. I can't express how much that means to me to have them home and unharmed. The fact that you saved my business too is also worth noting." He paused, looking at the boy closely. "I spoke with my wife, she says that you personally saved them, you didn't just deliver them for your boss afterwards. I must say, the idea of a kid your age taking on four adult thugs and winning is very impressive, and a little intimidating. Have you done this sort of thing before?"

Harry gave him an inscrutable look. "Please don't misunderstand, Mr Bradshaw. My involvement in your protection is only as a part of the mutually beneficial agreement that I mentioned to you on our initial meeting. I have no personal interest in you or your family, and it would be a mistake to imagine I do."

Bradshaw smiled. "I'm aware of that. I'm also pleased to have my suspicions confirmed. You aren't Vahan's employee, are you, you are Vahan."

Harry nodded slightly in confirmation. "I am. And I require your services."

Bradshaw pulled the mobile he had been given from his pocket, placing it firmly on the desk. "This hasn't left my person, and as long as you are my client, it won't. You may not be particularly altruistic, but the fact remains that you rescued my family. You have my loyalty, particularly if you continue to protect my assets."

Harry smiled serenely. "Good to know."

"Just so you know, I got a hold of the police report and crime scene photos from where my family was kept. I thought it prudent to track the investigation so that we could work to prevent your exposure if they were getting too close. I'm not going to lie, what you did to those men…" He
paused, turning slightly green and swallowing sickly. "Apparently the coroner isn’t sure if most of it was done peri or post mortem. They’re also having some trouble working out which parts belong to whom. Either way, you are a terrifying young man and I’m glad you apparently find me useful enough to keep around. In that vein, what do you need?"

Harry smiled faintly, quietly remembering the fun he’d had staging the corpses as gruesomely as he could manage. "You have been handling some transactions for a Mr John Smith. Mr Smith is looking to adopt a child."

Bradshaw blinked. "I’m assuming you are Mr Smith? Do I want to know how many alias’s you have?" He huffed in exasperation and rubbed his eyes. "Did you have a particular child in mind, or do we need to find one?" It was a testament to his professionalism that he kept his bewilderment and slight hysteria well hidden.

Harry rolled his eyes, amused despite himself. "Yes I am, no you don’t, and yes I do. I need to get away from my current guardians. Their ill treatment is beginning to interfere with my business, and that is unacceptable. I have a perfectly suitable adult identity for legal purposes. Therefore, Mr Smith will adopt me."

Bradshaw’s lips twitched, fighting a giggle. "You’re going to adopt yourself?"

Harry smirked.

"Alright, we can do that. Do you have a place you can live? Money to live on? What about school? Is there someone who can help look after you? I apologise if I’m prying, but these are all things I will need to know for the paperwork. Oddly enough, Child Services like to make sure an adult is capable of caring for the children they adopt."

"I have just purchased a flat that will serve well enough for the moment; you handled the transaction for me. Money isn’t an issue as business is good right now, and John Smith has several bank accounts that are growing at a steady rate thanks to some careful investments. I was thinking to continue my current school until the end of the year, and then have home schooling, though I’m open to negotiation about that if you have information I haven’t considered. As for someone to look after me, I am capable of looking after myself, however for the sake of appearances I believe it would be best if I hire one or two adults to play that role in public. I was hoping you might have some recommendations for that, actually."

"That’s achievable. Are your current guardians likely to fight the adoption?"

Harry barked a laugh, startling the older man. "No. In fact, they’d be thrilled to be rid of The Freak. However, in the interests of being prepared for all possibilities, I’d like to put together a file that can be used to apply pressure if need be. I thought my injuries from last night would serve that purpose well enough. They’ve done worse in the past."

Bradshaw’s eyes sharpened. "You were injured last night?"

Harry shot him a withering look. "I’m eight years old, and got into a hand to hand fight with a professional thug. What do you think?"

Bradshaw looked slightly ashamed. "I’m sorry; I didn’t even ask you last night. Or today either. Do you need a doctor?"

Harry pondered for a moment. "A doctor’s report for the file can only be beneficial for our case. Start filling in the paperwork and we can sort it out after that. I suspect that my business with you today
will take most of the afternoon, if not all of it."

Nodding, Bradshaw pulled out the appropriate forms. "Alright. I have all John Smiths details, but I'll need yours. Name?"

"Harry Potter."

Bradshaw started, snapping the pen in his hand. "Excuse me?"

Harry sighed. "So you are aware of that world. I had my suspicions, but I wasn't sure. Yes, I'm Harry Potter. Yes, I'm THAT Harry Potter. No, I won't give you an autograph."

"I'm a squib, but I have contacts in both worlds, so I heard all about that business with You-Know-Who. Sorry, I just... Didn't expect you to be like... Well, you."

"Of course not. Now, can we get on with this please?"

"Right, of course."

The next hour was spent filling in forms and questionnaires; making sure the paperwork was legal in both worlds. Harry was most insistent that there be not a single loophole that could be used to contest his custody in either legal system. The issue of his Magical Guardian would need to be addressed later, once they knew who it was.

Bradshaw summoned a healer associate he trusted, explaining to Harry that a full health assessment would be best for the leverage file they had discussed.

"Alright young man, my name is Healer Marcel Blanca. I need you to drink this potion, and lay down on the couch. The potion will act similar to a contrast in your body, and work with the charm I'll cast to record your medical history and current health. You may feel a little strange while this is happening, but it's nothing to be afraid of, ok? It won't hurt."

Harry gazed back coldly. "You are being patronising. Stop it immediately."

Healer Blanca blinked. "I apologise. I find most children are afraid, particularly if they haven't been raised in our world."

"I am not most children. Reassurance is unnecessary; I prefer to deal in facts as much as possible. Explain what you are doing, and save the coddling for patients that need it."

Healer Blanca nodded. "Very well, shall we begin?"

Harry nodded and swallowed the potion, not even wincing at the taste. Healer Blanca raised an impressed eyebrow, but just helped Harry to arrange himself on the couch, and cast the diagnostic charm.

Blanca's dark eyebrows rose as the parchment recording the results grew longer and longer, before dropping into a ferocious scowl. His coffee coloured skin flushed in anger, and he turned his piercing black eyes to an ashen Bradshaw.

"Are you getting Mr Potter away from the animals that did this?"

Bradshaw nodded silently, shocked to his core, the father in him hurting for the boy.

Blanca nodded firmly, before turning back to his patient, noting that the lengthy document had finally ceased growing. Scanning over the arm length document with a practiced eye, he pursed his
Harry looked back, impassive. "I have never seen a healer, magical or muggle, in my life. Mr Bradshaw seems to find you trustworthy though, and I prefer any information about me be kept to as little a number of people as possible. Since you already know about me and Mr Bradshaw trusts you enough to handle my case, I would like to hire you as my personal healer. Are you agreeable?"

Blanca smiled widely, his perfect white teeth gleaming. "I'd be honoured, Mr Potter. Does your new guardian have a guest room? To provide you with adequate treatment, I believe it best if I am close by for at least the next month, perhaps two, depending on how you respond to the treatment. I'll cancel all of my other clients for the duration, to allow me to concentrate entirely on your case."

Harry blinked. "My injuries are severe enough to warrant around the clock care?"

The wide smile dropped into a small frown. "Not exactly; the injuries are severe and do require medical attention, but it's recovering from the other abuse and neglect that'll cause the problems. You've had several broken bones that've healed incorrectly; your growth has been stunted, plus there are problems with your heart, lungs, immune response, and bone density from the malnutrition. You also have some problems with your lower bowel from the sexual abuse you've endured. Treating these issues will be painful and take time. You'll be out of commission for a couple of weeks, and then you'll have to gain enough weight to be healthy, which will take time. After all of this, you'll need regular monitoring for at least a year, to make sure no other problems crop up after the treatment. To be honest, it's only due to your magic sustaining you that you haven't suffered any cognitive delays. In fact, it seems to have enhanced them exponentially to help you learn how to survive. Do you find yourself recognising patterns and such in things? Excellent memory? What about your ability to learn new skills unusually quickly? It's a fascinating phenomenon, quite rare. If I remember correctly, the last person this happened to was a man by the name of Severus Snape. He is now the premier Potions Master in all of Europe, possibly the world. Teaches at Hogwarts I think, though I have no idea why he would waste himself there. I've no doubt that we'll see great things from you, lad, no matter what you choose to do with your life." During this speech, the efficient man was posing Harry's stripped body and photographing the livid bruises and prominent bones. Everything was documented thoroughly, ready to be added to the file.

Bradshaw would add their version of "how" to the report later.

Looking thoughtful, Harry nodded. "I understand. We may be joined by some other employees if they are available immediately, so we may be a little crowded for a while. I hope that won't be a problem?"

"Since we'll be in such close contact, you may as well call me Marcel. I hate that stuffy title and surname nonsense. And no, crowded isn't an issue. It's probably best if I share your room for the first few weeks anyway, if that isn't too much of an imposition. I'll need to be able to monitor you constantly during the beginning stages of treatment. Now if you'll excuse me, I'll go prepare for the coming months. Shall I return here to collect you?"

Harry nodded. "It will be several hours before I will be ready to go, I still have several things to discuss with Mr Bradshaw. Is there anything that can't wait until this evening to be attended to?"

Marcel frowned, "No, not really, though I'd like to begin healing you as soon as possible. I'd recommend eating a carbohydrate and protein heavy meal between now and then, you'll need it. Eat as much as you can stomach, alright?" Receiving an affirmative nod, he spun on his heel and
disappeared into the fireplace, muttering to himself as he mentally listed everything he needed to arrange.

Bradshaw let out a heavy sigh. "Alright, the papers are done, the file just needs me to add details of how you got your current injuries – we're blaming that on your current caretakers? All we need now is for them to sign off on the adoption. I've got some contacts at the Ministry of Magic and the muggle Child Services, so when I file these it'll be kept quiet. Now, what other business did we need to cover?"

Harry pulled his threadbare clothing back on, and settled into the soft visitors chair in front of the desk. "As I mentioned before, I'd like to hire one or two adults to appear as caretakers for me in absence of my 'Father'. Given these people will be in close contact with me at all times, they will be privy to many of my personal dealings, alias's, and the like. I am a very suspicious and private person, for obvious reasons, and I do not want to have to replace such intimate staff on a regular basis. Therefore, I need people who will know how to overlook my age and remain professional, are tough enough to stick out the general weirdness that surrounds my life long term, and won't be put off or tempted to sell me out because of my celebrity. If they are able to train me as well that would be a bonus since it would save me having to find additional tutors. Do you know of anyone? I need them as soon as possible. It would also be worth looking into someone who is able to play 'Mr Smith' for those times when his presence is unavoidably required, though that isn't urgent as I'm happy for you to be his avatar for the moment."

Rubbing his upper lip thoughtfully, Bradshaw frowned. "Do you have a particular personality you prefer?"

"Well, I intend to have 'Father' set me up in a relatively affluent lifestyle, so someone who can fit into that world and teach me to do the same would be helpful. But beyond that, as long as they know how to keep their mouth shut and can follow orders then I don't really care." Harry stilled at the knock on the door, and flashed an innocent look at Sally as she stuck her head in to deliver the Healer ordered meal for Harry and a coffee for her boss. She cooed at the tiny boy sitting so properly in the plush chair, completely charmed by his huge green eyes and messy locks. She fussed over him maternally until a pointed cough from her boss reminded her to get back to work. Daintily, Harry started picking at his meal, watching Bradshaw running through his list of contacts and smiling faintly at how often middle aged women fell over themselves to help when he batted his eyelashes.

"Alright, I have two people who might work for you, though they aren't cheap."

Harry waved his fork negligently.

"The first is named Alexander Charleston. Muggleborn, age 46, former British SAS. His parents served on the staff for one of the minor Royal branches before he was orphaned in a Death Eater raid. He would make an excellent body guard and butler for you, since he knows all of that toff etiquette and the like. I'm sure he could tutor you for your basic schooling as well, if you wanted. You did mention home schooling earlier, didn't you?" Bradshaw put the file to the side at Harry's agreeable nod.

"The second, well, I'm not sure how you would feel about him, but given your lifestyle, business, and fame, I think he will be your best bet. Plus he has extensive contacts in just about every social circle and back alley you could find, which I'm sure you would find useful. If you hire him, I hope you'd be willing to let me borrow him on occasion; he's worth his weight in gold, despite his dubious past."

Raising an eyebrow, Harry waited for the lawyer to stop waffling.
"He, ah, ran with the Death Eaters for a while. He wasn't a Marked follower, mind, just a mercenary, but he didn't shy from getting his hands dirty, if you know what I mean. To the best of my knowledge he doesn't subscribe to all that blood purity crap, but I wasn't sure how you would feel hiring someone that was working for the people who killed your parents."

Harry chewed slowly, looking over the file he had liberated from Bradshaw's desk. "Sergei Petrikov; age 60, Russian pureblood, mercenary since graduating Durmstrang Institute in 1946, top of all his classes. Highest scores since Gellert Grindelwald. Hmm, interesting." He took another bite. "As to him working with the Death Eaters, I don't care as long as he isn't going to sell me out. I never knew my parents; I have no particular attachment to their memory." Skimming the rest of the man's impressive resume silently, Harry fought to keep his eyebrows from rising. Petrikov was definitely someone to avoid aggravating at all costs. "You believe both of them would be willing to work for me?"

Taken aback by the cold attitude towards his parents' memory, Bradshaw took a moment to get his mind back on track. "I do. I don't think that you are likely to find anyone else trustworthy enough that will fill your needs at this point in time. I'll keep an eye out for others, of course, but for now I think they are your best bet, and to the best of my knowledge they don't have any other current jobs."

Harry nodded and accepted the copied files. "Alright, hire them for me. I want them as soon as they can make themselves available, though of course they will be required to take a vow of secrecy. I trust you can arrange that? And one for Marcel also; I really should have insisted on that before he left." Harry frowned, irritated with his lack of foresight. "Draw up the employment contracts and offer them whatever you think is a fair wage. They'll be living with me full time and training me in everything they can think of." Harry paused. "And I'll need a new property too, to house them all. My current apartment is only two bedrooms, and I'd rather keep it as a safe house for emergencies. I'll have Marcel share my room, and Charleston and Petrikov will need to share also. Find me a four bedroom house, perhaps in the country or on the outskirts of London. Given that I'll have two adult wizards with me, I doubt that I'll have any trouble getting into London from wherever it happens to be. I'll need a decent amount of land too, and room for training areas and a decent size pool."

Bradshaw frowned. "Are you able to use any of your family properties? I know the Potters had a Manor in Wiltshire that would probably serve your needs. I think it's near the Malfoy estate actually."

Harry shook his head. "I wouldn't know. I know very little about my family, and nothing whatsoever about my family assets. I don't even know if I have any family assets."

Slack jawed, Bradshaw stared. "Mr Potter, your family is one of the wealthiest in wizarding society! If I remember correctly, your wealth is comparable to that of the Malfoys! You're the Heir to at least one Lordship, possibly more. You honestly didn't know?"

Harry shook his head again. "No. But I'll be visiting Gringotts soon. The problem is doing it without drawing unwanted attention. I have my suspicions that someone has been orchestrating my life in a particular direction since my parents were killed, and if so, I don't want them to know that I'm poking around."

Bradshaw sobered quickly. "Do you have any idea who, or to what end?"

Harry nodded. "A guess only at this point, but I believe that Albus Dumbledore is the one who placed me with my current guardians. Considering their antagonism towards me, it's highly likely that he has applied some sort of leverage to force them to keep me in their home; otherwise they would have sent me to an orphanage a long time ago. If that is the case, then I wouldn't be surprised if he has a watch on my accounts at the very least. As to why, I'm assuming that he intended me to be malleable upon my entrance to the wizarding world; too dazzled and overwhelmed to ask the right
questions. I suspect that he plans to mould me to be the perfect hero, with him the guiding force behind my actions. It would allow him to use my political influence to his own ends."

Nodding, the older man made a quick note on the pad in front of him. "I'll look into it, and try to find a house for you as well, just in case. Though I'm curious how you worked all that out?"

Placing his empty meal carton on the desk, he sat back and sipped his drink. "I've been reading the books that have been published about me since my parents' death. Oh, before I forget, can you look into who authorised those, and if I have received any royalties? The same for any merchandise that uses my name or image. Anyway, from what I gather, the wizarding world looks to Dumbledore as some sort of god-like hero, and for the most part follow his whims without question. The man holds three positions of power, each of which would be a full time job on its own, but cumulatively allows him almost total control over wizarding society. He controls the education of the children which allows him to shape them to his own belief system; as Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot he controls or at least directs what laws are put in place, and since most of the other members were taught by him or view him as a hero for defeating Grindelwald, that would give him a psychological dominance over a goodly number of them. Add to that being Supreme Mugwump of the ICW, he controls information flow to the international community, meaning that it's highly unlikely that they have an accurate picture of what is happening in Wizarding Britain. Now, my parents were known to be working closely with him to end the war. Suddenly they are killed, and I am being hailed as a hero for stopping the Dark Lord. I can't imagine that a man who has devoted so much time to carefully manoeuvring himself into supreme power and taking credit for leading the war effort would be happy to have his influence and accolades going to someone else, especially not a child. All the books have agreed that the Light was losing the war, and since Dumbledore was their leader, this can't have looked good for him. He has also been the one to repeatedly state that I am being raised in a safe and loving home. How would he know that unless he put me there? Nobody else seems to have any idea where I am."

Bradshaw paled. "And if he can raise you to support him and his agenda, he retains his power and can use you as the fist to crush any opposition. I can see why you are suspicious."

Harry nodded, still sipping his drink slowly. "I have no proof, but it seems plausible to me. It's all in the patterns."

"Patterns, like what Marcel mentioned?"

Harry nodded calmly.

Rubbing his forehead, Bradshaw pondered the theory his youngest client had laid out for him. "I must say, that is extremely well thought out. Feeling slightly faint, he took a drink of water. "Was there anything else you wanted to address today? If you give me a couple of hours I can have Sergei and Alex here, and we can go get your guardians signature on the custody papers by this evening." He determinedly got back to business, thankful that his more casual manner had seemed to amuse the boy rather than put him on edge for not being treated like an adult client. He would do well to remember the carnage the seemingly innocent child had wreaked on his targets just the night before. Despite his cherubic appearance, this was a very dangerous young man, and it would be deadly to forget that for an instant.

Harry pondered. "I think that's it for now. Marcel will be back shortly, I'd imagine. I need to arrange furniture for the flat if we will be living there for a while, though fortunately electricity and the like have already been connected." He closed his eyes and rubbed his head, trying to massage away the headache building behind his eyes. His glasses were still the wrong prescription.

"Why don't you let me handle that? I'll send Sally out for you, and the flat will be habitable by close
of business today. In the meantime, you can take a nap if you want. I've got a cot in the room behind here, and you're still badly injured. If you'll pardon me saying so, you look exhausted."

Giving in to the pain and fatigue, Harry nodded in grudging agreement. He was shown to a small room off Bradshaw's office, and fell gratefully onto the small bed, barely even bothering to kick off his shoes. He managed to stay awake until Bradshaw had turned off the light and closed the door, but was asleep moments after that. Even his habitual paranoia and suspicion was unable to overrule his body's demands for healing sleep.
Harry woke abruptly when he heard the quiet click of the door opening. He kept himself relaxed, his breathing regulated to mimic the slow and deep rhythms of somnolence. Tracking his target, he waited until they were leaning over and reaching to touch him, before his arms snapped out, one grabbing the target's wrist and twisting it into a painful lock, the other holding a very sharp blade to their throat. His eyes were still firmly shut.

There was a muffled snort of amusement from the doorway, and Harry took a moment to remember where he was. Opening his eyes, he stared coldly into the startled and wary face of Marcel. His gaze flicked to the doorway. Bradshaw had a hand lightly covering his mouth to muffle his chuckles. It wasn't particularly effective.

"I'd recommend against doing that again, Healer Blanca." Harry's voice was calm, but with an edge of menace that was impossible to ignore.

Marcel cleared his throat nervously. "I thought I asked you to call me Marcel?"

Harry released him and sat up painfully, pulling on his shoes and walking out into the office. "You did, and I will do so; unless you do something stupid."

The handsome Italian pouted childishly at Harry's back. "But that just makes me cranky!"

Harry quirked an eyebrow, but the expression was lost on its target since Harry was too busy sizing up the two new gentlemen sitting in the office. "You piss me off, I piss you off. Fair trade, I'd say."

He decided to test the men before him, and flashed them a cheeky grin and jumped up to perch himself on the edge of Bradshaw's desk, kicking his legs idly. "Hi!" He chirped with a little wave.

Bradshaw hid a smile by burying his nose in his latest bucket of coffee and moving to sit behind his desk.

Watching with interest, Harry observed the two men looking him over. Alexander Charleston was thin and upright, his toffee brown hair grown out from its former military cut and into soft waves that were neatly combed in a sweep across his head. If it hadn't been so thick and lustrous it could have been described as a comb over. It was an odd style, but seemed oddly appropriate on the formal man. His light caramel eyes were reserved, giving away nothing as they swept over Harry's shabby form. He nodded politely, his almost girlish lips curved into a gentle smile. Harry noted that he carried at least six concealed weapons, and had been eating a pastry while attending to his correspondence before attending this meeting. Harry didn't return the smile, merely giving him a final once over and switching his emerald gaze to the hulking Russian.

Sergei Petrikov was another matter entirely. Harry couldn't see any weapons on him, but didn't doubt for a second that he was armed to the teeth. The man was huge and muscled, ash blond hair cropped close to his head and startling bottle green eyes trained unerringly on Harry, cataloguing every detail. He sat so still that it was difficult not to overlook him, despite his massive bulk. His face was impassive, but there was something in his eyes that told Harry that he knew exactly who Harry was and didn't care in the slightest. Harry scanned him closely, and was amused to discover that he couldn't read anything from the man's appearance that he didn't already know from reading his file.

Harry was impressed.

"Gentlemen, thank you for coming, and agreeing to the secrecy vow. I'd like to introduce you to
your employer." Bradshaw gestured to each of the men as he introduced them. "Sergei Petrikov, Alexander Charleston, this is... Actually, how did you want me to introduce you?" He frowned, disliking being caught off balance. The kid had too many aliases.

Harry quirked a small smile, dropping down off the desk. "Vahan, but you may know me as Harry Potter. Mr Bradshaw, to anyone else just refer to me as Vahan's boy. I prefer to avoid being named where possible."

The square jawed Russian didn't even bat an eyelid, but Charleston couldn't stop the slight widening of his eyes. They'd both seen the crime scene photos from when Vahan had rescued Bradshaw's family, and the British man was horrified that such a small child was behind it, especially since Bradshaw had confirmed he'd done it himself, and alone. He'd neglected to mention that the infamous Vahan was just a boy.

Snorting slightly in amusement, Harry folded his arms and rested back against the desk, one foot crossed over the other. He waited patiently for one of them to say something.

The seconds began to stretch into minutes.

Bradshaw coughed, breaking the tension. "Mr Potter here has a rather pressing need for your services. I recommended you both because you are the best, and there is no one else that I would trust more for this job."

Petrikov finally moved, but only to roll his eyes. "Flattery is unnecessary Marcus. We have already accepted the contract." His accent was thick and harsh, but excellent training and years of practice had softened it enough to be easily understood. "You want us to train you, boy?"

Harry's eyes darkened and his magic swirled around him, dropping the air to frigid temperatures. "Do not call me boy. Not ever. Do you understand?" His voice was almost as cold as the air surrounding them, and Marcel and Bradshaw shivered in barely concealed fear. The boy was so tiny that at times it was difficult to remember how dangerous he could be.

Petrikov barked out a shout of laughter. "Oh, kid, we're going to get along well, I think. Rein it in, Boss; you've made your point!"

Harry relaxed with a faint smirk, his magic settling.

Charleston took the lead, standing and offering his hand to his diminutive employer. "I think this will be an interesting endeavour, Mr Potter. I, for one, am looking forward to working with you."

Harry shook his hand, then stepped back, keeping himself out of arms reach of the tall men. He turned to his amused lawyer. "Mr Bradshaw, are the papers and file completed?"

Bradshaw nodded, putting his now frozen solid cup of coffee aside with a mournful look. "Yes. All we need now is to get your guardians to sign it, and you will officially have adopted yourself." He paused slightly, still amused by the idea. "Sally has set up your apartment, and Sergei has kindly obliviated the knowledge from her mind. I dislike doing that to her, but I assumed you would rather keep your locations as secret as possible."

Harry nodded in agreement. "Thank you. Do you have a particular plan in mind for dealing with my relatives? If my theories regarding Dumbledore are correct, then it's likely that, at some point, he will come looking for me, and his first stop will be their house. I remember reading about something called Legilimancy, and I'd be very surprised if he isn't capable of it. I'd be even more surprised if he doesn't use it on them to find what happened to me. If he does, I'd rather he not be able to recognise
any of my associates; that could make things difficult in the future."

Bradshaw smiled. "Not a problem. Sergei and Alex are excellent at glamour charms. I thought that having the three of us disguised and offering to take you off their hands would work. You said they are unlikely to fight it."

Harry thought for a moment, while Bradshaw placated Marcel who wanted to come along. "I have another idea."

Bradshaw looked at Harry in consternation. "Should I be worrying?"

Harry cocked an eyebrow and smirked. "Not as long as I keep paying you."

Harry adopted his typical "Dursley slave" persona as he and his entourage stood on the front step and rang the doorbell. He could feel the adults eyeing him surreptitiously but ignored it, focusing on playing his part.

The men had been disguised with a combination of glamour and obscuration charms, resulting in a perfectly ordinary appearance that was very difficult to recall once you looked away. Harry was thrilled at the potential, and demanded with childlike enthusiasm to be taught how to do it as soon as could be arranged, to his employee's amusement. It was the first sign of him acting his age that any of them had witnessed.

Marcel sighed in affected boredom and examined his nails. His limp and balding fair hair flopped listlessly into a face completely unlike his own. His normally well-sculpted and pleasing features were now pasty with slight jowls, a nose that turned up at the end and was too small for his face, and to his absolute disgust, Petrikov had taken great delight in giving the vain man enough paunch to strain the buttons across his stomach.

The fuming healer was contemplating retaliatory pranks, trying to work out something that wouldn't have him residing prematurely in a casket or a shallow grave in the woods somewhere. He was also itching to get out of this horribly uniform suburb. Everything was cookie cutter perfect, and he could see some of the neighbours' curtains twitching as the nosy old biddies sniffed out the latest gossip. His spine crawled in distaste. Even his cheerful and somewhat chaotic personality was feeling the pressure to conform.

Sergei and Alex had decided on a disguise they'd used in the past; two massive identical men in well-tailored suits, with skin as black as tar and unearthly pale blue eyes. It had been modelled off a movie they'd seen once upon a drunken evening, the two men tickled by the idea of the "Secret Service" members that all seemed to look alike. Having worked together many times, they had no problem syncing their movements to give the impression of being genuine twins, and combined with their intimidating appearance, they usually found that trouble took one look and decided to go bother someone else for a change.

Sergei had no need to change his height, but Alex found his new altitude of six foot five to be rather a change from his usual five foot eleven, and couldn't wait to remove the irritation. The men looked down at Harry's hunched shoulders, and were startled to realise that the boy barely reached their waist. In the hour they'd spent getting to know their new boss while preparing for this job, he'd always seemed so much bigger.

Both men felt a surge of protectiveness. Alex wasn't particularly disturbed; he'd always been fond of children, but for Sergei it was entirely unexpected and new. In his line of work it was foolish to make emotional connections, especially since someone could always come along and pay a better price to
dispose of a former employer or colleague. The small boy practically shivering in front of them though, he was different. Tough. Determined. Smart. Sergei wondered if he might have just found his protégé. It would be interesting to see if the boy had what it took.

Bradshoaw had gone for only slight alterations, relying primarily on the obscuration charms and a little muggle makeup and theatrical prosthetics. He had an odd genetic quirk that occasionally popped up in squibs; where any magic performed directly on him tended to make him ill, and the more was cast on him, the worse he got. Thankfully he was a dab hand at applying the makeup and prosthetics; apparently it wasn't uncommon for him to need to disguise himself to attend to a client's needs. He'd need to remove the obscuration as quickly as possible though, before it became too much for his body to handle. As it was, he'd probably be out of commission for a couple of days.

The door opened to reveal Petunia, and Harry had to fight the urge to cringe back into the men behind him. He knew that he was perfectly capable of killing the Dursleys if need be, and would feel no remorse if he did so, but years of abuse and trained behaviour was difficult to overcome, even for him. Besides, they could be useful at some point.

"Can I help you?" Petunia simpered, clutching the door in her bony hand.

"Good evening Mrs Dursley, we apologise for interrupting your dinner, but my employer has a business proposition for you and your husband. May we come in?" Bradshaw requested politely, while placing a possessive hand on Harry's hunched shoulder.

Petunia's eyes flicked down to her cowering nephew, before stepping back to allow the men inside the house. Directing them into the living room, she quickly summoned her husband, and sent Harry to the kitchen to prepare a tray of refreshments. Sitting down next to Vernon, she primly rested her hands in her lap, and her abnormally long neck stretched to its limit in a way that she probably thought looked elegant.

"So, what can I do for you gentlemen? You mentioned a business proposition?" Vernon huffed, his jowls creasing disturbingly as he tried to smile charmingly. "What did you have in mind?"

Bradshaw sipped his tea, mentally cringing at the cheap blend and tacky crockery. Glancing around, he amended his thoughts to include the entire decor in the tacky category. He noted Vahan standing quietly in the corner, waiting to leap into service. The idea unsettled him; the boy was a natural leader, seeing him cringing in the corner like a broken puppy was just wrong. Setting the garish cup on the equally eye melting saucer, he leaned back confidently.

"My employer," he gestured deferentially to the bored looking Marcel, "recently encountered your nephew. Being a gentleman of discerning taste, he was rather pleased to discover the boy's skills." He paused, taking another sip of the vaguely tea like substance in his cup. "Out of curiosity, were you the one who taught the lad?" Bradshaw adopted an innocently enquiring expression. He knew very well that the land whale in front of him hadn't touched Harry in that manner, but if the man was as stupid as he appeared then he may just get additional ammunition for the file. Marcus Bradshaw was not a man known for half measures, and since Vahan wanted his relatives destroyed, he would pin as much as possible to the adipose mountain in front of him.

Vernon puffed up proudly, not entirely certain what the other man had said, but certain it was a compliment. "Taught the boy everything he knows. Needs strong guidance, that one, not like my Dudley, but with proper discipline you can get him to do whatever task you want done. When my Petunia and I took him in, out of the goodness of our hearts, we promised ourselves we'd raise him right; try to make him a useful member of society. The boy is a bit too much like his good for nothing parents unfortunately, but we do our best to teach him what he needs to know, and how to treat his
betters." He nodded firmly, taking Petunias hand.

Bradshaw smiled toothily. "And you've done an excellent job, Mr Dursley. My employer was so impressed with your nephews' skills, in fact, that he wishes to extend you an offer. He will pay you £5000 to take the boy off your hands."

Petunia gasped slightly, glancing at her husband and clutching his hand. Vernon's piggy eyes narrowed greedily. "Is that so? And why would he want the brat?"

Bradshaw casually crossed his legs, casting a quick glance at the bored looking Marcel, who was staring disinterestedly around the room and pretending not to be listening. "My employer is something of a… collector. He's taken a shine to the lad."

Vernon and Petunia looked at each other and shared a silent conversation. Finally nodding, they turned back to their guests. "Fine, you've got yourself a deal."

Pulling the papers from his briefcase, Bradshaw quickly walked the Dursleys through the signing, before whisking the papers away and back out of sight. Alex pulled a second briefcase out of seemingly nowhere, opening it to reveal the cash inside and placing it on the coffee table.

Vernon quickly snapped the case closed and pulled it closer to himself with a grin. Turning to Harry, he barked. "Boy! Go get your things!"

The older men watched as Harry scurried obediently to the cupboard under the stairs and pulled out a ragged blanket, a threadbare set of pyjamas and a broken toy soldier.

The smouldering anger that had been building the longer they stayed in the presence of the disgusting muggles flared into a burning hatred when they caught sight of the thin folded blanket that served as a mattress, and the bucket tucked into the tiny space that clearly served as a latrine. Each man silently swore to do everything in their power to protect the damaged child that had employed them. If they had anything to say about it, Vahan would never again want for anything in their power to provide. That he was their employer was irrelevant.

"He's all yours, gentlemen. Pleasure doing business with you!" Vernon smiled cheerfully as he showed the men and his former ward to the door.

Hearing the door click shut behind them, Harry straightened and rolled his neck to work out some of the tension. "Well, that went well, though it's a pity he didn't haggle. That would have been fun later," he murmured, his mind already turning to the next task on his list.

Bradshaw chuckled. "It went better than that. The idiot didn't even read the papers before he signed them. He just sold you his house as well!"

At Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Headmaster Albus Dumbledore sat in the Great Hall and chewed another bite of roast beef, unaware that his major chess piece had not only escaped the game, but stolen the board in the process.

In the Headmasters office, the trapped phoenix trilled mournfully, and shifted on his perch. Spying the small device his captor had set to monitor the wards at the home of the child Fawkes had once saved, he saw it building up to scream a warning as the wards fell. Feeling carefully along the bond he had forged with the boy he had given his freedom to save that night eight years ago, he sensed that for the first time since his parents had died, the child was safe and content. Four energies that radiated protectiveness and furious determination surrounded him, and despite the darkness of two of them, the phoenix knew his little Harry was in good hands.
Seeing his chance to help the boy and exact some revenge for his forced bonding, he let out a short scream, sending a short burst of power at the device, shorting it out and leaving it nothing more than an odd looking trinket that whirred occasionally and released a puff of smoke.

The Headmaster would never know why he hadn't been alerted that The-Boy-Who-Lived was gone from his assigned prison, and by the time he discovered that little fact, Harry Potter would be long gone.
Harry perched on the swing next to Daniel, waiting patiently for his prey; Dudley and his gang of knuckle draggers would be along in about five minutes if they kept to their usual pattern. He absently listened to Daniel chattering away about something irrelevant and scanned his eyes over the otherwise deserted area. He knew Sergei and Alex were nearby, even if he couldn't see them, and he entertained himself by trying to spot anything that might give them away.

The past few weeks in their presence had been unexpectedly pleasant, the three of them falling into a comfortable routine with Marcel popping in and out each day. The healer still stayed with them, monitoring Harry closely; daily checkups and a strict meal plan an accepted – if mildly irritating - part of their standard interactions.

Because Harry was finishing out the school year to avoid suspicion, they were holding off on healing the long term abuse until the start of the holidays; however Sergei and Alex had started teaching him some of the less combative topics as soon as he had caught up on a little sleep. They'd discussed tactics, weapons, society, etiquette, history, camouflage, and what felt like a hundred other topics, all knowledge that the mercenaries were proud to see Harry soaking up eagerly. They'd made plans for when they would visit Gringotts, and the men were secretly pleased that Harry intended to continue his association with the Andrews. Despite his mental maturity, all three men firmly believed it important for Harry to have some non business related interactions with people, especially ones his own age. He would never be a normal child, but they could at least help him find a small degree of it in his daily life.

Harry smirked slightly when he caught the signal from his guards that Dudley and his gang had been spotted heading his way. Turning to Daniel, he interrupted the verbalised stream of consciousness.

"You want to stick around? I'll be dealing with Dudley momentarily."

Daniel's eyes widened in apprehension. "What are you going to do?"

Harry blinked and smiled innocently. "Nothing permanent."

Thinking carefully, Daniel pursed his lips and scuffed his toe on the ground under the swing. "Um, yeah, alright. But I don't want them to see me. I'll be over in those bushes, ok? Just in case." He peered up at Harry uncertainly.

"No problem. Just don't freak out. It might get a little messy, yeah?"

Daniel nodded anxiously and ducked into the nearby bushes, just before Dudley and his goons entered the park.

Harry waited calmly as they spotted him and sauntered over, their jeers and threats reaching his ears, only to be ignored. He continued swinging gently, pretending to be lost in thought.

Dudley jiggled to a stop, his piggy eyes – so like his fathers' – glinting with undisguised glee at finding such a weak target. Since his cousin had been taken away, his home life was different, and he wasn't sure he liked it. He'd put three holes in the wall during his last tantrum because he didn't have his usual punching bag to take it out on, making his parents cross with him since he couldn't blame it on Harry anymore. Plus his mothers cooking wasn't as good – something he complained about loudly at every meal time. They'd even given him chores!

"Look who we have here, boys!" He called mockingly to his friends. "You know, it's been a while
since we had a good round of Harry Hunting! What d'you say, Freak? Up for a game?” He cracked his knuckles and stepped forward menacingly.

Harry yawned, covering his mouth delicately.

Dudley scowled, trying to hide his confusion. "Anyone would think that you want a beating."

Harry smiled predatorily, though Dudley seemed oblivious to the danger. "Sure, it's been a while. Why don't you try? Teach me my place." He stood, arms down by his sides and blinking up at his taller cousin.

Dudley could feel the stares from his friends burning into his back. His cousin had never stood up to him before. He couldn't let that go unpunished; it set a bad… What was the word? Prescription? President? He puffed up, trying to cow Harry into acting like he normally did, but Harry just smiled faintly and waited. With a grunt of annoyance, Dudley drew back his fist and threw a clumsy punch at the dark haired boy.

Stepping to the side and grabbing the wrist as it swept past his head, Harry lithely turned and twisted, neatly folding Dudley's arm behind him and forcing him to bend at the waist. Taking advantage of this; Harry swiftly raised his knee into Dudley's descending face.

As blood and a pained grunt erupted from the bigger boy, Harry looked at the gaping members of Dudley's gang, smiling toothily. He dropped the limp boy, and kicked him hard in the stomach.

Dusting his hands lightly, he eyed the other boys. "Anyone care to defend your glorious leader?"

Dudley's best friend, second in command, and brains of the outfit Piers Polkiss held his hands up, placatingly. "I think you've made your point, Potter. No trouble from us, right?"

Harry nodded cautiously. "I need to have a little chat with Dudley here. I suggest you be somewhere else now."

The other boys turned obediently and started to leave as swiftly as they could manage without running.

"Oh, one last thing?" Harry called after them, waiting until they'd all returned their attention to him. "Leave Daniel Andrews alone." The cowed boys nodded obediently and resumed their less than dignified exit.

Collective dominance can be a powerful tool. If you can defeat the Alpha, the rest of the pack will follow.

Returning his attention to his cousin, Harry was amused and disgusted to see that Dudley had thrown up all over himself after the boot to the gut. Apparently nachos had been the snack of the afternoon, judging by the remnants now decorating the ground.

Squatting, Harry ignored the smell and pursed his lips as he looked the boy over. He felt Sergei, Alex and Daniel join him, and tossed a quick glance at them over his shoulder before moving to sit on the swing again.

"Dudley, these men have a job for you. I'd suggest you listen carefully, our employer is not a particularly forgiving man."

Sergei stepped forward and lifted the terrified boy off the ground, sitting him none too gently on the end of a conveniently nearby bench. He moved to stand behind him, keeping one hand clamped
authoritatively on his shoulder.

"Hello Dudley," Alex smiled coldly and offered him a handkerchief. "How would you like to earn some extra money?"

Dudley took it and wiped ineffectually at the blood still trickling from his nose and lips, eyeing the nicely dressed man warily. "What d'you want me to do?"

"Oh, nothing too strenuous, I promise. My employer believes that someone may come to your house, asking questions about your cousin. All we want you to do is send us a text from this phone if that happens." Alex held up a small mobile phone, keeping it out of reach of the greedy child. "Do you think you can do that?"

Dudley nodded, his eyes wandering over to Harry who was watching calmly, swinging slightly and resting his head on the chain. Daniel was on the swing next to him, not bothering to hide his interest in the proceedings. "Yeah, I can do that. How much are you going to pay me?"

Alex handed over the phone and charger, along with an envelope filled with small notes. "How does £100 a month sound?"

Dudley gaped, looking at the contents of the envelope. Even his parents wouldn't give him that much money all at once! Snapping his mouth shut, the obese nine year old nodded dumbly.

"Good! Now, the number to text is in the phone already. Do you know how to work it?" On seeing the boy nod, Alex smiled again. "Of course you do, clever lad that you are! Now, this phone is very important, alright? Nobody is to know about it, or what we want you to do. Not your parents, not your friends, nobody. It stays with you at all times. If it gets lost or damaged, the money stops, understand?"

Dudley nodded enthusiastically. Even when he was being nice, the man talking to him was very scary, and coupled with the huge man behind him with a painful grip on his shoulder, he was close to wetting himself. "Can I use it for other stuff too?"

Alex frowned severely. "No. This phone belongs to the boss, not you. If you want to call your little friends, you need to get your own." Relaxing again, he looked Dudley firmly in the eye. "That said, if you are ever in trouble, call the number in there. You work for the boss now, and as long as you do your job, he'll look after you. Got it?"

Nodding again, Dudley found his shoulder released and the men walking away with Harry and Daniel in tow. He looked down at the phone in wonder, greedily contemplating the things he could buy with his new money. And he got another £100 in a month!

"Oh, and Dudley," he glanced up at the retreating men. "The more details you can give us of whoever is asking questions, the bigger your bonus will be; assuming, of course, that you are telling the truth. My boss does not take kindly to having his time wasted with lies."

Dudley gulped and nodded, watching as the men and boys walked out of sight.

As they exited the park, Daniel looked at Harry and grinned. "Well that was all very dramatic!"

Harry rolled his eyes and replied dryly. "I live to entertain."

Daniel frowned slightly. "Though it wasn't as, you know, drawn out as I was expecting."

Glaring slightly, Harry pouted up at Sergei. "Honestly, there's just no pleasing some people!"
The commiserating nod from the giant Russian was worth listening to Daniel splutter indignantly the rest of the way home.

Harry collapsed onto the couch when they arrived back at the flat after dropping Daniel home.

"Did you get the charm on him?"

Sergei glowered at his diminutive boss, offended. "Of course we did. He can't talk about his assignment, and the compulsion charm will make sure he keeps the phone charged and close to himself at all times."

Harry nodded. He knew his guards wouldn't have failed, but he thought it important to check just in case. "And Daniel?"

"A pleasant visit to the park, with no interruptions. He doesn't remember anything."

"Any other business for today?"

Alex pulled out his ever present notebook, checking through it quickly. "We've arranged with Mama Andrews to take you, Daniel and Greg to Diagon Alley next Saturday. I'll put together a list of the basics we'll need to get you while we are there. I'd recommend you visit Gringotts too. It may tip our hand if Dumbledore is having your accounts monitored, but I have a few contacts among the goblins. For the right price, I'm sure we can stop word getting out just yet." He nodded in thanks as Marcel entered from the kitchen, handing him a cup of tea. "I'd also recommend we get you at least one set of better muggle clothes for the outing. I know you've been holding off since there isn't much point getting you a complete new wardrobe until Marcel has finished your healing since you will probably be growing a fair bit during it, but you will attract attention in your current rags. You want mid range clothing that won't make you stand out. Wizarding clothes are a different matter though, since we can add self adjusting sizing charms to them; we should take the opportunity to get you fitted."

Harry tilted his head thoughtfully; sipping the glass of milk he'd been handed. "Why can't we add them to the muggle clothes too?"

Marcel smiled, settling himself into his favourite armchair. Alex was well versed in appropriate clothing for all occasions, but the healer was the resident fashion expert. "The charms don't work properly on muggle fabrics. Wizards use different types of dyes that help bind the magic into the threads. Muggle clothes can be manually resized or transfigured once or twice, but the fabric will disintegrate quickly. Muggle leathers are a little sturdier, but still won't hold any charms properly."

He sipped his coffee.

Giving his healer an odd look, Harry nodded in acceptance. "Alright, we'll go get a couple of outfits tomorrow – yes, Marcel, you can come and help pick them out – and then I'd like to spend the rest of the day at the Lab."

"What about school?" Alex interjected.

"Call in and tell them I'm unwell or have appointments or something. Get them to give any homework to Daniel to pass along. We'll go as soon as the shops open, I'd like to get the clothing ordeal over with as quickly as possible." He ignored Marcel's pout, and stood, stuffing a biscuit into his mouth and dusting the crumbs off his fingers. "Marcel, plan out what I need for the next couple of days and where best to get them. I want to be in and out as fast as humanly possible." Business concluded, he walked into his room and threw himself into studying his latest interest – incendiary devices.
Friday started earlier than planned with a phone call from Bradshaw. He had located three houses and a penthouse that he thought might interest Vahan, and wanted to know how Harry preferred to approach it this time around. Harry sighed and decided that he would stop into Bradshaw and Cohen after the planned shopping trip, and put in a full day at the Lab on Sunday. He disliked adjusting his schedule at the last minute, but Alex and Sergei had both pointed out that being too rigid in his habits made him predictable, and predictable people got dead. Since it agreed with a lesson from Dave, Harry didn't fight the advice, forcing himself to be as flexible as possible – figuratively and literally.

Grumbling as he dried off from the shower, he dressed in his hand me downs, armed himself as usual, and stalked out into the kitchen.

Taking his usual seat at the head of the table, he glared when an overly chipper Marcel placed his carefully balanced meal in front of him. Harry knew he was lucky that all three of the men he had hired were excellent cooks, and more to the point didn't expect him to do any of the housework, but he was irritable and spoiling for a fight this morning.

"I don't want it. Make something else." He pushed the plate away, ignoring how tempting it actually was.

Marcel smiled, amused. "Too bad. I may be your employee, Mr Potter, but you hired me to look after your health. Since we aren't able to begin your healing just yet, I need to make sure your body is as well prepared for it as possible. That means I have Healers Rights, and in matters regarding your health, you will do as you are told." He pushed the plate back.

Scowling, Harry caved, the delicious smells proving too much to resist. "Healers Rights aren't a thing."

Marcel sat in front of his own plate, leaving the seats on either side of Harry free for his body guards. "Sure it is. Who's to define what things are things anyway?" He responded blandly, sipping his coffee.

Harry glared again, only to be completely ignored by his infuriating employee.

"I could fire you."

"But you won't. Who else would go to the trouble to arrange your breakfast in the shape of a smiley face?"

Harry paused and glanced at his plate for a long moment. "Is that what it is? I thought it was a giraffe. A dead one. I'm certain there is artistic dismemberment adorning my plate. Are you branching out into post modern art? Is this from your blue period?"

Marcel ignored him with all the aplomb of a man trying to pretend he isn't offended, burying his nose in the Daily Prophet, the wizarding newspaper that was delivered each morning by an owl of all things.

Alex and Sergei joined them at the table, quickly assessing their boss's mood. Eyeing each other, they argued silently before Sergei sighed heavily and took the bullet.

"What's got you uptight, Boss?"

Harry poked at his food and mumbled.

"Didn't catch that."
Heaving a sigh, Harry rolled his eyes. "The only times I've been clothes shopping were when Aunt Petunia took Dudley. It was horrible. There was fawning and cooing and gushing - lots of gushing. And I just know Marcel is going to go overboard and make Aunt Petunia look like a paragon of restraint." He stuffed a forkful of scrambled egg into his mouth, ignoring Alex's reproving look at his lack of manners.

The men glanced at each other lips twitching. Even Sergei's habitual stoicism seemed pushed to the limits.

"You can gut a man twice your size then happily wander off to mutilate some corpses, but you're afraid to go clothes shopping?" Sergei sniggered.

"Don't be stupid," Harry snapped. "I'm not afraid of shopping. I'm wary of Marcel's fashion addiction!"

Sergei paused. "Alright, that is a valid concern."

Harry finally cracked a grin and they returned to their breakfasts, ignoring Marcel's indignant huffing.

It was odd, Harry mused to himself, that he was starting to develop an attachment to the men. He hadn't felt anything like that since his time with Dave.

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Harry gazed around the final property he had come to inspect. It was huge; seven large bedrooms, five bathrooms, a study, massive family room, oversized modern kitchen, formal dining room, enormous backyard with established high hedges for perfect privacy, four car garage, pool, and a few other assorted features that all together made for a rather perfect package.

Sergei and Alex were doing a superb job of behaving like two well to do men looking for a new home to raise their newly adopted son. Harry was free to roam around the properties, acting like a typical excited nine year old while his men kept the agent busy with technical questions about the property and neighbourhood.

Harry had decided to purchase two of the houses and the penthouse. He had vague plans forming at the back of his mind for using the houses, and while he couldn't fully articulate them yet, an instinct told him that both houses would be necessary, not just the one he had originally planned. And, well, he liked the penthouse.

Bouncing back into the room, he ran up to his guards, grabbing their hands excitedly.

"This place is awesome!" He gushed, his face lighting up in a beaming grin. He knew the expression made his eyes sparkle, and combined with his messy hair and tiny stature, he was the poster child for adorable prepubescent manipulation. He'd practiced in front of the mirror until he got it perfect after seeing another child doing it to their parents at the park when begging for ice cream. "Is this going to be our new house?" He turned on the puppy dog eyes.

Alex smiled gently down at him, a hint of mischief in his eyes at Harry's performance. Looking quickly at Sergei, he cocked an eyebrow as if asking permission then turned to the agent. "I guess we'll take it! Our lawyer will look over the paperwork and process the sale as soon as possible."

When the agent had left, the men dropped their loved up act, and Harry resumed his habitual cool control.

"That was an impressive performance, Boss." Sergei commented approvingly.
Harry nodded slightly, barely reacting to the compliment. "Thank you. Once the paperwork is settled, I want one of you to get all three properties furnished. Make sure it's sturdy furniture – it will probably see a lot of rough use. Set up the bedrooms in the houses for two to four occupants each except the Master suite. We won't be staying here, I have other plans for this place, but I want a room kept ready for me anyway. And you too by extension, I suppose. In fact, make that a standing order for any properties we acquire." He paused, staring pensively out the window. "Set aside one other single room also - a nice one. Set up the penthouse like normal though, we'll be there often."

He turned, seeing their accepting looks. He was pleased that neither man felt it necessary to question even the more oddball directions.

Alex was scribbling the instructions in his notebook, making sure he didn't forget anything. He never had yet, but until he got to know his employer well enough to anticipate his needs and wants, he wasn't going to take the chance – or so he had explained to Harry.

"Did you want to stop anywhere else before heading home, Sir? It's nearly dinner time." Alex looked up as he finished his notes.

Tilting his head thoughtfully, Harry tossed a few ideas around mentally. "No, but I think I'd like a pizza and movie night tonight. I haven't done that before. You guys pick the movie, I've never seen one, I don't have a preference."

Heading out to their hired car, Harry silently mulled over the new plans forming in his mind, ignoring the friendly bickering of his companions about what movies they would watch that night.

Harry's first introduction to Diagon Alley had his jaw open and eyes on stalks. He knew that it was separate world, but he hadn't really understood how different it was. Gazing around at all the bizarre fashions and mind boggling goods for sale, Harry decided quickly that he had a lot more research to do.

"Alright there, Sir?" Alex whispered to the overwhelmed boy, his hand resting comfortingly on his frail shoulders.

Harry looked up at him, emerald eyes shining with apprehension. "I don't think I know enough societal forms for this world yet," he whispered back.

Alex smiled encouragingly. "That's what I'm here for, Sir. I'll be teaching you what you need to know, but until then, just let me handle it, and learn what you can from watching. Sound good?"

Harry nodded in relief, glancing around again. Squaring his bony shoulders, he nodded more decisively. "Can we come back here without the Andrews and do a proper shop soon?"

Alex and Sergei grinned, knowing exactly what Harry really meant. Knockturn Alley was going to get a new customer.

"Sure we can. Until then, smile. Mama Andrews is watching."

Harry blinked, assuming the persona the Andrews family were more familiar with. Smiling shyly, he pointed to a bookshop by the name of Flourish and Blotts, and asked the maternal woman if they would have time to have a look around later.

"Of course we can dear," she grinned, trying not to coo at how overwhelmed he seemed. She'd been briefed by Sergei and Alex to not refer to Harry by his name if it could possibly be avoided, the men explaining that Harry's new father didn't want his new son having to combat hordes of press vultures
at such a young age. While she didn't think much of a man who would adopt such a damaged child and then head off on a long term business trip leaving him with only two body guards to care for him, she agreed that the elusive Mr Smith had the right idea, about this at least.

"After we get you fitted for your new clothes, and you've finished your business at Gringotts, then we'll explore the Alley if we have time. Sound good?" Seeing Harry nod, she grabbed Daniel and Harry's hands, and began towing them gently after her towards Twillfitt and Tatting; the other men taking position around them.

On entering the store, Harry was chivvied up onto a stool, where he cast an amused look at a studiously blank faced Alex. He knew that Marcel had demanded this particular establishment be visited, since his butler-cum-bodyguard preferred to shop at Clotho's Spindle.

The argument between the two about which shop Harry would be patronising had been epic, and as far as Harry was concerned, highly entertaining. He'd retired before the conclusion, not bothering to inform the men that he intended to visit both. He wondered just how Marcel had beaten the notoriously bull-headed mercenary into submission. He suspected there may have been threats to withhold Marcel's triple chocolate brownies, in which case Harry could fully understand why the ex-military man had stood down. Those things were incredible.

Standing patiently, Harry tolerated being poked and prodded, measured, posed, dressed, tutted and fussed over, and generally used as a manikin.

An hour and a half, and ninety six outfit changes later, Harry cast a glance at Alex.

Taking his cue, Alex put a stop to the proceedings, arranging for the best fifteen outfits to be tailored, imbued with every possible charm that could be worked into them, and advised he would be back in a week to collect the order. Guiding a quietly scowling Harry out the door, man and boy took a deep breath of relief.

"I want to visit Clotho's Spindle too," Harry murmured quietly to his guard.

Alex smirked faintly. "Really? After all of that?"

Harry frowned. "I want ice cream first." He folded his arms and pouted slightly, knowing that it made him look like a brat, but too irritable to really care.

Alex, Sergei, and Mama Andrews shared an amused look.

"Sure thing," Mama Andrews grinned down at the sulky child. "Florean Fortescue's it is!" The party resumed their previous formation, with Alex and Sergei scanning the crowd at all times, and glaring at anyone foolish enough to get too close.

After fighting their way through the crowd, they finally made it to their destination, the reduced jostling greatly appreciated by all parties.

Harry's eyes goggled when he was told to choose what sundae he wanted, and his eyes swept over the absurd amount of flavours to choose from. Dave had once bought him a small chocolate ice cream after Harry had managed to score nearly £500 in an afternoon of pick pocketing, but he had no idea that there could be so many different flavours! He doubted even Dudley had ever tried so many different types. Feeling overwhelmed, Harry turned panicked eyes to his guards.

Sergei put a calming hand on the boy's shoulder, gently tugging him to lean against the older man's hip. He ignored Alex's faintly amused look at his willingness to comfort the child, and continued to scan the area.
Alex squatted down in front of Harry, his normal gentle smile in place. "Would you like me to order for you?" Seeing Harry's shaky nod, he nodded back agreeably. "Have you had ice cream before?"

"I had a chocolate one once when I was five." Harry responded timidly, and observed a flash of something cross Alex's eyes.

"Alright, how does a chocolate, vanilla, and caramel sundae with toffee bits and hot fudge sauce sound?"

Harry grinned faintly, and nodded. He looked around at the people crowding into the store; families with overexcited and sugar buzzed children, teens on dates, and the occasional senior citizen reliving their youth with long term favourites. The colours and noise were overwhelming; there were too many people, too many details, and it was all getting lost and jumbled in his head as he tried to assess and read each one.

He whined quietly and started to tremble, eyes darting around frantically. Only the large hand steady on his shoulder and the hip against the side of his face kept him from bolting as fast and as far as he could manage.

Sergei felt the change as Harry started to panic, and realised what was happening. The kid hadn't been around so many people in a long time, if ever, and was driving himself crazy trying to absorb all the input. He cursed mentally, there was no way they could get out without drawing attention, and Harry had specifically told them he wanted to avoid that at all costs today. He signalled Alex, and indicated the back room. Alex nodded, and quickly informed Mr Fortescue that they needed to borrow the back room to calm their charge down before he had a panic attack.

Fortescue took one look at the pale and shaking boy, and opened the way through the counter for the men.

Mama Andrews cast concerned looks at their retreating backs, but realised that there wasn't anything she could do besides find a booth for when they came back. She took possession of Harry's sundae, and with a similarly loaded Greg and Daniel behind her, made her way to an out of the way corner booth to wait.

Harry was shuddering as Sergei sat on an upturned bucket and pulled him into his lap while Alex secured the room. He couldn't prevent himself from burrowing into the solid warmth of the huge Russian, and as soon as the muscled arms wrapped firmly around him, he started to relax.

Being held was still a new thing for him, and physical contact was something he still generally avoided, but the men had discovered that on the occasions that Harry needed help winding his abilities back under control, Sergei was able to calm him the fastest.

Neither man understood why this was the case, especially since Alex was the more tactile and relatable of the two (though not by much, since both men were too paranoid to be comfortable with people close to them), but something about the Russian's gruff no nonsense approach seemed to reach the boy in ways that Alex's calm control couldn't.

Harry rested his ear against Sergei's chest, and let the steady thump of his heart set the pace for his mind as he worked through the massive input. He closed his eyes and allowed his breathing to settle as he sifted and processed, watching the patterns form and the raw data arrange itself into meaningful information.

He was frustrated and disgusted at his inability to do this on the spot, and vowed to expose himself to
the influx as long and as often as needed to overcome this pathetic deficiency. He couldn't avoid crowds forever, and even if he could, he wouldn't want to. Weaknesses were unacceptable, especially in his line of work.

Taking a few deep breaths, he flooded his body with oxygen and consciously relaxed each muscle group like his men had taught him after his first panic attack in their presence. Finally calm and centred again, he opened his eyes and sat up, slipping from Sergei's lap with a faint blush.

"Well, that was fun," he quipped dryly.

Sergei kept his face impassive and stood up without comment, while Alex chuckled lightly.

"If you say so, Sir. I assume you plan to desensitize?"

Harry nodded firmly, his hands clasped behind his back and his feet braced. "Yes. Once my healing is complete, arrange for a regular outing to a crowded place twice a week. We can work out details later." He rolled his shoulders, and took on his former persona, looking expectantly at the door. "Ice cream?"

Sergei rolled his eyes and opened the door, stepping protectively in front of Harry on the way through. Alex brought up the rear, closing the store room door behind them and nodding a thank you to the concerned shop keep.

Spying the Andrews holding a booth for them, the men joined them, Harry being guided to sit next to Daniel, with Alex on his right between him and the edge of the bench seat. Sergei sat at the other end of the bench, the two guards effectively bracketing the party and ensuring all directions were clearly visible and regularly swept for threats.

Harry was thrilled that his ice cream hadn't melted in the fifteen minutes he'd been freaking out; quickly snatching up his spoon and scooping the first bite of frozen confection into his mouth. He moaned softly in delight, eyes fluttering slightly as he analysed and committed to memory every nuance he could detect.

Mama Andrews watched sadly as Harry took such obvious joy in something so simple. When the little boy had been taken out the back to calm down, she had cast a preservation charm on their desserts, not wanting Harry to come back to melted smoosh. She cursed herself for never thinking to give him something like ice cream, having been more focused on feeding him as much nutritious food as she could stuff into him before he returned to those accursed relatives of his. She watched him savouring each bite, but guarding his bowl as if it would be taken away at any moment. She was grateful that the men tasked with Harry's care were so responsive to his needs.

Finishing their desserts, they made their way through the crowds to Clotho's Spindle, where Harry once again did his best manikin impression. He had to admit, the formal feel of Clotho's robes were a little more comfortable for him than the height of fashion that he'd been draped in at Twillfitt and Tatting. He could see why Alex (in all his toff glory) preferred it. That said he had liked the forest green robes with tiny copper toned leaves embroidered around the hems that Mr Tatting had suggested. He hoped Alex had added that one to his order.

Eventually the fabric based trauma was over, and after a hearty lunch at the Leaky Cauldron the party separated, with Harry and his guards making their way to Gringotts.

Harry stared up at the huge marble building, awed at such unusual construction. The building seemed to bend the eye, appearing both solid and strong, but also slightly off centre in a way that couldn't be quite defined. Harry wondered if it was the high concentration of wards that created the
haze effect.

He read the warning over the entry, and nodded a polite greeting to the Goblin guarding the door. He wasn't concerned that the guard barely acknowledged him, having been warned by Alex that the Goblins were an unfriendly bunch.

Harry glanced around curiously from his position between the two men. He was exhausted from his earlier melt down, and despite being fascinated by the Goblins and their bank, he just wanted to finish his business and go home. He wanted more books too, but right now the urge to curl up and sleep was more pressing.

Alex led them over to an open teller. "Good afternoon Sliprock. I'd like to see Gutshank please."

Sliprock sneered, though in a manner slightly friendlier than he had to his previous customers, and directed them to follow another Goblin through the discrete doors off to the side.

The party followed the squat little creature through a maze of identical corridors and doorways, before halting in front of one that seemed no different to any of the others. With a curt knock and a signal to enter, they found themselves in front of a huge oak desk and the ugliest goblin to ever grace the banking system sitting behind it.

"Mr Charleston," the creature's gravelly voice matched his deformed appearance perfectly. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

Alex smiled placidly. "Gutshank, it's good to see you again. There is a matter of extreme delicacy that requires your finesse. Would you be interested in a challenge?"

Gutshank's face rearranged itself into a horrific expression that bared his teeth, which Harry assumed was supposed to be a smile. With the heavy scarring and what looked to be natural deformation as well, it was remarkably hard to accurately read his expression.

"Always, though as you know, such attention doesn't come cheaply."

Alex nodded slightly in acknowledgement. "And your discretion regarding our enquiries is assured regardless of outcome?" He casually toyed with a small coin bag, from which a heavy clinking could be heard.

Eying the bag greedily, Gutshank snorted. "Of course; have I ever let you down?"

Alex smiled, and tossed the bag onto the desk, from where it promptly disappeared into cavernous pockets. "I knew I was right to recommend you for this job. Gutshank, Mr Potter here has a few questions about his accounts, but we suspect that they are being watched, and possibly accessed without his knowledge or permission. We need access and information, without it getting back to his little stalker."

Gutshank turned his beetle like eyes onto the small boy who sat so still between the two men. He took in the calm and almost bored expression, and smiled again. "Mr Potter is it? Well, this is interesting. What's it worth to you?"

Harry sighed slightly and flicked his hand, a small blade imbedding itself into the desk just in front of the startled Goblin. "Depends on what you can do for me. Full account information without tipping off my watcher is worth a hundred Galleons, with another fifty each time if you are able to update me on any changes. Access - with the same parameters - is another hundred. Depending on what is found regarding my accounts, there may be new portfolios to manage and a generous cut of the profits. The more thorough you are in acting in my best interests, the better you will be compensated."
While I'm the paranoid sort personally, Mr Charleston recommends you highly for this type of work, particularly on an ongoing basis. I'm sure he would be most irritated with me if I was forced to dispose of you. That said, he works for me, and if it comes down to it, his displeasure doesn't bother me particularly. If you flap your lips, I'll cut them off."

Gutshank eyeballed the small child for a moment, before burst into raucous laughter that was reminiscent of a small to medium scale rockslide. "Alright, Mr Potter, I'll sniff around for you. Tell me what you know, so I have an idea what I'm looking for."

By the time Harry and his men left Gutshank's office, he felt confident that his newest contact would do his best on Harry's behalf. The little creature was outraged at the idea that the privacy of Harry's finances may have been compromised (rather hypocritically, Harry thought) and agreed that the chances were high, especially since Harry had never even received a bank statement.

Steeling himself, Harry prepared for one last errand before he could go home and collapse. After meeting up with the Andrews again, Harry tiredly began to explore the tightly packed shelves at Flourish and Blotts. Alex hovered discretely nearby, ready to take possession of any selections or offer advice, while Sergei kept a weather eye on the Andrews and surrounding crowd.

Half an hour later, Harry was browsing the sports section in a back corner of the shop, when another boy roughly bumped into him and sent him reeling into the shelf.

The boy was about the same age as Harry, with clean limbs and pale pointed features, white blond hair slicked back severely, and an expression of distaste that seemed a permanent fixture. The boy looked down his nose at Harry, clear grey eyes flicking over him critically.

"Watch where you're going!" He snapped rudely.

Before Harry could respond, Alex, Sergei, and another tall man who could only have been the boy's father, converged on them.

The tall man was aristocratic and severe, his platinum blond hair worn longer and tied back with a black ribbon. He tapped his slender walking stick irritably, and Harry noticed it was topped with a vicious looking snakes head. His cold silvery gaze swept over the people assembled as if he was doing them a favour by being in their presence, at great inconvenience to himself, no less. His eyes widened very slightly as he recognised Sergei, and he quickly assessed Alex as well, before turning his probing gaze to Harry.

"Are you alright, Boss?" Sergei asked quietly, while pinning the squirming albino brat in place with a hard look.

Harry nodded quietly, handing Alex a book on Quidditch to add to his pile. "I'm fine," he murmured back.

Sergei nodded, turning to the as yet un introduced man. "Malfoy," he grunted, keeping his voice soft enough to not be overheard by other patrons. "Might want to teach that boy of yours not to judge a book by its cover. Could get him hurt, sooner or later." He kept his gaze steady as the man in front of him absorbed the warning for what it was.

Lucius was not a foolish man. Despite the obscurcation charms on both men and the boy they were guarding, he knew who and what both men were – if only by name and reputation in the case of Alex Charleston. The boy was still a question mark, but anyone who commanded such loyalty from the most vicious mercenary he'd ever had the terror to meet was not someone to take lightly. That
Petrikov had called the boy 'boss' was food for thought also. It meant that the child himself held the man's allegiance, not some absent guardian. He turned back to the boy, and bowed very slightly.

"I apologise for my son's rudeness. I am Lucius Malfoy. Perhaps you would consent to join us for dinner next week to allow us to make amends?" He waited patiently, carefully hiding his curiosity under a mask of polite enquiry as the mysterious child looked him over. It was disconcerting to be on the receiving end of an inspection like that for a change.

Finally the boy nodded. "Thank you, I'd like that. If you could arrange the details with Mr Charleston?" He cast a questioning look at Alex, who nodded serenely, firmly in his Butler act.

"Of course, Sir. I'll take care of everything." He handed Malfoy Snr his card, receiving one in return.

Draco watched this byplay curiously, trying very hard to ignore the huge man glaring at him. He didn't understand why his father was acting so deferentially to the other boy, but he wasn't going to disappoint his father again. The boy was wearing muggle clothes, new but not high quality, and seemed in dire need of a hair comb, but he must be very rich or powerful if his father was so keen to get in his good graces. Swallowing his pride, he waited until the conversation was finished before quietly attracting the boy's attention.

"Sorry about before," he squirmed.

The boy studied him impassively for a moment, and then nodded slightly. "No problem."

Turning back to the adults, he gestured to get their attention. "If you'll excuse me Mr Malfoy, I would like to get a couple of books on potions before heading home. I look forward to our dinner next week." He nodded slightly as he slipped away, trailed by a faithful Alex and fully aware that his lack of introduction had frustrated the curious man immensely.

Lucius turned to Petrikov after the boy was out of sight, a questioning look on his face.

Sergei smirked faintly at the confused socialite, before leaning close to speak quietly in his ear. "That boy is much more than he seems. You do not want to get on his bad side. Not ever." With that, he followed his charge, leaving a stunned aristocrat and his bewildered offspring behind.

Lucius was brought out of his stupor when Draco timidly spoke.

"Father? Who was that boy?"

He shook his head slightly. "I don't know, son. But I intend to find out."
"A week, and you've found nothing?" Lucius Malfoy hissed dangerously.

His contact, a man of dubious morals and worse reputation shifted nervously. "I'm tellin' ya, there ain't nothing to find! Nobody knows who Charleston and Petrikov are working for! Nobody even knows who he hired 'em through! When they was at Diagon, they never referred to 'im by any name, not even a nickname. There was a family with 'em, but nobody knows who they was either, and all of 'em was wearin' an Obscuration Charm! There is nothing to work with!"

Lucius tapped his cane on the marble floor in irritation. His guests would be arriving tomorrow evening, and he still didn't have a name for the boy. Every single one of his sources had turned up exactly the same as the odoriferous man cowering in front of him, and Charleston had deftly avoided giving him even the slightest hint during their correspondence.

Lips tightly pressed together in frustration, he negligently tossed a small bag of coins at the man. "Fine. Get out." He watched the man skulk away, and resigned himself to waiting another day for answers.

He detested going into a situation blind.

Harry was currently dripping with sweat and breathing heavily as he sparred in the lounge room with Sergei. They'd been at it for nearly four hours, and Harry was at the end of his endurance. Not that you could tell.

"Harry Potter!" Marcel shouted indignantly from the doorway, where he stood loaded with grocery bags. "What do you think you're doing? I specifically told you to avoid physical training until after your healing!"

Harry swept a foot at Sergei's ankles, only to have the older man jump lightly over it and follow up with a bruising kick to his side.

"I'll live," he grunted as he righted himself, finally calling a halt to their practice.

"I tried to stop them," Alex muttered from behind his newspaper.

Marcel rounded on him, practically crackling with irritation. "And I'm sure you tried very hard before letting Harry do whatever he wanted. You're supposed to be looking after him!"

"No, Blanca," Harry interjected firmly, his voice laced with steel. "They are to appear to be looking after me when other people are around. They are here to teach and protect me. Despite our friendly relationship, they are my employee's, as are you. They follow orders, and you should learn to as well, before it gets you in trouble." The boy wiped his face with a towel that his sparring partner had dropped into his outstretched hand.

"Healers Rights," Marcel began, only to be interrupted.

"Are not a thing in this case. If I need to burn off some energy and get some training in, then I will, and you will not stop me. Are we clear?"

Marcel and the tiny boy glared at each other, before the older man backed down slightly. "Will you at least let me check you over afterwards?"
Harry relaxed, nodding calmly. "Sure. Why else would I keep you around?" He grinned cheekily at Marcel's outraged look, and calmly sat at the table for the healer to run his scans. He looked at Alex. "Is everything ready for tomorrow?"

Alex nodded, calmly folding his newspaper and setting it aside. "Yes Sir. Your robes have been collected and checked over, and we've confirmed that he hasn't been able to find any information on you or the Andrews."

"Good. Anything else I need to know about?"

Alex nodded, sipping his tea. "The six bodies from yesterday have been found, but the police have no leads. I'll keep monitoring it of course, but I doubt there will be any problems; you were thorough with your cleanup. I'm expecting we'll hear from Gutshank some time today, or possibly early tomorrow. Vahan's reputation is growing, and Bradshaw will probably have a few requests from new clients, if you're interested." Seeing Harry nod, he continued. "The houses have been settled and paid for, and the penthouse sale should go through tomorrow. I thought I'd spend the weekend arranging furnishings for the houses, and Monday after school we can shop for what you want in the penthouse. I thought you might like to head that one."

Harry waved negligently as he sipped his hot chocolate that Marcel had forced onto him. "I don't care. Just make sure the furnishings are appropriate. I don't want to have to redecorate every time the fashion changes."

"Very well, Sir. Hmm," he consulted his notebook briefly, though he really didn't need to. "No word from your cousin, yet, which I admit to finding surprising. I'm beginning to wonder if someone isn't helping hide the failure of the wards around number four. I can't imagine Dumbledore being lax enough to miss them falling for nearly six weeks." He pursed his lips, thinking. "I'll give some thought to who it might be, and get back to you."

"Fine. Also, don't refer to Dudley as my cousin again. He is not family, despite being a blood relation. I have plans for him and his gang when they are a bit older, but I want to make it clear to him that he will be an employee, nothing more. If I don't, he'll think himself above his station and cause trouble."

The three men nodded, finding the rationale to be sensible, having met the brat in question.

Their conference was interrupted by a tapping at the window. When Alex let it in, the post owl swooped over to Harry, perching on the back of the chair next to him and offering its foot. Harry gently detached the shrunk package from its leg, and absently offered it a biscuit to nibble. Opening the package, it automatically resized, revealing a thick folder and a note on the top.

"It's from Gutshank," he announced quietly. He skimmed the letter, and quickly flicked through the folder, stopping occasionally to read a few lines in more detail. "Alex, tell Bradshaw I want a meeting first thing tomorrow, before school. Gutshank has really outdone himself, I'm impressed."

He left the table and retrieved a sheaf of high quality paper, penning a request for a meeting to discuss the goblin's findings. Attaching it, he carried the owl back to the window and sent it winging back to its master.

"Dumbledore is watching my account, but hasn't been able to get access. Not for lack of trying though. Gutshank has provided full account details, and once I've seen him and provided a few drops of blood, I'll have full access to all of my vaults. Apparently Bradshaw's paperwork voodoo with the adoption means that I can access everything before my majority, though nobody else will know that it's me and not my guardian. Apparently Dumbledore was my Magical Guardian, but that was
declared null once the adoption was signed, since the papers accept my magic as Mr Smiths. He doesn't seem to be aware of the change though, which works to our benefit."

He put the papers away in the safe in his room, returning to the table and picking up his fork when Marcel placed the full plate in front of him. He listened absently as his men discussed Gutshanks findings and the plans for the next few days, chewing slowly. Things were shaping up well. It wouldn't always be that way of course, but that was what his men were for. Perhaps he should plan a visit to Mr South again soon; he wanted some new toys.

Bradshaw happily met with them, gleefully adding the details Gutshank had unearthed to the files he was building on Dumbledore and the Dursleys. He also handed over what his sources had managed to dig up on the Malfoys, something which made Harry grin viciously.

As Alex had expected, several people had contacted the lawyer to request Vahan's protection, and were willing to pay through the nose for it. There were even a few offers from smaller gangs to amalgamate into Vahan's network, if he'd have them. His reputation for looking after his people was spreading, and more of the smaller groups were looking to trade up their current situations.

The boy passed the files off to Alex, requesting he assess each of the people involved and assign a few capable bodies to do the grunt work for the various projects he had running.

A quick text to Mr South had an appointment for Saturday morning, and a short drive later Harry was waving to a hyperactive Daniel as they headed towards their first class for the day.

Dressing carefully in his new robes, the young crime lord examined his reflection critically. The midnight blue robe hung to his knees and was edged in black, held closed with a multitude of tiny buttons up the front and at the sleeve cuffs. The collar was a low Mandarin cut, magically stiffened and altered by his men to conceal a garrotte wire and several needles dosed with a paralytic agent. It had also had several sleeping runes embedded that would trigger and protect his throat from any efforts to crush or slice it. Marcel had suggested adding one to protect from poisons or harmful potions that were ingested, and Harry was so pleased he'd given the man a large credit account at Twillfit and Tatting as a reward. He'd also demanded the rune be standard on all his clothing, even if the other ones couldn't be worked on all designs.

The severe frock coat design of the robe gave the tiny boy an illusion of greater height, and the tailored pants and expensive boots added to that impression. Harry had been about to despair about his hair ever behaving itself and was convinced that it would ruin the entire effect he was aiming for, when Alex and Marcel came to the rescue, levitating a veritable apothecary's worth of lotions and potions behind them. Between them, they managed to wrestle his hair into a semblance of order, smoothing the unruly locks into gentle waves that curled teasingly around his delicate features.

Finally ready to go, Harry allowed Alex to pull him close as they apparated to their engagement.

Apparating, while a distinctly unpleasant sensation was highly useful and Harry couldn't wait to learn how to do it himself. Sergei had mentioned that most people made a loud crack noise when performing it, but that with practice, the most powerful wizards and witches could do it silently – it was just so much effort that most didn't bother. Harry decided that he would do so, even if he had to boost his power via some of the rituals he'd read about in the books he'd borrowed from Sergei. The mercenaries had both laughed, assuring him that he had no problems in the power department, and the rituals wouldn't be necessary. Harry remained unconvinced, but had let it go for the moment.

Looking at the massive gates and winding drive leading to Malfoy Manor, Harry found himself mildly impressed. He could see the benefit of displaying such wealth openly, even if he personally
found it wasteful. Image could make or break you, he knew, and the Malfoys certainly knew how to work that in their favour.

The grounds were gorgeous; immaculate lawns dotted with albino peacocks surrounded by vibrant gardens and mature trees. The path to the door was lined with smooth stones set into the ground that Alex informed him quietly would glow in the dark, gently lighting the way for evening guests.

Crushed white shells shifted slightly underfoot as they made their way to the impressive building, the path meandering in lazy curves through the immaculate greenery and ending at the white marble steps.

Harry smiled slightly, murmuring to Alex as they mounted the steps and approached the door. "I've heard of accessorising, but building a house to match your hair colour seems a tad excessive."

Alex stifled a snigger, but Sergei wasn't quite so lucky, caught off guard for once.

They were met at the door by a diminutive being with huge eyes and bat like ears who proclaimed her name was Muffy, wringing her hands on the carefully pressed pillowslip that passed as clothing.

Harry skimmed his eyes over the creature – house elf, he recalled from his lessons – and nodded politely as it took their cloaks.

Following Muffy through the corridors to the drawing room, Harry absorbed every detail he could about the house and the people who lived in it, adding the observations to his mental portfolio on the family.

He'd read about the Malfoy family during his studies of both history and society, and the file Bradshaw had provided supplemented many modern details that the books had missed. Unsurprising really, since the details Bradshaw's sources had unearthed were not really the sort of things one would want published, especially if one was keen to avoid prison time.

Taking a seat near the fire once they'd been left in the drawing room, Harry took a moment to settle his mind. The Malfoys would make excellent allies in his future business endeavours in the wizarding world, and they had contacts that even Sergei admitted rivalled his own.

"I apologise for keeping you waiting," Lucius murmured as he swept into the room.

"Perfectly alright, Mr Malfoy, we haven't been here long." Harry smiled slightly, standing and offering his hand to the older gentleman. "I believe that it's time I properly introduced myself. I'm Harry Potter."

The look of unadulterated shock on Lucius Malfoy's face was one that Harry would treasure for the rest of his life.

Lucius blinked, hastily shutting his jaw and schooling his expression back into calm neutrality. "Mr Potter. I must say I'm honoured to be hosting such a celebrity in my humble home." He carefully shook the boy's hand, bowing his head very slightly.

Harry quirked an eyebrow. "Please don't do that," he asked quietly. "False modesty is unbecoming, and we are both above such games."

Lucius smirked slightly. "Very well. If you will follow me, dinner will be served momentarily."

The dining room was much like the rest of the Manor, beautifully appointed and luxurious almost to the point of absurdity. After being introduced to Lucius's wife Narcissa, and reintroduced to Draco,
they seated themselves at the table.

"So, Mr Potter," Narcissa began as they settled into their first course – a delicious light soup that Harry couldn't hope to identify. "There has been a lot of speculation regarding your whereabouts over the years. Are any of the theories correct?"

Harry smiled, amused. "Not even close, Mrs Malfoy, though I admit to finding some of the ideas to be highly entertaining. I believe my current favourite is Miranda McCall's theory that I'm living in a Tibetan monastery learning how to control my 'destructive power' through meditation and a diet of rice and caviar."

Draco snorted slightly into his soup, earning a reproving look from both of his parents.

Harry smirked slightly at the blond boy, before returning his attention to his hosts. "It's complete rubbish of course. I also eat foie gras." He sipped another spoonful, smiling slightly at the adults' startled laughter.

The dinner conversation was light and Harry found himself amused at how transparent the Malfoys were to someone with his skills. For all of their posturing and carefully primped superiority, they were quite mercenary at heart, easily attracted by those who promised the most power and prestige. His observations matched with the file from Bradshaw, and the briefing his men had provided, so Harry decided to continue his plan to cultivate a further relationship with the family. Draco would be in his year at Hogwarts, and would hold significant political influence amongst their peers, Lucius had the political clout to smooth away some of the more troublesome issues that might occur, and Narcissa was viewed as the pinnacle of social fashion. If he had them onside, everyone else would fall neatly into line.

Retiring to another lavish sitting room after dinner, Harry settled himself onto the comfortable sofa between his men, while the Malfoys draped themselves artistically around the other furnishings. Harry idly wondered if they had prearranged positions based on what company was present. He found the idea tickled him more than it should, especially when he imagined them practicing.

"You have a lovely home," Harry murmured softly, sipping at the cup of tea he'd been handed by Muffy.

Narcissa blushed prettily, a gracious smile faintly crossing her lips. "Thank you. Interior design is something of a hobby of mine."

Harry cocked his head, turning slightly to Alex, receiving a barely perceptible nod in return. "Would you be interested in a small project along those lines?"

The elegant blonde narrowed her eyes slightly, interest sharpening her gaze. "What did you have in mind?"

Sipping his tea calmly, Harry pursed his lips minutely. "I have recently purchased a rather lovely penthouse, and find myself in need of suitable furnishing. Mr Charleston here is excellent at anticipating my desires, but unfortunately that does not always extend to such things as this." It was a complete lie, of course, he had exquisite taste, but Alex was much too valuable to waste on furnishing a property when there was other business to conduct. "Would you be interested in such an undertaking? I don't imagine it would be particularly time consuming, the property is only five bedrooms after all." He sipped his tea again, watching the melanin challenged family closely. "Of course I would offer appropriate compensation for your time, I wouldn't presume upon a favour so early in our relationship."
Narcissa's lips twitched in amusement. "But at a later time you might?"

Harry smirked back at her. "I suppose that depends on how well we work together, doesn't it?"

When Narcissa's tinkling laughter rang out, Harry knew he had won.

"Very well Mr Potter, shall I arrange a meeting with you via Mr Charleston to go over the specifics?"

Arriving home from the Malfoys, Harry dropped wearily into his favourite recliner, watching through half closed eyes as his men settled in for their briefing.

"Well?"

Alex lifted his head slightly, clearing his throat. "You did very well, Sir. Charming Narcissa Malfoy was an excellent idea and will make it much easier to gain favour with Lucius. Draco is a bit of a non entity at the moment since he'll follow whatever his parents say, but he's just as quick as his father, with his mothers' gemütlichkeit. He'll be valuable if you train him right."

Sergei looked at his counterpart sideways, pursing his lips in irritation. "Your German is terrible. Please don't use it again."

Alex glared, huffing tetchily. "You're Russian; stop complaining. It's not like it's your language I'm butchering. Besides, I need to practice."

Harry waved a hand slightly, dispelling the brewing argument. Ever since Sergei had confessed to speaking no less than thirteen languages, Alex had been sulking over his apparently measly eight and had decided that German should be his next project.

"Argue on your own time. Anything else?"

Alex subsided, resuming his professional mask. "I think you have a good chance of convincing the Malfoys to work with you. They're still powerful, but their popularity took a hit at the end of the war. They'll see you as their ticket back, and you can capitalise on that. You should consider moving to Potter Manor, too. It's more secure, has the facilities we need, and is close enough that you could hobnob more easily. It will also give you more input into shaping Draco into something more useful than arm candy. If you don't like the décor, I'm sure Narcissa would be happy to help you out."

Sergei sighed faintly. "We'd best be getting you a wand then, Boss. Even then, you may not be able to apparate for several years yet. Your magical core isn't fully developed yet. Worst case, we can teach you how to make portkeys. A permanent one between the Manor and penthouse might be worthwhile anyway. You should always have an out for emergencies."

Harry shot him a faintly revolted look at the idea of having anyone, especially Draco Malfoy as arm candy. "Alright, but I want you to teach me to apparate and cast the obscuration charm as a matter of priority, I have a lot of business in London." He paused for a moment. "A couple of detection spells for consumables too, in case I'm ever without my rune."

Sergei sighed faintly. "Alright, I want you two to develop appropriate code names for the different safe houses too, and get them all properly warded. Emergency portkeys to several different locations would be worthwhile too; I don't want to be limited in my escape options."

Their conversation was interrupted when Alex's phone chirped an incoming message.
Glancing at it, Alex scowled. "The Millers are having some problems. They came under your protection this morning, but I haven't found anyone to take guard on them yet, so we'll need to handle it personally."

Harry groaned slightly. "One of you deal with it. I'm too tired to crack heads this evening, and I still have homework to do."

Sergei grinned as he stood, quickly checking over the arsenal concealed in his clothing. "Any particular message you want passed on?"

"Tell them Vahan sends his love," Harry called facetiously as he exited down the hall.

Saturday morning, Harry walked down the street on his way to pay a visit to Mr South. Alex and Sergei were both out on some delicate jobs for him, and Marcel was off doing a favour for Bradshaw. He didn't mind being alone for a change, relished it in fact. He'd known going in that he would be allowing many details about himself and his network to become known to his guards, but he hadn't really anticipated how vulnerable he would feel. The oath the men had sworn would prevent them betraying him, of course, but that didn't make being so exposed comfortable.

He turned the corner, only a block away from the warehouse the arms dealer was currently using for some of his bigger toys.

An unmarked police car pulling up next to him caught his attention, and his emerald gaze quickly swept over the two men getting out of it.

'Clothing wrinkled, assorted pastry flakes and small drops of sauce. Hair messy, bloodshot eyes, strong scent of cigarettes, skin grey from exhaustion. Glancing at each other for support or confirmation. Attempting to make themselves non threatening as they approach. Task force of some kind, probably homicide, and been working nonstop for days.'

Harry eyed the men warily as they approached him, keeping his body relaxed through sheer force of will. He'd serviced some cops when running with Mike's gang; he knew perfectly well how brutal they could be when they had the mind for it.

"Hi," said the older of the two men, his silver hair rumpled from too many fingers run through it.

'Habitual gesture of frustration, Harry noted absently. Drinks coffee, black, no sugar.'

Harry backed up a step, ready to run. He wasn't genuinely afraid, but he knew that these men would expect him to be, and he readily adopted the role.

"I'm Inspector Gregory Adama, and this is my colleague Sergeant Thomas Brady. We were wondering if you could help us with our enquiries?"

"Um, I guess? I'm just a kid though; I don't know what I could do to help." Harry stumbled over his words, peering up through his fringe and chewing his lip nervously.

Adama smiled warmly down at Harry, his bloodshot navy eyes warm.

'Married, ten years or so. Experienced with children, probably a father or very involved uncle,' Harry glanced between the men, leaning slightly closer to Adama when he saw the unfriendly look on Brady's face.

"What's your name?" Adama was crouched now, trying not to loom over Harry's tiny frame.
"T-tiny, sir," Harry stuttered, looking as pitiful as he could manage without bursting into laughter.

"It's nice to meet you, Tiny. Where are your parents?" Adama glanced around, as if expecting said parents to jump out from behind a non existent bush.

"Dead, sir." Harry bowed his head and slumped his shoulders slightly, eyes firmly on his trainers as he lightly scuffed his toe on the ground.

Adama sighed, looking like he wanted to give the boy a hug.

"Guardian? Who looks after you?"

Harry shrugged, staying silent. He stuffed his hands in his pockets, blindly thumbing a message to Bradshaw.

Adama sighed again, running his fingers through his hair in agitation. "Alright, would you come back to the station with us? It's nearly lunch time; we can get you a drink and something to eat. Sound good?"

Harry looked up, eyes narrowed suspiciously. "I'm not a rent boy."

The aging inspector looked startled for a moment, before comprehension dawned. "No, no, nothing like that. We just want to ask you a couple of questions, that's all. You aren't in trouble. I just thought you might be hungry. There's no catch."

Harry snorted, eyes darting between the men. "Yeah, heard that one before. I don't do tricks, right? And even if I did, I'd cost more than a sandwich!" He moved to storm past them, but was completely unsurprised when Brady growled impatiently and grabbed his arm.

"Get in the car, kid. We just need to ask you some questions. And I'm pretty sure Social Services will want a word with you, too." The dark haired Sergeant ignored the irritated look from his partner, and shoved Harry unceremoniously into the backseat, slamming the door shut behind him.

The room at the police station was spartan, aging and saggy lounge chairs in decades outdated fashions carefully arranged to be as non confrontational as possible. There were windows all around the room, but covered in horizontal blinds to give the illusion of privacy, most of which were currently closed. A small coffee table sat nearby, as battered and dreary as the rest of the room.

Adama and Brady entered, followed closely by a plump woman in her late twenties.

"One sandwich, as promised," Adama smiled, clearly trying to make up for the 'scare' his partner had inflicted on the trembling boy. He placed it on the coffee table in front of Harry, realising the boy would never take it directly from his hand.

Harry eyed it suspiciously, earning a snort from the older man.

"Yeah, it's station food, but no matter how soggy it is, it won't kill you. If it did, I'd be dead years ago." He smiled, and added a bottle of apple juice and chocolate bar to the small offering.

Harry shifted away from it, and cast a glance through his fringe at the woman who'd accompanied them.

Taking her queue, she smiled at the timid boy. "Hello, Tiny. I'm Amanda. I'm from Social Services. I'm here to make sure that you're looked after and that you don't get scared while Inspector Adama
and Sergeant Brady ask you some questions. Do you understand?"

Harry shrugged silently, drawing his feet up onto the edge of the couch, hugging them close and making himself as small as possible.

Adama cleared his throat, and pulled out a small tape recorder, setting it on the table and switching it on.

"Alright Tiny, before we get started, I want you to know that you're safe here. We can protect you if you want us to. You only have to ask." Adama settled himself opposite with Brady at his side, Amanda perching on the couch next to Harry.

Harry peered over his knees, green eyes bright with anxiety.

"Now, we've been hearing a few things about someone we believe you know. His name is Vahan." Here, Adama paused, his sharp gaze watching Harry closely. "Have you heard of him?"

Harry chewed his lip slightly, then shrugged. "Yeah, who hasn't?" He glanced away from the Inspector's penetrating gaze, picking at a thread on his jeans.

"But you've more than heard of him, haven't you, Tiny." Adama's voice was soft, coaxing. Harry glared for a second, then dropped his gaze and returned to picking the thread.

"We've spoken to a few other people, and do you know what they've said?" Adama continued. "They say that a kid, one that looks a lot like you, is known as Vahan's Boy. They didn't know your name, but they all gave the same description, and they were all very sure that you are the only one who knows who Vahan is." He paused, inviting a response, then continued when it was clear that Harry had no intention of speaking. "Vahan is under suspicion for close to twenty murders, and lots of other bad things too. If you talk to us about what you know, we can keep you safe from him. We can make sure you have a new name, a new home. Have you heard of Witness Protection?"

Harry nodded slowly, as if thinking things over. Bradshaw should be passing instructions to Harry's bought cops any moment now. He cursed himself for forgetting to have Sergei cast the obscuration charm on him before he left the apartment that morning. He was getting careless, relying on Alex to remember things for him. He would make a point to fix that.

"Will you tell us about him?" Adama was practically leaning out of his chair in anticipation, his eyes gleaming. Brady didn't look much better, though he managed to maintain a semblance of his cool disdainful look.

Harry peered up slowly, meeting the Inspectors eyes. "You can't keep me safe from him," he murmured softly. "He can reach me anywhere."

A loud siren split the air, causing all the adults to jump and peer around before scrambling to their feet. The ear piercing noise changed to a loud whoop, signalling an evacuation of the building.

"No!" Adama shouted, rushing to the door and sticking his head into the corridor to ask a passerby what was happening.

Harry grabbed the offered food, clutching it to his chest. Waste not, and all that. Plus, he had a cover to maintain.

Adama pulled his head back in, cursing. "It's a fire alarm. We need to evacuate. Tiny, I want you to stay with -" He trailed off, his eyes quickly skimming those present. "Tiny? Son of bitch!" He kicked
the chair in fury as he spotted the opposite door slightly ajar and his only solid lead gone without a trace.

Harry sent a message with his apologies to Mr South, and headed home as quickly as he could manage without drawing attention to himself.

Entering his apartment, he tossed the truly awful sandwich into the bin, and finished chewing the chocolate bar, washing it down with the last mouthful of juice.

"Boss?" Sergei questioned warily, seeing the furious expression on the normally pleasant face.

"Get Alex and Bradshaw. Now!" Harry snapped, stalking into his bedroom for a change of clothes.

Five minutes, and his men were assembled in the living room, a startled Marcel tagging along since he'd been with Bradshaw when the summons came. Harry had a moment of appreciation for magical transport. It made sudden meetings much more convenient.

"I got hauled in by a pair of homicide cops today, asking questions about Vahan. Apparently, people have been talking, and while they couldn't work out who Vahan is, they linked me as a contact for him."

The men shifted slightly, but didn't interrupt.

"Bradshaw, our associates performed admirably today, even allowing me to pull off my escape with a bit of dramatic flair. A+ for timing! Arrange a reward for them, I don't care what. Just make sure it won't arouse suspicion; I don't want any of them even potentially compromised. Make sure they know who it's from and that there is more of it if they can get me information on the Vahan Task Force and the people on it. In particular, focus on Inspector Gregory Adama and Sergeant Thomas Brady. I want to know everything from first steps to wanking fantasies, got it?" Seeing Bradshaw nod, he dismissed him with a portkey, turning to his other men. "I want to know who has been talking to the cops, and I want them dealt with. If you uncover anyone of importance, I'll deal with them personally, but anyone else I leave in your hands. Make sure everyone gets the message."

The mercenaries smirked. "Any particular message, Boss?"

Harry smirked back coldly. "Tell them, Vahan sends his love."

In the next two weeks, every person with even the most tenuous of underworld connections learned to fear the name Vahan. Every person who had spoken to the police was interrogated thoroughly, and those who had fingered an associate of Vahan were silenced permanently. The mutilated corpses often made positive identification of the bodies impossible without a DNA match, and since few of the corpses had their DNA on file, most of the bodies went unidentified and unclaimed.

But those with a hand in the uglier side of London life knew. They knew every single person who disappeared, and they knew why. And when the cops came hunting, they found unanimous silence at every turn. The London underground had learned their lesson, for now.

Anthony Michaels was not a stupid man. After having met Vahan's Boy, he'd known Vahan had the potential to be a big fish in their world, and that simply wouldn't do. So when he'd heard the cops were hunting around for information on the brat's boss, he hadn't hesitated to point them in the little whelps' direction. And now, as he stuffed wads of cash from the safe into a duffle bag, he knew he was going to pay for it. He held out a vague hope that he might escape Vahan's Hounds long enough
to disappear, but realistically he knew that the Hounds would make him disappear in a more permanent and less pleasurable sense before he would get the chance. Still, it wouldn't stop him from trying.

His frantic movements slowed to a stop as he heard the lock click on the door behind him. He didn't turn, knowing there was no point.

"Are you going to kill me now?"

The temperature in the room dropped, the glass in the picture frames slowly cracking as a deep frost stretched across them.

"Now, Mr Michaels? No. First, we are going to discuss payment."

Finally turning, Anthony took in the incongruous sight of the tiny boy lounging elegantly in the uncomfortable guest chair, flanked by two of Vahan's Hounds, and that fucking lawyer that started it all.

"Payment?"

The boy examined his nails disinterestedly. "Payment, Mr Michaels. I considered actioning the dispersal plan I mentioned on our first meeting, but I've had a better idea."

At a slight motion from the boy, Bradshaw stepped forward, placing his briefcase on the cluttered desk and opening it. He pulled forth a small bundle of papers, and placed them in front of the sweating man as Sergei shoved him forcefully into the seat.

"You are going to sign over everything to me." Harry murmured, still not looking at his trembling prey. "I've had copies of your real books for ages, and I think that tidy little profit you turn over would look much nicer in my account. Sign the papers."

Anthony glanced up into the glittering eyes of the men around him, and slumped in defeat. Picking up the pen, he signed where indicated, and closed his eyes in resignation. It was over. Everything he'd worked for his entire life, gone. As the huge Russian grabbed his arm and the oddest squeezing sensation overcame him, Anthony Michaels mentally raised his last drink in salute to the child who'd fooled them all.

The office was quiet after Sergei had departed with their last target, and Harry took a moment to roll his shoulders to work out some of the tension.

"Alex, send Bradshaw home with a portkey, I don't want him here unprotected. You and I are going to clear the building. There was an income stream in the books that doesn't match up, and I want to check it out."

As his orders were obeyed, Harry glanced around the office noting the slight differences since his last visit. He saw Alex finish clearing out the safe, and send the grumbling lawyer home with a decent couple of wads for himself. Nodding in approval, he waited for Alex to clear the next room, and they began to systematically check the premises.

The building was three levels above ground, and one cleverly concealed basement. The upper levels provided very little of interest, just the standard rooms for gang members to sleep or fuck their latest whores, a couple of storerooms, a pitiful armoury, and a few stashes of drugs. Standard street thug fare, as far as Harry was concerned. The basement, however, sent the boy into a murderous rage.
The basement was partitioned into six small bedrooms, with a communal bathroom tucked away in the corner closest to the stairs. Each room was bare of all furnishings except for a single bed, filthy and stained with fluids best not pondered. Each room was occupied with a terrified child, except for the last two which contained a set of identical twins in each, one set of each gender.

Harry's rage built exponentially at each door that he threw open, though only someone who had spent as much time observing him as Alex had would be able to read it from his stony expression.

"Alex," The raven haired boy spoke quietly, his voice tightly controlled. "Message Sergei. I want Michaels alive for the moment. Tell him to feel free to have some fun, but I want him able to talk when I get around to seeing him." He pulled out his own mobile and sent a quick message to Bradshaw demanding Marcel's presence with enough medical supplies for eight children. He knew Bradshaw would be able to read between the lines and start making other appropriate arrangements at the same time.

"What's the plan, Sir?" Alex asked quietly.

"After Marcel checks them out, we'll move them to The Nest. Marcel will stay with them for now, and perform any treatment they need. When they've healed, they can either work for me or we'll memory charm them and find them new homes if they don't have one they want to go back to."

Leaving his subordinate to create the necessary portkey and arrange any necessities not currently in the house they'd dubbed The Nest; Harry quietly called all of the children out of their rooms and gathered them together.

"Pay attention," he called. "There has been a change of ownership upstairs. As such, there will be some changes. In a few moments, a special kind of doctor will be coming to examine you. Cooperate fully; you will not be hurt. You will be given a drink to make you sleep, and while you are asleep, you will be moved to a new place where you will be cared for properly and receive any medical treatment you need." Harry tilted his head slightly as he heard Marcel working his way down the stairs. "Form a line over there," he pointed to one of the walls. "You will be called one at a time to be checked over and given further instructions."

He spun on his heel, nodding to the stricken Healer, and stalked back to where Alex waited patiently for him.

"Sir, I've taken the liberty to contact Bradshaw to bring in someone to help Marcel with the kids. No matter how well behaved, eight traumatised little ones who need healing and constant care will be too much for him."

Harry nodded in acceptance. "Marcel has final approval over any assistants and any in house requirements. You are responsible for security and any other logistics. Give it a week, and then schedule me in for a visit every couple of days. I don't care what else you have to rearrange in my normal commitments; the visits needn't be very long."

Alex nodded, scribbling in his notebook. "I've organised for food to be brought in, as well as clothes, toiletries, books, and a few toys. It should all be there by the time Marcel has finished and is ready to transport them. I've also stocked the office with everything Marcel will need to keep complete files on each child and run the house." He hesitated, but continued at Harry's questioning look. "I'm aware that these children are almost certainly muggles, and we are breaking the Statute of Secrecy as it is by offering them magical treatment, but this task is going to be too much for Marcel even with one or two assistants. Might I recommend purchasing a couple of house elves? They can keep themselves out of sight with no problem, and a mild muggle repelling charm can be used to keep the kids out of the kitchen. If any kids manage to wander through, we can test them for magic and
respond accordingly."

Harry considered this, turning the idea over in his mind. It certainly made sense in the short term, and other arrangements could be made if it didn't work out.

"Do it. As many as you think we need, and bond the elves to me."

Alex nodded, heading upstairs to make the necessary arrangements.

Harry cast one look back at the ragged waifs huddling against the wall, and his features hardened as he heard Dave's voice ringing through his mind, reaffirming Harry's purpose in this whole endeavour.

*Protect them.*
Chapter 10

Harry was not pleased.

The rescue of the children had left Harry irritable and unable to sleep properly; his rest plagued with nightmares of Dave telling him that Vahan was failing his task, his normally warm eyes turned cold and unforgiving as he demanded to know how many children had been left without protection because he hadn't moved fast enough. Images of children suffering in various situations played themselves out behind his flickering eyelids, and Harry had woken with a gut wrenching sob and a completely unfamiliar feeling of desolation.

He scrubbed his face in misery, erasing the tracks from his tears. He felt sick. Never once since Dave died had he felt so distant - the memories he carried of his mentor had always given him a feeling of comfort and connection, both of which pulled painfully in their absence.

Harry pulled a pillow close, hugging it to his body and tried to still his shudders. Dave had been an exceedingly pragmatic man, and Harry had never doubted that he would have approved of Harry building up his own network before beginning the task Dave had assigned. It was only practical, after all, but the sick feeling in his stomach wouldn't go away. He lay, wallowing in his misery and trying to convince himself that Dave would have understood.

He finally dragged himself out of bed, rubbing at his scratchy eyes and trying to ignore the hideous throbbing in his head. Each time his heart beat, his vision whited out, and he had to resist the urge to cradle his tender skull and go back to bed. He desperately wanted to rest, but he had too much to do; his sense of duty a driving whip flagellating his mind until the pain of inaction overwhelmed all other sensations.

Pulling his clothes on with slow formality, Harry turned his mind to his plans for the day. Or he would have, if he could articulate any thought beyond a wordless desire for food and caffeine. He shuffled out to the kitchen, only to be greeted with a grim looking Alex and no breakfast.

"We've got a problem," Alex announced, not even waiting for his boss to make it to a seat. "Do you remember Matthew Peterson?"

Harry grunted tiredly, resting his eyes as he listened and waited for Alex to make him breakfast; or a hot drink. Something to wake him up and fill his stomach.

"He heard the cops are after Vahan, so he decided to not keep up his end of the deal. Best guess is that he figured you'd have too much else to worry about to chase down one little supplier. Bottom line, we have an order to fill, and no ephedrine available to make it. I've already tapped out my sources, and conjuring or transfiguring some will change the drugs in unpredictable ways. The bad kind of unpredictable."

Harry groaned. "One of you go and see him, and remind him of the material we have on him. Don't let him know about what we've gathered since. I don't care which of you goes, as long as the other makes me something to eat."

Alex nodded. "That's not all, Sir. Marcel sent an initial report on the Nestlings. As near as we can tell, the oldest is ten, the youngest is four. There are four boys and four girls, and all of them are going to need extensive treatment. It seems the longest any of them were there was six months though, which is a blessing."
Harry opened one eye, curious. "Nestlings?"

Alex smiled faintly. "Marcel dubbed them that, since they're living at The Nest. It stuck."

Harry nodded, amused. He wouldn't be surprised at all if Marcel decided to stay at The Nest indefinitely or even the other house – named The Haunt, since it's only occupants would essentially be ghosts once they turned eleven. Perhaps having him oversee both houses would be a good option. Harry made a mental note to think about that in more detail later; when thinking didn't make him want to drive an ice-pick into his temples for some relief.

"Alright, but you look like you're about to give me some more bad news."

"Marcel has decided to keep them all sedated until the worst of the healing is over. But he hates the people Bradshaw found to work with him."

Rubbing his eyes, Harry contemplated whether it was worth ordering the flamboyant healer to just suck it up. "You mentioned house elves. Did you find any?"

Alex winced. "I went to the ministry, but for the first time in eighteen years they had no stock." He hesitated for a moment. "The file that Gutshank sent you, did it include a list of properties? Most of the old pureblood families had house elves. If any of your properties have some, you could reassign them temporarily, perhaps? They would already be bound to you."

Harry shrugged. "Probably, but I won't have access until after I've spoken with Gutshank. I have to sign a few things first, donate some blood, that sort of thing. The appointment is later today. But first, I really want breakfast."

Alex nodded, moving to the kitchen. With a few quick waves of his wand, food and cooking implements started whizzing around, and the heavenly smells of sautéed mushrooms, scrambled egg, gourmet sausages, haloumi, and wilted baby spinach perfumed the air. Oranges squeezed themselves, and tea steeped in Harry's favourite teapot.

Harry's stomach rumbled appreciatively, even as his head protested the noise and movement. As the filled plate settled in front of him, he sighed happily and picked up his fork.

Spearing a mushroom, he eagerly raised it to his lips, when a flurry of ill-tempered feathers crash onto the table, sending the fork skidding across the tiles and under the sideboard. The plate crashed to the floor, its offerings spreading their tasty joy in all directions like a culinary Rorschach's Blot.

Scowling furiously, Harry grabbed at the owl, wrestling it into submission while skilfully avoiding its angry attempts to take a chunk out of his finger. He tugged the letter from its leg, and released the foul tempered avian with relief.

Slitting the seal, his tired eyes flicked over the cramped and jagged writing. The missive wasn't long, but its contents were enough to send an extra heavy throb through his skull.

"Oh, for fucks sake!" He rubbed his temples, trying very hard to keep his temper. "Gutshank says that Dumbledore is trying to get access to my accounts again, and it's too risky to meet today like we'd planned. So I can't get access to the vaults until everything has died down and he can set up another meeting."

Alex frowned in concern, and flicked his wand to clean up the mess of food on the floor. "If he doesn't know he's lost your guardianship by now, he will soon. I expect he'll be paying the Dursleys' a visit in the near future, and we still have no idea who has been helping hide the ward collapse. Whoever your friend is, they haven't tried to contact you, so I'm concerned about what they may
want in return when the time comes, and what other information they may have on you."

Sergei strode into the room, his face even stonier than usual. "Bradshaw is in hospital. He was in a car accident last night; his wife and kid were in the car too. Wife is dead, kid is alive and unharmed, but Bradshaw is in a coma. They aren't sure when or if he'll wake up. I've already investigated, there was no foul play. It was just an accident."

Harry looked at his Russian mentor with resignation. "Given the way today is going already, I'm going to assume that isn't everything."

"Neither he nor his wife had any other family. In case of death or permanent incapacitation, he's named a Mr John Smith as guardian. Congratulations Boss, you're a daddy. Oh, and as far as I can tell, the kid is magical. Do you know who Bradshaw assigned to play Mr Smith?"

Grimacing, Harry shook his head. "If he had someone picked, he never mentioned."

The men watched as Harry stood and paced angrily for a few moments, still massaging his temple.

"Do either of you know anybody that we could trust to do it?" The boy glanced up, already knowing the likely answer, given the theme of the day.

Both men shook their heads.

"Whoever it is needs to be magical, don't they, even though Bradshaw was a squib?" Harry ran his fingers through his messy locks, tugging in frustration.

Alex nodded. "Yes. But it will need to be your magic on the forms, since yours is registered to that identity."

Harry ground his teeth in annoyance. "What about a glamour? Or an aging potion?"

Alex shook his head. "The contract will dissolve any glamours to prevent fraud, and you can't take an aging potion with the other ones Marcel has you on, unless you want to deal with some very unsightly and pungent side effects." He paused thoughtfully. "I'd suggest Captain Andrews, but he's a muggle."

Harry straightened with a sigh, rolling his shoulders to try to ease the tension crawling up his neck. "And I'd suggest Mr South since he owes me a favour or two, but he's a muggle too."

Sergei's eyes sharpened. "Mr South? The weapons dealer?"

Harry nodded warily.

"He's a squib, sort of. He has a little magic, but not enough to attend a school. It's why he never seems to age – he has the wizards life span." Sergei scratched his chin pensively. "Close cousin of the Malfoys I think, not that either of them would ever admit it. As far as I know, he hasn't had anything to do with the wizarding world since he was disowned at eleven."

Harry stared, then dug his phone out of his pocket with all his uncaffinated enthusiasm. Squinting against the light from the screen and tapping out a quick message, he waited anxiously for a response.

Mere moments later his phone chirped, and he quickly skimmed the message while downing the headache draft Sergei shoved under his nose. The pinched tightness left his face and shoulders as the potion kicked in, and he threw a grateful smile at his stoic pseudo-guardian.
"He'll see me as soon as I can arrive. Does he know either of you?" Seeing both men shake their heads, Harry quickly sent a response to advise that there would be two guests, and dropped into his chair. "After we collect the kid, we'll go stay at The Nest with Marcel and help him out however he needs it - until we can find assistants and house elves. We'll see if there is anything Marcel can do for Bradshaw, and if necessary we'll bring him to The Nest too. Nothing much we can do about Gutshank, vault access, or Dumbledore right now." He rubbed his eyes tiredly. "I'll still need one of you to deal with Peterson."

Alex nodded. "I'll do it. And the product order?"

Harry narrowed his eyes in thought. "Tommy's Boys are particularly good at robbery. Use them to get the ephedrine, and frame Peterson if you can manage it. In fact, don't worry about reminding him of the blackmail; just use it. If he's tried to screw me over once, he'll do it again. I want him alive, but out of the way; may as well let the cops make themselves useful for a change. I'll make an example of him later."

He spun on his heel and stalked into his bedroom to get dressed. It was going to be a very long day, he just knew it.

Mr South looked the same as always, his black suit paired with a rosewood red silk shirt and a gunmetal silver tie that emphasised the dark silver hair swept neatly back on his head, and his guarded storm grey eyes.

Now that Harry had met the Malfoys, he could see the resemblance. Mr South was clearly older than Lucius, and if he had been disowned at eleven it was entirely possible that the two had never met, but the resemblance was uncanny. Harry briefly entertained the idea of introducing them – just for the entertainment of seeing them try to out-stoic and eyebrow raise each other.

"Mr South," Harry nodded politely, shaking the man's offered hand. "Thank you for seeing me on such short notice."

The sharp eyed arms dealer noted his friend's tense posture and faintly irritable air, and smirked faintly as the boy's stomach rumbled.

"I'm assuming you've been too busy for breakfast?" His lips turned up the tiniest margin, but his eyes flashed with subdued mirth.

Harry flushed. "It's been a rather trying morning," he confessed.

Mr South gestured for his guards to stay behind, and guided Harry and his entourage into a private room, dominated by a modern looking powdered steel and glass table covered in a delicious looking breakfast spread.

"I haven't eaten yet either. You and your men are welcome to join me." He sat himself calmly at the head of the table, serving himself a small bowl of fruit and a cup of tea.

Harry gratefully sat next to him, leaving his men to sort out their own positions. "Thank you. This is Alexander Charleston," he nodded in Alex's direction, "and Sergei Petrikov. They know." For all that Harry trusted Mr South, he knew better than to carelessly speak of his secret. He was just fortunate that both Alex and Sergei didn't care if their real names got about – they each had more alternate identities than Harry himself. But just because Mr South could be trusted, didn't mean that anyone monitoring the security could, and it wasn't impossible that a rival or cop had managed to sneak a bug in somewhere. With Vahan being pursued so avidly by the police, it wasn't unrealistic to
expect they’d tap the offices of the most prolific arms dealer in London in the hopes of picking up a lead. And if they got enough dirt on the older gentleman in the process, well, so much the better.

Mr South nodded, taking a sip of his Earl Grey and watching the small boy serve himself some eggs and bacon. "What can I do for you today?"

Harry raised a forkful of eggs, then swore and jumped as one of Mr South's personal guards burst in, brandishing a handgun.

"Sir! Exit Plan Alpha!" The man spun and fired a few shots down the hall, ducking back against the wall and reloading.

Harry glanced mournfully back at his still steaming breakfast.

Mr South stood calmly, and gestured for his guests to follow him over to the far wall, prising open a panel to tap in a code which opened a concealed doorway. He ushered them down the fluorescent lit hidden passageway, closing the door behind them.

They emerged into a large garage filled with assorted vehicles, and slid into a discrete black limousine that was idling near the door they’d exited. The driver immediately took off, gently accelerating out the door and onto a side street, smoothly whisking them away from the firefight occurring in the building behind them.

Mr South sighed and pulled out his phone, tapping out a few instructions and sending them off. Putting the phone away, he took in the expression on his young friend's face.

"Don't worry; I've been expecting that for a few weeks now, it was just unfortunate that you happened to be there at the time. Now, what did you need? Your message indicated it wasn't within our usual dealings."

Harry straightened, looking the older man in the eye. "I need you to pretend to be my father so I can sign some custody papers. Bradshaw was in a car accident last night, and he left custody of his kid to my adult identity – I have no idea why, since he knows perfectly well who and what I am."

Mr South merely blinked slowly and folded his long fingered hands elegantly in his lap, crossing his legs. "I assume there is more to this for you to be so hesitant to call in this favour."

Harry nodded lightly, jaw firm. "The child is magical, and so am I. My magical signature needs to be on those papers. I'm aware of your past, and I realise the depth of what I'm asking you to do for me."

The arms dealer froze, his eyes narrowed harshly. "Is that so?"

Harry nodded again, holding the older man's piercing gaze.

Mr South pursed his lips and cocked his head thoughtfully, his eyes never shifting from the tiny boy opposite him. "And you're calling in a favour for this?"

Harry didn't move, not needing to acknowledge the non-question.

A slow smile spread across Mr South's face, wider than had been seen in many decades. "You could do that, or we could trade."

Harry quirked an inquisitive eyebrow, shifting to mimic his opponents posture.

"I'll help you sign the papers. I'll even loan you one of my lawyers if you need one until Bradshaw
either dies or recovers enough to work again."

Harry smiled coldly, not biting. "In exchange for?"

The predatory look never shifted. "I want to know who you really are. Everything. I knew you were magical, I can feel it radiating off you, and it's only gotten stronger over the years. You're not ordinary, even by wizarding standards. You, my friend, are interesting."

Harry half closed his eyes, considering. "And what would you do with this information? I know you; weapons aren't the only thing you deal in. You're also the biggest information broker in the UK."

"It's pure curiosity on my part, I assure you. You're too valuable as a contact and client to throw away by selling the information."

"And when I'm not?"

Mr South paused, smirking faintly. This was one of the reasons he liked the boy so much. He was one of the few people he could spar with. The verbal thrust and parry made the blood sing in his veins, and he had to stifle the almost giddy pleasure than ran shivers up his spine as they haggled.

"I will offer you an Unbreakable Vow to do everything in my power to protect your secrets. I'll even go so far as to let you choose the wording." There was no mistaking the hungry look in those grey eyes.

Harry felt Alex twitch very faintly next to him, and recognised the weight of what had just been offered. He hummed softly as he thought. "I'm open to negotiations," he said finally.

Mr South relaxed, content with the knowledge that the information that he had been burning to know since he'd first met the half-starved waif was within his grasp.

The car slowed to a halt, and the driver emerged to open the door; ushering the men into the safe house.

It was an average place, nothing like you would expect for a man of Mr South's wealth and standing. Generic carpet and dull wallpaper was matched with bland but comfortable furniture; a few pieces of inoffensive art decorated the walls and a few bouquets of pale flowers lightly scented the air.

Harry snorted in quiet amusement at the less subtle than usual surveillance equipment hidden in the pictures and flora. Clearly this safe house hadn't been prepped by Mr South's usual team. He chuckled. Newbies.

They were greeted by a new compliment of guards, and shown to a secure sitting room where they could continue their business.

"Would you care for something to eat? I apologise that our previous attempt was interrupted so rudely." Mr South was pouring on the charm, for all that he still looked like a hound on the hunt.

Harry shot him an amused look and nodded. "Thank you."

Settling themselves into the cushion strewn chairs, Harry pondered silently as his men cleared the room and Mr South ordered his guards to make a breakfast for them all.

When he had Mr South's attention again, Harry nodded decisively. "Let's keep this simple, shall we? I will answer all of your questions truthfully, as long as we are in a location where that information can be kept private. You vow to not reveal any information you may learn about me, my associates,
or dealings without my permission. You come with me and pretend to be Mr John Smith – oh, don't look at me like that, it's a perfectly serviceable name – and distract them while I sign the papers. Sound fair?"

Mr South smiled thinly, and dipped his head into a faint nod. "Perfectly reasonable. It's a pity we couldn't haggle the details more, but I understand that you have other demands on your time right now. Would you like one of your men to act as binder?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "I don't actually expect an Unbreakable Vow. Just your oath should be sufficient. I'll return the favour."

Chuckling, the stately man leaned back, drawing a slender ivy wand from his sleeve. He didn't miss both of Vahan's men tensing slightly. Careful to keep the wand tip pointed in non-threatening directions, he lightly drew on his sparse magic. "I vow on my life and my magic that I will not reveal the secrets entrusted to me by the person known as Vahan to anyone by any means that I am able to prevent, and will accompany him under the pretence of being Mr John Smith to collect his ward today. So mote it be."

Harry shot him an amused glance. "I notice you said nothing about using that information against me if you have the opportunity."

Mr South smirked. "Fancy that."

Shaking his head mirthfully, Harry borrowed one of Sergei's wands to make his own vow. "I vow on my life and my magic to answer the questions posed to me by Mr South regarding my identity and history up until the time this vow was made truthfully, provided such questions are asked in a place where privacy and confidentiality can be ensured. So mote it be." The boy shot the glaring arms dealer a smirk.

"That's cheating. You won't give me any updated information." Mr South found himself in the rare position of having to fight back a pout.

"Fancy that." Harry's cheerful response was almost lost in the confusion of the door falling open and the guards tumbling in, four of them landing in an undignified heap on the floor.

"Um, Sir?" One of the more agile men began hesitantly while his colleagues picked themselves up hastily. "About breakfast…" He cleared his throat and shuffled slightly.

"Yes?"

Harry watched with interest. It was fun seeing Mr South pin his irritated gaze on someone else for a change.

"Well, this safe house hasn't been used in a while, and while we gave it a check over last week like you ordered, Luke here," he nodded in the direction of a very pale and sweating man barely out of his teens, "misled that there was a problem with some of the wiring and equipment in the kitchen. So, we tried to make breakfast, but the house is now on fire and we need to evacuate." He cringed.

Harry sighed.

Harry looked around the hospital hallway, scouting entrances and exits and hiding places and potential threats. He'd been relying on his men too heavily for general security; that had to stop. He couldn't afford to let himself get soft - Dave would be disappointed if all his work went to waste just because Harry got lazy.
He quickly spotted his new ward sitting quietly in the hallway next to an open door, and was faintly impressed at how well behaved the boy was to stay put when he was obviously bored out of his skull.

"Connor?" He stopped in front of the boy, looking down at him from a height that was somewhat less than he might have desired.

Connor Bradshaw looked up, and his eyes widened in recognition.

"I know you!" He whispered, his hazel eyes darting around to check for lurking eavesdroppers. "You're the boy who saved Mum and me from the bad men!" His expression clouded slightly at the mention of his mother, but he firmed his chin and refocused on Harry. "Dad told me that if anything ever happened to him and Mum to find you, and you'd look after me." He cast a quick glance at the open door next to him, his gaze settling for the briefest moment on the machine draped shape of his father. "Are you going to look after me now?"

Harry sighed slightly and sat down next to the boy, trusting Alex and Sergei to keep watch for any overly interested parties.

"Yeah, I am, but it's a little bit complicated, so I need you to listen closely, ok?" He paused until the wide eyed boy nodded, his auburn curls stirring slightly at the motion. "I'll be looking after you, and legally responsible for you, but nobody can know that I'm Mr Smith, alright? As far as anyone else knows, Mr Smith is my adopted father. That will make you like my brother." Harry pointed discretely to the patiently waiting Mr South. "That man is a friend of mine, and he is pretending to be Mr Smith for today. So you need to pretend that you know and trust him, got it?"

Connor nodded, a serious expression on his face. "Would I have met you too?"

Harry shrugged. "Sure, why not?"

The beaming smile he got in return was enough to cause Harry to raise an eyebrow in surprise. He could practically see the boy developing some sort of bizarre hero worship type complex, and in all honesty, he found it vaguely unnerving. Still, good practice for how he would be treated in the wizarding world, he supposed.

A discrete cough from Alex had Harry glancing up to see a harassed middle aged woman who must be the magical social worker approaching at a brisk walk.

The woman eyed them as she approached, and quickly zeroed in on Mr South. Extending a hand as she crossed the final distance, she gave a jarring couple of shakes before dropping his hand. "Mr Smith? Right, I'm Tamara Burns, thanks for coming so fast. I'm sure you understand the delicate nature of this case, so how about we take it somewhere less public?" Without pause, she turned on her heel and strode away, expecting the men and children to follow along like ducklings in her wake.

Mr South shot a faintly disgruntled look at Harry which earned him nothing more than an innocent grin, then took both boys hands and towed them gently after the officious woman.

The room she had selected was only down the hall and around the corner, but it was so tiny that it barely classed as more than a broom closet, and certainly couldn't fit Alex and Sergei in with the rest of the party. Both men did a quick scan of the room, then assumed position at the door, pouting slightly that they wouldn't get to see how their boss pulled off this latest sleight of hand. A pity too, since they'd made a wager about what method he would use.

Settling herself to one side of the low table, Ms Burns dug in her worn brown satchel and withdrew a
handful of parchment, blowing a wisp of hair out of her face.

Adopting a bored tone, she began reciting what was obviously a standard notice. "These parchments are charmed to remove the results of all glamours, potions, and artefacts that alter or conceal appearance or magical signature. When you sign, it will register your magical signature, and keep it on record. Any attempts at fraud will result in your magical signature being tagged and traced, and aurors summoned. Upon signing this document, you will be Connor Bradshaw's Magical Guardian until he reaches the age of his majority, even in the event of him returning to his father's care, due to Mr Bradshaw being non magical himself. These documents are also legal in the muggle world, and will be automatically filed with the appropriate agencies. Do you understand what you have been told here today?" She turned an uninterested gaze onto a blank faced Mr South, ignoring Harry's quiet whispering into Connor's ear.

"I do, yes. Am I required to use a blood quill?"

"No, just a normal quill is fine." She handed over a Self-Inking Quill, her slightly glazed eyes turning to the doorway where she distractedly began to check out Alex's firmly muscled backside. To her credit, she managed to keep it subtle – only a faint flush and a slight wetting of her lips gave her away.

Harry released a soft breath as his gentle wandless Notice-Me-Not charm took effect. He'd tagged Alex about a week ago with a Focus Charm for a prank - though Sergei had called it a training exercise when he'd suggested it - and was rather pleased he'd managed to slip the charm on the paranoid mercenary without it being noticed. He was shaking slightly from the strain – wandless magic really took it out of him – and quickly signed the papers before handing the quill back to Mr South and released the spell with a stifled grunt of relief.

His head instantly bloomed with pain as his migraine returned with a vengeance, and he closed his eyes, resting his head on Mr South's suit covered shoulder. Cracking an eyelid to glance at the clock on the wall, he dimly registered that it was barely ten in the morning, and he still hadn't had breakfast.

"Thank you, Mr Smith. Here is a leaflet on your rights and responsibilities as a Magical Guardian, and a copy of the papers for your own records. Feel free to contact us if you have any questions."
With barely a glance, she was out the door and gone before anyone could say a word.

"Well," Harry murmured. "That was fun. Connor? We'll need to stop by your house and get anything you'll need. We'll be staying with a friend who's looking after some kids who've been hurt, and helping him care for them, so make sure you pack up all your clothes and a few toys and things, ok? We can make another trip if you've forgotten something, but I'm not sure when."

Connor nodded and took Harry's hand, pressing close to his side and leaning on him much as Harry had been leaning on Mr South a few moments before.

"Have you eaten?"

Harry started slightly as the gentle tone in Mr South's voice. He couldn't recall having heard it before, though he recognised the look in his eye, so he supposed it may have happened during his own early interactions with the man.

Connor shook his head, burrowing closer to Harry, forcing the older boy to release his hand and wrap an arm around Connor's shoulders so he wasn't knocked off balance.

"Let's get out of here, we'll grab something from the vending machine, and have something proper
when we get to The Nest." Harry paused and cocked his head in thought. "Mr South," he asked slowly. "You wouldn't happen to know where I could get my hands on a couple of house elves, would you?"

Mr South shook his head. "I'm afraid my dealings are exclusively in the muggle world. Were you unable to buy some at the Ministry?"

Harry shook his head in resignation. "No, they were out of stock." He pinched the bridge of his nose, shoving his glasses up his face slightly. He head was pounding worse than it had when he'd woken up, and he was finding it hard to think.

Observing Harry closely, Mr South frowned and cast a quick glance at Alex and Sergei. "Is there anything else I can help you with? You don't look well."

Harry shook off his discomfort as best he could and straightened, barely aware that he hadn't released Connor, or made any move to do so. "I'm fine. Thank you for your help today. If you want to arrange a time to ask your questions, send me a message next week and we can set something up."

Harry stepped out of the room, Alex and Sergei falling into step next to him.

"So, Boss, how did you do it?" Sergei couldn't resist asking.

"I made her check out Alex's arse," Harry replied with an innocent look, completely ignoring the outraged noise Alex released.

Sergei smirked, glancing up at Alex. "Well, who could blame her?" He adopted a breathy simpering tone. "He's so dreamy!" The normally humourless Russian found himself the focus of four pairs of incredulous eyes, and stiffened his back slightly. "What?"

Harry cracked first, his voice a choked whisper. "Did he just make a joke?"

Alex nodded, a faintly awed expression on his face. "I think so. It's hard to tell."

"Isn't Sergei displaying humour one of the signs of the Apocalypse?"

"So says the ancient prophesy. At the very least, several civilizations are almost certainly about to crumble."

Sergei scowled and swept ahead of them, scouting the way and frightening several nurses with his ferocious expression.

The group made their way down the busy corridors, dodging nurses and other patients and their visitors, stopping long enough for Connor to see his father and Alex to duplicate and link the chart at the end of the bed.

They paused and grabbed two sandwiches from the vending machine, deciding to eat and walk at the same time. Connor eagerly scarfed his down, shoving it into his mouth as fast as he could manage, chattering all the while. They might have gotten out of the building without incident, if the enthusiastic child hadn't tripped over his loose shoelace, and started choking on the last bite.

Harry dodged out of the way as Sergei stepped forward and whacked Connor on the back, only to be clipped by a passing orderly with a gurney.

His eyes fixed desperately on his untouched sandwich, watching it sail out of his hand and across the hall, splattering across the wall with a disturbing wet sound and sliding to the floor in a slick lump.
He stared, frozen in disbelief.

Eyes prickling, he swallowed harshly and lowered his head. He was determined not to be such a baby about missing just one meal, though right now it felt like the hardest thing he'd ever had to do.

Harry sat in the car, feeling sullen and trying to ignore the amused looks Sergei and Alex kept tossing him. Mr South had departed in his own limousine once they exited the building, but even he had tossed the petulant crime boss a humoured glance or two.

Harry noticed the area they were passing through, and sat up quickly.

"Take a left here," he instructed Sergei.

He felt giddy, his favourite sandwich bar was along this street. If anywhere was safe from whatever breakfast curse had been cast on him today, it would be Maria's. The middle aged woman who owned and ran it had always been kind to him, slipping him the odd extra item when he was unusually hungry over the past few years, and frequently doing the same for many of the street kids. Her husband was a nasty piece of work though, and Harry suspected that he would need to step in eventually. He'd seen too many unexplained bruises on the kindly woman to let that pass. She may not be one of his, but one good turn deserved a protective bullet, or however the saying went.

His relief turned to dread as he saw the police line blocking access to Maria's shop. Groaning, he rubbed his eyes. "Pull over, find out what's happening."

He waited in the car, one arm draped around Connor as the younger boy cuddled up to his side. He flipped idly through some paperwork that the ever efficient Alex had shoved at him, and ignored his stomach chewing holes through itself.

The front door opened, and Sergei slid back into the driver's seat, turning to look at his diminutive employer. "Hostage situation, Boss. Owner's husband flipped, claims that he'll see her dead before he lets her divorce him. It's looking bad."

Harry's eyes narrowed dangerously. "Can you deal with it without the cops getting in the way? I like Maria; I like it even more when she is intact and unharmed."

Sergei bared his teeth wolfishly. "I can do that. I assume you'd rather I didn't make a mess this time?"

Harry shook his head. "Quick, clean, and invisible. I want a sandwich, damn it." He ignored the strange look he received from his men, and turned back to his paperwork.

A few minutes later, Sergei was sliding back into his seat, somehow managing to look even more stoic than usual. He placed his hands on the steering wheel, and waited.

Pursing his lips in irritation, Harry closed his eyes. "What happened?"

Sergei shrugged. "I went in and dealt with him. But he'd trashed the place, and she was too shocky to make you breakfast, even if the kitchen was intact. Sorry, Boss. On the upside, she'll be fine."

Harry leaned back in his seat with his arms folded, and pouted.

Connor shifted fretfully against Harry's side as they approached the Bradshaw's townhouse.

Harry had been pleased that the boy didn't chatter incessantly after the initial burst in the hospital, and
so tolerated the wriggling for longer than he might have otherwise. Eventually, however, it got the better of him.

"What is it?" He asked, barely keeping the snap out of his voice.

"When will we be coming back here?"

Harry shrugged. "I'll send someone around every so often to check the place and pick up the mail, but there's no need to be here regularly. Why?"

Connor looked at his hands, clasping them nervously in his lap. "Mum has - had - lots of plants." He took a shuddering breath. "She was really proud of them." He squirmed, not wanting to continue, surreptitiously dashing a hand across his cheeks.

Harry twitched an uninterested eyebrow. "You can bring a couple with you if you want, and I'll arrange for someone to care for the rest until we know what's happening with your Dad." He noted Alex on his phone, texting instructions to the appropriate person. "Bring your clothes and a couple of toys you can't do without, and pick out what plants you want to bring. We'll empty out the fridge and cupboards, since even if your Dad wakes up tomorrow he won't be home for a while. Do you have any pets?"

Connor shook his head. "No, Dad was ok with me getting something, but Mum wouldn't let me. She said that I wasn't old enough for the responsibility." He pouted cutely, a sly look starting to form in his eyes. "Do you think I'm too young for the responsibility?"

Harry chewed his lip slightly, most of his attention on the paper he'd gone back to reading. "No," he murmured absently, oblivious to Alex and Sergei smothering laughter at how thoroughly he'd just set himself up. "Let's go pack up your house and make a list of what my guy needs to do when he stops by."

They climbed out of the car, and made their way up the well maintained slate paved path, stopping on the front step under the porch. Harry looked expectantly at his companions when they all stopped with him.

"Who has the key?"

There was a pause, when everyone looked at everyone else, and Harry pinched the bridge of his nose.

" Seriously? Nobody remembered to grab the key?" Harry gritted his teeth, trying not to lose his temper. "Sergei," he gestured for the Russian to break in. "Alex, get a new lock fitted."

His stomach grumbled, but he ignored it, focusing on Connor's fascinated expression as Sergei casually picked the lock, mere seconds passing before the door popped open. The Russian could have used magic, but he preferred to practice his muggle skills in non-magic areas ("Bad habit to be completely reliant on magic when you do a lot of business with muggles, Boss.").

Harry smiled slightly, deciding that Connor would start lessons with Alex and Sergei. It would keep him occupied, and since he was now Harry's ward, he represented Vahan; it wouldn't hurt to train him up. Bradshaw might not approve, but if he had any objections, he shouldn't have named Mr Smith as guardian.

They crowded into the narrow Entryway, the honey toned wood and warm burgundy highlights making for a warm and inviting space. The air was perfumed with the various flowers that Mrs Bradshaw had cultivated, clipped, and arranged around the house.
"Alex, go with Connor to pack up his room. Sergei, with me; we're handling the kitchen." He strode down the hall, familiar with the house layout from his early investigations of the lawyer.

He barely noticed the homey cottage style kitchen, focusing instead on rummaging through the fridge. "You have got to be kidding me!" He snarled, slamming the door shut and stomping over to the pantry. "I can't even get something to eat here?"

Sergei stifled a chortle at Harry's outrage. "They were on their way to do the grocery shopping when the accident happened." He walked out the connecting door to the garage, and came back with a couple of cardboard boxes, into which he started to pack the few odds and ends from the pantry and fridge.

"That's no excuse," Harry huffed. "No leftovers, no bread, not even a muesli bar! What kind of animals plan their meals that closely?"

Sergei laughed. "Yes, out of all of the people you deal with each day, the Bradshaw's are the animals." He laughed harder when Harry merely made a rude gesture and stalked out of the kitchen, muttering under his breath.

Harry snagged the notepad from next to the phone, and strode around the house, jotting down things for his guy to check when they came to collect the mail and water the plants. He could hear Connor chattering away to Alex as they packed what seemed the entire contents of the boy's room, and felt some of the tension easing from his shoulders, even as his stomach growled angrily. It may be an odd little collection, but piece by piece, he was building his own family. It was a surprisingly comforting feeling.

A few hours later, the four of them met in the front room, and Harry found himself rolling his eyes in amusement at how much Connor "needed" to bring to The Nest.

Nodding for Alex to send everything to the Receiving Room via portkey, Harry turned to Connor.

"The place we are going is currently hosting some other children, but they will be sleeping while we make them better."

"Like my Dad?" Connor interrupted, peering up inquisitively.

Harry nodded. "Yes, though in your Dad's case he can't wake up just yet. The other kids are being kept asleep by us." He paused to make sure that Connor didn't have any other questions about that, then continued. "While we're staying at The Nest, we'll all be helping Marcel with whatever he needs to get the kids better. You will be expected to help out in whatever way you can too, but when you aren't busy with chores or helping Marcel, you will be having lessons with Sergei, Marcel, or I. Did your father explain that you are a wizard?"

Connor nodded, a little hesitant. "He said that I have magic, and that makes me special, but I can't tell anyone about it. He told me that when I go away to magic school that some people might not like me because Mum and Dad can't do magic, but that they love me no matter what anyone else says, and they're proud of me."

Smiling gently, Harry rested a hand on the boy's shoulder, gripping lightly. "Has your Dad started teaching you anything about the wizarding world? It's traditions and culture and the like?" He frowned faintly when Connor shook his head in the negative. "Well, we'll be fixing that. I'm still learning too, but Alex and Sergei are really good teachers, and Mama Andrews will probably want to get in on our lessons once she knows about you. Actually, that reminds me," He turned his head to Alex. "Withdraw me from school; I'm too busy to keep pretending to be average. I know Daniel is
bored too - they won't let him skip grades - so you should talk to Mama Andrews about Daniel joining me for home schooling. Sort out the scheduling and details with her if he's joining us, just make sure that the program is challenging enough and covers both worlds. We'll do my additional training when Daniel isn't there. Mark up a plan for some basic training for Connor too. If he's living with us he needs to know how to not get himself killed." He paused, "Or me arrested; that's important too."

The men smiled, pleased that their boss was finally not wasting time and could finally do his healing as well, and then Sergei split from the group so he could drive the car back to The Nest, leaving Alex and the boys to vanish as the portkey grabbed them.

Harry could have wished for a better welcome to The Nest, but any mental grumbling he might have enjoyed was curtailed harshly when Marcel came tearing into the Receiving Room, grabbing Alex and Harry by the wrists and hauling them out after him. Connor followed along in bewilderment, completely overlooked by the crazy man in what looked like a maroon dressing gown.

"I need your help. The Nestlings arrived safely, and I've put them all on cots in the Drawing Room since we haven't furnished it yet and it's big enough for them all, but one of the youngest ones seems to have an allergy to the sedative. I need you help me purge her and keep her calm while I work out what one she can have. Her reaction is interfering with the scan results." Marcel spoke quickly, his usual flamboyance absent under the businesslike tone he used.

Harry was impressed at the glimpse of the professional side of his Healer.

"Sure. Do you need both of us? Because we need to get Connor settled too, and I'm not sure he should see this right now." Harry twisted his wrist free, but kept pace with the harried Healer, their boots clicking on the tiles as they strode down the airy hall.

Marcel blinked, and half turned to look over his shoulder at the little boy following behind them.

"Connor?"

Harry nodded. "Bradshaw's boy. He'll be staying with us indefinitely. We'll fill you in later."

Looking slightly bewildered, Marcel returned his attention to the more pressing issue. "Both of you would be helpful, but I really only need one. Harry, I think you'd be best, since she'll recognise you as an authority figure from last night."

Alex immediately spun on his heel, catching hold of Connor's shoulder. "I'll go get Connor settled, and get started on what you asked, Sir. Call if you need us." He nodded slightly in Harry's direction, and steered the pouting Connor back the way they'd come.

"Bradshaw's kid, huh?" Marcel asked as he began prepping basins and cool damp cloths.

"They were in an accident last night. Mother's dead, Bradshaw's in a coma. He named Mr Smith as Connor's guardian. He's magical, so even if Bradshaw wakes up I'll retain Magical Guardianship. We grabbed a copy of his charts for you, by the way. I thought it might be worth bringing him here if you think you can do anything to help." Harry quietly followed the Healer's directions, beginning the process of purging the girl of the sedative.

"I'll look it over later, but he's got Squib's Bane. I doubt there's much I can do to help; though I suppose Connor might appreciate having him close. Hold her on her side so she doesn't choke."

Harry knelt on the cot behind her, bracing her back against his leg and supporting her neck with one hand. He grimaced slightly as the purge began, and the lavender sleeping draught began spewing
from her mouth.

The girl began to squirm and whimper as the draught left her system and consciousness slowly returned, and Harry used his free hand to gently stroke the dark brown hair from her sweaty forehead. He rested it back on her hip, stopping her from rolling forward off the edge of the bed. He hummed softly; a tune that Sally had sung to him once after a particularly bad night.

"It's alright," he soothed quietly. "Just let it out. We need to get this out of you so that we can get you better. Just relax, everything will be ok." He continued murmuring gentle reassurances, and gradually the girl relaxed, leaning back against his legs and trusting him to support her head as she heaved.

Harry continued cooing and mopping her brow for the next two hours, murmuring reassuring nonsense to the vulnerable girl, until the purge was finally complete and Marcel could scan her and provide a sedative that wouldn't kill her.

Exhausted, the two men finally emerged from the temporary infirmary.

"You did well. If you ever decide to give up being a crime lord, you'd make an excellent nurse." Marcel chirped, offensively bouncy after such an exhausting task.

Harry glared. "Or, I could tell Sergei you tried to kill me and let him have some fun with you. He's been muttering about needing to practice his flaying techniques."

Marcel quirked an interested eyebrow. "Really? How did I try to kill you?"

Harry stomped ahead of him into the lounge room. "Excessive cheerfulness. It's like being beaten over the head with a rainbow."

The older man laughed loudly. "Oh, Harry, I can't help it if I'm always in a good mood around you!"

The boy scowled. "Don't take your fucking good mood out on me!"

They looked up as Alex stepped into the room from the hallway, brandishing a fistful of papers.

He opened his mouth, only to twitch his head slightly to the side to let the knife his young employer had thrown skim past his ear and stick, quivering, in the doorframe.

Harry's voice was low and dangerous. "Unless the next words out of your mouth are 'there's food on the dining table', I don't want to hear it."

Alex reached back over his shoulder without looking and yanked the knife free, slipping it into his belt. "Mm." He held out pile of folders. "You need to sign these," he handed over another bundle, "read these," and another, "and decide what you want to do about those. Marcel, this is Bradshaw's hospital file. It's self-updating. Also, Sir, Connor wants a puppy, since you said he was responsible enough to have a pet."

Harry blinked at his employee for a moment, then turned on his heel and stalked into the office, trying very hard not to cry in frustration.

It was seven thirty before Harry finished the last of his work and emerged from his paperbound exile. The smell of roast lamb and vegetables tempted him down the hall, and he entered the Dining Room eagerly, practically choking on his saliva. The polished oak table was laden with a mouth-watering spread, and his stomach cramped in vicious appreciation.
Alex, Sergei and Connor were already seated, and Marcel was entering the room after a final check of his patients. Harry took his seat at the head of the table, and glanced around at his dining companions.

"Any mail?" He inquired.

"No, Sir?" Alex looked faintly puzzled.


A negative response met each question, Alex and Sergei looking increasingly amused, while Marcel just looked confused.

Harry sighed in relief, and stretched his hand forward to take some slices of lamb.

"Um, Sir?" Connor whimpered slightly, still unsure what to call Harry.

Harry paused, apprehensive. "Yes?"

"I don't feel very-" Whatever else he might have said was cut off, as his stomach contents made an escape at velocity, thoroughly splattering every item on the table.

Closing his eyes, Harry withdrew his hand and hung his head, taking a few deep breaths and ignoring the smell.

He stood slowly, and offered a hand out towards his miserable looking ward. "Come on, let's get you cleaned up and into bed."
Chapter 11

Harry sipped his coffee with a lustful moan. It was black and bitter, its acrid heat burning down his throat and seeping through his body in a chemical haze. His muscles unknotted, and he felt the ache from yesterday's migraine - untouched by standard headache potions - starting to clear from his mind.

"Sir?" Alex hovered, arms filled with assorted papers and parchments.

Harry held up a hand, stopping any conversation from beginning. "No. I was up most of the night dealing with Connor's food poisoning from that fucking hospital sandwich. Right now, the most important thing is for me to have an entire pot of coffee and a large hot breakfast. Everything else can wait."

Alex opened his mouth to speak.

"Everything." Harry gave him a stern look, then went back to his quiet meditation on the wonders of the black gold contained in his cup, and how its absence really did make the heart grow fonder.

Pursing his lips, Alex put the morning reports on the sideboard, and sat down to have his own breakfast. He kept an eye on the boy at the head of the table, and his lips twitched faintly at the appreciative noises he made after each sip or bite. Each obscene sound was made all the more humorous by the perfect table manners Harry sported, Alex's teaching having taken firm root. If you weren't watching the child's face, you wouldn't even realise the sounds had come from him. It was like being stuck in some twisted food based porn movie, but there was no sex, and more bacon.

Sergei walked in, smirking slightly as Harry wrapped an arm around his plate and hunched over it protectively.

"I'm going to assume we have the morning off?"

Alex scowled slightly. "You might. I have a lot to organise."

Sergei chuckled and toasted his friend with his coffee mug. "Sucks to be you." He took a deep swig, then turned to Harry. "We dealing with Michaels today?"

Harry lit up. "I'd almost forgotten about him in all the fuss yesterday!" He gleefully shovelled the rest of his breakfast into his mouth, and tossed back the last of his coffee. Shoving his chair back, he practically skipped from the room to shower and dress.

Sergei watched him go with a fond smile. "I'm still not sure we should be letting him have coffee."

Alex shrugged, engrossed in the lists he was scribbling in his notebook. "Do you want to tell him he can't have it?"

The Russian paused. "Good point." His eyes gleamed as an idea made itself known.

Glancing up, Alex blanched. "No," he hissed. "Whatever it is, don't. I am not scraping you off the floor if you piss off the boss just because you felt the urge to prank him."

Sergei gave him an innocent look and sipped his coffee.

The warehouse was cold, damp, and dirty, and Harry looked around with approval.
Vahan and his Hounds moved further into the building, their footsteps echoing around the open space as booted feet impacted rough concrete. The morning light struggled weakly through the filthy skylights high above their heads, and the scratch and rustle of rodents scavenging in the random trash that littered the room in piles added to the abandoned feeling of the place.

A muffled groan was the only indicator of other life in the building.

Anthony Michaels hung from his wrists, his bare feet barely sweeping the ground, naked but for a worn pair of cotton boxers that were probably white once upon a time, but were now a yellowy grey colour. His toes were straining to lift his body enough to take the strain from his shoulders, and Harry cocked his head in interest as they gave out, dropping him a few centimetres. The boy listened to the wheezing of compressed lungs with delight.

Alex conjured a simple armchair for Harry, and took his position behind his employer's left shoulder.

Sitting himself down, Harry crossed one leg over the other, and folded his hands calmly in his lap; while Sergei circled the vulnerable man, checking on the various cuts, burns, and bruises he'd left the day before yesterday. He waited until Harry was settled and had nodded to him, then whipped the blindfold off the prisoner.

"Hello, Mr Michaels." Harry spoke smoothly, his voice cold enough to give Lucius Malfoy the chills. "Do you understand why you are here?"

Michaels looked at the tiny boy, and closed his eyes. "You're Vahan," he stated flatly, his throat raw from screams and dehydration.

Harry chuckled mockingly. "Don't be absurd. I merely represent him. Though I can assure you, my employer is much more terrifying than I could ever aspire to be. Of the two of us, I'm the reasonable one." He paused, taking a sip of tea from the cup that Alex had produced from seemingly nowhere, and sighed happily as he rested the cup back on the saucer. "Thank you, Mr Charleston, that's lovely." He returned his attention to the hanging man. "My employer has requested I interrogate you about what we found in your basement. I must say, I had not expected to find eight children amongst the inventory. Care to shed some light on the situation?"

Michaels looked at Harry in confusion. "Kids? What the fuck are you talking about? I don't deal in kids!" He jerked slightly, twitching in agitation.

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Studying the man over the rim of his teacup, Harry raised an eyebrow. "And yet…"

Michaels glared. "I'm telling you, I don't do kids. Not ever. I don't know what you're talking about, but whatever it was, it wasn't me! I pointed the cops your way, yeah, but that's it!"

Harry scoffed mentally. For a lifelong criminal with such a vicious reputation, the man was all too willing to talk. Pity, really, he'd been looking forward to seeing Sergei work. He sighed and nodded slightly to Sergei. Michaels was telling the truth.

The Russian grunted slightly, and unhooked the injured man before dumping him in the rickety wooden chair Alex had conjured out of the man's line of sight. Alex wrapped a rough wool blanket around Michaels' shoulders, and handed him a teacup that matched Harry's, steam curling playfully above the surface of the liquid.

Michaels looked at them in confusion, jerking his gaze away from the scowling Sergei. He turned back to Harry, shaking hands lifting the warm drink to his lips. It wasn't snowing yet, but the temperatures were dropping fast, and he was ridiculously grateful for the small comfort.
Harry watched the man sip, letting the silence stretch. Finally, Michaels shifted, flicking a nervous glance at Harry's implacable green gaze.

He cleared his throat. "Toby March."

Harry raised an eyebrow.

"My second. I reckon that he's the one you're looking for. I didn't know he was doing that; if I had, I would have shot the bastard myself." He scowled, pulling the blanket tighter around himself and taking another sip. "I came to me about seven months ago, talking about branching out, using the basement to get some extra income. He's been with me since the beginning, I trusted him, so I didn't question it, just ok'd it and left him to it. I thought he was growing weed or something, not this." He looked sickened. "Fuck, how many kids did you say there were?"

"Eight. Four boys, four girls. All aged between four and ten. He appears to have been selling time with them, and all will require extensive medical treatment."

Michaels rubbed a hand over his face. "Fuck," he muttered again. He looked back at Harry, staring the boy firmly in the eye. "I'll give you everything I know on March. That fucker deserves what's coming to him."

Harry cocked his head intently. "I assure you, Mr Michaels, you are in no position to bargain. You were dead the moment you spoke to the police about me. Giving me information about Mr March will not save you."

Michaels shook his head. "I know that; I'm not trying to bargain. Though a quick death would be appreciated, if you were feeling generous." He flashed a faint smile. "No, I just want that sick bastard dead for what he did. You don't do that shit to kids; it's not right."

Harry considered for a moment, then nodded. "Very well. Start talking."

The next two hours were filled with detailed information. Most of it, Harry already knew from his own investigations, but he was pleased that Michaels obviously wasn't holding back. The man listed habits, schedules, bolt holes and ex-girlfriends; every detail he could think of, no matter how insignificant it might seem. When he finally wound down, Harry was grudgingly impressed at how much their file had been supplemented.

"Thank you for your help, Mr Michaels." He nodded slightly. "Outside, you will see a car waiting for you. It will take you to your - former - home, where you will pack a bag of clothes. It will then take you to the airport where a ticket will be waiting for you at the desk. You will get on the plane, and you will not come back. If you set foot in the United Kingdom again, or try to re-establish your business connections here, you will be hunted down without mercy. Do you understand?"

Michaels stared at him in shock. "You're letting me go?"

"Would you rather I didn't?"

The stunned man shook his head vigorously. "No! I'm grateful, really, just shocked. I didn't expect to be leaving here alive."

Harry hummed lightly. "This will be your only chance to do so. The only reason I'm letting you go is because of the thoroughness of the information you provided regarding Mr March. Though of course, should it turn out that you've lied to me…"

Michaels shook his head again. "I didn't. Thank you, for this chance. You'll never see or hear from
me again, and I wish you all the best with March. Give him a few for me." He stood, pulling the
blanket closer around himself, and began walking to the door, wincing gingerly as his battered body
protested.

"Oh, Mr Michaels?" Harry called.

Michaels half turned, only to drop screaming to the ground, clutching his bloody knee when the
bullet ripped through it, shattering the joint.

"Just something to remind you why you don't ever want to cross me or my employer," Harry smiled
angelically, watching the man crawling pitifully to the door. He turned to Sergei, scolding him
lightly. "Sergei, you take the blanket back, then shoot him. Now we have to do more laundry!"

The older man rolled his eyes, holstering his weapon. "You're just sore because you didn't get to
practice your deboning technique on his hands, and you're going to be too busy to do it to March."

Harry pouted slightly. "True, but that's only because I'll be flat on my back while Marcel does his
best Frank N Furter impression under the banner of 'healing' me."

The older men both paused, and looked at each other, before bursting out laughing.

"Oh, Merlin, I don't think I'll be able to look at him the same way!" Alex chuckled.

Sergei looked faintly pained, for all that he was chortling as well. "I really did not want to imagine
what he was wearing under his robes, but now it won't go away. That was cruel, Boss, very cruel."

Harry smiled serenely. "You can Obliviate yourself when you get home if you need to." They
moved to their own car. "Alex, make sure the ticket is waiting for Michaels. I'm thinking, Rio de
Janeiro. Organise a packet for him too, passport, new ID, papers, a little cash to get him started, and
the contact details for a doctor to see to his knee. Make sure the doctor knows to leave a limp."

Marcel stood with his hands on his hips, glaring down at an unimpressed Harry.

"How could you let him go? You even gave him money and paid for a doctor for him! After he did
that to those poor children!"

Harry rolled his eyes. "And if I ever need eyes in that part of the world, I can call in a favour and he
won't dare to refuse. It was a risk, I admit, but a calculated one. Besides, it wasn't him; he didn't even
know about it, and was only too happy to squeal on the person he reckons did. We also tagged him
magically, so we can find him easily if he causes problems later. Now, I had an idea. You need help
caring for the Nestlings, and I need healing. I'm not sure when I'll next have the time to do it, so we'll
do it now. How would you feel about Mama Andrews coming to help? She can look after Connor as
well, and start instructing him when she isn't busy helping you."

Marcel frowned. "I could work with her, but what about Alex and Sergei? What will they be
doing?"

"Keeping my business running. I'll be vulnerable for weeks, I can't let it get out that I'm indisposed,
not if I want to avoid endless pissing contests when I reappear."

Marcel nodded slowly. "Alright. If you can get her here, I should be able to work with her. Elise is
doing better, too. The altered sedative seems to have done the job."

Harry smiled faintly, pleased; he'd been worried about the girl. "Good. How soon do you think the
Nestlings can be woken up?"

Flicking thoughtfully through his charts, Marcel sighed. "About the same time you'll be done with your primary healing, though I'd like to keep them under a little longer than that if you'd permit it. They'll be easier to manage if we wake them one at a time, and I think they'll respond better if you're there."

Sighing heavily, Harry closed his eyes and ran his fingers through his unruly hair. "Do what you think is best. I defer to you in matters of healing." He caught the gleeful look budding on the Healer's face. "Within reason." He smirked at Marcel's pout, then turned to go track down Alex.

His ever efficient Butler was currently in the office on the phone to the school, arranging Harry's withdrawal. He waited patiently until Alex hung up, then cleared his throat. "I was thinking we should get Mama Andrews here to help Marcel, and maybe take over meals. I thought she could handle Connor's introduction training too. I know I've piled a lot on you lately, I thought you'd appreciate sharing the load a bit. Thoughts?"

Alex smiled gratefully. "That would be appreciated, Sir. I can handle it all, but a respite would be welcome. How do you want me to approach it?"

Harry closed his eyes and thought for a moment. "Charm your voice, pretend to be Mr Smith. Tell her you rescued some muggle children and are magically healing them from their trauma, but the Healer needs some help, since I'll be doing my healing too. Feel free to mention Connor, she'll go ballistic if she doesn't get to meet him soon anyway. Spin it however you like, but I'm sure she'll agree, even when you insist on an Obscurari Locus Charm." He massaged his neck, more tired than he should be for the early hour. "She'll probably bring Daniel, maybe Greg as well. While she's here, I want you and Sergei to deal with March, and do your best to root out any others that might cause problems. Keep up Vahan's presence, basically. While I'm out of commission, you and Sergei have authority to do whatever you think necessary, but I want a complete report on all actions and why. That said, I don't want Mama Andrews or Daniel to know about my work. Feel free to enlist Greg if you need him and you can get away with it, but try to keep things as separate as possible." He stood, walking to the door. Pausing with one hand on the frame, he turned back. "I know you'll be busy, but if you have the time, see if you can start working out who else might be using kids like this. I want to put together a list. The ones in whore houses and the like, we'll put the information together and let the cops deal with it, but if you stumble across any on the street, I'd like to assess them personally before deciding on a course of action." He chewed his lip thoughtfully. "Actually, add any littlies you find on the street, whether they're working or not."

Alex shifted. "Age cap?"

Harry frowned. "Thirteen. Give priority to the younger ones."

"Alright. Should I stock up on supplies here too, in preparation?"

"Yeah. Do the same at The Haunt, just in case. I don't know if we'll find any magical kids or not, but I want to be prepared if we do. Keep checking with the Ministry about House Elves too."

"You're doing your healing now?"

Harry nodded. "No time like the present, and Marcel has a few hours before his next rounds with the kids."

"I'm assuming you want to get the worst out of the way before Mama Andrews comes?"
Harry nodded again. "It'll be bad enough having her fussing over me while I'm recovering, I don't need her doing it beforehand too." He took a deep breath. "Do what you can for Bradshaw too, yeah?"

"Yes, Sir." Alex smiled sadly at the boy in the doorway. He looked so fragile, shoulders hunched in apprehension of the pain he knew he was about to endure, but trying so hard to project his usual calm confidence. "We'll look after everything. Nobody will ever know you weren't around."

Harry nodded once more, then set his shoulders and exited the room.

The master bedroom had been set aside as Harry's, and he looked around in approval. He'd been too exhausted to pay any attention to the décor the night before, but now he could see what a beautiful job Alex had done. He hoped that Narcissa Malfoy had such exquisite taste in what she was doing at the penthouse.

He started stripping off his clothes, and pulled on some comfortable pyjama pants, leaving his chest bare since Marcel said his clothes would be ruined anyway.

His eyes skimmed around the room, taking in the utterly decadent King sized bed, dark wood bookshelves that matched the bedframe and writing desk, and a small fireplace with a settee and two armchairs in front of it that just begged to be curled up in on a cold winter evening. The walk in wardrobe was behind a discrete door near the entrance to the bathroom. It was a massive room, even for a Master Suite, but Harry supposed it was intended as a kind of 'parent's retreat'. The obscenely large ensuite with two person spa bath and the shower with duel heads certainly supported that theory.

The room was done in soft shades of sea blues and greens, with various darker shades of grey as accents, and wooden furniture adding a warmth to the otherwise cold space. Thick cream carpet in some ridiculously soft material covered the floor, and Harry couldn't help but scrunch his toes into it as he took off his shoes and socks. Luxurious fabrics on the bed and settee, and their profusion of pillows and cushions, made the room a tactile delight as well as soothing to the eyes.

Harry slipped between the green silk sheets and groaned in pleasure. The firm mattress supported his slight weight comfortably, and the plush pillow top cradled him softly, leaving him feeling like he was resting on a cloud. He ran a hand over the dark grey duvet cover, amused that Alex had found one that actually felt like suede (though it clearly wasn't). He had no idea what the material actually was, but he didn't doubt that it was hellishly expensive. He ran his hand over it again, enjoying the texture. Whatever it was, he liked it, and in some bizarre way patting it actually soothed him. He decided not to dwell on it, and simply enjoyed the sensation.

Marcel entered the room with a tray of potions, Connor and Sergei trotting after him.

"Do you want me to explain the process, Harry?" Marcel asked as he sat the tray on the bedside.

"Please," Harry murmured. "Just give me a minute first."

The Healer nodded, and continued fussing about in preparation.

"Connor, I'm going to be sick for a little while. While I'm being healed, I want you to do what Sergei and Alex tell you to do. Alex is trying to get Mama Andrews to come and help, and if she comes, I want you to be on your best behaviour for her too, but it's very important to me that she doesn't know any details about how I know your dad, or the sort of work my men do, alright? The same goes for Daniel, if he comes with her. If they ask any questions, shrug, say you don't know, and direct them..."
to Alex and Sergei. Do you understand?"

Unseen by the child, Sergei was flicking his wand, placing the magical gag on him.

Connor nodded, his eyes wide. He felt a burst of pride that Mr Harry was trusting him to keep his secrets. "Yes, Sir. I won't tell anyone anything."

Harry nodded with a smile. "Good. Now, I won't see you until I'm a bit better, but Alex and Sergei will still be giving me reports. I expect to hear that you are working hard on all your lessons, not just the fun ones." He levelled a stern look at his ward, but it gentled at the frantic nodding. "Good. You're a smart boy, I'm sure you'll do well. Now, one last thing; nobody else knows I'm your guardian, so it would be a bit strange if they heard you calling me Sir. While you're right to do it in private or if you start working for me when you're older, for now I want you to call me Harry."

Connor beamed. "I want to work for you when I'm older, you're the coolest! I'll study really hard and make you proud of me, you'll see!"

Harry chuckled. "I believe you. Now, go on. I have to talk to Sergei."

Connor nodded and turned to leave, before spinning back at the last moment and hugging a startled Harry tightly. "Get well soon," he whispered, then dashed out the door.

Sergei grinned at Harry's slightly ruffled look. "Cute kid you've got there."

Harry gave him a dirty look. "Quite. Now, Alex has instructions for what I want done, but there's something else I need you to handle. Send a message to Mr South, let him know I'm away for the next couple of months, but that once I'm back I'll meet with him to fulfil my end of the vow. Make it sound like something unexpected came up if you can, I'd rather not have him pissed at me. I also want you to keep an eye on Daniel while he's here. He's curious, and very smart. If any of them will figure out our business, it'll be him, and I don't want that. He's too soft hearted to be involved in our line of work, and he'd flip on me eventually. If you can get a line on what the Andrews angle is too, I'd be pleased. I haven't been able to work out what they want. My current theory is the Boy-Who-Lived hook."

Sergei nodded. "Anything else?"

"I want one of you to check in with me regularly. You'll both be too busy for body guard duties, but I doubt that will be an issue since I won't be going anywhere. I also want to do a bit of a recruitment drive when I'm up and about again, keep an eye out for candidates while you're going about your business."

Sergei grunted. "Magical or muggle?"

"Both. I need to start preparing for when I'll be going to Hogwarts, it's only a year and a half away. When I go, you and Alex will manage the bulk of my business in both worlds. Consider this a test run."

Sergei smirked. "I'm flattered. Keep it up, and I might think you actually like me!"

Harry rolled his eyes. "Don't get too excited. Marcel?"

The Healer turned to Harry, handing him a goblet filled with a revolting smelling potion that was a disturbing shade of chartreuse with orange flecks. "Basically, we're forcing your body to grow to what it would have been if you'd lived in perfect conditions your entire life. The potions will stimulate your DNA, returning it to its ideal state, and your body will reform to match. I won't lie, it's
going to hurt like hell, and I can't sedate you for it. It also won't help any hereditary conditions, but we can assess you afterwards and see what further healing you need, if any."

Harry frowned. "Is this standard healing?"

Marcel shook his head. "No. Not only would it not work once you hit puberty, but with the amount of pain it causes, that potion is technically illegal."

Harry looked amused. "Technically?"

"Alright, very illegal. But I assumed you'd rather have a bout of bad pain now followed by a functional body, rather than end up with a permanent colostomy collection spell in your thirties. Or any of the other issues you would have developed, for that matter. Was I wrong?"

Harry shook his head. "No, you weren't. How long will the pain last?"

"The initial potion will burn through your system in two days. That one will be uncomfortable, but not too painful. It'll 'mark' all of the cells that are damaged. The potion I'll give you after that's done will stimulate the changes. That's the bad one. The pain will be worst in the first twenty four hours, but will gradually decrease over a period of a week. The third potion will stabilise the changes. It'll make you sleep for another week while the changes settle and the earlier potions are neutralised. After that, it's a matter of rest, nutrition and physical therapy to get you used to your new body and build you up to a healthy weight. You'll even be free of any scars that you have. Won't that be nice?"

Marcel smiled, all teeth and manic glee.

Harry looked perturbed. "Vanity is not an attractive quality, you know that, right?"

Marcel sniffed. "Who needs attractive qualities when you're as pretty as I am? Now drink your potion, you ungrateful brat."

"Sure thing, Dr Furter!" Harry muttered under his breath.

Sergei chuckled. "Ni Pukha, Ni Pyera, Boss!"

Harry lifted his goblet in a mocking toast. "K chyortu!" He threw back the potion, gagging and fighting to keep it down. "Oh, that is vile!"

Marcel grinned and took the goblet, returning it to its tray. "Really? Doesn't bother me at all!"

Harry gave him a flat look. "That's because I drank it."

Marcel nodded peaceably. "Like I said; doesn't both me."

Harry grimaced as his muscles began to ache and tremble, his stomach cramping, and a heavy sweat broke out all over his body. He could feel it building, and he knew it was going to get a lot worse before it was done. Laying back with a groan, he prepared himself for what would almost certainly be the worst two and a half weeks of his life so far.
Chapter 12

Alex threw himself into his chair opposite Sergei with a groan. It was nearing two in the morning, and he was exhausted. Harry was halfway through the second potion now, and the shrieks of pain had been enough to turn even his stomach.

He'd been working hard to get everything done for his tiny boss, but when fatigue had led him to miss some mistakes in one of his report, he'd decided that he and Sergei were well and truly due for some downtime. Harry was such a driven little thing that he often forgot that other people needed time off occasionally. Alex didn't mind - usually - but he could feel himself wearing a little thin.

Their shared room had been expanded with wizard space, and turned into a rather nice suite. They each had their own bedroom off the small sitting room, and they'd decorated it to be as comfortable as possible. It had a decent sized fireplace (that Sergei had inexplicably rigged with a roasting spit), and the Russian had installed a huge squishy brown monstrosity that masqueraded as a chair, while Alex had elected for something slightly more refined, choosing instead a wingback armchair with matching ottoman in a pleasant cream. A large wooden coffee table rested next to the chairs, home to any range of books and papers and alcoholic leftovers, peppered liberally with weapons and their maintenance tools. The rest of the room was done in neutral colours that faded from memory as easily as the men who lived there.

"Why do I always have to arrange everything?" Alex moaned. "You're just as efficient, and probably have better connections than me anyway." He huffed, resting his head back and closing his eyes.

Sergei laughed, and handed his exhausted friend a shot glass of Vodka. He'd clearly been indulgeing even before Alex had arrived.

"It's because you've got this whole," he paused, waving a hand in a way that was clearly meant to encompass Alex's everything, "toff butler thing going on." He tossed back his shot and poured another. "It's why he hired you. You're dangerous, but you don't look it. Now me, I'm just the scary guy who lurks in the corner and removes vital organs when the boss needs entertainment."

Alex quirked an eyebrow. "Are you saying that he does it because I look more efficient?"

The mildly inebriated Russian smiled, toasting his companion. "Yep, so suck it up Butler Boy!"

Alex sighed, swallowing his drink and holding his glass out for another. "Yob tvoyu mat."

Sergei laughed, relaxing. "Don't be so sour. At least you aren't bored anymore. Before this job came along, I know you were just as itchy as I was. It'd been months since I'd killed someone, and I know it'd been even longer for you." He tossed back another drink.

"True. Though really, I think we need some more help. Captain Andrews has been useful, but I think we need someone as permanent as we are. Will you keep an ear out for someone you think could work?"

"Of course. But this is our night off, Pizdayob. Captain is watching the Boss, and we have sobering potions if there is an emergency. So shut up and drink your Vodka like a good little suka. Za vas!"

Alex smiled wryly and forced himself to focus on the most critical of tasks; getting as wasted as possible with the man he considered closer than a brother.
It defined his whole world; arcing lights of agony and swirls of impotent misery as his screams tore free from his ravaged throat. Bones stretched and cracked and reformed and broke all over again, ligaments screaming as they were twisted and pulled beyond endurance. His muscles burned as they dissolved and regrew, baby weak and barely adequate. He could feel his skin soughing off, long strips that left bloody lines on the linens, whisked away by his conscientious Healer. It was endless, eternal, a never ending cycle of burning and rebirth like the phoenix of legend. Harry revelled in the pain as much as he despised it, clinging to its familiarity to remind himself that he still lived.

A thick liquid, soothing the burning as it slid down his tortured throat; a cool relief that spread through his aching body and brushed the last wisps of flame away from his quivering nerves. He sighed in relief, and allowed his mind to settle into the blank slumber that beckoned with all the seduction of oblivion.

It was the ache in his throat that pulled Harry from his drugged sleep. It burned, each breath feeling like sandpaper on a sunburned nipple.

His hand twitched, and his lips pulled down into a frown as he tried in vain to open his eyes.

A cool hand grasped his, and he whimpered slightly, trying to communicate his discomfort. A faint rustle and then a straw was pressed between his lips, and - oh blessed relief - water flooded his mouth and down his throat as he sucked furiously.

His companion chuckled. "Easy now, not too much."

The straw was taken away, and Harry whined in protest. He felt a cool palm against his forehead, brushing the ticking hair out of his face. He noticed the callouses, they rubbed unpleasantly on his hyper sensitive skin, but the touch comforted him in a way he'd never experienced before, and he was too tired to fight it either way.

He drifted back to sleep, lulled by the rich baritone softly humming a lullaby.

When next he woke, it was to a hushed argument at the foot of his massive bed.

"No, I don't care. He deserves better than to go through this without his new father here! What kind of man leaves his child to go through something so terrible and doesn't even stay with him? It's not right!"

"Tammy, he's not our child, and it's not our decision. Be grateful that you could be here, and that Mr Smith clearly understands how important Harry is to us. Remember, he said that Harry had asked for us. That means something, especially from a kid like him."

Harry lay still, trying to work out who was talking. Mama Andrews was obvious, but the other didn't sound like Greg, or any of the other adults that Harry had green lighted to be present.

A heavy sigh and a sound of an embrace. "You're right. It's just, look at him! He's so small, and so alone. All the luxury in the world can't compare to a loving parent who's there."

"I know, love. Why don't you sit with him for a while? Marcel said he should wake up properly soon."

"Yeah, I think I will. You're due for a break about now anyway."
More rustling and a body sitting next to the bed.

"Nathan? Thanks. I love you."

"I love you too. I'll bring you up a sandwich when I come back."

Harry sank back into sleep, satisfied now that the mystery had been solved. It was nice to be reminded that he couldn't predict everything; omniscience would be boring.

Harry sighed, squirming slightly as he unwillingly rose back to full consciousness.

His nose was itchy.

With effort, he wiggled a hand free and brought it to his face, rubbing it and managing to poke himself in the eye in the process. He frowned. His fingers didn't feel right.

Cracking open the eye that wasn't watering profusely, Harry glared blearily at his digits. They were definitely longer.

"I guess that's what the physical therapy is going to be for," he rasped softly. New body indeed.

"Yes. Your new dimensions will take some getting used to." Marcel spoke next to him, the clink of vials coming from the bedside table. "Open your mouth. I've got some stuff that'll make you feel really good."

"You sound like a dealer," Harry croaked with a faint smile, opening his mouth as directed.

"Too much time around degenerate crime lords. It's all your fault." He grinned back.

Harry obediently swallowed the six or so potions Marcel poured down his throat. Painkillers and Strengthening potions, Stomach Soothers, and a few he couldn't identify by taste or smell. He made a note to find out what they were later, when he could be bothered to care. He smiled as the ache from being flat on his back for two and a half weeks receded, and he felt a burst of strength forcing its way through his limbs. He dragged himself up into a sitting position, and looked at the blob that was all he could see of his Healer.

"So, how did it go?"

Marcel sat on the chair next to the bed, and made a note on the chart in his hand. "It went well. You are now on the taller side of average for your age group, and the damage from your abuse has been completely reversed. The scars are all gone, except for one. The lightning bolt on your forehead resisted any changes, in fact, it reacted violently and we nearly lost you a couple of times. It also bled nonstop, I have no idea why. I took some thorough scans of it during your treatment, and I'll be going over the results to try to find out why it did what it did. Even a curse scar shouldn't have reacted like that. Of course, nobody has had a scar from that curse before, but even so, I'd like to investigate it."

Harry nodded. "Thank you. So what now?"

"Well, your physiotherapy will start tomorrow morning. I thought you might like to spend this afternoon getting caught up on what you missed. I think Alex and Sergei have some long and boring reports to give you, and I know Connor is dying to give you the picture he made. He's been babbling about it all week. The entire Andrews family is here, and I'm sure they'll be thrilled you're awake now, and they can finally stop pestering me for updates. You've barely been left alone since they got
here, you've always had at least one of them sitting with you. I told them it was an assassination attempt - poison - and that's why you were screaming for a week straight and we had to silence you. Nasty business, treating unknown poisons. Unpredictable results. Could be anything from accelerated growth to hairy eyeballs, especially when combined with the potions you were on already. Any questions?"

"I can't see well. My vision is a little better than it was, but I can still barely see you."

Marcel frowned and waved his wand near Harry's face. "It's hereditary, but correctable if I give you a potion in the next twenty four hours." He winced. "It will basically burn your eyeballs out and regrow them. I'm sorry."

Harry shrugged, resigned. "How long will that take?"

"An hour? Two at most. Luckily I can give you a mild painkiller that will take the edge off the experience, but it still won't be pleasant."

"Sounds like fun. Let's do it!" Harry gave a fake beaming grin.

Marcel grinned back faintly. "You worry me a little, you know that, don't you?"

"Meh. You're my Healer. If I wasn't making you worry, I wouldn't be doing my job right."

"I'm not entirely certain I like your logic."

"And I'm not entirely certain I care. Can I have some water now?" Harry blinked up at him innocently.

"Just for that, no. Die of thirst while I go tell your scary bodyguards that you're awake and demanding their paperwork." The Healer stomped out of the room in a mock huff, grinning to himself as Harry's giggles followed him into the hallway.

"Harry!" Connor leapt onto the bed, wrapping his arms around his guardian's neck and hugging tightly. "I made you a picture! Look!" He thrust a slightly crumpled piece of paper into Harry's face, bouncing with excitement.

Harry chuckled and took the picture, gently nudging the boy off his bladder. He squinted slightly, his glasses now the incorrect prescription. There were blobs that looked vaguely like trees, and another blob the same height with a black squiggle on the top and round bits on the massive circle under the squiggles. And a smaller shape that had brown and red… corkscrews, maybe?

"It's lovely, Connor! Thank you. I'm afraid my eyes aren't working very well right now, Marcel still has to fix them, so why don't you tell me about the picture? I can see a bit, but I'm sure I'm missing loads of details."

Connor beamed, and settled himself next to Harry, tucking himself under his idols arm. He pointed. "This is you, and this is me, and we're at the park. Look, here is the sun, and the swings, and the slippery slide, and a tree! And you're holding my hand! I drew it for you, because I thought that when you're better, we could go to the park, and this is to remind you, so you don't forget what outside looks like." He grinned, his eyes sparkling with enthusiasm. "Mum says - said - that fresh air was good for you when you've been sick, so I thought if we went to the park, you'd get better sooner. Can we go to the park, Harry? Just for a bit?"

Harry chuckled, genuinely entertained. "Sure, when I'm a bit better. I'm still very weak, but Marcel
Connor sat up, bouncing on the bed again as his enthusiasm reasserted itself. "Yes! Mama Andrews has been teaching me and Daniel, though Daniel's lessons are way harder. She tells lots of stories about the magical world, and the really important people who used to be alive and what they used to do. There were battles and heroes and goblins and unicorns and dragons - did you know dragons are real? - and she told me about you too! Did you know you're in a book?"

He finally paused to take a breath, and Harry felt a stab of gratefulness when Alex stepped in through the door, just in time to head off another trip down Incoherency Avenue.

"Connor, Mama Andrews has a snack for you before your afternoon lessons. You don't want to be late, or Daniel and Greg will eat it all again."

The five year old yelped and flung himself off the bed, taking off through the door at a dead sprint. Harry watched him go with a chuckle.

"Sir, how are you feeling?" Alex sat in the chair, placing the folder full of reports on the bed next to Harry's leg.

"High as a kite, thanks to Marcel. He doped me up before he left. Not entirely sure what he gave me, but whatever it is, it's good stuff. Now, what's been going on? The brief version, I'll read the reports after Marcel melts my eyeballs."

Alex gave him a strange look, but didn't comment. "The orders were made and distributed with no problem since Tommy's Boys came through for us, and you made a rather tidy profit as usual. It's been laundered and banked. March was dealt with, and paid thoroughly for what he did. His body was found a week later, and the message has gone out that Vahan has a particular interest in anyone who pimps kids. Amusingly, several people on our watch list turned themselves into the cops and are providing information on anything and everything in exchange for protection from you, just in case."

Harry snorted in amusement, but gestured for Alex to continue.

"You and Daniel are both withdrawn from Surrey Primary and registered as being home schooled, and Mama Andrews and I will both be teaching you. Your extra lessons will be scheduled around what we've set as designated school hours. Mr South has been put off and seemed understanding, though I'd buy him something very nice when you do see him, just to be on the safe side. What else..." He paused, pursing his lips slightly. "Peterson has been arrested, his trial is next month and he's been refused bail. Connor has been doing very well in his lessons; I'm honestly impressed with how hard he has been working. I doubt he'll ever be the same level as you, for obvious reasons, but with training, he'll probably rival Daniel one day. Anything else you wanted to know right now?"

Nodding, Harry reached for the cup of water on his bedside table, smiling gratefully when Alex picked it up for him and held the straw to his mouth. He sucked eagerly, enjoying the cool liquid sliding down his parched throat. Pulling back, he licked his lips. "The Nestlings? The Andrews? Anything major you had to deal with? House Elves?"

"Marcel will give you a full report on the Nestlings, but as far as I'm aware they're doing well. I've taken the liberty of having Sergei and Captain Andrews tracking down as many of their families as we could find, and doing a complete profile of all of them. I think most of them will be able to return to their families, but there are two that I'd be reluctant to send back, and one has nowhere to go. Marcel has their family profiles with each folio, so you should discuss it with him."

gave me a potion so I'd be well enough to talk to you for a little bit. Have you been working hard on your lessons?"
"The Andrews all turned up. I know you weren't planning on Captain Andrews joining our merry band of miscreants, but he arrived with them, and proceeded to make himself useful. I know you were worried about Daniel figuring out what we do, but it was actually the good Captain who did. It only took him four days, as well. Much to my surprise, he confessed to having decided on leaving the military, and enquired if we had any work available. He says he's happy to do whatever is needed, but for the sake of not lying to Tammy, he thought he could perhaps do something with the kids we take in. I have to admit, I think he'd be an excellent addition to your crew. He could handle the less than savoury things if we need him, but he has a way with children that I think we would be foolish to not utilize.

"There were no major upsets, and the most dramatic thing Sergei and I had to deal with was a hangover. Honestly, never drink with that man; I swear he can't tell the difference between Vodka and water." He shook his head in fond exasperation.

"As to House Elves, you'll be pleased to hear that I managed to purchase five; they'll be ready for collection tomorrow morning. I'll bring them straight here and you can bond them, and we can assign them afterwards. I thought two here, two at The Haunt, and one as a personal servant for you?" He looked at his diminutive employer questioningly.

"Sounds good. The reports have all the details?"

Alex nodded and stood. "Yes. I'll keep the Andrews away until tomorrow, since I'm sure you want to sleep, and I'm not even going to ask about the eyeball melting thing. I'm not sure I want to know."

Harry grinned, stifling a yawn. "Fixing my eyesight. There'll be literal eyeball melting."

Alex cringed. "It's a good idea. Do you intend to keep your glasses as a blind, if you'll pardon the pun?"

The nine year old smirked. "Of course."

Laughing, Alex made his way over to the door. "Excellent. I win that bet! Sergei will be pissed!"

Harry rested his head back with a sigh, waiting for his healer to return. He was exhausted, and wanted nothing more than to go back to sleep. He cracked an eyelid open, peering at the folder on the bed next to him. He contemplated trying to read his reports, but the blurriness of his vision quickly dissuaded him.

With a grunt of annoyance, he put the folder on the bedside table, and threw his blankets back. Despite the Strengthening Potion Marcel had given him he still felt as weak as a kitten, but he refused to use a bedpan, or whatever the magical equivalent might be. He tried very hard not to think about what kinds of messes he might have made during his treatment.

Trembling, he swung his legs over the edge of the bed, and sat, panting slightly.

It was an odd sensation, he decided, knowing how to move but lacking the coordination or strength to do much. His body felt wrong, all out of proportion, and he felt off balance. He didn't like it.

Tottering, he forced his protesting body across the room, aiming for the bathroom. His lip curled in distaste when he pictured what he must look like.

_Zombie_, his brain not so helpfully supplied. _You look like a zombie toddler._

He could feel his cheeks burning in shame and frustration, but pushed it aside, forcing his body to cooperate through sheer bloody mindedness.
His balance tilted too far forward, and he cursed as he felt himself falling. He managed to get his arms up in time to not smash his face on the carpet, but the impact was still jarring, and he swallowed blood from his bitten tongue.

Grunting, he pushed himself onto all fours, then used the convenient back of the settee to pull himself back upright. He panted with exertion, and little black spots danced in front of his eyes, but he gritted his teeth and calmed his breathing, waiting for the dizziness to pass.

The remaining fifteen feet to the bathroom door could have been a thousand miles as far as Harry was concerned. He left his hand on the back of the couch as he swayed on his feet, using it to anchor himself as he tried to get himself back together. His eyes drifted closed, and he took a deep breath, trying to calm his frustration.

Sometimes, when you're hurt or scared, giving up seems like the best option, but it isn't, kid. Not ever.

Harry started as Dave's voice rang through his mind.

If you want something, you've gotta be willing to move heaven and earth and everything in between to get it, no matter how impossible it seems at times. Nobody is going to hand things to you, and even if they did, it would be worthless. The only worthwhile things are the ones you have to fight for; the harder, the better. I know you're hurt, I know you're tired, and cold, and so damn scared you can barely think, but that's ok. Focus on the goal. That's the only thing that matters. Just keep going.

His mind drifted as he remembered that conversation. Mike had sent Harry into a building to steal something, a file of some sort. Harry had been caught by the occupants - a rival gang - and thrashed nearly unconscious. They'd tracked down Mike and tossed Harry's battered form at his feet, taunting the older boy for his failure. Mike had yelled at Harry once they were back at their warehouse squat, berating the injured boy for failing his task. Eventually Dave had stepped in, taking Harry aside and cleaning him up as best he could.

He'd whispered to him as he gently wiped the dried blood away, engaging the boy to bring him out of the numb shell he was sinking into as shock from the beating and depression over his failure set in.

Harry had listened, and Harry had learned.

That night after earning his keep as usual, Harry slipped away, making his way across the city; back to the target's house. He watched, absorbing every detail he could. Mike had given him information on the place and people, but it hadn't been enough. He would never rely on another's information before a job again, he swore to himself. They didn't see enough, didn't see the patterns he did.

And so he waited, watching. Hours passed, and his muscles screamed at his perfectly still position, cramping in protest and cold. But still he waited. The whole day passed and sank back into night.

It had just started to snow when he made his move. His body was wracked with shivers, but forced them away, single minded focus making his bodily needs unimportant for the moment.

He slipped in through the window, lithe as a cat and twice as silent. Ghosting through the house, he stepped over the squeaking floorboards, and made his way into the study.

He looked at the safe. Mike had said the file was in there, and that was how he'd been caught. He sneered, and turned away, crossing swiftly to the painting of a ship at sea on the wall behind the desk. He pressed the secret button on the underside of the tacky gold frame, and smiled to himself when the painting popped away from the wall, swinging open on a well-oiled hinge and revealing
the real safe behind it.

He closed his eyes, drawing his memories from that afternoon to the front of his mind. He pictured the target’s hand as it moved over the keypad, translating the pattern into numbers.

532781

He quickly typed it in, grinning broadly as the door fell open. He reached in, pulling free the file. He rolled it and quickly stuffed it into the small of his back, held in place by his waistband. He eyed the rest of the contents thoughtfully, and decided it would be worth it. Grabbing a convenient backpack, he quickly stuffed all the money, other files, and the brick of cocaine in the bag, then slung it over his bruised and aching shoulders. He drifted through the house, emptying a few other caches, then flitted out the front door.

He set off back across the city with a bounce in his step, proud of himself. Shoplifting was easy, but this, this gave him a rush! That he'd just successfully robbed a place filled with at least ten heavily armed men that would probably kill him on sight - alone! - left him nearly giddy with satisfaction.

He stopped briefly to put a couple of wads of cash away in one of his personal hidden stashes. Dave had suggested that when he could, he should build up his own emergency supplies. So far Harry had close to ten thousand pounds, assorted weapons, a med kit, and a couple of changes of clothes put aside in various holes throughout the city.

He was halfway back to Mike when the exhaustion and cold finally began to take their toll on the boy's fragile body. He was stumbling, barely able to put one foot in front of the other. His lungs burned with the cold, and his vision was swimming.

*Just keep going.*

So Harry did.

He was half dead when he staggered to a stop in front of his boss, but the look on Mikes face when the kid he'd been sure had run off returned and presented him with the pilfered goods had been extremely satisfying to the small boy. Dave had hustled the shivering and blue lipped child away, tucking him into his usual corner and bundling him up, a warm drink shoved into his hand, a joint and burger quickly following. The Armenian fussed over his protégé until the boy finally fell asleep, warm, relaxed and a little bit smug.

Harry blinked, pulling himself back to the present. *Just keep going.* He could do that. He forced his feet forward, one step at a time. Wobbling, he let go of the furniture, drawing himself up as best he could. One foot in front of the other, each more difficult than the last. He focused on the movement, excluding everything else around him.

*Just keep going.*

The cold tiles under his bare feet startled him, drawing him out of his blind determination. He grinned to himself as he used the facilities and washed his hands, taking his time. He couldn’t see himself clearly in the mirror, but wasn’t particularly concerned with examining the changes just yet.

Shuffling slowly back to bed, he resettled the blankets over himself just as Marcel returned, bearing a goblet that smoked and smelled of sandalwood and swamp arse.

"Alright, this is the potion for your eyes,” he stated, moving the file into the top draw so he could put the goblet down. He fussed, putting out some bandages and swabbing next to it. "We’ll get your eyes fixed up now, then you should go to sleep. Physio will start in the morning after your usual morning
reports and a visit from the Andrews. All going to plan, you should be walking again in about two weeks, then it will be business as usual for the most part, just with extra muscle building exercises and larger meals."

"I've already done that." Harry stated calmly, holding out an imperious hand for the goblet.

"Done what?" Marcel questioned, ignoring the hand and placing the swabbing against Harry's eyes, winding the bandage around his head to keep them in place.

"Walking. I went to the bathroom a few minutes ago."

Harry had to admit, the choking noise his Healer made was *extremely* satisfying.

She leaned back in her chair, staring at the screen, critically examining the one recent photograph of the boy that didn't inexplicably blur his features. Messy black hair and startling green eyes peered out of a narrow and slightly emaciated face, marked with a distinctive lightning bolt scar on his forehead.

Yes, he would do nicely.
Harry grunted in irritation. He'd finished his physiotherapy for the day, and was now going over the most recent correspondence before beginning his lessons.

"Alex," he called.

Alex stuck his head in, toffee hair slightly tousled from sparring with Sergei. He combed his fingers through it, lightly tucking it back into its usual smooth waves.

"Yes Sir?"

Harry waved a letter at him. "Gutshank says Dumbledore has been getting more pushy about gaining access to the Potter vaults. I'm going to have to get in there as soon as I can walk without fainting, even if I'm not one hundred percent. Arrange something for three days from now, but see if you can get a private access portkey or something so I don't have to walk through the bank. Perhaps even after hours if the two of you think that would be best; I don't care how much it will cost. I also need to see Mr South. Arrange it for the day after, if he's available." He held out a slip of paper. "And get this for him. Get as many as you can find, actually, but I need at least one for him. Stockpile any others you find."

Alex glanced at the paper and his eyebrows shot up, but he nodded. "Anything else?"

Harry hummed thoughtfully, shuffling through a couple of his papers. "For the moment, no, but I'll have more work for you once I'm back up to par. You and Sergei did well while I was out of it, not that I expected otherwise, so I'll be adding a bonus to your next pay cheques. I'll try to keep your duties light for the next week or so unless something comes up, so enjoy yourself while you can. Just stay contactable."

Grinning, Alex nodded again. "Thank you, Sir. I'll let Sergei know. Should I tell Daniel and Connor to meet you in the dining room for your lesson?"

Harry nodded absently, more focused on the report in his hand. "Please. I'll be there in ten. Oh, before I forget, let Marcel know that we're getting pizza for dinner. I'm in the mood for a movie night."

Alex chuckled. "How does pizza fit into your obsessively organised meal plan?"

"Well, I need to gain weight, don't I?" Harry gifted him an innocent look before breaking into a mischievous smirk. "If he gets fussy, tell him he can pick my topping. Bossy peacock that he is." He muttered the last under his breath, causing Alex to snigger slightly.

"Alright. Though I might leave off that last part."

Harry smiled, and placed his report into the pile to file later. " Appreciated."

Alex departed, and Harry leaned back with a sigh. He was exhausted, not that he'd let his men know. The healing had depleted the meagre stores his body had built up over the previous weeks under Marcel's care, and he was now almost scarily emaciated. The healer had put him onto a strict diet, feeding him five full meals a day, plus snacks. He was gaining weight slowly, especially when combined with the nutrient potions and muscle building serum he had to choke down twice a day, but it was hard going, and the constant cold from lack of normal insulation was wearing. His men
had thoughtfully added heating charms to all his clothing, and kept the house heated to a temperature that was probably a little uncomfortable for the rest of the residents, but nobody complained. And he was still cold.

Tottering into the dining room, he saw Mama Andrews and the boys waiting for him. Even Greg had decided to join the lesson, though he lacked any magic himself.

Dropping into his seat at the head of the table, Harry smiled faintly at the plate of chocolate chip cookies and giant glass of milk that was promptly deposited in front of him.

"I thought today I'd give you a choice; history or society?" Mama Andrews looked around enquiringly, though she focused on Harry.

Chewing a cookie thoughtfully, the young crime lord eyed his ward. "Connor? Have you covered much of society yet?"

The five year old shook his head. "No, not yet. I was wondering about goblins though?"

Harry raised his eyebrows in question, taking a sip of milk. "What did you want to know?"

"Well, the other day Mama Andrews said that lots of pure bloods don't like non humans, sometimes they hate them even more than they hate halfbloods and muggleborns and squibs. But don't the goblins run the banks? If the purebloods don't like or trust them, why do they let them take control of their money? What if the goblins got mad one day and turned on them, like they did in the Goblin Rebellions that Mama Andrews was talking about yesterday?" The boy flushed, fiddling with his own plate of cookies.

"That's an excellent question, Connor. You've clearly been thinking a lot about this. I'm impressed." Harry smiled warmly at the younger boy.

Connor lit up, eyes sparkling at the praise. "I've got lots more questions!" He opened his mouth to blurt them out, but snapped it shut again when Harry held up a hand.

"I'm glad. Questions mean you're thinking about things, not just taking everything at face value. I think this would be an excellent topic for today's lesson, don't you? At the end of the lesson, you can ask your next question, but then I want you to go away and think about it, and try to find or work out the answer on your own. At the start of the next lesson, you tell us what answer you came up with, and if you're close or your answer is logical enough to be plausible, we'll go to the park afterwards."

Connor practically vibrated with excitement, beaming up at the boy he adored. "That would be wicked!"


Tammy settled back in her chair, running a hand through her hair. The sunlight streaming through the large window facing the back garden picked out the natural honey gold tints in her thick brown tresses, highlighting them almost playfully, waves of light rioting through her loose curls.

"Certainly. We should probably start with more information on the goblins themselves, before moving onto their role in society though. Daniel? You've been reading about goblins lately, haven't you? What have you discovered?"

Daniel paused mid chew, looking faintly hunted. "Um…” He swallowed and took a sip of milk.
Connor grinned. "He wasn't reading about goblins, Mama Andrews, he had a comic book inside the text book. I read the book though. Well, some of it. I didn't understand it all, it used lots of big words I didn't know yet." His smug look faded into a slight pout.

Harry and Greg grinned, while Mama Andrews turned a light glare on her youngest son. "Is that so?"

Daniel avoided her eye, shifting in his seat and eyeing the door. "Um…"

"Well then, Connor, why don't you tell us what you understood from the book, and then we can fill in the blanks?" Harry asked quietly, a proud warmth filling his chest at the thought of how hard his ward was working. He'd never felt a real connection to anyone since Sally and Dave, though he supposed he was growing fond of his men and the Andrews. They were different though. His men were employees, and the Andrews were… well, he didn't know what they were, but they weren't in the same category as Connor. Connor was his, and the fierce possessiveness Harry felt towards him was burning in its intensity.

Connor sat up straight and beamed, eager to show off to his Mister Harry. "Well, the goblins used to be warriors, and everyone was scared of them because they were so tough. There was lots of wars, and the goblins won a lot, but eventually they started losing because there were more wizards than goblins. The wizards were scared of another goblin war, so they neg-o-tiated with them. That's when you sit down and try to work it out without yelling, isn't it? I didn't know that word."

Harry nodded with a faint smile, and Connor continued. "The goblins liked gold and treasure, almost as much as they liked fighting, so the wizards made a deal with them. If the goblins didn't go to war against the wizards again, they could set up banks and look after all the money. The goblins agreed, but the wizards tricked them, making the contract not mean what the goblins thought it meant. The goblins were now listed as creatures, and not people, and they have hardly any rights if they leave the banks."

"The goblins were really mad about this, but because the wizards didn't try to take over the banks, the goblins are magically bound to not start another war. If the Ministry of Magic keeps their end of the deal and treats the banks as… um, I don't know what this means, but the book said 'sovereign soil', then the goblins can't do anything."

Mama Andrews smiled. "Sovereign soil means that they are like their own little country within a country, and they can rule themselves."

Connor nodded, understanding. "Oh ok. But the goblins like to make things hard for the wizards who treat them badly, and are really good at finding ways to twist contracts and stuff so that they get more than the wizards wanted to give them. They learned to do it after their own contract hurt them so much. The book said that a goblin written contract is 'ironclad', and that you should always be really careful if you have to sign one." He paused, sipping his milk. Suddenly his eyes lit up. "Oh, so that's why! The wizards aren't afraid because the goblins can't do anything, as long as we don't do anything to them first!" He frowned. "Still seems wrong to treat them badly though. They might be nicer if we were nicer to them first."

Harry chuckled. "Well, why don't you come with me one time when I have to see the goblins, and we can put your idea to the test? I'm sure if you are very polite and respectful, the goblin we see might be willing to answer one or two questions for you. But you mustn't be upset if they don't, alright?"

Connor nodded seriously. "Harry? Do you know any goblin names? The book said that their names tell a lot about a goblin, because they get one when they come of age that talks about what they
became known for during their trials."

"I know one or two. What do you know about their trials?"

"Well, a goblin doesn't come of age when they get old enough like a wizard does. They have to go visit other goblin tribes and do something to prove themselves, no matter how long it takes. They have to 'make a name for themselves'. What names do you know?"

Harry considered for a moment, before deciding that the secrecy oaths the Andrews had sworn before arrival would cover this too. "I've met one called Gutshank, and I have heard about another called Riftweld."

Connor's eyes went round, and he gaped. "Riftweld? I read about her! She ended a goblin civil war by knocking out the two leaders, tying them up, and making them talk to each other. One of them was her dad. She agreed to seal the treaty by marrying the other leaders son, which made their clans into one. As a reward, she was allowed to look after one of the biggest accounts at the bank! She's so cool!"

Grinning, Harry decided not to inform the little boy that he would likely meet the object of his fascination at some point. It would make a nice surprise.

Connor frowned thoughtfully. "What does Gutshank mean though?"

Harry was sitting next to Elise. She'd been moved to a private room so that she wouldn't panic when she woke up and saw all her friends still sleeping. Her dark brown hair had been neatly combed, and she'd been put into a clean set of pyjamas; pink ones with a yellow flower on the front. She was tucked into the single bed, a purple stuffed unicorn tucked in next to her.

Harry hummed softly, repeating the song he'd sung for her during the purge. Gently stroking her hair back from her forehead, he examined her face intently, eyes roving thoughtfully.

At four years old, she was surprisingly beautiful. Her high cheekbones and pert little nose were complimented by full lips and almond shaped eyes so dark they were nearly black. There was a faint Asian cast to her features, but nothing within the last generation or two. Probably a grandparent or great grandparent, he mused. It wasn't hard to see why the girl had been snatched, as she grew older she would be truly stunning.

The file Sergei and Captain had put together on her family had been distressing. The poor child had been abducted straight from the hospital after the car accident that claimed both her parents' lives. Like Connor, she had no one else. Unfortunately for her, there had been no alternative guardians listed. The nurse who'd facilitated the abduction had already been collected, and was being held in a rather uncomfortable location for the time being. Whether he was added to Vahan's growing tally or handed over to the police depended entirely on what Elise chose to do when she woke.

Alex had already located a family that would be suitable to take her if she chose to leave The Nest, though Harry intended to offer her the opportunity to stay as a ward of Mr Smith. He'd prepared the legal files for either eventuality.

Dark eyes flicked open slowly, and Harry withdrew his hand, but kept humming softly. He watched her examine him closely, letting her look her fill.

"Hello," she said quietly, sitting up.

"Hello," Harry returned, waiting patiently.
"You helped me when I was sick, before I went back to sleep."

Harry nodded silently.

"I liked the song you were singing. It's pretty."

"Thank you. I like it too. Someone sang it for me once when I was hurt, and it made me feel better. I thought it might make you feel better too."

She smiled shyly. "I'm Elise. Who are you?"

"You can call me Harry, for now. Are you hungry, Elise?"

Nodding, she watched him warily.

"It's alright," he soothed, lifting the lid from the plate on her bedside table. "There's no cost for this. Just eat, and we'll talk, alright?"

Relieved but still cautious, she edged forward and picked up the spoon, taking a small bite of porridge.

"You won't be hurt here. This is a safe place, and you'll never have to do what those men did to you ever again. Now, I'm going to ask you a few questions, and I want you to answer as best you can, ok?" Seeing her nod, he offered an encouraging smile. "Do you know if there is anyone your parents would want you to stay with now that they can't look after you anymore?"

Elise bit her lip, looking down and thinking hard. Gradually, she shook her head, and clutched her unicorn close.

"That's alright, I just wanted to check. Now, I know it's a lot to take in, but we have a choice to make. You don't have to decide right now, but I want you to think very carefully about it, ok?" He watched her take another few bites of porridge, and nudged her glass of orange juice closer to encourage her to drink. "There's a family that will take you if you want them to. If you go and live with them, the doctor will give you a special medicine that will make it so you can't remember being here at all. My work sometimes means I have to do things that the police don't like, so it's very important that you can't remember anything that might get me in trouble. Do you understand?"

She nodded, her dark, almost black eyes guarded.

"Your other choice is to stay here with me. This will always be a safe place, but if you choose to stay, you may see things you don't like or that scare you. You'll never be made to do anything you don't want to do though, and you'll never be hurt here." He paused, watching her carefully. He could see she had already made up her mind, but he would encourage her to take some time to think about it anyway. "Now, finish eating your breakfast, and then you can ask me any questions you have, ok?"

Elise smiled shyly, and quickly polished off the rest of her meal.

The next morning found Harry outside for the first time since his healing. He watched indulgently as Connor, Elise, and Daniel played in the backyard, snowballs flying as they engaged in a battle for the ages. Their giggles and squeals of laughter were surprisingly pleasant to listen to, and he smiled slightly as he sipped his hot chocolate.

Marcel and Mama Andrews had bundled his skeletal frame into a ridiculous amount of clothes, and
layered multiple warming charms over him so he could rest comfortably on the back patio. And then they'd added the blankets. In all honesty, he was slightly too warm, but after nearly a week of constant cold, and then sitting outside and watching the children playing in the snow, it was a welcome change.

"How are you feeling?" Captain settled into the chair next to him, his own mug of chocolaty goodness steaming.

"Better. The potions and never ending food are helping a lot. Marcel says I should be back to a healthy weight by the end of next week, barring complications." Harry shifted, readjusting the blanket over his knees. "I'm sorry I haven't had much time to talk to you lately, I know we need to sit down and discuss your employment request."

Nathan smiled gently. "I understand. Alex and Sergei have been keeping me occupied. You'll get to me when you do."

Harry nodded, taking a sip. "I'd rather do it in the office where we will have some privacy, but I have a few ideas I wouldn't mind running past you, if you have the time."

"Whenever you need me. You're the boss!" He grinned when Harry rolled his eyes. "When are you going to see the goblins?"

"In about an hour. I'd rather wait longer, but needs must."

Captain hummed as he sipped his own drink. He gestured to the children with the mug. "What do you think she'll choose?"

Harry's lip twitched slightly. "She's already chosen, though she hasn't said anything yet. She'll stay here. Better the devil you know, and all that rubbish."

"She's a sweet little thing. Afraid of men of course, but that's hardly unexpected. She latched on quickly to Tammy though."

"Mm. I'm not surprised. She'll be useful at making the other children feel comfortable when we bring them here, once she's seen that we're as good as our word. I doubt it will take her long to settle in. Even with everything that happened, she's still very young. She'll adjust more quickly than an older child would."

"True. Any change with Bradshaw?"

"No, still in a coma, though Marcel is hopeful he'll wake up soon. Apparently he's showing increased brain activity. Connor has been sitting with him for a while every day, from what I understand."

"He has. It's a bit heartbreaking to see, honestly. I hope for his sake that Bradshaw is still himself when he wakes up."

They sat in comfortable silence, sipping their drinks and watching the children. Eventually, Harry stirred, and fought his way free of his blanket cocoon. Standing, he walked as best he could into the house, trusting the Captain to keep an eye on the kids.

Marcel met him as he passed through the play room.

"Ah, there you are. Now, I've given Alex and Sergei instructions for while you're out, but I'll repeat them to you as well. If you feel yourself getting too tired, you mustn't push yourself. In forty minutes
you're due for your next potion, which you have to take with a meal. I don't care if you're in a meeting, if you skip either it will disrupt your recovery. When you get back I'll be giving you a check up to make sure you haven't overdone it."

Harry nodded dutifully, thanking the Healer before the man swept off to do his next lot of rounds. He took a step forward, only for Sergei to materialise before him.

"So, Boss, I've been thinking." The gruff Russian had a mischievous glint in his eye that made Harry wary.

"Oh?"

"It's about time we looked at getting you a wand. I know we'd planned on it before, but then it got put off. What do you say to picking one out today?"

Harry thought about it, chewing his lip. "Tempting, but I think I'll wait until I'm a bit better and we can make a day of it. My magic is still a bit unsettled anyway. It would be better to wait until it isn't so busy repairing my body." He saw the faintly disappointed look on his companions face before it was masked. "You bet on what it would be, didn't you."

Sergei smirked unrepentantly. " Might have. Just a little gentlemen's wager, you understand."

Rolling his eyes, Harry resumed his shuffle towards his bedroom. "I need to change before the meeting. Make yourself useful and find Alex, would you? I'll need both of you to wrestle my hair into submission."

Laughing, Sergei strode off to do as he was bid.

"Ah, Mr Potter, a pleasure to see you again." Gutshank bared his teeth in greeting when the portkey dropped them into his office directly.

Harry staggered and would have fallen, but Sergei caught him and held him steady until the vertigo passed.

"Likewise, Gutshank. How's business?" Harry returned, shaking the goblin's gnarled hand, miraculously avoiding the claws.

Gutshank eyed the boy critically. "Better than your health, it seems." He quickly returned to his desk, pulling out a thick file.

"Hm, yes. It was an assassination attempt; poison. I'm recovering, though I should probably mention that I'll be required to take a potion and eat a meal in approximately twenty minutes. I apologise for any interruption it may cause to our meeting today."

The goblin waved a hand dismissively. "I'll join you. Nothing wrong with a business lunch." He leaned towards a carved stone on his desk, resting a claw on it and barking out an order in gobbledegook. Leaning back and opening the file, he pulled out a few pages of parchment. "Let's get these signed before the food arrives. We can discuss anything else while we eat."

Harry smiled and nodded, taking the forms and reading over them carefully.

"Sign them as John Smith. He will be listed as Regent for your Lordship until you reach your majority. If you want to have someone attend a Wizengamot meeting for you but Mr Smith can't attend personally, he can assign a proxy, though I wouldn't recommend doing that often. Do you
have someone to play him for public appearances?"

Harry sighed and leaned back in his chair. "No. I've had someone fill in on a one time basis, but unfortunately the man I had on the lookout for a suitable stand in was injured and is currently in a coma. I have no idea if he had someone in mind or not, we couldn't find anything in his notes, but that doesn't mean much."

"May I make a suggestion? You could create a golem. If you give it some of your blood it could even sign things for you. You'd need to imbue it with your own magic too, of course. The only complication would be if the two of you were in the same room with someone who can sense magical signatures. Not many can, but those with creature blood like Veela or Goblins, or someone extremely powerful like Dumbledore would be able to tell. If you had some people you trusted, though, they could add their magic to it as well, which would confuse their senses enough to pass muster."

Tilting his head in interest, Harry pursed his lips. "How would that affect the magical signature for blood though? If it signed things on my behalf, it's signature would need to match what is already on record."

Gutshank chuckled, inordinately pleased. "Very good, Mr Potter! The trick is to add their magic, but only your blood. It's a delicate bit of work, not to mention very illegal, but something tells me that legality is only a passing concern to someone like yourself."

Harry smirked faintly. "Legality is very important to me. It's important to know where the line is so you can wave to it as it goes rushing past."

Alex frowned and shifted. "I wasn't aware you could create a golem with multiple magics and only one blood. I thought you required equal contribution of both from all donors?"

Gutshank bared his teeth. "Wizards have to, yes. But Goblin magic allows for things that wizards could never even dream of."

Harry looked interested. "Really? Can you give me another example?"

"Well, we can link the golem's mind to yours, so what you know, it does, and what it does, you do. You can even look through its eyes if you wish, thought you can't control it from a distance. It will continue to follow the actions it was programed with."

"Fascinating. Definitely something I'd like to explore further. Would you make a note that I'd like to discuss that at our next meeting?"

Gutshank handed the boy a blood quill. "Certainly. Once you've signed, you will have full access to your accounts. You're fortunate, you know. The Potter account manager isn't likely to raise any alarms when she finds out you are your own guardian. My wife will think it a grand joke, and she will be pleased to do anything to keep that old man's fingers out of your gold. He's been causing her quite a few headaches, I must say."

Harry blinked. "You're married to Riftweld? You're the other clan's heir?"

Gutshank raised an eyebrow. "I'm surprised you know that."

Harry worked his way through the pile of parchment, supressing a wince as the blood quill cut into the back of his hand with each signature. "My ward has been learning about your culture and history as best he can from the books we've been able to obtain. Our knowledge is sketchy at best, but Connor seems to be quite enamoured with the story of your wife's naming. I admit to finding your
culture and history fascinating as well, and considering you hold the wizarding economy in your claws, I believe that learning as much as I can is prudent. It would be foolish to cause avoidable offence to such valuable allies."

"In other words, we have you by the balls and so you want to play nice so we don't squeeze too tightly."

Harry laughed. "Something like that. Though I do find your culture interesting. Connor has the real passion though. I believe he wants to learn Gobbledegook, and I wouldn't be surprised if his life's ambition is to meet your wife."

Their conversation was interrupted by four beautifully prepared meals appearing on the table in front of them. Harry quickly swallowed his potion and picked up his cutlery.

"So, Gutshank, I was wondering about Potter Manor…"

Standing in front of Mr South, Harry fought to keep the amusement off his face. The man made a habit of meeting his preferred clients personally, but he had sent a minion this time to show them to his room. Clearly, he was feeling miffed about the delay.

The man glared down at Harry, though his gaze softened marginally when Alex dispelled the glamour and he took in how ill the boy looked. He finally gestured to a seat, allowing Harry to rest.

"A glamour?"

"Of course. I have no desire to deal with endless pissing matches just because someone saw me having an off day."

Despite himself, Mr South chuckled. "This is just an off day? You look like hell."

Harry lowered his head modestly, peering up mischievously through his lashes. "What can I say? I've been practicing the Art of Understatement. I'm considering trying for a Mastery."

Alex snorted quietly, and Sergei disguised something that was suspiciously giggle-like with a cough.

"I'd imagine you would like to return home as quickly as you can manage, so shall we get to it?" Mr South crossed his legs and rested an arm along the back of his couch, reclining elegantly.

"Certainly, though first I would like to give you something." Harry nodded to Alex, who pulled out a beautiful polished rosewood box and presented it to the stoic weapons dealer.

With a raised eyebrow, the man took the box, opening it cautiously. His eyes widened minutely, and the faintest gasp left his lips. He cleared his throat, and the tip of his tongue darted out to wet suddenly dry lips. "Henri IV Dudognon Heritage Cognac Grande Champagne. I'm impressed."

Harry offered a faintly cheeky grin. "So am I forgiven for making you stew in your curiosity for weeks?"

Mr South levelled a faint glare at the boy, fighting a smile. "Maybe. I'll let you know."

Harry laughed lightly. "Whatever you say, old man."

Mr South huffed in mock indignation while Vahan's men stepped outside to guard the door and give
them some privacy.

"So, you have questions, I have answers. I propose an exchange." Harry grinned at his friend, relaxing fully.

Eying the boy carefully, Mr South put the box aside and stood, pulling a warm blanket from a cabinet and offering it to the obviously chilled child.

Taking it with a wry smile and a thank you, Harry wrapped it around himself, sighing in pleasure at the warmth and soft texture.

Resuming his seat with a glass of scotch, Mr South pondered where to begin. "Let's start with the simple questions, shall we? What is your real name?"

Harry looked down, picking an imaginary piece of lint off the blanket. "Harry Potter." He couldn't contain his laughter when the older man promptly sprayed his mouthful and started choking. He tilted his head and pursed his lips thoughtfully. "You know, I don't think I've ever seen you look so undignified. Not even when your lackey dropped a case of grenades on your foot." He grinned suddenly. "I feel like I've won a prize!"

Mr South gave the boy a flat look. "I can still kill you, you know."

Harry waved airily. "Oh I know that. But you won't, because I'm too much fun to have around."

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Mr South began to wonder at the wisdom of the deal they had made, if it had made the boy relax around him to this degree.

"I'll just start from the beginning, I think. You see, originally I lived with my Aunt and Uncle..."

Two hours later, Mr South had given up on refreshing his drink and had migrated to drinking straight from the bottle. A true crime against such a high quality spirit, but the circumstances definitely warranted such an action. Harry was sipping his own glass of scotch appreciatively, watching his friend try to come to grips with everything he had been told. It was taking longer than he'd anticipated, much to his amusement.

Mr South had long since loosened his tie and undone the top button of his shirt, the jacket discarded over the back of a chair. "I can't decide if you're brilliant or insane."

Harry shrugged. "Both, probably."

"What are your plans for your relatives?"

Harry shrugged and took another sip, humming in pleasure. "Dudley is on Wizard Watch, but once they've been approached, Petunia and Vernon are going to find themselves in all sorts of legal and financial trouble. I'm thinking to start small. Unpaid parking tickets and the like, then work up to bankruptcy after I buy out Grunnings and expose Vernon's fat filching fingers. I know that he's been skimming the accounts, and he goes through secretaries at an alarming rate because he keeps harassing them. After that, I'll get the police involved and will have my lawyer press charges for child abuse and trafficking. That will probably land one or both in prison. Beyond that I'll just keep an eye on them, and send some people to mess with them if they start getting too uppity."

"What about your cousin?"

"I'll make sure one of mine gets custody. I'm unwilling to let him go to Aunt Marge - the woman is almost as bad as her brother. He'll be working for me. Waste not, want not, or whatever. He may be
Mr South sat back with a sigh, his brain buzzing. The silence stretched, broken only by the popping of a log on the fire. Finally, the man seemed to reach a conclusion and sighed heavily.

"I don't think I'm drunk enough for this."

Harry smiled, and took a sip, verdant eyes gleaming merrily.

Life at The Nest quickly settled into a new routine. Elise and the two boys with dubious home lives - Mark and Louis - had chosen to stay with Harry, and the others had their memories altered and were returned to their very grateful parents. Mornings were filled with muggle lessons for the children while Harry worked through his physiotherapy and paperwork, lunches were raucous as the children told their tiny saviour all the interesting things they'd learned, and afternoons were physical training lessons and play time.

Harry spent as much free time as he could with his wards and friend, listening to them talk or playing simple games. The younger children were quickly coming to idolize Harry as much as Connor did, and it was obvious that there was nothing they wouldn't do for him. Harry was already planning a few jobs they could assist with, for training.

Within two weeks, Harry was back to a healthy weight and full health, though Marcel was still puzzling through the scar and its strange response to the healing. So far he'd had little success, but he claimed he was edging closer to a theory, so they left him to it.

Elise, Mark, and Louis were still exceptionally wary of the men in the house, but had come to adore Mama Andrews, eagerly hanging on her every word. The maternal woman had taken advantage of this, counselling the children as best she could, and helping them work through their fear enough to begin to trust the Hounds and the resident Healer, if nobody else.

Harry finally decided it was time to pay a visit to Knockturn Alley.

Gathering up Sergei, Alex, and Marcel - who wanted to acquire some less than reputable texts that he believed might hold the answers to the scar - Harry left the Captain behind to handle security for Mama Andrews and the Nestlings.

A quick visit to Gringotts under the most powerful glamours his men could manage, paired with his usual obscuration charm, and they slipped into the murky darkness that permeated the Alley.

"Where to first?" Harry muttered, glancing around carefully.

"Rafe Gregorovitch Custom Wands. He's Mykew Gregorovitch's half-brother, and just as skilled, though not as well known. He's the black sheep of the family, and isn't associated with the main Gregorovitch stores. Apparently his father disapproved of his willingness to provide wands for anyone with magic, regardless of species." Sergei intoned softly, giving a hard stare at a hag who was eyeing Harry a little too intently for his liking.

"Alright, lead the way. Aside from the bookshops, is there anywhere else in here you think I should visit?"

Alex shifted slightly to provide more cover for Harry's smaller frame. "There are a few curio shops you might like to browse, though I'd be careful about keeping those sort of things in The Nest. We should also make a few stops in Diagon."
"Peachy. Let's get going then. I promised the Nestlings we'd bring home ice cream for after dinner." Harry heard Marcel grumble about proper nutrition behind him, but he didn't bother to object directly. The Healer knew that Harry would do whatever he pleased anyway.

They walked for several minutes, dodging a few disreputable types and eyeballing a few others into submission, before reaching their destination.

The shop itself was an unassuming little hole in the wall, better maintained than many of the other storefronts, but still in keeping with the shabby and run down feel of the Alley. Inside, however, the store was warm and welcoming, if somewhat dimly lit.

"How may I help you gentlemen today?" Rafe Gregorovitch was an older man, his hair worn shoulder length and loose, more silver than its former russet. His accent was heavy, his English excellent, but so ponderous that it was almost painful to hear him talk.

Sergei quickly rattled of a string of Russian, gesturing to the disguised Harry before leaning a hip against the counter and folding his arms casually.

"Ah, I see. Very well, if you would please step into the workshop and remove your disguise, we can begin." Gregorovitch held the curtain aside, allowing Alex to step through and clear the room before Harry followed him in. Dispelling the concealments so they wouldn't interfere with the process, Alex stepped to the side, settling himself out of the way, but watching closely.

"We will begin with the wood. Touch each sample and pull out the one that calls to you." The man placed a series of small wooden blocks on the bench, and stepped back.

Harry eyed them, then stepped forward, holding his hand out. Closing his eyes, he allowed his fingers to drift over each of the samples, listening closely to his magic. It took several minutes, but eventually he'd selected three blocks. Opening his eyes and standing back, he looked at the wand maker expectantly.

The older man looked at him curiously for a moment, before smiling, revealing startlingly white teeth. "Interesting. Do you know the meaning of the woods you have chosen?"

Harry shook his head, not even aware of what types he'd chosen.

"Yew," he held up a pale coloured block, "is considered to be imbued with the power of life and death. It is particularly compatible for duelling and curses, and will never bond with someone who is mediocre or timid. Many people claim that those who bond with yew are particularly drawn to Dark Arts, but this is not true. What is true is that those who bond with this wood are often very protective, and will do absolutely anything in their power to safeguard those they care about. This is not a material for someone who will let another dictate what is or is not acceptable when pursuing their chosen course of action."

Putting down the yew, Gregorovitch picked up the next block, a handsome medium brown colour with a grainy look to it. "Walnut is particularly compatible with a wizard or witch who is extremely intelligent and inventive. It can be notoriously difficult to dominate, but once you have, this wood will do absolutely anything in their power to safeguard those they care about. This is not a material for someone who will let another dictate what is or is not acceptable when pursuing their chosen course of action."

Picking up the last sample, Gregorovitch smiled faintly at the black square. "Ebony's perfect match is someone who does not conform, and is happy to be considered an outsider. A person with this wood will hold tightly to their beliefs no matter the pressure to change, and will be almost impossible to
sway from their task. It is excellent for combative magic, and transfiguration. I think it is safe to say that you, young man, will be an extremely unique individual. I look forward to seeing what will become of you. I have no doubt it will be spectacular."

Harry shrugged. "I'm hardly ordinary. Superlative results are practically a given."

Throwing his head back, Gregorovitch laughed heartily. "Oh yes, I will be following you closely, lad. Now, a core. We do that one a little differently. You will drink a potion and go into a trance, then you will be pulled to the best core for you. The potion will dissipate from your system naturally once it is done. Are you ready?"

Harry frowned slightly, and held up a hand. "Wait a moment. Marcel?" He called out, unwilling to stick his un glamoured head through the curtain.

"What's up?" Marcel peered in, leaning through the door but not stepping inside.

"I have to take a potion to find the wand core. It won't interact with my other ones?"

Marcel's brows crinkled slightly as he thought, his teeth chewing gently on his full lower lip. "Shouldn't. I'll check you over afterwards though, to be certain."

Harry nodded in agreement, then turned back to the wand maker. "Alright. Dose me up, Scotty."

Gregorovitch looked confused, but handed over a tiny vial of opalescent liquid. Harry tossed it back quickly, surprised to discover it didn't really taste like anything, though it had a pleasant minty aftertaste that he quite liked. He could feel himself slipping into a gentle state, his mind fogging slightly. It reminded him of the first time he'd had pot when Mike and Dave had found him, though this left him slightly more disconnected from his body.

The men watched as Harry's face went slack, a placid look stealing across his features. He drifted forwards, a hand reaching out to the multitude of tiny drawers covering one wall. His fingers skimmed along one of the rows, before pulling open a drawer three quarters of the way along and dipping inside. He pulled free several stiff ashen coloured hairs, his eyes dropping half closed in pleasure. He brushed the bristles against his cheek, and both men were startled when he made an odd little purring noise.

Alex made a mental note to place a bet with Sergei about the boss becoming an animagus and what it would be.

Placing the hairs on the work bench, Harry returned to the drawers, pulling free a small vial of thin amber toned fluid. Adding that to the pile of hairs, he then snatched up a knife and dashed it across his palm, the cut welling with crimson fluid. Gregorovitch hastily conjured a vial, and caught the slow trickle of blood before it could be wasted on the floorboards. Once he had sufficient, he cast a quick healing spell at the boy's palm, sealing the wound without a scar. Expecting the potion to dissipate, he was startled when Harry once more glided to the draws, this time pulling free a vial of clear fluid, placing it on the work bench, but separate from the other pile. Only then did the haze clear.

Harry staggered slightly, and Marcel stepped in, steadying him and casting a quick diagnostic.

"You might develop a slight headache, but that's it. No other side effects or interactions." Marcel smiled at his tiny boss, then stepped back out to wait with Sergei; though torment might be a more accurate description.

Harry looked expectantly at the craftsman.
Gregorovitch raised his eyebrows and blew out a surprised breath. "Well, this wand will certainly be one of the most unique I have ever crafted! I have never even heard of a combination like this!"

Harry raised his eyebrows in interest. "Oh?"

"Tebo hair, basilisk venom, and your own blood for the core, and phoenix tears to soak the completed wand in."

"I'm sorry, I'm not familiar with tebo, and my knowledge of basilisks is extremely sketchy." Harry frowned, annoyed at not knowing.

"Tebo are a beast found in Africa, primarily Congo and Zaire and the like. It's similar to a muggle warthog, but it can turn itself invisible. They are extremely territorial, aggressive, and dangerous, and so tough that their hide is often used in protective clothing. A tebo is not a creature you want to mess with.

"Basilisk venom is one of the most toxic substances we know of. It is so deadly that only phoenix tears can heal it, and even then, only if the tears are applied in a timely fashion, since it will kill you in a matter of minutes. It can also eat through various materials like metal and stone.

"Your blood being added to the core means that even if you are disarmed or defeated, this wand will never change its allegiance to you. It will also never work for anyone that you do not approve of handling it. In fact, I would go so far as to say it would actively fight against any unapproved user; which would be very bad for them, considering the components it is made from. This wand will essentially be less of a tool - like it would be for any other wizard - and more of an extension of yourself. You may even be able to do some clever little tricks, like calling it to you, no matter where you or it may be."

Harry smiled, pleased. "And the phoenix tear soak?"

"Provides balance. Most wands do not require a soak, since they are naturally balanced, but in the case of a wand such as yours, where there is such aggression and violence coupled with woods that will amplify these traits, the soak will artificially provide the balance and stop the wand from trying to kill everything in sight. Or exploding; that is also a possibility."

"I see. What happens now?"

"Now, you go away and come back in an hour."

Harry blinked, then shrugged, turning so Alex could reapply his glamours.

Borgin and Burkes was an interesting place to spend an hour browsing, especially when the proprietors were good friends with your body guards. Marcel had disappeared off to Mr Mulpepper's Apothecary, but had claimed he would meet them back at Gregorovitch's when the hour was up.

Harry peered around as his men chatted with Mr Borgin. The Hand of Glory caught his eye, and he examined it curiously. It was very worn, obviously heavily used, but in good condition as far as he could tell. He'd read about them in muggle books, long before he had learned of the wizarding world. The idea of a hand that could provide light to only it's bearer, and unlock any door, or immobilize a person had great appeal to a boy thief, though at the time he'd thought them just a very cool myth.

Turning back to his men, he followed them through to the back room, and down a steep set of stairs into a hidden room.
"Oh, so this is where you keep all the interesting stuff?" Harry grinned at Mr Borgin.

"Depends on your definition, I suppose," Mr Borgin grinned back. If Sergei Petrikov and Alexander Charleston both vouched for the kid, then he had no problem showing his more questionable inventory. This kid must be something special to have impressed the hardest mercenaries he'd ever had the dubious pleasure to meet.

Harry wandered around, careful not to brush against anything, even by accident. He paused by a large tub of green ointment, glancing at Mr Borgin for permission before touching it.

"Is this what I think it is?" He asked, gently unscrewing the lid and taking a hesitant sniff.

"Possibly. What do you think it is?" Mr Borgin smiled, showing off his yellowed and crooked teeth.

"Well, a green ointment that smells of hemlock, deadly nightshade, wolfsbane, and henbane, distilled in a fatty base. I'm going to say flying ointment." Harry smirked faintly at the look of surprise on the grimy man's face. "I can see why you would keep it down here. I can't imagine the Ministry looking kindly on you stocking something made from the fat of an unbaptised baby, especially in this quantity. Though I honestly can't imagine why a modern witch or wizard would need it, since flying broomsticks are quite common nowadays."

Alex and Sergei stifled their sniggers at the dumbfounded expression on Mr Borgin's face. They'd become so used to Harry's unique mind that they often forgot how unusual he truly was.

"Impressive. Not many people would be able to identify it at all, let alone simply by sight and smell. You're right, of course. I picked it up at an estate sale a few years ago. I bought a few pieces of furniture, and this was hidden in a secret cache in of the cabinets. I have no idea why they would bother to make it either, but those Blacks were a mad bunch, even the cadet branches."

Harry tilted his head thoughtfully, staring absently at the container in his hands. Snapping back too attention, he gestured Sergei closer, pulling the man down so he could whisper in his ear.

"You're good with creative stuff. The Hand of Glory upstairs looked functional, but it was getting low on fat. What do you think would happen if I stuck the Hand in this tub?"

Sergei looked thoughtful. "You would probably end up with a flying Hand of Glory. They are semi aware anyway, so if you could win it's loyalty it would probably just fly behind you on jobs, which would leave your hands free I suppose, if you'll excuse the pun."

Harry smirked. "Could be useful. What do you think? Worth it?"

Chuckling, Sergei nodded. "Worth experimenting with at least."

"I'll take both of them then. Can you make the arrangements? I want to keep browsing." Harry was already thrusting the tub into the older man's hands and turning away to examine some books.

When the hour was up, Harry left the store several Galleons lighter, but the new owner of a Hand of Glory, a tub of flying ointment, a dozen books on various obscure and forbidden topics, and an antique ebony desk that was riddled with secret compartments that he was positively itching to put to use.

Returning to Gregorovitch's store, Harry once again stepped into the back room and had Alex remove the glamours.

"So how did you go?"
Gregorovitch grunted, standing from his workbench and stretching, his back popping loudly enough to make Harry wince.

"Very well. This wand may be the finest I have ever crafted. It is certainly the most complicated." He grumbled slightly, but his pride was undeniable.

He handed over a polished wooden box, the mahogany wood glowing warmly in the dim light.

Harry opened the lid gingerly, and gasped, his eyes wide. Lifting the wand from the padded velvet it rested on, he closed his eyes and moaned at the feeling that swept through him as the wand connected with his magical core. It was simultaneously a comforting warmth and a bone chilling cold, and despite the complete contradiction, it just felt right.

The wand itself was a work of art. The yew and ebony had been sealed together, leaving the wand white on one side and black on the other. The walnut, however, had been inlaid into the main shaft, coiling around to form a pattern of thorny vines that wrapped its way from handle to tip. The whole thing had been buffed and oiled rather than polished, leaving it smooth and silky to the touch.

"Wow," he breathed, eyes never leaving the beauty in his hands.

Gregorovitch smiled thinly, obviously pleased with Harry's response. "Thirteen and half inches, and one of the most powerful wands I have ever created. Seven is a very powerful number, magically speaking, and to have such powerful materials bonded from seven into one…” He shuddered, though whether it was pleasure or fear was open to interpretation. "The only thing stronger would be the legendary Deathstick, or a full sized staff, and since nobody knows where the former is or if it even truly exists, and nobody has the raw power to use the latter, I would say you have little to worry about in that regard.

"Now, you should be aware that performing underage magic is illegal outside of Hogwarts or other approved teaching institutions and as such, all wands purchased by students are required to have a Ministry Trace charm applied."

Harry's face darkened.

"However," Gregorovitch kept talking, completely ignoring the imminent harm to his person. "Since you are not currently eligible for any school - you would need to be eleven or older - I have not applied the charm." He flashed a roguish grin that had the boy barking a short laugh.

Harry smiled and tucked the wand back into the box, regretfully allowing Alex to slip it into an expanded pocket in the bodyguard's robes.

"How much do I owe you, Mr Gregorovitch?"

The wand maker frowned, calculating quickly in his head. "Thirteen Galleons."

Harry raised an eyebrow, since he knew most wands went for seven, and a custom would usually only cost nine at most, but he supposed that the sheer number of materials and their rarity was the cause. He handed over the gold coins without comment, and smiled his thanks to the man.

"You must be very special to have a wand like that, and even rarer still to have earned the genuine loyalty of these two men. If you ever require any more done, or I can assist in any way, please do not hesitate to let me know."

Harry smiled, pleased. "Appreciated, Mr Gregorovitch."
Placing a hand over his heart, the craftsman bowed slightly. "I would be honoured if you would call me Rafe."

Harry returned the gesture, his eyes never leaving those of the older man. "And I am Harry. Though if I ever send anyone to you, they will use another name." He turned on his heel, striding towards the door.

Rafe called after him. "And that would be?"

Harry paused with one hand on the doorknob, and looked over his shoulder with a smirk. "Vahan." With that, he and his men disappeared out the door and down the street, gone before Gregorovitch could even draw breath.

"Vahan," He murmured, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. Without his glamours, the boy had looked vaguely familiar. That black hair and startling green eyes, not to mention that scar… He started violently as his brain finally connected the dots.

"Yob tyovu mat, that was Harry Potter!"

He sat heavily on the chair behind the counter, pulled out a hidden bottle of vodka, and began to laugh.
Harry looked around the penthouse in awe.

"Mrs Malfoy," he breathed. "It's..." he drifted off, truly beyond words.

Narcissa smiled, folding her hands demurely in front of her stylish pencil skirt. "Would you like the tour?"

Nodding, Harry followed behind, shadowed by his two equally impressed body guards.

"I renovated the entire apartment, and I hope you don't mind, but outside of the public areas that you specified may have contact with muggles, I added a few wizarding touches. Space expansion and the like, though I kept it fairly minimal."

They entered an open courtyard in the middle of the floor plan. It was covered in loose black and white river stones, each no bigger than a baby's fist. They made a beautiful swirling pattern that seemed to bend the eye, and Harry decided that it was best to just accept it was stunning and not look too closely. Scattered around the edges were tall ceramic pots with manicured shrubs, and Harry was pleased to note that they had been placed with an eye to defence, not just aesthetics. The surrounding walls were all glass, but the fourth side opened up to a breathtaking view of London.

"This area is designed as a welcoming foyer for wizards. Once you place the wards, you can leave this open for inbound apparition, but they won't be able to go inside without your authorization. It can be locked down despite being open to the air, though I left the specifics of the wards and defences to you, only putting up a few basic ones as a temporary measure."

Harry smiled, pleased with her forethought. "Thank you. It's lovely."

Narcissa grinned. "Wait until you see the rest!" Her enthusiasm broke through her usual pureblood reserve, and she all but bounced in place.

The rest of the tour was just as stunning as the first. The "muggle approved" areas were covered first; an open seating room for larger gatherings was decorated with a polished wood floor and dark grey leather seating, chrome and glass tables and lamps scattered around in convenient locations. One directional glass surrounded the two sides of the room from floor to ceiling, taking advantage of the view.

A muggle entertainment room was next, a giant flat screen television set into the wall. Harry gaped, knowing that such things were currently top of the line, and barely available on the commercial market. He also had trouble believing that a pureblood would know enough about such things to install it. Comfortable lounges were arranged in a U around it, plush and luxurious enough that Harry could hear them calling, begging him to give in and burrow into their plump cushions, never to emerge again. Only his curiosity allowed him to resist, though his reluctance to leave was palpable, bringing a smile to the normally austere woman.

The rest of the tour covered a beautiful Japanese styled dojo which looked out onto the Apparition Courtyard, a climate controlled muggle style workout room, a general lounge room with large fireplace and several bookshelves, a sleek kitchen, two studies, and six massive bedrooms - each with an enormous ensuite. The predominant colour scheme throughout the entire apartment was varying shades of white, grey, and black, with hints of wood and greenery preventing it from being too dull or heavy. It was the perfect bachelors pad, and completely excessive. Harry loved it.
On realising just how much wizard space had been added, Harry turned a look on the blonde woman, who ignored it with aplomb. Apparently turning a discrete three bedroom penthouse into a single floor mansion didn't count as doing a lot of magic. Rolling his eyes, Harry followed her out onto a personal patio from the Master bedroom.

It was a corner of what would otherwise have been part of the room, with wooden decking supporting a few more of the tall ceramic pots and dense shrubbery. A sunken seating area kept the view undisturbed from inside the room, and the two open sides allowed for plenty of fresh air without risk from inclement weather.

"What do you think?"

"I think you have truly outdone yourself, Mrs Malfoy. It's absolutely perfect." Harry took her hand and bowed at the waist, kissing the back of her knuckles gently. "Would you allow me to escort you to lunch? I happen to know of a French restaurant reasonably close to here that reviews very well. I've been meaning to try it, and now seems like the perfect opportunity."

Laughing throatily, Narcissa agreed, tucking a hand into the arm offered. The new height gained during his healing allowed for the move to not look as ridiculous as it would have only weeks beforehand, and Harry silently blessed Alex for convincing him to wear one of his new Armani suits that day. Honestly, he didn't know what he'd do without that man.

Inspector Gregory Adama threw the folder onto his desk, snarling with frustration. How, he wondered irritably, was it possible for the boy to just disappear? The boy had managed to vanish during the confusion when the alarm had been triggered, and then nothing. Even CCTV had failed to find a glimpse of the child, and Adama was reaching the end of his tether.

His partner, Thomas Brady sneered. "Are you still fixated on that brat? I'm telling you, you're barking up the wrong tree. Nobody is going to tell anything to a kid! At best, he's Vahan's little fuck toy, but the little shit is too wily to lead us to his sugar daddy, and now that Vahan knows we know about him, the brat's probably feeding some fish at the bottom of the Thames about now." He leaned back and folded his arms, scowling.

Adama scowled back. "Maybe, but he was our only lead." He sighed and ran his fingers through his hair. "Fine, if Tiny can't give us an in, we'll have to start right from the beginning. We have to have missed something." He shuffled through his folder, and peered at the whiteboard that was covered with scribbles, pictures and assorted diagrams that made no discernable sense to anyone other than the author.

Brady groaned. "I'm telling you, there is nothing. The only way we are going to get anywhere is to send someone in undercover. You know this. Why do you keep refusing?"

"Because Vahan is more brutal than the fucking mob, that's why! I'm not willing to risk the lives of my men unless I have absolutely no other option, and to be honest, it concerns me how eager you are to pursue that direction."

Brady sneered and leaned forward, jabbing a finger at the older man. "Don't you fucking dare. These men knew what they were signing up for when they joined the Force, and they knew that one day it might end messily. So stop mollycoddling them and let them do their fucking jobs! You may like to play the protective father, but they aren't kids, and you need to stop fucking treating them like it!"

Adama sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Fine, but only if someone volunteers. I'll not assign someone for this, and I won't allow anyone who has a family to do it. I won't put innocents at risk."
Brady lit up with a triumphant smile. "I'll go round up the boys then, shall I?"

"Boss, got news." Sergei strode into Vahan's study without knocking, and threw himself into the chair in front of the desk. "Adama's finally making a move. Got word from one of the cops we bought on the taskforce. They're going to pull in one of Tommy's Boys and try to get him to roll on you, then they plan to use him to vouch for one of their guys to get him in undercover."

Harry shifted, leaning back in his seat, still reading a report. "Do we know who's being sent in?"

Sergei chuckled. "The same one who warned us - Timothy White."

"Fine. The kids miss you, but they're happy with the Andrews. Bradshaw is showing more brain activity, Marcel reckons he'll wake up in a day or two; we haven't said anything to Connor about it though. Speaking of Connor, are you going to bring him here?"

Harry frowned, chewing his bottom lip. "I haven't decided yet, but probably not. I was thinking that we should send him and Marcel to The Haunt, but he isn't being magically trained yet, so it's not really urgent."

Sergei nodded. "If we find some more magical kids though, we'll need to do it. We can't risk the muggle kids seeing something they shouldn't."

"I know. I need to go see them all soon too. I'll be taking them out on jobs in the near future, getting them seen around the community a bit."

Smiling, the Russian rested his chin on his fist. "You really are a piece of work, Boss, you know that, right?"

Harry frowned faintly, glancing up briefly from his paperwork. "Is that a compliment?"

"Take it how you like. There aren't many people who're cold enough to use kids like you do. For all your militant stance on them whoring - which I fully support, by the way - you're still willing to use them in your business for everything else. And you make them love you for it."

Harry sighed heavily and finally focused his full attention on the man opposite him. "Is that a problem?"

"Not at all. You look after them, and make sure they have what they need to thrive and make something of themselves, as well as winning their undying loyalty in the process. And you'll gut anyone who tries to hurt them. I count that as a good thing. I'm just pointing out that you are a seriously cold son of a bitch to be able to play them like this."

"It's just business."

Sergei scoffed. "Maybe. Doesn't mean I'm wrong though."

"Never said you were."

"What about Connor? You treat him differently than the others. Is he just business too?"
Harry's face closed slightly, warning the older man he was pushing into dangerous territory. "Connor is mine. He'll be trained up as my heir, if he proves himself worthy of it."

Sergei's eyebrows shot up. "Your heir? You don't plan to have any of your own blood?"

Harry shook his head. "Not at this stage. That might change in the future if Connor turns out to be a disappointment, but if he does as well as I think he will, then I'll see about blood adopting him."

The mercenary whistled between his teeth. "And you still aren't planning to bring him here?"

"Not yet. Once he's a little older and has had a chance to prove himself, I'll reassess. At the moment he would just be a distraction, and his desire to stand out from the others and win my approval is his driving force. If I bring him with me rather than leaving him with the other kids, that'll remove some of that desire."

"Fair enough. Did you want to head over to Potter Manor this afternoon?"

"No, in a week or so. I've got too much to do right now."

"Alright. I'm going to hit the dojo."

Already buried back in his paperwork, Harry waved a hand in absent dismissal, barely noticing as the man left.

Nathan jerked his head up in alarm when Greg and Daniel tumbled through the front door.

"Dad!" Greg shouted, staggering closer, his hand clamped over his ribs, blood dripping between his fingers. His face was a mass of scrapes and bruises, and his clothing was badly torn, revealing similar wounds all over.

"Greg? What happened?" He shot to his feet, catching his son as he stumbled and fell to his knees. "Daniel? Are you alright?" His eyes quickly scanned the sobbing eight year old, seeing only a superficial bruise on his face and a split lip. Shouting for Marcel, he lowered his oldest onto the tiled floor, adding a hand to the wound on the boy's side and applying pressure, trying to help stem the bleeding.

"Dad," the teen moaned. "They took Mum! I tried to stop them, I did!" He gasped, tears streaming from his eyes, leaving streaks of cleaner skin through the blood.

"Who? Who took her?" Nathan asked, frantic as he saw his boy begin to lose consciousness.

"Male, mid-thirties. Black hair and a scar on his neck. Two goons with him, but I didn't get a good look. I'm sorry Dad, I tried!" The boy sobbed, his eyes unfocused and breathing raspy.

Marcel ran in, quickly assessing the scene and taking charge. "Daniel, are you hurt elsewhere?"

The little boy shook his head, crying. "No. They hit me and knocked me out. Greg carried me most of the way home." He sobbed, looking at his brother. "Is he going to be ok?"

Marcel smiled reassuringly, even as he ran diagnostics over the now unconscious teen. "He'll be fine. It looks worse than it is. He'll be right as rain in a few days. Nathan, I need you to call Harry and the Hounds. They'll want to know about this." Flicking his wand, he levitated the teen and set off for the infirmary, ushering Daniel along with him.

Nodding, the pale man fumbled for the phone in his pocket.
"Harry? Someone took Tammy, and Greg is hurt bad."

Reassured that his boss was on the way, he set his jaw and strode towards the infirmary. First, he was going to see how his son was. And then, he was going hunting. Somebody was going to die for this.
Harry and his Hounds portkeyed into bedlam. The children were wailing for Mama Andrews, Marcel was focused on healing Greg - who was in a more precarious position than he had indicated to the teen's family, Daniel was sitting in shock, still covered in his brother's blood, and Captain was pacing wildly and swearing all sorts of vengeance and retribution that should never be overheard by little ears.

Harry looked around, and sighed. Catching Connor's eye, he noted that his protégé was the calmest of all the children, and had a sobbing Elise settled in his lap. Offering a small smile, he nodded in approval. Returning his attention to the room at large, he quickly assessed what needed to be done.

"Sergei, take Captain into another room and give him a stiff drink. Alex, take the children into the media room and set them up with a light hearted movie, then arrange them snacks and hot chocolate with extra marshmallows. Lace it with a Calming Draft." He glanced at his watch. "Give them warm drinks after dinner as well, but lace that with Dreamless Sleep. I don't want any disturbances tonight if we can avoid it."

He waited until his men had done their jobs, then snapped his fingers to summon his personal elf. Looking down at the little creature, he smiled faintly at how much better he appeared.

All the elves had been terrified and filthy when Alex had bought them, but Harry refused to let that stand. His first order to all of them was to wash themselves thoroughly, and don a proper protective uniform. They now all wore jackets and pants or skirt depending on gender, and sturdy protective shoes. The breast of each jacket was marked with Harry's house crest, done in carefully detailed embroidery - something that each elf had reverently stitched themselves by hand. They had decided on their own to add variations in the uniform to denote their assignments. Those at The Nest wore slate grey uniforms, the elves for The Haunt wore an ash grey shot with shimmering threads that gave them a faintly ghost-like appearance, and his personal elf wore all black - without an emblem, given Harry's many alias's. The elf had even deciding to add black gloves to his ensemble, and seemed to enjoy how intimidating his outfit looked compared to the other elves.

"Master?" The little elf stood in a military at ease position, clearly copied from Alex and Captain.

"Jinky, I need you to clean the blood from this room as quickly as possible, and if you can do it without being seen, any blood you find coming up the front path as well. The elves here are busy drugging my wards and cooking for everyone." Harry's words were kind, if somewhat brisk, his mind already on how to track down the bastard that dared to touch one of his.

"Jinky can, Master." The little elf practically vibrated with excitement at being able to do something for Harry, the creature's workload being fairly light. He disappeared with a soft pop.

Harry strode to the infirmary, coming to stop next to the blood soaked and blankly staring Daniel.

"Marcel?" He questioned softly, not wanting to disturb the Healer if he was in the middle of something delicate.

The Healer hummed in acknowledgement, finishing up his current spell with a rather pretty twirl that settled a lilac coloured glow over Greg's prone form. Finished, he turned to his young employer, and only then seemed to realise that Daniel was still in the room. "Oh dear. He's gone into shock."

Wrapping a warm blanket around the boy, he cast a warming charm as well, followed by a switching spell to get him into a set of stripy pyjamas. The blood soaked clothes were put into a bag and sealed,
since he suspected that Vahan had every intention of utilizing one of the forensic experts he had on Vahan's payroll to go over them, just in case. He poured a half dose of Calming Draught into a cup, and topped it off with Dreamless Sleep, tipping it unceremoniously down the boy's throat.

Harry cast him a mildly irritated look, but said nothing.

"Don't look at me like that. He wasn't going to be able to tell you anything in this state anyway. He needs to sleep, and you can pick his brains all you like in the morning."

Working together, they put the now unconscious boy into an infirmary cot, tucking him in securely and adding extra warming charms.

"What's the prognosis for Greg?" Harry asked quietly, standing next to the still softly glowing teen.

Marcel heaved a sigh. "Honestly, if he makes it through tonight, he'll be fine."

Harry scowled. "If."

The Healer nodded sadly. "His attacker was a pro. Slipped the knife between his ribs, damaging the spleen and nicking his stomach. Poor Greg nearly bled out from the damage to his spleen before I had a chance to patch him up. I almost had to remove it. The stomach wound was much more mild, but a small amount of stomach acid leaked, so there is a high chance of infection. I've stabilized him for now, but it's going to be a bit touch and go for the next twelve hours."

"He's tough. He'll pull through." Harry stated with quiet confidence, gently brushing a lock of hair off the boy's forehead.

Marcel grunted in agreement, stretching and popping his back. "So what's the plan?"

"Are you able to leave him for the moment?" Harry sighed, walking towards the door to marshal his troops.

Marcel cast a quick monitoring charm on both boys, and then followed Harry into the study, where the other three men were waiting.

"Alright, what do we know?" Harry settled himself behind his desk, green eyes glittering.

Sergei shifted. "Tammy, Greg, and Daniel were out shopping for Christmas presents for the kids. A man approached them when they were near the emergency exit, and injected Tammy with something that knocked her out. Daniel was knocked out when he tried to attack the man, and Greg was knifed attempting the same. The guy definitely knew what he was doing. Clear entry, contact, and exit plan."

"And we got all this from?"

"I called in a favour. A buddy of mine hacked the store's security camera."

"So we have a picture?"

Sergei nodded. "It's being sent to the drop point, along with a copy of the film and anything else he was able to dig up. I'll be collecting it when he notifies me it's there."

"Good. Any ideas who might be behind this?" Harry's face was hard, for all that his voice was deceptively mild.

"There are a few possibilities. A few of the gangs we haven't assimilated yet have been rumbling
about taking you down a peg, but none that have access to a pro like this, and there was nothing solid enough to send up alarm bells. I think we should be looking for a rival about your level or higher, trying to send a message."

"Ok. You know what to do to hunt this dead man down, you don't need me to walk you through it. Just bring me the results. I want both of you on this for as long as it takes. Captain, I know you want to run with the Hounds, but I need you here for the moment. Daniel and Greg are both going to need your support, and I need someone on security. I'll look after the kids and run their lessons, trying to keep as close to their usual schedule as possible. Check back with each piece of information, and keep an eye out. I don't want to risk losing anyone else, especially not now."

Everyone nodded and stood, making their way out.

"Marcel," Harry called, stopping the exhausted healer before he could escape. "How's Bradshaw doing?"

Scrubbing his hands over his face, Marcel sat back down in the chair facing the desk. "He'll wake up any time now. His injuries are all fully healed, and he doesn't seem to have any neurological damage, but it's hard to tell until he's surfaced."

"Does Connor know?" Harry tilted his head inquisitively.

"I haven't said anything, though I do encourage him to talk to Marcus whenever he visits. I'm hoping it will encourage him to fight his way back to us."

"Alright. I know it's early, but get something to eat and get some rest. This has all the markers of a messy situation, and I'm going to need you in top form and the infirmary overstocked, just in case."

It was only after he'd left that Harry realised that it was only four days until Christmas.

She sat back from the monitor, pensive. This could very well be her in, but it wasn't without a large degree of risk, and it was only too likely that she would be blamed for it occurring in the first place if she approached now.

Chewing her lip thoughtfully, she took a swig of her cola, and glanced around her tiny bedsit, eyes skimming over the shabby furnishings and absurd amount of paper and computer parts littering the room. It wasn't like she'd miss the place, and it was time to move on anyway; people were starting to recognise her as a local.

It had taken an unusually long time for her to put together the pieces, almost a whole two months - by far the longest project she'd undertaken - and if it hadn't been for the cops getting their hands on a picture of 'Tiny' and linking him with Vahan, she might have been faced with her first ever failure. The kid was fucking good, no doubt. As it was, she had solved the puzzle and found exactly what she needed.

Now, she just needed to figure out the best way to get close to him.

Two days later, Harry was frustrated at still being stuck looking after the kids. It wasn't that he disliked them, or didn't find their company passably entertaining, it was that their oppressive worry about Mama Andrews had manifested into constant whinging and fights about the smallest things, and their fractious behaviour was getting on his last nerve.

The fact that he wasn't able to get any work done didn't help in the slightest.
"Lewis, you fucking twat, give that back!" The shout rang out, giving Harry enough time to dodge out of the way of the two ten year olds who went pelting past.

Harry pinched the bridge of his nose, trying desperately to find one last shred of patience.

"Na uh, dick face! Mine now!" Lewis yelled back, running into the playroom and leaping over the couch to avoid Mark's tackle.

Harry couldn't even see what Lewis had taken, but from their direction, Harry assumed it had been something from Mark's room. The children currently had a room each, though they all understood that they may get a roommate at any moment, and were expected to make the newcomers feel welcome and safe.

Harry turned to make a quick visit to the kitchens, only to hear a loud crash followed by a scream from Elise. Dashing into the room, he stopped briefly to assess the situation, before running to the little girl, carefully cradling her bleeding head.

"Mister Harry, sir, it was an accident!" Lewis looked at Harry in terror as their tiny leader crouched in the debris of the cupboard that had crashed down on top of the little girl. He could see she was hurt, and he was trembling in anticipation of what would happen. His Mister was always so patient and kind, and Elise was such a sweet little thing, he felt absolutely terrible.

"We will discuss this later. For now, I want you and Mark to go to your rooms and stay there until I come and get you." Harry stood, lifting the screaming girl in his arms and making for the infirmary. He noted that both boys disappeared into their rooms without argument, Lewis only stopping long enough to give back whatever it was he took from Mark.

It only took him a few minutes to get Elise settled on a cot and dosed with her custom sedative so Marcel could patch her up, and Harry only lingered long enough to ascertain that she wasn't badly hurt and would sleep for a few hours.

Collecting both boys, he led them silently to his office, and settled himself behind his desk. He didn't offer either boy a chair, leaving them standing awkwardly as they faced him.

He levelled his stony green gaze on the boys, and remained silent.

It was interesting, he mused as he let the silence stretch uncomfortably, that both boys were slightly older than him and yet they both instinctively looked up to him. Alex had explained it once, saying that Harry wore an 'aura of leashed power', something that had only amplified with the addition of his wand. Apparently this combined with his above average maturity and intelligence just let people think of him as a very short and baby faced adult, rather than the child he really was. Harry didn't really have an opinion about it one way or the other, he just accepted it and used it to his advantage.

Several minutes passed as the boys squirmed, before Lewis finally broke. "Is Elise ok?" He whispered, his voice hitching slightly on the last word.

Harry leaned back in his chair and tilted his head slightly, his expression unchanged. "Do you really care? Or are you too busy taking Mark's things?"

Lewis shrunk down, miserable. "I care. I do. I didn't mean to hurt her, it was an accident!"

Harry's eyes softened very slightly, though he didn't relent. "Oh, I don't doubt that. But that isn't the issue we're addressing right now." He sighed slightly when both boys started to blubber in remorse. "Sit down, both of you." He shoved a box of tissues towards them, and waited for them to compose themselves a little. "I know things have been hard lately, don't think for a second that I don't
understand. But your behaviour today put Elise in the infirmary. It she had been sitting in any other place than where she was, she could have been killed. Do you understand?"

Both boys sniffled and nodded miserably.

"That said, Elise will be fine. She's asleep right now, and will stay that way for a few hours while Marcel patches her up. All going well, she won't even have a bruise." Harry knew perfectly well she wouldn't, since Marcel would magically heal her, but that wasn't the point. Neither boy was magical, they couldn't know about why Marcel's "Magical Cures" were so effective. They'd just told them that Marcel was very good at his job, and the medicines tasted so bad to prove they were good for them. After all, everyone knows that the worse it tastes, the better it is for you.

The boys looked up, relieved.

"I have things to do today, so I'd like to make this brief. Lewis, I don't care if it was a joke or not, do not liberate any item belonging to anyone else in this house. I may be teaching you to pick pockets and break and enter, but this house is a safe place, and its residents are your family for however long you or they remain here. We look after each other here, because nobody else cares about the street rats like us. We are all we have, and if we can't trust our Nest mates, then we can't trust anyone. So; no unauthorized burglaries, and never pickpocket anyone outside your assigned zone. I know you haven't been given one yet, but it won't be too much longer before you are. Also, never steal from a Nest mate, even for a lark. These rules are in place to keep us all safe and this location uncompromised. If you break them again, I will assign you to Captain for an attitude adjustment. If it happens again after that, Mr Petrikov. Third time, and the results will be..." He levelled an icy look at the quivering boys, and smirked faintly. "Permanent." Seeing that they understood, he climbed to his feet, noting with amusement that the boys scrambled to do the same. "This is your only warning. For punishment, you will be assigned to Marcel to help him in the infirmary, and when Elise is released, you will be covering her lessons in writing and math for the next week." He smirked widely at their groans, Elise's hatred for those two subjects a well-known fact in the house. "In the meantime, come with me. We are going to the park for a while so you can burn off some energy."

It was around midnight when Harry was woken by Marcel, who excitedly announced that Bradshaw was awake, and asking for him.

Entering the private room that had been set up for the comatose lawyer, Harry smiled at the prone man. "Well, hello Sleeping Beauty!" Harry teased lightly, sitting in the chair next to the bed.

Bradshaw grinned weakly. "Marcel has filled me in on the basics of what happened since the accident. I can't thank you enough for looking after Connor." His eyes glistened wetly, and he turned his head away for a moment. "His mother," he choked. "I can't - I don't think that I'm the right one to look after him at the moment. I know it's been a while for you, but the accident only just happened for me. I only really found out everything about an hour ago. She was my everything, and now she's gone..." His brow furrowed and he took a moment to breathe heavily, getting himself back under control. "When I'm up and about again, I was hoping that Connor could keep staying with you. I'd like to see him regularly, but..." He drifted off, uncharacteristically biting his lip.

Harry nodded solemnly. "I'm not sure if you're aware, but when you named me guardian of him, because we are magical and you are not, even if you recover enough to take him back, I legally remain his primary guardian."

Bradshaw nodded slightly. "Of course I knew. I couldn't imagine anyone better positioned to look after him."
Scrubbing his face lightly, Harry sighed. "I think it would be better if he remained with me regardless. There has been a lot of upset in his life lately, and I'm disinclined to remove him from his friends. He's taken up a leadership role amongst them, and they are all relying on each other, especially now."

Bradshaw nodded. "I don't know when I'll be able to take him back. It may not be until after he has left for Hogwarts, and by then I suspect he'd rather stay with you anyway."

Harry shrugged. "We don't need to decide right now. That's years away yet, and you're going to need to recover first. Once you're up, you've got a lot of work to do, so for the moment, just rest, and spend time with your son. We can handle everything else later."

Bradshaw nodded, and lay back, closing his eyes and drifting off into a normal sleep. He'd see his boy in the morning.

Harry needed a rest. It was Christmas Eve, and he was being driven up the wall by hyper children, stroppy Captains, a restless teen, and a frustrated Healer. Everyone wanted his attention, all the time, and he'd had enough. The only saving grace had been that Sergei and Alex knew better than to bother him without need, and had in fact barely been home since Mama Andrews was taken. They'd taken to working in shifts, one of them home and resting while the other was out hunting down leads.

Harry finally snarled, and decided that if he didn't get out of the damn Nest for a few hours, he was going to end up killing someone.

He glanced at the clock to see who would be home at this time. "Alex?"

The man in question stuck his head into the room, looking slightly more ruffled than usual. "Yes, Sir?"

"Are you sufficiently rested for a trip out for a couple of hours? I need some space, and I still have to check out Potter Manor."

Alex nodded. "Thought you might. I'll let everyone else know we've gone out for a while, and let Sergei know where we'll be. Ready in ten minutes?"

Harry nodded and stood, brushing the creases out of his Armani trousers and straightening his silk shirt. He'd taken to a more formal mode of dress, even just around the house; finding that after years of being forced into second hand rags by the Dursley's, the idea of having brand new and smart looking clothing comforted him. The only exception to this was when he needed to hit the streets as Tiny, in which case he grudgingly donned less noticeable clothing; though not without distaste.

Ten minutes and a portkey later, Harry could barely restrain himself from gaping. The Entry Foyer to Potter Manor was enough to put Malfoy Manor to shame. Black marble with gold veining covered the floor and the decorative pillars lining the walls, wooden panelling was highlighted to perfection with various paintings, sculptures, and floral arrangements in what were undoubtedly hideously expensive and probably antique vases, and the ceiling - nearly three stories overhead - had been painted with enough detail to put the Sistine Chapel to shame. Dragons, Griffins, Phoenixes, Unicorns, and countless other creatures of legend decorated the ceiling, each animated and interacting like old friends, no matter how odd the combinations. Harry thought he saw a Mermaid getting disturbingly cosy with a Minotaur, but he couldn't be sure, since he'd been distracted by a Chimera playing chess with Pixie and had started analysing their game to predict their next moves.
A small pop in front of him drew his attention away from the mind bending scenes above him. The House Elf that had appeared was positively ancient, but wore a neat burgundy uniform marked with the Potter crest. Its ears flapped against the floor as it bowed low.

"Master Harry has returned at last. What can Brix be doing for Master?" The creature peered up hopefully, his rheumy eyes locked onto Harry's face with a fanaticism that the boy honestly found mildly disturbing.

"Brix, was it?" Harry asked. "Firstly, you may call me Master or Sir. I dislike my name being used, since I have a lot of enemies, and a lot of aliases. I'd rather not have to tell you what name I'll be using from moment to moment. Do you understand?"

The wizened elf cracked a grin. "Oh yes, Master. Brix be understanding. Brix will remember and will tell the other elves."

Harry pasted on Affectionate Smile Number Three, gently resting a hand on the creature's shoulder. "Thank you. Now, perhaps a tour? I don't have long this trip, so if we could keep it to the most important areas for now I'd appreciate it. I'll be coming and going a fair bit, so I'll have plenty of time to learn the less important things later."

Brix nodded, and let them through an abridged tour of the tasteful but utterly decadent residence, chattering about various details of the house, or trivia about former family members and honoured guests. He led them through the library, master bedroom suite, training room, dining room, main sitting room, conservatory, observatory, and finally, up to the owlery - though Brix firmly referred to it as a rookery.

"Why rookery?" Harry asked, puzzled.

Brix shrugged nonchalantly, having relaxed once he realised that his new Master didn't care about formalities when nobody else was around. Apparently the mostly silent guard with him didn't count. "After Master James and Mistress Lily died, and you didn't come home, the owls disappeared one by one. It happens sometimes, if the head of the family dies and the mantle isn't assumed quickly enough. The magic binding them to the family just dissipates over time and they move on. But we had a few additions turn up once the tower was empty. Five ravens moved in and decided to stay. They seem to be waiting for someone or something in particular." Opening the door, he stepped in, half turning as he waited for Harry to follow him through.

Harry looked up, noting that there was room for close to thirty birds in the tower, perches and comfortable nesting boxes of various types and sizes littering the walls all over. He could feel a faint tingle along the floor, and assumed it was a self-cleaning charm to deal with the birds leavings. The stone room was well protected from the elements while allowing the birds the freedom to come and go at will, and was well maintained, much to his pleasure.

A cawing and flapping of wings drew his attention, and he watched as five truly stunning ravens swept down onto a nearby perch. They settled themselves onto the long branch, slightly above eye level.

"Well, hello there," Harry murmured appreciatively. He extended a hand, waiting for permission from the nearest bird before stroking its breast. "Aren't you beautiful?"

The bird puffed up proudly, croaking happily.

"Do you have names, lovelies?" Harry couldn't help but coo, utterly enamoured by the intelligent birds, and deliberately ignoring Alex's amused cough behind him.
The birds shuffled, giving the impression of a negative. He wasn't sure how he knew that, he just did. Just as he knew that they were all female, sisters, and from the same laying. What's more, he knew they had been waiting for him. He decided to put the question of how aside to deal with later. "Would you like one?"

The birds cawed and flapped excitedly, bobbing and shoving each other as they tried to crowd closer to him.

Harry laughed, and examined them each closely, head tilted to the side as he thought. "Any preferences?" He waited, absorbing the strange understanding they seemed to have gifted him. "Ah, I see. Something with a theme for you all to share, then? I can work with that." Tapping his finger against his lips, he let his mind wander. "Oh! I know!" He lightly stroked each bird, starting from left to right. "Omen, Portent, Harbinger, Reaper, and Dread. How's that?"

The birds all let out various tones of a throaty gurgle, and dove off their perch, flapping around the boy happily.

Harry chuckled as they took turns to land on his shoulder and preen his hair lightly. "Alright my beauties, I need to go for now. I'll come and see you next time I'm here, ok?" He smiled, and turned to leave.

Harbinger swept down, perching on his shoulder, and began scolding him, croaking and making displeased knocking sounds. A sharp bite to his earlobe made her position very clear.

"Ah, you're coming with me, are you? Alright then." Harry chuckled, ignoring the sting from the broken skin on his ear. He understood that the birds would take turns being with him, and that one of them would always be nearby now that they had made contact at long last.

"Anything else before we return to The Nest, Sir?" Alex asked quietly, eying the birds appreciatively.

"One last thing. I want to tie the wards to me, and get a copy of the ward schematics and property defences to take with us. This will be my Fortress, so I want to make sure that it is properly protected."

Brix snapped his fingers, summoning another little elf and sent her off to get the requested schematics, before leading his new Master to the ward Keystone. As they walked, the old elf couldn't help the feeling of pleasure that swept through him. His new Master was going to be exactly what this old place needed. With any luck, he would be the one to return the Potter family to their original glory, undoing the shame that the miscreant James had brought upon it.
Chapter 16

Harry sighed and scrubbed his face in exhaustion.

It was Christmas Day, and the children had insisted he be up and with them in front of the Christmas tree at five o'clock in the morning. The tree and other festive paraphernalia had been a group project by Mama Andrews and the children a few days before she had been taken, and they'd had a sugar fuelled afternoon where they'd gone utterly mad with the decorations.

Harry was of the opinion that it looked like a tinsel factory had thrown up in his living room.

Being dragged from his warm bed by five pyjama clad children had been traumatic enough, but watching them tear through the mountains of presents under the tree had reduced him to a wreck; flashbacks of the Dursley's playing behind his eyes. For a moment, he felt the cold of inadequate clothing, and the biting hunger of an empty stomach, envy and desolation eating away at his insides as he peered through the narrow shutters on the door of his cupboard as the rest of his so called family laughed and smiled around the glittering tree.

Forcing himself to breathe deeply, he beat a quick retreat into the kitchens to obtain his secret recipe chilli hot chocolate for everyone, and buy himself enough time to calm down. And if he'd spiked is own with a liberal dose of Frangelico, well, it wasn't as if anyone would tell him off about it, even if they knew.

After a huge cooked breakfast and a lingering shower, Harry dressed in Armani trousers, wine red silk shirt that was closely tailored to his slim form, and threw on a thick wool ankle length coat. Pulling on gloves and wrapping his scarf around his neck, he collected Sergei, determined to get out of the house and away from the nauseating festivities. He honestly didn't understand what all the fuss was about, it was just another day like any other; but it seemed important to the children, so he put it down to being a non-optional social convention and tried to keep his eye rolling to a minimum.

"So, where to Boss?" Sergei asked as they strode down the street together, neither really aware of what an intimidating picture they presented as their coats swirled dramatically behind them, their steps perfectly synced.

"I don't care. I just need to get away for a bit. Do you have any errands to run that I can tag along with?" Harry looked up at his Russian bodyguard pleadingly, his emerald green eyes huge and glistening.

Sergei snorted derisively. "Put the puppy dog eyes away, Boss. If you want to go out, I'm hardly going to stop you. I don't need to do anything, but I wouldn't mind stopping down Knockturn for a few bits and pieces, since you're offering."

Harry smiled cheekily, skipping ahead and spinning so he could walk backwards. "What are we waiting for? Why are we still here? Hurry up, old man!"

The mercenary rolled his eyes indulgently and ducked into a discrete alley, holding his elbow out for his bratty protégé. With a deft spin on his heel and a soft crack, the two of them disappeared.

Reappearing in the Apparition Zone, they quickly slipped through the crowd and ducked into the shadowed alley.

Harry dutifully followed the older man around, taking the opportunity to browse while his
companion haggled, threatened, bribed, and traded his way through several stores. Their final stop was Borgin and Burkes, and Harry entertained himself by browsing the new merchandise in the back room.

His interest piqued by a bone white carved trunk, he called Mr Borgin over.

The shopkeep scratched his scalp through his lank and disturbingly greasy hair. "Ah, interesting piece that one. Picked it up yesterday from an acquaintance. Doing him a favour, really. It's not magical, despite being made from Mage Wood. Don't usually buy from him, but he claimed his latest venture had fallen through when some merchandise went missing, and he needed some cash to get out of town before some less than pleasant folks decided to get chummy, if you know what I mean."

Harry nodded with a bland smile. "May I?"

"Of course, of course! Wish all my customers were as thoughtful as you, lad. You're a rare one, no doubt about that!"

The boy rolled his eyes and he kneeled next to the trunk, looking it over closely. He ignored Mr Borgin's nattering about the benefits of buying unenchanted Mage Wood and focused. There was something… His fingers found the slight depression that didn't match the rest of the engraving, and the entire top section of the trunk flipped out of the way, leaving a small compartment hidden in the base.

"Huh," he blinked in surprise. "I think I found the missing merchandise."

Sergei stepped up, leaning over his boss's shoulder to see, only to pause and blink in surprise as well. "What is that?"

"Looks like some sort of big cat - or at least it will be when it grows up."

"You mean like a Puma?" The Russian watched as the boy carefully lifted the pitiful kitten out of the filthy compartment.

Mr Borgin was beside himself, wringing his hands fretfully. "I had no idea! I don't do live things! I would never have - you know I wouldn't - not right, it's not!"

Harry continued his policy of ignoring the annoying thing until it shut up and went away. "He's in bad shape, Sergei. Is there anything we can do? He's just a baby!" He settled the shivering kitten close to his chest, stroking it gently. He was trembling just as much, fighting against the flashbacks of being locked in his cupboard for days on end. Shuddering, he bent his head and nuzzled the little fur ball gently, eliciting a weak mewl.

"No idea Boss, but Marcel might be able to help. Not sure if he's ever worked on animals before, but he's a soft touch, so I wouldn't be surprised."

Nodding, Harry stood. "Mr Borgin, I'll be taking the kitten. I think I'll skip the trunk, if it's all the same."

With a rather impressive swirl of his coat that was miraculously no less intimidating for all that he was cuddling a fuzzy thing with huge eyes to his chest, Harry strode from the store, his faithful bodyguard hot on his heels.

"Well firstly, he is actually a she."
"What?" Harry looked up from where he was stroking the sleeping kitten in the box next to his desk, focusing his attention back on the Healer.

"You've been saying he. She is a she."

"Oh. Alright then. Is she going to be ok?" Harry fought the urge to bite his lip in nervousness, keeping his face as blank as he could manage.

"With some TLC and a bit of time, she'll be fine. It's lucky you got her here when you did though. She's severely underweight, and was dangerously dehydrated. We're going to have to feed her carefully though, she's too small to be away from her mother, really. I'd put her at maybe six weeks old? It's interesting though; she's completely non magical, so I have no earthly idea why she was locked in a magical trunk."

Harry scowled. "Considering what Mr Borgin said of the acquaintance he bought the trunk from and how she was found, I'd say that they were trying to smuggle her. Some rich arseholes idea of showing off his superiority - like the Malfoy's with those fucking albino peacocks. Her mother is probably dead."

"What are you going to do with her? Sergei was right when he guessed she was a Puma, and Mountain Lion's get big." Marcel brushed his hair behind his ear and sat, finally putting the clipboard down, his urge to fiddle with things sated for the moment.

"She'll stay with me for the moment, but I'll be moving back to Sanctum as soon as the situation with Mama Andrews is resolved. I'll also be spending a lot of time at Fortress. I'll keep her there once she's big enough to not need me. The grounds are extensive there, I'm sure she'd love it."

"Sanctum? Fortress? Are these new codenames you've forgotten to tell me about?" The handsome Italian pouted playfully.

Harry rolled his eyes, smiling faintly. "Well if you paid attention in the meetings instead of linking all of my paperclips together into new and annoying patterns then you might remember things like this. The same also applies to your repeated theft of my pens, stapler, and coffee mug. But yes; Sanctum is the penthouse, and Fortress is the Manor."

Marcel looked up from where he had just started linking all the paperclips into a chain. "Sorry, did you say something?"

The lock popped open with a soft click, and she held her breath, listening for any movement in the house. Breathing out slowly at the somnolent quiet, she slipped inside, gently closing the front door behind her.

Treading lightly, she slipped down the hall, her soft soled shoes completely silent on the polished wood. She kept close to the wall, a black clad shadow as she stepped closer to her target.

With a faint grin, she wedged a chair under the door to the guards room. Despite their pattern for the last few days, both men were currently home, and she wasn't going to risk them stumbling on her before her task was complete.

Pressing her ear against the final door, she listened for a moment, before carefully turning the doorknob. Slipping inside, she ghosted over to the bed, and looked down at the lump under the duvet. She couldn't see much of the boy, and the lump was unsettlingly small, but she had done her research. There was no other way.
Trembling slightly, she leaned forward, fingers curling around the edge of the blankets.

Alex groaned and stretched, glancing at the clock before settling drowsily in his chair in front of the fire. The warm light flickered playfully over his features and his half lidded eyes glittered in the low light, changing the hazel to a warm amber.

He stretched out an arm, and lazily lifted a tumbler of scotch to his lips, enjoying the burn as it slipped down his throat and warmed his stomach.

"Oi, suka, it's time for rounds."

Sergei's gruff tones broke through his comfortable haze, and he scowled. "Not your bitch, arsehole. And it's your turn."

The Russian chuckled. "I've got a winning hand at poker from a week ago that says it isn't."

Alex scowled again, and grudgingly hauled himself to his feet. "Curse you and your immovable face! One day I will figure out your tell!"

Sergei raised his glass in a toast, grinning slightly. "And until you do, I will continue taking your money, valuables, and IOUs. But for now, ni pukha, ni pyera!"

With a playful sneer, Alex turned to the door, raising one fist as he walked. "K chyortu!" Grabbing the doorhandle, he frowned when it refused to budge. Testing it a few more times, he threw a look over his shoulder. "Sergei?"

The older man swiftly joined him at the door, testing the knob himself a few times.

"You think there's trouble? Because if we bust the door down and wake the kids for no reason, Harry's going to have our balls. It took him three hours to get the kids asleep after all the sugar and excitement today." Alex bit his lip lightly as he pondered.

"Better the kids wake up than the Boss getting offed because we didn't do our jobs. But I agree we should try the quiet way first. I can't hear anything outside, so it's not the cops at least."

The two men set themselves to casting every unlocking charm they knew.

A cold metal cylinder pressed firmly against the base of her skull.

Raising her hands slowly, she straightened, not daring to turn and look into the burning green eyes she knew were boring into the back of her head. Unable to repress a shudder, she trembled when the boy's icy voice broke the silence.

"Christmas was last night, Santa, and you didn't come down the chimney; so why don't we talk about who you are, and why I shouldn't ventilate your head?"
Chapter 17

"Alex, Sergei, we'll be taking breakfast in my office. Marcel, Captain, you're on kid duty." Harry strode through the dining room, barely slowing long enough to impart his instructions.

The mercenaries looked at each other with a grimace. Despite their best efforts at unlocking the door, they'd been rescued by a laughing Captain barely an hour later, who had informed them that the door hadn't been locked at all, it had simply had a chair wedged under the handle. Their mortification had been complete when Connor had overheard the conversation, and had enquired innocently why they hadn't simply gone out the window.

Settling themselves in the chairs at the small circular table in the office, the men waited for their boss to join them.

Harry settled himself into his seat, leaning back and resting his elbow on the armrest. He tapped his lips contemplatively with one finger, the rest of his fist curled under his chin. "Tell me, why is it that I pay you both so much when a complete stranger is able to waltz into my bedroom unopposed while you are both in the house? For fucks sake, your room is next to mine!" Green eyes glared piercingly at the uncomfortable men. "And don't think for a second that I don't know that you were freed from your room by Captain, or that going out the window never even occurred to you. If I hadn't set up my own wards around the property and tied them exclusively to myself, it's entirely possible that I'd be dead this morning."

"Oh, don't be so dramatic, you big baby. I wasn't going to hurt you!" A female voice broke into the conversation, quickly joined by a slim girl dressed in tight black pants and an equally tight long sleeved turtleneck sweater. Her straight brown hair was cut into a chin length bob, and had purple streaks running through it, and they caught the light as she tucked a strand behind her ear. Her hazel eyes sparkled with humour, and her plump lips naturally curved as if she was constantly on the edge of bursting into laughter. She was small and lithe, and moved with a casual grace that was partially hidden by her terrible posture and flippant attitude. She looked to be about sixteen, and about as threatening as a butterfly on a plate of fairy bread.

She rolled her eyes when both men jumped to their feet, instinctively drawing their weapons.

"Yes, yes, you're very manly; I wasn't going to hurt you!" A female voice broke into the conversation, quickly joined by a slim girl dressed in tight black pants and an equally tight long sleeved turtleneck sweater. Her straight brown hair was cut into a chin length bob, and had purple streaks running through it, and they caught the light as she tucked a strand behind her ear. Her hazel eyes sparkled with humour, and her plump lips naturally curved as if she was constantly on the edge of bursting into laughter. She was small and lithe, and moved with a casual grace that was partially hidden by her terrible posture and flippant attitude. She looked to be about sixteen, and about as threatening as a butterfly on a plate of fairy bread.

She rolled her eyes when both men jumped to their feet, instinctively drawing their weapons.

"Yes, yes, you're very manly; I'm practically drowning in your testosterone and I'm very impressed with your dick substitutes. Now get out of my way, you're blocking the way to the food."

Harry's lips twitched into a faint smile, despite his best efforts.

"Alex, Sergei, meet Shot. Shot, this is Alexander Charleston, and Sergei Petrikov."

The girl didn't even bother looking up from her plate, simply waving dismissively and muttering around a mouthful of bacon. "Yeah, I've checked them out already."

The men eyed her suspiciously, cautiously resuming their seats.

"Checked us out?" Alex questioned, picking up his fork.

Harry smiled, baring too many teeth. "Shot here has a rather unique talent. Where I see patterns, she can manipulate anything computer or electronic based as easily as breathing. She's also an expert at finding information, no matter how well hidden. When she says she's checked you out, she means that she's put a file together on you. I've seen it, it's a lot more detailed than Bradshaw's, even. Sergei, are you aware that you were voted 'Most Likely to Set Someone on Fire' by your graduating class?
And Alex, you never mentioned you won your school spelling bee in first grade."

Both men winced, knowing how comprehensive the file must be if those details had been unearthed.

"Now, Shot has kindly provided us with some valuable information, which we will be discussing in detail after breakfast. She's proposed a trade, of sorts, and I'm seriously considering it. However, given that some of the information pertains to Mama Andrews current whereabouts, I want to keep Captain out of the loop for the moment. He's too volatile right now, and I want him out of the line of fire, just in case things go wrong. I refuse to leave Greg and Daniel orphans if it can be avoided."

His Hounds nodded, and silence reigned as the four quickly finished their meal. Once the house elves had discretely whisked the empty dishes away, Harry gestured to Shot, who pulled out a file, and offered it to Sergei.

"If you could make copies please?"

Sergei obliged, mildly curious about why the girl was unwilling to do so herself, despite being clearly magical.

"Cheers. Now, this file contains everything I could find on Mrs Andrew's abduction, who was involved, and where they are. I've included schematics, guard rotations, profiles on the key players, and a few titbits for blackmail if you need it. I have a much more detailed file, of course, but I've provided everything I thought was relevant. I doubt you need to know about Lucas McCreedy's truly terrifying spaghetti fetish or Timothy Winter's forays into the world of Furries to pull this off."

Alex pursed his lips, eyes narrowed as he tried to ignore those mental images. "And you want what, exactly, in return for this information?"

Shot sighed, her perky demeanour darkening instantly. "As I discussed with your boss last night, Mrs Andrews is being held out the back of a, uh, specialist establishment." Her tongue flicked out to wet her lips, and she flicked a nervous glance at the boy watching her quietly. "Do they really need to know?"

Harry nodded slightly. "Yes. Though the information won't leave this room."

Sighing again, she straightened, eyes locked over Harry's head and jaw set. "Fine. The building is a high end specialist brothel. They provide trained kids, and a few very special teens. My little sister is there, and I can't get her out without help."

The men stiffened, glancing quickly at the unmoved Harry. Clearly, he was already aware of this information.

"The full story, if you please, Shot." Harry murmured, picking up the puma kitten that was chewing his shoelaces, and setting her on his lap. She snuggled down for a nap, purring softly with her face buried against his stomach.

Realising if she wanted their help, she would have to show all her cards, Shot grimaced. "Ok then, a little history for context."

"I didn't come from a good family. My mother was a junkie, and my father was an abusive fuck. He was more than happy to keep my mother supplied, and she in turn did whatever - or whoever - he told her to. When I was four, he decided he'd had enough of my 'freeloading' and he was going to have me earn my keep. I'm sure I don't need to spell it out for you. Anyway, a year later, my little sister was born. I'd just turned five - we actually share a birthday." She smiled fondly, her eyes distant as she remembered the little girl who had been the only ray of sunshine in her dark world.
Clearing her throat, she continued.

"I don't know why, but even my scumbag father adored her. He treated her like an absolute princess, even though he still treated me as anything but. I didn't resent her for it though, I was just glad that she wouldn't be treated like I was. There was nothing I wouldn't do for her." Sniffling slightly, she rubbed her eyes. "When I was seven, things got even worse. Rather than just keeping me for his own use, my father decided that he would offer me up for others as well. He charged them larger amounts, and offered me to the real sicko's, the ones who like to brutalize kids, not just screw them.

"One day, I was beaten and used so badly I could barely move afterwards, let alone do my chores around the house or service any of the other clients. He was so furious he beat me again, until I lost consciousness. When I woke up, I knew that I couldn't take it anymore. If things kept escalating, I'd be dead before the year was out. So as soon as I could stand, I ran.

She drew a shuddering breath, her voice thick with suppressed tears. "God, if I'd known, I never would have left Alice there! But he doted on her, and I was only seven and badly hurt! How the hell could I have looked after a two year old, even if I'd known?" She buried her face in her hands, shoulders shaking slightly as she sobbed quietly. "I tried to keep an eye on her, wanted to watch her grow up from a distance, even if she didn't know who I was, but I got into some trouble, and couldn't stick around. I lost track of her. By the time I got back, that bastard had sold her to the McKinnon's to pay off a debt he'd run up with them. It took me ages - nearly a whole month - to find her, but I can't get her out on my own. The place is a fucking fortress, and while I may be a tech genius, I'm useless in a fight. So here I am."

Alex quietly offered her a handkerchief, while Sergei pondered her story quietly.

"So when you saw that one of ours was in the same building, you decided to take the chance to recruit people who are a little more handy in that department than yourself." Sergei grunted.

Shot nodded, discretely wiping her nose. "Yeah. I'd heard rumours that Vahan had a set against people who sold kids, so I was already checking him out to see if I could convince him to help. When Mrs Andrews was snatched, I decided to see if he'd accept a trade. I was pretty sceptical about what a kid could do to help, but, well, his reputation is well earned, from what I've been able to find."

"So, you provide the intel, we do the grunt work. That's the exchange you're offering?" Alex asked quietly, his hazel eyes sympathetic but still guarded.

Harry chose this moment to interrupt. "Partially. Shot is a very valuable resource, a fact of which she's well aware. Her sister, also, will be in need of assistance, probably for quite some time, given that she's spent the bulk of her life in that establishment. From the profile Shot has put together on her, it seems that Alice has a unique skill, which makes her highly sought after, but not particularly well suited to life outside a sheltered environment. Our best guess is that the situation she grew up in has fractured her magical core - not that the muggles would understand this - and the free magic is expending itself as a form of empathy so she doesn't spontaneously combust from it - a very real danger if her ability is ever disabled. She's able to not only feel the emotions of those around her, but also influence them to a degree. Nothing overt, and no full control, but enough to aid in protecting herself. Soothing anger, boosting affection, that sort of thing. As I'm sure you can imagine, such a skill would be useful, but detrimental if exposed to regular life. Too many people, too much stimulus."

The men nodded pensively.

Harry shifted, and lightly scritched his kitten, who despite being so young was almost large enough
to drape fully across his lap. He stroked the soft spotted coat, smiling slightly when she shivered with
pleasure under his hand. "So Shot has offered her skills to me exclusively, in exchange for a safe
place for her sister to live for as long as she wants it, and a weather eye on her after that." He snorted
at the incredulous looks that flitted across his men's faces. "Not *those* skills, perverts. Her tech and
information retrieval skills."

The Hounds grinned in amusement, ignoring Shot rolling her eyes.

"So what are you thinking, Boss?" Sergei asked, sipping a cup of coffee that a dedicated house elf
had just delivered.

Harry frowned, pursing his lips thoughtfully. "Marcel is struggling with being around muggle kids all
the time, and having to hide everything he's doing. I'm thinking I'll move him to The Haunt. I'll offer
space there to Mama Andrews, Captain, and Daniel too. Greg can stay here, he's been thinking about
moving out of home for a couple of months now, and this will keep the entire family happy. I'll have
Captain work with both the Nestlings and Ghosts regularly for basic defence training and the like.
Same things we've got him doing now. Between the two groups, and running security for both
houses, it should be enough to keep him busy."

Alex frowned. "What about here? Who will you have look after the Nestlings day to day, and screen
any new little birds to see if they are Ghosts?"

Shot lit up, a wide smile splitting her face. "Alice! She'd be perfect! She's already trained for how to
run a large household with lots of kids, she's excellent at the counselling thing because of the
empathy, she understands what the kids will be dealing with emotionally, and she won't bat an eyelid
at any less than legal dealings. And because of her own magic, she'll be able to spot any magical kids
that come through and send them over to The Haunt! Oh, you are *good*, Mr Potter!"

Harry chuckled as his men stiffened again and eyeballed his newest acquisition darkly. "I'm aware.
Stand down, men. You didn't think she'd approach me without checking me out as thoroughly as she
does everything else? The very fact that she was able to not only figure out where we are, but my
*entire* history, not to mention my financial and legal contortions, had me convinced to offer her a job
even before the whole sob story came to light. And I made her swear a secrecy oath before
breakfast."

"At gunpoint," she grumbled.

"At gunpoint," he nodded amiably, smiling slightly.

"Alright, so, anything else we need to know before planning this raid?" Alex asked, gratefully
sipping his tea.

Shot shifted uncomfortably, flushing in shame and dropping her eyes to the floor. "Just one thing.
Alice doesn't remember me. She doesn't even know she has a sister, and I want to keep it that way. I
don't want her to know I was involved in this beyond what I'll do for any other job, I want her to
think of me as just another of Vahan's employee's."

Alex frowned lightly. "If you don't mind me asking, why? We will of course respect your wishes in
this, I'm just curious."

Shot glared at him sullenly. "How the fuck would I explain to her that I left her behind, and because
I was too weak, too *selfish* to take her with me, she was sold into prostitution and slavery? That it's
my fault her life was so shit that something in her broke and she will never be able to cast active
magic? That because of *me*, she will never be able to be a part of the world that should have been
Harry’s eyes glittered as he watched the exchange, the patterns forming in his mind, calculating the best approaches to achieve his desired results, weighing the benefits of using them or leaving things to fall as they would; a thousand possible futures stringing into webs in his mind's eye.

He decided to intervene, primarily because he was sick of all the emotion in the air. He didn't understand it, and he didn't like it. He may be perfectly willing to take advantage of it in other people to manipulate them for his own benefit, but it was an irritant when there was work to be done.

"It wasn't your fault, Shot. You did what you had to, and you had no way of knowing. But if you want our silence on the matter, you have it. The topic will not be broached again, by us, anyway. Now, we need to get this raid planned. I, for one, want to retrieve Mama Andrews before Captain punches any more holes in my walls."

Harry groaned, rubbing his face. He'd sent out Alex and Sergei to do some last minute recon and act as decoys, given that they now knew the McKinnon's - the ones behind Mama Andrew’s abduction - were stalking them. Luckily both men had been exceptionally carefully when coming and going from The Nest, and that combined with the discrete wards that prompted anyone not keyed into them to remember something urgent they had to do elsewhere, had allowed The Nest to remain uncompromised.

Harry wasn't concerned about Mama Andrews disclosing their location, even under duress, since because she wasn't bound by Vahan's secrecy oaths, she'd only been keyed to part of the wards. She could walk in any time she wished, but was unable to remember where the house was, or any incriminating or identifying information about Harry if she tried to tell anyone else. It wasn't as stringent as a Fidelius Charm, but it was effective enough for a home for muggle children. All of the residents not bound by the oath were placed under the same spell, though of course the muggles were never informed of this.

Wandering out to the backyard, he sat on the back porch and eyed the gardens, breathing deeply in the cold air. He'd sent Marcel and Bradshaw to The Haunt earlier, and Captain and a finally healed Greg to the park with the children since they still had access to too much sugar and were driving him up the wall with their constant yelling and interruptions. Shot had ducked back to her bedsit to pack up all her belongings, since she was now to be a permanent part of his entourage, moving with Vahan and his Hounds whenever they did. Of course she wasn't likely to follow him around like his guards, but he wanted her on hand at whatever place he was staying, and she had agreed, as long as he paid for duplicates of all of her tech gear so that she could - well, he wasn't sure what she intended to do, since she had descended into tech-talk that he couldn't parse. He could probably learn enough to follow the gist of the technobabble, but at this point he had no intention of doing so. If he was honest, all the tech stuff bored him silly.

He laced his fingers behind his head, stretching back until his spine clicked and his muscles tingled, enjoying having the house entirely to himself for a change. It was peaceful, and he found himself smiling slightly, even as he shivered from the chill.

Slightly restless, he decided to nip up to the shop on the corner, and buy himself a treat of some description. He could easily ask the elves to provide something, but the need to get out of the house and stretch his legs for a few minutes before everyone got back drove him from his chair. Alex and Sergei would have a fit about him leaving the house without an escort, of course, but there were benefits to being the boss, one of which was he could have alone time if he bloody well wanted it.

Throwing his ankle length coat on over his standard Armani and silk combo, this time with an added
cashmere sweater, he tucked his wand into the heavily charmed holster on his arm, and added a
couple of extra blades to the ones already strapped to his body. Shoving his wallet into his back
pocket and tugging on gloves and a scarf, he strode out the door.

The walk to the shop was just what he needed. The air chilled his exposed skin, but the weak sun
peeking through the clouds made the snow glitter prettily, and the recent snowfall had coated
everything in a lovely white blanket, not yet reduced to muddy slush. He browsed the shelves idly,
not desiring anything in particular but contemplating buying some different candy to stash in his desk
for when Alex gave him stupid amounts of paperwork to go through.

He was debating the benefits of red frogs versus jaffas when a scuffed footfall behind him alerted
him he wasn't alone. Before he could react, something heavy hit the back of his head, and everything
went black.
Harry kept his breathing slow and steady as he regained consciousness. His head was throbbing abominably, and his wrists ached where they were tied above his head, the shooting pains running down his arms letting him know he'd been out for a couple of hours at least. He was dangling from his hands, his toes barely able to touch the floor, and the weight of his body dragging on his arms was sending bolts of agony through shoulders that felt stretched to the edge of dislocation.

He was also naked.

He sighed silently. His Hounds were going to be unbearable, and he was going to have to listen to them bitching and moaning about this every time he tried to take a piss with the door shut, he just knew it.

Stretching out his senses, he tried to get a feel for the room he was in, and any unexpected company he may have in it. As near as he could tell, he was in an empty corner of a mechanics workshop or similar. He could smell dust and fuel, hints of grease and hot metal.

There was a faint breeze coming from the left, but from its slightly stale smell he thought it was air conditioning from further inside the building. He strained his ears, and could barely make out the sounds of traffic; nothing heavy, but a regularly used road. He couldn't detect anything from further inside, but he knew that didn't really mean anything.

As he cracked his eyes open the faintest bit, he could see someone sitting in a chair a handful of meters away, watching him with an expression of boredom. He couldn't be certain in the half light, but he thought it was the man who had taken Mama Andrews - that they'd identified as Michael Foster. Interesting.

He must have given some sign that he was awake, because his observer raised an eyebrow.

"Awake then? Good. I was getting tired of waiting for you to rejoin us."

Deciding there was no benefit to playing possum, Harry raised his head, but adopted his Tiny persona. It had taken Shot two months to figure out that he was actually Vahan, so he didn't think it likely that anyone else had put it together.

"What do you want? Where am I?" His eyes were opened wide and he made himself look as young as possible.

The man smiled nastily. "Well, Tiny, word on the street is that you're the key to getting access to your boss. And my boss, he wants a word. Vahan has been getting a bit too big for his britches, and has been interfering with business." He shook his head in mock sadness. "Nothing against you kid, but I hope you suck cock as well as Peterson bragged, because you're going to be doing a lot of it from now on. Mr McKinnon has decided that you're too pretty to dispose of, so he's going to keep you and the rest of Vahan's baby sluts as compensation for business disruptions. After he tortures your boss to death, of course."

Blinking slowly, Harry wondered if this guy was just really lonely, or thought that he had to prove he was a bad guy by monologuing like one.

Groaning heavily, Harry allowed his head to drop backward, using the dramatic movement to glance around the room. He'd been right, he was in a mechanic's workshop.
"You want to use your peanut dick on me in some pathetic attempted to soothe your ego over your inability to attract someone on your own merits, fine, get on with it. But if you're going to keep with the bad guy ranting, then please, kill me now."

The man stood with a snarl, stepping closer. Drawing back, he launched a punch at Harry's vulnerable stomach, leaving the boy choking and gasping to reclaim the air that had been forced violently from his lungs.

"Mouthy little brat, aren't you."

Harry smiled around gritted teeth. "Just how Daddy liked it. Said I had a smart little mouth, and a talented tongue. Just perfect for all sorts of uses!"

The man chuckled lightly, his eyes roaming over Harry's exposed body. "I'll bet. I look forward to getting to know the back of it intimately. I'm going to get to know it real well."

Internally, Harry was rolling his eyes. Honestly, this loser couldn't be more cliché if he tried!

"Yeah, well, I'm sure your boss wants to talk to me before you gag me with your clit, sorry, I meant your huge veiny and very masculine prong of doom, so why don't you run along like a good little lackey and tell him I'm awake?" Harry mentally winced. The hit to the head must have been harder than he thought, he was having trouble concentrating enough to remember which persona he was supposed to be using right now. He could feel himself slipping between the more softly spoken Tiny and his usual foul mouthed vitriol as Vahan. Given the throbbing at the back of his skull, he assumed he had at least a mild concussion, since it was unlikely they'd drugged him if they wanted answers.

Scowling, the man walked over to a phone mounted on the wall, and dialled, the handset pressed against his ear.

"He's awake, Boss. Mouthy little shit, too. Want me to soften him up a bit before you get here?" He listened for a moment, mouth drawn down in disappointment. "Yes, Boss."

Replacing the handset, he sullenly resumed his seat, eying Harry darkly.

Harry kept his amusement carefully hidden. So they were going to play it like that, were they? Tiny was Vahan's closest, and they thought he would be so easily manipulated? Pathetic.

His musing was interrupted by the door opening and two men walking in. The suit was huge and looked about as intelligent as a concussed rock, taking up a guard position; the other, who Harry assumed was McKinnon, wore dress pants, and a button up shirt covered with a knitted vest. Harry thought he looked like a middle aged man who had never left his frat boy days, especially with the thinning black slicked back hair. The softening middle didn't help at all.

"You must be Tiny. I apologise for my associate's poor treatment; he can be a little over enthusiastic at times." Turning to Harry's original abductor, he frowned slightly. "Let him down Foster, and for goodness sake, give the poor boy his clothes."

Harry winced as he was lowered to the ground and his binding released. Rubbing his wrists, he waited for the pins and needles to fade before lightly massaging his strained shoulders. He ran a hand down his bare forearm, and silently berated himself for leaving the house without his wand. He deserved the arse kicking Sergei and Alex were going to give him for being so foolish.

Shuffling to his feet, he pulled his clothes back on while playing up his fear, particularly of Foster. Patting over his pockets, he scowled at the men.
McKinnon looked faintly amused. "I'm sure you can understand why we would confiscate your weapons, but I assure you, you will not require them."

Nodding, Harry sullenly wrapped his arms around his ribs, hunching slightly. His head lowered and eyes hidden by his fringe, he glanced around, absorbing as much detail as possible. He could hear Dave faintly in the back of his mind, whispering instructions.

*Observe your surroundings. What can you use to defend yourself? Where are the exits? Wait for your opportunity, strike, and get the hell out. Don't try to be a hero. Hero's get dead. Strike like the little viper you are, and come back to finish them off on your terms. And then steal their wallet.*

"Foster, make yourself useful and go get us something to eat. Roast beef and gravy rolls, I think, from the place on the corner. Chips and drinks too. That alright with you, Tiny?" McKinnon glanced enquiringly at Harry.

Shrugging, Harry shuffled nervously in place.

Scowling, Foster stalked out of the room, muttering about being treated like an errand boy.

Harry watched in hidden amusement, fighting to stifle the twitching of his lips. They had clearly played this game before, and their acting was rather well done, if a trifle obvious.

"Please, sit. Can I get you anything while we wait?" McKinnon smiled winsomely, and gestured to the metal folding chair Foster had been using.

Harry hesitated, then moved to the chair, plonking onto it unceremoniously, his arms still locked tightly around his ribs.

"Now, I'm sure you want to know why I wanted to talk to you, yes?" McKinnon gave what he clearly thought was a fatherly smile, crouching down to Harry's eye level. "Your boss and I have had a couple of business conflicts, and I want to meet with him so we can talk it out. Do you think you could tell me where to find him?"

Harry gave him a flat look, the throbbing in his head increasing in line with his irritation.

"I may be young, Mr McKinnon, but I am not your average idiot child. I'd appreciate it if you would stop condescending to me." His eyes blazed an eerie green as he sneered at the man squatting in front of him. "And if you think for one second that I would betray Vahan, you're even stupider than you look. Quite the accomplishment, let me assure you."

McKinnon eyeballed the boy for a long moment before sighing in mock sadness. "Well, I suppose we can skip the niceties then." Standing, he motioned his guard closer. "John, if you would?"

Moving forward, the mountain cracked his knuckles threateningly. He loomed over the boy, an ugly sneer on his face. "Boy, this will go a lot easier on you if you just start talking."

Harry's head was buzzing and he had trouble focusing, the world around him fuzzing in and out. He glanced up, seeing a huge man standing over him threateningly and calling him boy, and something in him snapped.

He was back at the Dursley's, Vernon about to hit him. But this time was different. This time, Harry had hours upon hours of training with his Hounds. This time, Harry wasn't a scrawny malnourished runt. This time, he was Vahan. Lashing out with his foot, he nailed the man in the groin, throwing himself to the side and off the chair. Grabbing the backrest, he swung it, smashing the lowered head of the thug as he doubled over with pain and clutched his damaged jewels.
McKinnon took one look at his now unconscious guard and lunged for the alarm button next to the phone.

Harry snarled and tackled him to the ground, throwing a flurry of wild punches into the yielding flesh beneath him.

Grunting, McKinnon shoved the flailing hellion off him, scrabbling as he tried to fight his way to his feet.

Harry twitched as he heard scuffling at the door. Oh goodie, guards. He lunged away from McKinnon, snatching up a large wrench and a stanley knife from the bench next to the door. He spun as the door opened and two men ran through.

The first man fell to a blow from the wrench on his temple, blood splashing wetly against Harry and the wall. His body collapsed limply into his companion with the side of his skull caved in, knocking the second man off balance as he instinctively tried to catch him. Harry continued his movement, ducking low and slashing the Two's Achilles Tendon as he swept past. Spinning on the ball of his foot, Harry swept the wrench down to cave the hobbled man's skull, his other arms slashing up and across the eyes of a third man coming through the door. The wrench slipped from Harry's hand, flying across and hitting McKinnon square in the face, knocking him out cold.

Harry giggled.

Screaming, Three clutched at his ruined eyes, and tripped over the corpses in the doorway, falling on top of Harry before he could dodge out of the way and knocking the stanley knife from his grasp, sending it skittering along the floor and under a bench.

A fourth man jumped over the squirming tangle of bodies, running to McKinnon's side and checking his pulse. Assured that his employer was still alive at least, he turned to Harry and his comrade who were still struggling on the floor.

Dropping to one knee, he tried to grab Harry's hands, intending to restrain him while they sorted out what was going on. Unfortunately for him, Harry kept one hand free. Grabbing the man's flick baton from his utility belt, Harry used the flicking motion to smack Three in the face, the brought it up to collect Four under the jaw, knocking him out.

With a snarl, Three managed to pull a handgun from his own belt just as Harry scrambled free, cursing the pain in his arms for making him weak and slow. Aiming wildly, the man shot at where he thought Harry was, missing the boy entirely but hitting the oxygen bottle for the oxy torch.

Harry's eyes widened in alarm, and he dove behind some metal sheets with a yelp, wincing when he heard the breached bottle and the ones surrounding it explode. Shrapnel peppered the metal he was hiding behind, pinging off harmlessly and he smirked viciously as he smelled cooked meat. Hopefully they hadn't gotten under cover in time.

Shuffling along on his hands and knees, he emerged out the other end of the sheet metal, only to feel the muzzle of a gun pressed against his head. Cursing mentally, he looked up at a new guard, one who must have come in after he'd had to give up bottlenecking the others in the doorway.

"Stand up, slowly." Five growled.

Harry shimmied free of the metal and stood up, hands raised. Five took a half step back, keeping the gun trained on the flushed boy.

Harry sighed, then lunged forward, bringing his elbow down on the inside of Five's, and twisting the
hand holding the gun up and under the man's chin. He smirked, slipping his smaller finger inside the trigger guard and firing, the bullet tearing through Five's head and exiting through the top with a messy splatter.

Pulling the gun free from Five's limp fingers, Harry ignored the mess in his hair and looked around for his next target. He pouted slightly when he realised that only McKinnon and Three were still alive. McKinnon had been shielded from the blast by his mountain - who now looked charred and somewhat pulpy. Three was not in good shape, eye ball juice and blood running down his face, and shrapnel wounds and burns all over. Even if Harry left him, he wouldn't survive the next hour.

Harry shrugged and tucked the gun in the back of his waistband, fishing around under the benches until he located the stanley knife again. Humming a bouncy little tune, he set to work.

Harry had just finished playing with Three and was eying a conscious and kneeling McKinnon when his Hounds arrived. Alex's mutter of "bloody hell, it looks like the aftermath of a Greek tragedy in here" sent the concussed boy into fits of laughter, which subsided to random chuckles at the expression both men wore.

Surprisingly, it was Sergei who began the verbal lashing.

"For fucks sake, Boss. We spent hours working out a plan of entry, and what the fuck do you do? Ignore it all and go in on your own! Why the fuck couldn't you have waited until one of us got home before you got yourself kidnapped?" The Russian snapped, his accent thickening slightly in his fury.

Harry pouted. "Yes, because I deliberately wasted everyone's time and effort! How the fuck did you get inside anyway?"

Alex smirked. "We followed Foster through the front door." He held up a plastic bag of food. "Hungry?"

Harry laughed. "Maybe later. Got a concussion from where the fuckhead knocked me out, I want Marcel to check me over first."

Alex nodded with a faint smile, then turned his attention to the man on his knees in front of his boss. "What are we going to do with him?"

Harry tilted his head, absently licking a drop of Three's blood from his lip. "I'm feeling inspired by history."

The Hounds both raised curious eyebrows.

"Oh?" Alex questioned. He knew his boss, this was going to fun.

"Mm. I was in a church the other day, and the minister was talking about this guy called Jesus, who preached forgiveness and turning the other cheek."

"And this inspired you?" Sergei grunted sceptically.

Harry grinned wolfishly. "Yeah. He was crucified, and I want to try it."

Their arrival back at The Nest with Mama Andrews, Alice and five children aged between six and thirteen was hectic, to say the least.
Marcel and Shot took over, hustling the sedated bodies into the infirmary, leaving Harry and the Hounds to face down a practically foaming Captain.

Connor peered briefly around the corner of the playroom, before ducking back in to keep the other Nestlings out of the way. Harry made a mental note to spend some one on one time with him soon. The kid had been doing really well lately.

Captain opened his mouth to rant, only for Vahan to smirk and tilt his head cutely. "We brought you a present," he sang lightly. The thump of Foster hitting the ground at the soldier's feet was met by stunned silence.

Captain looked from the unconscious man at his feet to the smug trio waiting for his response. "Aw, you shouldn't have!"

Harry pouted playfully. "Well, if you don't want him, we'd be happy to have him back. After all, he did abduct Mama Andrews and me. I have a concussion and everything!"

The positively bloodthirsty look Captain directed at his present was enough to send Harry into peals of laughter again, which earned him a strange look from his Hounds.

"Boss," Sergei interjected delicately. "Perhaps you should have Marcel check out that concussion."

Harry looked up with wide green eyes glistening. "No no no! I have to give Captain the second part of his present first!" He handed the soldier a box, which when gingerly opened revealed a pair of pliers and a blowtorch.

Captain looked at them with an expression that indicated he might like some alone time with his gifts.

Sergei rolled his eyes. "Alright, will you go to the infirmary now?"

Waving a hand dismissively, Harry moved out of the entryway and down the hall to his office. "I will, before I go to sleep. I want a shower first; I have brain goop and crunchy bits in my hair, and they're starting to dry."

Sergei grinned. "Aren't you glad we came when we did?"

Harry rolled his eyes, wincing slightly as it exacerbated his headache. "Yes yes, you rescued me from a house full of dead men, you're very brave. Now make yourself useful and change the fucking doorknobs. Oh, and tell Shot I want to see her, and Connor not to make plans for this evening."

Sergei and Alex exchanged sheepish glances when Connor stuck his head back into the room.

"Why do you need to change the doorknobs?" He asked curiously.

Alex muttered something unintelligible about lever handles being a security risk, and stalked off down the hall, a glowering Sergei prowling behind him.

Harry stared pensively at Shot, putting aside the report he'd been pretending to read.

"I thought you said Alice was your little sister."

Shot frowned slightly. "She is. She's five years younger than me. Why?"

The boy shrugged slightly, his gaze roving thoughtfully over his newest employee. "She looks older
than you. You're what, sixteen? She looks in her early twenties."

The lithe girl scowled, crossing her arms huffily. "She's sixteen. I'm twenty one."

Harry's lips twitched in faint amusement. "That's going to annoy the hell out of you, isn't it. That everyone will think she's older and that you're barely even legal yet."

Shot merely flipped him off and stalked toward the kitchens, intent on harassing the elves into providing her with one of her strange smoothie concoctions that turned everyone else green.

Alex frowned slightly as she left, turning to Harry. "When she was talking about her sister, I expected her to still be a little kid, not a teenager. Did you know?"

Harry shrugged slightly, and jiggled a piece of string for the kitten to chase. "Well, she suggested that Alice be Nest Mother, so I assumed she would be old enough to divert attention if anyone came sniffing. But no, I didn't know specifically how old she was."

Alex nodded thoughtfully, then turned his attention to the kitten who was doing her level best to kill the evil string. "Have you decided on a name for her yet?"

Humming cheerily, Harry nodded. "Remember when I was playing Halo with Daniel, and you commented that the Warthog looked more like some sort of big cat?"

Alex closed his eyes ruefully. "And you asked what kind, and I replied that it looked kind of like a puma."

Grinning, Harry flicked his green eyes at his companion. "And so, I shall call her Warthog."

Alex whined at the thought of such a beautiful creature having such an undignified name. "But why Warthog?"

Harry blinked back at him, his expression faintly puzzled. "Because M12 LRV is too hard to say in conversation." With that, he scooped up the kitten, and walked out the door to go check on his newest Nestlings and spend some time with his boy.

"Did they hurt you?"

Harry and Connor were alone in Harry's room, curled up on the thick fur rug in front of the fire and roasting marshmallows in the cheerily crackling flames.

"In the sense that boredom can be painful, yes." Harry grinned at the younger boy, relaxing back on one elbow.

Connor grinned back, stuffing a melted marshmallow in his mouth and talking around it. "I would have been so scared! I can't believe you fought them off like that! Will I be able to do that one day?"

"If you work very hard and listen to what the Hounds tell you, probably. That's not to say you should go looking for trouble, but if you're in it, you should do whatever you need to in order to get out of it."

Playing with an auburn curl, Connor chewed his lip as he thought. "Hey, Sir?"

Harry grunted absently as he tested his latest marshmallow for optimal toastiness. "Mm?"

"I'm going to be staying with you, right? Dad said that he thought it would be best if he wasn't
looking after me right now."

The older boy scowled darkly. "I would have preferred he not discuss that with you just yet. I asked him to give it some time before making a firm decision, but I suppose this was his way of forcing the issue." He sighed heavily and sat up, meeting Connors anxious hazel eyes. "Yes, even if your father hadn't asked, I wouldn't have let you go. Remember those papers I signed at the hospital? Well, they mean that I'm your guardian, and because I have magic and your father doesn't, it means that I have more say than he does where you're concerned, even though he's your father." He eyed the boy, noting the signs of agitation. "What is it you really want to ask, Connor?"

The little boy looked up at his idol, desperation poorly hidden. "So, you actually want me then? You're not just doing this because Dad doesn't want me anymore?"

Harry looked at his ward sadly, remembering his own desperation to have someone who wanted him, back before the realities of the world had crushed what little heart he'd had. He reached out and gently gripped Connor's chin, making sure their eyes were locked.

"I want you here. You are wanted. Your father still loves you very much, and he wants what's best for you, even if that isn't him right now. But no matter what, from the moment I signed those papers, you were mine. And I will never let you go. If you run, I will find you. If you are taken, I will hunt them down and bring you back. And if they hurt you, I will burn the world to ashes to exact revenge. Do you understand?"

Connor nodded tearfully and launched himself into Harry's arms, sniffling into the older boy's shirt. "Thank you, Sir. I promise I'll work really hard so you never have to regret taking me in!"

Harry hugged his boy tightly, stroking a few random curls from his face where they were tickling his nose. "I appreciate it. I'm sure you'll do wonderfully, if you keep going the way you have been."

They remained like that for several minutes, before Connor sheepishly drew back, embarrassed to have cried all over his hero.

"You know you're different to the other Nestlings, right?" Harry asked casually.

Connor looked up curiously. "What do you mean? Is it 'cos I wasn't hurt like them?"

Harry smiled faintly. "That too, but that wasn't what I meant. There are several things that make you different, and I suppose now is as good a time as any to go over them and answer any questions you have." He paused for a moment to collect his thoughts. "Firstly, you have magic, and they don't. I know you've kept that a secret from the other kids, and I'm very happy about that." He gave a quick smile and was gifted a beaming grin in return. "I have another house set aside for any magical children I end up taking in. We call it The Haunt, and the children living there will be called Ghosts."

"Like the ones living at The Nest are Nestlings?"

Harry nodded with an approving smile. "That's right. Now, once everything has settled down with Mama Andrews and we've sorted the new Nestlings, you and Marcel will be moving to The Haunt. I'm going to offer the Andrews a place there too, but I haven't asked them yet. The Ghosts and Nestlings will have some lessons together, but for the most part you'll be taught different things. I'll be stopping in regularly to spend time with all of you though, and I'll be teaching some of the more practical lessons."

Connor perked up. "Like what?"

Grinning, Harry shifted so he was leaning back against the couch. "You'll have to wait and see." He
laughed when Connor pouted.

"You sound like you won't be living at The Haunt with us." The little boy questioned softly after a momentary pause.

Harry shook his head. "I won't be. I'll be at Sanctuary or Fortress most of the time, but you will have a way to reach me at any time, outside of mobiles or the like."

Tearing up slightly, the smaller boy whined. "Why can't I live with you? You said you wanted me!"

"Because what I do, it isn't safe to have anyone around me regularly that can't defend themselves. You may be getting good, but you've got a long way to go before you can stand up to the sort of people I deal with most days. When you're older and have proven you can handle yourself, then you'll join me full time. Do you understand?" He waited for a nod of acknowledgement, and noted with pleasure the spark of stubborn determination in his boy's eyes. "Good. Now, the next thing that makes you different from the rest of the kids. You will be taught how to run my business if something happens to me. And I will expect you to train your replacement when you find the right person."

Connor frowned. "Like an heir? But you're only a little older than me. Why would you make me your heir?"

Harry smiled fondly. "Because you're mine, and people in my line of work don't tend to live out their full life expectancy. Yes, having a larger age gap would be better, but we work with what we have."

Shrugging in acceptance, Connor yawned slightly. "You don't treat me like the other kids, either."

Curious, Harry raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean?" He knew perfectly well that he didn't, but he wondered what Connor had observed and his thoughts on the matter.

"You look after the other kids, but when you smile, your eyes are still cold. You don't do that with me. When you smile at me, your eyes sparkle bright green and they get little crinkles at the sides. You spend time with just me sometimes, but you don't do that anywhere near as often with them, and never as long. Most of the one on one times with just them are lessons, but you just hang out and play with me sometimes. I don't think the other kids have really noticed that you treat me different though; you pretend really well."

"Does it bother you that I don't see them like I see you?"

Connor shook his head sleepily, curling up on the couch. "No. You said I'm special, and you still treat the other kids really good. They all love you, and they feel like you love them. They don't need to know you're faking it, and I'd never tell."

Harry smiled in fond amusement as his ward dropped off to sleep almost mid-sentence, and gently picked the smaller boy up after casting a featherweight charm. Carrying him into the boy's room, he gently set him into the bed and tucked him in, smoothing the hair back off his forehead. He paused and watched the boy sleeping for a few minutes, noting the relaxed look and childishly pouted lips parted as he breathed steadily. He looked around and grabbed Connor's favourite teddy, tucking it gently under his arm before quietly leaving the room and walking into his office, his heart warmer than it had been in years.

He settled at his desk, shuffling through the preliminary reports on the kids they'd rescued that afternoon. They didn't have much yet, but at least these kids had been relatively well looked after compared to the first lot. There was the expected damage from their occupation, but otherwise they
were in excellent health. Small mercies, he mused.

Snapping his fingers, he summoned his personal elf. "Jinky," he murmured softly. "Are all the children asleep?"

"Yes, Master," Jinky answered just as quietly. "All the Nestlings are in bed and asleep. All the new children are healed but are still asleep until you are ready to talk to them."

"And the Andrews?"

"In their rooms. Master Healer said that Madam Andrews could leave the infirmary."

Harry nodded absently, lightly massaging his temple. "Alright. Can you ask the Hounds, Marcel, and Shot to join me here? And bring us warm drinks and some light snacks afterwards, please."

Jinky bowed slightly and left with a quiet pop.

A scant few minutes passed before his people joined him. Marcel immediately began scanning and fussing over his tiny employer, muttering under his breath about stupid boys who didn't respect all the effort that had been spent patching them back together enough to get their concussion seen to promptly.

Harry tolerated his bitching and fluttering, calmly making a cup of tea and helping himself to some finger sandwiches when Jinky popped in with a tray bigger than the elf was.

"Now, anything anyone want to discuss that doesn't need the Andrews to join us? Their debrief can wait until the morning, since I'm sure they'd appreciate some time together before being pestered."

"I'd like to know what you plan to have me doing, since you've told me I'll be part of your regular entourage." Shot piped up, her mouth full of half chewed… something.

Harry shuddered slightly and looked away from the appalling sight. "Information retrieval primarily. Building files on people that you think I should be aware or that I bring to your attention. I'll also have you erasing any trails that could lead people to me or finding out what I don't want them to. Is there anything else you'd like to do?"

The girl lit up, beaming even as she fished bits of food out of her teeth with the tip of her tongue - an action that made the men present cringe.

"I like to make stuff. I can blend tech and magical items. Like, um, hold on a sec." She ran from the room, taking care to step lightly and not wake the children. In moments she was back, her face flushed with pleasure as she handed over a narrow leather cuff to Harry.

He looked at it, raising an eyebrow in question when he couldn't see anything unusual about it.

Shot pointed to some small indents patterned around it. "See these? They're actually tiny magical pouches. When you put something in it, like, say, a potion bottle, it will just appear like a small stone or bead on the cuff. You just tap it with your finger and it will be ejected from the hollow on demand. Obviously you key it to your magical signature so that nobody else can get your goodies. It's also designed to hold your wand, concealing it the same way. It will just look like a bead, and it means you don't have to have it strapped to your forearm. I was thinking if I add a notice me not type charm to it, and make sure that it can't be removed by anyone else as well, then it might be useful to you."

Sergei raised his eyebrows, impressed. Taking it, he pulled his wand and cast a couple of diagnostic
charms on it, looking at how the spells were woven. He grunted in surprise at the results. "How did you cast these charms? The magic is… strange."

Rolling her eyes, Shot grabbed a couple of grapes, tossing them casually into her mouth as she talked. "I'm like Alice. My magical core was fractured, and I can't use normal magic. I can't even use a wand."

"Then how did you make it?" Alex asked curiously.

She shrugged casually. "I can channel through my tools. If I keep a clear image of what I want while I'm shaping something, it just… happens. I can't explain it better than that. Doesn't matter if it's leather or a circuit board or anything in between. I read a lot, so I know what sort of charms and things are out there, and I make stuff to replicate the effects."

"Impressive," Marcel opined, smiling at her admiringly.

"Cheers," Shot grinned back, slurping her coffee.

Alex and Harry traded a look, and Alex nodded.

"I'd be happy to provide supplies and the like for your creations, especially if you provide things we can use or sell. We can work out the details and draw up an agreement later." Harry offered. "I'll be having Alex and Sergei teach you a few things too. I expect you to learn thoroughly and apply the lessons at all times."

Frowning, Shot burped loudly. "Like what?"

Alex smirked, leaning back in his chair and eyeing her with unholy glee. "Table manners, for one."

Shot scowled. "There is nothing wrong with my manners!"

Harry interjected before an argument could erupt. "Shot, how you eat and drink when you are on your own is up to you. But when you eat with us you will use the skills Alex will teach you. Consider it practice for when we are in public or meeting with allies and clients." His face hardened. "I will not have you embarrass me when it is completely avoidable."

Grumbling under her breath, she subsided sulkily.

Eying her sternly for a moment, Harry determined that was the closest he would get to agreement, and moved on.

"Any updates on Dumbledore or the Dursleys?"

Harry pondered the report from Mama Andrews, via Captain. Foster had grabbed Mama Andrews on McKinnon's orders, as they'd assumed, but to their mutual relief, her captivity had not been as bad as feared.

"So they took her because they'd seen me with her and thought she might know how to get to Vahan?" Harry summarised.

Captain nodded. "They picked her first because Tiny has a reputation, and they figured her for a soft target. They didn't hurt her, thankfully, just tried to starve the information out of her."

Alex frowned. "Doesn't sound like their usual MO. I wonder why?" Catching the darkening expression on Captain's face, he raised his hands and hurriedly backtracked. "Not that I'm glad they
didn't, I'm just wondering what was different. She isn't the sort to flip."

Shot stirred restlessly and popped her chewing gum. "It's 'cos she's pretty. They probably meant to sell her afterwards. Can't get as much for her if she's beaten all to hell." She rolled her eyes at the snarl from the volatile muggle. "Dude, don't get pissy with me just because I answered the question. I don't know about you, but I'd like to get this meeting over and done with, because I have other shit I'd rather be doing. I get that she's your wife and all, and I'm thrilled you got her back, but seriously, wrap it up!"

Harry pointedly threw a paper ball at her head, meeting her glare with a hard look. "Play nice, Shot." He stared her down until she lowered her eyes in submission, slumping back in her chair.

Turning back to Captain, he gave a faintly apologetic look. "She's right though. Did Mama Andrews mention anything else of note?"

Here Captain hesitated for a moment. "They kept showing her pictures of the two of you, and calling you Tiny and asking questions about Vahan. Right now she thinks it's a case of mistaken identity, but she'll piece it together very soon, for sure. I think we need to bring her in, preferably before she figures it out herself."

Harry pursed his lips in small moue of displeasure, and thought for a long moment. "She can know that I'm Tiny, nothing further. She'll probably figure out some of the things I'll be teaching the kids, but we can deal with that without too much trouble."

The men - and lady - nodded in agreement.

"Alex, Captain, you two can handle Mama Andrews. You know what to do. Shot, I'd like you to help Marcel find out what you can about the new kids families. He knows the drill, so follow his lead if you have any issues. If he can't handle it, call Alex or Sergei." Leaning back he took a sip of coffee. "Captain, once everything is sorted with the new Nestlings, I'd like you, Mama Andrews, and Daniel to move to The Haunt with Marcel and Connor. I know that at least one of these kids is magical, and I want The Haunt running smoothly before the kid is sent over."

Captain frowned. "What about Greg?"

"He'll be staying here to help with security for The Nest. I know he's mentioned moving out of home to you a couple of times, so I thought this was an option that would appease you and Mama Andrews, and still give him the space he needs."

Sighing in grudging acceptance, Captain subsided. "You're right. Though I'll give it a few days before mentioning it to Mama Andrews, if you don't mind."

Harry nodded. "No problem. I'm not expecting the move for a week or so yet. I want to test out Alice as Nest Mother before you all leave. Either way, you'll all be over here regularly anyway, for lessons and playdates and the like."

Seeing Marcel glance at his watch, Harry realised it was time for the Healer to go about his rounds.

"Marcel, keep everyone under for another twenty four hours. I have too much to do today, but when I get to them, I want to deal with Alice first."

The man nodded, then left, deftly stepping over Warthog who had leapt out from under the cabinet to attack his shoes.

"Anything else?"
Everyone shook their heads, mentally going over their assigned tasks.

"Good. Captain, Alex, get Mama Andrews sorted asap. Alex, as soon as you're done, we're meeting the Goblins at Fortress."

Midmorning found Harry at Fortress with the goblins, setting up the golems for the property, and the one to play his 'father'.

The guards were a fascinating amalgam; combined features of different beasts moulded together to create what Sergei described as nightmares from a hell dimension envisaged by a neurosyphilitic Dali fan.

Harry thought they were adorable.

The guards moved on four muscular legs, the back ones as thick as tree trunks and canine in shape, the front ones slightly longer and leaner, but rippling with muscle and tipped with curved claws as long as his forearm. Standing at six foot at the shoulder and four foot at the hip, their massive heads hung low on a short thick neck. Their faces were lost somewhere between a dragon and a bear, with something faintly shark like in the set of the teeth.

Harry was cooing as he patted the Alpha, which stood a good foot and a half taller than the rest of the pack. He ignored his Hounds - and some of the goblins - eying him like he'd sprouted another head as he baby talked his newest pet, rubbing it's muzzle and nuzzling his face against it like he was a cat. It wasn't technically alive, but that didn't matter to him in the slightest, and besides, he liked how the scales and fur blend the creature was covered in felt against his skin. It was passably sentient, and he'd been linked to be able to see through the packs eyes any time he wished, so he would treat it like any other living creature. It also helped with the deception of what exactly they were.

Shot had taken one look at the beasts and taken up residence in the kitchens, intent on letting the House Elves stuff her with food until she couldn't walk. As soon as she'd left the room, the Hounds had started betting on how long she'd keep it all down once they portkeyed back to The Nest. Her green expression on arrival at Fortress had sparked a thousand planned pranks, and Harry honestly didn't care enough to stop them, as long as they didn't interfere with Business, of course.

The ravens had flown through the window and were perched around the room, cawing and croaking to Harry, carrying on a conversation that only they and he seemed to understand. They'd taken a liking to Warthog too, and were taking turns playing with her, swooping around and encouraging her to chase them and practice pouncing. She never got close, of course, but they seemed to be having fun so Harry didn't bother to intervene.

Finally sending the Pack out to run the grounds and perimeter, Harry turned to the golem of John Smith.

He, the Hounds, and even Shot had donated samples of magic, but only Harry had donated his blood. This allowed the golem to sign magically binding documents for him, without compromising them both if someone was unusually aware of peoples magical signatures.

The goblins had programmed it with an appropriate amount of business and contract law knowledge, as well as various other details that a man of his standing would be expected to know. It was then linked with Harry, so that he could be aware of everything the construct did or learned on his behalf when he activated the connection.
Harry smirked at how like Mr South it appeared, right down to clothing and the way it held itself.

"He's completely autonomous, you said?" He asked Gutshank.

"Yes, and his mind will mimic that of a Master Occlumens, so there is no worry about a Legilimens learning anything from him."

"I'm impressed." Harry smiled warmly, thoroughly pleased. He had every intention of handing over a lot of his non-essential paperwork to it as well, since he could just link in once a day to glean the details.

His thoughts were interrupted by a majestic looking eagle owl swooping in through the window, greeted by heckling calls from The Heralds, as he thought of his ravens.

Raising his wrist, he let the bird land, ignoring the dribbles of blood from where it's claws punctured his skin.

"You're beautiful, aren't you?" He cooed, stroking it's breast feathers. The owl gave him a haughty look, as if to say 'of course I am, are you unusually dense?'. Chuckling, Harry waited for his Hounds to finish scanning it for curses and trackers and the like before taking the note and flipping it open with one hand.

"Apparently Lucius has given Draco permission to write to me directly now. There's the standard conversational babbling, and then he asks if I'd like to visit, or, since I came to him last time, maybe he could come to visit me. Lucius must be losing his touch if he thinks such a transparent attempt to find out more about me will go unnoticed." Harry cocked his head in amusement, looking at Alex. "Is he so ham handed in politics?"

Alex shrugged slightly. "He's considered a consummate Slytherin, and as slippery as an eel. So he's either testing you, or doesn't think you're smart enough to notice. I'm inclined toward the latter, since you've been too busy to keep in contact recently and I'm sure your standard shock treatment has worn off by now."

Harry grinned. "Well then, why don't we play his little game?" He turned to the owl who had been waiting patiently on his wrist. "Thank you. I'll send a response with my own bird once I've decided the proper way to reply."

The owl bobbed his head, and took off out the window.

Portent flew over and landed on his shoulder, busying herself with grooming his now shoulder length hair. Harry laughed when Reaper and Omen followed, one with a Self-Inking Quill, the other with some parchment.

"You want to show off to the Malfoy's, huh? Think we should play nice?" Harry laughed again at the indignant caws from his birds. "Hmm, alright, alright, we'll put on a show. Will that make you happy?"

The Heralds took wing, swirling around Harry like a feathered cyclone, croaking in laughter.

"I think if we are going to do this, we should do it properly, don't you?" He asked them, drawing his wand.

The birds swept down to perch on his wrist one at a time, each letting out a pleased warble when, with Alex's help, he charmed a light and flexible collar around their necks. It was a silver toned chain, not quite metal, not quite fabric, but soft and flexible unless someone was trying to remove it.
From it dangled a matching silver pendant with the raven's name engraved deeply that stuck lightly against their breast feathers - able to be moved when the bird wanted to preen, but always returning to its place and never swinging free.

Leaning on the nearby hall table, Harry scribbled an invitation for both Draco and Lucius to visit immediately, since he was right next door. Sealing it, he held it up, chuckling when Omen swooped past and snatched it from his hand, the rest of the Heralds streaming after her, playing tag as they headed for Malfoy Manor as a group.

Harry closed his eyes and smiled to himself when he heard the girlish scream from Draco. Linking into the Pack, he suppressed the urge to laugh when he saw a pasty faced Lucius in a defensive pose with wand drawn, Draco cowering behind him. He supposed that being confronted by the Pack when setting foot inside the front gates might be intimidating to anyone else, but from his perspective it was just funny.

Harry sauntered up to the snarling beasts, slipping fearlessly between them until he could see his guests. He smiled calmly when Lucius caught sight of him, and leaned his shoulder against Alphas foreleg, ankles crossed and arms folded. The pack stopped snarling immediately, but maintained a watchful eye on the two shaken intruders.

Alpha lowered his massive head and turned slightly so that Harry could pat his nose, a huffing growling noise erupting from his huge chest. Harry chuckled fondly when Lucius flinched.

"Don't worry, Mr Malfoy, he's just purring." He roughly scragged the wrinkled muzzle, eyes shining. He really liked his Pack.

"Who's a good boy? You are, yes, you are," he cooed happily into the massive ear.

"Mr Potter, I must say that when we accepted your invitation, we did not expect to be accosted by these… things. You certainly have an interesting way of greeting your guests." Lucius drew himself up, trying his best to look as if he hadn't been seconds away from wetting himself.

Harry ignored the posturing, still scruffing the purring Alpha. "Beautiful, aren't they? Only ones in existence, and completely loyal to me." He tossed a sly glance at the older man. "I imagine it was rather a shock to be confronted with them, but they were just making sure you were allowed to be here. They wouldn't have hurt you without permission, since you came through the front gate. I can't promise what they would have done if you'd breached the perimeter anywhere else though."

Lucius stiffened, taking the warning for what it was.

"What are they?" Draco peered around nervously from behind his father.

Harry thought quickly. "Khalidah," he announced. It was an Arabic name meaning immortal or eternal, which was close enough to the truth to fit his purposes. The phonetic hat tip to the Kalidahs from The Wizard of Oz tickled him as well, forcing him to stifle a grin.

"I've never heard of them," Lucius eyed them speculatively.

"I'd be very surprised if you had. As I said, they're the only ones in existence."

"Can I pat one?" Draco asked tentatively, ignoring his father's look of disapproval.

Harry smiled faintly, and sent a mental command down the link to the pack that Draco was not to be attacked right now. "Sure. Let Alpha get your scent first though." He watched in amusement as
Draco cautiously extended one hand for the monstrous creature to smell. Harry found his lips twitching when he realised that even the smallest member of the pack was large enough to fit Draco entirely in their mouth without difficulty. Compared to Alpha, Draco looked like something the beast would use to floss its teeth.

The blond boy grinned happily when Alpha took in his scent, then nudged his hand with his nose, demanding affection.

Harry watched in amusement, marvelling again at the Goblin's work. The newly dubbed Khalidah pack were autonomous and each had a different personality, and he was able to link into and command each one individually, even having them 'talk' to him through it. They would behave as real creatures, complete with individual quirks. He found it absolutely fascinating.

"Shall we go inside? I think a cup of tea would be lovely about now." He eyed the still pale Lucius. "Perhaps something a little stronger for some of us."

The three made their way inside, escorted by Alpha; the rest of the pack returning to roaming the property. Watching the expression on both Malfoy's faces when they saw the entry hall was well worth the interruption to his afternoon, Harry decided. For all that they tried to be stoic and cold, it was impossible not to drop your jaw when first stepping into Potter Manor.

"Whoa," Draco breathed, ignoring the sharp glance from his father. "This place is even better than Malfoy Manor!" He stared in rapt attention at the ceiling, eyes wide as he took in the activities of a centaur and a bowtruckle that Harry was certain wasn't entirely appropriate for children's eyes. He'd have to have a word with the painting later. Clearly the manor had been uninhabited for too long if they thought that sort of behaviour was appropriate in front of guests.

Clearing his throat, Harry regained his guests attention, and ushered them out into the solarium. The weak winter sun struggled through the window panes, doing nothing to add to the warmth of the room, but the heating charms kept it at a pleasant temperature.

Jinky appeared, efficiently serving the men, and including two extra settings for Alex and Sergei as the men joined the trio.

Harry watched as Draco played the part of the perfect pureblood heir, his manners a faultless mimic of his father's impeccable actions. Despite that, Harry could see that the blond boy was bored out of his mind with the small talk the adults were engaging in. If Harry was honest, he was too.

Leaning slightly closer, he spoke quietly. "Hey Draco, want to get out of here?"

Draco eyed him, a mischievous gleam appearing in his eye. "What did you have in mind?"

Harry pondered for a moment. "I've got some horses, if that's your thing. Or the library? Gardens, training room, observatory? What sort of thing do you like to do?"

"I really like flying," Draco confessed. "Quidditch is wicked fun!"

The darker boy frowned, mentally reviewing what he knew of the sport, and flying. Sports weren't really his thing, he didn't see the point of them, but he understood that they could function as a bonding activity, particularly between children.

"I have a Quidditch Pitch, but I've never actually flown before." Harry noted the incredulous look on the other boy's face. "Would you like to fly, then?"

Draco scoffed quietly. "Do you have a decent broom?"
Harry shrugged. "I have no idea, and I don't know what constitutes a decent broom."

Grinning, Draco sat up straight, politely gaining the adults attention.

"Father, Harry mentioned that he has a Quidditch Pitch, but has never actually flown. I thought we could maybe teach him?"

Lucius looked at the brunette boy, eyeing his completely neutral expression. "If Mr Potter would like to, I see no reason why not. When would you like your first lesson? Now?"

Harry frowned slightly, glancing at his Hounds. "Today, certainly, though perhaps not right this moment. I've been led to understand that you are a very accomplished duellist, Mr Malfoy. Would you be interested in a display session? I've been training very hard, and I would appreciate an outsider perspective on my performance."

Lucius smiled faintly. Sergei Petrikov and Severus Snape were the only people to ever beat him in a duel (not including the Dark Lord, obviously), and it had been such a long time since he'd had a decent challenge.

"I'd be delighted," he murmured. Casting a glance at his son's slight pout, he took a sip of tea. "Perhaps afterwards we could offer you the use of some of our brooms, and we can have that flying lesson? My son is passionate about flying, and if you like it, perhaps you could fly together regularly?"

Draco turned pleading eyes on Harry, silently begging.

"That sounds possible. I'd need to see how I do on a broomstick first, of course."

Lucius inclined his head slightly. "Of course."

Lucius sat in his study, sipping at a glass of brandy. He was still completely in shock at the revelations of the afternoon. He knew perfectly well that the scene at the gate with the Khalidah pack was engineered to remind him of how dangerous the Potter boy was. He'd forgotten in the time since their last meeting, and had begun his usual political manoeuvring, thinking to position himself as some sort of mentor to the poor little orphan. He realised now how badly he'd misstepped.

The visit had been surprisingly enjoyable to begin with. He'd savoured catching up with Petrikov, and Charleston was a contact he had every intention of cultivating. And then Potter had suggested the duelling display, and Lucius had belatedly understood why both Petrikov and Charleston were willing to work for the boy. He'd duelled Petrikov just like back in their days as Death Eaters, and while it had been close, Lucius had triumphed. He'd not neglected his training in the years since the Dark Lord fell.

And then Potter had stepped up, and proceeded to duel both Petrikov and Charleston at the same time, none of them restricting themselves to pure magic. There had been flurries of kicks and punches, blades drawn, and blood spattered. The fight was fast and dirty, and Lucius couldn't remember seeing something so vicious in all his years, not even at the height of the Dark Lord's campaign. If he was honest with himself, he didn't think he would have been able to beat the boy unless they agreed to duel using only magic.

To add insult to injury, Potter was a natural on a broom! From the moment he'd kicked off, he was flying like the wind itself. The most graceful of birds couldn't compete with Potter's beauty on a broom. Draco, of course, had been over the moon to find a friend who could match him in flying ability, and the boys had spent several hours just flying around, and once Draco had introduced the
concept of a Seekers Game of Quidditch, it had been on for young and old. The boys had flown in ways that professional players would envy, and Lucius had thought his heart was going to stop at some of the moves they pulled.

Draco had been thrilled when Potter had offered to allow him to join his fighting lessons twice a week, following each with a flying session.

Lucius had eyed the brunette boy warily, before nodding to his son and inclining his head gratefully to Potter. After all, as he'd said to Draco on their return to Malfoy Manor, one never knows who will turn out to be a real threat. The understanding gleam in his son's eye had been deeply gratifying.

Taking a sip of his brandy, he pondered how best to address the issue of his new neighbour. He had every intention of nurturing an amicable, and preferably friendly relationship with the boy, but how far he should take it he was uncertain.

Deciding abruptly that he needed a second opinion on the events of the afternoon, Lucius set his empty glass aside and moved to the fireplace to make a call.
Chapter 19

When Severus Snape emerged from the Pensieve, Lucius sighed in exasperation at the man's expression.

"Why, exactly, did you feel the need to inflict the Potter brat on me before I'm forced to deal with him at Hogwarts?"

Lucius quirked an eyebrow and stood, moving to the drinks cabinet to pour a scotch for them both.

"I would like your opinion. Draco is quite taken with him, though he knows to remember where his loyalties lie. The boy is much more than he appears, that is quite clear. The fact that Petrikov is willing to work for him, as well as this Charleston..." He trailed off, deep in thought as he lightly swirled his drink. "Some form of relationship with him is inevitable, I merely wished your opinion on how close it should be."

Severus sneered. "He is an arrogant brat, exactly like his father. He proved that when he was strutting around with those monsters of his. At least he has the credit to not have his beasts pretend to be human, unlike Potter Senior. He is nothing special, and that Petrikov is working for him merely means that he is fritting away the Potter fortune, nothing more." He took a deep sip from his drink. "If you wish to cosy up to the boy that is up to you but I will have none of it."

The blond man hummed, not so uncouth as to roll his eyes. "Your history with his father is prejudicing you and blinding you to the potential benefits. The-Boy-Who-Lived has a lot of political cachet. If you were to be seen close to him, that could only benefit you. It might even be enough to get you out from under the Old Goat's thumb. You do yourself a disservice by holding onto a grudge against a dead man." He shifted his weight, and gestured at the penseive his glass. "That boy has never known the man that you hate so much, and he is not as light as Dumbledore would paint him. Underestimate him at your own risk, Severus."

The Potion Master sneered, his crooked teeth seeming more yellowed than usual in the firelight. "I'll not be party to your madness." The sneer shifted into an ugly smirk. "Though I will reserve the right to say I Told You So when the time comes."

Lucius couldn't fight the urge any longer, and gave in, rolling his eyes hard enough to send a twinge of pain through his eye sockets.

"If you must. For your sake, I hope you don't antagonise him too much when he gets to Hogwarts. It is entirely possible you won't survive the experience."

Harry was sitting in his office at The Nest, cursing the paperwork that seemed to breed exponentially if he stepped away from his desk for zero point three of a second. He could barely wait to get out of what he was starting to privately think of as the Brat House, and give the bulk of his paperwork to his 'Father' to handle.

A quiet knock on his door had him sitting back in his chair with a sigh, and grunting for whoever it was to enter.

The girl who entered sent a jolt of pain through his heart, his mind flashing back to the little redhead girl who'd run with Mike and Dave back in the day.
He'd adored Sally, nearly as much as he'd worshiped Dave. He wished he had a picture of them, but he made do with looking at the picture of his mother in the 'biographies' of him. They looked similar enough that he would sometimes pretend that he was looking at a grown up Sally; one who had managed to free herself of the life she hated so much.

He knew Mama Andrews had seen him mooning over the picture, and thought he was missing his parents, but honestly, he didn't give a damn about them. He had no memories of them or their sacrifice, but Sally had been there for him in ways that even Dave hadn't.

And now, he had another red haired girl with soulful hazel eyes in his life.

"Alice. What do you need?"

The elegant sixteen year old smiled faintly, sitting in the chair in front of his desk and crossing her legs, hands folded neatly in her lap.

"Nothing. Your employer is very thorough, thank you. I just thought that since we will be working so closely together that it would be worth getting to know each other better, yes?"

Her voice was a smooth velvety purr, her training so deeply ingrained that even now, everything about her oozed seduction. Harry privately thought that seeing Alice and Narcissa together would be… something else. Alone, either woman could have any man falling over themselves to satisfy her every whim, but together, they could rule the world inside of a week. He was almost tempted to set them both on Mr South just for fun.

"Is that so? I'm aware of your abilities, Alice, so why don't you cut to the chase and tell me why you're really here. I know you've done your research since you woke up here, and you aren't stupid enough to bother me without a reason."

Chuckling lightly, she tucked a stray wisp of hair behind her ear. "I genuinely do think we need to get to know each other better, but you're right; I do have an ulterior motive for this visit."

Harry waited patiently, his gaze never wavering.

"I can feel your frustration with the paperwork from the other side of the house. I thought you might appreciate a break. The chance to get to know you was a convenient bonus."

"Thank you, but I'm fine. Close the door behind you." Harry flicked open a new report, beginning to skim it.

"Sir, with all due respect, we do need to get to know each other better. Your boss wants me to take over running this house, I need to know what is expected from me so that I can actually do it effectively."

Biting his tongue until he could taste blood, Harry took a moment to just breathe and calm himself down. She was right, and there was no excuse to take his annoyance out on her. Her resemblance to a shade of his past was hardly her fault.

"Very well. What do you need to know?"

"Before we begin, do you have a notepad and pen I can borrow? I don't want to forget anything."

Harry handed over a legal pad and ballpoint, before sinking back in his chair, resting an elbow on the armrest and his chin on his fist.
"Ok, so firstly, how long do you want me to run the place?"

"Indefinitely. Barring a change in circumstances unrelated to you that you don't need to know about, you're welcome to live out your entire life here. You'll be provided with everything you need to do your job, as well as a generous personal allowance. That said, you're by no means a prisoner. You're welcome to leave at any time." Harry watched as she jotted down a few notes, observing her reaction. She hid it well, but finding out that she had a permanent protected home had removed a great deal of tension from her frame.

"Who will be doing general maintenance, cleaning, cooking, that sort of thing? Am I expected to hire staff?" She glanced up, eyebrows raised slightly.

"No, that's already been taken care of. In fact, I may as well introduce you now. Jinky, Tinky, Twirly!" He called out, watching Alice carefully as the three small elves popped into the room.

"Master called?" Jinky questioned.

"I did. I wanted to introduce you to Alice. She will be taking over running The Nest." He turned back to the redhead. "Alice, this is Jinky. He's my personal elf. You may call him in a dire emergency if you can't reach me any other way, but for no other reason. Tinky and Twirly," he gestured to the two unusually small twin elves, "this is Alice. She will be Mistress of the house for as long as she stays here."

The elves turned adoring faces to the slightly pale girl.

"Mistress!" The first stepped forward slightly and bowed low. "I is Tinky. If you be needing anything, call for Tinky."

The second elf bowed low, then ducked behind her sister nervously.

Tinky glanced sadly at her twin, then returned her attention to Alice. "Twirly is shy. Old Master hurt her bad, even for an elf. Talking hurts her lots. But Twirly is a good elf! Twirly is a good cook, and likes watching over the children and caring for the garden!"

Alice shook her head dazedly, and then smiled at the anxious elf. "I'm sure you both work very well. You cook and clean here? What else do you do?"

Tinky beamed. "Oh, elves do all sorts of things! We clean and cook and fix things, and care for the garden! Is there anything else Mistress would like us to do?" She looked up hopefully, her hands clasped in front of her bony chest.

"Uh, no, that will be everything right now, thank you." Alice looked back at Harry with wide eyes. Taking pity on her, Harry turned to Tinky and Twirly, getting their attention by clearing his throat.

"Mistress Alice will be living here, and you are to obey her as long as her orders do not endanger any of the children here, or countermand my orders. Do you understand?" Seeing their eager nods, he dismissed them back to the kitchen. "Jinky, if Miss Alice calls you, you are to go to her. But you are to exercise extreme caution, as she will only call if she has no other option."

Jinky frowned slightly, his ears drooping a little. "Miss Alice? Not Mistress Alice like Tinky and Twirly?"

Harry nodded. "That's right. Tinky and Twirly answer to her, you do not. The only person you answer to is me."
Jinky nodded in agreement, then popped back to whatever he had been doing before Harry had called him. Probably sculpting the little zen garden he was developing in the Apparition Courtyard at Sanctuary.

Alice slumped back in her chair, looking pale. "What were they?"

Raising an eyebrow and quirking his lip in amusement, Harry leaned back in his seat and twirled a pen between his fingers. "House elves. A slave race that needs to be bonded to a magical family or person to survive. They're extremely resilient, and love to work. Honestly, the more you give them to do, the happier they are. Unfortunately many people consider them little more than useful vermin, and mistreat them horribly. Severe punishments for the smallest perceived misdeed are not uncommon. Twirly was forced to eat hot coals and had her throat cut for supposedly speaking out of turn. She healed up quickly, and can speak, but between the mental trauma and a small amount of scarring on her vocal chords, she'll avoid it if she can."

If possible, Alice's eyes grew even wider. "Magic?"

Snorting faintly, Harry threw his pen on the desk between them. "Yes, magic is real. I'll have some books put in your room to explain the basics." Flashing her a wicked smile, he crossed his legs. "Welcome down the rabbit hole, Alice."

Offering a sickly smile back, she chuckled slightly. "Curiouser and curiouser!"

Harry watched her quickly shake off her shock, accept the new information, and move on. He was grudgingly impressed at her fortitude.

"What else did you need to know?"

Regaining her poise, she glanced down at the notepad. "I'm assuming since magic and magical people exist, you're thinking my empathy might help you somehow?"

"When you're around Alex, Sergei, or I, do you feel anything different than you do around say, Captain, or Greg?"

Drawing her eyebrows together slightly, Alice thought for a moment. "Yes. A faint static tingle. Why?"

"That's our magic. You yourself are magical, but because of what happened to you, your magical core fractured and internalised. Your empathy is a result of that; it's how your magic uses itself up so it doesn't burn uncontrollably through your body. You'll never be able to use magic the same way that we do, but it's possible that you may discover other talents that normal magicals don't have, because of the unique way your magic behaves now.” He knew he was being unnecessarily blunt, but he really didn't have the patience - or inclination - to coddle her. He had no use for someone who wasn't strong enough to deal with both him and the responsibility of looking after a varying number of street tough kids. They'd eat her alive otherwise.

"I see." She swallowed. "I assume you want me to keep an eye out for any other magicals that come through here?" Seeing his nod, she continued her train of thought. "And you have a separate place for them to go? One that will teach them to use their talents?"

"The Haunt. Magical children are offered a place at a special school for magic when they turn eleven. Magicals have an entire society hidden away from the muggles - non magic folk. Any magical children you find will be taken to The Haunt and taught the basics of the magical society and any other information they need to assimilate properly into this society. We call them Ghosts, since as
far as the muggles are concerned, that's essentially what they are once they begin at Hogwarts."

Alice choked slightly. "Hogwarts? The school is called Hogwarts? Who on earth thought that was a
good name?"

Harry chuckled. "I have no idea, but I agree with you. It's awful."

"So what will happen with these Ghosts once they move to The Haunt? Will we ever see them again
once they've gone?"

"Oh yes. Until they start school they'll still have regular lessons with the Nestlings. They'll be taught
everything they need to know to be comfortable in either society. Once they've begun school, they'll
be returning to The Haunt over summer holidays at least, as well as any other holiday breaks they
wish."

Nodding and jotting down a few notes, Alice pursed her lips. "So all new kids will come through
here first? Like a screening process?"

Harry nodded and sipped from the coffee Jinky had thoughtfully popped in for him. "Yes. Your job
will be to not only weed out any magicals, but also counsel the kids and help identify any that're
going to be unable or unwilling to follow the rules here. You'll find a copy of all rules and
expectations in your room with the books I promised you." Leaning forward and adopting a more
serious look, he continued once he had her undivided attention.

"Alice, the children that will stay here are the ones who have nowhere else to go, but if there is one
that is too disruptive or problematic, then arrangements can be made to get them the help they need
and find somewhere safe that will suit them better. The Ghosts and Nestlings will be taught how to
survive, but more importantly, they will be moulded into a form that is most useful for my employer
both now and once they reach adulthood. We don't ask them to do anything they're uncomfortable
with, and we attempt to work with their natural talents. That said, some of the things we teach or
allow are," he paused, looking for the right words. "Morally ambiguous. As Nest Mother, you need
to be aware of this, and not undermine our work. In fact, your active support would be ideal, though
I understand this might not be possible."

Alice's hazel eyes developed a fierce glint. "You promised those children that they would never have
to whore again. Did you lie?"

Harry actually looked slightly startled. "Absolutely not! And if I had, my employer would make very
sure that I understood the error of my ways. I was referring to things such as how to break and enter,
pick pockets, fight - and when necessary, kill effectively, gather information, negotiated with a fence;
those sort of things. It means that they'll frequently be engaging in illegal activities, and will actively
work for my employer when they reach their upper teens. We sculpt them now to help them be as
well-adjusted individuals as possible given their pasts, and also build their loyalty to Vahan. He looks
after his people. Happy people with no reason to waver in their loyalty make better employees,
which makes for better business." He gave her a hard look, scrutinising her closely for any signs of
discomfort or reticence. Seeing none, he relaxed slightly.

Giving the small boy behind the large desk a flat look, Alice quirked an eyebrow. "That's hardly
going to be a problem for me. When I worked for McKinnon, I all but ran that House, and I had to
convince and train kids to do a lot worse things than that." Changing the subject and tapping her pen
lightly on the notepad, she sighed. "How many kids am I likely to be playing Mother to?"

Harry shrugged. "It'll vary. Some days you'll only have one, others you might have a full house.
Whenever new kids come through, they will be seen by Marcel first, and assessed before they
even get here. You'll never see the ones that have a good home to go back to. The kids who'll stay here will probably be here for a few years at least, some longer than others. We don't usually take kids older than twelve, though you might get one or two occasionally."

"You mean you move them at twelve-ish?"

Harry shook his head. "No, I mean we don't usually take them in after that age. If they're already here then they'll most likely stay, but they'll be expected to start taking on more jobs for Vahan, so you won't see as much of them."

"What about their educations? Will you let them go to school? What about time for their homework once they are working for our boss?"

Harry grinned faintly, amused at how protective she was of the children already. "Their educations are priority. They will attend the local school, which I've been assured is quite a good one, and will be provided supplementary tutors where needed. If they have particular skills, for example sports, or science, they will be encouraged to pursue and develop them as best they can. They'll be provided with every support possible for them to succeed in life, as long as they work for it. There are no free rides here. If they don't put in the effort, then there is no future for them in our organisation, and other arrangements will be made."

Alice frowned, tilting her head quizzically. "I'm not sure I understand. You expect them to work for Vahan, but they will simultaneously be encouraged to create lives for themselves? Even ones that may lead them away from Vahan's influence? I mean, what use would a crime lord have for an astrophysicist, or a basketball star?"

Smiling openly, Harry stood and moved to stand in front of the picture on the wall. Staring at it with his hands clasped in the small of his back, he hummed lightly while he gathered his thoughts. Spinning on his heel, he walked back to the desk, perching on the front edge, leaning forward intently as he began to explain.

"Not every child has the brains and dedication to become an astrophysicist, but if they did, our employer would find a way for them to be useful, even if it wasn't related to their day job. More likely to occur are mechanics, doctors, nurses, chemists, artists, social workers, teachers, builders, engineers, or even bar staff. All of them have the potential to be useful, even if it's only in making other connections or finding potential clients, though many will just be assigned to pass on whatever interesting information they come across. Besides that, not all of Vahan's investments are less than legal. In fact, the majority are completely above board, and these companies will need qualified employees in the future. Not every child who comes through here will be suited for those roles, but the options are there if they want them.

"To use your example of a basketball star, what do you think being a basketball star would entail? Travel, meeting lots of people, making connections. Now imagine what information or artefacts someone who does those things for a living might encounter? The people they might be able to direct to my employer for future business deals? Or if you prefer something a little more blatant; how many drug samples do you think they could move, especially if they never raise suspicion by taking it themselves?"

Alice was gaping by the end of his speech, finally beginning to understand a fraction of the scope of Vahan's operation. "He's playing the long game."

Harry nodded, still smiling, his green eyes shining with fervour. "Oh yes. And right now, you're positioned to be a key part to that."
Sitting up with a determined look and holding out her hand, Alice smiled back, a shark's grin concealed behind perfect white teeth. "Sounds like my kind of place. It will be an honour to work with you, Sir."

Chuckling, Harry shook the offered hand.

Alice got a thoughtful look. "So, how do you stop the kids from finding out about the elves?"

"Muggle repelling charms on the kitchens. It acts as another way to see if any of the kids have magic, as they would be completely immune if they did. Other than that, the elves are excellent at keeping hidden. They keep a weather eye on the kids though, and will intervene if they get into anything dangerous."

"And if they are seen?"

Harry shrugged. "Memory charm it away."

Alice's eyes bugged. "Wait, you can do that?"

Dudley quivered in fear as the door to the small room shut behind the rumpled looking older man who had arrested him, and a plump woman from Social Services who introduced herself as Amanda.

"Hello Dudley," Amanda said. "I'm here to stay with you until your parents arrive."

Dudley nodded silently to show he understood, his multiple chins wobbling with suppressed tears.

The older man peered at the frightened boy intently, a notepad in one hand, and a chocolate bar in the other. "My name is Inspector Adama. Do you mind if we have a bit of a chat with you before they get here?"

Dudley nodded again, twisting his pudgy fingers together nervously under the table.

"Great. Here, I know it's been a while since you've eaten anything." Adama handed over the chocolate bar, then pulled a bottle of juice from his pocket, and placed it on the table in front of the boy.

"Now, we need to ask you some questions about what you were doing in the Robertson's house this afternoon. We know they are away at the moment, so why don't you explain why you were there?"

Dudley bit on the inside of his bottom lip, and stayed silent. He wasn't going to say anything to the bacon. He didn't really understand why the police were called bacon, but he'd heard Bobby call them that, and Bobby was the boss, so bacon they were. His stomach rumbled.

Adama sighed, looking disappointed.

"Now, son, it's alright. We know that you were just doing what you were told. All we need you to do is tell us who it was that made you break in to the Robertson's house. Just give us a name, and we can make sure you don't get into any trouble. You understand that breaking and entering is a very serious crime? Unless you tell us what we need to know, we can't help you."

Dudley closed his eyes, sick to his stomach. He was pale and sweating with fear, but he refused to squeal on his gang. Everyone knew that Bobby answered to men higher up, and those men answered to the two men who had been with Harry in the park that day. Those men had been terrifying, and had clearly been following his cousin's orders when they left the park, even though they'd been
pretending not to. They'd reminded Dudley of the Secret Service men that followed the American President around on the TV. Harry may not live at Privet Drive any more, but he still scared Dudley a lot more than a sweaty and overworked cop did. Whoever he worked for now was obviously top of the food chain, and while he knew he wasn't very smart, Dudley knew better than to piss off someone who must be even scarier than Harry and his goons.

Thinking of Harry reminded him of the phone that the men had given him. For some reason, the cops hadn't seemed to notice it even when it was right in front of them, so he'd quickly stuck it back in his pocket. He could feel its outline against his leg as his pants strained against his flabby thighs.

"I have to pee," he squawked suddenly, an idea forming sluggishly in his brain.

Alex raised an eyebrow at the barely comprehensible text message he'd just received from Dudley's mobile. Rereading it, he took the time to decipher it's meaning properly before swearing and calling Bradshaw, then stalking out of the room to find Harry.

Quickly finishing his business in the stall, the obese boy readjusted his pants, and emerged to wash his hands. He hoped that Harry and his men understood his message, and that he wouldn't get in trouble for using the phone. They'd told him to send a message if he was in trouble, and he figured this probably counted.

Waddling down the hallway back to the interrogation room, Dudley could hear his mother yelling at Inspector Adama even before the Social Services woman whose name he couldn't remember opened the door.

"My Diddi-kins would never do something like that! If anyone is out breaking into houses, it's that degenerate nephew of mine! Always blaming things on my little angel, even now!" She sobbed dramatically into a lace edged handkerchief while Vernon nodded officiously next to her and patted her shoulder in what could be interpreted as a consoling manner if you squinted.

Adama frowned, and rechecked his file.

"Your nephew?"

"Harry Potter," Vernon spat, his lips curling in distaste under his massive walrus moustache. "Brat was dumped on our doorstep as a baby after his no good parents were killed in a car accident. We took him in, we did, but blood will tell, you know. We gave him the very food from our mouths and the clothes off our backs, and the little miscreant repaid us by causing trouble around the neighbourhood, and attacking our Dudley whenever he thought he could get away with it."

Dudley paled, his eyes flicking between his parents and the cop. He knew, he knew that mentioning Harry was just going to get the cops interested in his cousin, and that couldn't lead to anything good for his health. Before he could fall over, or do something else to distract the adults, a smooth voice interjected.

"Mr and Mrs Dursley I presume?" The tall redhead was impeccably dressed in a tailored suit, a briefcase held lightly in one hand. "My name is Marcus Bradshaw, I'm your son's legal representation."

Vernon frowned. "Dudley's lawyer? But we didn't-"

Bradshaw cut him off with a smile. "Your son is a very bright boy, and has made friends with someone who wanted to help when he found out your son was being accused of a crime. My fee has
already been taken care of, never fear." Turning smoothly to the incensed and overly interested Inspector, his face hardened slightly. "What is my client being charged with?"

Adama gritted his teeth. "B and E."

"And did you attempt to question him before his parents or legal representation arrived?"

The Inspector snarled, his jaw clenched so tightly that he could feel a headache forming. "He gave permission, and a Social Worker was present at all times."

Bradshaw’s eyes sharpened, even as he adopted a slightly bored look. "I'll take that as a no then. Tsk tsk, Inspector. You should know better. Procedure is there for a reason, after all." He smirked faintly. "I'll be speaking with my client in private now. And then we'll be signing the release papers. Perhaps you should save us all some time and go and get those ready now?"

"And why would I do that?" Adama sneered. God he hated lawyers!

"Because you have illegally detained my client and questioned him without suitable representation. We both know your case is going to get thrown out, so why don't you cut your losses and just withdraw the charges, hmm? It'll look a lot better on your record."

The two men stared at each other, until finally Adama looked away mutinously and stalked from the room, slamming the door angrily behind him. Amanda followed, her exit much quieter.

Bradshaw turned his charming smile on the elder Dursley’s. "Why don't you both go get a cup of tea and take a moment to compose yourselves? I know how stressful these situations can be, especially for such upstanding citizens as yourselves. I'll stay here with Dudley, and make sure he isn't bothered any further."

Petunia nodded, still sniffling soggily into her handkerchief. "Thank you, Mr Bradshaw was it?"

Bradshaw nodded. "That's right. Go ahead and take as long as you need."

Offering a watery smile, Petunia exited the room, escorted by a solicitous Vernon.

Dudley eyed the newcomer warily.

"Hello Dudley. Our mutual friend on the other end of the phone sent me. I need you to tell me everything that happened, alright? We'll take care of everything."

Adama stopped by Missing Persons on the way to organise the Dudley kid's papers. Winding his way through the maze of desks, whiteboards and filing cabinets, he stopped at the one manned by his drinking buddy.

"Max, can you do me a favour?"

Max Brendan looked up from his computer screen, automatically minimizing the windows. He'd gotten into the habit of it after working a particularly sensitive case, and saw no reason to change now.

"What do you need?"

Adama scrubbed his hand through his hair roughly, and sighed heavily. "It's probably nothing, I've just got a feeling, you know?"
Max nodded with a faint smile. Over the years he'd learned to trust Adama's instincts; he hadn't steered him wrong yet.

"Sit down, tell Daddy all about it." He smirked at the revolted look his friend gifted him.

Flopping into the chair next to the desk, Gregory rubbed his eyes and threw Dudley's file on the desk. "It's this kid. Caught him doing a B and E. Tight as a fucking clam, wouldn't talk at all until he had to piss. Seemed scared of more than us if you ask me, but that's not it. Thing is, when his parents showed up, the father mentioned a cousin who was always causing trouble and blaming it on Dudley. They said they took the kid in as a baby, that he'd been left on their doorstep, and accused him of causing Dudley trouble 'even now'. I checked, there's no record of a Harry Potter - that's the cousin's name apparently - ever being listed as living there. The way they were talking…” He trailed off, looking troubled. "It's probably nothing, just incomplete records, but would you mind checking it out for me?"

Max nodded amiably. "Not a problem, Greg. It's a slow week anyway, so I may as well. Want to meet up at the pub after work? I still owe you a game of darts from last week."

Adama smiled. "Thanks Max, I appreciate it. And yeah, I'd love a pint. I finish at seven, I'll swing by your desk and pick you up so you don't have to drive?"

"Perfect. I'll do some digging for you in the meantime and fill you in once I have something either way."

Max frowned at the picture of a small dark haired boy with messy hair and a lightning bolt scar on his forehead. It was a school class picture, and the boy was huddled on his own at the side of the group, his soulful green eyes half hidden behind a too long fringe and ugly round glasses. Noticeably smaller than his peers, he was clad in baggy clothes that were barely a step up from rags, and held himself in a way that reminded Max painfully of a wounded animal. The photo was a couple of years old, and the calls he'd made indicated that he'd been adopted by a new family and had been withdrawn from the Surrey school in favour of home schooling with private tutors. The kid had all but disappeared, and yet every lead seemed perfectly legitimate; the boy's new father supposedly reclusive and paranoid about security. Given the man's net worth, it was hardly surprising.

He jumped as Adama materialised next to him, and automatically closed the screens before shutting down his computer.

"Ready to go?" He asked, grabbing his jacket.

Adama nodded, leaning a hip on the desk as he waited. He'd caught a glimpse of some sort of class picture before Max had closed the screen, but it was gone too fast for him to be able to glean anything from it.

"Yeah. Find anything on that Potter kid?"

Max shrugged. "Not really. Kid was listed as living with the Dursley's until about a year ago, when he was given up for adoption. A guy named John Smith adopted him, and he pretty much disappears after that. His new daddy is super rich and just as paranoid. Apparently the kid even has personal bodyguards for when he goes out. Home schooled, the works."

Adama grunted. "Anything else jump out at you?"

Max scowled. "He seems to be doing fine now, but I'm glad he got away from those Dursleys. I don't think they ever even fed the poor kid."
"Why do you say that?"

Shaking his head sadly, Max grabbed his bag from under his desk. "The boy is tiny."

Adama froze for a moment, something tugging on his memory.

"You coming or what?" Max teased, jostling the older man as he walked past.

"Yeah, yeah," Greg laughed, shaking his head, the half formed connection drifting away undiscovered.

Harry stood in front of his mirror as he knotted his tie.

"Who the fuck is Bobby?" He asked, distracted. He scowled and undid the knot, starting again. For all his prodigious skills in nearly every area, he just could not tie a fucking tie properly!

"Timothy White, the undercover cop." Alex offered a file, but Harry waved it off, more intent on trying to get the tie done up.

"We have an undercover cop who chose to go by Bobby?" Harry snorted in amusement.

Alex smirked. "Yep. And despite being named White, he's as black as they come."

Harry shook his head. "I think I like this guy already. So what went wrong? Why did Dudley get picked up?"

Sighing, the mercenary-turned-mostly-butler-and-personal-assistant flipped through the file. "Short version, he didn't know Dudley was your cousin. Not surprising since we've gone to such lengths to hide all your connections. He was being pressured to start handing up people to be questioned by the cops, and he thought Dudley would be suitable for the role. Young, pliant, but didn't know anything and wasn't likely to."

"But he gave me up?"

"Oh no, not at all. In fact, he never said a single word until he asked to go to the bathroom to send us a message. It was just bad luck that his parents got there before Bradshaw. They accused you of framing him."

Harry sighed. "And that got Adama my name."

Alex nodded, then walked over, brushing Harry's hands out of the way and quickly tying a perfect Half-Windsor knot.

"Thanks to Shot, we managed to strengthen John Smith as an alias before anyone started digging, but it was a near thing. That said, unless he manages to dig up a picture of you, it's unlikely he'll make your alias as Tiny."

Handing Harry his jacket, he grabbed the files off the side table. "Did you want to do anything about Bobby or Dudley?"

Pursing his lips, Harry thought for a moment. "No. Anything we say or do will just draw unwanted attention. Bobby may be on my payroll, but I have no reason to trust him yet. And god knows what Dudley would do if he was singled out in any way; though I'll have to reward him for keeping his mouth shut. There's no reason to punish him for his parent's idiocy."
Alex nodded and jotted a note in his book. "Anything else?"

"It's Connor's sixth birthday in two days. I want to spend the day with him, then take all the kids out to dinner. Any suggestions for places that won't raise an eyebrow at eight kids and a handful of adults? Nothing fancy, I want the kids to be able to relax."

"Wimpy's?"

"Yeah, sounds perfect. Will you arrange it? And invite Bradshaw too. I doubt he'll come, so don't let Connor know; I'd rather he think I was the bad guy if his dad decides not to come."

"Of course. Now, where exactly are we going?"

Harry smirked. "Sanctuary, via Savile Row and possibly Harrods. I'm in the mood for some shopping."

Alex's eyebrows shot up. "You're taking an afternoon off?"

Harry shrugged. "Why not? I'll be at Fortress tomorrow, which means I'll probably have to spend at least a little time with the Malfoy's, and then the day after I'll be with Connor all day. Then I'll be swamped in paperwork, even after I hand the bulk of it over to Father. I think I deserve some time off."

"Absolutely. And we can look for a gift for Connor too. Actually, you should let Alice know so she can arrange to take the Nestlings out and get him something too."

Harry sighed. "Yeah. But for now, let's go. If I don't get away from these kids for a while I'm going to do something unfortunate."
Harry woke early the next morning and stretched until his muscles quivered, exhaling heavily as he relaxed. Throwing his blankets back, he dropped his feet off the side of his massive bed, scratching his stomach drowsily. A sharp pain had him yank his legs back up with a yowl, his heels bleeding from several claw and teeth marks.

"Ow! What the fuck, Warthog? You little shit!" Harry hissed furiously, dangling a hand over the edge to tempt the rapidly growing furball out from under his bed. Waiting until she leapt out to take a swipe at him, he grabbed her by the scruff and dangled the unrepentant kitten in front of his face.

"I should feed you to Alpha for that stunt!" He glared into her amber eyes. Warthog merely mewed apathetically and squirmed. "Oh, don't think you're getting out of it that easily! I don't care if it's perfectly normal behaviour for a kitten, you're going to be too big to be allowed to get away with games like that! You, missy, are going to have to have some serious attitude correction, even if I have to magically increase your intelligence so that you understand the lecture I'll give you!"

Tossing her gently onto the bed, he derailed her attempts to attack his retreating form by throwing a pillow on top of her. By the time she had wiggled free, bristling with injured pride, he was in the bathroom with the door shut.

When Harry arrived at Potter Manor, he was mid discussion with his Hounds.

"...be a way to increase her intelligence! Then when I leave her here she can be part of the property's defences. If we found a male and did the same thing, and it passed the intelligence onto their offspring, we can breed some. Aren't they endangered or something anyway? We can write it off as a private conservation effort or whatever. It should be easy enough to forge the permits."

Alex coughed slightly in amusement. "Puma's aren't endangered, Sir. If you wanted to breed them, that's up to you, but I honestly wouldn't bother. The permits wouldn't be an issue, but them eating the other things on your property might be."

Harry frowned. "You're right. Even intelligent ones left to roam free would probably eat my horses. And possibly the elves."

Sergei rubbed his upper lip, covering a smile at the horrified expression on the elf that had just popped in to bring them tea.

"The only way I know of to increase a mundane animal's intelligence is to bond it as your familiar." The Russian interjected, returning the conversation to the original point. Harry had been driving himself hard lately, and in so many different directions that he would sometimes go off on tangents if someone didn't keep track of his original thoughts.

Sighing, Harry sipped his tea. "Well, not every idea can be a good one, I suppose."

"No, but bonding her as a familiar might be." Alex nibbled on a scone, dabbing at the corner of his mouth with a serviette to get the miniscule trace of cream left behind.

"Why's that?" Harry sipped his tea, looking out the window and watching his horses in the paddock. One of the mares was pregnant and due to foal any day, or so Brix had informed him.

"Well, she would stop attacking you for one. A familiar can't hurt their bonded. It would allow her to
share a little of your magic, so chances are she would develop some new and interesting abilities that would benefit you, and her intelligence would be increased exponentially. She wouldn't be quite as smart as you, but it would probably be close. She'd be on par with the average person without a doubt. You could also see through her eyes, and all sorts of other fun tricks."

"Maybe, but what about when I go to Hogwarts? Bonded or not, it's not like I can show up with a Cougar in tow. Sergei, stop sniggering."

Snorting into his coffee, Sergei wheezed, still stuck on the image of Harry in Transfiguration with a middle aged slut perched on his desk while he tried to turn her into a goblet.

Alex smiled at his friend, before turning back to Harry. "Why not? Hogwarts regulations say you can have a cat, owl, or toad. It doesn't specify breed or size. And she is technically a cat."

Harry stared at his bodyguard, completely bewildered. "And you seriously think that me taking a hyper intelligent cat with a bad attitude that's larger than most of the students is a good idea?"

Shrugging, Alex shifted in his seat, crossing his legs elegantly. "You can't have body guards with you at school. And even if we were to get a little place in Hogsmeade so we were closer, you need us to run your business for you while you're away. We won't really be able to help you. But having a massive hyper intelligent cat with a bad attitude able to find you wherever you are that will fight to the death to protect you? That's going to be enough to make most trouble think twice."

Harry groaned and dropped his head back, smiling slightly as Reaper swooped over and perched on the back of the chair and started preening his hair. "You have a point, but I'm still not sure it will be a good idea. At the least, it will set the teachers against me right from the beginning."

Sergei swallowed his biscuit, and threw back the rest of his coffee. "Boss, your security is more important. Besides, if you don't do something about that little menace, she's going to end up eating one of the kids. Or me. I'd rather not have to kill her for attacking me."

Reaper burbled her opinion, Harry tilting his head to listen attentively.

"You really think so?" He asked the bird.

Reaper responded with knocking sounds and a brief warble.

"Well, when you put it like that," Harry sighed.

The two men watched the discussion with interest.

"What did she say?" Alex finally asked, when it seemed like Harry had no intention of translating.

Harry blinked, coming out of his thoughts. "Hmm? Oh, she said that Warthog will provide exactly what I need at Hogwarts, and that she will make for excellent protection."

Alex looked indignant. "That's exactly what I said!"

Nodding amiably, Harry sipped the last of his tea. "Yes, but you're unlikely to shit in my hair if I don't listen to you." He smirked faintly as both men cringed and glanced warily at the smugly preening Raven.

Harry had spent a rather enjoyable afternoon training and flying with Draco. The blond boy was surprisingly good company once he dropped the superior attitude. Lucius had clearly put a lot of
effort into training his heir, and Harry was pleased that he wouldn't have to do as much tweaking to
the boy's personality as he'd feared.

The blond boy was still amusingly naïve about the world, but he was learning quickly under Harry's
subtle tutelage. He wasn't a natural leader, but he would make an excellent second at the school; his
intelligence, family connections, and natural charisma (when he wasn't being a little snot) all things
that Harry fully intended to use to his advantage.

He had just settled himself at his desk to do some paperwork before dinner, when a deep growl
rumbled through his mind from the Pack. Opening up the link, he was bombarded with images,
scents, and some sort of other sense that had no real human equivalent. He swore mentally; the
goblins hadn't mentioned any sensory overlap down the link. He swallowed hard, trying not to hurl
at the dizzying connection. Breathing slowly, he ignored Alex and Sergei's frantic questions, and
focused on the images, slowly teasing apart the threads that were the connections between individual
pack members. He quickly realised that a large part of the problem was that each member of the pack
was contacting him individually - the equivalent of puppies all jumping on their owner and barking
simultaneously. Groaning at the mental cacophony, he gripped the edge of his desk tightly so he
didn't slide off his chair and onto the floor.

Dimly, he realised that Sergei had gone to summon Marcel since Harry couldn't speak through the
onslaught, and his men had no idea what was wrong.

"Sir!" Alex was shouting in his ear now, his hands on Harry's shoulders holding him steady. "Sir!"

Groaning, Harry staggered to his feet. "Outside," he rasped, listing heavily into Alex as he tried to
take a step.

If Alex was thrown by the order, he didn't let it show. Scooping Harry into his arms bridal style, he
strode out of the room, collecting Sergei as he came down the hallway. Stalking quickly down the
stairs, he snapped orders to a frantic Brix, and ignored the Heralds as they flapped above his head,
following the party out the front doors.

Harry groaned as he felt the pack coming closer, the mental noise increasing as they all tried to
communicate at once.

The pack ran up to them, restlessly shoving each other as they growled and tried to get closer to
where Harry was slumped on the lawn, leaning limply against Alex's muscled chest.

"Too much!" He groaned to Alpha, trying to shove a sense of the discomfort down the link.

Alpha clearly got the message, because he snarled and whirled on the rest of the pack, driving them
back.

The onslaught cut off, all but the link with Alpha. The massive beast lowered his head and gently
nuzzled Harry, the connection buzzing with concern.

Smiling lightly, Harry scratched the wrinkled muzzle. "I'm alright now, Alpha. I just couldn't handle
you all shouting at me at once. What were you trying to tell me?"

Alpha gave him one last sniff, then sent a clear image down the link.

Harry closed his eyes as he watched the memory of Draco walking down the pathway and exiting
the front gate, heading along the road towards Malfoy Manor. He frowned, not understanding, until
he saw another man appear and grab him, dragging the struggling child into the woods that edged the
road.
Bolting upright and nearly head butting both Alex and Alpha, Harry cursed. He sprang to his feet, throwing out a hand onto Alpha to keep his balance when his head swam.

"Sergei, get Lucius, Draco has been taken. Let him Floo, we don't have time to fuck around. Alex, I assume Marcel is on his way? Good. Prepare a room, we're going to send a message. It appears we're going to introduce Vahan to this world a little earlier than planned."

Both men nodded and hurried off to their tasks, while Harry took a moment to converse with Alpha for any other details the golem may have picked up.

Mere minutes later, Lucius and Sergei joined him on the lawn, Alex arriving a few seconds behind.

"What happened?" Lucius demanded, gripping his cane handle tightly. He was making a valiant effort to remain outwardly unperturbed, but it was a useless effort against someone with Harry's observational skills.

"Draco left the front gate approximately ten minutes ago, and started walking back to Malfoy Manor. He was grabbed by an unknown man and dragged into the woods."

Lucius frowned. "They didn't apparate away?"

Harry shook his head. "No. My guess is that they didn't intend to have him long, or need to take him far from Malfoy Manor. If I'm correct, then we need to move, now."

"Can your Khalidah track them?" Lucius eyed the massive creatures speculatively.

"Easily, but they're too big to fit between the trees in the woods; unless you want to alert them in plenty of time to escape. Talented they are; subtle, not so much. I've already sent the Heralds searching. They should find them quickly and lead us right to them."

Lucius opened his mouth to unleash some no doubt scathing comment, when Portent flew up, cawing and flapping eagerly. She circled above them, then started to fly away, darting back and forth to show the direction.

"Let's go." Harry began jogging after the bird, knowing Lucius and the Hounds were following closely. He set a hard pace, thankful for the training his men had put him through regularly. He'd always been fast, but now he had the stamina to match.

The four companions followed the bird into the woods silently, keeping an eye out for any traps or wandering dangers. It took barely three minutes before Portent swooped lower, flitting from bush to bush to show they were close.

Slowing to a silent walk, Harry gestured to alert the men they were close. He crouched, prowling forward to peer through the leaves into a small clearing.

The man stood over a terrified and bound Draco, waving his arms spastically as he ranted. He was average height, and his light brown hair was wild and uncared for, currently decorated liberally with leaf litter and twigs. Draco must have put up quite a fight, Harry noted with approval. The man was unremarkable except for the shabby and rumbled look he sported. It was obvious from the jerky movements and wild gesticulation that he wasn't entirely compos. The ranting wasn't helping either.

"I don't want to hurt you, do you understand? But your father, he and the rest of those Death Eater scum killed my family! My wife and son… My boy was the same age as you are now. He was such a happy little boy, never hurt a fly he didn't. And then You-Know-Who fell, and your father was arrested. And I thought, I thought to myself, he'll get it now! He'll pay! But he didn't, do you
understand? He claimed to be under the Imperious Curse! But he wasn't. Oh no, no he wasn't. That monster killed my boy. And now I have to make him understand. He has to know what his victims felt. What the people left behind felt. Do you understand?"

Draco was whimpering softly, tears leaking down his slightly bruised cheeks. He'd obviously been hit a few times in order to subdue him during the struggle, but beyond a few scrapes and bruises he appeared unharmed.

The man kneeled next to the pale boy, stroking his hair from his face in a parody of affection.

"He was about your age, my boy was. Looked nothing like you, of course, but he was the sweetest child. We didn't have much, but with him, we had the world. My boy, my boy," the man was weeping softly, still stroking Draco's hair. "He suffered, my boy did, do you understand? But don't worry, little Malfoy, I'm not a monster like your father. I'll kill you first, then mess you up a bit. You won't feel it, I promise. But your father, he'll think you suffered when he finds your body at the gate of Malfoy Manor. I have to do this. I have to make him understand. I'm sorry, little Malfoy, that you have to die for it to happen."

Harry had heard enough, and stood, casually strolling into the clearing as if just out for an afternoon constitutional.

The man stopped and blinked in surprise.

Harry supposed that was a reasonable reaction since it wasn't every day an Armani suit clad nine year old interrupted your murderous interlude in the middle of the woods.

"You're making a very large mistake," he announced idly, leaning a shoulder against a handy tree and crossing his ankles. He folded his arms, idly examining his nails as he waited for Lucius and the Hounds to take position hidden around the clearing.

"Who are you?" The man glared suspiciously.

Harry pursed his lips, faintly irritated. "You don't need to know that right now."

The man eyed him curiously, ignoring the wide eyed Draco at his feet.

"That's a bit rude. You should always introduce yourself when meeting new people. Where are your parents?"

Sighing heavily, Harry rolled his eyes. "You're boring." Snatching his wand from the custom leather cuff Shot had made for him, he cast an overpowered *stupify* at the man. His stunner punched straight through the weak shield his target threw up, hitting him dead on and knocking him flying.

The Hounds and Lucius emerged, the former scowling slightly.

"Boss," Sergei whined, earning a strange look from the blond at his side.

Harry pouted, crossing his arms sulkily. "I have a headache, and he was boring. I want to play with him." He cocked his head at Lucius, who was now checking Draco over with barely hidden concern. "That ok with you?"

Lucius glanced up from where he was picking leaves out of his son's hair. "Certainly. May I join the party?"

Smiling wolfishly, Harry chuckled. "Of course!" A mischievous gleam appeared in his eyes. "You
too, Draco?"

Lucius looked as if he would like to object, but he kept his peace, allowing his son to make the choice. It may have been the most intelligent thing he'd ever done.

Draco hesitated, still shaking slightly from his fright. Eyeing the crumpled man that was now being bound by Alex, he turned his reddened eyes to the calmly waiting boy.

"I'd like to come too, please."

Harry raised an eyebrow, impressed despite himself. He hadn't thought Draco ballsy enough for something like this yet.

"Sure thing." He turned to Lucius, bowing very slightly. "I apologise for this entire situation. Please be assured that such incidents will not be repeated. My healer should have arrived at the Manor by now, and I would like to offer you his services."

Lucius nodded back stiffly, resting a hand on his son's shoulder. "We would appreciate that, thank you."

Harry stretched his hand towards the Malfoys, taking their hands and placing them on his wrist where the concealed leather cuff rested. Activating the portkey, the three were whisked away, leaving the Hounds and their guest to follow behind.

An hour later, Draco had been given a clean bill of health and had his minor injuries healed. A fortifying cup of tea was provided, and then the men and boys were making their way down into the secure dungeon room Alex had used to house their guest.

There was no doorway, merely an odd looking wardstone set in the wall that one had to place their hand against. You would then be allowed through the doorway, similar to what Harry had been informed the entrance to Platform 9 3/4 was like. It had been set to supress the magic of anyone not keyed to the Manors wards, a fact that Harry made sure to inform the Malfoys of. The only way in was to be brought by a keyed person, the same for getting out. As an extra precaution, the block on the room was intent based, to prevent any escapes by prisoners jumping on a keyed person as they left. They could only be taken out if the authorised person willingly and intentionally took you with them.

Harry turned to look at Draco. The boy was quiet and pale still, but seemed to be mostly recovered from his abduction.

"You don't have to do this, Draco." He offered the boy a reassuring look. "This is going to be messy, since we'll be doing it the muggle way."

Lucius shifted slightly, but Draco remained resolute.

Shrugging, Harry gripped Draco and tapped the charm on the wall that allowed them into the cell, Sergei doing the same for Lucius. Alex and Marcel followed on their own.

Draco's would-be murderer was tied to a chair in the centre of the room, facing the wall through which they appeared. The rest of the wall was covered with assorted implements ranging from pliers to whips and branding irons.

Harry cast an amused look at Alex when he saw the impressive array of items on display. The Hound smiled back blandly, completely unapologetic.
"Who the fuck are you?" The man struggled against his bindings when he saw Harry, his eyes rolling wildly as the rest of the observers arranged themselves around the room.

Draco, Harry noticed, positioned himself to Harry's right in the corner where he could see clearly every action Harry made. He decided that he liked having the boy in that position. Lucius cast a quick look at his son and stood next to him, rather than in the back corner as he had originally intended.

"You may call me Sir, for now." Harry finally answered after a long pause.

Sergei flicked his wand discretely, placing gag spells on the Malfoys. Harry was already wearing his standard obscuraction charm, and he kept his scar covered with a combination of makeup and a glamour as a matter of course these days. It had become habitual to put them on first thing in the morning now, and never before had he been so pleased by his foresight.

The man scoffed. "Sir? Feeling a bit pretentious, are we? Where are your parents? Do they know what you've done? You'll be in lots of trouble, young man, when they find out." The man tried to look stern, but the effect was completely ruined by the tattered clothing and tight ropes wrapping around his body.

"My parents are none of your concern. What is your concern is that you have pissed off the wrong person today."

"Who, Malfoy?"

Harry shook his head, before turning to peruse the wall of toys Alex had put out for him.

"Oh, you've certainly pissed off Mr Malfoy as well, but that isn't who I was referring to."

He turned back and observed the look of confusion on the man's face. Holding up a hunting knife, he examined it thoughtfully, twisting it back and forth, letting the light play on the blade. Finally shaking his head, he put it back in its place, and moved on down the wall.

"Who, then?" The man watched the dark haired boy warily, finally beginning to realise the danger he was in.

Smiling angelically, Harry glanced over his shoulder. "We'll get to that." Turning swiftly, he brought his arm up, and fired a round through the man's shoulder. He giggled as the man jerked and screamed, blood pouring from the wound. He held up the handgun, allowing it to be clearly seen by the wizards in the room.

"Did you like that? This is a muggle handgun. A Smith & Wesson SD40 VE if you want to be exact." He kept his gaze on the writhing man, raising his voice slightly to be heard over the pitiful whimpers and sobs. "A gun really is a fascinating device. It fires a bullet, which is basically a blistering hot lump of metal at very high speeds. Fast enough to tear through flesh with ease, as you have so thoughtfully demonstrated for us. At this range, it will do a lot more damage, particularly if I hit you somewhere more delicate. A kneecap, for example." He paused long enough to fire another round, shattering the joint completely. Waiting patiently for the screams to subside into whimpers, Harry replaced the weapon on the wall. He glanced around, noting the amusement of the Hounds, the boredom of his Healer, Draco's sickened yet curious expression, and Lucius's green tinged complexion.

He chuckled to himself, ignoring the flinch of the bound man before him. Who would have thought that a man infamous for his torture while serving the Dark Lord would be squeamish over a little
muggle style play time? Though, he realised, there was a significant difference between casting a spell at someone and actually using your own hands to do the deed.

Gesturing negligently to the Hounds, Harry grabbed a couple of branding irons off the wall and shoved them into the convenient brazier.

Leaning against the wall, he waited for his men to finish adjusting the man's restraints. He was screaming in pain as they wrenched his injured shoulder around, strapping him to a transfigured x frame on a swivel, and a leather gag was shoved between his teeth and under his chin. It prevented him from biting his tongue or thrashing his head around, but did nothing to muffle the sound. Spread eagled, the man sobbed helplessly as every stitch of clothing was banished from his body.

Harry motioned for the frame to be set horizontally.

Picking up a packet of toothpicks, he pulled one free, spinning it between his fingers. Stepping closer to the man's feet, he grimaced at the unkempt state of his nails.

"Gross. You really should take better care of yourself you know. Honestly, what would your son think if he saw you this afternoon? Dirty, reeking, rambling to an innocent child that you planned to kill in cold blood? A child who had never done you any harm, and in all likelihood didn't even know who you were?" He tsk'd disapprovingly. "I didn't know your son, but I'm sure that he would be terrified of you. He would think you to be the very monster you accuse Mr Malfoy of being. Doesn't that just break your heart?" He mocked. "I imagine that if he is able to watch over you from the next life, as so many believe, that he saw everything you did today. Do you like knowing that your son might have watched you brutalize a child as innocent as he was?"

The man's sobs grew louder, and Harry snorted slightly in amusement. Honestly, this one was no challenge. It was a bit boring actually.

Humming a tune he'd heard on the radio recently, Harry began to insert the toothpicks under the man's filthy toenails, taking care to only put them in enough to hold their place as the man's feet jerked desperately. He only bothered with one foot, since he'd shot out the other knee, and unbalanced sensation was much more distressing to the nervous system anyway.

The Hounds tilted the frame upright, and Harry smiled faintly when the added weight on the destroyed shoulder made the man scream again. Grabbing Sergei, Harry murmured quietly into his ear, causing the stoic Russian to laugh slightly before doing what was asked.

Flicking his wand, a thick board of wood was conjured a small way in front of the frame, and the foot with the toothpicks was freed from the bindings. Sergei tucked his wand back into his arm holster, and resumed his position against the back wall.

The man looked at Harry in fear and confusion, cringing when Harry picked up the handgun again. Harry pressed the muzzle against the man's elbow opposite his ruined shoulder.

"Kick the board."

The man stared at Harry in fear. "What?"

"You heard me. Kick the fucking board, before I put a bullet in your elbow. Every time I have to tell you again, I'm going to shoot you somewhere else. I have a Healer standing behind you, so don't think you'll bleed out before I'm done with you. We'll just heal you up and start again. Make it easier on yourself and be a good boy." Looking the man dead in the eye, he pressed the muzzle of the gun harder into the tender flesh of his inner elbow. "Kick. The fucking. Board."
Sobbing, the man did as instructed, drawing his freed foot back and kicking the board hard, driving the toothpicks under his nails and further, not a sliver of wood left visible past the ends of his ragged toenails.

Harry smiled at the scream of pain, and leaned close to his ear, crooning softly and patting his hair.

"That's it. Good boy. I know it hurts, but you did so well. I'm so proud of you."

"Fuck you!" The man shouted, practically foaming at the mouth in his fury.

Laughing in delight, Harry backed off and turned to the watching Malfoys.

"I do so like it when they have a bit of fight in them, don't you?"

Lucius looked at the boy with faint splatters of blood on his hands and beaming face, and promptly decided that this child was even more terrifying than the Dark Lord had been at his worst. The Dark Lord had been completely mad and curse happy, but he would never have lowered himself to actually getting his hands dirty, let alone enjoy it as this boy clearly did. Swallowing heavily, he offered a sickly smile.

"Quite."

Draco was pale and shaking, but had set his jaw determinedly. Harry had saved him, and was now exacting retribution on his attacker. He didn't care why he had done it, only that he had. With that single act, he'd won the boy's unshakable loyalty, especially since he hadn't missed how even his father was afraid of upsetting the other child.

"Can I play too?" He spoke out, proud that his voice only caught slightly.

Harry looked at him in delight.

"Sure! You deserve a go at him! Tell me, are you familiar with bastinado?"

Harry patiently coached Draco through how to properly cane a person's feet, and smiled proudly as each blow fell, elicitin a tortured yell from the man. Harry supposed that having the impact on one foot already hurting from the toothpicks and the other transmitting the impacts right up into a shattered knee probably added to the man's distress.

After a few minutes of letting Draco work out with the cane, Harry directed him over to the branding irons. Resuming his patient lecturing tone, he continued Draco's education.

"Now, with burns, particularly ones as severe as branding, anywhere on the skin will hurt. However, there are certain areas of the body that will hurt more as they heal, especially if they have to heal the muggle way, or can't get to a Healer promptly. Any ideas where those areas might be?"

Draco lowered his head, frowning at the floor as he thought.

"The feet?"

"Why do you say that?" Harry asked with a faint smile.

"Because then they couldn't walk to get help?"

"Excellent. Go for it!" The little crime lord gestured, and watched as Draco carefully branded the arch of the man's feet. The smell of cooked meat filled the room, and Harry realised he was getting a little peckish. Burned flesh really did smell like roast lamb. "Where else, do you think?"
"Hands?" Draco was clearly unsure, but trying to think the problem through.

"Palms or back?"

Draco paused, chewing his lip. "Palms," he finally stated firmly. "So they can't grip a weapon or broom or floo powder or whatever."

Harry beamed. "You're doing well! You might also try the back of the knees, groin, under arms, and other sensitive places."

Screams filled the air, and the smell of cooking meat intensified, while Harry eyed Lucius. The older man was pale and had closed his eyes against the image of his son pressing the red hot metal against tender flesh. Cocking his head curiously, Harry walked over to him.

"Are you alright?" Harry asked quietly, keeping one eye on the blond boy.

Lucius glanced down at Harry, swallowing heavily to clear his throat.

"Quite well thank you, Sir."

Harry raised an eyebrow at the title, but didn't contradict the older blond.

"You look like you're about to hurl. I'm surprised. I'd been lead to believe you had inflicted much worse in your time."

Lucius nodded jerkily.

"Yes, but not like," he flicked his fingers slightly, indicating the scene playing out before them. "Not like this."

"Ah," Harry nodded in acceptance. "It can be a bit of a shock to the system, I suppose. This is honestly just a little love tap really. Muggles have some truly horrific tortures throughout history; the atrocities of the Witch Trials are just the tip of the iceberg." He observed the older man closely. "Or is it because it's Draco?"

Lucius's twitch was enough to give him away.

"I see. If it makes you feel any better, at least you know he's got the balls to do what needs to be done. You've raised him well."

Returning to the other boy to continue the lesson, Harry never saw the pained expression cross Lucius's face as he realised that he really had been training his son for this his entire life - though it had been with the thought of serving a resurrected Dark Lord. Not once had he stopped to realise what he was setting his pride and joy up to become; and now it had already been realised.

Several hours later, the man was a broken shell of what he had once been. Draco, it turned out, was quite the artist, taking a scalpel and carving a winding pattern all over the man's naked body. Harry looked it over as he rubbed a paste of salt and lemon juice into the wounds - it really was extraordinarily beautiful. He made a mental note to see if the boy was as talented with a pen, and if so he might consider getting the boy to design a tattoo for him.

Harry decided that they had played enough, and it was time to get down to business. They'd already had to partially heal the man twice, and he was looking rather worse for the experience. In hindsight, peeling the skin in strips from his groin and inner thighs might have been a bit much for this session. He motioned for the frame to be transfigured back into a chair, and had one conjured for himself in
Sitting down, he crossed his legs casually while calmly wiping the blood and paste from his hands.

"Now, do you understand why all this has happened to you?"

The man sobbed, unable to lift his head. He did manage a weak shake though, his sweaty hair swinging gently.

Harry sighed. "You attacked someone currently under my employer's protection, and an innocent child at that. My employer is not a nice man, Mr… actually, I never did get your name."

The last few hours had taught the man to answer promptly at least. "Brett Jones. My name is Brett Jones." His voice was hoarse from screaming, but he knew better now than to remain silent.

"Mr Jones. My employer is not a nice man, and he takes his obligations very seriously. Therefore, when you target someone under his protection, it falls to me to educate you on the error of your ways."

Harry wiped the last of the blood from his hands, and threw the soiled cloth into the brazier causing a swirl of sparks to flare up. "Look at me, Mr Jones." Waiting until the man had raised his head and met his eyes, Harry's voice grew infinitely colder. "This is a pleasant as I'm going to get, and I'm never going to get this pleasant again. So you run back to whatever little hole you crawled out of, and you tell anyone who thinks to cause trouble that this is *my* neighbourhood, and *you do not shit on my doorstep*. Do you understand?"

The man dropped his head again, lacking the strength to hold it up any longer.

Harry narrowed his eyes and picked up a large hunting knife, stepping closer to the broken man. Draco stepped up behind him and grabbed his hair, roughly yanking his head back.

"I don't think you're listening to me." Harry crooned, before roughly grabbing the man's ear and slicing it off with a single swift stroke. Holding the severed ear to his lips, he looked the mewling man in the eye and shouted. "Can you hear me now?"

Draco giggled, and Harry flashed him a brief smirk, before returning his attention to his target.

"Now, are you paying attention, Mr Jones? Good. We are going to let you go. And you are going to spread the word that Vahan is in town, and what happens to people who piss him off by touching his things. Are we clear?"

Jones nodded his head a vigorously as he could, ignoring the pain in his scalp from where Draco still gripped his hair.

"Good." Harry turned toward the door, before pausing and tossing a final remark over his shoulder. "Oh, and Mr Jones? Be sure to heal the muggle way, won't you? I'd hate for Draco's masterpiece to be damaged by a careless Healer."
Chapter 21

Of the children rescued with Alice, fourteen had been returned to their families, three would be staying as Nestlings, and three had proven to be magical and would be going the next morning to The Haunt with the Andrews, Marcel and Connor. They would begin their wizarding cultural studies as soon as they were settled in.

Harry sat in his study reviewing the files on his new Ghosts. Isabella Grey - who refused to answer to anything other than Tink for some inexplicable reason, Sarah Hanovan, and Trent Donnolly. All three were muggleborns whose parents had been unable to cope with a magical child and given them away to an orphanage, where they had been selected by a scout for McKinnon. From there, the kids had been trained up and put to work at the brothel where they had spent the next two years.

Ordinarily Vahan would have just passed the information anonymously to the cops and let them deal with it since it was an established brothel and not street kids, but with his agreement with Shot to collect Alice, he'd had to deal with it personally. As it turned out, it was rather lucrative that he had. Aside from Alice and the six children, the vacuum of product and services left after the collapse of McKinnon's empire was conveniently filled by Vahan's network. He'd even absorbed the more lucrative loose ends into his own organisation. While all traces of child prostitution had been dismantled and dealt with, the other parts of the organisation had netted him several million pounds profit each month. Not something to complain about, though with a bit of reorganisation he'd be able to nearly double that in the near future.

Sighing, he sat back and listened to the general house noise outside his study. The new Nestlings, Sophie, Lizzie and Brian were settling in well, though they hadn't bonded with him as quickly as Elise, Mark, and Lewis had. He supposed it was partially because they had an existing bond with Alice, but he would have to put some serious work in with them to get the level of trust he wanted.

Tucking the files away, he stood and stretched, before wandering out to find his boy. He found the child in his room going over his Goblin history - again.

"Connor?"

The six year old snapped his head up, eyes sparkling with pleasure. "Is it time?"

Harry chuckled. "Not yet, Birthday Boy. We'll be going at twelve, and it's currently," he paused to look at his watch. "Ten thirty. In the meantime, it's time for ballet practice."

Connor grumbled, but closed his book and hid it away in the magically locked drawer the Hounds had set up for him. Both boys quickly changed into the tight clothing the Hounds had provided as uniform, and made their way to the converted basement that had been put aside for movement studies. Like a typical dance studio, mirrors covered one wall from floor to ceiling, and a barre had been installed. The polished wood floor was carefully maintained by the elves, and shone warmly under the lights set into the ceiling. The room was sizable enough to fit all the children for dance classes with room to spare, but the smaller rooms off to the side were stuffed with an assortment of props and tools used for the children's lessons, everything from pickpocketing to bomb building and lock picking. Today however, it would be used for its more traditional purpose.

Stretching out and warming up carefully, the two boys practiced their basic positions while chatting about whatever came to mind. Both of them detested the ballet lessons that Alex had insisted on to help correct their posture and movement, but they couldn't argue with the benefits. The strength and flexibility alone made it worth it, but the gracefulness that was beginning to show through their every
gesture was something they were both rather pleased with. According to Alex, it was the fastest way for them to learn to mimic the smooth gait and movements of their pureblood peers.

Deciding they were sufficiently limber, Harry moved to the sound system and put on his current favourite dance playlist. Beginning with Danse Macabre, then continuing through select parts of Swan Lake and the Nutcracker, the boys danced the routines that Alex had developed for them, their movements carefully executed and perfectly synchronised. While far from professional level, the dedication and regular training was apparent.

Graceful and smooth, the boys swept across the room, spins and jumps executed as if carried by the notes of the music itself. Young muscles flexed and bunched as they twirled and stretched, long limbs and heaving chests testament to their efforts. Their movements were technically correct, but the complete lack of passion gave away their lack of interest.

When the music finally ended, the boys dropped to the floor, sweaty and exhausted, trembling with fatigue. Laying back on the floor they took a few moments to get their breath back before beginning to stretch and cool down; both children too tired to chat.

Glancing up at the sound of someone clapping, Harry smiled gratefully when Alex handed the boys a bottle of water each.

"You're doing well; there's improvement even over last week. How are you finding it?" He laughed when both boys scowled. "Aside from the mild dislike I see smouldering in your eyes, I meant."

Connor shrugged and answered, since Harry was in the process of taking a drink.

"I hate it, but if you say it's working, then it is. Can we go to Wimpy's now?"

Alex and Harry both laughed.

"Twelve o'clock, and not a minute before!" Harry chided gently, grinning when Connor folded his arms and pouted. Exchanging a look with Alex, the dark haired boy rolled his eyes. "Go shower and get dressed." He stretched out a hand and grabbed the bolting child as he ran past. "Take your time and wash thoroughly. You don't want to be stinky on your birthday, and we still need to get everyone else ready too." Releasing his ward when he saw the genuine agreement, Harry let himself flop onto his back on the floor.

"You doing ok, Sir?" Alex eyed the boy with barely hidden concern. He'd pushed himself hard the day before and no matter how grown up he seemed most of the time, physically he was just a kid, with all of the limitations that implied.

"I'm fine; just tired. It's been a big couple of days, you know?" Sitting up and taking another mouthful of water, Harry looked at his bottle and pursed his lips slightly. "The idea of going out to eat with eleven kids under twelve, plus seven adults is... exhausting. And we haven't even done it yet."

Alex cleared his throat, fighting down a smile. "Eight adults, Sir. Bradshaw is coming too; he'll meet us there."

Harry looked up, surprised. "Really? Connor will be thrilled. Keep it a surprise for him, yeah?"

Alex nodded. "I didn't give him an option about not coming, even though I know you hadn't specified that. I just didn't want Connor's birthday ruined because his father is being a self-absorbed twat."
Snorting with laughter, Harry mopped the sweat off his face with a small towel. "He is that. I'm glad you took the initiative. Thank you."

"No problem, Sir. Connor's a great kid."

"Yeah, he is," Harry agreed softly. Shoving himself to his feet, he handed the empty bottle back to his Hound and strolled from the room to have his own shower. It may be a bit early to get ready, but it was a special day so he was going to put the extra effort into his appearance. His boy deserved nothing less than his best.

Their arrival was a boisterous and chaotic as Harry had expected. Knowing that keeping track of so many young children would be a headache even with eight adults on deck, Harry had instigated a buddy system with the kids. On learning of this, every adult present had given him grateful looks and a heavy sigh of relief.

"Dad!" Connor shouted when he spotted Bradshaw waiting in the area that had been put aside for the party.

Bradshaw grinned, scooping the boy up onto his hip.

"Well, don't you look fancy? No prizes for guessing who you're trying to look like!" He grinned, smoothing down the tiny suit his son wore before returning Connor to his feet. While not a replica of Harry's, his entire look was clearly inspired by the older boy. He ignored the faint stab of pain that his son wanted to emulate Harry and not his father, reminding himself that it was only natural given the circumstances.

Connor grinned back, oblivious to the older man's turmoil. "Harry took me shopping! He prefers Armani, but I liked Ralph Lauren better. Do you like it?" He peered up through the auburn curls escaping from his hair gel, lightly chewing his lip.

Bradshaw pasted a smile on his face, refusing to ruin his son's birthday in a fit of jealousy. The boy was only six years old, he'd be the worst kind of bastard to ruin this day for him. Not least because Vahan would kill him without a second thought if he did.

"You look very handsome."

Satisfied, Connor turned and grabbed Elise's hand. When Harry had been pairing the kids up, he'd quietly requested to be buddied with the little girl. He remembered how sick she'd been when he'd first arrived at The Nest, and he couldn't help hovering over her protectively. He liked all of the Nestlings - except Lewis, because he'd knocked over the pot plant Connor had brought from home after his mother died, breaking the pot and nearly killing the plant - and tried to be helpful and look after them as best he could. He knew one day it would be his responsibility, and he didn't want to let his Sir down. But despite that, Elise was his favourite and he doted on her.

The group of children threw themselves into their seats, chatting loudly and bouncing around in their excitement.

Harry paused, looking at them, and closed his eyes tiredly.

"Boss?" Sergei asked quietly, his eyes scanning the room with practiced ease.

"I'm fine. Just looking at the… What do you call a group of kids, anyway? A gaggle? Committee?"

"A migraine." Sergei grunted, the corner of his lips twitching.
Harry chuckled, thoroughly amused and distracted from his pending headache. He'd been on the edge of another overload, but as usual his Hound had done exactly as he needed. Both Alex and Sergei had been an absolute godsend - assuming such a deity existed.

"Accurate. Let's go with that." Harry wove his way through the seating area, pausing only to greet Bradshaw before taking his seat at the head of the table. He cast a quick look at Alice, checking to see how she was coping with being in public. She seemed slightly subdued, but nothing alarming at this stage. Cutting his eyes to Shot, he relaxed when he saw that she was subtly keeping a close eye on her little sister.

The lunch progressed much as one would expect for such a large group with multiple young children - raucous, messy, and interspersed with sugar fuelled arguments and equally enthusiastic laughter.

After a while, Harry noticed Elise shifting in her seat, and he nudged Connor.

"Elise needs to use the loo. Can you take her, please?" He spoke quietly into the younger boy's ear.

Nodding, Connor stood and took the almost four year old by the hand, leading her through the back and to the toilets.

Taking the opportunity to use the loo himself while they were there, Connor made sure she was finished and clean before tending his own needs, and instructed Elise to wait next to the sinks while he was in the cubicle.

Hearing the door open, he finished up as quickly as he could. He'd heard stories of what the Nestlings and Ghosts had had to do before Sir saved them, and he knew Elise was still wary around adult men. He didn't want to leave her alone with a stranger, even a friendly one.

"Well, hello there sweetie. Are you all alone?" The stranger's voice was warm and friendly, but Connor felt a shiver of dread run down his spine. Something seemed… off.

Doing his pants up, he barely bothered to tuck his shirt back in before darting out of the cubicle and to Elise's side. He eyed the man, and decided that his instincts were right. The man was a total creeper.

Short and stocky, the man had a bland and open type face, and an aura that invited people to trust him, but there was something dark in his eye, and Connor could feel a slight fizz along his spine that he was sure was his magic reacting to a threat.

The man frowned when Connor took the trembling girl's hand, tugging her lightly behind his body.

"I'm not going to hurt you. Where are your parents? Surely you're not here alone?"

Staying silent, the boy began to edge around the room, keeping himself between the man and Elise. Dropping the nice act, the man stepped between the children and the door, blocking the exit.

"Now, now, surely you're not leaving so soon? I think we should become special friends. Don't you?" He smiled, flashing perfect white teeth.

Connor could feel his heart beating quickly, hammering away in his chest like a panicking bird. His focus narrowed to the man and Elise cowering at his back, eyes picking things out in minute detail. He heard the man say something, but the rushing in his ears muted it to an indistinct murmur. He watched as the man darted a hand forward, seeming to move in slow motion to his hyper aware senses. The hand slipped around him, latching onto Elise's arm and dragging her out from where she
With a whoosh, time snapped back into focus, and the rushing in his ears dropped away leaving a harsh silence. Connor charged forward with a yell, driving his head into the man's stomach like a raging bull.

Staggering back, the man let go of Elise with a grunt as his back hit the wall next to the door and the air was forced from his lungs.

Shouting for Elise to get Sir, Connor punched the man as hard as he could in the groin. He knew he didn't stand a chance in a fight against a grown up, so all he could think to do was stall the man long enough for Sir to come save him.

Reflexively doubling over with a pained whine, the man hit his head on the sink with a meaty thud and slid to the floor, dazed. Not wasting any time, Connor pulled a screwdriver from the leather cuff Shot had given him for his birthday, and leaped at the man, bringing the screwdriver down over and over as fast and hard as he could. He ignored the wet sounds as the metal shaft drove into yielding flesh, intent only on stalling the creeper. Sir would be here soon, he promised himself, just a little bit longer.

An arm snaked around his waist and yanked him from where he straddled the man. He fought for a moment, before his brain registered Sir's cologne, and he slumped back into the restraining arms. He dimly saw Mr Petrikov checking the creeper's wrist for a pulse, forced to avoid the mangled face and neck that sluggishly oozed blood onto the floor. Turning away from the grizzly sight, he buried his face in Sir's chest and shook; too shocked to cry despite his relief.

"Connor?" Harry asked calmly as he led the boy to a cubicle, lowering the toilet lid and sitting the blood splattered boy on it. The toilet walls blocked the boy from seeing the results of his furious attack, though Harry heard Sergei muttering slightly in appreciation at the results. The phrase 'hamburger meat' may have been mentioned in conjunction with an impressed whistle.

Connor looked up at his Sir, eyes overly wide and slightly glassy. "Yes, Sir?"

Harry looked him over carefully. "Are you hurt?"

The six year old shook his head. "No, Sir. Is Elise ok?" He frowned, worried.

Grinning, Harry nodded. "She's fine. A little shaken but Alice calmed her down and got her a milkshake. I think she's mostly forgotten about it now, to be honest."

Connor sagged in relief. "That's good then. What happens now?" He changed the subject, trying to do what he thought Harry would do in this situation. Namely, get on with Business.

Harry noted the change and went with it, content to let his boy do what he felt he needed to for the moment. "Now, Mr Petrikov is going to deal with the body, while you and I stay here for the moment and give you a chance to calm down a bit. I know that you're pretty hyped right now."

Connor nodded, clasping his shaking hands in his lap. "Do you get like this too after a fight?"

"Yeah," Harry grinned. "You get used to it eventually, but you'll always get that little jolt of adrenalin. Or at least that's what the Hounds tell me. Can you show me what you used?"

Looking down, Connor only now noticed that he was still clutching the screwdriver, but partially hiding it up his sleeve. Wordlessly, he offered it to Harry.
Taking it gently, the dark haired boy looked it over. "Where did you get this?" He asked curiously.

Connor shifted sheepishly. "Shot's workbench. I took it when she was fitting my cuff today." He looked down, ashamed when he saw the disapproval on Sir's face.

"Connor, you know the rules about stealing from people in the house. Why did you take it?"

"Because you wouldn't let me have a knife yet, but you said that you should always carry a weapon. So I imp- um, imp-" His face screwed up as he tried to remember the word.

"Improvised?"

"Yeah."

Harry shook his head and smiled fondly. "Good job."

Connor's head shot up in surprise. "Really?"

Nodding, Harry gently smoothed the wild curls back from the younger boy's face. "Yeah. While I'm not happy you stole from Shot - something that you will not be doing again, by the way - I'm really proud of you for taking your safety so seriously. Doubly so for protecting Elise the way you did. I was only a little younger than you when I made my first kill, and it was nowhere near as intimate as yours. So yeah, I'm proud. You did really well." Reaching into his boot, he pulled out a small stiletto blade, and flipped it over, offering it handle first to the blood spattered child in front of him. "You've earned a real weapon. And you won't be going to The Haunt, you'll be staying with me. I think you've proven you can handle yourself in an emergency." He eyed the suddenly deliriously happy boy sternly. "But that just means we'll be training you harder now. Just because you did well here doesn't mean you have any excuse to slack off your training. You still have lots to learn. We both do."

Nearly swooning with delight, Connor took the offered blade, clutching it tightly and eyeing it as one might a religious relic they'd spent their entire life searching for.

"Thank you," he whispered.

"No problem. I'll take you to see Mr South and get you started on your own arsenal. There's no excuse for you to be using other peoples tools now."

Standing, Harry offered his protégé his hand. "Now, before we dispose of the body, you should have a look at what you did. It's important, though it might not seem so now. You ready?"

Connor tucked the knife away into his cuff and took Harry's hand. "Yes, Sir."

Leading the boy from the cubicle, Harry gently towed him closer to the body. He remained silent, giving Connor time to observe and process in his own way. His ward would certainly have nightmares about the day's events, but he firmly believed that a clear image was better than half formed pictures formed from an adrenalin fuelled frenzy. An understanding of just what he was capable of would only help him in the future, too.

Observing the mangled face and neck of the body, Connor swallowed heavily. Now that he was calmer, he could clearly see the massive damage he'd managed to inflict. The body was completely unrecognisable, and he was reminded of a fox he'd once seen that had been hit by a car. It's face had been all battered and cut up like this too.

"I killed him?" He asked quietly.
Sergei nodded. "With one of the first blows, I'd say. Looks like you got him in the eye a couple of times, and the jugular too. Either of those would be fatal."

A sudden rush of fury swept through him, and without thinking, he lashed out with his foot, kicking the corpse in the face as hard as he could.

"Fucking arsehole!" He shouted, anger making his voice shake.

Looking shocked, Harry stared at him. "Connor! There's no need for that sort of language!"

The two boys stared at each other for a moment, before cracking up laughing.

Sergei rolled his eyes and flicked a cleaning spell over them, removing all traces of gore. Another flick and the body and screwdriver were vanished and the bathroom sparkling clean again.

Throwing an arm around the slightly hysterical six year old, Harry chuckled. "Come on kiddo, we've got a party to finish!"

Two days later saw Bradshaw slumped into his seat, resting a shaking hand on the edge of his desk. "Blood adoption?"

Harry nodded calmly. "Yes. He's already mine, and now I wish to claim him fully. He's proven himself to be a worthy heir."

"He's only three years younger than you!"

"Three and a half," Harry corrected. "But that's irrelevant. I will be blood adopting Connor as my son and heir; I'm only notifying you beforehand as a courtesy. I'll be using the Altherian Ritual for it, so any family holdings or gifts from your line will remain; he'll still be your blood as well."

Running a hand over his face, Bradshaw realised that he would never be taking his son back. No, not his son anymore. Vahan's son. He closed his eyes in defeat, grieving for his short sightedness in the wake of his wife's death. He didn't regret naming John Smith as Connor's guardian, but he fervently wished things had turned out differently.

"What do I need to do?" He whispered in resignation.

Connor ran through Potter Manor, gleefully exploring the multitude of rooms. It was the first time Sir had let him come to Fortress, and he thought it was brilliant.

He'd been assigned the Heir's Rooms as his own, secretly grateful that they were just across the hallway from the Master Suite. The house elf assigned to him, Swit, had explained that the Manor would move the family personal rooms to best meet the family's needs. Apparently The Disappointment used to have his own wing as far away from his parents as possible when he was the heir. Connor wasn't entirely sure why Sir's father was called The Disappointment, but he wasn't going to argue with the feisty old elf. While she may have been assigned to him, he was under no illusions about ordering her about; she'd take the paddle to his backside if he gave her any lip. He couldn't help liking her though, she was like the old Italian grandmother he'd seen once at the park.

Opening a new set of doors, he stopped dead in his tracks, staring in wide eyed wonder at the massive music room.

Filled with various instruments kept in top condition, the room was also littered with comfortable
seating for both musicians and guests, the bright and airy room instantly his favourite place in the whole Manor. Barely blinking, he took a hesitant step forward, eyes glued to the massive grand piano by the window.

Fingers twitching slightly, he extended a hand and lightly tapped a couple of keys. The resulting notes brought a smile to his face, and his face lit up with a grin. Suddenly, he couldn't think of anything he wanted more than to learn how to play it.

Spinning around, he dashed out the door in search of Sir. He had lessons to beg for.
Chapter 22

Harry cursed under his breath as he made his way through the rank sewer tunnels. The moist squelching under his feet was enough to make his nose wrinkle, even if one ignored the pervasive smell seeping into every pore. He seethed as he picked his way along, cursing Adama with every fibre of his being.

His tenth birthday had started out so well. Midnight had found him in the back room of a disreputable drinking establishment, a tumbler of rather nice scotch at his elbow and a Royal Flush in his hand. He hadn't even needed to cheat this time!

He was only playing for pocket change, a measly £500,000 pot, but he had every intention of cultivating a business relationship with all three of his fellow players. The conclusion of their negotiations was dependant on proving he could hold his own against them, something he was doing exceptionally well at as they hashed out the details during their game.

And then *fucking Adama* had burst in through the door before he could show his hand or collect his winnings.

Given that he was completely unwilling to be questioned at this time, Harry had been forced to make a hasty and undignified exit through a back window and over a roof, only to be spotted not even a block away. Adama had clearly studied the exits and surrounding streets carefully before making his move, anticipating which way Harry would run. And so Harry had been forced to leg it again, the cop hot on his tail.

*Fucking Adama!*

Grimacing as he stepped in something he'd rather not look too closely at, Harry could only be grateful he was in his Tiny clothes - baggy mass produced jeans, scruffy t-shirt, oversized military jacket and scuffed converse - rather than his usual suit and silk. He had every intention of burning these clothes once he got back to Sanctum.

Briefly considering using his emergency portkey, he decided it was best not to risk it. It was currently three in the morning, and he *really* didn't want his staff to see him in such a state. Using the portkey would only trigger the wards and bring them all running. Reinforcing his resolution to learn how to apparate as soon as his magical core was developed enough, he sped up, looking for the next exit.

Scowling, Harry muttered to himself as he stalked along, trying to work out how he could salvage the negotiations. He had a feeling though that the deal had fallen through. There was no way that they would want to be associated in any way with someone so closely tagged by the cops. So that was about £12 million a month that he'd just lost out on, not to mention the product he wouldn't be able to ship through them.

He made a mental note to find out who had snitched on his presence at the bar and shove their head down every open sewer pit he could find until they drowned in it.

Engrossed in his thoughts, he didn't notice the slick patch in front of his foot, and skidded, falling into the stinking sludge with a splash and a yelp. Surfacing, he retched; violently spitting the foul mess from his mouth. Whimpering pathetically as he tried to scrape as much of it off as possible, he wondered if it would be an overreaction to ruin Adama's finances by buying shares in every second rate port-a-loo and waste disposal company that was listed on the open market in the mans name. Shot could get the relevant details in a heartbeat, he was sure.
"Wow, you look like you've had a shit time of things," Shot observed, her lips twitching in amusement.

Harry glared from beneath his matted fringe, ignoring how the half dried sewerage had caused it to stick to his forehead. "Don't think for a second that I won't shoot you."

Shot raised her hands in mock surrender. "No need to take your crappy mood out on me!" She laughed and dodged the carving knife that the bedraggled boy snatched from the kitchen bench and launched at her.

"Sir?" Alex appeared, his eyes widening as they raked over the mess coating his employer. "Do you need anything?"

Closing his eyes in an effort to keep his temper in check, Harry shook his head. "No thank you." He made to walk past the Hound, only to have Sergei materialize in the way.

His eyebrows raised, Sergei pressed his lips together and tried to ignore the stench.

Throwing his hands up, Harry rolled his head back to look at the ceiling. "Vse zayebalo!" He ignored the snort of laughter from the Russian, and stepped around the hulking man, intent on getting to the shower before anyone else saw him.

"What's that smell?" Connor stumbled sleepily into the room, rubbing his eyes.

"That would be me," Harry responded dryly. "Now please excuse me, I need to shower, then gargle an entire bottle of mouthwash, and maybe drink one as well. And then I'm going to get very, very drunk and pretend this entire night didn't happen."

"You can't," Alex interjected. "You're bonding Warthog today. You can't have any alcohol in your system, not even trace amounts from mouthwash."

Turning with intimidating slowness, Harry's verdant eyes gleamed like a blades edge as he settled his gaze on the apologetic man before resuming his trek to his ensuite. He had clothes to burn and some serious exfoliation to conduct.

"No, really, what is it? Why do you smell?"

Harry grunted irritably and tried to ignore the boy.

"What is that stuff all over you? What happened? Are you alright? You really stink." Connor followed Harry down the hall, peppering the frustrated older boy with questions.

Harry grimaced. "Connor, not now."

"But."

"Not. Now."

Pouting, the six year old subsided, but continued following his idol into the master suite. Or at least he would have, if Harry hadn't shut the door in his face.

After a thorough cleaning and half a bottle of mouthwash, Harry threw himself onto his bed and stared at the ceiling. He groaned as he heard Warthog scratching at the door. The cat was huge now, though she wouldn't reach her full size until she was around two years old. She was about the same
size as him if she stood on her back legs, perhaps a little taller. He really couldn't put off bonding with her any longer. They'd researched it thoroughly, and determined that his birthday was the optimal time to perform the ritual. Something to do with power levels and phases of the moon and Dates of Personal Significance. He hadn't paid much attention when they were explaining it, more intent on his coffee at the time. All he'd needed to know was that they had to do it at sunrise on his birthday.

Ignoring the scratching, he flicked his wand to engage a Do Not Disturb sign on his door. Everyone in his household knew that if the sign was up and they wanted to bother him, then someone had better be dying, or he'd make sure they were.

Setting his alarm for five o'clock, he sighed and burrowed into his bed. Three hours sleep was better than none.

Stepping into the ritual circle, Harry glanced over at the intersecting circle that contained the furious mountain lion. Given that Warthog was unlikely to stay put for the duration of the ritual, they'd been forced to put her in a cage. It was large enough for her to lie down comfortably and she could see through the bars with no difficulty, but her intense displeasure at being restrained was very clear.

They were in the open Apparition Courtyard in the centre of the penthouse, the last few stars twinkling above them in defiance of the approaching dawn. Harry shivered, and wished that he could wear something warmer than the plain ritual robes the Hounds had provided. It may be summer, but five thirty in the morning at thirty stories in the air made things a bit chilly, and the cool air circulating against his bare skin under them made things retract rather uncomfortably.

Sergei poured the small amount of blood taken from Warthog earlier onto the activation rune in the circle around her, causing the complicated drawing to light up and glow with an eerie red light that pulsed in time with her heartbeat.

Harry nodded and drank the noxious grey brown potion he'd been given, then cut his palm with an atheme, calmly dripping the blood onto his own rune. His circle lit up an intense sickly orange, morphing into light blue, amethyst purple, and then settling a pleasant forest green.

Locking his knees so he wouldn't fall, Harry closed his eyes and began the chant that his Hounds had drilled him in relentlessly over the past months. Breathing steadily, he drew his focus inward, allowing his mouth to continue the chant on autopilot while he searched out his magical core.

He drifted deeper and deeper into the velvety black inside his mind, seeking the light that was the source of his abilities. Finally, he found it, a burning orb whose surface rippled slowly like waves of molten lava; white hot and painfully bright to look at. Harry fought the urge to flinch away, forcing himself ever closer.

He could see sections of the surface hardening and cracking slightly in response to the potion and chant that he was dimly aware his body continued, and he breathed a slow sigh of relief that it seemed to be working.

Determinedly reaching out a hand, he couldn't suppress a mental scream of anguish at the pain engulfing his senses. Logically he knew that his hands weren't actually here, and he wasn't really feeling the skin and nerves blister and shrivel and peel from charring bones, but knowing and knowing were apparently very different in this situation.

Tears streaming down his face, he lunged, wrapping his fingers around a sizable shard of the hardened magic. Heaving backwards, he shuddered in agony as he felt it pull free with a
reverberating crack that he felt to the very depths of his soul.

Casting about in the darkened surroundings, he located a small red light pulsing a slight distance away. He paused for a moment, startled at the beauty of it.

Feeling the shard of magic beginning to soften in his hands, he hurried forward, and carefully suspended it above the pulsing red light. The white shard continued softening, liquid magic trickling down the sides and dripping off the bottom point, each drop mixing slowly with Warthog’s essence.

Harry had to fight down a faintly hysterical giggle at the thought that it looked like some bizarre plasma based ice cream.

Finally, after several agonizing minutes, the last of the shard had softened and melted into the red light. The light was unchanged in colour, but somehow seemed stronger and more brilliant, a depth added in a way that defied description. It was still the same, and yet somehow more.

Pulling back with a sigh, the exhausted boy let himself drift back toward his core, observing how the orb had healed as if nothing had been removed. Satisfied that things had gone as planned, he drew his consciousness back into his body, and opened his eyes.

Staggering as a massive bolt of pain lanced through his head, he nonetheless carefully concluded the chant and broke the ritual circle. Sergei handled Warthog, while Alex caught Harry as his legs gave out.

"Sir?" Alex asked, concerned. The ritual should have been exhausting, but not to this degree. The boy was limp and almost unconscious in his arms.

A pained whimper was his only answer, and he exchanged a worried look with Sergei.

Warthog lay in a similar state, eyes unfocused and heavy lidded as she panted in distress.

Sergei levitated the cage, following behind Alex as he carried his unprotesting employer down the hallway to his bedroom.

Placing the small boy on the bed, he stripped the ritual robes from the slim body and charmed some soft pyjamas onto him. Knowing Harry preferred to sleep topless when the temperature permitted it, he didn’t bother with a shirt, merely tucked the boy into bed.

He turned and helped Sergei float Warthog out of the cage and over onto the bed next to Harry, settling her as close as possible without putting her under the blankets with the tiny wizard. Arranging the two so that they were touching, the Hounds shared one last worried look before vacating the room.

HarryCub twitched as Petunia slapped his face, screeching about something he didn’t understand. He gazed around, confused. This was in the past, wasn’t it? He was small, much smaller than his ten year old self. Surely the last few years, all that he had accomplished, couldn’t be just a dream? He felt a wave of animalistic fury as he watched Dudley stuffing his face, eating all of his food then snatching the meagre portions off HarryCub’s plate as well. HarryCub released an angry growl, wanting to pounce on the fat little human.

A shift, and HarryCub was shivering in the snow, looking up at the blurry figures of the two older humans and two cubs. Not siblings, no, but adopted. The oldest human invited HarryCub to join their pack, and HarryCub agreed, trotting after them obediently.
Shift. Pain in their jaw and backside, the stink of older male all over them. Hunger gnawing at their belly, and cold eating into their bones. Why did the older humans allow it? Was HarryCub being punished? HarryCub growled, determined to challenge the Alpha when HarryCub was grown. Until then, HarryCub would work hard, and earn their way up the pack ranking, learning everything they could. The Beta was a tolerant teacher, and HarryCub moved closer, following every action closely.

Shift. HarryCub had procured their own den. A safe place to rest and heal. A place pungent with the smell of chemicals mixed together to make the crystals that the humans desired.

Shift. Fighting, HarryCub slashed with the metal claw, crimson blood splashing hot and metallic on their skin.

Shift.

Shift.

Shift, shift, shift.

Faster and faster the images flashed by, a short lifetime of memories revisited and overlayed with a primitive animal intelligence. As Harry twitched and moaned in his sleep, a thousand injuries and countless indignities relived, his familiar experienced and learned, absorbing everything his mind contained.

"What went wrong?" Shot asked, worriedly stirring a spoonful of chocolate syrup into her already sludge like shake. Since teaming up with Vahan, she'd become very fond of the young man, thinking of him as something like a very dangerous younger brother.

"Not sure. They shouldn't have collapsed like that, and they certainly shouldn't have been in any pain." Alex pursed his lips, absently fiddling with the handle of his teacup. It was proof of his agitation, since he would ordinarily never stoop to such vulgar or revealing actions.

"He wouldn't have any alcohol in his system, would he? I mean, you specifically told him not to even use mouthwash, right?" Shot licked her long spoon, then grabbed a chocolate chip cookie from the plate of freshly baked goodies that Jinky had thoughtfully provided. Breaking it in half, she dipped one piece in her drink, then popped it in her mouth.

Sergei eyed her concoction in barely disguised disgust. The Russian was known to have a cast iron stomach, but he doubted even he could bear more than a single mouthful of any of her creations.

"What in Merlin's name is in that?" He asked, unable to resist any longer.

Shot glanced up. "Hm? Oh, um, Almond milk, chocolate syrup, caramel topping, toffee chip ice cream, a shot of espresso, whipped cream, a pinch of ground chilli powder and cinnamon."

Sergei swallowed heavily, regretting having asked. "That's revolting."

She grinned, unrepentant. "Two yums don't make a yuck. First rule of combination coordination."

"I don't think he would have been foolish enough to have ignored me about the mouthwash," Alex interjected, returning them to their original topic. "He knew how important it was that every detail of this ritual was perfect."

"Perhaps, but after seeing the state he was in when he got home, I'm not sure he was remembering..."
details about things like that." Sergei sighed, stretching his legs out in front of him and crossing his ankles. He had to admit, Narcissa Malfoy had done a marvellous job when she chose the furnishings. The couch was absurdly comfortable.

Alex scowled. "He's in for a rough time if that's the case."

"Well what will happen?" Shot asked, dipping another cookie.

"Well for one thing, the process would have heightened sensation astronomically, and been extremely painful. Sticking your hands in a volcano then performing open heart surgery on yourself without anaesthetic type painful."

Shot paled, eyes wide in horror.

"And then, once he'd blended his magic into Warthog, rather than her gaining intelligence and any relevant knowledge painlessly in their sleep over a period of a week or so, their minds would blend and he would relive his entire life in a single twenty four hour period. Warthog would still adapt and learn, but it would be much more traumatic for both of them. Not to mention that there could be any number of side effects that affect the bond itself. This is, of course, assuming he doesn't die or go insane."

"Well, shit," Shot supplied succinctly.

Exactly twenty four hours later, two pairs of eyes snapped open.

Dazed emerald green framed in thick black lashes blinked slowly, taking a few moments to focus on the plain white ceiling. Grunting, Harry turned his head slightly to look at his furry bed companion. Warthog stared back, her amber eyes now turned a brilliant blue and shining with newfound intelligence.

"I did not like that," a feminine voice sounded in his mind.

Harry blinked a few times, and frowned. "Neither did I."

"It was your fault," the voice continued, "you were told not to use the mouthwash."

Harry glared slightly, even as he accepted that the voice was correct. "I'm aware. I didn't think it would make that much difference."

The voice sniffed disdainfully. "You should have. Your Hounds would not have mentioned it if it was not important. I dislike you taking such risks with my safety. You will not do such things again."

Groaning, Harry flung an arm over his eyes. "We have to spend the next twenty four hours in isolation to let our bond settle. Are you going to talk in my head all the time? Because that's going to get really annoying."

"I will talk whenever I wish. You have no say in the matter."

"Oh yeah, Harry thought in resignation, this was a great idea."

It was forty eight hours after the ritual that the newly bonded pair emerged from the Master Suite. The other residents of the penthouse waited with baited breath, eager to see what, if any, changes had occurred.
"Please," Harry's pleading voice drifting down the hall, "stop talking!"

Shot snorted in laughter, immediately burying her face in her arms where they rested on the table, while Alex and Sergei traded amused glances. Connor just looked confused.

"No, I don't want to. No. No! Oh for god's sake, fine! But I want to eat breakfast first!" Harry stomped into the room, followed by a very smug cat.

Throwing himself into his chair at the head of the table, he groaned and rubbed his temples. "Good morning."

"So," Alex began delicately. "Did you sleep well?"

Harry glared at him, then switched targets and glared at Warthog. "No! I don't care if you're smarter than the average cat, you're not eating at the table! And why the hell do you have such a fixation with Yogi Bear?" He paused, listening to a response nobody else could hear. "I am not BooBoo! If I'm anyone, I'm Ranger Smith! Wait, why are we talking about this?!

"Why can't she eat at the table?" Connor asked innocently, smiling when Warthog purred her approval.

"Because I said so," Harry sighed, knowing that the battle was already lost when Sergei shifted down a seat, forcing Connor to do the same.

Harry now sat at the head of the table with Alex on his left, and Warthog on his right. Shot was seated next to Alex, a place she had claimed as hers and would fight tooth and nail to retain. Sergei sat stoically at Warthog's right, with Connor at the foot of the table grinning at Harry's disgruntled expression.

Jinky appeared with a soft crack, placing several heaped platters of various foods on the table. Eggs - fried, poached, and scrambled - were on one platter, crispy rindless bacon on another, sausages, steak, toast, tomatoes, hash browns, haloumi, mushrooms, wilted baby spinach, baked beans; the elf had clearly gone all out.

Harry eyed the mountain of food dubiously, but shrugged and began serving himself.

"What would Mistress Warthog be wanting?" Jinky asked, looking intently into the cat's startling blue eyes.

Harry glanced up, waiting for Warthog to pass on her request. To his surprise, she seemed to be able to communicate directly with the elf, and he popped away, returning moments later with a large plate of raw steak cut into large cubes. The best cut, Harry noted absently.

Warthog licked her lips and began delicately eating the bloody meat, fastidiously licking up any drips that dared to stick to her muzzle.

Deciding that some things just weren't worth fighting over, Harry shrugged and resigned himself to the new way of doing things.

After breakfast, Harry informed everyone that Warthog demanded to go to Potter Manor, because she wanted to chat with the Heralds and the Pack. He also informed them that he had no intention of staying there himself, because he wanted to go to Diagon Alley. Well, Knockturn, really, but he might as well browse Diagon while he was there.
Shot decided to come too, wanting to pick up some new materials for her tinkering.

"Sir?" She asked thoughtfully, as they paused briefly at the Manor.

"Mm?" Harry responded, distracted as he glanced over a few reports his Smith golem had passed on.

"What do you think about making Warthog her own portkey cuff? That way she can come and go as she pleases, and if we add a tracker we'll always know where she is. We could build an alert into the wards so that you're notified each time she comes or goes."

Harry thought for a moment before nodding decisively. "Do it. Charm as many protections as possible into it as well, and make it as close to indestructible as possible."

Shot grinned. "I knew you had a soft spot for her. You're so cute when you're all protective." She made a grab as if to pinch his cheeks, before thinking better of it. She liked her hands attached, thank you very much.

Harry rolled his eyes slightly. "She's my familiar. We are literally bonded magically and mentally. She may be my protection when I'm at Hogwarts, but I will not allow myself to be weakened by a preventable loss if someone strikes at me through her."

Pouting, Shot folded her arms. "You live to ruin my delusions, don't you."

"It's my mission in life," Harry murmured, his attention already returned to his reports. Signing off on a couple, he handed them back to the patiently waiting golem. "Warthog, do you need anything before we go?"

"No, but if you could pick me up something pretty while you're gone? I like Shot's idea of giving me my own portkey cuff, but I think it should be invisible like yours; so I want pretty things to wear as well. I don't want to look like a common pet like one of those kneazles we read about. Nasty common creatures." Her voice was haughty with feigned disgust, but belied by traces of humour.

"I'll see what we can find. We might need to look at options other than a cuff though. Unless you wore it as a collar - much too obvious - it would probably be too restrictive. Would you consent to some form of armour? Or implanting small portkeys under your skin?"

"Have Shot come up with some designs. I'll consent to things under my skin only if we can't find something else suitably secure."


Their arrival at the Diagon Alley Apparition Point was smooth and unremarkable, or at least as unremarkable as a suit wearing boy with an unrecognisable face, two obviously very dangerous men, and a slender girl with purple stripes in her hair can be. Shot's tie-dye ripped shirt, leather biker jacket, denim miniskirt and neon green stripped leggings probably didn't help towards blending in either.

"Want me to head off on my own while you go attend to your shady business dealing in the back alleys?" Shot chirped, bouncing lightly on the balls of her feet.

Harry gave her a bored look, trying not to let her teasing get to him. Her theory that he took himself too seriously might have some merit, as did her observation that everyone around him did the same, but her method of countering that - annoying him until he wanted to shoot her in the liver - left a lot to be desired. Apparently Time and Place were foreign concepts to the young genius.
"I have no clandestine meetings planned until next week. Unless you meant my extremely secret meeting with an ice cream sundae at Fortescue's later." Harry glanced around casually, scanning the crowds and letting the observations and deductions roll through his mind. He was pleased that his practice with crowds had paid off.

Alex leaned slightly closer, leaving a closely listening Sergei to keep lookout for trouble. "We should stop at the bookstores, I know Connor has reread his Goblin texts several times; I'm sure he'd appreciate some new ones. We should also get a few more texts for the Ghosts. They're doing very well in their studies, and I'd say they're getting close to being ready for the next level up." He paused, thinking. "We should also restock the potions supplies, general clothing stores for The Haunt, and maybe-"

Harry cut him off with a scowl. "Bugger that. All the things for the Ghosts and Nestlings can be ordered or picked up by one of the others. This is my day to just chill out and do unplanned stuff."

Shot's eyebrows flew up. "My god, you are doing something unplanned? Are you feeling alright? Do you need to sit down?"

"Alex, remind me to use Shot for target practice later?" Harry stated mildly.

Fighting down a grin, the dapper man nodded. "Of course, Sir."

"Now, what do people usually do on their day off?" The young boy asked quietly. "I don't know what a normal child my age would be doing, and I don't want to stand out too much." He bit his lip, fighting down his anxiety.

Shot's eyes softened, and she draped an arm around his shoulders, pulling him lightly until he grudgingly leaned against her. "Well, usually they drool over the newest brooms or go to the pet shop first. Also, candy stores, joke shops, and ice cream before going to the Leaky Cauldron for lunch. What appeals to you?"

"I already have a couple of Starsweeps, they've only just come out, so I guess we can skip that? Maybe the pet shop? We could get some ideas for collars and things for Warthog. She says she wants pretty things to wear."

Sergei cleared his throat slightly. "Actually, I was thinking that you should see about getting at least one owl too. The Heralds are excellent, but very distinctive. You don't always want that. I'd suggest using them for your other correspondence, and using an owl for daily things."

Harry nodded. "I've been thinking similar. Alright then, should we go look at owls now or later?"

"Now is good," Shot shrugged.

The four made their way through the crowds, taking their usual positions. Sergei led the way, his large form intimidating enough that people parted around them with no difficulty. Shot bounced next to Harry, humming to herself and glancing around for things she might want to examine more closely later. Alex brought up the rear, ever watchful for threats, and attentive to the smallest change in his employer that might indicate a need he could attend to.

Eeylops Owl Emporium was dimly lit and smelled slightly of droppings and feather dust. The rustling and occasional screech of the various birds for sale filled the air, and Harry looked around curiously.

There were only a few other customers in the shop, mainly young children picking out their first owl to take to school, or older students buying treats for their existing pets.
Harry wandered around, stopping every now and again to examine a bird more closely. He wasn’t sure exactly what he was looking for, so he turned to his Hounds for advice.

"I'd suggest something fairly nondescript, but tough." Alex offered thoughtfully. "Given your status in this world, it's not unreasonable that someone may try to interfere with your mail at some point, and you'd be best with a bird that can take a piece out of them if they try." He didn't need to state names, but everyone immediately thought of a certain old man who had already shown a history of meddling.

"What about this one?" Shot asked, warily eyeing a Great Horned Owl. "He looks kind of nasty."

The manager of the store approached, flinching slightly at the intense scrutiny he received from Alex and Sergei. "That owl is a female, actually. A Great Horned Owl. Beautiful creature, and one of the fastest fliers. This one is from particularly good stock; my brother bred her. I've had a bit of trouble selling her though; she's a bit temperamental. Excellently trained though, no worries there!" He snapped his mouth shut, casting a nervous glance at the Hounds, and then Harry. He returned his focus to Shot, clearly deciding she was the least threatening person in the group. "Were you looking for something in particular?"

Shot glanced at Harry quickly, then smiled at the shopkeeper. "I need something fast and tough, which will defend itself and its delivery if threatened. Obviously it would be better if it didn't bite or attack the people handling it, but I'm sure you know what I mean." She fluttered her eyelashes slightly.

"Oh! Well then it's definitely a Great Horned Owl you want, and this bird might just suit you fine. Like I said, she's a bit temperamental, but she won't bite unless you try to take delivery of something that isn't yours." The man was flustered, blushing and stammering slightly.

"Temperamental how?" Harry asked.

The manager started slightly, and scratched his head. "Well, she's smart, one of the smartest birds I've ever handled, and she doesn't like most children. She sometimes gets into a mood, and you'll need to coax her a bit to get her to take a letter. See the way she's glaring at us? To be honest, she's always reminded me of old Minerva McGonagall, the way she looks at you sometimes!"

Harry shrugged and turned to the owl. "Would you like to come with us?" He wasn't sure how intelligent she was, but the manager had said she was smart, so he would treat her like it until she proved otherwise.

The owl looked at him closely, eyes half closed in a glare. She finally hooted in acceptance, and flew down to perch on his shoulder.

Wincing slightly as her claws sank into his jacket, Harry made a mental note to have all his jacket shoulders reinforced and protected magically. Spelling them may shorten their lifespan (according to Marcel) but he really didn't want all his suits ripped to pieces by owl talons.

Making their way to the counter, Harry waited patiently while Shot flirted and haggled over the owl and all its accessories. He nudged the owl until she was sitting on the counter in front of him, and eyed her closely. The owl eyed him back sternly.

"She really does look like Professor McGonagall," Alex mused thoughtfully. "I feel like she's about to give me detention for not doing my homework."

The owl swivelled her head and eyed the older man, beak clacking as if she was about to launch into
"Sir, I don't think we have a say in the matter. This owl's name is Minerva." Alex averted his eyes, standing stiffly as if trying not to shuffle like a guilty schoolboy.

Harry's eyes glimmered mischievously. "Minerva McGonagowl?"

Shot turned in time to catch the last comment, and snorted with laughter. "I love it!"

Their conversation was interrupted as a high pitched hooting bundle of feathers came barrelling out of the back room, swooping them erratically and flailing in the air until it collided with the window and fell to the floor with a thud.

Harry waited patiently for Alex to stop crouching over him, and then stood, tugging the wrinkles out of his suit. He was faintly amused at Alex shielding him with his own body, but it was what he paid the man for, so he wasn't overly bothered by the indignity.

The manager swore under his breath, and went over to the limp bundle on the floor. "Ruddy owl. No idea what I'm going to do with you!" He picked it up gently, letting the dazed bird rest on his wrist.

"What is it?" Shot asked, stepping closer after a short nod from a silent Sergei.

"A Saw-whet owl. Someone left him on our doorstep as a chick, and he isn't quite right, he nearly froze to death. He isn't trained or anything, he can't even fly properly." The man sighed, petting the cooing owl softly.

Shot melted, looking at the tiny little owl. "He's adorable!" She reached out, gently stroking its head. The bird nibbled her fingers affectionately.

Unable to resist, she turned pleading eyes to Harry. "What do you say, we could keep him as a pet!"

Harry raised an eyebrow. "By we you mean you, I assume?"

Shot smiled, ramping up the puppy dog eyes.

"You want a retarded owl as a pet? One that isn't even useful?"

The owl gave an indignant hoot and glared at Harry.

"He's not retarded!" Shot pouted, taking the bird onto her own wrist, and placing it on her shoulder, smiling when it chirped and snuggled into her neck. "You're a little smarty, aren't you?" She cooed, adopting the universal tone of new mothers everywhere.

Harry stared, then whispered to Alex. "Is she babytalking an owl?"

Alex nodded, also staring. "It would seem so, Sir."

"Is it just me, or is that really weird?"

"It's not just you, Sir. I also find this situation strange and uncomfortable."

Sergei nodded silently in agreement.

Harry took one more look at the stubborn set of Shot's face, and knew that he wasn't going to win. "Fine. Consider it a birthday present."
Shot smiled and turned to place a kiss on the owl's head. "Welcome to the family! What should we name you, hmm? Such a little smarty like you deserves an equally smart name." She glanced at the sternly disapproving Minerva, and had a moment of inspiration. "If the boss gets to make terrible name puns, then I think we should continue the theme. What do you say to Owlbert Einstein?"

The little owl hooted and fluttered excitedly, nibbling her ear.

Harry groaned, dropping his face to his hands. "Remind me again why I didn't leave you at home?"

The rest of the morning was spent browsing, stopping only for an ice cream when their feet began to hurt from the cobblestones.

After spending an hour or so in Flourish and Blotts, they settled into a booth in the Leaky Cauldron for lunch. Jinky had been summoned to a discrete alley to take the owls and other purchases back to the penthouse, leaving the tired foursome to fill their empty stomachs.

Harry glanced over the menu, and grimaced slightly at the food on offer. It all seemed heavy and greasy, traditional English fare.

Alex noticed his unenthusiastic response. "Sir? Do you see anything you want?"

Harry looked over the list again, his face tight. "I don't know. Would you recommend something?"

Alex glanced over the list, and frowned slightly himself. After the extensive healing and intense training Harry had gone through, they'd taken extreme care with his diet. The unfortunate side effect of this was that greasy or heavy food tended to leave him feeling uncomfortable or ill. "How about the grilled chicken burger with a side of chips, and a butterbeer?"

Harry shrugged. "Sure."

Alex nodded and gathered everybody's order, passing it on to the waitress when she stopped at their table. After she left to fetch their order, he flicked his wand, casting a silencing spell around their table.

"So, what would you like to do this afternoon?"

Harry rested his head back against the seat. "I don't know. Maybe head down Knockturn?"

They passed their meal chatting about nothing in particular, before forcing themselves to their feet and out of the pub. Shot requested to stop in at the pet store before heading down Knockturn, reminding Harry of his promise to look for pretty things for Warthog.

They wandered into Magical Menagerie, and Shot headed over to the cat accessories, browsing thoughtfully. Harry took the opportunity to familiarize himself with some of the more magical animals available in this world.

A series of reptile tanks caught his eye, and he drifted closer to have a look. A large snake filled one tank, basking on a heated rock.

"Aren't you beautiful," Harry said, admiring the blue diamonds on the otherwise jet black snake.

The snake raised its head, tilting it like a curious dog. "You speak?"

Harry frowned in puzzlement. "Of course I do; though I'm surprised you do."
The snake flicked its tongue a few times before sliding slightly closer to the glass. "Are you going to take me away from here?"

Shaking his head, Harry rested a hand against the edge of the cage. "No. I'm just looking around today. I already have a familiar, and she's demanding pretty things." He rolled his eyes, smiling faintly.

The snake let out a rasping hiss that approximated a laugh. "A cat?"

Grinning, Harry nodded in agreement. "Yes. A very large one with an attitude to match."

The snake laughed again. "You could always buy me, and I will eat her and then I could be your familiar. A snake such as myself is far superior to a mere feline."

Unable to contain himself, Harry laughed. "I never thought I'd meet anyone with an ego bigger than hers, but apparently I must tip my hat to you in that regard!" He brushed his fingers to his forehead in a mocking salute.

"I'm very useful, even if you choose not to bond me as your familiar," the snake weeded. "My venom is highly sought after, second only in toxicity to that of the mighty Basilisk! If taken regularly, it can even let you become immune to most poisons and venoms! I can smell death on you, immunity such as this would be useful to you, yes?"

Harry pursed his lips, head tilted and eyes narrowed. "You're very persistent. Do you offer yourself like this to everyone who stops to chat with you?"

The snake reared back, offended. "Certainly not! You are the first I have spoken with! Speakers of the Serpent tongue are legend, and as rare as I am! It was thought they had died out many years ago."

"Serpent tongue?" The boy repeated, puzzled. "What do you mean?"

The snake stared for a moment, then laughed again, shaking its head ruefully. "You did not realise you were speaking in my tongue and not your own? How utterly enchanting! I demand you take me with you; you are amusing and I want to leave this horrible cage."

Harry glared. "I told you I already had a familiar. I'd rather not deal with death matches between a mountain lion and a… whatever you are."

Sighing, the snake flicked its tongue. "And if I swear not to try to take her place? Surely you have a place I could roam? Or a nice corner that could be made suitable for me? You need not keep me with you at all times, just come speak with me on occasion. I truly detest this place. Take me with you."

Harry tipped his head back in exasperation, then turned to his Hounds. He stopped at Sergei's stony look, surprised. "What's wrong?"

"Boss, you're a parselmouth. You don't want that shit getting out or people will be screaming about you being a dark wizard before you can sneeze."

"Is that what the snake meant when it said I was speaking the Serpent tongue and not my own? It sounds like English to me." Harry frowned.

"Just hisses from this end. Boss, we need to get out of here. As soon as we realised we threw up a silencing spell, but somebody may have noticed, especially since you've been chatting so long."

Sergei was tense, almost quivering with the need to be elsewhere.
"Alright. We'll go in a moment. I need to get this snake. It seems remarkably well informed, and I need to explore this."

Sergei's eyebrows shot up. "Warthog isn't going to like you getting another familiar."

"I won't be bonding it, though I'll probably milk its venom. It claims to be second only to a Basilisk in toxicity. I figure it can roam around Fortress or something. It's desperate to get out of here, and I wouldn't put it past it to find a way out and hunt me down if I try to leave it here."

"I'll arrange everything," Alex interjected. "Go with Sergei and Shot. I think she's picked out a few things for Warthog anyway, and you should give them to her personally so she doesn't make her displeasure known on the furniture or something."

Harry nodded. "I'll meet you at Fortress." He turned back to the snake. "My man will arrange to purchase you and transport you to one of my residences. Do not harm him in any way or I will make you suffer before I kill you. Do you understand?"

The snake bowed its head, tail twitching slightly in excitement. "As you say Master. Your man will come to no harm from me. I look forward to our future conversations."

Rolling his eyes, Harry stalked from the store, Sergei shadowing him closely and Shot scurrying along behind. "I don't even like snakes," he muttered. Warthog was going to be so pissed at him over this.
"Explain, please." Harry sat at the desk in his office, leaning back in his chair.

"Parseltongue is the language of snakes, and a person who is able to speak Parseltongue is called a Parselmouth. It used to be a highly regarded skill, and considered proof of being a descendant of Salazar Slytherin, since his line was the only one that reliably produced them. There were a few others that would pop up here and there, but they almost always married into Slytherin's line once provided with the right incentive, keeping the gift strong. It's always been thought to be a Dark ability, but it wasn't until He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named came to power that it was viewed with fear and suspicion." Alex sipped his tea, eyeing his employer thoughtfully.

"So if people find out I'm a parselmouth, they will assume I'm an Heir of Slytherin or somehow related to Voldemort?" Leaning forward, Harry rubbed his temples. "Also, please stop with the He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named and You-Know-Who rubbish. All those hyphens give me a headache. I understand the need to do so where others could hear, but just between us I'd prefer you just use his name."

Alex nodded. If he was discomforted by the order, he gave no indication of it. "Is it possible you are a descendant?"

Harry shrugged. "No idea. I haven't encountered any rumours to that effect in the books about me I've read, but they are so wildly inaccurate I wouldn't trust them anyway. I could probably look though some of the books left in my family vaults, I'm sure at least one of them has some sort of genealogy."

Shot sat up. "I could do it. I need a new project anyway, my brain feels like it's melting. All the jobs you've given me lately have been really basic."

Harry nodded. "Thank you. I'll arrange for Gutshank to trawl my vaults for anything relevant. Actually, the Goblins should have some sort of record, so they can trace Heirs and the like. You should try to compare the two results."

Huffing, Shot folded her arms crossly. "I don't tell you how to Crime Lord, don't tell me how to Data Mine! As if I would need to be reminded of something so basic!" Subsiding into offended muttering, she sank back into her chair with a scowl.

Grinning faintly, Harry nodded in apology. "Alright. I'll leave it in your capable hands then. Let me know if you need anything."

Sergei had remained silent until now, deep in thought. "I think we should get Marcel in on this," he stated suddenly.

Harry raised his eyebrows, then summoned Jinky. Scribbling a note, he passed it to the waiting elf.
and sent him to the Healer.

A few minutes were spent in idle conversation, mainly catching Harry up on what Alex had done to settle the new birds and snake into the Manor.

The wards alerted the team to Marcel apparating into the courtyard, and they waited patiently for him to make his way to the office.

"Alright, who's dying?" He chirped as he flounced through the door, his dark blue robes swirling dramatically around his feet.

"Nobody, yet." Harry stated dryly, gesturing to a seat. "Though apparently the Wizarding World may die of shock when they discover their Saviour is a Parselmouth."

The look of shock on the Healer's face was enough to send Shot into peals of laughter, particularly when he missed the chair and landed on the floor with a thud.

"You're a what?" He asked faintly.

"A Parselmouth." Harry repeated calmly. "We're looking into possible relation to Slytherin, but Sergei suggested getting you in on this conversation, presumably in case we missed anything."

Marcel looked over at a brooding Sergei. "You know something?"

Sergei grunted. "Know, no. Suspect, possibly."

There was a moment of silence while everyone waited for him to elaborate, but he remained silent.

"Well?" Marcel prompted.

"Do you have a copy of the results from when you scanned the Boss's scar during his healing?" The Russian asked, his brows drawing together as he tried to puzzle through what was bothering him.

Marcel raised an eyebrow, but summoned Soot from The Haunt and requested Harry's file. He handed it over, watching quietly as Sergei read through the relevant parts.

"Sergei," Harry was getting impatient. "Care to share with the rest of the class?"

"I don't think you're related to Slytherin, or if you are, it's coincidental. What do we know about the night you got your scar?"

Harry's eye twitched, his irritation at the evasions increasing. "Not much. Voldemort came to my house, killed my parents, and disappeared. We have no proof of what happened between my parents dying and the house exploding though, so for all we know he might have performed an adoption ritual on me and screwed it up. Hell, he might have dressed in drag and done the hula and I destroyed him in a bout of hysteria. Who knows? Why?"

"I think that something might have attached itself to your scar. Something of his. These scans," he gestured to the file, "they don't read like you. Even accounting for the fact that it's a curse scar, there should be some kind of baseline that reads like you. But there's nothing. It's like-" He paused, trying to find the right words. "It's like it's reading a different person almost. Or part of one?"

Marcel sat bolt upright, his eyes wide. "Say that again," he demanded.

Sergei looked at him warily. "It's like it's reading a different person almost. Or part of one."
"Puff!" The Healer shouted, summoning a rather startled looking elf. "Go into my Locked Library, and bring me the book titled Secrets of the Darkest Arts. Be careful of the wards, they're nasty."

The elf nodded quickly, causing its bat-like ears to flap against its face, before disappearing with a pop. It reappeared a minute or so later, looking slightly worse for wear.

"Are you alright?" Marcel frowned, taking in the slightly singed appearance and the smoke rising from one ear tip.

"Yes Master Healer, Sir," the elf replied softly. "Puff will be fine."

"Alright. Thank you. Go tend to your injuries." He dismissed the elf, and began flicking feverishly through the pages, looking for something in particular. "Ah!" Leaning forward, he hunched over the book in his lap, mouthing the words as he skimmed through them. "Oh, I really hope I'm wrong," he moaned, running a hand through his hair.

"Why don't you explain what you've found, before I have to find myself a new Healer?" Harry snapped, throwing his pen on the desk in frustration.

"A horcrux." Marcel stated flatly.

"Aside from a whole lot of Not Good, what's that?" Asked Shot, almost as irritated as Harry at the lack of clear answers.

"A horcrux is a piece of soul, deliberately split away and stored in an external object. It's theorized that it could save someone from death, effectively anchoring them to this world so they can't pass on."

Harry sat silently for a moment, processing the patterns. "And you think my scar may be one?"

"Well, it's theorized that the scar is a result of a rebounded Killing Curse, but that's known for not leaving any marks. So even if he did use the Killing Curse, clearly something else caused that wound. We almost lost you during your healing because something in it was actively fighting being removed from your body, so if it is a soul fragment, it's possible that it might even be partially sentient. It's also most likely parasitic, leeching small amounts from your magical core. It's possible that the Parseltongue is stemming from a slight bleed across, since the Dark Lord was known to be a Parselmouth."

"So a horcrux container can be a living vessel as long as it has a magical core?"

"There isn't much information about them, but I would suppose so based on your results."

They sat in silence for a long moment, before Shot snorted derisively. "Well that's stupid!"

Everyone looked at her in bewilderment.

She held up her hands, shaking her head. "Seriously, think about it! The whole point is to be immortal, right? And a horcrux is an anchor? Well then why would you put it in something living? You'll only be anchored as long as it's still alive, and if it's leeching off the vessels core, then it will reduce the vessels lifespan anyway!"

Harry snorted in amusement. "Good point. Alright, so how do we test if it's a horcrux? And if it is, how do we get rid of it?"

Marcel drew his wand. "I don't know of any specific spell that will show it up, but I'd like to try a
few charms?"

Harry nodded and sat back calmly, watching as Marcel circled his desk and stood next to him.

Pointing his wand carefully at the scar, he tapped it lightly. "Specialis Revelio." The charm connected with the scar, but fizzled. Marcel frowned, and leaned slightly closer. Tapping the scar again, he tried a different charm. "Anima Revelare." The spell connected, and a sickly green light spilled from the scar, pulsing malevolently.

Marcel slumped back onto the desk, his wand held in limp fingers between his legs. "Oh, that's not good."

Harry sighed. "Positive, then?" He glanced around at the pale and drawn features of his people. "How do we remove it?"

Marcel moved sluggishly back to his chair. "Without killing you? I have no idea."

Harry pursed his lips. "Well, give it some thought. In the meantime, Shot, I want you to find out everything you possibly can about that night. Chase down every rumour, theory, and accepted truth. I want concrete facts, accept nothing as truth without it. Find out why Voldemort went after my family personally as well. Hell, investigate Voldemort too, from birth to explosion. Trace every person and event you think might be related. Are you up for it?"

Shot looked slightly overwhelmed at the scale of the task, but unnervingly eager for the challenge. "Sure! Timeframe?"

Harry shook his head. "Take as long as you need. Triple check everything and everyone."

She grinned impishly. "Even you?"

Harry nodded. "Even me. I still want you to check my genealogy. It's possible there's some connection between Voldemort and myself, and if there is, I want to know about it."

Sobering, the tech genius nodded. "I'll get right on it. It's going to take ages though, to dig this far back and this deep."

Harry stared back gravely. "Whatever it takes."

Harry looked over the three Nestlings that arrived the same time as Alice, and nodded to himself.

"You've all done very well with your in-house training, so it's time to see how well you can apply it."

Sophie, Lizzie, and Brian looked back at him expectantly.

Harry motioned for Alex to distribute the bags they had prepared for them. "Inside each bag, you will find a mobile phone, disposable camera, food and water for twenty four hours, a notepad and a couple of pens. Anyone want to take a guess at today's task?" He looked at them expectantly.

Lizzie shifted, nervously tucking her blond hair behind her ear. "Spying?"

Harry grinned at the eight year old. "Close enough." He handed her a small chocolate bar and a bottle of juice as a reward. "Today, you're going to pick a person at random on the street, and you're going to follow them. Your task is to find out as much information as possible about that person in twenty four hours. After that time, you will make your way back here. Use the mobile to call for a
pick up if you are more than three hours away. You will be completely alone for this task, and you can approach it however you think best provided you don't blow your mission. Whoever gets the most complete and accurate information will win a prize. Believe me, you want it. All information gathered will be checked, so make sure it's right; got it?"

The three Nestlings nodded eagerly, and quickly looked through their bags. They'd been drilled relentlessly, and knew better than to accept an unchecked kit.

Harry waited until everyone had checked their packs and phone batteries, then smiled. "You have ten minutes to go change clothes and get anything else you think you'll need from your rooms. Meet back here and we will take you to the drop zone. Remember, you'll be completely on your own for this task, so don't expect back up. And no, you can't work together." He smirked at Sophie and Brian. The two were practically inseparable, and according to Alice had been since they were five years old. At eleven, they had quite a history of mischief to their names.

While the Nestlings disappeared, Harry and the Hounds drew straws for who was going to follow which child. All three of them would be using heavy duty camouflage charms developed by Shot to help them avoid notice, and they would be discretely trailing the kids to make sure they didn't get into any more trouble than they could manage.

Hearing their charges returning, the three men braced themselves for a very long day.

Harry sat behind his desk, and listened to Sophie reporting everything she had discovered on her target the day before. Harry had trailed her, so he knew all of it already, but she had no idea of that.

He had to admit he was impressed. She'd used every skill they'd taught her - and a few besides - and had accumulated a significant amount of information; she'd even managed to sort and present it logically. She hadn't had time to put it into a proper report format, but she'd done very well in the time available.

"You did very well, Sophie. Breaking into her house and getting all of her medical and banking details was an excellent touch. I'm impressed you managed to do it while she was home, too. Can you think of anything you might have done better, or some piece of information you might have missed?"

The little girl stared at the floor and chewed her lip as she thought. "Maybe, I could have gotten her work passwords? She writes them all down because she has a really bad memory."

Harry smiled. "And how would you do that? What benefit would there be if you did?"

Sophie frowned, mulling it over and fiddling with her notebook. "Well, the security isn't very tight around her office, but she works in the IT department for an antiques house. So if we got her login details, we could use it as an in for the system to spy on their acquisitions and sale lists? Might help us find things for other clients?" She looked hopeful.

"Excellent!" Harry praised, beaming. "That's very well thought out, good work. How do you think you might be able to get her system details?"

Sophie looked blank.

Taking pity on her, Harry smiled gently. "If you were older, you could pretend to be a delivery person. Packages or flowers work well, or food. Low level staff like a janitor or intern is also a good option. At your current age your choices are a bit more limited, so it's worth playing up your youth. You could pretend to be lost, or a relative of another employee. Do you understand?"
Nodding slowly, it was clear that she was trying, but didn't really get it.

Harry huffed a small laugh. "Alright, I want you to put together a list of ways you might be able to get access to a person's office or desk, and what you would need to pull it off. As many as you can think of. I'll pick it up next week."

Pouting, the girl nodded in acceptance. "Yes, Sir." She returned to her seat next to Brian, and leaned against him.

Harry took a moment to look over the three children in his office, then traded glances with Alex and Sergei. Both men nodded discretely, confirming that none of the children had cheated.

"You've all done very well. I promised that whichever of you got the most complete and accurate information would win a prize, and I've decided on a winner. Sophie, your acquisition of medical and banking details, coupled with your clear reporting tipped the balance. Congratulations; you've just won yourself an ident-packet, and £5000 in a bank account." He paused, watching her eyes widen in shock.

"An ident-packet? I get my first alias?" She squeaked.

Harry grinned and nodded. "With all relevant documents and paper trails. You're responsible for maintaining it, but I'd recommend you ask Alice for assistance until you've had more practice."

Sophie nodded, her short brown hair flopping wildly. A beaming grin split her face, and she could barely stop herself from bouncing in glee.

"Brian, Lizzie, you both did much better than I was expecting of you at this stage. Well done. You'll both be rewarded as well. You'll receive £1000 each." He smiled at their delight, then continued. "All three of you will start working for Vahan now that you've shown you can handle yourselves on low level jobs. You'll be paired with an older partner to help show you the ropes, listen to them and learn as much as you can. Remember that you're still novices, and you do not get any special treatment just because you're one of his Nestlings. If anything, you will be pushed harder to prove yourself trustworthy. Am I clear?"

All three children nodded fervently.

"Good. If I hear that any of you have been mouthing off or not obeying the chain of command, we'll have problems. You're bottom rung, make sure you don't forget it. Now, take the rest of the week to plan out your street alias, and present Alice with a list of anything you'll need that you don't already have. Bear in mind that all purchases and aliases will need to be approved beforehand, and you should take care that they don't lead back to your regular life in any way."

Lizzie looked up at him, a sly grin spreading across her lips. "So, we're like Secret Agents?"

Shot stared at the data her bots had mined. Eyes scanning quickly, she absorbed the details of a young orphan named Tom Marvolo Riddle, born 31 December 1926 at Wool's Orphanage in London; there were also few details about the unsolved murder of a family by the same surname in the summer of 1943 in a town called Little Hangleton, but details were scarce about both topics.

She wasn't entirely certain why she had decided to trawl the muggle world as well, but Vahan had ordered her to be thorough, and it went against the grain to cut corners. But that boy... She studied the face of the young man, perhaps thirteen years of age, as he stood with the other children for the group photo out the front of the dilapidated orphanage. The bots had searched for him since there were records of a Tom Marvolo Riddle attending Hogwarts between 1938 and 1945. As Head Boy and with an excellent academic record it was odd that the boy had disappeared seemingly without a trace after a brief stint working at Borgin and Burkes.

She frowned in thought, he may be completely unrelated, but there was something that niggled at her and she knew better than to disregard it. Her gift worked in odd ways sometimes, and even though the connection wasn't immediately apparent, she knew there was something there.

Taking a huge bite of her mashed egg, mayonnaise and barbeque sauce sandwich, she settled in to adjust the search parameters and start digging.

Harry scowled at the snake and Warthog. The two were bickering - again - somehow managing to communicate by using him as a medium, despite him being completely removed from the conversation.

The snake, who had so far refused to be named since apparently such things were degrading, was hissing insults about *lumbering fur covered monstrosities with delusions of importance*, and Warthog was retaliating with comments about *useless belly crawlers unable to even move out of danger if it got a bit chilly*.

He sighed, and wished that they could argue without using his head as a resonance chamber.

"Alright, that's enough," he finally interrupted, grimacing slightly at the odd echo as Warthog used their connection to translate his Parseltongue into English. "Snake, you informed me that your venom is second only to a Basilisk, and that regular exposure can grant me immunity to most poisons. Can you elaborate on that please?"

Snake settled into a coil, head raised as if to strike. "I would have thought that to be self-explanatory. If I'd known you were stupid I would have stayed at that dreadful shop."

Harry pinched the bridge of his nose, ignoring Warthog's smug chuckle at his frustration. "I was asking you to go into more detail, if you're able. What kind of snake are you? Why is your venom so special? How does it work?"

"I am a hybrid. My father was a Nædre, my mother was a Sep. Are you familiar with these"
Harry frowned, and summoned Swit from the Library to bring him a book on magical reptiles. Thanking the elf when she returned with the requested book, he quickly flicked through to find the relevant sections.

"Ok, so a Nædre is a British native similar to an Adder; it's known for its hypnotic colour changing eyes, and its venom is constantly changing which makes it extremely difficult to treat. Sometimes known to crossbreed with other magical snakes which produces highly intelligent offspring that can reach astonishing sizes." He paused, looking up at Snake. "Is that accurate? Not much is known about them, they seem pretty reclusive."

Snake dipped its head, flicking its tongue out passively.

Turning back to the book, Harry flicked to the section on Seps. "Highly dangerous, the Seps venom is extremely corrosive and will dissolve not only flesh, but also bone with ease. Untreated, a single bite will reduce even the largest prey to slurry in under five minutes. There is no antivenin, and the only successful treatment for a Seps bite is a hasty amputation of the bitten limb. Living Dragon Hide is the only material known that is strong enough to resist the corrosive effects of the venom, though once removed from the Dragon, it is as vulnerable as any other fabric." Harry threw a startled look at his snake. "Slurry? Really? That's… gross."

Snake hissed a laugh. "If you say so. I personally quite enjoy it."

Harry looked slightly green. "So, since you're a hybrid, does that mean your venom is a combination of the two?"

Snake nodded smugly. "Yes. Which is why regular exposure to my venom will provide immunity to nearly every poison in existence."

Harry eyed the snake narrowly. "Alright, I get that, but how do you know all this? I mean, I get that being a Nædre hybrid you would be intelligent, but that doesn't always equal knowledgeable. And this is all pretty specific information."

Snake undulated in a way that could be interpreted as a shrug. "I am very old, and you are not my first Master."

Warthog hissed, growling as she settled closer to Harry, tail lashing angrily.

Snake laughed. "Relax, fur ball. I'll not take your place."

Harry grinned as the cat dropped her head possessively onto his lap, silently demanding pats. At nearly adult size, her head was huge, filling his lap and sending a dull ache through his legs from the weight.

"So how often should I milk your venom? And how should I be exposed to it without turning me into a Slurpee or burning a hole through my skin?"

"Once a week to keep up with any changes in my venom. A single drop should be diluted into a litre of fluid - purified water is best. Merely add three drops of this dilution to your drink once a day with your largest meal."

Harry's eyebrows shot up. "A single drop in a litre of water, just to take three drops of the mix per day in another fluid?"
Snake nodded. "I'd suggest giving some to the Brat Cat too, just in case."

Nodding, Harry made a mental list of everyone he would give some to. He saw no reason to leave anyone in his immediate entourage vulnerable.

"I'll check with Marcel to make sure that it doesn't interfere with any other standard potions that I might be given in an emergency. Would you be willing to donate some extra venom that we can experiment with?"

Nodding agreeably, Snake headed out the door to the Manor grounds, tired of being inside with the smelly fur beast and disappointingly stupid Speaker.

Harry and Daniel drifted haphazardly down Diagon Alley, window shopping while Sergei and Alex trailed them discretely but tried not to interfere. The boys chattered away excitedly, gushing over the odds and ends that caught their interest, rushing from store to store in childish glee.

The men traded an amused glance, pleased to see their boss acting his age for once. They knew that it was mostly an act, but not even Harry could fully fake that level of enthusiasm.

"I bet you'd be brilliant at flying," Daniel was saying, waving his hands around animatedly as they walked away from the window of Quality Quidditch Supplies and the newest broom displayed therein.

"Why do you say that?" Harry asked, nibbling a piece of chocolate and not bothering to mention his twice weekly flying sessions with Draco and Connor.

"Well, you're always super graceful, and you pick things up so quickly! I bet if you watched a game of professional Quidditch, you'd be able to fly like them right away! I've seen you watch people do things or read about them in books and then do it yourself just as well in no time flat, so why would flying be any different?" Daniel grinned, turning around to walk backwards in front of his friend.

Draco and Lucius had informed Harry that he was indeed flying at near a professional level, but Harry didn't see anything special about it. He hadn't even studied it beforehand, it just seemed to come naturally. Shrugging he chewed the last of his chocolate. "Maybe."

Glancing up, Harry saw Sergei signal that the man he wanted to speak with was in the alley across the street.

"Hey Daniel," he turned back to the younger boy. "Can you grab us a seat in Fortescues? I just need to do something quickly."

Daniel frowned, not pleased to be ditched for some mysterious errand. "I could come with you, I don't mind." He looked up hopefully.

Harry shook his head. "It's fine, I'll only be a couple of minutes. Alex will go with you. Get me a sundae, yeah?"

Pouting, Daniel agreed and followed a quietly amused Alex to the bustling ice cream parlour.

Harry turned and swiftly made his way into the alley, Sergei close behind. Somehow, both men managed to move effortlessly through the crowd, blending in and evading notice even as they slipped between and around the oblivious shoppers.

Stepping into the shadowy alley, Harry sauntered up to the dealer he was here to see.
"Mr Fink, I presume?" Harry eyed the man, unimpressed. Average height with sweaty brown hair and shifty eyes, the man clearly used more of his product than he sold.

"Who's asking?" Fink snorted, looking down his nose at the well-dressed boy in front of him.

"My name is unimportant. I was sent to speak with you by our mutual employer." Harry smiled to himself as the blood drained from the dealers face. It was entertaining to know that even the mention of him could inspire such a reaction.

"Look man, I don't know what you were told, but I ain't done nothing wrong. Been selling like I agreed! Paid the designated percentage up the chain and everything like I was supposed to!"

Harry shook his head. "Mr Fink, don't bother lying to me. We know every bit of product that goes out and where it goes to. We know exactly how much profit each shipment should return, and any deviation of that leads to questions; questions that I specialize in finding the answers to. And I already have my answers. I know that you have been taking the product yourself, and offering copious 'samples' to your friends. I know that you've been skimming the profits and charging your customers above the instructed rate." Harry's voice lowered from its brisk businesslike tone to a mocking purr. "You were warned, Mr Fink, when the first payment came up short. You do not get another chance."

In a blur of movement, Harry shoved the man against the wall and drew his knife, thrusting it into Fink's gut. With a vicious twist, Harry pushing it deeper and higher, puncturing his stomach and nicking an artery before pulling the blade free with a jerk.

Standing back, he casually cleaned the blade on a strip of fabric as he dispassionately watched the dying man sliding down the wall and slumping onto the ground.

"It didn't need to come to this, Mr Fink. Vahan looks after his people, and the better they work to his interests, the better he rewards them." His voice chilled. "But he does not look kindly on people attempting to avoid their obligations or break their agreements." Squatting on the balls of his feet over the fallen man, he cocked his head and watched placidly as his latest victim began to struggle against the darkness heralding the end of his life.

"Our word is our bond, Mr Fink," Harry whispered as the last traces of life fled the prone man's eyes.

Standing, Harry stepped from the alley and blended into the passing crowd, his blank faced guard in tow.

Daniel leaned back morosely in the booth he'd managed to secure with Alex's help, distractedly poking at his ice cream.

"Is everything alright?" Alex asked neutrally. He had a good idea of what the problem was, and wasn't entirely certain he wanted to be the one to deal with it. Amazingly, Daniel was still oblivious to Harry's darker tendencies and Crime Empire, and his boss wanted it kept that way. Explaining that the younger boy hadn't been ditched to meet another friend on a day reserved for the two of them would be irritating since he couldn't exactly say that the ten year old boy was off gutting a drug dealer who'd stiffed him less money than he gave Connor a week for pocket money.

"It's not fair, you know?" Daniel whined. "I mean, we used to go to school together and hang out all the time afterwards, but now aside from lessons and a 'scheduled day' like today I barely see him. And then he runs off to do whatever when he's supposed to be spending time with me. I mean, I'm
his best friend, right? Why couldn't I have gone with him wherever it was he went? And I know he's hiding things from me. It's not fair!” He gave a particularly vicious stab at his confection, scowling heavily.

Alex sighed silently. When he'd first signed up with Vahan, he'd thought Daniel to be an excellent stabilizing influence on his young employer; but as time went on he could see that the youngest Andrews was becoming possessive and jealous, even going so far as to throw his weight around a bit with the Nestlings before being moved to The Haunt. Fortunately the Ghosts were older and made of sterner stuff, merely ignoring him and reporting to a suitable adult as instructed when he got too pushy. In all honesty, despite the Malfoy boy being a tad sycophantic, he was a much more suitable friend for the tiny entrepreneur.

"I mean, what is he even doing? Why couldn't I go too?” Daniel whined.

Alex scanned the room, and almost sagged in relief when he saw Harry and Sergei approaching.

"I was picking up something for you," Harry grinned as he dropped into the seat next to him, and pushing a small wrapped box over to him.

Daniel lit up, tearing open the wrapping and pulling the lid off the box. "Is that…" He breathed, shocked.

"The snitch used at the last World Cup, signed by the winning Canadian Seeker Howard Barton? Yes, yes it is. I knew you were bummed that you couldn't go to the match, so I thought you'd appreciate a souvenir at least."

Harry choked slightly in shock when Daniel threw his arms around his neck, hugging tightly and wrinkling his suit.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you!” He babbled, bouncing in his seat as he let go of his stunned and highly uncomfortable friend.

"You're welcome," Harry muttered, and turned to his waiting sundae, scooping a large spoonful into his mouth. He winced at the instant brain freeze.

"Harry!” A voice called, drawing their attention.

Draco darted through the crowd until he stood next to their table, Lucius and Narcissa following sedately behind.

"I didn't know you were going to be here today! You should have said, and we could have met up!” The platinum blond grinned, eye eyes sparkling excitedly.

Harry coughed slightly. "Hello Draco. Lucius, Narcissa." He inclined his head politely to the elder Malfoys. "I hope you are all well?"

Draco's eyes dimmed slightly, and he drew himself back behind his stoic Malfoy mask.

"We are well, Harry. And yourself?” Lucius drawled, eyes flicking over Daniel curiously.

Harry nodded and offered a bland smile. His eyes darted to Draco quickly, then back to the adult Malfoys. "I'm well, thank you. May I introduce Daniel Andrews?” He gestured to his companion. "Daniel, this is Lucius Malfoy, his wife Narcissa, and their son Draco. Draco will be attending Hogwarts with us. He'll be in my year."
"Oh, you'll be attending Hogwarts as well? It's good that you'll already know someone there when you start. Harry here is excellent about looking after his friends. I'm sure you'll have no trouble." Narcissa smiled at Daniel, her expression as warm as her social mask would allow. She did so like children; it was a pity that there was no chance for Draco to have siblings.

"Yes, ma'am." Daniel nodded, then eyed Draco warily. "How long have you known Harry?"

Harry frowned slightly at the odd note in the boy's voice. He wasn't sure he liked what he thought he was hearing.

Draco noted the faint frown, and quickly realised that this Daniel character wasn't aware of Harry's other activities. He smirked cockily. "Oh, a while. We're pretty good friends. What about you?"

Daniel's eyes narrowed slightly. "We've been best friends for years."

The blond boy twitched slightly at that revelation. He couldn't help the stab of hurt at those words. Harry was his best friend, and he'd thought it was mutual. "Lucky you," he murmured blandly. "He's a good friend."

"You don't have to tell me that," Daniel gritted his teeth in a false smile.

Harry sighed slightly and rolled his eyes at Alex.

"Sorry I didn't let you know I'd be here, Draco, but I promised Daniel I'd spend the day with him. I'm sure you understand."

Draco nodded amiably. "Sure. I mean you see me all the time, it wouldn't do to neglect your other friends." He raised his chin arrogantly and smiled at Daniel, showing a few too many teeth to be completely friendly.

"I'm glad you understand," Harry interjected before Daniel could explode. He traded a look with Lucius and Narcissa, nodding politely. "It was lovely to see you again; we'll have to catch up soon."

"Certainly," Lucius responded, catching his meaning and making a mental note to review the relevant reports and finances when he got home.

The party watched the Malfoy's leave and make their way to the counter to order.

"Who was he, Harry?" Daniel asked, turning a possessive glare onto the older boy.

Harry's jaw tightened marginally in annoyance. Daniel had been treading a fine line for a while now, and if Harry wasn't so closely involved with the other members of the family he would have cut him loose months ago.

"He's a friend. He lives near one of my Father's properties." He noted the flair of jealousy in Daniels eyes and mentally groaned. He'd known a visit to the wizarding world today was a bad idea. If he hadn't needed to deal with Fink he would have insisted on going somewhere muggle. Maybe that amusement park Connor had been obsessing over lately.

"So, you see him pretty regularly then?" Daniel's attempt at nonchalant questioning left a lot to be desired. It was a pity that his love for deductive observation and reasoning had tapered off over the last few years; he was slipping badly, especially since he was giving away his agitation by tapping his finger on the table.

Harry sighed. "Does it matter? What's really bothering you?"
Daniel scowled, stirring the melted remains of his ice cream aggressively. "I just don't like him, that's all. He seems like a real prat."

Harry sniggered slightly as he spooned the last bite of his sundae into his mouth. "Oh, he can be."

As they stood to leave, Daniel frowned at Harry's chest. "Oh, you've got a drip of something on your tie."

Harry glanced down, cursing mentally when he saw the tiny spot of blood, and a second partially concealed by his suit jacket. "Just a bit of strawberry topping." He smiled gratefully as Alex flicked a cleaning charm at him.

As they left, Daniel frowned slightly as he wondered how Harry had gotten strawberry topping on his tie; wasn't his sundae chocolate?

The next time Harry saw Draco at Potter Manor for lessons, the first words out of the blonde's mouth were *who was that kid? I don't like him; he seems like a real wanker.*

Harry stifled a grin behind a bite of his apple.

The weeks after Daniel met Draco were filled with passive aggression and possessive demands for time and attention that Harry tolerated with barely concealed irritation. After Daniel demanded that Harry not go to Potter Manor for his usual lessons, but send Connor on his own, he decided it was time to have it out with the younger boy.

"Daniel, what's going on?" Harry asked as he closed the door of the sitting room at the Haunt. He had a feeling Daniel might start getting destructive, and didn't want the office trashed.

"What do you mean?" Daniel wandered around the room, fiddling with random knick-knacks and eyeing the soothing paintings on the walls.

"Daniel," Harry said firmly, pinning the younger boy with a stern look. "Don't play dumb, it doesn't suit you. What's eating you?"

Daniel huffed and threw himself in the chair. "It doesn't matter."

"Daniel," Harry snapped. "Just spit it out already!"

The youngest Andrews glared at the floor, jaw twitching as he clenched his teeth spasmodically.

Narrowing his eyes, Harry leaned back in his chair and folded his hands across his stomach. "Fine, if you won't tell me what the issue is, I'll tell you what I've observed, and reach my own conclusions. Feel free to jump in and correct me at any time," he mocked lightly. "Firstly, you seem to resent the time I spend with Connor, though you've never really commented on it one way or the other, merely trying to exclude him from any time we spend together outside of lessons. This has become more noticeable since you met Draco and realised that I have friends other than you and the Ghosts and Nestlings. Next, since meeting Draco you've been doing your best to keep me with you, to the point of trying to get me to avoid my responsibilities to my Father and Family. Your excuses have become completely ridiculous too. I mean, last week it was that you hurt your ankle and needed help getting around - as if you didn't live with a Healer who could fix that for you in less than a minute - and today it was that you baked too many cookies with your mum and didn't want them to go to waste? I'm not stupid, and I don't appreciate being treated like I am. I also dislike being treated like a possession." He eyed the still sulking boy, then continued. "So, my conclusion is that you are jealous
Connor and Draco. What I don't know, is why. Care to fill me in?" He fell silent, waiting patiently.

Daniel scuffed the toe of his shoe in the carpet, before shifting slightly. "Alright, yes, I don't like how much time you spend with them. I mean, Connor's just your adopted brother, it's not like he's really part of your family. And your dad just dumps him on you and Mr Charleston and Mr Petrikov! Your dad's never around, so it's not like you're close to him or anything. You don't owe him anything if he can't even be bothered to do more than give you money to spend! I mean, you were adopted nearly two years ago now, and I've never even met you dad. I've never even been to your house, even though I'm your Best Friend! I mean, I know that your dad owns the Nest and the Haunt, but that's not the same thing. You don't live here with us anymore. So yeah, I don't get why you care so much about Connor. He's just like the other kids who your dad took in." He jumped to his feet and began pacing, waving his arms around in agitation as his voice rose. "And that Draco kid! You said he lived near one of your dad's properties and his dad was your dad's business partner or something, so you see him all the time. So what? He was acting like you were all buddy buddy rather than you just having to entertain him because your dad makes you. It's sickening! He acted like he was your Best Friend, like he had some sort of claim on you!" He took a deep breath to continue his rant, but stopped short when he caught sight of the thunderous look on Harry's face.

"How dare you," Harry's voice was a low threatening growl. "How dare you tell me who makes up my family and who doesn't. We may be friends, but Connor is my brother, whatever you may think. It doesn't matter that he was adopted. So was I! I don't know why Father chose to make him my brother rather than just his ward like the other kids, but he did, and I'm glad. I don't care what you think or say about it, I love my brother! He's special, and he's mine. You're my friend, yes, but he comes first, and I won't tolerate you dragging him into this or taking your foul mood out on him! As for Draco, hate him if you want, it makes no difference to me. But you need to accept that I have other friends and responsibilities, and being my oldest friend does not give you the right to dictate my other relationships! So you need to get over this, because I won't cater to it any longer!"

Harry stood and stalked to the door, pausing with his hand on the doorknob. "Daniel," his voice was calmer, but no less firm. "I'm grateful to everything that you and your family have done for me, but I can't, won't choose you over Connor and my Father; any more than I would expect you to choose me over your own family." With that, he strode through the door and closed it behind himself with a resounding click that sounded ominously final in the ringing silence.

Harry strode into Fortress, still fuming over his argument with Daniel. How dare that little twat try to dictate to him?

Storming into the training room like a metaphorical thunder cloud, he moved to the targets and started throwing knives at them, the heavy thunk as each sunk into the canvas covered wood a steady beat that underlined his thoughts.

How dare he! Thunk.

That arrogant - thunk - possessive - thunk - foolish - thunk - little boy!

He took a deep breath, trying to regain control over his temper. He had an overwhelming urge to go and torture someone to death to work the anger out of his system, but he didn't want to be that sort of leader. Those sort of people tended to draw too much attention and ended up with their underlings rebelling and trying to kill them. So he stayed at the targets and threw knives until his arms ached and his fingers were blistered and nicked from the blades. And then he threw some more.

Finally, he became aware of his audience; Connor, both Malfoys, his Hounds, Shot, Warthog, and
Snake. Even his Heralds were perched around the room, watching curiously.

Sighing, he scrubbed a frustrated hand through his hair, oblivious to the blood he'd just smeared on his forehead and through his hair.

"Sorry about that," he murmured.

"Bad morning?" Lucius enquired casually.

"Something like that," Harry nodded. "I don't know about you guys, but I really don't think I should be sparring or anything today. What do you say we go do something completely different? We can go to the cinema, then do some muggle shopping? I need a few things anyway, and Connor needs some new clothes, he's outgrowing the ones he has."

Draco and Connor lit up at the idea, practically vibrating with excitement.

Turning to his father, Draco put on his best puppy dog eyes. "Please, Father, may we go?"

Lucius rolled his eyes indulgently. "Only if your mother comes too. I refuse to deal with her sulking if we go shopping without her."

Draco jumped and pumped his fist in the air with a whoop, ignoring the reproving look Lucius shot at him. "Harry, can I borrow an owl?"

Harry waved negligently. "Use Portent; I can't be bothered convincing Minerva into taking a note." He scowled slightly at the thought of the owl. She was fast, no doubt about that, and she protected her missives viciously against anyone except the intended recipient, but coaxing her to actually take a letter was frustrating and usually involved a substantial bribe.

Draco grabbed a self-inking quill and scrap of parchment from Alex and quickly jotted a note, being careful to use his best handwriting and proper formalities. His father had been drilling him relentlessly in preparation for Hogwarts, and insisted on proper form at all times.

Holding up the note, he smiled when one of the ravens swooped down and grabbed it from his fingers, winging her way out the door. The Heralds fascinated him, and he was pleased that they consented to take a note for him since they usually refused anyone except Harry.

Turning back to the rest of the party, he eagerly joined the conversation about what they should go see at the movies.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to The Monster Book of Monsters for the snake information.
Dumbledore popped a Lemon Drop into his mouth as he stared pensively out the window. The school year had only just let out, and it was time to begin getting things ready for young Harry's arrival in September.

It was a risky move, certainly, but he really had no other choice; everything depended on it. On Him. What he needed was the right sort of bait; after all, one doesn't catch a Great White Shark with a worm.

White tufted eyebrows rose slightly as an idea began to form. Perhaps it was time to pay his old friend Nicolas a visit.

Vahan strode into the meeting room behind Mr South, his Hounds following closely.

"So," Harry asked politely when the door was shut. "What can I do for you?"

The older man's frozen expression thawed microscopically as he gestured for his guests to seat themselves on the stiff leather chairs.

"Vahan, it's good to see you. It's been too long." His lips twitched very slightly.

Grinning back cheekily, Harry tilted his head in a parody of coyness. "Why, Mr South, anyone would think you missed me!"

Huffing faintly in amusement, Mr South handed the boy a tumbler of scotch, raising an enquiring eyebrow to Alex and Sergei. At their quiet refusal, he carried his own over to his seat and settled with a small sigh, crossing his legs elegantly.

"Thank you for coming on such short notice, but I have a matter that I'm hoping you can help me with." He paused, taking a sip from his tumbler. "I've attempted to resolve the issue on my own, but it's resulted in the loss of four of my best assets. As failure is not an option, I thought it time to bring in the only people that I'm certain will get the job done. If anyone can pull it off, it would be you."

Harry raised an enquiring eyebrow, sipping his own drink. "You're being unusually liberal with the praise. Must be big if you're going out of your way to flatter my ego."

Mr South sighed tiredly and handed over a file.

"Over the past six weeks, several of my informants have disappeared. Fourteen to be exact. Now, normally this wouldn't be an issue, except one was found still alive three days ago. Before he died from the truly horrific injuries he'd sustained during his incarceration, he told us what he could of his captors. I've included it all in the file, as well as anything else we've managed to dig up on them, but that's only part of the issue." He paused, contemplating his drink. "What I am about to tell you I expect you to keep as private as the information I hold on you."

Harry nodded in acceptance.

"They've taken a fifteenth informant. One that I absolutely must get back before they discover her true identity." He took a deep breath. "I only have one living relative in this world, Vahan. My niece; and they took her."
Pursing his lips, Harry thought for a moment. "And you want me to retrieve her?"

Mr South nodded grimly. "As I mentioned, I've already lost four of my best attempting to do just that, but I thought you might meet with better success given the skillset of both yourself and your men. Not to mention your personal stake in the issue."

Harry's eyebrows shot up. "Personal stake?"

The older gentleman's voice sounded heavily in the quiet office. "They're looking for you, my friend. And they're tearing my network apart to find you."

Smirking wolfishly, Harry drained the last of his scotch and set the glass on the coffee table. "Well then, perhaps I should go and introduce myself."

Harry passed the file from Mr South to Shot, demanding everything she could pull together in the next two hours. Leaving the startled girl behind, he made his way to The Nest, feeling the need to spend some time with Alice.

It had been close to a year since the redhead had joined them, and her steady nature and easy acceptance of the rather odd life Harry led had been an unexpected blessing. Harry hadn't intended to spend any more time than necessary with the young woman, but after a while he'd found himself seeking her presence when stressed or plagued with too many thoughts. While she never overstepped the bounds that separated employer and employee, the boy would - with prompting that might or might not involve sharp objects and blunt force trauma - admit that he considered her a close friend.

"Alice," he greeted as he threw himself into the comfortable chair in front of her desk, tapping his fingers irritably on the armrest.

Lifting her head and leaning back in her chair, the girl casually tossed her pen on the desk.

"Sir. Is everything alright? You feel agitated." Her hazel eyes assessed him calmly before she quietly called Twirly to bring some herbal tea.

Harry flicked his fingers dismissively. "I'm fine. Just got an urgent job to do for the boss, and I have a bad feeling about it. We don't have much prep time, and something like this needs it. There's nothing that can be done since it's time sensitive, but I just can't shake the feeling that something is going to go wrong." He sighed and ran his fingers through his shoulder length hair, pulling the hair tie free and redoing his standard ponytail.

"I see," she murmured, pouring him a small cup of her favourite blend of lemon and chamomile, sweetened slightly with honey. "Any clue beyond that?"

Shaking his head, Harry sipped his tea, relaxing as Alice's ability worked to soothe his jagged nerves. "No. I just wish I had the time to do my own recon for this. I hate having to rely on other people for that, it never ends well."

Alice nodded in agreement, sipping her tea delicately.

As a comfortable silence fell between them, Harry thought it was remarkable how different Shot and Alice were. Where Shot was messy and sarcastic, lacking in any form of refinement despite Alex's almost hysterical attempts, Alice could give Narcissa a run for her money. Witty, graceful, and with a genuine interest in her charges, Harry couldn't have found a better Nest Mother. The fact that she kept the house running smoothly and managed all of the paperwork and household accounts with seeming ease was just the icing on the cake as far as Harry was concerned.
The two sat in silence for a while, sipping their tea and enjoying the quiet company, before Harry shifted slightly.

"Have you seen Shot lately?" It was a never ending source of amusement to those in the know that Alice and Shot were constantly being 'mistaken' for sisters, and just as Harry had predicted, people always assumed Shot was the younger; something which drove the tech genius spiralling into sugar fuelled fury. Despite that, the two were practically joined at the hip, their close friendship a blessing for both hurting women.

Alice shook her head. "No, we haven't had much time lately. I've been here dealing with the kids and paperwork, and she's been buried up to her eyeballs in some project or another. The last time I saw her, she was muttering something about liquid grenades." Seeing Harry perk up with interest, she shook her head. "I didn't ask."

Harry subsided with a pout. "What about the Nestlings? I know you've been sending me regular reports, but it's not really the same. Any problems you haven't mentioned?"

Thinking for a moment, Alice tapped a manicured fingernail gently against the desk. "Elise is missing you fiercely. Being so much younger she doesn't really get the opportunity to spend as much time with you as the others. She feels a bit left out when you take the older kids out for lessons."

Harry shook his head slightly. "She's too little to be out on jobs yet, even just a lookout. I'll try to make some time to take her out, even if it's just an observation lesson or something."

Alice nodded gratefully. "She'd love that. All the kids are devoted to you, but I wouldn't be at all surprised if Elise decides she wants to marry you when she grows up. She's bordering on a crush already." She giggled slightly at Harry's pained and revolted look. "Don't worry, I'm sure she'll grow out of it. Maybe."

Harry scowled. The idea of pairing up with anyone made his skin crawl. He knew he was young yet and that it might change when he was older, but he honestly couldn't understand the appeal. He cleared his throat uncomfortably.

"Right. Anything else?"

"Mark has been giving me a little trouble lately. He's absolutely devoted to you - no worries there - but he needs a very firm hand or else he gets out of control."

"In what way?" Harry frowned, sitting up attentively.

Screwing up her face thoughtfully, she opened her draw and pulled out Mark's file and flicked it open. "It's hard to define, really. He does as he's told, usually, but there's definite attitude behind it. I don't really know what to do about him. I'm unwilling to punish him for anything because he hasn't done anything, but…" She chewed her lip lightly, delicate brows pulled together in frustration.

Harry tilted his head as he ran through his mental file on the boy. "He's what, twelve now?"

"Nearly thirteen."

"How do you think he would handle responsibility? Particularly if it came from the boss man?"

Alice thought about it carefully. "What did you have in mind?"

"I've been thinking about setting the Nestlings into teams as an experiment. The older kids will be out working as they get older, and having practice with small jobs in teams while they're young will
give us a chance to pick out the ones worth training up as leaders, and who works better alone."

"And you're thinking of giving Mark command?"

"Do you think it would work?"

"Actually, I think it might." She picked up her pen and began doodling absenty. "I mean, he's just hitting puberty, so his emotions are all mixed up right now, but giving him a specific task, and holding him accountable could work. You'd have to monitor him very closely though to make sure he doesn't bully who you team him with. Did you have any ideas for his team?"

"I was thinking Lewis and Lizzie? Sophie and Brian would be another team."

Alice nodded. "That would work well. Make Lewis 2IC. He's calmer and very dependable. Lizzie has a lot of potential but she's too young for much responsibility yet."

Harry nodded in agreement. "Is Brian still the leader out of him and Sophie?"

Waving a hand in a see-saw motion, Alice shrugged. "It varies. Brian is more task oriented, Sophie does better with people. I'd say that if you kept them as a unit, switch the leader depending on the job. Their dynamic is pretty fluid and I'd be very surprised if you had any resentment issues between those two, as long as you didn't introduce a third element. If you team them with anyone else I'd say make that other person their superior."

Making a mental note of that, Harry smiled. "Alright. I'll set up a couple of beginner jobs and see how the teams go. Don't say anything to them about it yet."

"Not my area, Sir." She smiled, standing when Harry did.

"Thanks for the visit," Harry smiled, lightly holding her hand for a moment. "I feel much better."

"Good luck with the job, Sir. Hope everything goes well despite your misgivings."

Harry grimaced slightly at the reminder. "Thanks. Here's hoping!"

Harry cursed under his breath as he threw himself behind a pew, covering his head as bullets ripped through the wood and peppered him with debris. His ears were ringing from the loud gunfire echoing around the beautiful building, and he could feel the ache of a massive bruise already forming on his shoulder where it had clipped a kneeling bench on his way down. He scowled fiercely; he fucking hated churches. Actually, he hated every damn thing about this fucking job. Insufficient intel, no time for recon, deeply entrenched enemy; yeah, this was an epic clusterfuck, and there was no way it was going to end well.

A small group of religious zealots calling themselves The Acolytes - who fancied themselves part Witch-Finder and part Crusader and had all the toys to match - had decided that God wanted them to track down those that Man's Law could not touch, and punished them for their sins. They'd apparently caught his name after what had become known as Vahan's Massacre - the violent silencing of anyone who'd fingered Tiny as an associate of the then barely known crime lord. Vahan's reputation and budding empire since then had only cemented their determination to remove such a villain from the picture. Harry was vaguely flattered that they chose to target him over someone like Mr South, but he was more pissed at the inconvenience than anything else. He had other things to do, damn it! He'd had to cancel his planned afternoon with Connor, and that left a sour taste in his mouth when he remembered the boy's disappointed look.
"I hate vigilantes," Harry muttered to himself as he army crawled to better cover, taking shelter behind a statue of St Nicolas. He smirked at being protected by the Patron Saint of pharmacists and repentant thieves. Apparently the repentant part was a bit flexible.

Harry glanced around, spotting Sergei, Alex, and Captain pinned down in various places around the walls. Huffing in irritation, he shifted position behind the statue to get a better view of where the shooters were. The acoustics in the church bounced the sound around, making it difficult to pinpoint their location.

"The Choir Loft." Harry grumbled into his earpiece, even as he rubbed his sore shoulder. He couldn't get a clear view, but he estimated at least two shooters, which left the other four Acolytes in the basement with Mr South's niece. Harry frowned and made a mental note that he should have picked her name out of the file. Oh well, next time.

Carefully aiming his latest Berretta, Harry squeezed off a couple of rounds at what he thought was one of the people currently pissing him off, ignoring how the recoil painfully jarred his injured shoulder. Grinning at the following thump and groan, he scanned what he could see of the Choir Loft for the second shooter. A couple of rounds from Captain into a corner that Harry couldn't see, and the suppressive fire fell silent. Harry rubbed at his shoulder again, cautiously poking his head from behind the statue.

When no further bullets came flying at them, the men crept forward into the echoing silence, scanning their surrounds with the paranoia of trained soldiers. Captain remained behind to keep their egress clear.

Sergei was the first down the stairs and to the door leading into the basement room where the hostage was being held. They could hear muffled thumps and groans that didn't bode well for the girl, but they were slightly reassured to hear one of the Acolytes questioning her between thuds.

Pausing at the door, the men listened carefully.

"It would be easier to just tell us, you know. Why are you so important to them? None of the other people we took warranted one rescue attempt, let alone three, so clearly you know something, or you are someone. Which is it?"

Sergei didn't give the girl a chance to answer, kicking in the door and diving to the side as bullets zinged past his head to pepper the door frame. Harry and Alex darted through after him, the two older men engaging the Acolytes while Harry dashed to the girl and sliced through her bonds. Smiling reassuringly, he pulled her to the ground and started ushering her to the door.

"Hi, my name is Irrelevant, and I'll be your rescuer today," he joked, quickly eyeing her to make sure she wasn't going to bleed out from her injuries before he got her safe. She was in bad shape, but he couldn't see anything immediately life threatening. Blonde and in her late teens, if one overlooked the injuries she could have passed for one of those cliché American cheerleaders. The fighting behind them was loud enough to make him wince as they made their way to the door.

"What?" The girl asked, confused. She kept shaking her head as if to clear it, and listing slightly to one side.

Harry frowned as he realised that she was drugged. That complicated things. Before he could alter their escape plan to account for that, he was kicked in the ribs and sent sprawling, his gun flying from his hand and coming to rest against the wall. His head ached dully from where it impacted the floor.
Scrambling to his feet, he eyed his opponent carefully. *Lefty. Knuckles bloodied but flattened from regular impacts. Boxer or some sort of combat sport likely. Well trained, but not as well as the others. Holy shit, he's dressed like a Priest?*

He was distracted when Sergei yelped in pain a little way behind him where he was grappling with a mountain of a man even larger than the Russian. The fleshy thuds as the two titans landed hits was enough to make even Harry cringe, or he would have it he hadn't just been punched in the face during the moment his focus wavered. Staggering back with blood pouring down his chin, Harry tripped over a prone Alex, who'd just been knocked on his arse as Sergei and his opponent barged into him as they threw each other around the room. Crashing to the floor on top of the soldier, Harry and Hound struggled to detangle themselves while avoiding being stomped by their opponents.

Harry's vicious cursing went unheard in the cacophony of grunts, thuds, and crashes, and as he rolled clear of Alex and scrambled to his feet, he took a moment to observe the mess this mission had become.

It was chaos.

There was a motionless body by the door leaking blood from a bullet wound, the other Acolytes engaged in an all-out brawl with his Hounds, and Harry realized no assistance would be coming his way anytime soon. Shouts and grunts of pain reverberated through the tiny basement room as the five older men flailed at each other, weapons forgotten or knocked clear. Leaving his Hounds to do what they did best - even if they currently seemed to be on the receiving end of a rather brutal beat down - Harry darted around the room, dodging wild swings and sweaty bodies. It seemed that nobody had any particular targets, everybody just swinging madly and hoping they didn't hit an ally. Crouching next to the semi-conscious girl, he reached out to pull her arm over his shoulder, only to be jerked violently backwards by his collar.

"Oh no you don't, boy!" The Priest snarled, and Harry recognised the voice that had been questioning the hostage.

Oh lovely, Harry thought sarcastically. **His head snapped back as his nose crumpled under the man's fist. A Matthew Hopkins wannabe with a crime fixation and a Scottish accent!**

He grunted as he was thrown bodily against the wall, his head still ringing from the blows. He could feel blood trickling down his chin from his nose, matched by the one making its way down the back of his neck from where his scalp had split on contact with the wall.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, OW, Harry groaned mentally as he staggered to his feet, throwing himself at the man who was trying to pick up the girl over his shoulder while everyone else was distracted.

He swung wildly, knowing that he was barely bruising his opponent despite his training; he had no idea what had happened to his weapons, he could barely think well enough to remember that he'd had any in the first place. A careless backhand sent him crashing into a table against the wall, slumping groggily in a pile of splintered wood and a few religious knickknacks. His fumbling fingers found something solid and heavy, and he grabbed it blindly from the wreckage, swinging it with all his strength at the man, even has he flung himself back into the fray. His arm shuddered painfully with the heavy impact, and he grinned manically as the man slumped to the ground, his head partially caved in. Harry whacked him a couple more times just to be sure - and vent some annoyance - then spat the blood pooling in his mouth onto the floor with a chuckle. Looking at the object in his hand, he giggled when he realised he'd just beaten a Priest to death with a golden crucifix. Blood and a little brain matter coated the figure of Jesus, adding a macabre element that Harry personally thought improved the tacky ornament dramatically. He felt the urge to say something pithy to the corpse at his feet, but his head hurt too much to think of any decent witticisms so he kicked it instead.
Staggering as he turned to check Alex and Sergei, he raised an eyebrow, wincing as it pulled and leaked more blood into his eye. Alex had managed to pull a knife from who-knows-where and was currently doing his best Master Chef impersonation, carving deeply into his target with savage glee. Harry spat another mouthful of blood, and made a mental note to stop watching so much television.

Sergei had managed to get an advantage over the bear-like Acolyte that had been giving him trouble, and was straddling him and pounding his face into pulp with his bare fists. The watching boy laughed wetly; he could well imagine that Sergei hadn't taken kindly to not being the toughest bastard in the room. He'd be a demon to train with for the next couple of months.

Turning back to the semi-conscious girl, he pulled her up and draped her arm over his aching shoulders. He pulled her close with a careful arm around her waist, and the two staggered from the room and up the stairs. Harry could barely see between his concussion and the blood pouring down his swollen face, but they managed to make it to the main church and towards the waiting exit.

Captain's eyes widened when he saw the brutalized figures shuffling painfully towards him, and he hurried forward to take the weight from Harry's slumped shoulders.

"Sir?" He enquired when Harry staggered.

"'M fine," Harry waved away his concern, raising a wrist to gently wipe some blood from his chin. "Get her out of here." His voice was thick and muffled, distorted by the injuries to his face. Gingerly shifting to hold a hand to his ribs, he realised he'd probably managed to crack a few of those too at some point. He stifled a sigh with a wince.

Alex and Sergei staggered up the stairs behind them, covered in blood - some of it their own - and heavily injured. While Alex had come out of his confrontation in a better state than any of the others, even he looked like he'd just crawled out of the Pits of Hell. Harry noted the irony with a mental snort before pushing it aside to focus on his task.

"Egress is clear, Sir." Captain reported. "No sign of movement from the shooters, but kills have not been confirmed."

Harry scowled as best his mangled face would allow. "Confirm them," he snapped as he made his way painfully through the ruined pews to the door. Marcel was going to flip when he saw them, but he fully intended to drop the girl off to Mr South before heading home to his fussing peacock of a Healer. Business before showers and all that, though he considered the effect returning from such a mission apparently unscathed might do for his reputation. Perhaps a shower and healing first after all.

Alex and Sergei moved to do as he ordered, Sergei taking the basement room while Alex braved the narrow stairs to the Loft. Captain hovered close to Harry, still supporting the sagging girl against his side. They were both aware that Alex and Sergei wouldn't have followed him upstairs if they hadn't confirmed their kills, but Harry was pleased that they took him seriously enough to double check anyway.

As he waited by the main doors his sensitive ears picked up a faint scuffling sound and a wordless cry a split second before something heavy crashed onto his slender frame, knocking him to the floor and crushing all the air from his battered lungs. He heard the wet snap of at least one of his injured ribs give way under the sudden weight, and if he'd had any breath left he would have screamed at the agony suddenly flooding his side.

As he fought for breath and tried to ignore the black spots clouding his vision, he could hear gunfire followed by another thud as if something meaty had fallen from somewhere high. Dimly, he realised that one of the shooters must have still been alive until a few seconds ago. They'd probably fallen
from the Loft after Alex had opened fire.

The crushing weight was pulled off him a few moments later by a frantic Alex and Sergei, and Harry finally saw what it was. Captain lay on the floor where he'd been rolled, panicked eyes wide and blood bubbling wetly from his lips.
Chapter 26

The blood was pooling rapidly under the soldier's body, leaking from the grizzly bullet wound on his back.

Harry could vaguely hear Sergei and Alex swearing up a storm, and the girl they'd come to rescue working herself into hysterics despite her barely conscious state. Had he cared, he might have been impressed by that. Or suspicious.

Harry grunted in pain, curling around his injured side even as he scooted over to the fallen man.

"Captain," he wheezed, leaning over the man, trying not to lean any weight on him and not succeeding as well as he might have wished.

He glanced up, seeing Sergei take charge of Mr South's niece, and Alex on the phone to summon Marcel. He looked back down, and knew that it was too late, even with magic there was no way that the Healer could make it in time, and using a portkey would kill him even faster.

"Tell," Captain choked, coughing up blood. "Family… love… them." His chest rattled wetly as he gasped for air that wouldn't come.

Harry nodded sombrely. "I'll tell them, you have my word. Thank you for protecting me." In a rare display of affection, Harry gently stroked the man's hair from his forehead, leaving a bloody streak across the clammy skin.

Captain smiled, his eyes already slightly glassy from the blood loss. "Good… kid." He wheezed, trying to find the breath to say what was on his mind. "Proud… you… like… mine."

Harry pressed his lips together tightly as Captain's body shuddered and relaxed, seconds before Marcel arrived with a loud snap of apparition. Reaching up and ignoring the jolt of fire through his ribs at the movement, Vahan gently closed Captain's eyes for the last time.

Harry sat in the office at The Haunt, sipping a cup of tea that Marcel had spiked with a gentle muscle relaxant and painkiller. Harry and his Hounds had been worked over thoroughly, and Marcel had nearly had a fit when he got them all back to the infirmary and scanned the damage. Mr South's niece had been sedated, and was being kept in a discrete corner away from prying eyes until Vahan was ready to take her back to her uncle.

Harry had decided to inform the Andrews of what had occurred before attending to his temporary employer though. His people came first, after all. Hearing a knock on the door, he waved the three Andrews in and quietly invited them to take a seat.

"What's going on, Harry?" Mama Andrews asked quietly, seeing the serious look on the normally friendly boy's face.

Harry rubbed a hand over his newly healed face, wincing slightly as he brushed his freshly repaired and still tender nose. Stalling slightly, he called Jinky, and requested some tea for the Andrews.

Jinky nodded, and taking note of the tension in the room, made an executive decision to spike it with calming draught.

Once everyone had been provided with the laced tea and taken a few nervous sips, Harry took a
"Today, Captain was supposed to meet the Hounds and I at a place that my father was considering buying. I was going to be meeting Father there, so we'd asked him to come for added security, and to get a look at the place since he looked after security for the muggle properties."

Mama Andrews sat her tea cup down on it saucer, the china clattering slightly as her hands shook.

"Please tell me you aren't saying what I think you're saying," she whimpered, closing her eyes in despair at the grim expression on the boy opposite her.

"Mum?" Greg asked, taking her hand and glancing worriedly between her and Harry.

"He's dead, isn't he." Daniel's voice was flat, the statement hanging unnaturally in the silence of the office.

Mama Andrews covered her mouth, trying to stifle a sob.

"I'm very sorry," Harry offered softly. "Someone took a shot at us, and Captain jumped in front of the bullet to protect me. He died before Marcel could get there to help. He asked me to tell you that he loved you all very much."

Greg pulled his distraught mother closer, offering a hand to his little brother to pull him into their group huddle.

Daniel ignored the offer, glaring furiously at Harry. "So, my dad is dead because of you?"

Harry watched the younger boy steadily, but didn't refute the claim.

"Daniel," Greg called, his voice cracking slightly from grief. He grabbed his brother's hand and tugged him until he was settled on Mama Andrews lap, held closely between them.

Harry rose and quietly exited the room, closing the door behind him as he left the family to their grief.

Sighing heavily, and wincing at the twinge of pain from his strapped and still healing ribs, Harry rested his forehead against the wall for a moment, willing away his own sorrow. He couldn't help feeling a twinge of guilt over the situation. The entire job had been a mess; poorly managed, poorly planned. He rubbed his face again, careful to avoid his nose this time.

He had no idea what the Andrews would do about this situation. It was entirely possible that they would leave and never speak to him again, in which case he'd have to have Alex or Sergei either modify their memories or dispose of them entirely. He frowned, not entirely happy with that idea. Of course it was equally possible that they would continue working with him as they always had, in which case he would add a form of widows pension to help account for the loss of income for the family. Had Captain died doing something stupid he wouldn't have bothered, but the man had died on duty, through a stupid fuck up of Vahan's. Compensating his family and paying for the funeral was the least he could do.

Waving to Alex at the door of the infirmary to show he was ready, he had a quiet word with Marcel about the Andrews in the office, then followed the Hounds and the still sedated girl into the garage. Marcel had healed the worst of her injuries, but she still looked a little rough.

Placing her gently in the car, they piled in and pulled out to the street. Their sleek black limousine sped smoothly down the quiet street under Sergei's steady hand, while Alex sat with Harry and th
unconscious girl in the back.

Harry could feel Alex eyeing him, but ignored him completely. He didn't feel like talking, or going over any business his ever efficient Hound might have brought with them. He settled back into the comfortable leather seats with a sigh, closing his eyes and letting his head drop back. He was aching and tired, and wanted nothing more than to go to bed and sleep for a few hours. Or days. He imagined his Hounds weren't fairing much better. Marcel had grudgingly let them go, only the fact that he would be beaten bloody if he tried to interfere with business by enforcing the bedrest he claimed they needed staying his hand.

"Sir?" Alex asked quietly, unusually tentative.

Harry grunted in reply, not bothering to open his eyes.

"What's the plan when we get to Mr South's?"

Taking a deep breath, Harry let it out gradually and forced himself to open his eyes. He glanced at the intercom to make sure Sergei could hear the conversation, then turned to Alex.

"Hopefully just a quick drop off, though Mr South may want to chat a bit. Official story is that while we lost one of our team to a sniper, the rest of us got in and out without a scratch. There will be no mention of how many of us were on that team. We stopped long enough to get her treated, and then we bundled her in the car and dropped her back to him as agreed. We'll give him a copy of her medical report, and hopefully that will be that."

Alex raised an eyebrow. "Do you think it will be?"

Harry quirked a tired smirk. "Probably not. Mr South will probably ask for a debrief from us with as much detail as possible. Something that I'm disinclined to agree to, and not just because I'm hellishly tired. I'd like to keep as much of our methods and the like quiet; add to the mystery a bit. He'll probably also ply us with drinks, which Marcel specifically ordered us not to have. Apparently alcohol doesn't go well with the potions we were given."

"So we get out as soon as we can manage without being rude, and give as few details as possible?"

Harry nodded and settled back in his seat again. "Pretty much. Our actions aren't secret, so don't get too hung up on it, I just want to keep people guessing about what we're capable of. Which is why I insisted on getting cleaned up before we dropped her back."

Alex grinned in response. "Unscathed from a situation everyone else died attempting? Nice spin."

Harry flashed a grin. "Thank you. I thought so."

"What about the Andrews?"

Harry sobered. "We'll discuss it later, after we've rested. I've got a few ideas, but it depends in large part what they choose to do."

Nodding, Alex took the hint and settled back as well, both of them resting as much as they could for the remainder of the trip.

The following weeks were stressful as Harry began handing over the daily running of his businesses to Sergei and Alex, as well as spending as much time as possible with Connor and the other kids. He hated that he would have to be away for so long, a sentiment that his charges agreed with
The loss of Captain weighed heavily on them all, and Harry did his best to support his kids even as he juggled the rest of his tasks. Greg had stepped up, taking over as much of his father's role as he could; something that impressed Harry enough to order his Hounds to give him a crash course in everything they could cram into him. As a result, the now twenty year old was fast on the way to becoming as invaluable as his father before him, if not more so.

Mama Andrews poured herself into the kids in an effort to distract herself from her grief. The children found themselves receiving more lessons, as well as being showered with affection, something that they were gradually getting used to but still found uncomfortable.

The only real problem was Daniel. He clung to his belief that Harry was to blame for his father's death, and refused to be dissuaded. Harry's silence on the issue frustrated the rest of the adults. The tension that hovered around the youngest Andrews when Harry was in sight was enough to make a person flee the room, and everyone wondered how much more the simmering child could take before he blew up.

Things finally came to a head a week before Harry's birthday.

Harry was having a teddy bear's tea party with Elise on the floor on the playroom, chatting quietly with the youngest girl about the merits of pink over purple and enjoying the downtime. Connor, Mark, Lewis, and Lizzie stared stonily at each other over their cards, practicing their poker techniques over wagered chores. Sophie and Brian were tucked into a corner, giggling as they plotted their next prank. Harry had called for a day off from training since the kids had all done very well in their end of year school tests. Apparently all of them were fighting for top spot in their respective classes. Harry was thrilled at the effort they were putting in, and had made his approval clear, rewarding the kids with downtime, a small shopping trip, and personal gifts all 'round.

He looked up when Sergei stuck his head into the room, and sobered at the man's serious expression. Excusing himself, he exchanged a look with Connor who nodded at being left to keep an eye on the other kids.

"What's happened?" Harry asked as he slipped from the room and followed Sergei out of earshot.

"It's Daniel. He's…" The Russian trailed off, looking pained. "I'm so sorry Boss, we should have seen it coming."

"Dead?" Harry asked calmly, even as he settled into a chair opposite Alice.

Sergei shook his head. "Not quite, but he gave it a fucking good try."

Alice served them some tea, frowning prettily. "What happened?"

The hulking mercenary slumped slightly, taking a sip from the delicate white china teacup Alice had handed him. He set it gently back on its saucer and rubbed a hand over his face.

"From what Alex told me, he hasn't been handling his dad's death well. We all knew that of course, and that he still blames Harry for Captain's death. Apparently he was a bit more unstable than we'd thought, and in hindsight, having him around Harry in such a state was probably making it worse."

Harry grunted slightly in irritation, encouraging Sergei to get to the point.

"He got into Marcel's potions, swallowed everything he could get his hands on, then climbed onto the roof and jumped off. He's in the infirmary at the moment, but he's not in good shape. Marcel's
working as best he can, and he's stable, but we don't know what lingering damage there might be yet, if any."

Harry sipped his tea, fighting to control his annoyance at the situation. "And Mama Andrews?"

"Not doing so well. She blames herself for not focusing on him more. I'll be honest, Boss, I think once Daniel is released from the infirmary, we're going to lose them. We should start looking for someone to take care of the Ghosts now, since Marcel won't be happy about playing babysitter any longer than strictly necessary."

Nodding, Harry drained the last of his tea.

"Worst case scenario, we'll get the Goblins to make another golem. It would probably be more secure anyway."

Sergei placed his cup on Alice's desk, ignoring her faint scowl, and scratched his chin. "You're right. Want me to get your father to organise it?"

Harry smiled slightly. "I'd appreciate it. Setting him up was the best decision I've made yet I think. And not just because I can offload most of my paperwork onto him."

Sergei chuckled. "I'll bet. It certainly freed up a massive chunk of your time. I've been meaning to ask, how are your language studies going?"

Rolling his eyes, Harry pouted. "I've gotten the basics of Mandarin and Japanese, I'm fair at conversational Russian and German, and relatively fluent at Latin and French."

Sergei's eyebrow twitched up. "Impressive. I guess that's one of the benefits of being a super brain, then!"

"I suppose. Picking up a new language is easy enough once you understand the speech patterns. After that it's just a matter of memorising the words and their contexts."

"Still, that's an impressive achievement, Sir," Alice interjected quietly. "Especially since you started teaching yourself and have only had a bit of help polishing it in the last few years. However I think we've strayed from the original topic. What do you want to do about the Andrews?"

Shifting in his seat, Harry thought for a moment. "Does Greg know yet?"

Sergei nodded. "He was taken over as soon as he got back from the run he was on. I don't know what he'll choose to do, to be honest."

"Alright. Alice, I'll leave you to look after the kids, Sergei and I are going to play the concerned friends and see what's what. I'll be by to collect Connor once we're done there."

The trip over to The Haunt was mercifully short, and Harry took the time to work himself into the right state of mind. It wouldn't do to show his irritation during such a volatile situation, and not just because Daniel and Mama Andrews still had no idea who and what Harry really was. It was amazing what people ignored when they didn't want to see something unpalatable, he mused. Honestly, this whole thing with Daniel might be a blessing after all. He could get the little annoyance out of his house and away from the potentially damaging information he might stumble over, and if he got a golem to replace Mama Andrews that would be another potential leak plugged. The only sticking point was Greg; he really was too valuable to lose.

Noting that they were pulling into the garage, Harry scrubbed his face a few times and ruffled his
hair, then scrambled from the car with a worried look and hurried into the infirmary with a stoic Sergei in tow.

"How is he?" He asked, striding over to where Mama Andrews sat next to Daniels bed, holding the unconscious boy's hand.

Mama Andrews stood with a sniffle and wrapped her arms around Harry, hugging him tightly. "Oh, Harry, thank you for coming, love." She sniffled again, wiping her eyes with a soggy tissue. "Marcel says he'll be alright, that he won't have any lingering issues, physically that is. Emotionally, well, we'll have to wait and see." She turned to look at her sleeping son, biting her lip anxiously. "I don't know what to do to help him. He's so angry, so hurt..."

Harry rested a hand lightly on her arm. "Whatever you need, let me know and we'll work it out. I'll help in any way I can, and I know Father will too."

Mama Andrews gave him a watery smile and patted the hand on her arm fondly. "Thank you. You're a good friend to us."

Harry smiled slightly, and turned to Greg, walking over to join him in propping up the wall across the room from the occupied bed. "You doing ok?" He asked softly.

Greg shrugged, his arms folded tightly across his chest. "Got a job for me?"

Harry shook his head. "No. Focus on your family; you're needed here right now."

Greg pursed his lips, nodding slightly. "Daniel isn't going to let this go, you know that, right?"

Nodding, Harry sighed. "Yeah. I'm thinking it might be better for him to be away from all of this, have his family back to himself again. He isn't doing well here; I don't think he ever really did."

"Want me to gently encourage them to go?"

"That depends. What would you want to do? Would you go with them?"

Greg frowned slightly and tilted his head to eye the boy next to him. "Would you actually let me go if that's what I chose?"

Harry's lips pursed in a moue of distaste. "Yes, if that's what you want. You've proven yourself capable of keeping your mouth shut, and as long as you continued to do that I see no reason to prevent you leaving. I'd really rather not though. I have plans for you."

Greg looked at him in unadulterated shock. "You'd really let me leave if that's what I wanted?"

Harry rolled his eyes slightly, his irritation rising. "I dislike repeating myself, Greg. There are only a small handful of people in my organisation that I would let leave without X-ing them out. Annoy me too much and I'll remove you from that list."

Greg stifled a grin, and turned back to observing his mother and brother. "Yes, sir. But it's irrelevant at this point anyway. I agree that that Mum and Daniel need to be elsewhere, but no matter what they decide, I'm staying with you."

Harry's lips twitched into a pleased smile, which he promptly smothered before anyone could see it. "I'm glad to hear that. See what you can do about your mum and Daniel, but don't force the issue. Let them think it was their idea, for Daniel's mental and emotional health or something. I'll make sure they're suitably cared for financially either way."
Pushing himself off the wall, Harry walked back to Mama Andrews, and after a quiet word of sympathy, headed back to The Nest. He had a tea party to finish.

Dumbledore smiled to himself as he sucked on a lemon drop. Everything was in place for Harry's arrival in the next school year. All he could do now was wait.

He pondered what Harry would be like, and how much his personality would need to be tweaked to mould him into what he needed to be. If the Dursley's had done their job's properly, he should be malleable enough that a few comments dropped at the correct time would steer him onto the right path without the need for the suggestibility and control potions he had stored away just in case. He really didn't want to use them on the boy, there were far too many potential ways for it to be detected or disrupted. No, a more subtle approach would prove the most effective, he was certain.
Harry looked up from his breakfast when the morning post arrived. His dining companions looked up as well, Draco's gleeful anticipation an almost direct counterpoint to Connor's depressed resignation.

The blond had insisted on staying the night at Potter Manor so that he could be there when Harry got his Hogwarts letter, and had gleefully joined Connor in jumping on Harry's bed to a loud chorus of Happy Birthday as a wakeup call that had Harry moaning and swearing vengeance for being dragged awake at five am.

Quickly sorting through the correspondence and putting the business reports aside for his Smith golem to deal with later, he eyed the letter addressed to him in looping green calligraphy. Turning it over, he broke the seal and flipped the parchment open with a negligent snap of his wrist.

"Dear Mr Potter," he mocked in a pompous tone. "We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Bitchcraft and Wankery." Harry read aloud. Skimming the rest of the contents quickly, he pursed his lips, mentally toying with the patterns and trying to decide how he wanted to go about things, given Dumbledore's unhealthy focus on his life.

His thoughts were interrupted as a truly vicious looking Great Horned Owl dropped unexpectedly onto the table in front of him.

Sergei checked for unfriendly spells, removing the letter once it was cleared and handing it to Harry.

The boy opened it, finding himself curious about what could be so important as to warrant such a terrifying feathered guardian. His eyebrows crept upwards as he read, gleeful incredulity making its way across his face.

Clearing his throat, despite already having everyone's full attention, he leaned back slightly in his high backed dining chair.

"Well now, that's interesting. Have any of you heard of a Nicholas Flame?"

Well, we have reached the end of the first installment of the Vahan Saga. This is the first in a six part series, and I thank you all for sticking with me this far. The second part of this series, Vahan: Possession is Nine Tenths, is being posted as we speak (read?). I hope you continue to enjoy my work on this story.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!